

**AWARDS CEREMONY • SUNDAY, APRIL 27, 2014  
FEATURING MATT DE LA PEÑA**

CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL THE AUTHORS WHO PARTICIPATED IN  
LOUDOUN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY'S 2014

IT'S ALL  
**WRITE**

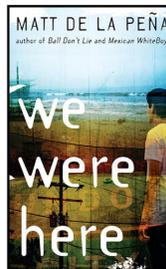
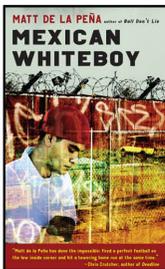
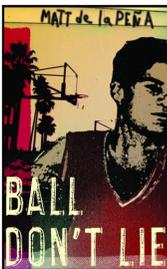
SHORT STORY WRITING CONTEST FOR TEENS • GRADES 6-12



**BEST PIECE OF ADVICE FOR  
ASPIRING AUTHORS?**

“I believe you can write anything you want as long as you absolutely nail the heartbeat of the characters and the details of the world.”

Matt de la Peña is the author of four critically-acclaimed young adult novels:  
*Ball Don't Lie*, *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here* and *I Will Save You*.





**THANK YOU TO OUR GENEROUS SPONSORS:**

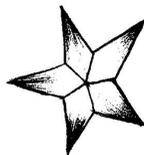
James Horton for the Arts Trust Fund

H.W. Wilson Foundation

**THANK YOU TO OUR JUDGES:**

Kwame Alexander,  
author of *The Crossover* and *He Said, She Said*

The Loudoun County Public Library Teen Services Staff



# Table of Contents

## **Middle School**

- 1<sup>st</sup> Place *First Contact* by Elliot Byrum...5
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Place *Made You Look* by Patrizia Manziano...15
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Place *Butterfly Bones* by Nadia Leiby...27
- 4<sup>th</sup> Place Runner Up *Hector Ruled the Moon* by Zora Grace...35
- 5<sup>th</sup> Place Runner Up *Glass and Thorns* by Katie Bushman...45

## **Honorable Mentions**

- With Love* by Adithi Ramakrishnan...57
- Genocide* by Sara Carter...73
- Something Like Hope* by Megan Hajdo...87
- The Bloodstained Cloak* by Victoria Chuah...101
- When the Water Meets the Sun* by Elisabeth Nagle...113

## **High School**

- 1st Place *On Brick Walls and My Sensual Parrot* by Ryan Chapman...129
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Place *The Pen and the Sword* by Sarah Pennington...135
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Place *The Valkyrie* by Ana Diederich...141
- 4<sup>th</sup> Place Runner Up *Seven Deadly Sins* by Sarah Santoro...151
- 5<sup>th</sup> Place Runner Up *Open Eyes* by Indu Radhakrishnan...159

## **Honorable Mentions**

- The Last Orange Coat in Sussex* by Henry Tyler Rihn...173
- Gladiolas* by Emily Forbes...183
- Not to Yield* by Lily Nguyen...195
- Precious* by Michaela Pierre...209
- A Pursuit of Happiness* by Bridget Starrs...223



# **First Contact**

*1<sup>st</sup> Place  
Middle School Entry  
by Elliot Byrum*



We have always believed in the idea of kindness among species. We treat more primal creatures with the respect they deserve. We refuse to murder under any circumstances, regardless of species. Having grown up in this society, I consider this philosophy proper and fair.

As a result, most of our food comes from agriculture. The outer parts of the city are mostly rolling fields and grasslands. Since the land is so valuable to us, our buildings and houses are built into the landscape, so as to harm it as little as possible. It is not uncommon for houses to be built along the uppermost branches of trees, or for hills to be hollowed out and used for various purposes.

Whenever others visit our fair city, whether for trade, refuge, or sightseeing, they are treated with hospitality. As I sat with my friend in the shade of the towering fruit trees, a small, silver craft came floating down. It was sleek and shiny, made of some sort of material neither of us had ever seen before. As it landed, we walked over to it to bid the passengers welcome.

After several minutes, the beings finally came out. I was surprised. They looked exactly like the creatures the Naboorian tradesmen told of. They had two limbs for interacting with objects, and two others that seemed to be used simply for traversal. They were rather small in stature, unlike those of our race. The traders had called them 'hoomans' and said they were vicious and not to be trusted.

However, when seen face-to-face, they hardly looked

threatening. They were slender and emaciated, and rather small in stature. Their clothes were in bad shape; dusty and torn in some places.

I gave them glad tidings. They looked around and I could tell they were impressed with the scenery. One of them tried to climb one of the fruit trees. A group of two hoomans were standing by the door of one of the hill-homes, staring with wide eyes. A creature wearing a strange, black vest called them together and then walked up to me. He had a shiny badge that I guessed designated him as the higher authority among the group. It spoke in a language neither of us had ever heard.

“What do you think it is saying?” my friend asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “But they seem rather... disconcerted. Maybe we should introduce them to our city.”

“That is a bad idea! The tradesmen told us they are ‘not to be trusted!’”

“Oh, come now. They look harmless.” I did not see why my friend was concerned; we were much taller than they, and they had only two arms and no exoskeleton as we did

“Very well, but if they turn on us it will be your fault.”

“Understood,” I said, though I doubted they would try to do any damage.

We showed them the various buildings and monuments to try to help them understand our history and culture. They

looked fascinated. I heard them conversing among themselves as they looked on.

I looked back at the creatures. They seemed anxious.

“Our guests seem troubled. What do you suppose is wrong?” I asked my friend.

“Maybe they are tired after walking for most of the day,” he replied.

I looked up and noticed that our twin moons were coming out. “Indeed, it is getting late. Perhaps we should give our visitors a place to stay?”

“Very well, they can stay with you. My house is much too small to accommodate them.”

As my friend and I parted ways, I brought the hoomans to my home so they could rest for the night. After some muttered conversation, they accepted my invitation and came inside.

When I woke up the next morning, I went to check on my guests and found that they had left.

At about that time, my friend came to the door to check on the hoomans. When I told him they had left, he said that they were probably back at their spacecraft. We went to see if they were doing well.

Once we got close to the craft, we heard a loud yelp. We looked and saw one of the hoomans perched over a creature, with a sharp blade in its hand. The creature was being attacked, and we rushed over to stop it. I looked down

and saw that the victim was a gromlahn which, when tamed, make excellent household companions.

“See? I told you they were dangerous!” my friend said accusingly.

“Well, perhaps it is excusable where they’re from,” I replied.

I tried to explain that our customs disallowed the killing of innocent animals, but it didn’t seem to understand.

My friend used primitive hand gestures to convey the message, pointing at the knife in the hooman’s hand and then at the ground. It dropped the weapon.

My friend then pointed at the animal, then at the spacecraft, and finally at the sky.

The being gave a worried look and went back to its craft.

I could hear conversation coming from inside. My friend and I walked over. The creatures sounded upset.

“Come look at this,” my friend said. He was looking through the window of the craft. I walked over.

“What’s it holding?” he asked. The hooman seemed to be handling a strange device.

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “What do you think it is?”

“It looks like some kind of weapon.” he replied. “Do you think they intend harm to us?”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“Perhaps, though the thought disgusts me, killing

animals is a common practice on their planet. They might not appreciate being barred from it here.”

“That’s outlandish. I’m sure that they will soon realize that such actions are not necessary, and learn to give it up.”

We walked back into the city. I did not believe that they would harm us over our laws and customs, but my friend’s concern did have a base. We had been told that the hoomans tended towards violence, and that a troop of them had devastated a Naboorian village. As my friend and I separated and I walked home alone, I began to feel genuinely worried despite my outward confidence.

I woke up the next day to a very loud knocking. Someone was at my door.

I opened the door and saw that it was my friend. He looked horrified, and was breathing heavily. “A disaster has befallen us!” he yelled.

“Indeed?” I asked, calmly. It was very common for him to fret over small and irrational things.

“The hoomans attacked Sector 13! They did a huge amount of damage!”

“Oh, no...”

My calm turned into a combination of confusion and anger. I could not understand why they would have done such a terrible thing.

“The officials are holding a meeting to discuss what we should do about them, and they want you to attend,” my friend

said.

In our city, our residential areas were split into sectors. The overseer of each cluster would be asked to attend meetings. I was the overseer of Sector 26, so I would have to come as well.

“Yes, ok,” I replied, dazed and in shock.

I walked over to the capitol building in the middle of the city. I took my seat and joined the discussion.

“These creatures are dangerous! We cannot allow them to cause any more damage!” said the Sector 18 overseer.

“What should we do?” said another overseer. His badge said he was from Sector 8.

“We have to get them off this planet! They are a danger to our society!”

It was at this point that I entered the conversation. “We can’t do that!” I said.

“And why not?” asked Sector 18.

“They don’t have warp technology like we do, and all other inhabited planets are light years away! They would starve to death before they got to Kaavish!”

“Then so be it!”

“It would be a death sentence! You know that killing other species is against our customs!”

“We have no choice! We must send them away from us before they cause more harm!”

“Are you suggesting we break our ancient philosophy?”

“Order!” said a very loud voice. It was the Supreme Judge, the head of the city. “Since we cannot seem to come to a definitive conclusion, we shall take a vote. Sector 1, what do you say? Should we cast off the hoomans, or let them stay?”

“I say we make them leave!” she said. “No benefit will come from allowing them to stay.”

“Sector 2, what is your vote?”

“Though I do not like these ‘hoomans’, Sector 26 does have a point. We must not break our own customs; however, they should definitely be put in some form of restraint.”

“Sector 3, what is your vote?”

“Get them out of here! They’re a menace to society!”

On it went. Each official gave their vote except for the Sector 13 official, who was absent. Finally, I was asked to cast my vote.

“Sector 26. The committee is divided. Your vote will decide whether the hoomans will stay or go. What is your choice?” asked the Supreme Judge.

There was a long silence. This was a very heavy decision. What I said could significantly change the future of our civilization.

The silence grew more intense. It felt as though the whole universe was holding its breath.



# **Made You Look**

*2<sup>nd</sup> Place  
Middle School Entry  
by Patrizia Manziano*



*“A clown. Elders say it liked to roam around town for days—even weeks—while spotting the perfect victim and plotting its entry. At dawn, with a frown. He made his move and took the child. It ran and never was found. By the time anyone noticed the absence of a young body, it was long gone. It made no sound—”* Vanessa shut the newspaper and hopped off the bench where she was stationed. She simply loved entertaining herself with the town’s cheesy legends. The town’s traditional stories were one of her favorite time-killers. She loved the thrill, the suspense, the excitement, and the shiver they sent down her spine. Of course, she knew that none of them were remotely true because they were only folktales and nothing more.

It was a beautiful day in Knoxville, Tennessee. Rays of sunshine weaved through the leaves of tree canopies. The aroma of dried pumpkins and the sound of crunching leaves reigned in the air. A light, soothing breeze danced with Vanessa’s golden locks. Her blue eyes sparkled in the sunlight as she glanced around looking for house 57313, which she was to babysit that evening. The mansion belonged to the parents of Tommy and Jamie Rogers. Vanessa had babysat them several times before, but this time, in contrast, she was sleeping overnight due to the fact that their parents wouldn’t be back until dawn.

*Ding, dong!* The doorbell shrieked. “Vanessa!” Mrs. Rogers answered immediately, “so nice to see you again, honey! I’m

sorry I can't stay and chat for a bit; we're going to a salsa-dancing party! The instructions for the night are on the fridge. Thank you so much for doing us this favor!" The Rogers waved goodbye and they were out the door.

"Have fun!" Vanessa screamed after their car before the engine crackle became just a distant rumble. Then, she greeted the kids—who happily hugged her—and headed over to the kitchen to read the directions for the night. As promised, on the fridge was a note unmistakably written by Mrs. Rogers.

*Hey Vanessa! Follow these instructions and you'll get through the night just fine! 😊*

*~Kids must be tucked in bed no later than 8:30 and don't allow them to eat too much candy!*

*~Your room is the last door on the east corridor of the third floor*

*~Concerns? Call us! Make yourself at home, dear!*

*Thanks again!*

At the lower left corner of the paper was a \$50 bill attached by a paperclip. Vanessa smiled. She felt so incredibly lucky to know people as generous and compassionate as the Rogers. *Thump!* Vanessa whirled around at the sudden sound of a thud behind her head. When she turned back she found a clown nose on the table. Across its sleek surface and written in black marker were three words: "Made you look." She giggled

aloud. *The kids are trying to play funny, huh?* she thought.

Vanessa prepared some glittery crafts for the youngsters and a snack for herself. She dug her index finger into the corner of the Doritos bag, not wanting to waste even the smallest amount of chips. She slumped down on the couch to watch the news. However, her attention wasn't focused on the boring afternoon broadcast. Instead, she listened intently to the strange, yet humorous, conversation the kids were having.

“Do you like clowns?” Tommy asked Jamie.

“No, but I know they like me because their always near me,” Jamie replied faintly. “Do you like clowns, Tommy?”

“No! They're scawwwy!” he cried out. Vanessa chuckled. What silly kids!

Suddenly, a loud thunder clap and lighting lit up the living room and startled everyone in it. Tommy and Jamie screamed in unison. “How lovely; a thunderstorm! C'mon kids let's get y'all to bed.” She carried Jamie over her right shoulder and guided Tommy, who was numbingly walking beside her, to their luxurious bedrooms. After completing this task; she walked over to the guest room intending to put away her belongings. Her eyes widened in amazement at the sight of her room for the night. Silky curtains cascaded from the high ceilings to the polished floors. There was a mahogany desk, nightstand, and table; each with an intricate design carved on the side. On each

elevated surface there was at least one vase of flowers. As a result, the room was tinted with the divine fragrance of roses and tulips. *This room is bigger than my parents' house*, she thought to herself. She twirled around like a happy dancer on stage. A smudge of pink in her peripheral vision caught her attention and caused her to look at the bed, which she hadn't had time to examine, yet. There were several petals of roses on her bed; they spelled out a phrase. She experienced a déjà vu when she read it: "Made you look." Confused, she blinked a couple times and scanned the room to find the one responsible for the message. She was beginning to get worried. This wasn't a funny joke anymore. To clear her thoughts, she decided to explore every corner of the bedroom. She squealed in excitement, "This should be fun!"

Vanessa began her exploration by opening the first door, which lead to a humongous bathroom. She whistled in awe. She continued to search for hours, letting out *ooh's* and *ahh's* whenever she stumbled across something interesting. When she opened the closet door, her hand flew up to her chest. There, standing perfectly still in the middle of the wardrobe, was a clown statue; a hideous one. It had a big red mouth and a round nose. Its face was paper-white, and its eyes glimmered with a realistic shimmer. A stitched-up scar slashed from its left temple to the near corner of its eye. Its appearance made the hair on the back of Vanessa's neck stand. Lines from the article of the legend column popped into her head and sent a cold tin-

gle down her back. As much as it pained her, she simply could not sleep in the same room as that thing. No way.

Consequently, she rushed down the stairs skipping two steps at a time. She quickly dialed Mrs. Rogers' cell phone number. *Ring...ring...ring*. After several rings, the line went dead. Determined, Vanessa tried once more. *Ring...ring...*

"Hello?" Mrs. Rogers shouted over an extremely noisy crowd.

"Hi, Mrs. Rogers! Sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if I could sleep in a different room tonight, please?" she pleaded.

"Sure, but why?" Mrs. Rogers asked her in a kind voice; as always.

"Cuz the creepy clown statue in the closet is kind of freakin' me ou—"

"GET OUT OF THE HOUSE! GET THE KIDS AND RUN, NOW! GET OUT!" All of the sudden her sweet tone impulsively evolved into an urgent, panicked howl.

"What?! Why?!" Vanessa gasped for breath desperately.

"WE DON'T HAVE A CLOWN STATUE!" Mrs. Rogers hollered into the phone. Vanessa's eyes widened and her blood turned icy cold. Her knuckles turned white as her grip on the phone tightened immensely. She thought back to the kids' silly

conversation; they weren't being senseless.

*Thump!* The redundant thud snapped Vanessa back to reality and out of her inner trance. She was fast lightning running to the children's room. Once outside in the pouring rain, she reached for the hands of the children, but only met Jamie's. A mix of perspiration and rain droplets trickled their way down the back of Vanessa. "TOMMY!" she shouted desperately. A shriek followed by tears escaped from Jamie's mouth. A dark silhouette was now standing by the window. Its frizzy bush-like hair confirmed it was the clown. It was not a statue. A panicked scream echoed from the house, and Vanessa's knees hit the ground. Besides the clown was a small boy...9-1-1.

Neighbors had already noticed the commotion and rushed out of their homes to see if they could be of any help. Vanessa left Jamie in the arms of one of the neighbors and sprinted into the house without even thinking of the consequences. She repeatedly murmured to herself, "I have to save Tommy. It's my fault. I left him in there." She burst into the room and her heart shattered into a million pieces. Tommy wasn't bawling. He was blankly staring ahead, and when Vanessa appeared a single tear slid down his cheek. His fragile throat was enclosed in the huge hands of the clown. A wide smile spread across the clown's ugly face. No one moved, no one spoke, no one blinked. The three just gazed at each other.

The silence was broken by a screeching siren and then

by the door swinging open ferociously. A dozen police officers broke into the room with their guns held high, and behind them stood Mrs. Rogers. Huge tears accelerated down her bluffed cheeks, and mascara ran all the way to her chin. Mr. Rogers hugged her from behind, and the ire in his eyes radiating towards the clown was almost tangible. The clown was still smiling as if there weren't fatal weapons pointing at his head. "If I were you I wouldn't come any closer," the clown taunted them joyfully. Amongst the crowd, a police officer's gun clicked; meaning it was loaded. Out of the blue, the clown nodded towards the door and whispered, "Look."

Everyone looked: Mr. and Mrs. Rogers, Vanessa, and the cops. Big mistake. In the blink of an eye, all that was left of the clown was a colorful wig. In between the tangled strands of hair was a note with a three-worded message: "Made you look."

Vanessa lunged towards petrified Tommy who had seen his seven years of life flash before his eyes just moments ago. His parents joined in from above. All the officers rushed past the huddled family and got to hunting down the killer clown. Vanessa still wondered, *will they ever catch the clown?*

"I—I should have listened t—to them," Mrs. Rogers managed to cry out in between sobs. "For months they've been—*sniff*—warning me about this. I told them it was just—*sniff*—a dream and that they were reading too many scary stories!" Before anyone knew it Mrs. Rogers was back-tracking to the past

three months.

“Mommy!” Jamie had pleaded and stomped on the floor, “there’s this ugly clown watching me sleep. I don’t like it one bit!”

“Don’t worry Jamieboo! It’s just a tiny nightmare! You sure need to stop taking Daddy’s newspapers and reading those stories!” her mom had assured her.

“Mommy, when you’re at work someone plays weird carnival music,” Tommy had protested a couple weeks later, “it’s scaawwwwy!”

“Oh Tommy, it’s just your wild imagination!” his mom had chuckled.

Speaking in present tense once again, Mrs. Rogers cried, “This is all my—*sniff*—fault!” The rest of the crowd told her otherwise and comforted her.

Meanwhile, the cops called back-up and attempted to track down the clown. They searched churches, behind clock towers, under playgrounds, and in bushes; all in vain. Later that night, Mr. Rogers received a call from the police department. They hadn’t found the clown. Not even the K-9 Unit dogs managed to pick up a scent that related to the wig it left behind.

“Daddy,” Tommy whimpered, “it gave me this.” Tommy held out his hand where a crumbled paper laid. In messy scribbles, it wrote, *“I made you look...and you looked. You will continue looking. Why? Well, because I will make you look.”* Vanessa cringed at the unpleasantly familiar words.

“It made me look,” Vanessa mumbled, so her words were inaudible to the others.

Mr. Rogers spent a big share of his dollars to fund a search for the wicked clown. The police department looked for months and found nothing. The incident was the public’s talk for many weeks. As time went by though, the quests and discussions gradually dwindled.

The years passed and soon after, the Rogers case became just one more story for the legends’ column of the paper. But what is a legend if not a true story that was forgotten?

*A clown. Long scar, fake smile, big nose, no heart. At dawn, with a frown. As thunder rumbled, it immaculately covered its tracks for the wrong that it had done. It ran and never was found. Its skills and strategic moves only improving after each prey. It made no sound. One night he made a mistake and was found. He made them look. Human curiosity is to blame for his escape because of course, they had to turn. They grabbed on to his hook because, after all, they always do.*



# **Butterfly Bones**

*3<sup>rd</sup> Place  
Middle School Entry  
by Nadia Leiby*



Silky, liquefied fabric ran across my hands like white sand. Opalescent purples and vivid reds filled the circular metal racks, lining up in neat little rows. Angry soldiers stabbed at the lining of my stomach with heated iron rods. The creamy vanilla scent of the perfume department set up camp in my nostrils, making each prod and poke burn like a flame melting me like candlewax from the inside out. I coughed to cover up the deep rumble that was emitted from my midsection. *Not hungry nothungry NOTHUNGRY.*

The shrill sound of Alice shrieking made me jump out of my skin casing. She clip-clopped over to me in her kitten heels with five dresses slung over the crook of her elbow. She grabbed onto my arm, her fake fingernails sinking into my flesh like a cat's claws.

"Freya! Look at this!" she squealed, holding out the first dress with a flourish. Turquoise sequins glittered like stars on a sheer green mesh material. The size on the tag jumped out at me like a haunted house attraction: zero.

No weight, no worries, and no virginity. Three things Alice didn't have that I did. Her small, birdlike frame was perfect for miniskirts and muscular boys. Chestnut hair flowed down her back and cascaded past her perky breasts. A butt made for skinny jeans and yoga pants sat atop long, toned legs. She could wear anything, eat anything, and do anything she want-

ed. I was a whale in her presence.

“Look at what I found for you!” she exclaimed. Alice only had one volume, and that volume was ear-shattering. She fished around in her pile and pulled out a floor-length, fuchsia gown. She shoved it towards me, her smile flashing into my eyes like August sunshine. It physically hurt to look at her. Bats beat around in my skull as I took the satin dress from her hands. I couldn’t look at it. I couldn’t see what I already knew. I imagined the number on the tag. Bigger than Alice, bigger than the obese woman eating candy at the check-out counter, and bigger than the lump in my throat and the ice in my veins. Pushing me towards the dressing room, Alice jabbered in my ear about how amazing I’ll look at homecoming.

She shoved me into the compact space, the *shiiing* of metal against metal ringing in my ears as she closed the faux-velvet curtain. “I can’t wait to see it!” she cried.

I took a deep breath and began to undress. I was shedding my layers, shedding my skin, shedding my protection and innocence and empathy. The girl in the mirror stared back at me with empty eyes and hollow bones. I looked her over, going down the list of every flaw that she possessed. Hips too wide, sausage fingers, and thighs that jiggled and squished as she moved. I ran my hands over the soft, glistening fur that

enveloped my body. The 360-degree mirrors highlighted every single thing wrong with me, causing tears to spring into my eyes. Rivers flooded my cheeks and trickled down my chin like summer rain.

“Freya, are you doing alright in there?” Alice asked. She peeked her head inside the curtain and a dramatic gasp escaped her lips. Classic Alice.

She slipped into the small room and stood in the corner, looking me over. Humiliated, I covered my chest with crossed arms; I couldn’t look at her. I felt ashamed.

“Freya...” Alice murmured. It was the lowest I’d ever heard her voice drop in the ten years that I’d known her.

“I know,” I whispered, my voice cracking. “I’m a fat cow.”

Alice looked at me in disbelief. She covered her mouth with her hand, shaking her head. I watched her voluptuous hair bounce flawlessly in her reflection. “Are you kidding me? Freya, I can count your ribs. You look like an orphan during the Great Depression.”

“Don’t you see?” I sobbed. “I’m an elephant! There’s fat everywhere!” I pointed at my arms, my chin, and – God help me – my awful, tree-trunk thighs. Snot ran down my face and spit flew out of my mouth as I screamed out every place that

needed improvement.

“Stop!” Alice shouted. I bit my lip and whimpered, shoulders shaking. Why was it so damn *cold* in there? Alice pulled me into a hug, putting a hand on my head. When she pulled back, there was a look of horror on her face.

*She’s disgusted. She could feel your Pillsbury Dough-boy fat rolls and your disgusting yellow pudge encompassing your bones you’re worthless you’re gross you’re ugl—*

“Freya,” she breathed. She opened up her balled fist and I inhaled sharply at what she held. Someone’s hair. No, *my* hair. I touched the back of my head and felt more fall into my hands. It was brittle and thin and it only made me cry harder.

“Now I’m fat *and* bald!” I wailed, slumping against the bumpy plaster wall. Hunger demons burned bright in my stomach and I doubled over, almost knocked out by the pain. I hadn’t eaten more than 1,000 calories in five days. Alice put her hand on my shoulder, fingers tensing as she felt the knobby bones under her skin.

“You’re not fat,” she told me, staring into my eyes. “You’re not even *healthy*. Why are you doing this to yourself? How did it get this bad?”

I shook my head, looking down at the floor. I ran my hands along my diaphragm, feeling every rib pass my fingertips like piano keys. I forced myself to meet Alice's eyes, but the dizziness I suddenly felt was overwhelming. I staggered and she supported me, her concern obvious on her perfectly painted face. Then I felt it. It was as if Satan himself had reached into my chest and grabbed ahold of my heart. He squeezed and squeezed and squeezed until –

*Ms. Freya Thomas, 15, was shopping for homecoming dresses, accompanied by fellow sophomore Alice Wendle when she went into cardiac arrest on October 19<sup>th</sup>. Autopsy reports show that she was extremely dehydrated and severely malnourished. Thomas had been battling anorexia nervosa, although knowledge of her illness was kept within her immediate family. "I didn't even notice how skinny she was until I saw her in the dressing room," Wendle told reporters. "It was terrifying. I knew right then that something was wrong. I just can't believe I was too late."*

*The Thomas family could not be reached for comment. A source close to the family states that they are "reeling from the loss of their eldest daughter". Once again, there is another life lost due to this crippling mental illness – read more about anorexia nervosa on page 3.*



# **Hector Ruled the Moon**

*4<sup>th</sup> Place Runner Up  
Middle School Entry  
by Zora Grace*



Hector sat in the field, letting the grass cover his legs like a blanket. He stared up at the night sky, transfixed by the constellations. He had thought he knew what all of them meant, but upon meeting Rachel, had learned that he did not. Now the only one he knew for certain was the little dipper, Ursa Minor. Little Bear. At least that's what Rachel had told him. To someone else it might be different. Hector had not quite decided what it was to him yet.

His donkey and faithful travel companion, Pokey, breathed gently behind him, onto his messy dark brown hair. The sound of it mixed in with the wind rustling the trees, creating an extreme sense of calm. A simple melody floated out of his wooden guitar. Even though it was the middle of June, Hector was cold. He was always cold. If he sat in one place too long, the grass would start to freeze. This unique skill created a lot of awkward situations at dinner parties. He went to a lot of them anyway. He wished he didn't, but it's kind of hard to avoid them when your dad owns the moon. Hector changed his gaze now, down to the large lake. He could see the reflection of his cargo in it. The glistening white balloon which was tied around Pokey's middle with some rope. Beautifully it illuminated the dusky blanket, making the stars seem dim in comparison. It hung there in the sky, round and smooth, as if nothing had ever touched it. Hector was waiting.

Rachel was late. Once again she had woken up to a room full of empty bunk beds and a black sky. Well, almost all empty. Lilly was asleep in her usual spot. Her face was completely covered by her long blonde hair. This was a good thing for Rachel, because Lilly wasn't exactly wonderful in the mornings. Lilly's shift had been picked up by Claire, so she could go see her boyfriend in the morning while the rest of them slept. Rachel hadn't thought much of her late waking, the gorgeous sunrise that she had stayed up to watch was worth it! Until she remembered that this was the day. Her oversized t-shirt and flannel shorts were replaced with an orange blouse and a red skirt in a blink. She threw her long, auburn hair into a ponytail and slipped just the tips of her sockless toes into a pair of sneakers, which she wasn't even entirely certain were even hers. The only other person's they could be were Lilly's, and what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her! She grabbed her paint and paintbrush and hurried out the door.

She ran down the street, looking down every road to see bright lampposts shining back at her. She really was late. She made her way to her first lamppost. And there, she did something quite impossible. She flung the contents of her bucket into the air, being careful not to use too much, and her warm yellow, glowing paint stuck there, as if it had hit a wall. Her hazel eyes glinted in the dim light. She then took

her paintbrush and spread it evenly, until it looked like it could be a beam of light on a street corner. A very disheveled one at that, but a beam of light all the same. Tonight, her craft lacked her normal precision. She was usually very careful to make it look perfect, but tonight you could make out her thick brush strokes if you looked close enough. She proceeded to the next light and did the exact same thing. Her work just kept getting sloppier and sloppier, but who cared, she was making record time! As she flew by each one of her stops, she passed several girls she knew from the boarding school. There was Libby, who was desperately trying to paint little dots of luminescence on every individual lightening bug. Rachel never valued her position more than when she saw Libby struggling to catch them all. She also passed Allison and Lena, who were eating junk food on a bench outside of CVS. Why not stall? They only had to get dew on the grass by five A.M. Painting the streets was really fun and all, but Rachel always longed to be up with her parents, painting the stars.

She looked up to see tiny dots of radiance popping up all over the darkness. She smiled as she noticed Ursa Minor. “Little bear” was what her parents had called her as a little girl, and every night, she liked to think that they painted it in the sky for her. The unusually bright moon peeked over the top of the park sign. Towering the trees, high it hung in the sky. The

sound of music guided Rachel into the green field.

Hector was now resting on a frosty patch of long grass. Pokey's breath was visible in the warm summer air, and it came out cooler than it should have. Rachel spotted Hector and made her way over. She plopped herself right down next to him, and the frost began to melt. Rachel was always hot. She could never go swimming because the water would boil, and she could never play in the snow, because snow angels quickly turned into a mud fest. All of her relatives said she had a spirit like the sun. She wasn't sure if she believed them. She always thought of the sun as being better at math. And Latin. And not to mention that she never really pictured the sun as being the nocturnal type. She thought her spirit was more like a distant galaxy. Not all parts were discovered yet. Rachel looked at Hector, who looked down at his guitar and strummed. Hector stopped playing, and the park became dead silent. Then looked at her, with his deep blue eyes.

“Are you ready?” he asked. “Are you sure your dad's going to be okay with this?” Rachel asked, knowing that just by asking that, she was making this un-fun. “I mean, my dad goes away on business leaving me the moon. How can he expect me not to take someone up there?” Hector smirked.

“I guess it’s okay then.” Rachel added. She looked back at Pokey and the long rope leading from his middle to the sleek, marble-like moon. “Ladies first.” Hector set down his instrument and gestured to Pokey while bowing his head. Rachel laughed.

She laid one of her warm hands on Pokey, which startled him quite a bit because he kicked both of his back legs at the same time. Rachel moved her hand to his saddle and he calmed down a bit. She hoisted one leg onto him, then another, and grabbed hold of the loose rope. She had thought that it would be tighter, it holding the moon and all, but there was a lot of slack a fair amount of the way up. She wrapped herself around it and began to pull herself up, inch by inch. Hector followed closely behind her. “I thought it was Wednesday.” He called up to her. “What?” She asked, and then quickly understood. She blushed three shades of red. She was in such a hurry when she woke up, that she still had on her day of the week underwear, which had been accurate the day before. “Shut up!” she replied jokingly. Hector laughed. The sight of them was entirely extraordinary. Two kids silhouetted by the moonlight, and it almost looked like they were floating in mid-air. After about an hour of climbing and brief chatter with each other, they reached the top of the rope. The bright bulb of the celestial satellite hung in front of her. It was beautiful.

Rachel reached up and grabbed hold of what was a briefly cold surface. She hauled herself up to where she could see the rest of the surface. It was truly the prettiest thing that she had ever seen in her life. A snowy garden greeted Rachel's eager eyes. Hundreds of frozen plants dotted the top of the moon. Pink roses coated in ice. A little pond with immobile lily pads. Rachel raced around and tried to take everything in, while Hector pulled himself on to the ground. "You like it?" He asked while trying to catch his breath. "It's amazing!" Rachel cried in pure delight. Every step crunched under Hector's red converse. Rachel's steps sadly didn't crunch. Instead, they kind of squished. Winter crystals began accumulating on Hector's blue jeans and black sweatshirt. Meanwhile, every child who stayed up late or woke early, noticed them there. All of their mothers thought they were going insane when they started talking about "A man on the moon!". Rachel and Hector sat down together, one burning a hole in the ice and the other only making it stronger. Rachel was finally happy for the first time since her parents dumped her with all those girls she had nothing in common with in her horrible boarding school. Rachel rested her head on Hector's shoulder keeping it free of any wintery substance and stared into the stars.

After a while, the sun began to come up, and Rachel decided that they'd better head back down. And after what seemed like even more time spent on the rope, they were on the boring, normal ground again, and away from the frozen

grace of the moon. Rachel wanted one last peek at it, and when she looked up, she grimaced. Dark spots from where she had melted the winter wonderland were everywhere. Now instead of completely smooth, it almost looked rocky. “Uh, Hector.” she pointed towards the moon. Hector tried to keep his facial expressions under control, even though he was freaking out inside. “Is it gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’ll be fine!”

“Is your dad gonna be okay?”

“Of course!” Hector nervously ran his fingers through his hair.

“I made it look so ugly!”

“No! No!” Hector scratched his head. He squinted and tilted his neck about 90 degrees. “See, Rachel! It looks okay! And if you squint really hard, it almost looks like a face! He’ll never notice!” Rachel mirrored Hector. A confused expression spread across Rachel’s face. Hector tilted her neck as far as it would possibly go without snapping. “It kind of does....” Still saying this with quite a bit of uncertainty in her tone. “I should probably head back to the school.” If Hector’s dad came home right that second, there was no way she was going to let herself be on the wrong end of that conversation. “Bye!” Hector called as Rachel skipped back out of the park and up the street, illuminated by only the early morning light. The glimmering, newly spread dew, courtesy of Allison and Lena, shimmered with the

new sun's offerings. Her mind was still racing with all of the fantastic things she had seen. Hector walked over to Pokey, and began leading him over to a tree, where he leaned against it and closed his eyes. Frost crept up the bark.

Rachel returned to her dorm, to find every single bunk bed full , except for Lilly. She returned her pair of shoes to their spot by the door. Silently, she crept over to her spot away from everybody else in the corner, so nobody would get too warm sleeping near her. Before her pajamas were even on, she was in bed. She rolled onto her stomach, pulled the covers over her head, and dreamt of the moon.

# **Glass and Thorns**

*5<sup>th</sup> Place Runner Up  
Middle School Entry  
by Katie Bushman*



They could have lived happily ever after, had they only loved each other.

It wasn't that they disliked each other. They just weren't in love. True, he was everything a prince ought to be – charming and handsome – and she was everything his bride ought to be – kind and beautiful – but she found him far too reckless, and he found her far too quiet.

When she had arrived at the ball, her gown made of spun silver and her shoes of starlight, he was intrigued. When he saw her the second night, he was entranced. When she fled down the staircase the third night, leaving behind one perfect glass slipper and vanishing into the moonlight, he was love struck. But when a shy scullery maid produced the matching slipper and rode home on the back of his horse, never saying a word, he wondered if he had fallen in love with the idea of the mysterious maiden in shining shoes instead of the real girl.

She thought he was nice enough, that first night. He'd asked to dance with her. No one had ever wanted to dance with her before, let alone a prince. The next night, she donned the too-tight gown and shoes that pinched once again. This time the prince danced with no one else the whole night, and she didn't have the heart to tell him that her slippers gave her blisters so painful she could barely walk. The third night, as she sprinted down the steps of the palace, she kicked off

a shoe. The other she tucked away in her tiny closet, a last shining memory of the nights she danced with royalty. She had thought it was over until the prince's court knocked on her door. She had brought out the other tiny glass slipper, and her stepsisters had howled in fury as she rode off with the prince.

The court was far too loud and crowded for her tastes. She found herself donning simpler clothes and hiding down in the kitchens. The prince spent days hunting and drinking, surrounded by a pack of adoring courtiers. He hardly talked to his bride-to-be, nor she to him.

They played the part of happy couple well, kissing at the engagement party and making polite yet awkward conversation at the dinner table. The rest of the court, including the king and queen, bought it, but the prince and his bride could not play it well enough to fool themselves.

A fortnight before the wedding, the prince went a-hunting for wild boars and stags. He bade farewell to his bride-to-be with a kiss and they both forced smiles. When a day had passed and he had still not returned, she thought nothing of it. When a week had gone by and he was not back, she was worried. The day that should have been their wedding day, a search party was sent out. The prince and his hunting party had disappeared without a trace, and after a month of futile searching, hope was given up.

She did not cry for the man she did not love. Her eyes remained dry as the empty casket was lowered into the earth. When she was alone, though, she wept for herself. She did not know what would become of her, the serving girl who had been engaged to the dead prince, and she was afraid.

The first village was attacked a week later. Buildings were burned, homes ransacked. Wide-eyed witnesses spoke of a hulking beast with twisted claws and curling horns. A second village was raided, then a third. The kingdom was plunged into terror. When the beast pillaged the fourth he left a message gouged on the side of a building: *GIVE ME THE PRINCE'S BRIDE.*

The court assured the would-be princess that she was safe, that they would never turn her over. She trusted them, but she would not live with the guilt of knowing she could stop the beast. She stole a horse in the night and galloped into the forest, not knowing where she was going, but having faith that the beast would find her. And find her he did. Shadowy figures – wolves? Something else? - herded her towards a crumbling fortress covered in thorny briars.

She creaked the door open, a carpet of dust and cobwebs muffling her footsteps. She called a greeting, and did not get so much as an echo in reply. An unseen hand slammed the door behind her, and she shivered. She stood with one hand against the wall, waiting for the dawn or her death,

whichever came first.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed down the spiraling staircase as the first light of dawn snaked underneath the doorway. She stiffened and turned, slowly, slowly, her breath catching in her throat as she caught sight of the figure lumbering down the stairs, and still she was not afraid. The beast's tusks and horns were sharp and menacing, his shaggy fur matted and singed, and yet there was compassion to his eyes, a strange humanness in his gaze.

"I've come," she said, her voice barely trembling.

"As I requested." His voice was deep and gravelly, and she blinked. She had not expected him to talk.

She stepped closer. "I am ready. Whatever you might do to me, I am ready."

The beast laughed, a chilling, bestial laugh. "Do you think I am going to eat you?" It was exactly what she thought, but she said nothing.

The beast bowed to her, deep and formal. "No, Your Highness, I will not eat you. My servants will show you to your rooms. I will meet you in the banquet hall for dinner." He disappeared back up the stairs, leaving the almost princess staring up after him.

She could not see the servants, but gentle breezes

guided her towards an upstairs chamber. It was lavish in an empty, unused way, with a bed that had clearly never been laid in. A red rose lay on a side table, its long stem covered in sharp, wicked-looking thorns.

She carefully lay on the bed and let sleep overcome her until she was awoken by an invisible hand. It lead her down a maze of corridors until she came to a room containing a long table piled with food. The beast sat at the head of the table, alone. He motioned for her to sit at the other end, and she did.

He did not say anything as the invisible servants loaded decadent dishes onto their plates. He did not say anything as the prince's bride pecked at her food and he wolfed down his. He did not say anything for the entire dinner, and neither did she.

It was the same the day after, and the day after that. Meals spent in silent company with the beast, days spent wandering the halls without even knowing what she was looking for. She explored ballrooms and libraries, and on warmer days, the grounds and gardens.

Two weeks after she had come, she found the beast in the rose garden, gently watering the bushes. There was tenderness in his movements, the way he stroked the leaves and patted down the damp soil. Strange to think that a beast as terrifying as he could be so gentle. It took him a moment to

notice her, and when he did, he smiled.

“Do you like the roses?” he asked. He broke one off and gave it to her, and she stammered a thank you. That night, they spoke at dinner – a real conversation. He asked if she was comfortable. She said yes, of course, thank you very much. He asked if she missed the palace, if she mourned her prince. She said no, and sometimes. He stopped talking.

The next night, however, they talked again. And the next day they visited the library and read books of poetry for hours, and a week later he showed her how to tend the roses. As she fell asleep one night, she thought about how much nicer he was to her than the prince had ever been. She immediately chastised herself. The prince was dead, and the beast was a monster. She couldn't feel this way.

But as the days bled into weeks and months, her heart warmed even more to the beast, and she realized that she was happier than she had ever been. It couldn't last, of course. Once she had been there almost six months, a squadron of soldiers snuck out of the woods, surrounding the palace. Whether they were there to hunt down the beast or to rescue her, she did not know. She begged the beast to stay inside, to stay safe, but he would not listen. He told her that they would find their way in whatever he did, and he might as well go down fighting.

Tears streamed down her face as she watched her beast go to the doorway and bellow a challenge at the soldiers, and when the first one raised his musket, she realized that she could not live without her beast. She flung herself in front of him, shielding his body with her own. The soldiers halted. They could not shoot her, the former princess.

“Your Highness!” one called. “Run! Save yourself!”

She held her chin high and spoke like she was still royalty. “I shall not move. I shall not allow you to shoot him. He may be a beast, but he is not a monster.” She hesitated. “He may be a beast, but I am still in love with him.”

When the soldiers gasped, their eyes wide, she thought it was in horror at her confession. But when one cried out, “Your Highness! Your Highness, you’re alive!” she turned to face her beast – and found him gone. In his place was her prince, eyes bright and locked on hers.

“You...” she breathed. “Beast?”

He gripped her shoulders. “I was cursed,” he said. “A witch transformed me into a beast, the enchantment only to be broken by true love. I didn’t think it would be you at first, but it was.” He grinned at her and brushed away a tear she didn’t know she had shed.

Her prince and beast leaned down to kiss her, and for the first time, she kissed him back.



## **Middle School Honorable Mentions**



# **With Love**

*Honorable Mention  
Middle School Entry  
by Adithi Ramakrishnan*



Volunteering was certainly not Eric's forte, and yet he found himself at the contribution booth for Hearts of America, scrounging for service hours, on a chilly Sunday morning with a fur coat and a low level of determination. The chap on the shift before him, Brian, gave him a quick summary of the ropes before unceremoniously departing. "No personalized cards or letters to soldiers. Put donations in this bag"—he gestured to a small glass jar in one of the stand drawers—"and hand each contributor this." A stack of papers was precariously balanced on the table. An eagle and a thank you message were printed on each sheet.

Eric watched as Brian held his coat close to his chest and stumbled down the icy pavement. He shivered as he consulted his watch and ran a frigid hand across his graying hair. For the next hour and a half—every Sunday for the next two months—he would find himself in this same position, waiting for donations that would never come in weather that would never cease.

The hours trickled by, and eventually Eric found himself handing off to the next unsuspecting volunteer. Like Brian, he wrapped his coat around him and called for a taxi.

The following week, when Eric staggered down the road coated in slick ice, he saw Brian deep in conversation with a young girl. She stood on tiptoe to reach the stand, curling her gloved hands around the booth.

Careful not to surrender himself to the snow, Eric hurried down the path to the stand. Brian caught his eye and breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank heaven,” he said. “Perhaps *you* can talk some sense into her.” He gestured to the little girl, who watched the proceedings with almond eyes.

Appearing gratified, Brian bounded down the streets, leaving Eric alone with a girl who didn’t appear to be older than nine.

He made his way inside the booth and monotonously rattled his script to her. “Would you like to contribute to the Hearts of America Foundation and help those serving in the armed forces?”

She bit her lip. “Well, yes,” she responded, fishing around in her coat pockets. She pulled out a meager sum of coins. “This is for my dad. He’s in...” she thought deeply for a moment. “Iraq.”

Eric, at a loss for words, watched her eyes widen. “Sorry,” he said. “We can’t send this to your father.” He reached for the coins as he spoke. “But Hearts of America helps all soldiers. Don’t you want to help other dads?”

Stubbornly, the girl snatched the coins back and spirited them away into her pocket. “Sure I do,” she retorted. “But this is for *my* dad!” Without another word, she made her way down the other end of the sidewalk. Eric watched her

go, somewhat saddened, knowing her situation couldn't be helped.

However, the very next week, he watched her make her way once again down the sidewalk, first slipping on a sheet of ice, before stopping at the booth. The same coins shook in her pocket.

“Will you help me today?” she demanded.

Eric scrambled for a reply. “What’s your name?”

“Molly.” She paused for a moment before interjecting, “Molly Hatcher. My dad’s name is Jakob Hatcher.” She set the coins on the table, then reached into her pocket for something more. She retrieved a hand-drawn card from her other pocket and placed it on top of the coin pile. “I made it myself.”

Eric picked up the card and inspected it. *I miss you, Dad*, Molly’s untidy scrawl proclaimed on the front. He scanned the note on the inside:

*Dear Dad,*

*How are you? It’s been exactly 342 days since I saw you; I’ve been counting. How is life in the army? Is it tiring? Do you get a lot of sleep? Do you jump on the beds like we used to? Mom doesn’t let me do that anymore now that you’re gone; it’s not really fair.*

*I hope you have enough food to eat there. In case you*

*don't, I am sending thirty-six cents so you can buy some food.*

*Mom says she loves you and hopes you come home soon. She misses you a lot but I promise I miss you more.  
(Shh, don't tell her!)*

*Your Daughter,*

*Molly Alice Hatcher*

"I'm sorry," Eric said, handing the letter back to her. "I can't send this."

Molly's smile dissipated. "But why?" A tear made its way down her pale face.

"I..." Eric fumbled for a response. He couldn't make a promise he couldn't keep, but at the same time...

"Does your mom know that you're here?" he attempted.

Molly flushed. "Well... not really," she admitted, her hands inching towards the card on the booth table. "If you want, you could come with me and we could tell her together," she then suggested.

Eric smiled nervously. "I'm on a shift, Molly. I can't just *leave..*"

She shrugged. "That's okay. I can wait." She sat down on a nearby bench, humming 'My Country Tis of Thee' to her-

self.

Eric desperately attempted to distract Molly, but to no avail. He received no donations for the rest of his shift and was forced to follow the girl back to her house. They skipped through puddles of slushy snow as she spoke to him.

“It doesn’t look like you’re getting much money. Doesn’t anyone want to help dads and moms in the military?”

Eric shrugged. “It’s a choice everyone has to make for themselves. Don’t worry, we get by.”

Molly dipped her boots in a particularly intimidating puddle. “So, what do you do with all the money?”

Eric halted. He hadn’t quite thought of that one. “Well, we use it to provide soldiers with better food and clothing,” he explained. “Sometimes, we send cards from students”—he broke off abruptly when he realized the mistake he had made. “*Anonymous* cards. Students make cards for the soldiers, and we give each card to one.”

“But where’s the love?” Molly asked as an apartment complex began to come into view.

“The love?”

“Yeah, the love. See?” Molly held up her card, and only then did Eric notice the oddly red blotch on one corner of the paper. Molly giggled. “I stole some of Mom’s lipstick, but

it's okay. Now my card has love, because I kissed it. Now, when my dad opens it, he'll feel my love, even though we're far away."

Molly eagerly led Eric towards a small cluster of buildings. "We're here. We live on the first floor." Eric followed cautiously, checking his watch at regular intervals. What was he to do when he arrived?

Molly stopped in front of an aging door that barely clung to its hinges and banged the brass knocker. Eric heard the sound of someone stumbling to answer within the house.

The door swung open and a middle-aged woman greeted the two. Her eyes widened at the sight of both Molly and Eric. "Molly, you're late," she scolded, yanking the girl inside. Then, her gaze traveled to Eric. "And you're..."

"He's going to send a card to Dad," Molly explained patiently. "He told me that I needed su...su... *supervision*," she sounded out triumphantly. "I told him that he could ask you."

Molly's mother sighed. "I... you should come inside," she told Eric. "I'm Sarah. Sarah Hatcher. We... we need to speak."

Sarah ushered both Molly and Eric in and closed the door behind them.

Sarah guided Eric to a fragile table which quivered as

she placed mugs of tea on it. Molly scampered into her room, humming a song to herself. As soon as she was gone, Sarah beckoned to Eric.

“How did you meet Molly?” she asked, her voice terse.

Eric cleared his throat and fixated on a particularly interesting vase on the mantle. “Well, she visited the donations booth for Hearts of America—we help the troops—on more than one occasion, asking if I could send money directly to her father. Your husband is serving, Mrs. Hatcher?”

Sarah’s face went pale. “Yes,” she whispered, turning her face away.

But Eric still saw the emotion which flickered in her anguished eyes. *Pain. Pain* for a man that carried her heart into combat with him.

“I wanted to speak to you... quickly,” he added, “about Molly. This afternoon, she asked me to send a card to her father. We can’t contact individuals, Mrs. Hatcher. Is there any way you could get this to him?”

Sarah quickly wiped something small and wet from her cheek and rose from the table. She stepped into another room and returned with a stack of papers. She handed them to Eric.

*Dear Jakob,*

*How long has it been since we were together? I want you home more than I want anything else...*

*Dearest Jakob,*

*I hope that you are not injured. I wish I could help you to face your troubles by being with you. I feel too far away...*

*Jakob,*

*Will you come home soon?*

And each time, between the stacks of love letters, was an automated note:

*Dear Army Family,*

*We thank you for your interest in our armed forces. Unfortunately, we are unable to send messages to specific soldiers as certain ranks are incognito. We offer you strength and thanks for supporting our troops.*

“They never reach him,” Sarah said softly as Eric looked up from the letters. “I write him every week, but I always get this back.”

Eric’s thoughts wandered to Molly, who sat in her room, and the letters on the table filled with words left unsaid. He couldn’t let Molly’s letter become one of them.

“I’ll do it,” he told Sarah. “I’ll find a way.”

“It’s not possible, Eric. Can’t you see I’ve tried?” Sarah’s eyes glistened with tears.

“I know you’ve tried. But / haven’t.”

~

The night air pounded at the windows as freezing rain assaulted Eric’s house. His eyes were fixated on the computer, however, as he searched for methods to contact army squadrons. “Iraq. She said he was in Iraq,” he said quietly to himself as he scanned website upon website. Molly’s card sat next to him, propped up in a way that let him see the imprint of her kiss. He could still hear her voice asking him, *Where’s the love?* He had to send this letter for her. To preserve her love.

His eyes scanned the many pages for army donations before one caught his eye.

*Iraq Military Services – Exception Requests*

*Contact Us? Phone Number:*

Eric’s hands were reaching for the phone even before he finished reading.

~

Though it wasn’t quite his turn, Eric decided to take over the volunteer booth the next day. For some reason he couldn’t fathom, he felt drawn to it...

Sure enough, as if she'd known he'd be there, Molly rounded the corner. Her eyes lit up at the sight of Eric and she bounded towards him, splashing in all of the puddles around her. "Did you find him?" she asked.

Eric smiled. "I found a group that handles special requests for soldiers in Iraq and gave them your father's name. They told me they'd call me tonight."

Molly grinned. "Okay, cool."

Her eyes wandered to the back of the booth as her focus shifted. "What's behind here, where you work?"

"Want a tour?" Eric inquired as Molly's eyes lit up.

She scampered behind the booth as her eyes widened at the rows of boxes. "What are all these?" She held up a plastic container filled with plastic bags.

"Those are care packages," Eric explained. "Some children put together non-perishable items that we can send overseas to help the troops."

"Am I allowed to touch them?" Molly asked. When Eric nodded, she picked one up and inspected it. "Hmm..." She leaned in just as Eric realized her motive. He reached out to grab the bag, but not before Molly planted a soft kiss on the paper.

Eric attempted an angry look, but fell prey to Molly's

simple, “It has love now.”

~

That night, Eric received the phone call he was waiting for. He could send the letter to the address they gave him, and Molly’s dad would find it when his troop reported back to the base.

It was impossible for Eric to contain his joy. He’d call Sarah in the morning, tell her the good news, and perhaps Molly could accompany them when they mailed the letter.

He sat back and thought for a moment. Having a family member so far away, serving the country, was harder than he had ever realized. But with courage, strength—and a little bit of *love*—he supposed it was possible to endure.

He retired to bed, still smiling to himself.

~

Early in the morning, Eric’s fingers clumsily dialed Sarah’s number. The letter sat on the kitchen table next to him as his heart raced.

Sarah picked up almost immediately. “Eric,” she said simply.

“Hello,” Eric replied, speaking faster and faster with each moment. “Sarah, I found the address! I’m going to mail

the letter today. Can you believe it? Is Molly up? We should all go together... Can you be ready in a couple of minutes?"

He heard Sarah chuckle slightly on the other line. "Eric, that's wonderful," she said, and he knew she meant it. "I will be there in ten minutes."

When Sarah came by in her car to pick him up, Eric tagged along, still holding the card in his hand. Sarah turned the corner and proceeded down the road. But when Sarah made a suspicious turn that took them in a direction away from the post office, Eric's throat clenched. "Sarah, did you make a"—he attempted to speak, but a withering look from the driver silenced him.

When Sarah began to pull into the next street, Eric saw the blackened fence first. He rejected it the moment it came into view. *No. No. NO.* And yet, when the rest of the wicker fence was revealed, along with the mossy graveyard, he knew the truth.

They pulled into the parking lot and Sarah stepped out. Warm tears trickled down her cheeks, and she didn't relent when Eric swept her into his arms.

"We got a phone call this morning," she whispered into his coat, her voice shaking.

Eric wasn't surprised when he felt his own face grow wet. *Molly...?* The letter dropped from his hands.

“She knows,” Sarah said slowly, as if reading his mind.

“She’s so brave,” Eric whispered into Sarah’s mop of hair. “I can’t believe...”

“She gave me a message for you,” Sarah said, handing him a letter with a red blotch. “She said you’d know what it meant. She said... ‘Make sure every package he sends to Iraq has love.’”

Eric let in a choked breath. “Tell her I will,” he said softly. And he would. He would. For Sarah. For Molly. For Jakob Hatcher, who was only a breath from his daughter’s kiss.

~



# **Genocide**

*Honorable Mention  
Middle School Entry  
by Sara Carter*



Pain. Pain was the first feeling I can remember of that day, the day that changed my life forever. I remembered pain as I awoke under my house roof, a face full of concrete and rubble. All I breathed was dust, leading me to cough up my lung and realize that I was, in fact, stuck under my kitchen light. I couldn't move and I couldn't feel my arm.

Where was my family?

I coughed some more and called to them, "Anders? Halina? Mom? Dad?" No response. I repeated the plea as my panic began to rise to the sounds of war filling the air. "Anyone, please! HELP!" And suddenly the weight was lifted off of me and someone was forcefully pulling me out from the devastation. They were coated in dirt and I couldn't make out a face until they embraced me in a rib crushing hug.

"Bryda!" My 19 year old brother, Anders, was smacking the dust off my clothes and wiping my eyes so I could make out his form.

"Anders! Where's Halina? Where are mom and dad?" Halina was our 9 year old sister and fear clenched my heart at to where she could be in the wreckage. He shook his head,

"You were the first I found." Without hesitation I started calling my little sister's name and pushing concrete off of concrete. It wasn't long until I found a small crumpled fist.

Hope flared, but then horror replaced that. "No, no,

no, please be alive.” I hurriedly ripped the trash off of Halina and pulled her into my arms. She was still for a moment, and then, her body started raking with coughs. “Oh Halina, I was so worried!” She still hacked but I felt her little arm find its way around my waist.

I picked her up and found Anders a little way off, standing at the top of a massive pile of debris. I set Halina down at the bottom of the hill and climbed up. “I found Halina, now we only have to find mom and dad.”

“No need.” He looked down on me with sorrow in his eyes and dread filled every fiber of my being. I slipped on some stone but Anders caught me, yanking me up next to him. I looked at what he was staring at and saw my parents lying there, not moving, not breathing...dead. I let out a wail but Anders told me I had to be strong and snap out of it for Halina.

He wiped my tears away and grasped my shoulders. “Come now, you’ve always been the strongest of us. Wipe away the tears and grab Halina, we’ve got to get out of here.”

Tears made tracks in the dust on my face, “How can you just brush it off like nothing?! They’re dead Anders! They’re never coming back!” I broke down in sobs and he pulled me close again.

“I know, but we both have to be strong for our sister. We have to protect her. Come Bryda, your name even means

power and strength. Use that strength and grab your sister, like I said, we have to get out of here. I'll find food." I realized he was right, so I wiped the tears away and scrabbled down to Halina.

She was a little dizzy and unsure of what was going on but fire was in all of the buildings around us and cries of the wounded resonated between the walls of the town. I pulled her off the ground, into my arms, rushing to where Anders had grabbed some food rolling out from the ruin of what was our house. He had a backpack in one hand and was shoving food with the other. He slung it over his shoulder and grabbed my elbow.

"We have to go Bryda, now. They're going to come back." I nodded and started to escape from the wreckage of the home I had spent 16 years in. He stopped around every corner, slinking in the shadows, careful to avoid anyone, even people we've known since birth. When we were just about to reach the border of town when he stopped me again. He ripped something from my coat and Halina's too. He threw them on the ground,

"They will catch us and kill us if we wear those." I knew he was right but it was horrible seeing three yellow stars of David smashed into the ground.

As we raced into the hills of Poland we could hear the

distraught town below.

The city itself was silent. But the absence of sound in the town offered an opportunity for the cries of sorrowful parents, and wailing children to echo throughout the courtyard. It bounced off the stone surroundings and left the air reeking with the stench of desolation. The misery pulled the few survivors out from under the rubble, out from under their disintegrating homes, and out from any cramped hiding spot they could find. The air held palpable dejection, creating an atmosphere of smoke, fire, and death.

That's when the Nazis showed up, wrangling all the left survivors into their cars to sweep them away to concentration camps. I fought and pleaded to Anders to let us go back and help but he told me we too would be taken. Realizing he was right, I stopped fighting and made revenge plans.

But those plans were stopped shortly after they began.

It was only a week after the death of my parents, when my brother, sister and I had hit the road, running for our lives, when we had made camp in a forest. We were in seclusion but we could still hear the sounds of war echo throughout the country. Anders had made a fire and Halina was fast asleep in my lap. My brother and I sat in silence for a while until I needed to say something so bad, I couldn't hold it in any longer.

“Anders, how much longer can we keep this up?” He

stared at the fire for a moment before answering, the light dancing in his hazel eyes.

“I don’t know, Bryda. I really don’t know.” Well that’s not what I wanted to hear. “The Nazis get closer to us every day and you know that. Halina gets more tired early with every passing day, and it’s only been a week! Mom and dad would’ve known what to do.” Depression clouded his vision for a moment.

I let Halina’s head down softly in the grass and came to sit next to my brother, resting my head on his shoulder, “I know we’ll make it through.” He snorted.

“How?”

“Because you’re looking out for us.” And it was true, with my brother as my guardian; I felt as safe as I could. He looked down on me with uncertainty but I silenced him, “You got us out didn’t you? If you hadn’t, we’d already be in a death camp.” He still looked unsure. “And we wouldn’t be together.” He gaze flicked between Halina and I with love and affection. “Mom and dad are watching us and guiding our path. Don’t worry Anders, we’ll make it through.”

But as I laid my head down to sleep, I was tentative myself. Could we really continue? Not just Halina, but I noticed Anders and myself were getting weaker and weaker every day.

And that's exactly when our makeshift camp exploded with German soldiers. They barged out of the trees and into the small clearing, guns at the ready. I screamed, waking Halina. Anders jumped up and grabbed the nearest soldier, pulling the gun from his hands. My brother wasn't a violent man but there was a fierce protective look that had glazed over on his face. I grabbed Halina and we were about to run when they closed in on all sides.

We were trapped.

"HALT!" A crisp, clear, ear-deafening voice rang out. Anders stopped hitting the man he was brawling with and the Nazis pulled him off the other, holding his fighting form steady as he attempted to free himself. A man in uniform stepped out from behind the other soldiers and surveyed the scene. He flicked his wrist and the warrior Anders had been fighting with only moments before stood up, and pulled his pistol.

"No!" I screeched but it was too late, the shot fired and Anders slumped. "ANDERS!" I wailed in desperation. I ran forward but was restrained by Nazis. "ANDERS!" I cried again, weeping alongside Halina who hadn't said a word but somewhat understood the magnitude of what just happened.

They had killed our loving brother...and we hadn't even gotten the chance to say goodbye.

I embraced her and we wept together as we watched

them man handle Anders body, throwing him into a small ditch where he will lay eternally. I spat at them when they came near us. I had lost my parents and my brother, so now I protected my sister with every ounce of energy I could, shielding her from the blows I was given for my disrespect.

“Put them in with the others.” The man who had order the soldier to kill Anders said. We were thrown into a boxcar crammed with about twenty other women. They didn’t say anything to us, so we didn’t say anything to them. Halina and I held each other tight.

“Bryda?” I barely heard my sister ask.

“Yes.” I whispered back through my silent tears.

“Is Anders with mom and dad now?” I pushed the hair out of her eyes and answered, my voice cracking with empathy.

“Yes, they are all together now, in a better place.” She nodded.

“Will we ever be allowed to visit them?” Her innocence almost made me burst into further sobs,

“No, I don’t think they will.” She looked sorrowful but began falling asleep on my lap once more as we hit another bump. Eventually I couldn’t even keep my weariness at bay, as I too drifted off.

When I awoke on the third day, the doors were opening and firm hands tore us from the car. “Where are you taking us?” I asked, furious, but my voice cracked as my parched lips and tongue formed words.

No one answered us but as we got closer, I saw the fences armed with barbed wire, and I saw the laborers working till they dropped. I gripped Halina so tight I’m sure she was getting bruises, for that’s when I realized where we were. But Anders voice rang out in my head, reminding me I had to be strong for Halina, that I couldn’t break down and scream ‘Why me!?’

They ushered us into a small building so we could change into our uniforms, and then they took us out into the yard where we were shoved in with a bunch of girls, ranging from 6 to 19. Some looked sympathetically at us, while others didn’t seem to notice that they had gotten two new roommates. I pulled Halina behind me as we made our way to the back of the yard.

We had no idea we were looking at the home we’d have for almost two more years. We worked through sweltering heat, and we worked through blistering winter winds. Every day we got up knowing pain and suffering was ahead, but still holding onto a wisp of optimism that liberation would one

day come.

After the first year my hopes were discouraged, but I held my head high for Halina. Most of the women we had first come to live with were gone. More and more people came and left every day. I pushed Halina harder than myself almost, so she wouldn't fall behind in her work and be sent away to her death.

I lost track of the days but after about a year and 10 or so months, I began to realize the Nazis were becoming jittery, uptight, and nervous. More than usual that is. Halina, about 11 or so now, worked efficiently next to me. But she didn't seem 11. This camp had hardened her into something I never thought I see her be. As I slowed down to study the Nazis she elbowed me.

"Bryda, stop slacking. You know what happened to Veronika when she slacked off." I immediately, out of habit, began to continue my work. We were digging a trench. I knew what the trench was for, I wasn't sure if Halina yet knew what it was for but I knew that Veronika would be living in it.

"I'm sorry, I know, Halina." She shrugged. When I realized I wasn't just seeing things, that the Germans were actually panicky, I shouldered her. "Halina, check out the soldiers, do they seem, on edge to you?" She took a quick glance around.

“No more than usual.” That should’ve calmed me down but it didn’t do much.

We finished our work and went to our cramped corners for sleep. The first month or so, it was hard to sleep in such confined spaces, but now as soon as our heads landed on our section of the floor, we were out cold.

A loud wail broke through my slumber and I looked about. A firm hand shook my shoulder. I looked over and saw Halina being roused just as roughly. The soldiers had come and were waking all of us.

“Get up! Quick, come with us!” They were anxious and I grabbed Halina’s hand. We were shepherded into a spacious, metal room. As soon as the Nazis made sure we were all accounted for, they closed the door and we were left in absolute darkness.

“Bryda?” I heard the uneasy and innocent voice of Halina right next to me. “Bryda, where are we?” Her voice broke through the silence like a knife. “Bryda?”

But I was crying too uncontrollably to answer her. I fell to the ground and her anxious face, taunt with hunger, was in front of mine in an instant. “Bryda what’s wrong?” I knew what was going to happen, where we were, what they planned to do with all of us.

I grasped her in a tight hug, “Nothing’s wrong, I just re-

alized that they were giving us special treatment.” I could hear the release of some smoke as our fellow inmates started to cough. She cocked her head and I could see her silhouette in the darkness, oblivious to anything else.

“What? I don’t understand. The Nazis never give out special treatment.”

“Halina, they’re sending us to visit mom, dad, and Anders.”



# **Something Like Hope**

*Honorable Mention  
Middle School Entry  
by Megan Hajdo*



I walk up to the cash register, my purse digging into my shoulder. The floors are a dark hardwood, dirty, and covered in faint muddy footprints. I'm waiting in line, looking at the menu on the wall, and the Christmas decorations, when the young man in front of me, probably fresh out of college, covers his face with his hands. He runs them through his dark hair, and then rubs his face again, blowing out a steady stream of air.

The woman at the cash register looks up at him for a second, then at the Styrofoam cup on the counter in front of her.

Her nametag says Madeline.

The man is talking, but I only catch little phrases of what he's saying—his voice is so soft.

“...my wallet at home...give it to someone else?... run home really quickly...”

I don't know what the store's policy is, but she's shaking her head. Before she can open her mouth, before I know what I'm doing, I've taken out my wallet. “Wait,” I say. I can feel their eyes on me, and my face is heating up, starting at my neck. My hair is in my mouth, and I'm fumbling with the cash, but I pull out a ten and hand it to Madeline. She takes it slowly in her wrinkled hands, looking with uncertainty from me to the young man and back.

“I can’t take your money,” he says. I can see the top of a tattoo peeking out from under his shirt.

“It’s yours now,” I say, and the words feel foreign to me, like I’m hearing them from a distance, outside my body. I turn my head to the left slightly, and he follows my gaze, looking at the people behind us. A little boy is clinging to his mother, and the elderly woman in front of them is looking at me, and she catches my eye, with this large lopsided grin on her face.

The man knows there’s a line, and lets Madeline put the money in the cash register. He tells her to give me the change, though.

When he’s ready to leave, and Madeline has taken my order, I take out my credit card. The young man is waiting a little ways over. He catches my eye and smiles.

When I’m ready to leave, I gather my purse and two coffees, heading towards him. I look back and Madeline winks at me.

“Derek.” he says. We’re right next to the exit, and the cold wafts through as more costumers come in. “I wanted to say thank you. I don’t know what I would have done.”

“Sara.” I say softly. “I just wanted to help, honestly.” The cups are burning my palms. “I thought... you know, what would I want someone to do for me?”

He nods, and starts walking towards the door.

“Merry Christmas, Sara.”

I smile, my wallet and heart lighter.

Derek makes his way slowly towards the door, his sneakers squeaking against the ground as he walks, holding his cup in one hand. His other hand is in his empty pocket as he turns, pushing the door open with his back, and into the sunlight. It shines against the tops of the cars, blinding him for a moment as he starts towards his car.

A noise catches his attention from behind him, the jingle of the door opening again.

He glances back, expecting to see only the mother and her stroller coming out but instead sees the door is opened just a crack. The elderly woman from before is struggling to open the door. Her walker holds it open while she twitches her purse back onto her shoulder, self-conscious, balancing a small Starbucks bag in her other hand.

Derek pauses. He knows he has to be home soon, but... one minute won't hurt.

She looks up as he nears her, and with his free hand,

he takes the door handle and pulls it open to give her enough room to walk through. She meets his eyes and says, “Thank you,” her wiry white hair blowing across her glasses. Derek keeps the door open for the woman with the stroller, then nods with a smile. “Have a nice day, ma’am.”

And the woman goes on her way, with a strange feeling inside her. Hope, I suppose.

She walks on, pushing past the biting cold of December, and counting the cracks on the sidewalk. The woman crosses a street slowly, walks down a block, and is just nearing a group of apartment buildings when she spots something on the ground ahead of her—a little brown shape with arms and legs. Slowly, she stoops to pick it up.

A teddy bear. Its fabric is cool to the touch, and it’s patched and worn down at places. She looks up, and a little ways down the road, there’s a woman walking with a toddler and a stroller. The woman with the bear calls out, just loud enough for the little boy to hear, and turn around. His mother tries to pull him back around, until she sees what he’s pointing at.

The woman starts forward with her walker as the boy turns his mother around. He’s dragging the young woman behind him, and they meet halfway. A sudden breeze is blowing her light hair across her face. There is a small child in the

stroller, a young boy, covered in a soft blue blanket. His face is a bright red, with pale streaks running down his face where he'd been crying. His face lights up when he sees the older woman and the teddy bear draw closer.

The mother is holding a cup of coffee in one hand, and pushing the stroller with the other, her older son hanging onto her free arm. When she sees the toy, a smile creeps onto her face. Her little son starts to giggle, with a huge smile, and the woman bends down to hand it to him.

“Merry Christmas,” she says, and her face and heart are smiling.

The boy tugs on his mother's hand again, impatient to get home. The infant with the bear isn't crying anymore; he seems to be the type of child that doesn't smile much. Now he's laughing—he's laughing and looking at the woman with huge blue eyes, his little pale forehead turning a light shade of red and green from the Christmas lights decorating the apartment next door.

“Thank you so much,” his mother says.

The older woman smiles again. Then she turns into the apartment complex, walking slowly with her walker down a short driveway.

Soon, the mother and her children turn back around, past the apartments, down the street, and closer to the center

of town. Her son's smile has slipped again, but he snuggles with his toy, as if attempting to keep it warm as well.

A little while later, they start getting closer to the tall office buildings covered in glass windows, with tiny blinds. The streets gradually start coming to life, more cars stopped at larger intersections, more people crowding the dirty sidewalks.

The mother maneuvers the stroller around black gum and trash. Men in tuxedos and briefcases brush past her, not looking up from their phones. Students race their bikes down the street, perfectly at ease in their surroundings.

A man sleeps against a brick wall near the end of the street. He blends into the wall like it's a backdrop, and he's painted in, his body a simple, dark brushstroke. His hair cropped and his head slightly balding, she would have noticed him there even if she hadn't been watching her step.

She had grown up in this town; a girl born into poverty, and perpetually starving, with limbs like sticks. It was not uncommon to spot the homeless begging for a dime, tears permanently carved into their faces, dirt crusted into their wrinkles like they were born that way. But they seemed at home—like they were too far gone that they wouldn't know what to do with a dollar if they had one.

But there is something different about this man. She watches him, and as they near, his eyes open. He eyes the

woman as she approaches with her stroller and son, and she sees something, a light in his eyes, something like hope, or courage, like he hasn't given up yet, like he won't give up without a fight.

She looks away, at the ground, embarrassed, and her grip tightens on the stroller; an instinctive reaction she can't control. But there comes a noise from her feet, in front of her, a baby's whine. Then she sees his arm poke out, covered in goose bumps, like scales. The woman slows to a stop and crouches in front of the baby.

"Trent?" she says. The little boy looks at her, his blue blanket at his feet, his face dark underneath storm clouds, and holds the teddy bear out to her. And then he turns his head to the left, to the man with nothing, with empty hands but not empty eyes, and he smiles a little. The boy pushes the toy into his mother's hands. At first, there's silence, and the wind is so cold. And after tucking in her son again, his blond hair waving in the wind, the woman stands and turns towards the homeless man.

He looks at her and holds her stare. The bear almost falls from her grip, but then she holds on tight, and shivers. She takes a step forward and drops the animal in his lap. Now that she's closer, she can see; those wrinkles by the corners of his mouth are from smiling too much. It makes her happy to see, and he smiles now as he takes the teddy bear in his

hands and looks down at it with such gentle fondness, like he's holding his own child in his arms.

“Merry Christmas,” she says, and backs up again, towards her children.

Before she leaves, the man croaks out, “Thank you.” Even his voice is grimy.

She smiles, and then the family starts walking again.

A middle-aged man in a suit is coming up the path, a black backpack and a newspaper in his hands. He passes the woman and her children just as it starts to drizzle.

The name on his badge says Sam.

His head jerks up when he sees the homeless man's feet in front of him, and he slows down a bit as he nears him, his short hair now slick and dark in the rain, debating this side of the road, or the other. But he can smell spring in the air, even through the cold, and he stays on the sidewalk.

Their eyes meet—just for a split second— and then the rain is in their eyes, and they look down.

“Excuse me?” the man on the ground says. “Sir,”

Sam looks at him again, reserved, but his face visibly softens when he sees the mud on the ground, the water, and dirt.

The man picks up a blue umbrella, relatively clean, and unharmed.

“Have a nice day,” the man says, holding out the umbrella. “Please.”

Sam hesitates, but only for a second. Then he smiles, wide and genuine, before opening it up and starting back down the path. “Thank you,” he calls over his shoulder.

The homeless man smiles and closes his eyes.

Sam walks four blocks (cold, but warm inside) holding the ratty umbrella over his head. Rain patters down around him, splashing in puddles, running down the road. At an intersection, he hops on the bus, sitting in the only available seat, near the front. Beside him is a young woman, her stomach large and round under a thin dress.

After a brief moment of silence, after the bus lurches forward again, he shifts a little to look at her and says, “Sam.”

The woman brushes a lock of wet, blond hair out of her eyes, smiling a little and saying, “Jessica.”

He nods and there’s silence again.

Jessica speaks over the hum of the bus, the chatter of the small crowd in the back. “Job interview.”

He nods again. She watches the rain outside the window

until the bus stops.

As people begin to stand and make their way to the front, she turns to look him in the eye. “My stop,” she says.

He nods after a moment before moving into the aisle to let her out. Sam jumps forward after a split second of debate and taps her on the shoulder. “Ma’am?”

There’s a buzz around them. She turns.

“Jessica?” he says, holding out the umbrella. “Here.”

She watches him for a long second, staring, before reaching out slowly. “Take it,” he smiles, sliding back into his seat. “And good luck.”

Then she smiles and takes the umbrella, heading out quickly, in front of the crowd, saying, “Thank you,” repeatedly as she walks out.

Sam smiles as he takes his seat again.

Jessica hurries off the bus, and on the sidewalk she opens the umbrella, laughing out loud as the bus rolls away. For a moment she stands in the rain, watching the bus disappear. She rubs her belly almost absentmindedly before turning around.

Twirling the umbrella in her hands, she nears a restaurant at the end of the quaint little street, and suddenly there’s a puff

of warm air, and she closes the door and the umbrella, smiling to herself.

I push through the kitchen swing doors at the back of the room and call her over. There's light chatter across the room and smiles are everywhere. I pause at a couple near the windows to drop off their check before taking Jessica to the kitchen.

She turns towards me with what looks like a hesitant smile and something hopeful in her eyes. "Are you ready?" I ask. She smiles but doesn't say anything. "He's just in the other room; you'll do fine. We talked about it last night, okay? I know you were nervous, but it's a new day."

Jessica's smile drops and she puts her coat and umbrella away. "I know. And I'm sorry about last night."

"It was just nerves," I say, but I couldn't be more confused.

"Thanks, sis," she says, and then she hugs me, and there's nothing I can do at that point but hug her back. She hasn't hugged me for two years.

"And I got you something," I say, stepping back to grab the Starbucks cup from the counter. "It might be a little cold now, but it's your favorite."

Jessica smiles again and says, "It's okay."

For a second all I can do is stand and breathe, and then

we're laughing and smiling, and I know we'll be okay.

# **The Bloodstained Cloak**

*Honorable Mention  
Middle School Entry  
by Victoria Chuah*



Scarlett was awoken abruptly to an ear-piercing scream. Several loud crashes echoed through the house, sending adrenaline racing through her veins. She immediately jumped out of her bed and ran down the stairs, each step groaning in objection. Hearing another familiar scream, she turned her head around the corner.

“Mom?” Scarlett called out, her voice shaking with fear. Suddenly, her nose was assaulted by the metallic scent of blood.

“Scarlett,” her mom cried out as Scarlett let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. “Save yourself!”

Scarlett stood frozen on the stairs for a second, unsure of what to do. She was going to save her mother, but then found herself running up the stairs with her heart threatening to leap out of her chest.

She rushed into her room, locking the door behind her. Swiftly, she grabbed her sheets, knotted them with trembling hands, and tied them to the foot of her bed. Just as she was about to climb down, she threw on the white cloak that her mother had given her. If she was never going to see her mom again, she may as well have a memory with her. Then hauling the end of the sheets out the window, Scarlett climbed out of the house. Halfway down, she felt the cloth slip out of her shaking hands and crashed to the ground, sending jolts of

pain up her arms and sides.

“Get a hold of yourself,” she thought, brushing herself off and pushing herself up. “What would mom want me to do?”

“Go to your grandmother’s house,” Scarlett remembered her mother saying. “She will keep you safe.” The words rang in her head.

Unable to help herself, she looked back at the house and her stomach lurched. The windows were covered in a splatter of crimson. Before she knew it, Scarlett was running through the woods. Her pale skin was being torn by the dense thicket of thorny bushes and her feet were hitting the sharp rocks, but she kept going. The trees crowded around her, their branches grabbing at her cloak. Her auburn hair was tangled from the twigs stuck in it, but she could care less, she had to get to her grandmother’s house. Soon, all other thoughts were erased from her mind and all she could do was run.

In the midst of fleeing, Scarlett caught a few glimpses of paper nailed to the trees surrounding her. She didn’t have time to read them though; she was running too fast. She was so focused on running that she didn’t notice the tree root protruding out of the ground. By the time she noticed it, it was too late and she fell flat on her face. Thankfully, her fall was softened by the layers of crunchy leaves covering the ground.

Once she sat up, she felt her adrenaline rush go away

as she coped with reality. Her mom had just been killed. She could never kiss her goodnight or feel her warm hugs ever again. The person that had mattered the most to her was gone. Even though she felt her world collapsing around her and the sadness in her heart was like a stab wound, she was surprised when she felt a tear roll down her cheek. Suddenly, unable to control her tears, she began to sob. Her tears were pouring like water out of a broken faucet. Cries of anguish escaped her lips as Scarlett slammed her fists against the nearest tree.

Her knuckles bled as she screamed, venting all her anger out. Then she collapsed on the ground in a crumpled heap, her eyes unable to produce anymore tears. As she lay against the trunk of the tree, a torn piece of paper, that must have been stuck to the bark, fell at her feet. Picking it up with a wince, she read it to herself.

“Warning. There has been a killer lurking in these woods. Be cautious at all times and never travel alone. If you happen to be alone, get to a safe place as soon as possible.”

Scarlett sat by the tree, no longer caring about anything. “I should just die,” she thought bitterly. “It’s not like anything matters anymore.” She looked up at the rays of light shining through the canopy of leaves. They seemed to blur together and Scarlett felt the world spin around her.

Just as she was about to give up all hope, she heard a quiet voice in the back of her mind. It was her mother's voice. "Get up," it urged, "Live."

Her mother's words resonated through Scarlett's head and gave her enough energy to get up. She stood, quivering slightly, and re-tied her cloak. It was almost ripped to shreds, bloodstained, and covered in dirt, but it gave her strength.

Just as she was about to start running again, she heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps. Almost as if it was a sixth sense, she knew it was the killer. This was the thing that had killed her mother. Then she heard another sound. She was silently wishing that she wasn't right when she heard it. It was a sound that made her heart skip a beat. It was the same sound she had heard on the night her father had died. It was the battle cry of a wolf.

She began to sprint away from the sound, her legs pumping and her heart racing. The wolf howled again; it was getting closer. The branches snapped and cracked underneath her feet and against her face. Even though she was running for her life, she still couldn't stop replaying her father's death in her head. The scene kept flashing through her mind every time she heard the wolf's baying. She could still see her father being torn apart by the wolf as he screamed for Scarlett and her mother to escape. She could see his tears trailing outlines on his dirt-caked face and his eyes growing dark. She felt her

mother's hand pulling her through the woods to safety. Safety. Scarlett snapped out of her thoughts. She had to get to her grandmother's house, before the wolf got to her.

"You may have killed my mother. You may have killed my father too." Scarlett thought as the wind slapped her face, "But I know one thing for certain; you will never kill me."

Scarlett's feet were swollen, her face was scratched up from twigs, and she was running on pure adrenaline, but she kept moving.

"Finally," she thought, as the trees began to clear up. Scarlett was just within reach of her grandma's house; she could see the burgundy roof. She was so happy when she got to the clearing that she practically skipped up to the door. After seeing it was locked however, she knocked on the door. When there was no answer she started to bang her fist against the door.

"Grandma, open the door!" Scarlett shouted. Her grandmother was always at her house. After banging on the door a few more times, Scarlett started to panic. Not only was her grandmother not there, but the footsteps that she had gotten so far ahead of were within earshot. She could hear them get closer and closer every time her fist hit the door.

She screamed at the door, "Grandma! Open up! Help me! Where are you?!"

“I’m right here, darling” Scarlett’s hand froze an inch from the wood. She didn’t hear the footsteps anymore. It couldn’t be true, could it?

Scarlett slowly turned around only to flinch at what she saw standing behind her. This woman wasn’t the sweet old lady in her memories that had baked her cookies and had read her bedtime stories. This was a woman covered in her mother’s blood, holding a knife in her hand as the corners of her mouth turned upwards into a sadistic smile.

“Grandma?” Scarlett choked out, “What happened?” She felt a lump forming in her throat.

“Sweetie, you know better than to run from your grandmother,” her grandma chuckled, brandishing the knife.

“But you can’t possibly be the killer. You’re my grandma, the sweetest person that I know,” Scarlett saw that her words had no effect on her grandmother and felt her eyes get misty. The woman who she knew as her grandmother was gone, replaced by this menacing murderer. Then as she watching the knife in her grandmother’s hands, reality sank in, “Grandma, please... Don’t do this.”

Scarlett moved back as her grandma closed in, but felt her back collide with the door. “It’s over,” she thought, praying to at least join her parents in a better place. Slowly, her grandmother walked towards her, grinning like Cheshire cat.

“Calm down Scarlett, it will all be over soon. You probably won’t even feel a thing,” her grandmother brought the dagger to Scarlett’s throat, slowly digging the tip into the flesh of her neck and drawing drops of blood, “Any last words? Anything at all? Don’t you want to say goodbye to your Grandma?”

A tear rolled down Scarlett’s cheek. She knew that her journey was going to come to an end in a matter of seconds. Her voice lowered to a whisper as she said her last words, “You aren’t my grandma; you’re a monster.”

Her grandmother raised the knife above her head and Scarlett gulped. She shut her eyes tightly and braced for death. However, instead of feeling a quick stab of a blade, she felt a strong force knock her to the ground. Opening her eyes, she saw a large pair of amber eyes staring back at her. Scarlett’s heart almost stopped as she realized what had knocked her down. A giant wolf had pinned her to the ground and she had no chance of escape. Her breathing came out as a hiss and she whimpered, wondering what she had done to deserve this.

Just as she was about to scream, she felt the wolf dragging her towards the bushes, away from her grandmother. As soon as Scarlett was far enough, the wolf turned and began to sprint towards her grandmother. She let out a yelp as the wolf tackled her to the ground, snarling and growling.

Scarlett watched in amazement as the wolf fought with her grandmother. She would have thought that a wolf would end up killing here, not saving her. Yet here she was, watching as the wolf's jaws snapped at her grandmother's neck. Although she knew what the likely outcome was, she couldn't help but watch the fight before her eyes.

The wolf prepared to attack her grandmother, aiming for the neck. She rolled away just in time, managing to place a blow right in its leg. Ignoring the pain of the wound, the wolf sank its teeth into her left shoulder. The wolf was clawing and lunging as her grandmother slashed and stabbed. Their bodies moved together in one giant blur and they filled the air with the sound of clashing knives and teeth. Suddenly, the wolf ripped into her throat, right as she plunged the blade in between his ribs.

Her grandmother's body convulsed on the ground as she gagged on her blood, then slowly grew still. Her mouth was frozen into a smile, her teeth stained with blood. Scarlett stared at the deformed figure that she had once said "I love you" to, and shuddered. She was then aware of the wolf limping towards her, its coarse fur was slicked with blood and her grandmother's knife poked out of its ribcage. Its eyes were filled with a sense of achievement like it was proud to have saved Scarlett's life.

It lumbered towards her, its eyelids growing heavy. As

if it knew its fate, the wolf let out one more mournful howl and fell over. Scarlett's eyes widened, snapping out of daze, and ran towards the wolf.

"No," she whispered hoarsely. She quickly pulled out the knife in his ribs then threw her mother's cloak over his wounds, "No one else is going to die today. You won't die today. I can still save you if I work fast enough," but her voice was wavering and tears filled her eyes.

Scarlett looked at the wound to assess the damage and let out a short gasp. The enormous gash in his ribs was flowing blood like a waterfall. She frantically used the cloak to try to dab away the blood but even then, she knew it was no use. Tears fell from her eyes onto his matted fur. His eyes looked up at her and seemed to say "It doesn't matter. I'm going to die."

The ground soon became wet with both Scarlett's tears and the wolf's blood. The birds seemed to grow quiet, immersing Scarlett in quiet melancholy. She stared at the creature who had saved her life, weeping silently, and choked out, "What a big heart you have."

The wolf looked at her one last time before the light left his eyes completely and Scarlett was left alone with only her own thoughts to keep her company.

She got up slowly, her grief turning into rage and ran

towards the door, forcing it open with a kick. Scarlett fumbled through her grandmother's possessions until Scarlett found container of oil, a shovel, and a small box of matches. She grabbed the tank of oil and drenched a trail to the door with its contents.

She stepped out of the house and threw the empty canister aside. Scarlett lit the match, pausing for a few moments before throwing it inside the house. She stepped back as the oil ignited and watched as the fire slowly consumed the house.

"Good," she thought sourly. The flames leapt throughout the house, dancing on the furniture. Then she walked away from the burning house, stopping right in front of the wolf's lifeless corpse and dug into the ground with the shovel.

Finally, she finished the hole and put the wolf in it after wrapping it in her beloved cloak. Scarlett piled dirt over the wolf's body bit by bit, feeling the cool breeze bite at her skin as she did so.

"Thank you," Scarlett whispered, her words lost in the wind when she finished the grave. Then she took off, getting as far away from there as possible and never returning.

# **When the Water Meets the Sun**

*Honorable Mention  
Middle School Entry  
by Elisabeth Nagle*



The water rose high above the city's skyline, ushering in an inescapable darkness. The water rose so high, that it met the sun in the afternoon sky. The siren's wails echoing in the distance meant one thing, a Tsunami. Kai, my older brother, flung me over his shoulder, jumped in the car, and then we barreled down the road.

"Tsunami, Tsunami! Everyone please hurry!" he bel-  
lowed.

I clung to his arm with both of my hands which shook like a kite in a March wind. The next few hours were a blur. I tuned everything out except for a few things, like Kai's arms around me, and his tender voice. I didn't bother looking at his face. His usually warm brown eyes would be dull and full of fear, and his lips pressed in a thin line so tight, they'd be white instead of pink. I kept myself emerged in the darkness and safety of my mind until he told me to open my eyes.

He told me we had to leave home, but we would come back soon. The Red Cross needed to use our house as a refuge center until everything was cleared up, and that we should be honored that we were able to help such a cause. I could only think of one thing; the wave. The mountain of water, hissing, rumbling, growling

We went to live with our Aunt and Uncle at their beachside house. When I first saw the lagoon I screamed

and hid behind Kai for protection. I had begged to leave and clawed at his shirt pleading for mercy. The water was following me where ever I went. The water was in the glass cups in the kitchen, the bathtub, even in the rectangular fish tank. It taunted me. Nowhere was safe.

After a while I was forced to come into contact with it. Eventually I could be next to it and have a few sips of it. I didn't have the courage to go outside though. The lagoon was just too much to bear. Kai never left me alone. I must have been scaring him with the way I was acting. He hadn't smiled in two days, and his eyes lacked their usual shine. Not wanting him to feel miserable, I headed out to the lagoon.

I sat on a log that overlooked the water. It was glistening peacefully, and small waves broke against the shore. A few boys hollered at each other as they splashed around. The water looked so normal. How could it be so peaceful now and so deadly in the Tsunami?

“Why aren't you in the water?” a voice asked.

I whipped around to see a girl about Kai's age staring down at me. She had bright blue eyes and ink black hair that draped over her shoulders with a sleek shine. Her gaze made me feel warm and safe. I was immediately fond of her. I told her I was scared. She sighed and sat down with me. She'd leave when she saw that the others were having so much fun.

She surprised me by saying, “Would you like to do something else?”

Her voice was sweet, slow, and kind. A small smile formed at the corner of my mouth.

“Do you like to paint?” I asked her.

My voice was small and weak, but she was kind enough not to ask me to repeat myself. She said she’d love to paint with me. On the way up to the house she told me her name was Mizu. I told her my name was Cho. We each took a paint pallet, brush, and a cup of water out onto the deck. I started to dip my brush in the water, but pulled back.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered concern edged in her voice.

“I don’t like water,” I murmured.

I shoved my fear down into the pit of my belly and sniffed haughtily, “But I don’t need water to paint anyway, you can make a pretty picture without it.”

She let out a small giggle. It sounded of wind chimes ringing in a summer breeze. Her blue eyes filled me with warmth from head to toe.

“I’m sure it will be a very pretty picture,” she said, “But it won’t have any life.”

I told her it would have lots of life in it, and started to paint. But when I put down my brush no color came. I tried again and again, but no color. If I could survive without much water, so could the paint. I stabbed the paint pallet with my brush and managed to smudge a few chips of paint onto the paper. After a few minutes struggle I threw the brush and gave a frustrated sigh.

Mizu moved over to me as she whispered, “The paint needs the water for you to use it. To bring the color you must use water. If the paint has no water, it has no life.”

She dipped her brush in the water and gave it to me.

“If there is no water, there is no life,” she repeated.

Her words rung in my ear, and then flitted around inside my head. Maybe she was right. Maybe the paint couldn't live without water. Nonsense, I could survive without water. But she meant the paint. Not me. I took the brush and started to paint. The next day I crept closer to the lagoon. I actually braved the grass and ended up at the shore line, but was cautious near the waves that pulled at the sand. My fear had gradually begun to ebb away. I still couldn't go into the lagoon, but I could stand near it.

The sandy shore was covered in colorful shells that varied in shape and size. Suddenly a very beautiful shell caught my eye. I kneeled down and snatched it up, marveling at its

beauty. Then I turned it around in the palm of my hand to see a patch of barnacles growing inside. I threw it into the lagoon in disgust.

“Why did you do that?” a warm silky voice asked.

I gasped and spun around to see Mizu with a bucket of shells in her hand. Her ocean blue eyes were full of confusion and hurt.

“It had barnacles in it,” I explained.

Mizu gave me a puzzled look and questioned, “But you thought it was pretty before, why does it matter that it has barnacles?”

“It’s just... not... perfect,” I murmured.

“Nothing is perfect, so you don’t need to strive for it,” she whispered.

I gave a curt nod. Of course I knew that, I knew that better than her. Besides I was the one whose parents could have been swallowed by the sea. Kai had said that they could be alive, but I knew he was trying to give me a little hope. Maybe he was trying to convince himself it wasn’t all that bad. She sat down at the water’s edge and patted the spot next to her. I sat down. She told me that the shells I thought were perfect were really just all looks.

“You see, the ones with the imperfections are the most

beautiful,” she observed softly.

I quizzed, “What do you mean by that?”

Her blue eyes light up at the question.

She noted, “You see the pretty shells are new shells that have no history except for being formed, but the old shells have a history that could go back as far as time. Why these shells could have been in a monsoon, hurricane, or could have even been held by an Ocean Spirit.”

I looked at the shells in awe, but then cocked my head in confusion.

“But if they have been through such a storm, why are they considered beautiful?” I asked.

A warm smile grew across her face as she said, “Just because the shells have suffered a great hurt doesn’t mean they won’t have a better future. In fact, they will be even more durable for when things get tough later on.”

She opened her hand and in it laid the shell I had thrown. I gasped.

“This shell has been through a Tsunami, just like you. Maybe you can learn something from the shell,” she whispered.

I smiled at her logic. The shells must have been very

brave during the storms. I was surprised at how much the shells and I had in common. I had survived a Tsunami and they had survived a storm at sea. If the shells could survive monsoons, I could survive a Tsunami. We spent the rest of the day collecting shells, then we sat down on the shore and she read the shell's stories to me.

“My father taught me how to read the cracks,” she whispered.

I asked her who her father was.

“My father is the ocean,” she answered, “I am his daughter.”

I looked up at her in awe. Her bright blue eyes seemed to glow, just like when sunlight shines through underwater. Mizu was an Ocean Spirit. I gasped with surprise. She said nothing else on the matter. We continued to read the shell's stories as the sun cloaked the sea in the final rays of light.

The next day I sat in a tree that leaned out over the water. The rough bark scratched at my skin, but the view was worth it. Little ripples ran across the surface of the lagoon, the sunlight caused the water to gleam like polished crystal, and the water was so clear I could see my reflection.

“Hello Cho,” Mizu sang.

I grinned and slipped off the tree branch.

She whispered, "I want to show you something."

She waved her hand out over the lagoon. The water went eerily still. It almost looked like a mirror had been laid across the lagoon. With a snap of her fingers the water rose toward the sky. It sloshed up and around until it formed a tunnel opening. My eyes shot wide open and my jaw unhinged. The tunnel was made of two walls of water and a carpet of soft damp sand. Walking into the mouth of the cave, she held out her hand to me. I took her hand and slowly let her drag me into the tunnel.

The wave walls kept reeling in water to keep the tunnel in shape. The sunlight shone through, providing a soft turquoise light. We walked deeper into the tunnel and deeper into the lagoon. Soon the walls of the cave became transparent. Fish with all sorts of different colors, shape, and sizes sped past the tunnel. I could also see bottoms of fishing boats. A massive sea turtle skimmed the bottom of the sand, passing right by my feet. Kelp danced in the currents and wriggled with swarms of fish and bubbles. When we came out of the tunnel she gave me her pearl necklace.

"Keep the ocean with you," she told me.

I told her I would. Kai was waiting for me in the house.

"Where have you been?" he asked worried.

"I was at the water with a friend of mine is all," I an-

swered.

His eyes widened at the news.

“I thought you were scared of the water,” he whispered softly.

I nodded.

“Then why were you at the water?” he asked seething with worry.

I murmured, “I don’t want to be scared of the water anymore. Water isn’t supposed to be scary, and I shouldn’t be afraid of it!”

Kai told me to stay inside for the next few days. I asked him why, but he just stayed silent. I sat at the window staring out at the lagoon. Angry waves formed, the water boiled and frothed like water in a stewing tea kettle. Mizu walked up to the shore line, unfazed by the violence. With a flick of her hand the water immediately simmered down.

“Kai, can I go outside?” I whispered.

“No,” he spat.

I glared up at him, my lip curled. He didn’t look my way; he just glared at the wall. The hostility in his voice could only mean one thing; he was scared of the water. I wanted to help him. Quietly, I slithered out the door to Mizu.

“Can you teach him not to be afraid?” I asked her.

Her laugh rolled like waves crashing onto the shore as she replied, “I don’t know...”

I offered, “I’d help!”

“Why do you want to help him?” she inquired.

“He’s my brother and I want him to see the ocean isn’t scary, it’s beautiful. He doesn’t have to be afraid,” I responded confidently.

Then I heard Kai yelling me name over and over. I grabbed Mizu’s hand and stormed up to the house. Kai’s scowl melted into a state of awe at the sight of Mizu. I glanced up at her to see that she was blushing. Kai tried to say something, but no words came out. This made him flush a dark burgundy.

“Kai, this is Mizu my friend,” I beamed.

“Nice to meet you,” he croaked.

Mizu looked up at him bashfully as she asked, “Why isn’t Cho allowed in the water?”

He ran his fingers through his brown hair as he whispered, “I’m afraid that she’ll drown.”

I gripped his hand tightly.

“Kai, we have to face our fears, but you don’t have to do it alone. I am here, just like you and Mizu were there for me,” I whispered.

“And there are a few others that can help you as well,” Mizu hinted smiling.

There was the sound of a car rolling on top of gravel after she finished speaking. Kai and I spun on our heels to see our parents emerging from the car. Our cries of joy could be heard from miles away. We ran up and flung ourselves into their open arms. There were lots of tears and apologies coming from both my parents and us.

We all headed inside the house for some privacy. Then I remembered Mizu. I looked back at the lagoon to see her walk up to the water’s edge. I waved good bye and she waved back. She slipped into the waves. My hands grabbed at her pearl necklace. I thought, *‘I won’t forget you.’*

The sun gradually lowered itself into the lagoon, and disappeared, submerging the world into the night. I smiled at the sight. When that sun set, I made my peace with the ocean. Only when I look back on the moment do I realize how much it resembled the sun behind the Tsunami, but the resemblance stops there. The Tsunami was a scar inside my mind, but the sunset was a memory I’d treasure forever.



# High School Stories



# **On Brick Walls and My Sensual Parrot**

*1<sup>st</sup> Place  
High School Entry  
by Ryan Chapman*



The one window of my apartment sets itself apart from all the other windows in my apartment by being the only window to technically exist, which is a stunning qualification in terms of competitive requirements. However, despite its commanding lead in terms of actually being there (in which it scores a ten out of ten), this particular window does not seem to garner any points in terms of visual endowment. This is mostly because it looks out not on some grand vista, but rather upon the brick wall of the building beside mine, which happens to reside about two feet away from my own building.

Originally, when I first started renting this apartment, I hated the kiln-fired ceramics that plagued my only true connection to the outside world, but over the course of several years, I've grown accustomed to the flaky masonry that greets me on the daily. The window sits above my grimy fake-steel sink and tries to illuminate my linoleum kitchen with natural light, but instead sucks shadow into the room. Which is to say, whenever I slide open the window, shaking it back and forth to conquer the friction along its old, wrinkled tracks, the perpetual city smog climbs into my apartment as if it had been hanging cliff side by a pinky finger all day, waiting for a chance to haul itself back onto secure ground. But when the window is jammed shut (I had to duct tape it closed months ago) and the smog is rebounded by my transparent exorcist, the bricks two feet away from me each reveal a personality, hidden among their cracks and splits and stains. I named one of the bricks

Fred, because a crack arcs down through his brick-face to form a smile complemented by two spots of bird crap that almost look like eyes.

And while I think through this extended metaphor on badly made windows, demonic smog, and bricks named Fred, my parrot dig its claws into the soft tissue of my unmuscular shoulder and chirps, *This place really needs a woman's touch.*

“Go to hell.”

It doesn't.

I aim a bowl slick with the residue of Kraft Mac and Cheese into the sink where it bounces off of the plastic sink bottom. My sink, as I hinted at earlier, is a plastic basin painted to look like metal, but the metal has chipped off in some places to unmask a color similar to that of teeth of mediocre hygiene. I smack the dented faucet with a loose, callous hand and the fatal city tap water shudders up the pipes and onto the bowl, blasting the golden cheesy leftovers off of my dish. For a moment, the rush of the ice cold water makes me think I'm on the bank of the Amazon River, leading a group of rugged adventurers.

And while the Amazon River rushes in front of me and piranhas leap out of the water to catch mac and cheese noodles floating in midair, my parrot pierces its claws into the soft tissue of my unmuscular shoulder and chirps, *I love you, but*

*I'm sick of dish duty every night. You do it.*

“Leave me alone.”

It doesn't.

I glance over my non-parrot shoulder and my eyes send me a photograph of a defunct room; behind the one counter kitchen, a mess of empty pizza boxes, a torn up couch, and a small stack of unopened letters. Fake flowers sprout up from old gift vases placed on each table and counter of the room, a testament to my inability to care for anything that has any real life. The front door is triple locked shut, bolted and chained. The photo doesn't have to be in sepia for me to get the theme. I swing my head back to the window and Fred the brick stares at me disapprovingly. I break eye contact, look away from the bird droppings, and my eyes alight on the house phone.

Contrasting the average house phone, this one is not cordless, and has a range just short enough that you can't stand up fully as you talk, so anyone with any intention of good posture and social involvement has both of their New Year's Resolutions instantly obliterated. And if you were to pick it up, each voice on the other line would be overshadowed by a constant thrum, as if the device itself had an invasive pulse, or some kind of mechanical heart trapped deep inside its cradle, yearning to voyeuristically tap into your conversation while

your back aches from the constant stooping and the other person's voice fades in and out. It's dusty. It's unplugged. I don't know if it works anymore—the last time I plugged it in and answered a call was months ago. For a moment, I imagine it screeches a ringtone, but even in my imagination I don't pick it up. It'd just be more bad news.

And while the phone rings and Fred shames my gaze from his, my parrot cuts into the muscles of my shoulder and the agony drives me limp, paralyzed from the shoulder out. The beautiful fowl whispers, *I'm leaving, and I'm not coming back.*

“I know.” I say it again.

She never did come back.

Fred stares at me disapprovingly, but what does he know? He's a brick. In a brief flash of inspiration I tear the tape off of my window, jimmy it open to let the smog in, and plug in my phone. Despite months of disuse, when I pick up the receiver I hear a dial tone. I stoop over the cradle, punch in ten digits, and listen to the heartbeat of the earpiece as my own heartbeat threatens to kill me.

On the other end of the line, my parrot speaks up in her soothing birdsong. She says, “Hello?”

# **The Pen and the Sword**

*2<sup>nd</sup> Place  
High School Entry  
by Sarah Pennington*



For the life of a novel, the battle was fought  
Between our good Writer and foul Writer's Block.  
It started when Writer's Block swooped in one day,  
Captured the novel, and carried it away.  
When the Writer discovered what had occurred,  
He knew that his story could not go unheard.  
So, armed with his pen, the Writer set out  
To find Writer's Block and challenge him to a bout!  
The villain was soon found and the challenge was given,  
Writer's Block laughed. "Have you a wish to stop living?  
I am the slayer of stories, the terror of tales,  
And the bane of all writers- surely you'll fail.  
But if you wish to attempt it, I'll gladly comply,  
And so on the same day, you and your novel will die."  
So he stepped out of his fortress and drew his dark blade-  
Still bloody from all of the tales he had slain.  
The Writer looked at the sword and then at his pen,  
And prayed for a miracle right there and then.  
The trumpet-call sounded for the fight to begin  
And Writer's Block charged, as if with one blow to win.  
The Writer dodged, leaping aside,  
Then again! And again! At this Writer's Block cried,  
"Stand and fight like a man, you cowardly cur!  
You're even more of a pansy than I thought you were."

But the Writer kept dodging each stroke, stab, and strike,  
In unending dread of losing his life.  
But finally he found himself trapped by his foe,  
With nowhere to run, nowhere to go.  
Writer's Block laughed and raised his blade.  
"Now 'tis time to add to the writers I've slain!"  
It seemed that the Writer's fate was now sealed  
As down came Writer's Block's sword, the deathblow to deal.  
But suddenly the villain found his stroke stopped,  
Much to the surprise of both Writer and Block.  
The pen of the Writer, which was still in his grasp,  
Miraculously transformed until, at last,  
It became not a pen but a sword, shining bright,  
That blocked the deathblow and saved the Writer's life!  
For the first time that night, the Writer saw fear and surprise  
Replace the anger and cruelty in Writer's Block's eyes.  
Emboldened by the miracle that had just taken place,  
The Writer swung his new sword and his foe dodged away.  
And now, at last, the true battle began  
And the swords clashed together again and again.  
Back and forth the two fought, shadow against light,  
Cliché against creative, all through the night.  
At last Writer's Block fell, his dark blade shattered-  
Alive, to be sure, but much bruised and battered.

He lay there, defeated, waiting for the sword to come down.

But then he looked up- what was this now?

In his hand the Writer held not a sword but a pen.

He knelt by Writer's Block and began to write then:

“For the life of a novel, the battle was fought  
Between our good Writer and foul Writer's Block . . .”

And so Writer's Block died, not by the sword,  
But by what's mightier still, the pen and the word.



# **The Valkyrie**

*3<sup>rd</sup> Place  
High School Entry  
by Ana Diederich*



## Author's Note

The Norse myths about the Valkyrie tell of warrior women, who came down from the sky to carry spirits up from the battlefield. Half of the warriors, the more heroic fighters, were brought to the hall of the god Odin, Valhalla, the hall of heroes. Here these heroes feasted until the coming of Ragnarök, the battle between good and evil at the end of the world. In this great battle, it was foretold that everything, gods, mortals, and monsters, would die, except for one man and one woman. These humans were put to sleep by Odin and hidden away from the fighting in a secret wood. When the earth had healed from the destruction, they would wake up and go out into the world. They would tell their children and those children's children the stories of the gods and the great deeds they performed. The Norse believed they were the descendants of these two humans who'd been hidden at the end of the world and that they could still bring glory to the gods by telling their legends. These legends never specified what happened to the gods after they died in Ragnarök, but, as the Norse people still prayed and sacrificed to their gods, it seems that they must have still believed that there was something left of their gods, if only their spirits. The idea of the Valkyrie returning from the dead and resuming their jobs of fetching the heroes' souls has no basis in the myths, but I thought it was an interesting idea and one worth exploring on paper.

## The Valkyrie

*“Once in the halls she walked and she was war, angel of war, angel of agony.”*

– Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*

August 1757 – Battle of Gross-Jägersdorf, East Prussia

A cold wind blew through the trees and set the leaves dancing in the light of the dying sun, when the Valkyrie came. Not a single man on the field, strewn haphazardly between hills and ditches like the castoff toys of childhood, saw her. Not a single living one, that is. Except for the rich blood that trailed across shirts and dripped down silent faces, they could've been sleeping. She stepped through tangled limbs that seemed to grasp up at the red sunlight, seemed to plead *“Not yet. One more day, just one more day. It's too soon to go.”* She peered down into the face of one boy, too young to call a soldier, whose bright blue eyes were misting to dull grey. She watched one hand grope slowly towards his head, trying to cover the gaping wound that ripped across his skull and laid the white bone bare to the chill air. He blinked twice and looked up at her, childish eyes toying with her heart. “Engel?” he whispered. She knew the German word: angel. Leaning down low, she stroked his hand, then watched as the blue eyes closed forever. He was smiling, poor sweet fool. She placed two shimmering fingers on his bloody forehead and

murmured a blessing. "Måtte allfather se ned med nåde mot dere, kan de synger navnet ditt til evig tid i haller av gudene." *May the Allfather look down with favor upon you; may they sing your name forever in the halls of the gods.* She moved forward from the body, now deadly cold under her hand, passing through the destruction like a candle through the darkness of the earliest morning. The grass, wet beneath her feet, hissed with dying spirits as she walked. A white hand, shaking in the final clutches of Death, clawed at her foot, and she turned back to look at the man. He wore an officer's uniform, covered with badges, pins, ribbons, and every other pointless decoration known to man. He'd been proud of them once, far more proud than was appropriate, but now, looking pale Death in the face, he'd have sold every one of them, and his soul too, for another hour. His voice slithered and coiled in the Valkyrie's ears. "Please, Angel, spare me. I was," his eyes writhed in their sockets, "I am a good man." His grabbing hand was colder than Night. "Bring me with you to Heaven." He moved as if to raise his arms in supplication, but they were dead already by his sides. "Please, I don't deserve this." He moaned, whined, and whimpered, but his pleas fell on an icy heart. She drew her foot up out of his hand and he screamed out in loneliness as his fingers groped at the air, but fell back empty. She turned quickly and strode silently away, but the wicked wind seemed to carry the sound of his crying after her. She put her hands over her ears to muffle the wretched sound.

The Valkyrie did not stop again, not until she saw the soldier she'd been sent for. He was at the front of the charge, lying against a weathered oak that had already seen more than its fair share of bloody battle. His head slumped over his chest, which heaved as he struggled to breathe. He was soaked in blood; it trickled down his face and into his eyes, making his shirt stiff with the weight of it. She pressed one ethereal hand to his heart and felt it churn underneath her fingers. He was alive; she was going to have to wait. She sighed and sat down next to him, careful not to let her long starlight cape trail through the mud. Most times, she was lucky; the spirit had already separated from the dying body when she arrived. She would cradle the soul, soft as a baby's cheek and light as the Heavens, in her strong arms and bear it up to Valhalla, the hall of heroes. Great Lord Odin, the Allfather, waited there for the valiant warriors, to welcome these fallen soldiers into his golden hall. She had carried more souls than any of the rest of the Vanguard, earning her a seat at the Heavenly table and a place at the Allfather's side as his most trusted aide. The lord of forges, the god Weland himself, had hammered her shining armor from a fallen star, sending up such sparks that the sky glowed for days and the mortals hid their faces in fear. That had been a long time ago, before Ragnarök, the last battle of good against all evil, when the stars had fallen from the sky, the fires of Muspellsheimr had consumed the world, and even the gods themselves fell victim to Death. The end of the world,

the mortals had called it, and the name seemed true enough. She'd stood tall at the front of the Vanguard, urging them on as they threw themselves against the great monster, Fenrir, and fell one by one on the ground at his feet. Skuld, holding her great shield, Skögun, the earth shaker, Gunnr, whose name meant war, Hildir, who thrived in battles, Göndul, the wand wielder, and Geirskögun, waving her golden spear; every one of them was slain until only she'd remained against the beast. She had never known fear until then, staring into the golden eyes of the wolf and watching the spirits of her warriors slip out from their bodies like raindrops down a spider's web. The wolf had torn through her armor in one sickening flourish of his claws, throwing her down to her knees like a rag doll. She'd tried to raise her head, tried to continue the fight, but her limbs had been like lead, so cold and so still. Her blood had tasted bitter between her teeth. Death had tasted like defeat. She'd risen from her earthly body, a shimmering soul, and soared towards the welcoming Heavens, where the gods waited for her. They'd dressed her in new armor and sent her back down to Earth to carry up the heroes' spirits, just as she had before. She no longer retained her mortal form, the body that had tied her to the earth; she was a spirit, as free as the winds that tangled her cloak and burnished her armor. She relished the freedom.

“Are you an angel?” The soldier's voice was soft. She looked into his face and saw now that he too was still a boy,

a boy fighting in a man's war. His eyes were half closed from the blood that dried thick on his eyelashes and crusted them together. She pitied his suffering; she knew the pain of death. One soft hand brushed over his pale face, while the other rubbed small comforting circles across his back. She whispered an old lullaby about harvest fields and the sweet song of the river, one that her mother had sung to her long ago, before she'd known time or that it could run out. The soldier smiled. "My grandmother used to sing to me like that." His voice was trailing off as if he was about to fall asleep. He laid his head on her shoulder and was quiet, except for the sound of his rasping breath.

"Are you an angel?" He repeated the question. His back was hunched under the weight of the pain. He coughed and hacked until blood came into his mouth and trickled out between his lips.

"Not exactly." Her voice was golden like the summer moon. His back arched suddenly and he stiffened as the pains racked his broken body again. She felt the heat of fever rush up from his skin. "Hold my hand." He gripped it tightly between his shaking palms.

"Am I going to die?" She looked down at him; a tear was dribbling down one cheek, mixing with the caked blood and dirt.

“I think so, my hero.” He struggled to raise his head but was forced to drop it back onto her shoulder in exhaustion.

“Please.” His voice was hoarse; he coughed again and blood gushed out of his mouth. “Please don’t take me away.”

“You aren’t the first person to ask me that today. I let the other man die. Why should you be the exception to the rule?” Her face was smooth and emotionless. She wondered when she’d let herself become so cold that this suffering didn’t move her heart.

“Because I have a reason to live. Because my father’s dead and my mother and sisters will starve if,” his voice stumbled, “if I’m not there to provide. They’ll take the farm and everything else we own. Please, I don’t want to go!” He cried then, but he cried silently, like a man and a soldier. And somewhere deep inside her, her heart ached for him.

“But don’t you want to go to Paradise?” He looked up at her with tears in his eyes and her resolution began to waver.

“I want my family to live. For that, I’d be willing to forfeit anything.” The wind rose up harsh and cold, blowing her cloak over her shoulders and sending racking shivers up his body. He sighed. “Please?” His head fell forward limply again and he was silent. She leaned over him and saw how his chest rose and fell slowly. He was still alive. She sat beside him for a long time, thinking, until the sun had died behind the dusky dark

hills and Night spread her long cape across the sky. The stars had just come out when she rose. She looked back down at him, sleeping in the cold. Unclasping her cloak from around her shoulders, she wrapped it around him. She would let him live. Placing her hand on his head, she whispered, “Thor protect you, Baldur guide you, Tyr fight for you, Odin watch over you and make you a prince among men.” A shadow seemed to slide off of his face and his breathing was steadier. She hesitated for a moment, then kissed his forehead and continued, “And may the blessing of the Valkyrie guard you all the days of your life.” Then she turned and walked away into the silent twilight, leaving the soldier behind her in the deepening gloom.

# **Seven Deadly Sins**

*4<sup>th</sup> Place Runner Up  
High School Entry  
by Sarah Santoro*



It was a good little church in a good little town. Every Sunday morning the town's good and faithful gathered there to receive the Good News. The church had a tall white steeple and stained glass windows. The sun shone through the glass depicting scenes of Jesus and the apostles, throwing pretty, colorful patterns on the wood floor. You could stand outside and look up at the saints in the windows in all their holiness. You could sit inside and look around at the congregation in all *their* holiness.

They had nice little pews made out of pretty dark wood, just hard enough to keep you from getting too comfortable; they didn't want the chairs to put you to sleep; that was what the pastor was for.

No, he was a good little pastor. He had a firm handshake and kind eyes and a voice that could "glory be" and "hallelujah" with the best of them.

The congregation was full of good little church ladies. The kind with soft countenances and softer voices that held charity dinners and small prayer groups and knew how to work the words blessing and grace into any conversation you could think up.

At the front of the church was the big wooden cross. It was a good big cross, silent and humble. It wasn't the cross's fault.

That Sunday was a bright, warm day; the kind that made the people of the church talk about the majesty of nature and how truly blessed they were to witness such a beautiful day.

Respectable families dressed in their best settled into the pews they occupied every week, smiling graciously at those around them. And the choir started to sing, each the perfect picture of devoutness, eyes closed and hands raised as though the force of their rapture was overcoming them, aware of all the attention and preening just a bit under the gazes of the church. Holy hands clutched leather-bound hymn books and leafed through the gold-edged pages of well worn Bibles.

The offering plate was passed around and the congregation placed money in it, selflessly and conspicuously, each carefully creased bill or check a reminder of their incomparable generosity. A few small children contributed their own fistfuls of nickels and dimes and pennies, slightly sweaty from being clutched in eager hands, excited to give their part. The clanging of the copper and brass was pure and true.

The pastor was lit by a holy passion. It seemed as though he could save the whole world that morning just by the force of his words; a damned world reborn through his zeal.

One of the younger children fidgeted in his seat, sliding

around and pulling faces, unaware of the near miracle he was witnessing in the pastor's sermon. His mother put a gentle hand on his squirming limbs, and his father looked down at him sternly. Obediently, the little boy straightened up and looked ahead, but the picture of solemnity was broken by the small fingers pulling at his starched collar, trying to loosen it, to bring some release from the stifling restrictiveness of it all, his shiny black shoes swinging above the ground.

That morning the pastor gave a particularly moving sermon, you could tell it was a good one because there had been ample opportunities for the congregation to "mm-hmmm" and "amen" and "praise Him", and a reverent hymn accompanied by exceptional talent on the organist's part, bless him. And they prayed for the downtrodden, and the wayward, and that those who didn't know what they knew would see the light.

After the service they gathered outside the church. How's your mother doing? Will she be home from the hospital soon? We must have you over for dinner soon; it's been far too long. I heard about your brother, I'll keep him in my prayers. And they talked and they smiled and they chuckled politely, until family by family and person by person descended those holy church steps to return to the world.

Greed walked next to the Sunday school teacher as she ran her fingers over the edges of the bills she just couldn't bring herself to place in the offering dish again this week, not

when she knew that shiny red car was out there calling her name, begging to be brought home.

Lust eyed the organist's daughter, trying to help the deacon remember just how old she was again as they walked away.

Sloth shuffled alongside the dark haired man who always sat in the third row, already thinking about the couch and a beer at home, his wife thinking about their shrinking bank account and growing debts, his children thinking about their worn clothes and their hungry stomachs.

Envy kissed the prettier sister, the smarter one, the favorite one and left with the younger, plain one; the resentment creeping into her eyes as soon as her back was safely turned.

Glutton nudged the choir leader who saw that little boy considering the last doughnut by the coffee pot, and grabbed it before the child could get his hands on it, walking to his car, unaware of the powder of his fourth pastry dusting his chin.

Wrath followed out the tall, broad shouldered father and his son with the downcast eyes.

The pastor stood and watched as each left with their failings and he felt sad for his church and the state of the world and prayed for the forgiveness of their sins. And Pride put an arm around the pastor and comforted him, congratulated him on his holiness, told him what a good sermon it had been, that

he was doing everything he could; some souls just couldn't be saved.



# Open Eyes

*5<sup>th</sup> Place Runner Up  
High School Entry  
by Indu Radhakrishnan*



In the beginning, I create the heavens and the earth. The earth is the wooded New Jersey neighborhood I live in, a little pocket of a little town of aging brick and crumbling buildings held together by the mere strength of our collective moral fiber. This world is filled with good Christians. In the beginning, there was my mother, my father, my sister, and me – these four people are my world, and we are good Christians.

We are all good Christians, even before I understand what the word “Christian” means.

This world was small indeed; most, if not all, of my early memories revolve around my family and my family alone. Most of them are in my father’s arms.

He takes my older sister outside to teach her how to ride her two-wheeled bike. He artfully pries off her training wheels and tells her that she can do it in his firmly kind way, assures her that he will be holding her steady the whole way. My sister gets the hang of it quickly. When my father finally lets go of the bottom of her seat, she races forward fearlessly. I’m jealous, but still too little and too scared to try it myself. My father picks me up and sets me on his shoulders, and while my sister pedals shaky circles around us, I noisily brag about how much taller I am than she is.

I play outside whenever I can. I am the ringleader of all the little kids on our block. I must go forth into every conquest,

even when it requires getting my hands dirty. I come home covered in filth. My mother brandishes her wooden spatula and screams up a tempest once she sees my state, but I still refuse to bathe. My father has just gotten home from work, but he calms my mother and cheerily races me up the stairs. Even though I'm only four and he's Superman, he loses to me. He tickles my feet with soapy suds once he coaxes me into the dreaded tub. I recount to him the tales of grand adventure I invent, but my uncoordinated toddler tongue twists and gives way to giggles.

Upon request, my mother recounts tales of my blatant favoritism. As soon as I can string together sentences, I proudly claim that I drank milk from my father's bosom, not my mother's. She asks me who my favorite parent is; I try to be the diplomat, telling her that the truth would only hurt her feelings. I pretend to fall asleep sometimes so my father will carry me to bed, but if my mother tries to pick me up, I immediately open my eyes and tell her to put me down. My mother screams for hours, but I continue to disobey her. One word from my father is all it takes.

We are all good Christians, but he is somehow better; he is magical.

One of these early memories is of driving to church without my father. He is standing in the window, his mouth pressed into a hard line, arms crossed. I turn to wave to him from the backseat of our Nissan. I know he sees me, I know he does, but

he simply looks away and closes the curtains. I feel spurned. I am not used to him ignoring me. I ask my mother why he isn't coming, but she looks upset and ignores me too. We ride in a tense quietude. In church, they describe the torture waiting in hell and for the first time, I feel scared of Christianity and all it entails.

I never feel connected to God in church or elsewhere, but I make the assumption that He is there. After all, the entire world cannot possibly be wrong.

I only see that particular expression on my father's face once more, when I give him a cross made of modeling clay for Father's Day. His mouth presses into that same line again and he turns away from me. It feels like I'm sacrificing my father forever when I close the door to his office in silence, hoping that the silence will tell him that I'm sorry for trying, that I'm even sorer that Hindus don't go to heaven. I think about eternity without my father and I cry for the rest of the day.

By then, by my ninth Father's Day, my world has grown uncomfortably. I have learned that the world I created is a lie.

We are not all good Christians.

There are only two miracles in my life, and only one occurs while I still believe in miracles. The first miracle is the birth of my brother. I am convinced that he is evidence that God is real and that He is listening to me; I have been praying for years

for a brother so that the gender balance of the family would be fair. My mother looks haggard but happy, and my father is overjoyed. He adjusts my brother's tiny hat on his tiny head lovingly. The hospital reeks of disinfectant; when I crinkle my nose in distaste, my father pokes it affectionately and tells me that I can hold my brother if I'm careful. While I hold him in my arms for the first time, I silently wonder why God wasn't listening to my other prayer, the one about making my father a Christian so we could go to heaven together. I put the thought out of mind and cradle my little miracle.

Still, my doubt is not so easily resolved. When the baby is back in his crib and I leave the hospital with my father and sister, the thought grows. I fault God for not letting my father into heaven. I know I am not supposed to blame God, but I do.

I then realize that I am not a good Christian.

The first time I hear the word "atheist" spoken aloud, it comes from my sister's mouth. She's confessing to me all of her darkest secrets in a moment of rare honesty. My heart stops when she says it because as much as I admire my father, I love my sister more. It is supposed to be safer to love her because my father can't go to heaven. My sister and I, we are supposed to be together forever. That is our deal.

"Atheist" breaks our deal.

She is looking for sympathy in this moment, and I can tell

how hard it is for her to admit this truth to me; still, I have been conditioned to hear “atheist” as a dirty word and I can’t look her in the eye. I don’t know what I say, but I know that it isn’t what she hoped to hear. There are tears streaming down her face. She is an ugly crier. That trait runs in the family. I am crying too.

Why didn’t He create us so we would all be good Christians?

On a quest for answers, I read the Bible from cover to cover and I am repulsed. This book is not what I stand for. It is not what anyone stands for, not completely, at least.

Otherwise, there would be no good Christians.

I still think there is a God and a Jesus and a Holy Spirit, but I realize that if I want something, I have to find a way to get it on my own. I start to lean on my own understanding. Something is changing, everything is changing, but I don’t notice it. I am too preoccupied with middle to go deeper into my religious philosophy.

I become a rising star at my church for my Biblical knowledge. I don’t tell anyone that during prayer, I keep my eyes open, searching for answers in the lines on my palms.

I feel like a fugitive when I read the Bible in church, my filthy sinner’s hands automatically seeking out all of the horrors they can find. The pastor is talking, but I don’t mind him. Half of the flock is staring with glassy eyes forward, not paying the

slightest bit of attention to their salvation. I ignore them. The other half is listening raptly, and it is this other half that I gaze at affectionately. Scanning the room, I light upon an Indian family other than ours. Among their number is a mustachioed father.

We are supposed to bow our heads in prayer. My sister is beside me. I glance over at her and we make eye contact because she is an atheist. She understands something I can't understand yet and nods her head quietly to me, a pitying smile tugging on the corners of her mouth

I can only think about the other Indian family.

They are happy together, and they are all good Christians.

Seventh grade biology solidifies my understanding of the world. I hear "evolution" and for a moment, I shut down completely. It is yet another buzzword I am trained to see and deny. It is hard, but I am slowly unraveling what took my mother and the church so many years to perfect. I start refusing to go to church. My sister had been protesting for a while, but now that I am also joining the fray, my mother didn't stand a chance. There are tearful arguments, derisive comments over stiff family dinners, Post-It verses on the fridge. Finally, there is silence.

I don't know what I believe, nor do I care. All I know for sure is that I am not a traditional Christian.

Our house is in a state of perpetual uproar. My sister is

upset at my mother, and my mother is upset because her favorite child is upset at her, and I am upset because my mother loves my sister more than me.

There is no peace until my sister leaves for college.

It is 4:00 AM when my mother raps on my door. For some reason, in my drowsy haze, I think she is calling me for nightly prayer. I have never seen her so serious before. She tells me that my sister is in the hospital, and that they are heading to Williamsburg to see her.

Within two weeks of being at university, my sister is in a coma.

I stay with my brother in Ashburn. Somehow, I trudge my way through school, sneaking off to the dingy high school bathroom to text my father for updates. The prognosis doesn't look good. The doctors say that the odds of her survival are slim. When I call and my father picks up, I barely recognize his voice; it isn't the tinny quality of his words over the phone, it's the terrible sound of desperation that seeps into every syllable, pervades every sentence. He senses my anguish. He tells me that he loves me quietly; my father's sorrow is quiet by nature. He tells me he is sorry.

Holding back tears, I strangle a scream. I say goodbye and hang up before I start crying.

I don't once think of praying to save her, I don't once

think of religion or God. I just cling to hope. Hope is its own religion, the religion of baseless belief against the odds. I am its newest convert.

The second miracle is that she survived. I realize that I am not a Christian anymore.

My mother stops forcing prayer nightly. On occasion, she has it for the sake of keeping my brother in the fold, but she doesn't have to try very hard. I should tell her that she doesn't have to lift a finger until he hits middle school. That is when she has to be careful. That is when the changes start to happen. I don't say anything. I wait.

In an appeal to my softer side, my mother tells me that my brother feels bad when I don't come to prayer. She told him that my sister and I are still Christians; we just like to pray alone. I say nothing—I press my mouth into a hard line and turn away.

A year later, the blinds are closed in my French class.

I sit on the far side of the room, but I can't stare out the window to distract myself. We're discussing an article in French about a boy who lost his teddy bear and whose mother found the same exact bear online somewhere. In relation to this, my teacher is saying something about the will of God, which is the phrase "La Volonté de Dieu" in French. The words roll off her native tongue and hang in the air for a moment as everyone digests what she said.

Another classmate says something about the will of God being wasted on teddy bears. The conversation gets heated and transitions to English.

She polls the class for religiousness and sees that two of us have not raised our hands.

“You don’t believe in God?” She addresses her query to the classmate who had questioned her earlier.

“No,” he says proudly, “I’m an atheist.”

My teacher is visibly shocked. “Wow,” she says loudly. I find myself rather annoyed. Is it really so amazing? Is it really so incomprehensible?

Unfortunately, she notices my hand hadn’t raised either.

“And you? You don’t believe in God either?”

I shake my head.

“Oooh!” She places a hand on her chest dramatically. “It hurts my heart to hear you say that. Why?”

At first, I think she is asking me why it hurts her heart. I am about to tell her that I have the same question. I am about to ask her what business it is of hers. I am about to say that her condescension is uncalled for. I am about to let her know how brave my classmate was for speaking up so confidently in a room full of Christians and Muslims.

Then, I realize she is asking me why I don't believe. I want to tell her of my father in the window, or my sister in the hospital, or the science in the books, or the Indian family in the pew in front of me. How do I say it? I'm not looking at my hands anymore. I'm looking at my class. Half of the class is staring with glassy eyes forward, not paying the slightest bit of attention to the discussion. The other half is listening raptly.

"I'm an atheist, too. It's really not hard to understand." I blink a few times. It came out differently from what I expected. Of course it's more complicated than that.

No, it's not. No doctrine. No sermons. No salvation. Just open eyes.

"I just don't believe."

During lunch, I call my sister to tell her the news. She knowingly smiles on the other end. I am crying. My eyes are open, but I am scared of what I see.

## **High School Honorable Mentions**



# **The Last Orange Coat in Sussex**

*Honorable Mention  
High School Entry  
by Henry Tyler Rihn*



Death behind, the unknown in front, there was only one choice. So he ran on, sprinting, leaping, and diving with all his heart, anything to outrun Death. The forest moved past him in a blur, each and every synapse in his brain devoted to surviving the next few steps. He willed his body not fail him, sweat streamed down his face, stinging his eyes. His was torn and muddied by the path he'd taken, a path that had lead him to no better a situation than what he was in before. But still he kept running, dodging through the trees feeling the back of his neck tingle in anticipation of being caught, looking back in paranoid expectation of seeing his killers upon him. He turned back just in time to see his next obstacle; he hopped across the small stream in two clumsy strides, barely keeping his balance, righting himself at the last moment before falling. His muscles screamed for him to stop, his calves twitching liked plucked strings, and his arms burned with the acid of exertion; he sidestepped a fallen branch.

Coming to a hole in the canopy the forest, he stopped for a brief moment, the light filtering through the trees shined on his orange coat, caked in mud. His breath coming in heaves, he decided where he would go next. He ran forward, again. Ever so faintly, he could hear them. Their footfalls like the whisper of a lover, tempting him to stop; to give in to his exhaustion and accept defeat like the rest. He snarled at that, and a raspy laugh passed his cracked lips. Who did they think he was? Some run-of-the-mill weakling? A coward who would

just role on his back and accept defeat? No, they had no idea what they were dealing with, he was the Alpha. None of the others ran faster, none of others were stronger; none of them had his heart. That's why they were gone he wasn't. That's why he was going to live!

They hadn't died all at once, but one by one they'd been picked off, there weren't very many of them to begin with. As each of his kin fell, they're strength became less and less, to survive, and they ventured to lands they knew they shouldn't. Alone, he had done just that. He'd always been alone, such was the way of his kind, but this time it was different. He wasn't just alone, he was all there was.

As he ran, the path became more and more blocked by fallen foliage, and he took a sharp left, hoping in vain to keep his trackers off his scent. "I'll live for them" he thought in anguish, "I'll survive." His musing came to an abrupt stop as he reached another clearing in the forest, he slammed his feet in to the ground and came to a stop after a few stumbling steps. Before him stood his rival, scanning the ground and surrounding forest before seeing the Alpha. "You." the Alpha whispered in disgust. His rival's skin hung loose on his body and face, deceptively hiding the strength and loyalty bred into his bones. His rival took a tentative step towards him, his body just as weathered and torn as the Alpha's, but he seemed not to care. The Alpha looked at his rival with repulsion, in

everyway they were the same, their bodies almost of the same form and their eyes the same cold blue. But that's where the similarities ended; his rival was a servant, a beast created by the meddling of his masters' into nature. Where he was born of the natural way of things, his foe was the product of powerful minds put to purpose. Where he ran the beast followed, no matter the cost to self. It seemed to him as though his rival lacked any personal thought, just another tool of his pursuers; like the metal ones they carried with them. "Stop!" it screamed, looking at him with the eyes of zealot. "He's here! He's here! I found him! I found him!" and his rival's call was met with a chorus of responses from his kin, reverberating around the woods as they seemed to come from all directions.

The Alpha dashed back into the woods, deciding he had better chances against the indifferent forest that would hinder both him and his pursuers than against this unnatural foe. The rival followed as expected, darting after him without a second thought. The Alpha pushed on. Through the thorns, through the broken branches, through the mud and the rain and the fire in his lungs; and so did his rival and its allies that had caught up to him. But he was running faster than the others, as he always had since he was a boy, and he pushed through to the sinking light at the edge of the forest. "It must be twilight" he thought. He'd always liked the twilight, it was the time of day when the family all came together to rest, it was peaceful. The thought gave him renewed vigor, he couldn't

day now, he had a family to feed, a life to live. Before he was on his own, but now the paternal drive as a father kept him going.

He was getting closer now, and the barks were becoming more distant, he leaped a small branch in front of him. Suddenly pain erupted in his leg, as though someone had grabbed his entire right side and crushed it in their hand. He fell to the ground, whimpering in pain. He looked down with disbelief at the leg that had betrayed him, it was clearly broken. Whether through misstep or just the stress of his ordeal he wasn't sure, it didn't really matter though; this was the end. He rolled onto his side and closed his eyes, he couldn't do it anymore, he had nothing left. "SHUT UP!" he screamed to himself, whipping away his pessimistic thoughts. He had to live, someone had to survive, and it was going to be him. He pushed himself against the trees around him, using the forest to his advantage, working his way up to his feet by wiggling against the bark and slowly, very slowly, rising. On his feet once more, he pushed hard on his left side as he favored his broken leg along, forcing the strong side to bear the weight of his entire body. He didn't swear, he didn't think, he walked on; one shaky foot after other. It was like learning to walk for the first time again, each step was test of his determination and control, but he didn't care. He was past adrenaline, he was past being tired, he just had to keep going. He made his way towards the twilight and the tree line. If he could

only reach it, if he could only get out of this forest, he would have a chance. The forest that had once been his whole life had become a prison. With each weakening step the vines, thorns, and branches of the woods grabbed at him, pulling at his already failing body as it tried to keep him, as if the forest felt cheated that his love had turned to fear and so worked to withhold his right to leave.

He could hear his pursuers coming closer; his time on the ground had cost him precious seconds. Moving in a swarm they charged, as they each tried to be first to reach their prize. The Alpha looked back to catch a brief glimpse: clad in brown, white, and black, they charged him with abandon. He pushed harder, in anger, to defy those beasts the satisfaction of catching him in these god-forsaken woods, “Well, come on!” he screamed, barely able to get the words out “You idiots! You slaves! Catch me!” He was at the edge of the woods now, the warm light blinding his eyes in its radiance, just a few more steps and he had it, he’d beat them. He closed his eyes against the over-welcoming light, and at a staggering sprint took the last steps.

He practically threw himself from the woods, putting all his might behind this final effort. On the other side he collapsed into a field of tall grass, unable to feel his limbs, except for the broken one of course. He breathed heavy breaths of open air; he could still hear his foes coming.

Opening his eyes to move, he found he no longer squinted from the sun. Because before him where the massive forms of his rival's masters, sitting atop horses. They had coats of red and black that sat oddly on their skin, their fur wasn't attached to his body as his was. There was so many.

He tried to rise, but he couldn't, he had nothing left. The leader of the rival's masters urged his horse forward, looking down at the Leader. The leader looked in his killer's eyes, trying to understand, but still he didn't. He screamed up at the god-like being, asking him why, demanding an answer... no was forthcoming.

*“Oh dear, this one gave us quite a bit of trouble.” Mr. Kilmore said with a smile. He looked down in pity at the broken fox below him; which was yelping and screaming at the top of its lungs. Mr. Roberts rode up to Kilmore's side, looking at the fox in pity. “Oh won't you just be done with it?” he said in irritation, “Can't you see the poor chap struggling? Put an end to this.” Kilmore looked over at his lesser “I know, I know, don't worry the dogs will be here soon.” As if on queue the pack barreled from the woods, circling the injured animal. Kilmore and Roberts turned away, preferring to avoid seeing the more gruesome parts of the hunt. Kilmore faced himself towards the assorted horsemen, and with a smile declared the hunt finished. “Good” began Roberts, already losing interest in the*

*task at hand, "It was going to be dark soon, and it's getting quite chilly."*



# **Gladiolas**

*Honorable Mention  
High School Entry  
by Emily Forbes*



About twenty percent of Americans have a diagnosable mental disorder. Six percent suffer from a serious condition. One percent have schizophrenia.

I don't know why they need statistics. Apart from the national consensus, of course. The effect has fallen short on me, but maybe I'm just different. Do concrete numbers make the situation more real? Is reading the numbers more credible than witnessing visible proof?

Perhaps.

I always thought this, for some reason, when I sat outside room 233 of Clearview Hospital, stationed in the stiff metal chair next to a vase of fake flowers, staring at the same painting of a gondola beneath a bridge. The ragged copy of *The Great Gatsby* was steadily losing its dignity, falling apart between my fingers. Tradition seemed vital, though, in the portion of my life that crawled by in the hospital. Peggy at the front desk always asked me how my day was, and the nameless man who delivered my mom's lunches and medications always saluted me. I curled up in my stiff safe haven, and everything usually continued normally. Or however normal things could be in a building full of the mentally ill.

Life moved at a different pace inside Clearview. Reality twisted and morphed into an indistinct thing. Sometimes I delved entirely into the world of Jay Gatsby. Other instances

were spent conversing with the desk ladies, or listening to the nonsensical babble of patients as they passed by. I was the unofficial employee of the hospital; majority of the patients knew me by name. Whatever the responsibility, I forged ahead without complaint and minimal resistance. After all, what was the use of fighting when the opponent didn't even know they were the bad guy?

“Miss Kyra?”

I looked up from my book, smiling as Nurse Gretchen strolled into view. “Hello,” I greeted.

“How are you?”

“Fine.”

“Your mother?”

I paused, eyes boring holes through the closed door, to what I knew lay on the other side. “I think she's fine,” I replied in a small voice. Gretchen said nothing else, but entered to do the usual rounds. I collected my things, and when she emerged she waited patiently by the door until I was finished. After that she walked me to my car. I used to kiss my mom on the cheek goodbye, once upon a time. Back when she could distinguish her chaotic world from reality, and the truth wasn't so bad. But since collapsing within herself I simply departed without a backward glance. Maybe it was a selfish action, sparing my broken mind from any more damaging blows. I

didn't know. I assumed the details were inconsequential anyway; regardless, I still left in the most impersonal way. Like I wasn't Susanna Harold's own flesh and blood.

Whether or not people judged me for it couldn't be helped, or so I learned over the last few years. Schizophrenia was tricky like that. Mixed reactions and controversial responses were ordinary occurrences. Sometimes you just had to deal and move on.

School, likewise, was an adventure all its own. For some reason, kids thought having a schizophrenic mother was the perfect opportunity to refine and perfect their cruel nature. Schizo, crazy, psycho; harsh hits I now warded off with a bullet proof vest. In a way, I pitied them. Had they known the true struggle of the disorder, they probably wouldn't have acted so savagely. But ignorance would trump all every time, and high school kids aren't exactly known for their celebrated intellect.

The phone rang almost as soon as I kicked my shoes off. When I picked it up Gretchen was on the other end, calling to make sure I arrived home safely like she always did. Gretchen pretty much named herself my interim mother. I couldn't complain. She made the best peach cobbler.

My evening unraveled as usual, with homework, some housework, dinner, and sleep. A normal routine. A daily routine.

I would be the first to admit that, sometimes, I grew sick of routines.

Before, when people saw the name Kyra Harold, the first word that popped into their mind was “strength”. I was strong, because I didn’t have a father. I was strong, because I took care of my mom. I was so incredibly strong, because I never complained about anything. They were lies, but I never did point them out. Maybe a part of me was thankful people viewed me that way, when the truth was less than glorifying. In all honesty, I was scared. A fearful girl of five-foot-three with a future as uncertain as the weather. The unknown frightened me, as did the uncontrollable. Unfortunately, my life consisted of equal halves of both.

The truth, for everybody, was always the hardest thing to admit.

But when I was alone, staring at myself in the mirror, I found it wasn’t so hard to admit my faults. To admit that I really had no idea what I was doing; that I was too much of a coward to cross over the threshold of room 233, when even entertaining the thought caused my skin to crawl. And only when I was burrowed deep beneath the blankets of my bed could I openly confess the worst secret marring my soul with blackness and regret.

I had not spoken a single word to my mother in three

years.

When I walked into the hospital the next day, Gretchen was waiting by my usual seat with a smile on her face. That usually wasn't the case. My mother had a severe case of schizophrenia, one that reduced her to extended periods of catatonia and drastically wild hallucinations. News of her was never good. But when I dropped my backpack to the floor the nurse told me, "Your mother is doing very well."

"*Well*". A relative term. For her, that could mean she was hallucinating about dancing elephants rather than voices demanding she shove an eating utensil through her daughter. That was why I shrugged, because "*well*" did not mean perfectly fine and ready to carry on with her life. It just meant, simply put, "*Well*".

I retrieved my ragged novel and commenced reading. Gretchen released a long sigh from above me, drawing my gaze upward. "You should see her, Kyra," she urged.

My eyes lowered back down to the words, but they no longer registered. "Later," I said, the automatic response tasting like a bitter excuse on my tongue.

"Kyra."

"She's not going anywhere anytime soon."

Gretchen crouched down in front of me, gently closing my book. I was forced to meet her vibrant green eyes through thick, black spectacles. “She’s your mother,” she stated lowly. “And you haven’t exchanged a single word in three years. I know it’s hard, but seeing her would help.”

I cracked open the book once more, a silent decline. “Later.”

The nurse huffed in defeat and clicked away in her heels. My mind churned, mulling over her words. I told myself every day that she was wrong; that I really was just waiting until everything was fine again to thread our family back together.

But I would be lying.

And I carried those lies like a burden on my back, each night I left the hospital. Each night I returned home to go about a daily routine I didn’t feel. I closed my eyes every night to nightmares I couldn’t always separate from reality. Possibly because the reality I lived was a terror all its own.

People used to tell me that I had and always would look exactly like my mother. I knew they probably only said such things because my father was never in the picture, and they didn’t want to upset me, but I did wonder if my physical features were the only things I inherited.

Every morning I woke to silence and peace was a blessing. My greatest fear was ending up like her; to wake up

one day and be controlled by disembodied voices. Driven insane by false realities.

Maybe I used to be strong, but those memories were far and few in between. Kyra Harold was synonymous with “coward” and “weak”. I embraced those terms, as they had become a part of who I was. Barely functioning alone in a deserted house, with the lingering shadows of a mother who wasn’t even my mother anymore.

One evening I was tidying up, keeping things straight and in order, when I found them. An old packet of gladiola seeds. Just the sight sent a slew of memories crashing through me. Better times of sunlight and smiles and happiness. Of summer dresses and dirt and homemade lemonade. The nostalgia burned like acid down my constricting throat, reluctant to release the tears that so longed to escape. I wanted to leave the packet of seeds where I found it. In fact, I *should* have. But something within me resisted, placing the seeds inside the bag I carried to the hospital each day. I turned in like I did every night, with my right cheek on the pillow and my hands shoved underneath. But something felt different, like a miniscule shard of the universe had shifted and rendered it completely off balance.

Something had changed.

The thought stuck with me on my next visit to Clear-

view. Gretchen wasn't present. She had the flu, apparently, and a woman named Nancy was filling in for her. The other woman didn't seem as personable; indeed, she was more likely to scowl my way than spark a conversation, but I didn't mind so much. I read the entire first half of *Gatsby* sitting in my usual chair, surrounded by the usual commotion. But something was different.

Something had changed.

In placing the novel back in my small bag, I dislodged the carrier and something tumbled out. The gladiola seeds. Gingerly I scooped the packet up, staring reminiscently at it. The remembrances both warmed and scattered my heart, in all sorts of directions. Would I one day stare at a budding gladiola flower confined by two metal bars and a plated window? Would I be subject to watch its withering growth behind a haze of medication? The beauty would be tarnished and destroyed.

The thought saddened me, immeasurably. I was forced to consider my mother, locked in her room. Did she long for the presence of a comfort as simple as a flower? Did she strive for a reality different that the illusionary consequences of her incarceration? The abrupt guilt lacerated my heart. Three years. Thirty-six months. Roughly one-thousand-ninety-five days, and about twenty-six-thousand-two-hundred-ninety-seven hours. All that time, and not a single minute could I find to spare a glance at my mother. The woman who promised to

love me unconditionally, no matter what. My neglect was the greatest sin a daughter could commit. I sought for so long to preserve the delicacy of my mind, thinking I was doing the right thing, when the truth was the opposite. My mother was more deserving of everything I had.

Around closing time I made up my mind. With the packet of seeds in hand I paused outside her room. When I swallowed it felt as if thorns marred my throat. What did one say to their mother when they had not seen her for three years? How did one go about confessing the truth, that they were *ashamed*?

There was no legitimate excuse for my actions. Nothing but the shortcomings of my own self. Inadequacies I had yet to own up to. Some small part of me must have felt the blow, though, for my hand to turn the cool metal handle and push the door open. A decent portion of my brain undoubtedly still cared; the portion that guided my feet over the threshold and to the bedside of my mother.

She looked much the same. Her blonde hair was wispy, face grey and sallow. Her chest rose and fell evenly, mind having already succumbed to the sedation. I seated myself in the stiff chair by her bedside, feeling unworthy to be in the room with her. The gladiola seeds remained fastened between my fingers. Once upon a time, when the stirrings of the schizophrenia made their debut, the only thing to offer serenity to the

chaotic frenzy of my mother's mind was her garden. The very first plant we grew together was a gladiola. The tradition stuck, and every spring we were sure to have sewn loads of their seeds in our tiny patch of mulch.

There were no words that could be said in the quiet darkness of the hospital room. No apologies to atone for my callous selfishness. So I did what I knew to do. What a girl of seven learned when her mother would retreat into herself because of the cruel voices in her head.

I clasped her hand with my own and offered wordless support.

"I'll plant them for you," I said. "And we'll have a garden of gladiola flowers again."

Though I wished for her eyes to open, or for her smiling forgiveness to envelope me, neither happened. And I would not be so naïve as to think this problem could be fixed by a miracle alone. With that in mind, minutes later, I departed. She would never know I was there, but perhaps it was better that way. It wasn't the point, either; not that, or the lateness of the hour, or my irredeemable sins.

For actions would show what words never could, and I had a garden to plant.

# **Not to Yield**

*Honorable Mention  
High School Entry  
by Lily Nguyen*



It was official.

Ivy hated flying.

The nauseating, unpredictable turbulence had induced another wave of migraines. The jarring connection with the runway drilled her teeth into each other. Her ears popped an orchestra, and the blue cloth of the seat in front of her blurred. Above her head, luggage collided in alarming thuds. She gripped the edges of her cushion, paralyzed by the plane's intense moving force.

*Calm down, calm down.* She told herself. *This is normal, it's just a few bumps...no, it's not! We're going to crash, I'm going to die, and Nick-*

A sudden jolt interrupted her internal hysteria, and eerie quiet settled in the cabin. Finally, the pilot spoke rapidly, explaining twice that they had landed. Tokyo. Six p.m. Phones could be turned on.

She had finally reached her destination after over twelve hours of travel, alive and intact. But it wasn't over yet, not by a long shot. Ivy shakily felt for her bag under her seat and grimaced from the dull headache. She hadn't thought to pack her first aid kit in her leather purse; she would have to wait until baggage claim for relief.

*How much battery's left?* She thought as she held down the power button of her cell phone. Almost immediately, the device

vibrated, sending shockwaves up her arms and into her aching temples. An emerald pop-up bloomed on the blinding screen, showing her latest text.

*How's the future? ;) –R*

Rachel. Only Rachel would wake at the ungodly hour of four a.m., just to text her. Her bubbly friend had been overly concerned with her trip, more so than Ivy's own mother.

*Fantastic.* Ivy quickly texted. As her message sailed across the globe and the aisle crowded with drained passengers, she gazed out the window and tried to distract herself. Autumn had coaxed the sun to sink beyond the horizon, and airstrip lights gleamed like round pearls. Mom's parting words had been a request to buy her some. No fussing for her daughter, no last minute reminders. Just an insipid desire for a souvenir. And Dad only asked if her hotel room was adequate. Adequate. She hadn't been surprised; love wasn't in their vocabulary. Was that why-?

And then her phone blared with another text. Despite the last throbs of her migraine, she squinted at the screen.

*International rates apply. See company policy for details.*

Real fantastic.

\*\*\*

She barely remembered Nick. He was nine when she was

born, and she was nine when he left. But what she did remember was good.

“Who’s St. Nick?” She demanded one December. He had picked her up from school, a rare treat since he was usually so busy. “I keep hearing his name, and it isn’t you.”

“Of course, it isn’t me.” Nick had ruffled her fiery orange hair. “That’s just another name for Santa Claus.”

“Does that mean you’re named after Santa Claus?” She stared at him dubiously. Nick didn’t look like Santa Claus. In fact, he didn’t look like anyone else in their family. She, along with their parents, had elfin features and fair complexions, whereas he had almond eyes and a short nose. He said it was because his father was from Asia.

“No, I think Mom just liked the name.”

And this was where memory failed her, but afterwards, she never greeted him with “hello” or “hi”. She always said “Merry Christmas, Nick”, regardless of the time of year. Something of an inside joke.

He had been an ideal big brother, teaching her how to skip stones and sharing the pictures on his Kodak. He read aloud to her, especially a poem he liked by Tennyson. “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” She still knew the line by heart.

Her last recollection of him was a brief moment, before she

went to bed. He lifted his pinky finger. “Promise me you’ll be happy, Ivy. Okay?”

“Okay.” She had thought nothing of it as she linked her smaller digit with his.

The next morning, he disappeared, along with all of his documentation and cash earnings. Mom vaguely said something about finding his roots, but she had let him go. She hadn’t even tried to contact him, and for that, Ivy despised her.

But now, she wasn’t the little girl Nick had left behind. She was twenty now, and resolved to search for him.

*Even if it takes another eleven years.* Closing her eyes and stretching out on the futon, she drifted into a dark and dreamless sleep.

\*\*\*

“I’m sorry, but there’s no one like that in our database.”

“Are you sure?” Ivy had learned rudimentary Japanese in college, if only to help her find Nick. She adjusted her phone, propping it more firmly against her ear and bracing against the headboard.

“He might go by a different name...” The man on the other end mumbled something too fast for her to catch. “...sorry.”

He was about to hang up, Ivy could feel it. And then a scrap

of memory snagged in her thoughts. “Wait!” The words were rising faster than her mental translation, and her tongue was suddenly fifteen pounds too heavy. “There’s his birth name. Suzuki Hajime.” At least, she remembered to say his last name first, as was custom.

There was an agonizing pause, and then the man asked if she had a pen.

\*\*\*

There were three different towns. Nick’s real name was as rare as John Brown, and Ivy’s memory failed at details other than his birthday. Still, it was a start.

*I’ll start at the closest town. If I don’t find him there, I’ll just keep going, and after that, I’ll circle back to Tokyo. Hopefully, I’ll find him before the return flight in two weeks.*

Wind rushed over the platform, tossing her ponytail and fingering her cheeks. The bullet train was better than an airplane; no migraines had plagued her during the brief trip. The suburban town was larger than she expected, but she wouldn’t give up.

*To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.* She repeated to herself and clenched Nick’s high school graduation picture in her hand. *Not to yield.*

“Excuse me?” Ivy tentatively tapped the nearest stranger, a middle-aged man with a briefcase. “Hi, have you ever met

someone named...”

\*\*\*

It was long past noon. Her sneakers were rubbed raw from battering the beige sidewalks and asphalt roads. No one had been helpful, either gawking at her hair color and shaking their heads or apologizing for inability to assist. And she was stumbling over her Japanese again. She accidentally called herself Nick’s brother during the latest inquiry, much to the amusement of nearby teenagers.

*But I’m not about to call it a day yet.* Ivy swallowed and wiped her damp forehead. *I’ll ask a few more people, and then I’ll go back on the train.*

“Good afternoon.” She hated to step in front of an old lady, but perhaps she was a local. “I’m looking for Suzuki Hajime.”

The squat woman peered up at her, then at the picture of Nick. Her narrow eyes flitted sideways, and she suddenly grinned, showing the gaps of her missing teeth. She spoke fast, faster than the pilot, and with a rough accent that slurred the syllables.

“Sorry.” She racked her exhausted brain for the correct phrasing. “I don’t-”

Her paper-thin hand snagged around Ivy’s wrist, and she impatiently gestured to a figure walking across the street. Ivy’s

jaw dropped.

The woman must have been a dancer or a model. Impossibly long legs in navy slacks led to a tapered waist. Long midnight hair swayed just above her gray-sleeved elbows. Her slim hands, one of which gleamed with a gold wedding band, steered a bright green stroller. Her pale oval face was calm and reserved. She was young, not even a decade older than Ivy herself.

“Her?” Ivy wanted to clarify, and the old woman vigorously nodded. She heaved a deep breath, glanced for cars, and sprinted across the narrow road.

“Wait, excuse me!” Ivy skidded to a stop beside the elegant young lady, who now looked very startled. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I’m Ivy Morgan and I’m looking for Suzuki Hajime.”

“You’re from America, right?”

Ivy’s heart nearly stopped. This woman had spoken in English. Clear English, with the barest hint of an accent.

“Yeah, I’m from New York.” She wanted to shout with joy.

“I’m Yumiko. It’s nice to meet you. You said you were looking for someone?” She moved the baby stroller back and forth, an edge of a pink blanket fluttering.

Ivy brushed orange wisps away from her face and held out the picture. “Yeah, this-” Some furious animal roared within her,

demanding to be fed. She forgot she skipped lunch. How embarrassing.

Yumiko gave a small smile. "I can make you lunch. Then, we'll talk."

\*\*\*

The house, a sturdy two-story home, wasn't too far off. The style was an odd marriage of modern and traditional, with neutral white paint and many windows but the gently sloped roof evocative of Oriental palaces. Snowy chrysanthemums and indigo morning glory sprawled in the front yard.

"This is Kotori, my daughter. She just had her first birthday." Yumiko held her baby with one arm as she jiggled her key. Kotori was pudgy, with dark hair just covering her scalp and a tiny nose. Her pink lips parted in a sleepy yawn, and Ivy smiled.

"Who does she look like more, you or her father?"

"Mm, I think she takes after my husband." Yumiko answered and entered. The foyer was tidy, but it was the multitude of photographs on the walls that caught Ivy's attention.

Two yellow butterflies against a scarlet amaryllis. A newborn Kotori in Yumiko's arms. An arching double rainbow. The lighting was perfect, the colors extraordinarily vivid.

"My husband's hobby." Yumiko explained and walked toward the living room, at the end of the foyer. Sunlight poured in

through open blinds, dancing off the hardwood. Part of the floor was occupied by a blue quilt, on which Yumiko gently set her daughter down.

“He certainly has talent.” Ivy hastily removed her shoes and closed the door behind her. The interior of the house reflected the same combination of new and old. The sleek living room couch was the color of espresso, and a flatscreen television hung opposite. Underneath, a small shelf housed a collection of potted bonsai and origami cranes.

A pulsing ring sounded and Yumiko snapped her head up. “That’s the phone. I’ll be right back.”

She disappeared into an adjacent tile-floored room that must have been the kitchen; presently, Ivy heard her speaking in rapid Japanese, too fast for her to understand. Kotori babbled, toddling unsteadily. The quilt slipped dangerously under her feet.

“Whoa, careful.” Ivy rushed over and knelt. The little girl stared at her, her fist rising to her mouth. Then, she toppled over into Ivy’s lap, before raising her head to offer a self-satisfied grin. Her short breaths smelled milk sweet, and Ivy awkwardly patted her back. “Just keep trying. To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Was she really that hungry, that she was reciting Tennyson to a stranger’s kid? But then again, said stranger was acting real-

Ivy nice to her. Ivy didn't get the feeling Yumiko was usually this friendly to anyone, much less redheaded American women.

Ten minutes passed before Yumiko returned with a tray of food, and Ivy temporarily forgot her worries.

\*\*\*

"Are you sure you don't want more?" From the other side of the table, Yumiko bounced Kotori on her lap.

"No, I'm very full. Thank you." Ivy shook her head; her bowl had been scraped clean. She resisted licking her lips to catch the last remnants of soy sauce and rice vinegar. "Your English is perfect."

"I still get mixed up sometimes." She modestly replied. "I learned from my aunt; she raised me. She also lived in America for a while. Now, Suzuki Hajime. Who is he to you?"

Ivy sipped from her water glass, every muscle twitching with anticipation. "I'm his younger sister. Well, his half-sister, we have the same mother. I haven't seen him in eleven years. But, I'm guessing you've met him?"

"Yes, when he first arrived in Japan. He was a couple years older than me and he stayed with my aunt and me for a summer. Apparently, his father and my aunt knew each other."

"Oh. Were they friends?"

“More like neighborhood rivals.” Yumiko smiled, almost apologetically, before raising her voice over Kotori’s stream of mangled syllables. “But when Hajime’s father passed away, he gave everything he had to my aunt.”

“Nick’s father is dead?” The words escaped her before she could stop herself. “Sorry. So...what happened later?”

“My aunt enrolled him in a university, and he went there. His Japanese wasn’t too good at first, but I helped him out in between classes.”

“I thought he stayed with you for only a summer?”

“I didn’t say anything about afterwards.” Yumiko replied innocently.

*This woman’s crafty. There’s more to her than meets the eye.* Ivy thought. “Do you know anything about him now? Like, does he have a job?”

“He’s a teacher, like me.”

“Are you still in contact with him?”

“You could say that.”

Ivy’s frustration was about to reach a high point. Yumiko was incredibly vague, even if she did have great cooking skills and English. “Look here...” She slowly began.

The front door creaked, and a deep voice reverberated to the

kitchen. “Yumiko?”

“In here. We have a guest.” She responded before heavy footsteps approached. Kotori gave a happy shriek and vigorously waved her arms.

It was as if she was in a film, and this was the part where everything went into slow-motion. Air evacuated her lungs, and she turned in her chair.

And maybe she had always known, from Yumiko’s willingness to be so casual to the photographs to Kotori’s little nose. He was taller than she expected; his hair darker and longer than she remembered. His face was still the same, perhaps leaner, but she would have recognized him anywhere, even with that bewildered expression.

She could have said anything. Anything at all. But only one phrase fell from her trembling, smiling lips.

“Merry Christmas, Nick.”

# **Precious**

*Honorable Mention  
High School Entry  
by Michaela Pierre*



April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1975

They gave us one hour.

They gave us one hour to pack up our lives. They gave us one hour to decide whether to die where we live or live where we may die.

I'm sorry, I'm not making any sense, dear journal. But, nothing is quite making sense right now.

I know that the Khmer Rouge soldiers must have won against Lon Nol's army because it was a Khmer Rouge soldier that knocked on our door. I know that we have to move to Kampong Cham where my father's family lives because America is about to bomb Phnom Penh. I know that we have only one hour to pack what we believe are necessities and to abandon all that we cannot carry with us. I know that my sisters are crying. I know that my brothers are trying to be stoic. I know that my parents are worried. I know that I know nothing at all.

My mother is calling me to help her pack up food for the journey. I hope that it will be enough.

April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1975

I was unable to talk to you after that yesterday because after the one hour of packing away food and clothing, we had to wait in the middle of the entire populous of Phnom Penh. My

father, winking at me, had told me to not write inside of you where people could see—that was my one condition for keeping you with me.

After standing in the middle of the voices, hushed, filled with “what’s going to happen”s and “what is going on”s, we marched, herded by the Khmer Rouge soldiers.

‘Herded.’ That is certainly the most appropriate word. We are only sheep in their eyes. Animals that have to be guided on a path and are discarded when we cannot continue.

I apologise for smearing blood on you, dear journal. I thought I had scrubbed off all of it.

The Khmer Rouge soldiers had shot a man two paces in front of me. He, they said, was a spy sent from Viet Kong in order to guide them to us. However, I knew that man, he was my neighbour, and he was a schoolteacher at my sister’s primary school. He had lived in Cambodia his entire life.

Somehow, I do not think he will be the first man to be killed.

April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1975

My feet are tired. There are sores and blisters travelling up the soles of my feet. However, I am older and stronger than my two sisters and two brothers, who are silently crying from the pain. The worst of it is my six year old sister, who cannot be

carried by my mother like our two year old brother. My father and my older brother cannot carry anyone since they are too busy carrying the food. I cannot help my sister either because I am carrying the clothing.

How I wish, though. I hate to be useless, and her tears fill me with guilt every time they drop to the ground.

You're not a good big sister. You're not a good big sister, they seem to say.

In my guilt, I give my sister an extra piece of my dry fish. I give my fifteen year old sister a piece of my shirt to wrap the blisters. I give my twelve year old brother words of encouragement in order to bring his spirits up.

This is all I can do. This will never be enough.

April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1975

There are people dying as we walk. Dropping like flies due to starvation or thirst. My family is one of the only ones with food, and every day we are begged to give some up.

Please help us, they scream. Please, my husband is dying. My wife is dying. My child is dying. My brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, they're all dying.

We're all going to die, aren't we?

The soldiers have gotten tired of some of the cries. I managed to hide my sisters' eyes from the sight of blood splattering on the ground. Trembling at the sound of gunfire, but who isn't trembling, really?

Wasted. Everything is just wasted.

May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1975

We have finally made it to Kampong Cham after a month of walking. The chief of the village is waiting for us, no, the Khmer Rouge soldiers, at the edge. After chatting together, five families, including mine, are dropped off at Kampong Cham and away the soldiers go with the other families from Phnom Penh.

We are switched off to other Khmer Rouge soldiers, and we are herded to our families' houses. My father's parents are waiting for us at their door, bowing to the Khmer Rouge soldiers and thanking them for their protection.

Protection.

We are finally given good food to eat, and we do so as if we were starving men. Perhaps we were. I know that my mother and father were giving up a portion of their food to feed the younger ones, and I know this because I was doing the same. My older brother, however, is selfish and didn't share.

He ate the most out of all of us, even the elders. And that's shameful.

May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1975

My family is being split up. They are splitting up my family.

The Khmer Rouge soldiers have told my parents that we, the three eldest, have to go work at the labour camps. The younger siblings, my parents, and my grandparents will work on the farmland.

I do not want to go, for we will be separated even further. My older brother will head off to the men's area, and only my sister will be with me.

I have to protect her, I must. She is the only one of my family that I will be able to see daily. The only one that I can protect with my mere presence. I have to be there. I will be there.

I have to protect her.

May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1975

There are blisters on my hands that make writing here hard, so I apologise for my messy handwriting.

On the first day here, yesterday, we were told to dig holes

squares that measure from five metres across and five metres down. We had until the sun rose and the sun set in order to finish those cubes.

My sister could not finish—she stopped after three feet. Despite the pain I had throughout my body, I helped her dig the last two metres. The commander of the camp saw and told me that I could not help her if I didn't want ten lashes with the whip.

Today, my back stings.

June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1975

Life has become monotonous in a way. Dig until you can't or until you're done. Help your sister dig her box. Take ten lashes by the whip for helping your sister or by not completing your own box (it's the same). Eat half of your food and give the other half to your sister. Sleep.

That is the reason why I have not written in you for over a month. I have been too exhausted to even begin the thought of picking up this pencil.

But it's not just physical exhaustion that has driven me to give up writing. It's the exhaustion of my mind and spirit. I have seen too many people wither away in front of my eyes. I have seen too many people get taken away in the middle of the

night, never to be seen again.

We all know where they go.

They go to hell.

They go to Tuol Sleng, the torture house.

Even just writing that name gives me shudders.

I can hear the commander walking past. I'll write to you later again.

July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1975

I'm going to stop now, dear journal.

So tired.

May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1976

They *threatened* my family. How dare they! How dare they use my family against me as a weapon, a tool, to breed hatred in my heart?

I know that it has been a while, journal, but I've been so tired. Recent events have caused me to pick up this pencil.

Before you worry too much, my sister is well, as is my brother. I know nothing about the rest of my family, but I can only hope

that they are doing well (as well as you can in these times, at least).

However, my family may not be safe any longer if I do not listen to the village chief. He has told me that I must marry a soldier of the Khmer Rouge. I do not want to, for I do not know him and he is uneducated, but then the village chief told me that I was to be married to his nephew, the soldier, or my family gets sent to Tuol Sleng as soon as possible.

I hear that my brother faces a similar ultimatum as well: marry this woman and procreate or die.

They're trying to breed new soldiers to kill our country, and I want no part in it. I am only eighteen years old, but I am going to be married to a man twice my age. Smarter than my husband, forced to live and love the people killing my country.

I want no part in it.

But I must. For my family.

May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1976

I am married now. There were twelve other couples with my brother and his new wife and me and my new husband. The majority of us stated our vows with guns pointed to our heads.

No family. Only the familiar feel of cold steel.

How I wish for oblivion.

Why can't they just give it to me?

Why can I not just give up?

June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1976

My husband has found you, dear journal. You with all of my thoughts and feelings. You with my hopes and dreams. You with my poems and stories and songs. You with my everything.

I begged and pleaded to him not to kill my family just because I was educated or because of the disobedient words I have written towards Pol Pot and his regime.

I had been holding out on trying for children because I wanted no part of this marriage; I was forced into it by threats. So far, my husband has respected my wishes, which seemed strange in and of itself but I found it a blessing buried under this horrible situation.

With this, my precious journal that holds everything I love, the evidence to show that I am in fact educated and should be put in Tuol Sleng, has now become my weakness. What I love becomes what I hate. What I hate becomes what I have to love in order to survive.

I feel so conflicted.

September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1977

Somehow, in some way, I have managed to avoid becoming pregnant after more than a year of sex. It is apparently my fault as the woman, but I believe that my husband is infertile.

I so hope he is. I never want to carry his seed inside of me. I never want to carry on the legacy of the Khmer Rouge within my own body. I already have the scars that will last me a lifetime. I already have the memories that will stay with me for my next one hundred lives. I have no need of a child that serves as a reminder too.

January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1978

You have become so precious to me.

No, wait, that's a lie. You've already been precious to me.

The place where I could put all of my hopes and thoughts and dreams. The place where I could pen down my writings. The place where I could sketch if I wanted.

Now, you've become so much more.

You've become my object of rebellion, the source of my strength. Even if I haven't written in you for several months, I remember that you have helped me survive this unfortunate

world filled with death and darkness and hate. You are the only link to my past left, the only member of my family that has stayed with me throughout my trials.

You are so precious to me. I do not believe I could survive if I had not had you with me.

Writing is the only thing in my life left.

Please don't let anyone take this away from me.

So preci



# **A Pursuit of Happiness**

*Honorable Mention  
High School Entry  
by Bridget Starrs*



*Plop.*

*Plop.*

Seeping through cardboard, raindrops fall on the old man. His eyes are shut, but they flutter open as a raindrop lands on his cheek. Suddenly he is aware of his stiff body and his soggy brown paper walls and floor. Weariness floods him. The sweet reprieve of nothingness is gone, at least for now.

A watercolor stained gray sky greets him as he crawls out into the alleyway. He groans as he stands up, his stiff bones protesting. His feet send water splashing off the pavement as he makes his way down the alley, past other cardboard boxes and trash heaps. His head is bent against the rain and his left hand is shoved inside his pocket. The empty right sleeve of his coat flaps in the wind.

He takes turns onto different streets, the din of the city growing steadily louder. The old man turns onto Seventh Avenue and is met by the full morning clamor of New York City. Horns beep and neon lights blare and the smells of wetness and gasoline and hot food fill the air, all at once. People, so many people, hundreds of tight-pressed bodies, mill about- busy and intent, but purposeless.

The old man walks past the crowds. Not many people notice him, and the ones who do quickly look away. He slips into an empty bus stop, and sighs rather contentedly as his tired legs

rest on the bench and the rain patters on the glass roof. This was his favorite part of the day: simply sitting, and watching. Usually, he would have gone to the park and watched the birds. By now his eyes would be closed and he would be listening to their sweet, carefree music. After he listened for a while, the old man would often fall into a blissful unawareness, smiling softly, not saying or doing, but simply being. Eventually the birds' melody would lull the old tired man back to sleep.

But today was different. Here in this tumult of human chaos, the old man was listening to a different sort of tune. It was a hum: the hum of a ticking clock, of thousands of little pieces in constant motion. He watches the pieces walk past him, in a blur of called taxis, cups of coffee, and beeps on glowing screens. The pieces bumped and jostled one another, each set on their own goals and purposes. It was as if they were all on a race, a race to achieve their goals, and to achieve happiness.

The old man's eyes glaze over as the rain falls harder outside the bus stop and he thinks about the ticking pieces of the clock. He used to be a piece too- one more whirring piece, grasping for happiness in this vast humming world. The ticking grows louder, and the old man slips into the memories.

**~1941~**

His name was Charlie Wallace. He was 25 years old, and

all the puzzle pieces of his life seemed to be fitting together perfectly. It hadn't been easy, and Charlie believed that he deserved to be where he was. After growing up in the Chicago orphan asylum, he'd put himself through four years of college, taking nightshifts at the drugstore and working all summer at the car repair shop. During those four years, Charlie discovered several things: first of all, that he had a knack for telling stories. Second, that he was in love with Lily, the red-headed girl who sat behind him in English and kept him awake at night writing poetry.

Charlie graduated from the University of Chicago in the spring of 1940. Lily went to Europe and Charlie faced a lonely year of paying off loans, eating cheap meals, and steadily sending out job applications. There were a few bright spots, though: Lily's letters from Europe came almost every week, and a few of his articles got published in local newspapers. Finally, late in the year 1941, all his hard work paid off.

It started with two phone calls. The first was from Lily, who said that she was back from her post graduation trip, and was wondering if Charlie wanted to grab a bite to eat. The second caller was an editor at the Chicago Tribune, who said that he'd read several of Charlie's articles and wanted to hire him as a columnist. Two months later, Charlie was a full-time journalist, and he proposed to Lily. She said yes.

It was in that one small moment when Charlie thought he had

finally reached his unspoken goal. He'd gotten everything he'd worked for, and more. He was happy. Though he was a writer and hated superlatives, for a moment Charlie thought he was, in fact, the happiest man in the world.

The seemingly perfect happiness lasted all through the fall. But then, the red and golden leaves withered to brown, and the happiness came to a sudden halt on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941.

*"The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, by air, President Roosevelt has just announced..."*

Charlie was enlisted just a few weeks later, and in late January he was deployed to Britain. The memory of the train station and the sound of the departing whistle rubbed against Charlie's memory like sandpaper. Waving to Lily through the glass window, through the cracks in their happiness, had been almost unbearable.

Stationed in Exeter, a city in the south of Britain, Charlie spent his free time wandering cobblestone streets and bridges and trying to focus his thoughts on the foreign city and the company of his friends. But his thoughts always found their way back to Lily and Chicago.

It was that sort of a day in April when Charlie was walking through the streets of Exeter with his infantry. The city was bathed in an unfamiliar sunshine, and everyone was cheerful. Suddenly a plane roared overhead. Charlie glanced up, but

the sky was so bright that he couldn't see anything.

The other side of the street burst into flames.

“RUN!” “DUCK!” Screams and smoke curdled the air. Charlie coughed and stumbled as swarms of people ran past him, away from the smoldering rubble. Sirens blared, and the air was ringing. All in one brief moment, Charlie looked up at the sky and saw another plane approaching- a man from his regiment was stumbling across the street. He was coming out of rubble, apparently uninjured. But the plane was almost directly above him, and Charlie was barreling toward him, shouting. He tackled the man, and everything went black.

Charlie woke up in a hospital. He'd survived a bombing, they'd said, and saved the man he'd tackled in the street. But his right arm had clean blown off, and his face was burned to the point that his ruddy, handsome features were unrecognizable. That day was April 23<sup>rd</sup>, one of the first German bomb raids on Britain. America's time spent in World War 2 had barely begun, but Charlie's time was over.

He was flown back to Chicago, where Lily greeted him with a painful smile and hug. She couldn't bring herself to kiss his mangled face. Days passed in a cycle of rehabilitation, long and uncomfortable hours spent with Lily, and a steady stream of postcards and well-wishes. A month later Charlie went back to work, where no one looked him in the eye. He sat miserably

behind his desk, his creative spirit dead. He wrote wretched, empty words that no one would publish. But nobody asked him to leave, and something about going to work and sitting behind a desk made Charlie feel like he still had some kind of purpose, like he was still a part of the giant moving clock of people who mattered.

Inevitably, the night came. The night when Charlie walked home from work, set his empty briefcase on the table, and found a note.

*Dear Charlie,*

*I'm sorry, but I just can't do this. I can't stay. I'm sorry. Maybe it's for the best. -Lily*

She'd been staying in the spare room of his apartment. It was empty now. Charlie walked into the ghost room, staring hard at the cracks in the wooden floor.

It was inevitable. Lily had left. Inevitable, Charlie knew, yet he'd always held onto that absurd human string of hope. But the hope was killed. And there was nothing left but broken strings and his hopeless, sobbing figure, sinking into the floor of the empty room.

*HONK!*

The old man wakes with a start.

Looking around, he realizes he is still inside the bus stop, and

must have fallen asleep. While he was asleep the sun had come out, washing everything in soft, golden light. It was almost evening time, and the wet pavement of Seventh Avenue glittered like gold and the puddles shimmered. The old man's shabby, water-logged clothes had dried while he slept. With that pleasantly foggy feeling you get after a good sleep, the old man decides to go for a walk.

The whole city is wrapped in the early evening sun. It dances across the building tops and peaks through side streets, turning the ugly city grays into molten gold. The old man lifts his bent face and lets the sun caress it as he walks. People peer at him, at the burnt remains of that German raid so long ago. But the old man doesn't mind today. There's even jauntiness in his step as he walks toward Central Park.

When he arrives there, however, the old man is tired again. He seems to be getting more and more tired these days. So he stands resting for a moment, watching the sunlight shimmer on the duck pond. It's funny, he thinks, how sunlight made everything, even a little duck pond, extraordinarily beautiful.

All the benches are full, so the old man saunters over to the edge of the water and settles himself down in the grass. A smile plays at his lips as he watches a little boy nearby trying to feed the ducks. Running around the pond, and throwing kernels of corns at the poor creatures, the little boy stomps his foot in frustration as the birds scurry away from him.

“Mommy, I can’t *feed* them,” he whines.

“Hmm? We’ve got to go soon, Charlie,” a woman sitting at the nearest bench replies, looking distractedly down at her phone.

*Charlie*. The name catches the old man by surprise, as he looks from the woman to the frustrated little boy. Slowly, tentatively, the old man walks over to the little boy.

“Excuse me...” he mutters, but doesn’t catch the boy’s attention. Hesitantly, he taps him on the shoulder. The little boy turns, and looks up at the old man with wide-eyed fear.

“Excuse me, but, uh...coulda, I give it a try?” He points to the little boy’s handful of corn kernels. Glancing from his mother to the old man with the strange face, the little boy nods distrustfully.

Walking over and crouching at the edge of the pond, the old man holds his hand steadily out over the water. The little boy stares. They are both still, waiting for something to happen.

And then a duck floats casually passed, and stops to peek inside the old man’s hand. Two other ducks follow suit, and soon a crowd of birds are pecking corn right out of the old man’s palm. Hearing the little boy laugh behind him, the old man turns.

“Would you like to try?” he asks. The little boy nods, and the old man helps him steady his hand out over the water. The

ducks soon notice a new pile of food, and begin to peck out of the little boy's hand. "It works!" he exclaims, laughing wildly at the tickling sensation. The old man chuckles and his eyes crinkle into a smile.

"Charlie!"

The agitated tone cuts off the two laughing voices. "It's time to go," Charlie's mother says, looking uneasily at her son and the old man. The little boy stands up. "Bye-bye, ducks," he says, then walks away.

The old man watches the two figures, the hurried mother and the skipping boy, growing smaller and smaller as they walk further and further away. Just before they turn and disappear, the little boy turns and waves to the old man. Raising his left arm, the old man waves back.

The park is still scattered with people, but the place suddenly seems empty without the little boy. The old man returns to the edge of the pond, where he sat next to Charlie. A few corn kernels lie in the grass, and the old man gathers them up and holds out his hand out on the water. One by one the ducks come to him and eat.

His eyes close, and the old man's thoughts return to earlier. His sleep. The dreams. The memories that had stirred. He thinks about Charlie Wallace, and his sad, miserable life. And then someone comes to the old man's mind- someone he

hadn't really given much thought. The man Charlie Wallace had tackled and saved. The man who wouldn't be alive without him. But, that man had also ruined Charlie's happiness, his success, everything that had mattered. He'd ended Charlie's pursuit of happiness.

A duck floats past and pecks the last bit of corn out of his hand, and suddenly, after years...it hits him.

You couldn't pursue happiness, the old man realizes. It came to you, like the ducks came toward an old man's open hand.

The sun was nearly set. After musing a while longer, the old man stands up, and heads toward the direction of Seventh Avenue, and the alleyway with the cardboard boxes. But something stops him, just before he leaves the park. He turns around, and looks at the sky. It's a lit up mirage of gold and pink and purple and blue, and the sun is its shiny centerpiece, spilling its final glow on the park. An early spring breeze must've started to blow, because the old man's eyes start to sting with tears. He looks at the park, and strings of nostalgia pull inside of him. There's a funny feeling inside him, telling him this might be the last time he will ever see the park, or watch the sun kiss the grass and shimmer on the pond.

So he stands for a while, and just let himself be happy. It wasn't that hard. The old man wishes he could've shown Charlie Wallace how to be happy. It would've saved a lot of

years of misery. But all was well now, the old man thinks as he walks away. It had been a good day. He had mattered. And he was happy.

Charlie Wallace whistles as he walks into the sunset.