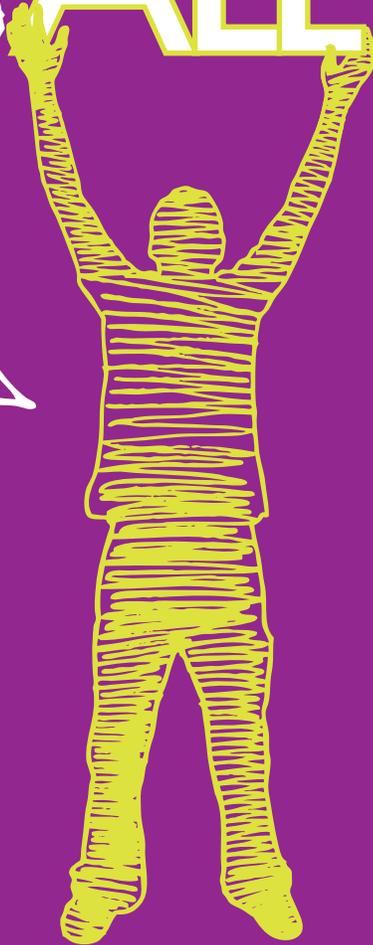




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grades 6-12

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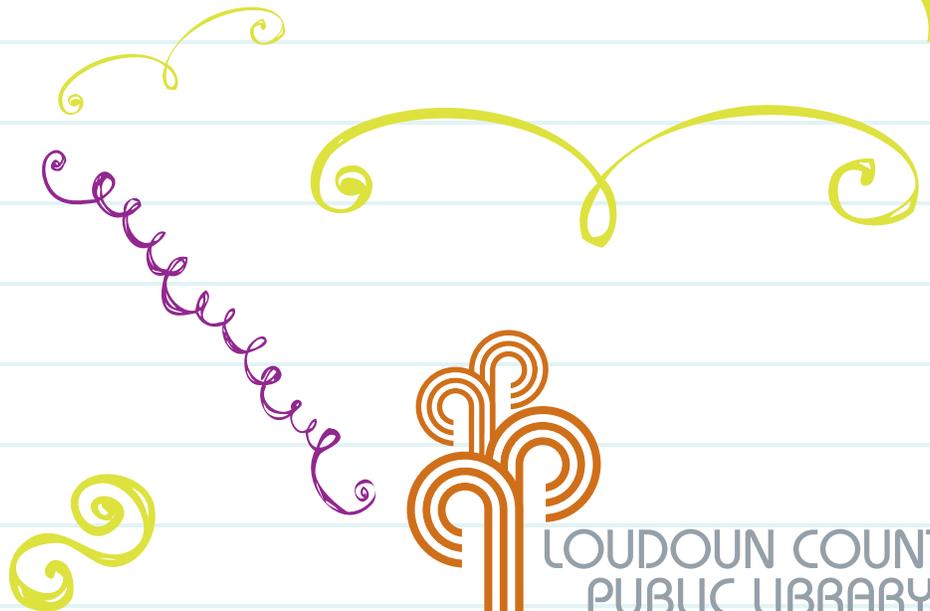
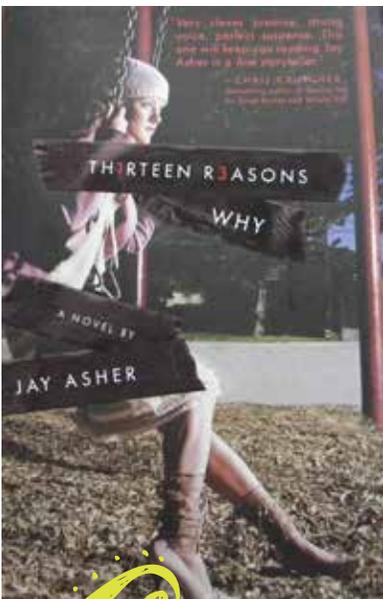


**Congratulations to all the authors who participated  
in Loudoun County Public Library's  
2013 It's All Write contest**

## **Best piece of advice for aspiring authors?**

Join a critique group. You want one that's honest and made up of people with similar goals. If they enjoy writing but don't absolutely want to get published, they're not going to push you as hard as a group of writers battling to be the first one published. But they should also be extremely supportive, and it helps if someone in the group bakes cookies!

Keep Writing – *Jay Asher, Thirteen Reasons Why*



**LOUDOUN COUNTY  
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Nurturing Minds

# **Middle School Stories**

# **Joe Smith, P. I.**

**Middle School Entry**

*Emily F. Wolfe*

*Part One: The Biscuit Business*

I hadn't been in the business long when I saw her, but I haven't set eyes on her equal since. When she darkened my door, held in the arms of a young man, I thought I was dreaming. It was love at first sight. She was as white as a cloud, light as a feather, and delicate as a butterfly.

In short, the best-looking biscuit I'd ever seen.

I would've snatched her right out of the man's arms and gobbled her up if there hadn't already been a bite taken out of her. Instead, I stayed cool and plotted to get the recipe.

"Mr. Smith," the man said, "I have a problem."

"Most people who see me do," I replied. "That's why they come." I gestured to the sign on my door. It read: Joe Smith, Pastry Investigator. "Now, what's wrong? The specimen you've got there seems to be just fine."

"I know," he said, agitated. "The rest of the batch has been stolen."

"Crumbly Croissants!" I cried. "Why didn't you lock them up?"

"I did," he said, looking wounded. "Don't you think I know the value of a good biscuit? I locked them in the pantry-I have the only key-and left them there this morning. When I came back to get one, nothing but crumbs remained."

This was truly a tale of woe. "Please don't get offended, Mr.-"

"Jones."

"Don't get offended, Mr. Jones, but it seems the obvious answer to your predicament is that you have mice."

"Mice!" he exclaimed, looking very offended indeed. "Mice! I'll have you know, Mr. Smith, that I have neither seen a whisker nor heard a twitch during all the years I've lived in my house."

Mice tend to be pretty quiet, but one of the first rules of being a pastry investigator is that you don't argue with a client. I decided to move on. "Just how many biscuits were there in this batch?" I asked.

"Twelve," he told me, "including this one. *It* was only saved because I took it out to eat and forgot about it."

"Were there any windows in your pantry, Mr. Jones?" I was already hooked. I could never resist a good biscuit case. Plus, there was the matter of payment to consider.

"There was one," he admitted, "but very small and extremely high up. No one could've reached the biscuits."

"Well, they must have. They might have used some sort of device. It's amazing what people will do for a well-made biscuit."

"Please, Mr. Smith! Just tell me- can you help me or not?" Jones begged.

I thought it over. "I guess I can help you. Just one condition: You have to give me this recipe."

"Why do you think I need them so badly? The recipe's been stolen, too! Oh, my precious, precious biscuits..." Jones was becoming hysterical at the thought of losing his beautiful biscuits.

"Then it'll be with the biscuits when we recover them. Now let's go find them before they get stale."

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We had barely reached my lime-green Volkswagen Beetle when Jones' cell phone rang. The tune was my favorite song: 'Pattycake'. Clearly Jones and I were men of similar interests.

"Bob Jones," he answered hurriedly.

Standing as close as I was, I couldn't help but hear the reply that made Jones's face go white. "Mr. Jones? I've got your biscuits," said a menacing female voice.

Jones leaned against my car, apparently unable to support himself. "My...my biscuits?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Mr. Jones," that same voice continued. "You know full well which biscuits. Eleven of them, I have here...although it might be ten soon."

Jones swallowed. Voice hoarse, he asked, "What do you want for them?"

"Three thousand dollars."

"Three thousand..."

"You aren't deaf, are you, Mr. Jones? Three thousand dollars. I'll keep them fresh and call you in twenty-four hours for your answer." The woman hung up, leaving Jones in a state of shock.

"Three thousand dollars!" he repeated. He looked up at me. "Would you say it's worth it, Mr. Smith?"

"For biscuits like that? Frankly, yes," I told him. "But we have a day to track them down ourselves. That's where I come in."

"Where do we begin?"

Without answering, I asked, "What's the number of the phone that just called you?"

He opened his phone and rattled off a number. I wrote it down and called up an old friend of mine, the county Chief of Police. I asked him to trace the number. While I waited, I told Jones what I had done.

"Don't get your hopes up just yet," I cautioned him. "A lot of criminals may be stupid, but biscuit thieves tend to be a cut above the rest. The thief likely used a pay phone. Using a personal cell phone would be just *too* stupid. Not that it wouldn't be *nice* if they had happened to...what's wrong?"

While I was talking, Jones had suddenly burst into tears. "It's just...my biscuits!" he blubbered. "I'm afraid I'll never see them again! And, Mr. Smith, - what if they're *stale*?" His voice had crescendoed into a wail by the end of the sentence.

I was starting to regret my decision to take the case -clients crying always makes it a little too personal for my taste- when my cell phone rang. The Chief of Police was calling back to say that the call had in fact,

been made from a pay phone. He gave us the location.

“It’s a start,” I said.

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The pay phone was in a convenience store five miles away. We drove over and checked it out. It didn’t appear too suspicious.

“Hey, are you looking for the people who used that phone awhile ago? They asked for directions to Smurple City.” This was said by the clerk of the store in a monotone, so that it sounded like, “Hey. Are. You.” It was actually pretty funny in the falsetto voice of the clerk. We looked over at her. She was clearly reading from a piece of paper.

“Oh come on. How is that supposed to fool us?” Jones asked disgustedly. “It’s clearly a blind planted by the crook.”

“They might be double-bluffing us,” I pointed out. “Maybe they really are in Smurple City. Can I see that piece of paper, miss?” I asked the clerk. She shook her head and tried to hide it. “The people who gave it to you might have said you would get hurt if you showed it to anyone, but we won’t let that happen.” She still wouldn’t give it to me, so I grabbed it out of her hand. It was blank! I turned it over. Not so much as a smudge. That could only mean one thing...

“You stole the biscuits!” I accused the clerk. “You must have stuck around to throw us off track. Didn’t you think we’d catch you? Gosh, I guess biscuit thieves can be dumb after all.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she asked in the same falsetto, but this time I recognized the malicious undertones that were in the voice of the woman who had called with the ransom demand.

“I’ll watch her and get the biscuits. You call the police,” I told Jones, carefully keeping my eyes on the burglar. He went over to the pay phone and I said, “Okay, no fooling around. Give me the biscuits, and give them to me fast.”

She glared at me, but pulled out a burlap sack and handed it over. I held it close to my nose, breathing in that delicious flaky smell. There was no doubt about it—the biscuits were in there.

I, Joe Smith, Pastry Investigator, had done it again.

### *Part Two: The Almond Affair*

I was at a party when a mystery struck. A party for the Allergic-to-Almonds Club.

This club consisted of a group of people who sat around eating almond-free things. I didn’t quite get the point of it, but no matter. I was just there because an old friend of mine, Mrs. Flotsam, was hosting this meeting of the club, and she’d invited me. And, if you have a large group of people, chances are that *one* of

them is having some pastry-related problem.

This was the part of the party when Mrs. Flotsam was supposed to be making something almond-free--although everyone knew her personal chef made it ahead of time--and the rest of the guests were mingling. I decided to do some mingling myself.

"Hello, sir," I said to a friendly-looking man.

"Hi, sonny," he replied.

Sonny! This man couldn't have been more than five years my senior! I wanted to punch him, but a pastry investigator always keeps their cool. So instead of kneading him up like bread dough, I smiled and said, "I'm Joe Smith."

"John Aldman," he told me, and we shook hands. "I'm a new member of this club, my wife and I both. I'm not actually allergic to almonds, but my wife wanted me to join. Are you allergic?"

"Nope," I said. "I don't even belong to this club. I'm a pastry investigator. Perhaps you've heard of my involvement with the Jones biscuits?"

"Ah, yes," Aldman said, but I could tell he hadn't really. I had figured he wouldn't, and that now he would assume the case had been a great success. That's the way we work in the detective business.

He said something else, but I wasn't listening. I got the same feeling you get when you've put your chocolate chip cookies in the oven and you know they're going to burn. Something was about to happen. Something big.

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Sure enough, as we sat down to eat, it became clear something was wrong. The cake Mrs. Flotsam's chef had made was delicious, but as soon as they tasted it, a large portion of the club's faces started swelling up.

"She didn't put *almonds* in it, did she?" Aldman asked. He started to laugh, but stopped when the club members threw him reproachful looks.

"I smell something nutty," I said. "I'm going to go into the kitchen and see what's up."

I arrived in the kitchen to find Mrs. Flotsam anguished, standing in the middle, wringing her hands. It seemed she herself had not tasted the cake, as no reaction was visible, but she had certainly heard of the tragedy. She seemed to have no idea of what to do.

"I have *no idea* what to *do!*" she cried, proving my powers of observation right again.

I, ever the quick thinker, asked the obvious: "Do you have any allergy medicine?"

"Oh, yes!" she said, brightening. "What a good *idea!* *Thank* you, Mr. Smith." She bustled off, leaving me alone.

I went out to the dining room. "Folks, Mrs. Flotsam's getting you some medicine. Just hold out until

she comes out, okay?"

Their responses were too garbled to be made out, but I'm sure it was a positive response. Who could say no to Joe Smith, Pastry Investigator?

"Here it is!" Mrs. Flotsam said, emerging triumphantly from upstairs holding a big bottle. "I *think* I have enough for everyone." While medication was being doled out, she added, "Sorry about the mix-up, I don't know what's gotten into Molly lately. My chef," she explained in response to my confused glance.

The guests, grumbling, took the medicine and left quickly, leaving me alone with Mrs. Flotsam.

"So," I said, getting right down to business, "You didn't tell your chef to put almonds in this cake?"

"Oh, no. Like I said, I don't know what's gotten in to her. She forgot to send an invitation to the Aldmans—she's my secretary, too, and my gardener—and I had to call them up myself! And now this! I might have to dismiss her."

I was beginning to see a possible solution to this case. "Is it possible, Mrs. Flotsam, that when you told your gardener-secretary-cook to invite the Aldmans to the party, that you said, 'Be sure to add the Aldmans to the party,' or something like that? And that she thought you said *almonds*?"

Mrs. Flotsam's worried face broke into a smile. "Why, that's right! I did say something similar to that! And I remember she gave me a strange look and said, 'Are you sure?' Of course! Thank you so much, Mr. Smith! I'm glad that mystery's been cleared up."

I returned home, satisfied that the case had been solved and I had gotten the rest of the almond cakes as a thank-you from Mrs. Flotsam. I was savoring my very first bite when I got the call. I almost didn't answer, but I sighed and picked up the phone, crossing my fingers that it wasn't a telemarketer.

It was Mrs. Flotsam, almost hysterical. "My *jewelry* has been *stolen*! Mr. Smith, you've *got* to find out who's *done* it!"

I groaned. "You're forgetting, Mrs. Flotsam. I'm a *Pastry* Investigator."

"Please, Joe? *Please*? You were so much help earlier..."

"Fine," I grumbled. "I'll be right over."

When I arrived at the Flotsam mansion for the second time that day, Mrs. Flotsam welcomed me inside.

She showed me her jewelry box. It seemed pretty full to me, but apparently it was shockingly empty. "Almost half of my jewelry is *gone*!" she wailed. "Who could have *done* it?"

"I hate to say it, Mrs. Flotsam, but it seems the obvious suspect is your cook-gardener-secretary. She could have put the almonds into the cake and then used the upset as a chance to steal your jewelry."

"I *thought* of that," she said, surprising me—she had never seemed much like the *thinking* type to me—"but she *left* at noon for her day off! She went to spend time with her *grandchildren*."

I was beginning to get into full detective mode. "The cake *must* tie into it somehow—aha! She put the

almonds in the cake to cause a diversion for someone *else* to steal your jewelry.” Apparently Mrs. Flotsam’s italics were catching—I would have to be careful.

“*Who?* Who in the Allergic-to-Almonds club would *do* such a thing?”

“Well, it would *probably* be someone who *wasn’t* allergic—I mean, it would probably be someone who wasn’t allergic to almonds.”

Comprehension dawned on her face. “*Surely* not Mr. *Aldman?*”

I shook my head sadly. “It would certainly appear that way, although it might just be a hunch. I’ll call the police.”

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As it turned out my hunch was proved correct. (As they so often are.) John Aldman and his wife, as well as Molly Andrew the secretary-gardener-cook, confessed under questioning and were convicted of theft. The *Teacake Times* ran an article on the case, and I had a feeling I would be getting a lot more business.

I, Joe Smith, Pastry Investigator, had done it again.

*Can’t wait for more of Joe’s adventures? Check out the newest book in the Pastry Investigator series, ‘The Marmalade Murders’!*

# **Beneath the Surface**

**Middle School Entry**

*Sanjana Raghavan*

Once upon a time, there was a baby who was cursed from the beginning. King Johann and Queen Aliese did not know this, of course, but fairy magic has its price. The baby, Princess Estefania, had been something both they and the kingdom had wanted for years. A big celebration, one day after the baby was born, was arranged. The kingdom's four fairies flew in as guests of honor, and everyone (even the villagers) were invited. Everyone except me. The stupid villagers liked to call me an old, evil witch who lives all alone in an abandoned manor (which I have tastefully decorated with candy), but the truth is, I'm just shy. Also, I'm not that old, and I do have a name, Ivy.

Witches and kingdoms don't have a great history in the Kingdom of Regency, but I was still offended. On the day of the Birthday Banquet, I did the only thing I could do. I crashed. Disguising myself as a Royal Baker, I snuck into the huge brick palace. There were excited people everywhere, and no one noticed me. The fairies arrived next to the King and Queen, and everyone tried to catch a glimpse. Fairies have the kind of beauty that is so unattainable, you can only stand back and admire it. Today, they were wearing iridescent dresses that gently swayed as they flew, and their hair rested on their shoulders in curls, framing their picture-perfect faces.

"Attention!" the King yelled.

The whole room fell silent at once, eagerly waiting for his next words.

"The fairies will each give the princess a special gift," he proclaimed.

The crowd erupted into cheers, and the fairies basked in the spotlight.

Lilith, the youngest and prettiest, waved her crystal wand. "I grant beauty," she announced in her high, sweet voice. A cloud of pink enveloped the princess, shimmering and buzzing.

Edna, the plumpest, granted wisdom. This time, pale yellow dust fell.

Lena granted kindness, a tornado of blue erupting. I saw a devious look pass between Edna and Lena. It wasn't like the fairies to give the gifts out of the goodness of their hearts.

"And now, the final, best gift," Delia, the wickedest fairy, announced. I didn't like the gleam in her steely

blue eyes.

“Stop!” I cried, unmasking myself. Some people stared, shocked, while others murmured nastily.

“The fairies are turning her into a monster,” I warned the King and Queen. “There will be a heavy price to pay.”

The King haughtily said, “These fairies are our friends, Witch. Unlike you, they were invited.”

A shiver ran down my spine, and a tear threatened to leak out of my eye.

“Fine. Then here’s my gift. When she grows up, the princess shall prick her finger on a needle and die!”

I heard a collective gasp. Too angry to stop myself, I performed the intricate spell, a black cloud swirling around me and Princess Estefania. When it dissolved, I cloaked myself with an Invisibility Spell and made my way to the back of the palace.

Thinking I was gone, the Queen began to sob.

“I cannot take away the spell,” Delia announced dramatically, “but I can change it.”

Certain spells, like Death spells, are called Irreversibles. Only a very powerful being could change one.

“Instead of death, the needle will bring on one hundred years of sleep. The princess will be awakened by a prince’s kiss,” Delia said, her voice thundering with passion.

I left, wanting to cry. Delia had been very clever to combat Death with another Irreversible, Love. For everyone knows a prince can only kiss a princess if he loves her.

The following week, King Johann made eccentric new laws. They banned needles of every kind, and those in existence were to be destroyed. The people obeyed, terrified of the consequences.

Over the next few years, Princess Estefania grew into a beautiful, cunning young woman. Her beauty

was said to turn men crazy, her cleverness luring them to death, and her kindness really hypnotism in disguise. The fairies had the King and Queen under their thumb, convincing them Estefania would not be safe without them. I'm surprised they didn't realize what their daughter had turned into, but perhaps they *wanted* to be blissfully ignorant.

The night before Estefania's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, I had a Dream. Dreams, for witches, predict the future, and only happen once in a lifetime. In my Dream, the kingdom was covered in a thick, gray fog. The people looked weary, as if they had given up on life and happiness. A blonde figure stood in the center, her cold blue eyes reminding me of Delia's. I recognized Princess Estefania, although she looked a few years older.

"All hail the Queen!" a tired chant broke out from the people. "Or else?" Estefania demanded, her plush lips curling up. "Death!"

I woke up shaking, Estefania's cackling ringing in my ears. I knew I had to stop her. Rifling through my pantry for inspiration, I came across an old potion. "Aphrodite- Approximately 2 hours" the label read. I wasted no time, weaving a plan in my head. I would go to the palace, pretending to be a florist for the party. Then, I would sneak into the party and drink the potion. Finally, I would lure Estefania and prick her.

The first part of my plan went smoothly. The palace guards were so busy they gave me no trouble. Sneaking to the party was a little harder. After I dropped off a dozen red roses (fresh from my garden), one maid wouldn't stop complaining to me about how much cleaning she had to do. I managed to evict myself though, and drink the overly sweet potion. I was transformed into a stunning young woman, with brown curls, jade green eyes, and an olive complexion. At least, that's what I looked like to me. The Aphrodite potion makes everyone see the Drinker as the most beautiful girl in the world, but it's different for everyone.

I found the princess dancing with a smitten looking man. Quickly, I found her lady-in-waiting, Mia, and convinced her to take me to the princess's bedroom. "Mia, darling, bring Princess Estefania up here as quickly as you can. Tell her it's Snow White," I begged, batting my eyelashes. The giggling girl promised she would, and left. Snow White and Estefania have a small, petty rivalry in the looks department, so I knew she would come immediately. Indeed, the princess came quickly and alone, swathed in yards of pink tulle.

"You're not Snow," she spat out, her voice sweeter than honey.

“No,” I agreed. “In fact, I’m prettier than her *and* you.”

Her eyes narrowed as she examined me. “Impossible!” she scoffed. Confusion seeped into Estefania’s voice. “You look just like... me.”

I pounced, pricking her finger with the needle hidden behind my back. Estefania crumpled, her chest gently rising and falling. I Transported myself back home, celebrating with Fried Newt on a Stick and, for dessert, Essence of Frog Ice Cream.

The next day, the gossip girl who did my laundry told me what happened after I left. “When the King and Queen found out, they were so sad, they called off the party and cried for ten hours. Then, they ordered a bed of roses for the princess to sleep on.” Cady may exaggerate, but she’s a pretty good source of information. “I heard the fairies are helping the King and Queen. They’re flying in today from their palace in Atlantis,” Cady added. The fairies? They were sure to ruin everything!

Hastily bidding Cady farewell, I Transported myself to the Palace. The air was heavy with magic, almost suffocatingly so. As I looked around, it soon became clear why. Everything had been suspended, frozen in time. Even the King and Queen, who I found upstairs, were frozen. It was eerie being in the big palace all alone with silent figures. I soon left, drowsy from the spell. The King or Queen must have asked if there was a way for the palace to remain exactly as it was for a hundred years. They would have been easy prey for the fairies.

News spread around the kingdom of the Sleeping Palace. Everyone moved from Regency, for there was no one to govern them. Soon, nature reclaimed the kingdom, and a bristly forest bloomed. I spent the next hundred years focusing on my Witchcraft, free to do it in the open once again.

One day, as I was practicing a Heat spell, I saw a young man riding on a horse towards the palace. Intrigued, I followed him. His caramel-colored hair shone in the sun, and his velvet breeches and magnificent white horse could only mean one thing.

“Greetings, Prince,” I called.

He turned in surprise, his green eyes widening. “Greetings, Witch,” he replied, his nose twitching ever

so slightly in disgust. "I'm Prince Heath, from the Kingdom of Utopia."

I self-consciously twisted my black hair into a bun, adjusting a few hairpins, before answering. "I'm Ivy. What do you seek?"

He grinned, his smile brighter than a thousand suns. "There is a rumor of a Sleeping Beauty trapped in these Enchanted Woods. I am on a quest to rescue her."

Prince Heath kicked his horse, spurring it on. "Farewell," he called, galloping towards the palace.

For a while, I just stood there, day-dreaming of Heath's grass-green eyes. As the sky grew darker, a realization dawned on me. Heath was trying to wake Princess Estefania. Estefania, a truly evil monster with the deceptive face of an angel, was going to be woken up. I had to stop him. A Transportation spell would not work well this late. I grabbed my "Eat Me!" potion, in the form of a cake this time, and ate it as quickly as possible. The sugary taste in my mouth and lighter-than-air feeling in my chest was all I could think of as I grew higher and higher. I stretched my long arms, secured my brown bag that held my potions, and ran through the forest. My legs were so big, it almost felt like flying, and I got to the palace in minutes. I was surprised to see a tiny boy, also running towards the palace.

"Hello!" I called, and my voice echoed "lo-lo-lo!" He looked up, startled.

"G-g-giant!" he stuttered. I laughed, rustling the leaves on the trees. I had forgotten about the potion. Quickly downing the "Drink Me!" potion, I felt a terrible squeezing feeling as I shrank. I stretched, my arms back to normal.

"Hello," I tried again. "Sorry about that. I'm Ivy." The boy, who on closer inspection was actually a young man, said, "Greetings. I'm Prince Denton, from the Kingdom of Dystopia."

I studied him, observing the silk clothes and well-groomed manner of royalty I had not noticed before.

"Where's your horse?" I asked. Smiling sheepishly, he told me his horse had run off. "It's like the palace is cursed or something," Prince Denton said, shrugging. Cursed. Princess Estefania. Heath!

I ran into the palace, and Denton followed me.

“Heath?” I called. “Ivy?” Denton whispered. He pointed towards the staircase. Two shadowy figures walked down, hands intertwined.

“Heath!” I cried, his face becoming clear as he came closer. Then I saw the other face, and the gorgeous, cold smile plastered across it.

“Princess Estefania!” I blurted out, shocked. My hand instinctively went to my brown bag.

“Heath!” Princess Estefania commanded. One word, one syrupy sweet word, and Heath’s hands were around my throat. His hold tightened, and I gasped for air.

“Ivy!” Denton yelled, his sword raised high.

“Don’t,” Estefania ordered, a dangerous undertone to the word.

“Heath,” she cooed, and his grip loosened. I let out a huge gasp, re-inflating my lungs. I examined Heath, trying to find out how she controlled him, and stopped at his eyes. They were glassed over, a cold emptiness in them. *Her gifts.*

Estefania beamed at Denton, slowly batting her eyelashes. “Why are you helping a witch? She’s evil. Haven’t you seen the horrible things they can do?” she asked, manipulating him like dough. His brown eyes began to look glazed, and I knew it was now or never. I grabbed what was left of my prized Aphrodite potion, guzzling it down.

“Heath!” Estefania shrieked, but the potion was already taking effect. I was swept away in a horrible pressure from all around me. “Oh no!” I choked out, realizing what had happened. In my hurry, I had grabbed the “Drink Me!” potion. I was now only six inches tall, but to me it seemed as if everything else had just expanded.

“Where is she?” I heard Estefania shriek, her voice amplified to my tiny ears. I clapped my hands over my ears, knocking a hair pin loose. A hair pin, I realized, that was very similar to a needle. I murmured the Enlarging spell (it only worked on metals), and almost buckled under the weight. The hair pin was five times

bigger than usual. Using all my strength, I lifted it high in the air and quickly brought it down on Estefania's leg. She only had time to let out a yelp of surprise before the magic began to work.

Estefania was the product of so much evil magic, fire had begun to build up in her blood. The needle, which held Symbolic magic, sped up the fire's growth. Basically, the minute the needle hit her skin, Estefania burst into flames. Soon, all that was left of her was a pile of ashes. I stuffed the "Eat Me!" potion in my mouth, rapidly expanding. Heath looked at me like I was a ghost.

"What happened?" he gasped. I summed it up as simply as I could for him. "Estefania was cursed. A needle would activate the curse. The curse was altered so instead of death, sleep would come. Still, Death can't be changed so much as put off. Now, she's, well, you know..." I trailed off uncomfortably.

Heath looked ready to puke. "I'm out of here," he muttered, running out of the palace. Helplessly, I watched him leave.

"Thanks for saving my life," Denton said quietly. I turned, taking in his sincere brown eyes and auburn hair. "It was nothing," I mumbled, suddenly shy.

We walked out of the palace, past the sleeping figures who had begun to awaken, like a museum coming to life. The moon threw a soft light on Denton's earnest face, making my stomach flip-flop.

"Denton, it's getting really dark. Do you want to stay in my house for the night? It's made of gingerbread and candy," I offered. Smiling shyly, he said he did, and ended up staying for the rest of his life, alternating between his palace and my house. We lived blissfully together, our life always full of surprises. The only downside was our house attracted lost brats wandering around in the woods. But that's another story.

**Chairs:  
An Informative Pamphlet to  
Alert You of the Very Real Danger**

**Middle School Entry**

*Lydia Smith*

Chairs hate humans. I mean, would you want someone's butt pressed into you all day? I seriously doubt it. I know that chairs must be planning a revolution. They will destroy the human race to get back at us for forcing them to endure this torturous existence. Maybe chairs aren't as they seem. Perhaps they are not the harmless inanimate objects we make them out to be after all. I know for a fact that my chair purposefully trips me. There's no way I could have just, like, tripped.

So, we at the Chair Revolution Prevention Committee (the C.R.P.C.<sup>1</sup>) are doing our best to warn people of the dangers of chairs. A chair revolution is one option to be taken very seriously. If it happened, we would stand no chance! How long do you think you could go without sitting on a chair? I am sitting on a chair as I type this. And it's not just sitting that we use chairs for. Most people stand on chairs a fair amount, if they can't reach something.<sup>2</sup>

Plus, chairs get abused. I am not joking. They are constantly getting nicked, scratched, kicked, and muddy. The chairs in school often times get stabbed with pencils, and that isn't fun-it's happened to me. This abuse of chairs will, we are convinced, force chairs into taking drastic action, in their best interest. So, for your own safety, please treat your chairs with the utmost respect and caution.

If I were a chair, I would want revenge. I would definitely want to do something big. For instance, do you think that chairs could legitimately use humans as slaves or something? I mean, what for? Chairs are not as fragile, and they certainly do not need to eat, sleep, or write bizarre stories for English class. Chairs are creatures with powers unknown to man, and this is not something to be taken lightly.

Robotics nowadays are quite advanced. They have robots like Apple's 'Siri' which recognizes voice patterns, to robots that can function as a human can. Chairs can be quite complex, too. I know that those easy chairs which have a million and one functions are. The more functions our chairs are equipped with, the easier it will be for them to take over the world. I urge you to send a polite letter to the chair company closest to you, asking them to stop making chairs, for safety purposes. Chairs could be the most threatening household object there is, but no one even notices them.

Yes, chairs are and have been a very important aspect of our lives, and if they weren't here, then the human

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1 For more information, visit our website, [www.crpc.chairs/visit/homepage.crazy](http://www.crpc.chairs/visit/homepage.crazy)

2 See informative pamphlet #6, *The Dangers of Footstools and How to Prevent Them*, for useful tips about training your footstool to be docile and not fall out from under you when standing on it to reach things.

course of events would have turned out very differently. For instance, and this is just one idea, maybe one day George Washington was really tired and wanted to lie down as a little boy. Having no chairs on which to sit on, he lies down on the ground. It is a warm, sunny day in Northern Virginia, and he falls asleep soon. Unfortunately for George, a large out-of-control horse-and-carriage was coming that way, and they ran off the road and over top of him! He is crippled for life. So, sorry, colonies! No fearless general Washington to win the Revolutionary War for you! Adios! Then, as the British still control, they might get greedy and take over the rest of Europe, too, while they're at it. *Then*, no World War one or two, because it is only one country!<sup>3</sup>

Maybe that is a little out of proportion, but we are realizing that chairs are our worst enemies. Here is our 100% solid proof!<sup>4</sup>

ONE: Chairs are secretly robots planning to destroy us like Terminator. I know this because one night I was in my room and the chair next to my desk creaked EXACTLY like a robotic code message thingy. This is proof that they are robots. Also, I once tripped on a chair and landed on my nose and it started bleeding. So chairs are definitely violent-minded.

TWO: Chairs are an ancient race that wants to reclaim their original territory (i.e. The World). This was a tricky one. There are records of chairs dated back to almost the eighth century B.C., and then are lost for a while. However, we (this still being the Chair Revolution Prevention Committee, otherwise known as the C.R.P.C.) have good evidence proving that they have been around since before humans, and were actually fraternizing with the dinosaurs. Unfortunately, the only conclusion we can draw from that is that the chairs destroyed the dinosaurs in their lust for revenge

THREE: Since it has already been explained how chairs destroyed the dinosaurs in their lust for revenge, it must be noted that dinosaurs were around BEFORE humans. Thence, we must allow for the fact that chairs can, in fact tell the future and read minds. So when you are thinking very private thoughts and your chair creaks, it's just the chair laughing at you.<sup>5</sup>

FOUR: Chairs can read minds, it has already been proven. Thus, were they to go to the point of revolution,

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3 This is a very possible theory to what might have happened had chairs not been around, according to our history specialist at C.R.P.C., Dr. Jacques LeFebvre

4 Did you know that 80% of statistics are made up? We at C.R.P.C do our best to arm you with the most accurate, up-to-date information possible.

5 For information involving the chairs' language, or Creakysqueak, read our bestselling book, *Creakysqueak: A Guide to the Complex Language of Chairs*. Over thirty copies sold!

we would stand no chance at all. They would simply read our minds, discover our tactics, and wipe us out. I am terribly sorry to report this, but it is proven factual information.

FIVE: Human obesity is NOT helping the problem. Chairs do not appreciate the extra bacon at IHOP. In the interest of preserving your life, diet, fat ones.<sup>6</sup>

So there you have it. Solid, conclusive proof that chairs are menacing creatures determined to stomp out our race and eventually take over the world. Thank you for reading this informative pamphlet, and I urge you and your family to take all this information with at least four grains of salt. Remember, we are not trying to scare you out of your mind; we simply must do our duty as a noble committee bound to protect humans and spread the word of this all-too-real danger.

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6 According to Health, United States, 2011, table 69, 69.2% of Americans are seriously overweight or obese, and we have inferred that hundreds of accidents involving chairs being sat on by these people happen every year. We think that America is where the chairs will strike first. If you live in the States, it is advisable to protect your family by moving to Antarctica (because there aren't many chairs there).

# **The Tunnel**

**Middle School Entry**  
*Rachel Dugdell*

The puddles of cold rain were drenching the torn bottoms of my jeans as I ran down the road. Shripping screams echoed through the tunnel. My mother was standing at the end of it; she looked defenseless. I could hear her pleading for mercy. Tears were streaming down her sunken cheeks into her dark matted hair. I tried to save her, but no matter how fast I sprinted down the path, I wasn't getting any closer. I was starting to feel desperate, so I leapt forward. Instead of grabbing her arm and pulling her away from the danger, I got a face full of pavement, and she got a bullet in her heart.

My eyes shot open. My entire body was shaking and covered in sweat. For the past two years, images of my mother's murder haunted me. She had been held for ransom and then killed when my family couldn't pay them what they asked us for. I can remember the bored looking police officer questioning us. He blamed me for not being able to answer him when I couldn't stop crying long enough to get a word out. The only person that I can talk to is Mrs. Catfield. I know most people think I'm just some crazy girl that saw her mom get killed, but Mrs. Catfield understands. She's one of the few people that I completely trust. I think it's something about the way she talks. Like how she told me that the rug on her floor is a lot softer than it looks. She said that I'm sort of the same way; that people look at me and can only see what's on the outside. They think they know who I am already, so they never try to get to know the real me. If they'd just take off their socks and put their feet out, they'd know that I'm a lot softer than I look.

I sat up in my bed and stifled a yawn. I looked in the corner of my room that my window occupied. The large navy blanket draped over top of it blocked out most of the sunlight which left my room pretty dark. I hated looking at the window. It made me feel like I was a kid in the doctor's office about to get a shot. The nurse was coming in with the needles. I knew that she was there, but seeing the needles that would soon be puncturing my flesh made it seem worse than it really was. The needles won't do anything to me; they barely hurt once they're in. It's seeing them waiting for me that was so scary. I'm like a little kid in a doctor's office when it comes to that window. I have to close my eyes because I can't handle seeing what's on the other side, waiting for me.

With a slight shudder, I jumped down onto the floor and walked over to the mirror that hung on the wall over my dresser. My room was painted white but you could barely tell because of all the pictures I had hung up on the wall. With another yawn, I grabbed the first t-shirt I saw in the drawer. I slipped on a pair of black jeans, threw my hair in a ponytail and set off to the kitchen. Within five minutes I made myself a cup of coffee and a piece of toast. Shoving the bread in my mouth, I picked up the phone and punched in a number.

"Hello?" the voice said

“Zoe! Come pick me up!” I answered with the toast still clenched beneath my teeth. I bent over to knot the laces of my sneakers. “I will,” Zoe said “but I have to get Amber first!”

“Okay. Just hurry up.” I pushed the phone back into its holder and grabbed my back pack.

Zoe is twenty and goes to the local community college with one of my brothers, Steven. We’ve been best friends since we were really little. She was always like a big sister to me. When we were little, she was a little heavier than me and had mousy brown hair. Now, she has bleach blonde hair with purple tips and wears too much makeup. She’d be a lot prettier if she didn’t wear so much, but she thinks she needs it. It’s partially from the fact that she had a lot of trouble with eating disorders when she was in high school.

“Julianne, you have an appointment with Ms. Catfield after school,” said my father. His body was slouched against the wall; he looked tired and overworked. “Alright,” I said brightly; I try to be as nice as possible around my dad. It’s been really hard on him since my mom was killed. Not only does he have to work hard at his job, he also has to take care of three kids at home. “Have a good day,” said my dad, a tiny smile crept into the corner of his mouth before he kissed the top of my head.

I heard a muffled shout coming from outside; I knew it must be Zoe. Sure enough when I walked outside into the crisp air, I saw her beat up Ford sitting in my driveway. Amber was sitting in the passenger seat. Her strawberry blonde, curly hair was pushed back by a pink headband that matched her outfit. “Hey Julianne,” Amber said without looking up. “Hi,” I said back to her. Amber and I met when we were freshmen; she has changed a lot since then. Back then, she wouldn’t be caught dead with any shade of pink on her body, but these days it didn’t seem like she owned another color.

The school day went by quicker than usual today. In no time we were heading outside toward the buses. “Do you want to walk home?” Amber asked me as she looked up from her compact mirror. “I can’t,” I told her. “I have an appointment with Mrs. Catfield.”

“Alright,” she said. “Well, see you later then.” I looked back to see her curly hair bouncing away.

As soon as I got home I sprinted up the stairs into my room. I walked towards my bed where I had put my phone before school. As I turned to grab it, I noticed that the blanket that usually covered my window had fallen off. I didn’t move; I could feel my face getting hot under the shocked expression I was sure it possessed.

After a few seconds of staring at the blanket on the floor, I turned around and headed down the stairs.

It took me about ten minutes to walk to Mrs. Catfield's office. The entire time I was walking, I kept remembering the blood splattered memories that so often infested my dreams. Once I got there, I sat down in the waiting room and looked around. Fear was streaming through me. The glimpse I caught of what lay outside my window wouldn't escape my mind. The familiar voice of Mrs. Catfield calling my name broke my train of thought. I looked up to see her smiling sweetly at me. The soft blonde curls of her hair were partially covering her eyes. "This way," she said steering me toward her office. I felt slightly uncomfortable as I slumped down into the cushioned chair that sat in the corner of the room. "So, Julianne," she said as she put on her thick glasses that make her eyes look too big for her face. "How are you?" Before I could answer I started to feel hot tears welling up in my eyes. I put my head in my hands and started wailing like a baby. In between sobs I'd make out a couple words like blanket and window, but it was obvious Mrs. Catfield couldn't understand me in this state.

After a few minutes, I had calmed down a bit and looked up. I saw Mrs. Catfield in a chair beside me. She had a box of tissues in her lap and a glass of water in her hand. "Thanks," I said, taking the water. She looked at me; her eyes were kind and understanding. "I know you're hiding something. This is the fourth time you've come in and been like this. What is wrong?" She said. "Something is bothering you. If you tell me I can help you through it." I took a deep breath and looked at Mrs. Catfield. "Okay well, outside the window in my room, there's this thing, and every time I see it I get really scared," I began. "Not scared like you think your parents are going to get mad at you or that you'll get sent to the principal, but scared like you think something is going to hurt you." As the words escaped from my mouth my mind started filling with pictures. Lights were flickering inside my head. I could hear my mother shrieking; blood was dripping, dogs were barking, babies were crying. "What is it?" I saw Mrs. Catfield's lips form the words, but it took a minute for my mind to process what they meant. "The tunnel," I said weakly.

I explained to Mrs. Catfield how the window in my bedroom contained a clear view of the site of my mother's murder. I told her that for the past two years I've kept a blanket over it so I don't have to see it every day. "It mocks me," I said. "It sits there without a care in the world." I started crying again. "Julianne," Mrs. Catfield said "It's just a tunnel. Horrible things happened there, I know, but it cannot hurt you. It will not hurt you." The calmness in her voice angered me. "How can you say that?" I shouted at her, "My mother was murdered there! I saw my mother get shot in front of my eyes!" She stayed silent. "MY MOTHER DIED IN THAT TUNNEL!"

"I know. Your mother died in that tunnel two years ago, and you've been stuck there ever since."

"WHAT IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN!?" I bellowed as I stood up. My throat was burning from the screaming and the tears that were flowing out of my eyes seemed to have an endless supply. "You haven't gotten over your mother's passing. You never will until you get through that tunnel. All you can remember about her is how she died. Is that really how she'd want you to remember her?" Without waiting for a reply she continued. "You should think about the good memories you had with her. It's what she'd want." I glared at her. How dare she pretend like she knew what my mother would want? "YOU DIDN'T KNOW HER!" I screeched, "AND YOU'LL NEVER GET TO KNOW HER BECAUSE SHE'S DEAD! I CAN'T PRETEND LIKE THAT'S OKAY! I CAN'T PRETEND THAT I'M OKAY!"

"You won't have to pretend."

I sat back down and looked at Mrs. Catfield. Wiping the smeared black makeup off my face I said very quietly, "How is walking through a tunnel supposed to help?"

"Think about it. It's the only thing holding you back."

Two hours later I was sitting still on my bed with my legs crossed staring out the window. I had the navy blue blanket that once guarded what I was most afraid of around my body. I decided that Mrs. Catfield was right. Whenever I thought of my mother, the tunnel always came to mind. I called Zoe on my cell phone. "Hey Jules!" said her cheerful voice from the other end of the line. "Hey." I started. I told her everything that happened at Mrs. Catfield's office and that I wanted to walk through the tunnel. "If you really think you're ready," Zoe said questionably. "I am," I said. "Can you come over? And call Amber and tell her to come to?" "Of course," she said.

A familiar nervous feeling was forming in the pit of my stomach as Zoe, Amber and I walked down the road. I paused slightly at the opening of the tunnel, took a deep breath, and then started moving forward again. I looked left to Zoe. She took my hand and squeezed it. When I looked at Amber she smiled then whispered, "Ready?" I nodded and we started walking through the tunnel. I looked around at the walls of the tunnel. They were white and covered in graffiti that reminded me of the walls in my room. The lights gave the floor a yellow tint that reminded me of the beginning of a sunrise. Although my heart was beating twice as fast as it usually did, the atmosphere was strangely peaceful. The only sound was our echoing footsteps.

We were halfway through the tunnel when I started to think about my mother. Instead of her screaming with smeared blood on her face, I saw her laughing and smiling. A particular memory popped into my mind. We

were at the pool when I was ten. She had her hair in a ponytail at the top of her head and was getting ready to jump off the diving board. "Go mommy!" I yelled "Yeah!" called Zoe from beside me. My dad ran up behind my mother and pushed her into the water. She squealed as she fell into the pool sending splashes in our faces. Beaming, she started to swim over to Zoe and I. Steven did a flip off the board into the water that was gleaming in the sunlight. The moment was full of pure bliss. Reality flooded into my mind, I turned to Zoe and then to Amber and just laughed. I hung my arms around their shoulders and walked through the end of the tunnel.

Coming out of the tunnel I saw the beautiful lights of the city. That was when I realized that even though my mother was gone, I was finally free to remember her how she would have wanted me to. My mother was known for her laugh. It could brighten up anyone's day, and people could recognize it as soon as they heard it. I remember hearing her laugh and always feeling warmer and happier than I did before. I escaped the cell that the tunnel trapped me in within my own mind. I knew I would never be able to hear her laugh again, but I was finally free to remember it.

# **Saved my Life with his Words**

**Middle School Entry**

*Megan Hajdo*

It's about the 'one comment thing.' The ones that make you lose control. And everyone else around you takes the heat. It takes one word occasionally, just to get you going, and when the next unfortunate soul says one small thing, you simply explode. Perhaps it's just the simple remarks that keep adding up all day and you think you can sleep them off that night. But the ones that stick- the cruel ones from the person with the demeaning glint in their eye- they sometimes thrust you right over the edge and, just sometimes, you can't get back up again. Those words can be good or bad, really. Other times, comments can lift you off your feet- you soar through the clouds.

That's what this story is about. It may not be the romantic, horror, maybe even dystopian story you were hoping for.

But it's certainly something.

Maybe because it begins with such a depressing subject that it's been hard for me to get my gripping on this story- white knuckles, sweaty palms- death was never my thing. I sometimes feel myself slipping, and so I'd like to get this over with; get it onto paper. And perhaps this will be lost in the archive of all my other stories- though not also about suicide, I assure you- and maybe ripped to shreds by my mother, or maybe even my father. As long as it was here, I know it was once a tangible concept. That is all I need.

I figure it'll take me awhile to figure out where to start. It could be the day the noose was tied- but then you wouldn't know *why*, and about Brady. So I will start first day I remember being bullied; it was October 14<sup>th</sup>. I was in the sixth grade.

I remember clearly the rain pattering down on the roof top of the school, the chatter of the kids surrounding me, and the clang of a lunchbox as it fell to the tiled cafeteria floors. It's funny, somehow, that we remember some things, like sounds and tastes and smells, while most of the time the point of the memory slips our brains. And it amuses me that this one lasts about the time it takes to make the 'one comment'. The lunch box that fell; I remember the bright red and blue splashes on the side, the small dancing creatures.

"What a lunch box!" someone called out. They were directing it at me, the owner. "Freak." Of course these are the words I *imagined* them spewing. The years basically wipe the words away from my recollection, sometimes replacing them with new ones. I know they were cruel after that, and there were some that made me cry- some tripped me as I fled the large room, the word *freak* following me like a ghost.

And no one followed to help.

Oh, and I suppose my mother had something to do with it. Maybe my father, also. No, not maybe- yes;

he had everything to do with it. It was his actions every night when he returned from the bar. You can imagine that. There was the alcohol that dribbled down his scruffy chin, the scent of the liquor, overpowering on his breath. Ah, and my mother watched. That was the other thing. And I was so mad at her for that. So, in a way, she can be blamed for him and my miserable life. But the thing is- I don't think she ever knew about everything else that was happening to me at the time. At school, in the park, in my room. Ever since all these new Internet websites came out, people have just found more and more ways to humiliate me.

And let me get something straight, here. I needed everyone to know that I was in no way the typical nerd everyone picks them out to be. Thick broken glasses. Carry around a heavy dictionary. Straight A students. There are stereotypical people out there, everywhere, laughing at the high school kids with thick glasses.

Because I was in no way, by any stretch of the imagination, the 'nerd type'.

Perhaps I was somewhat antisocial. People never would have known if they had simply *ignored* the ninth grader sitting in the back of the cafeteria every day, alone. The whole table was empty. I never talked to anyone, and so maybe that's why I never met anyone there, except for the bullies. I never gave anyone eye contact, but they didn't want to either, and perhaps that is why no one came near me. Maybe people tried to talk to me. But conversations involve two sides, and I was never much into enveloping myself in their words, filling in the blanks.

And so that was what I finally found out was the barrier between me and friendship.

I think I might have skipped something along the way. I get carried away sometimes. Ah, yes; me. You should probably know who I am. Well, more of what I look like. Let's see.

Most of the time there is a smirk in the smile I force myself to wear. The grin doesn't come out often, so my mother takes what she can get. Just so you don't think I am some beautiful 16- year old girl, unjustly tormented at school, I'll tell you all the facts.

The truth is this: I am not much to look at. And it's not that I'm ugly. It's that my natural blond locks curl up like the girls at the high school. The reason they effortlessly bullied me is because their bleached hair had been put through several hours a day worth of curling. My cobalt eyes come from a trait my mother passed down to me; not contacts. They harass me because I am not artificial. They try so hard to make a show; they need to terrorize someone at school to gain affection from bystanders. And sadly, these high school girls feed off of these incidents.

Honestly, sometimes I actually make myself believe that they are lonelier than I am. Because sometimes, being alone is not the same as lonely.

You must be verging on boredom, and I am sorry for that. I never was a great writer; but I wrote stories anyway, to fuel my mind, to get me thinking. I figure I'll skip around a bit, to try to near our conclusion. So let me introduce Brady.

He was a strong boy. He had a cap of dark brown hair, shining like chocolate. He was always top of the class; whether in algebra or in gym. He befriended many people, quickly, with a glint in his kind green eyes. It was fortunate for him to enter my life, and at such a time.

The boys at my school had watched my clumsy retreat from my locker, and my hasty approach to the front doors. Following, they stripped me of my backpack, throwing both of us to the tiled floors. That was when the fifth boy in my clouded vision appeared, and, lo and behold, he spoke to the boys. Not the smartest idea; it was followed by a punch to the face, and Brady lay sprawled on the ground. The hall was deserted aside from us. I picked myself up, grabbed my backpack, and sprinted for the doors. I ran outside and flew behind the brick wall, clutching my supplies to my chest, breathing hard. Brady appeared next to me before I knew it, grabbing my hand and yanking me forward, past the school building. The bitter wind chipped away at my skin, its teeth piercing. The boy threw his jacket around my shoulders and placed a hand on my shoulder, lowering me to the ground. We sat huddled like that until I broke the silence.

“Why would you do that?”

His gaze slowly found mine and he stared at me defiantly. “Why do you let them hurt you?” He was asking the question I dreaded. And he asked it with such bare honesty. “Why don't you let anyone try to help?”

“Because no one has ever tried to,” I responded, brushing his thin coat from my shoulders and stooping to pick up my backpack. I raced along the fields behind the school, towards my parents' apartment. I could hear Brady's feet crunching on the frosty grass behind me. He sprinted to catch up, his breath like mist in the chilly air. “What are you doing?” I asked him.

He never answered my question. And he never did for all the years I've known him. The boy only said, “Don't your parents know about this?”

I gave a short laugh, stripped of all humor. “When my father's sober he's never home and my mother is doing everything she can't do when he is home.” I gave him a short silence to think on this, still walking fast. “She reads, goes to the movies. When my father *is* home, he screams, hits, and drinks. My mother cries in her

room because she can't make him stop. He makes us clean, and cook. Do you realize this is the most I've ever said to anyone?" We were right behind my apartment when he took hold of my elbow and steered me to the left. "What are you doing?" I asked it again.

He stopped me right there. He looked me in the eyes. He told me about how I let everyone bully me. He told me, "It is the worst possible thing you can do with your life. Don't *let* them hurt you." And I have never forgotten it since.

Brady knew most of the story of my life. It began with my parents; he knew about them. In a way, my mother was also part of the problem. And then I was haunted with the students from school. It was non-stop, relentless. He often witnessed these scenes. I often felt too fed up with my life. Sometimes it became too much, and I shut myself in my room and cried. That I would never tell. The tears streamed down my face until I couldn't cry any longer.

I often thought of suicide.

It was never a first resort. I never attempted it. But it was always there, always an option, always, constantly, floating around in the back of my head.

And then Brady popped up. Let me tell you, I have received a boat load of negative 'one comments' before; never a positive one, and absolutely never one quite like the one Brady gave me, "the worst possible thing" comment. It kept on running through my mind, forcing me to listen, *think* about it. He saved my life. He crawled through my window.

I was in my room on a Saturday night looking through history notes. The lights were dim, most of the light bulbs long since burnt out, my parents never bothering to replace them. I sat cross-legged on my bed, head bent over a worn-down textbook, eyes scanning over the words I would never read. Then a word popped out of the canvas of blurry black, a word that had never stood out to me more.

The word was *death*.

And that's what drew the line. That's what drew the tear from my eye; it plopped onto the page, blurring the words, dribbling down the paper. I peeled my fingers away from the page, stripped myself from the bed sheets, and strode forward, leaving my textbook sprawled on the ground behind me. Fingering the thick rope, I looped it into a circle, testing its strength. Would I really have to use it? Would I tie the knot? A sharp banging brought the answer quickly and swiftly, from right through the crack underneath the door.

I didn't want to live in this life any longer.

And then- it was all ready. All I had to do... should I? It was the biggest decision I had ever made. Thoughts swirled inside my head like a thunderstorm, knocking against my brain, making me dizzy.

Only one thought was having a hard time surfacing. It struggled in the back of the bunch- it was out of sight- and yet I knew it was there; somewhere. And with that shadow came a word- *Why?* And the *worst possible thing*.

*Life.*

Brady.

He was lifting himself through the open window. A breeze filtering through softly, slowly, warm on my face, my hair blowing back behind my shoulders. That's nice, I think. The boy is standing straight now. His hair is wavy and looks lopsided on his head from the climb. I think, he climbed the house to see me. Brady is staring. It takes me a little while to realize a noose is clutched in my hands. White knuckles, sweaty palms. I recognize I never wanted to die.

I see him starting to speak.

I fully understand he saved my life with his words.

They made me hesitate, and that was worth everything.

Before he can get out a word, I've thrown myself into his arms. I am finally enveloped in his grasp. It'll take me awhile to fill in the blanks.

"Thank you." I speak into his shoulder. Tears dribble onto his thin shirt. I'll have to explain to him later. I remember my father at the door. Was that just a minute ago? He's listening in. I hear his footsteps outside the door.

He hears me talking- does he recognize my voice? He's walking away. Heavy thuds against the staircase. I look up at Brady.

The boy pulls me to the window. We leave the scene. A dark, spooky night.

Sparkling stars. Beautiful silky sky. Night like velvet.

The air is warm; a soft, sleek breeze.

I'm racing away from my house in the night with a boy who saved my life.

# **The Raining Hero**

**Middle School Entry**

*YenNhi Hoang*

Hydro Gen Jr. is a hero in the small puddle of Cohesia. He is named after his father, Hydro Gen Senior and his mother's name is Oxy Gen, who is famous for inventing the sport of surface sliding (sliding down windows, leaves, etc). Ever since he was rained (Born), Hydro has been adventurous and selfless. Hydro does so many good deeds to the Cohesia community; from saving unfortunate droplets from the evil wraith of the Rain Gage, to reading the Anemometer to see if the coast was clear for the residences of Cohesia to wander the waters. Ever since the beginning of time, the Droppington clan and Particles clan have been allies. Though there is a divide between their substances, they all live together in the puddle of Cohesia. Hydro's own best friend is a Particle, there being many types (Smokes, Dusts, and Salts). Hydro's friend is part of the Dust family and is named Debris. She is also an honored resident at the Cohesia community, and is usually referred to as the brains of the pair. The land of Cohesia was about to change...Badly.

One day, Hydro was doing his daily check for wind direction on a Wind Vane, when he saw something very alarming on the Thermometer...the air temperature was 100 Degrees Fahrenheit!!!! That explained the feeling of emptiness that grew by the second!! The Sun was going to consume the entire town of Cohesia!!! Hydro rushed back home as fast as his molecules could carry him and found that...everyone was gone!!! Or so Hydro thought...He could hear the distinct sound of splashing and rushed towards it with eagerness. Under a small pebble, he found Debris!! After a lot of reasoning, Hydro persuaded his friend to emerge out of her hiding place.

"What happened?" Hydro practically screamed.

"Th-Th- They evaporated, Hydro," Debris stammered.

"WHAT?!"

"Everyone was doing their morning routine when they just...disappeared...even your parents, Hydro!!"

In dismay, the pair searched the town several times over, but no positive results were found. There was no use, the town had evaporated and like all water vapor in low pressure environments, had rose up into the air. When Hydro looked up into the cirrus clouds, all he could think about was the fate of his peers. He, himself, has been born from a cumulonimbus, and droplets from that cloud are said to have a free, wild spirit.

Even as he thought, Hydro was being eaten alive by the terrible Sun. He felt as if he had to act, as this was a horrific tragedy that needed a hero. After a lot of pondering, he decided on the action he was going to use...he was going to go after his family.

The next morning, Hydro set out on the perilous journey to save his friends. With Debris at hand, he checked the Barometer to see the pressure; it was still low, which meant that there was a rather large warm front among them at the moment. In the silver rim of the device, Hydro saw his reflection, a small raindrop, and one that was indeed, shrinking. At that spot, Hydro and Debris lay until, finally, Hydro evaporated.

When the deed was over, Hydro could feel the change in pressure as he rose. Debris was clinging on with all of her might onto Hydro, making her float up too. Leagues above them, the two could spot the tiny particles in a large air mass. The two were struggling to catch up, and they felt the pressure increase by the second, the air getting thinner, temperatures colder....High pressure was among them. Traveling for days on end, the pair slipped farther and farther away from the air mass, but never gave up hope. Eventually, while floating lazily in the air, the crew reached the community.

The overjoyed residents were practically back into water, the process of condensation was kicking in. Each of the Droppingtons was hugging a Particle. "We....Can't....Let....GO!!" they exclaimed in unison.

"Oh no!!" This was bad news for Hydro and Debris, sure enough when they looked down, their hands were fused together!!

"Everyone find a buddy!!" Hydro ordered

Soon, the whole neighborhood was sorted out. Now that all of them were together, Hydro started to feel the moisture building up in the tightly-packed area of molecules. A few hours later, the community formed a stratus cloud. As distressed air masses of vapor from neighboring towns joined the already cramped cloud, Hydro began to sense that the cloud was becoming saturated. The overcast of the humongous cloud formed a blanket of warmth that reflected heat back onto the Earth's Surface, the residents of Cohesia's and countless other town's homes. Hydro could feel it in his atoms what was coming next, especially because another low front was approaching, they were going to return to their beloved home, Earth, as a form of precipitation.

Just as Hydro predicted a few days ago, the whole cloud was practically oozing out water. When he picked up the courage to speak aloud in front of an audience, he instructed the communities to group with their neighbors and to prepare to jump off the cloud. When the jet stream pushed the cloud to the exact spot, Hydro instructed each and every droplet belonging to that area to jump, where he bade them farewell. When the cloud was empty except for the Cohesia clan, Hydro, once more, told every droplet to hop off into the air... This time, the droplets got a pleasant surprise, there was a cold front waiting for them, turning them to snow. As they gracefully floated to the ground, the Cohesia Clan announced that Hydro and Debris were the greatest, most determined particles in the entire Ecosystem.

# **The Clock**

**Middle School Entry**

*Janice Nguyen*

Everyone nowadays believes that inanimate objects simply stay that way forever. But do they?

Jonathan Smith was a young boy when he first carved a simple toy out of wood. His woodcraftsman father taught him as the years went on and when Jonathan was thirteen, he carved his very first clock. It was a fine clock made of mahogany and silver trimmings. He also added a special feature. Whenever the minute hand reached the twelve, a small clown would come out of the clock, like a cuckoo bird. It had a circular wooden head with eyes that were drawn closed and a straight line for a mouth. Since Jonathan wasn't a master craftsman, it had small wooden spheres for hands. When it popped out, it would wobble back and forth. His father was very proud and kept it in his office. Every day, Jonathan cleaned and oiled the clock with his father's help. The clock was his best friend. He'd come back from school and regale it with stories. Even though it couldn't talk back, he still thought it could understand him. His father often joined in these conversations.

But one day, when Jonathan was a young man, his father fell ill and passed soon afterwards. Heartbroken, he took his beloved clock and belongings and moved.

Decades later, old man Jonathan owned a mansion with acres of land. He'd bought it using the money he made from carving clocks, furniture, you name it. He also had a butler named Tom. His butler seemed like a very nice man on the outside. He came when Jonathan called, and he took care of him in his old age. He cooked the most delicious food and was quiet and obedient. But you should never judge a book by its cover. Deep down, Tom had a dark secret. That was why he always had a five-inch knife in his pocket.

Jonathan coughed. He felt like he was literally coughing up his lungs.

"Are you all right?" his butler asked. "I could go fetch some medicine from the village."

Jonathan shook his head. "I'll be fine. But a bowl of soup would be nice."

The butler nodded assent. "I'll be back soon."

"Wait. Could you bring me my clock?"

Tom nodded again. "Of course, sir."

In the hallway, Tom punched the air as hard as he could without causing his arthritis to flare. *Finally*, he thought, *finally I can get rid of that lunatic clock lover, now that he's dying anyways*. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he subconsciously touched his pocket. Then he went to go make his master's soup.

"I'm back," Tom said. "I've made your favorite: tomato soup with toasted bread."

Loud hacking coughs echoed around the room. "Oh, thank you Tom. You've always been so good to me. Is my clock there?"

Tom lugged the clock over to Jonathan and carefully placed the piping hot soup on his nightstand.

“Is there anything else you’d like?” Tom asked.

Jonathan shook his head.

Tom bowed and walked out of the room. He went to his room and thought, *the time is right. I can’t afford to make any mistakes tonight.*

Eleven fifty nine P.M.

Tom crept into Jonathan’s room holding his knife and wearing nothing but black. His heart matched his clothing, as he felt no remorse at slitting his master’s neck.

After the sudden death of the owner of Smith Manor, possession of the manor was turned over to Tom because Mr. Smith had no living relatives or descendants. Tom was overjoyed. He had to work hard to keep a mournful face during the funeral.

A year later, Tom was living comfortably in the mansion. He put the clock back where it belonged in the hall. But he didn’t quite trust it, for the clock gave him a feeling of unease. Every now and then, he would walk past it and feel like someone or something was watching him.

One night, he and his friends had a party in the living room. It went late into the night, and Tom had to clean up the mess. As he was sweeping in the hall, he heard the clock start chiming. *Bong, bong, bong*, until it had chimed twelve times. Midnight. Shivers went up his spine and goose bumps erupted on his skin. It was then when he remembered that today was the one-year anniversary of Jonathan’s murder. Tom heard a small click behind him. Then all he saw was darkness.

Police sirens flashed in front of the Smith estate. The sheriff rang the doorbell.

“Mr. Tom? Are you there?”

The sheriff had gotten a call from a concerned neighbor who hadn’t seen Tom leave or enter his house in over a week.

The sheriff sighed and said, “Okay guys, let’s get out the ram.”

His squad smashed the door out of its frame and took in the scene before them. The hallway was empty.

“Come on, let’s keep looking.”

As his squad split up to check for any sign of Tom, he heard a bloodcurdling shriek of horror. The sheriff ran towards the noise and saw his trainee standing in front of an open closet with his mouth stretched

into another scream.

“Calm down, what’s going on?”

The trainee squeaked and pointed.

His entire squad looked into the closet. Tom lay there, pale and bloodless. His clothing was ripped and covered in red stains. His eye sockets were smeared with dry blood and from the looks of it, the killer had gouged out his eyes. His arms were bent in odd places, and the pristine white carpet was dark. The trainee made the mistake of looking down. Tom’s hands were reduced to gory stumps and all his fingers were gone. The bone was visible, and the stench of rotting flesh permeated the room. The poor trainee sank to the floor in a dead faint. Although the squad covered the entire property, they couldn’t find a single shred of evidence. Other police squads did the same and were unsuccessful. Not a single footprint, hair, or fingerprint was left behind. The mystery remains unsolved to this day.

If only they hadn’t overlooked this clue. The clown in the clock now had two eyes and all ten fingers.

# **Literarily Ever After**

**Middle School Entry**

*Adithi Ramakrishnan*

The day that Miss Isabella Bennett first walked into her office, she knew that happiness was just around the corner. She ran her fingers down the spines of ancient voices that had yet to be heard and perused the shelves stacked up with little doses of wisdom. Working in the library was something Isabella knew she could grow to adore. She had always thought of it as an abode of adventure, where happy endings were down the hall and wild quests were only two racks away.

Then, Isabella Bennett met Savannah.

She came skipping up the large stone steps of the library, sliding open the door and leaping towards the fiction section, her feet nearly tripping over one another. Isabella watched her from the counter, an elfish smile dancing on her lips. The librarian crept out of her station and followed the girl deep into the library. She found her curled up in a corner, buried deep in a thick book with a green jacket. Wavy hair the color of baked clay danced down the sides of her tanned face. Little red freckles speckled her rosy cheeks, and a bright red band circled her right index finger. Instantly aware, the girl looked up into the deep blue eyes of the librarian. "Can I help you?" Isabella prompted.

The girl smiled, and extended her hand. "I'm Savannah," she answered. "I just moved here." "What are you reading?" Miss Bennett asked. Savannah handed her the book: *The Brothers Grimm Book of Fairytales*. "It seems you like fiction." Savannah nodded eagerly. "Fiction is my favorite genre. I love losing myself in stories. When I can picture myself living with the characters, telling their tale- that's when I *know* the book is good." Isabella smiled. "Ms. Librarian, I didn't get your name." Isabella chuckled. "My name is Isabella, but I suppose Bella would be just fine." Savannah nodded and flounced out of the fiction section, clutching the fairytale book close to her chest. Bella smiled at the quickly retreating figure. She already sensed that Savannah was way beyond her years.

Savannah came bounding back to the library the next day, clasping the fairytale book in one hand and a notebook in the other. A pencil was wedged in the space between her soft auburn locks and her ear. She broke out into a wide grin as her eyes met Bella's. "I finished the book," she said proudly. Bella grasped the girl's hand and gently led her back into the fiction section. This time, she had a few titles ready. "Do you like magic?" The response was enormous. Savannah leapt up and brandished her pencil like a wand. "Magic is my favorite part of fantasy," she announced grandly. "How amazing would it be to travel into a world where dreams always do come true, where all of your wishes could be granted with the flick of an enchanted stick?"

Bella let Savannah read book jackets and first chapters for a while before deciding to introduce a

new topic of discussion. "You know what, Savannah? I think we should play a game." Savannah sat down on a beanbag chair and watched excitedly as Bella plucked several novels from the shelf. "Now, we need a notebook for this." Without hesitation, Savannah retrieved her notebook and set it down on the floor. Bella opened the storybook. "Now, this is how it works. You open one book at random, choose a page, and put your finger on one sentence." To demonstrate, the librarian selected *An Elfish Encounter* and flipped through the pages. She stopped and, after tightly closing her eyes, pressed her finger down on a sentence. "*Willow's ears ended in a sharp point, curving upwards.*" "Now, we write it down." Savannah flipped to a clean page and neatly scribbled down the sentence. Isabella smiled and gently urged, "Now, you try, Savannah."

After an hour of composing fantastical stories, Savannah read the last few sentences. "The fair maiden waited in her castle, longing for the sight of her fabled savior. (*Tower Maiden*) Who in this land is the fairest of all? (*Snow White*) And they all lived happily ever after." Bella cherished Savannah's company. The brightness in her hazel eyes and her unquenchable thirst for reading made her impeccable company. The two avid readers composed endless stories together in the refuge that was the fiction section.

Savannah came skipping towards the library the next day. However, something was amiss. There was something queer in the way she carried herself, something in the way she dragged her limbs towards the books she prized. Bella noticed this immediately, being so attuned to the ways of her friend. "Savannah, is there something wrong?" she asked worriedly. Savannah shrugged. "It's nothing," she said absently. Bella knew better than to accept that response. "You told me you were starting school today," she recollected. "Did something happen?" The expression on Savannah's face revealed the truth.

"They don't like me very much. They think I live inside stories and not real life... I didn't make any new friends." Bella read dictionaries, and she immediately sensed what was happening to Savannah. "It's only the first day," she said gently. "Those children don't know you yet, but I do. You're always so excited, so cheery, so *alive*. Give them time." Savannah nodded, but the downcast expression on her pale face remained even as she scribbled down various sentences from stories. Savannah left the library in better spirits than she had come in, but the thundercloud that was her loneliness and longing for friends still loomed largely overhead.

"To make you feel better, I'm going to take you *outside* the fiction section." Desperately, Bella led a still crestfallen Savannah out of her beloved fantasy shelves. The kids at school were not very accepting. Savannah ate her lunch alone and furiously tried to ignore the taunts of "bookworm." It was clear to Bella that her little friend's only haven was the library. She reveled in a world that was anything but the real one she

had to endure, and this pained Bella. Nevertheless, the patient librarian forced herself to remain standing as Savannah's savior and her escape from harsh reality.

"Now, nonfiction books are quite different. There is no magic, but they are just as interesting. Let's see..." Bella chose a book from the shelf. "Ah, *Red Pandas*." She flipped through the various pages and displayed a photograph of the creature, its dark red pelt the color of Savannah's silky hair. Two black pupils looked inquisitively outwards. "We can play the sentence game with these books, too." Savannah quickly took a liking to nonfiction books. Although they were closer to real life than she would have liked, she lavished the fact that they still took her away from her troubles. Savannah traveled to the Far East and learned about Chinese cuisine; she visited the jungles of South America and identified trees; she even toured America and named famous landmarks.

"I like these fact stories the best," Savannah announced as she read out the last few lines. "The Civil War severely distressed the American country. (*The War that Tore the Nation*) This was because... White tigers are an endangered species. (*Save our Animals: A Pledge for Help*.) And... they all lived factually ever after." Savannah closed her notebook and looked triumphantly up at Bella. She had started using conjunctions and connectors, and was now starting to piece stories together in a way that- at least remotely- made sense. Although her smile was not as wide and cheery, Bella could tell that her friend's spirits were rising- if only slightly. She hoped that, with time, Savannah would once again bloom into the bubbly girl she once was.

But, as much as Bella lingered for it and Savannah yearned for it, it was not to be. One day, when raindrops slid down the sides of the windows, Savannah burst into the library. Her face was spattered with raindrops mingled with tears. Bella slid off the girl's raincoat and guided her to their newest haunt in the nonfiction section, where she poured out her story. "They called me names," she whispered as she batted tears away from her bloodshot eyes. "It's not *virtuous* to make fun of people." Even Bella had not the heart to congratulate her comrade on the use of her newly-learned word. The two of them had begun to read through the dictionary, thumbing through pages populated with exotic new syllables to be added to Savannah's vast vocabulary. "Maybe we shouldn't make up stories today," she gingerly suggested. "Today seems like a good day to focus on real life."

Savannah flipped through pages and pages of heroes, fair maidens, and facts about Chihuahuas before finding a clean, blank page in her notebook. "Why don't you try and write down what happened today.

Express your feelings: it's a good way for you to feel better." Doubtfully, Savannah let the end of her pencil scratch the clean surface of the page. Then, she wrote down one word: *hopeless*.

The rest of the words strung together like beads on a necklace. Savannah spent thirty minutes scribbling her deepest thoughts and wishes into the notebook. She filled ten pages with both the experiences of the past and of the ones of that day. Bella played the role of a spectator, simply sitting next to Savannah as a friend in need. By the time Savannah finally set down the pencil, the lead worn down to a stub, she felt lighter. The weight of her distress, her burden of defeat, was now staring at her on paper. Her deepest thoughts were no longer simmering within her, torturing her with every breath she took.

●○●

*Dear Notebook:*

*Today was not an easy day for me. Bella says that I can't let loneliness bring my spirited nature down. That's a word that she taught me. Now that I'm writing my feelings down, I can almost see them float above me. I used to feel every word cut right through me to my soul, but that has changed. The gasps, the angry looks, the mean notes still hurt, but now my story is on paper. It's not a figment of my imagination that people say I make up when I try to tell them. My situation feels real when I have the proof, when every saddening moment is merely a few page flips away.*

*I don't write sentence stories anymore. I've decided to focus on my real life, and fly away from my fairytales. Perhaps the kids will like me better that way. Bella calls it maturing. I'll have to look that one up.*

*I'm almost finished with this notebook. It's been a long time since I started school- since I met Bella.*

*I hope someone will find this someday and read my story. Maybe it'll be someone at school. Then they'll know what I'm going through. And nobody else will need to go through what I have.*

*Yours Hopefully,*

*Savannah*

Bella hadn't been planning on reading Savannah's diary. She'd decided from the very first entry that her friend deserved privacy, especially during such a time in her life. Then, Savannah had left her notebook at the library. Bella had noticed it immediately, the worn front now covered with doodles and words Savannah meant to look up in the dictionary. She had, of course, only wanted to read some of the fictional stories they'd conjured so long ago. But as she rummaged through the pages, the very first entry had surfaced. Savannah's heartfelt script had been desperate and compelling. Bella hadn't even realized what she was doing until she came to the end of the notebook, where Savannah had written a passionate "*my story shall live on in another*

*book, perhaps”.*

Savannah’s condition was more serious than Bella had imagined. Her helpless cries for “*an ear to listen, to believe what is happening*” stirred something within Bella’s soul. Savannah, she now realized, was a very gifted writer. But her immense talent would never be recognized if her problem was never resolved.

And that was when Isabella Esther Bennett decided to do something erratic- not just for Savannah, but for the other children like her. There had to be other kids who felt the same way, who felt hopeless and lost in a world where they were not accepted as they should be. Savannah’s light deserved to shine and she was going to make sure it did.



The letter came in about five months later. Bella waited for it expectantly every morning, her thin fingers drumming out a whimsical tune on the mailbox. At last, she poked her head through the flap and eagerly plucked out a manila envelope. “Inkblot Publishing,” she breathed, running her nail along the elegant script. Bella skittered into the library, clutching the envelope close to her chest. Savannah hadn’t arrived yet, and the young librarian wanted this to be a surprise. She tore off the front, pulled out a thick piece of paper, and read it eagerly. “The staff at Inkblot Publishing would like to congratulate Miss Savannah Greene on the publishing of her novel, *Letters to Hope*. We were extremely impressed and moved with the construction of the first few pages and formally request that the author send the entire novel to the company so that it may be printed.”

Bella was absolutely ecstatic. Her grasp trembled as she read the letter over once, twice, three times. This was absolutely perfect. All she needed was Savannah’s permission- and, of course, one last entry.

*Dear Notebook,*

*I believe that today is the best day of my life. I have the most awesome librarian possibly in the entire world. Bella just told me that my diary is going to be published in a real book with a hard cover and a nice font. At first, I was angry because she didn’t tell me that she read my diary and went through my personal belongings. But honestly, I think I’m going to forgive her quite soon.*

*School is almost over now. The kids at school think it’s really cool that I’m going to be an author. I guess they just didn’t realize how much their words hurt me. My parents are happy that I’m “fitting in.” They were really shocked when they read about what had happened. I think they’re over it now. They gave Bella*

*their consent to go ahead with the publishing. I'm overjoyed that my voice is going to be in print. I'll never be alone again. And hopefully, no one else will.*

*I can't wait for my book to be published. I suppose I'll keep writing in my brand new notebook that Bella gave me; it even has my name written on the cover in fancy calligraphy. Maybe I'll write a sequel.*

*This isn't the end; it's merely a happy ending and a new beginning. I've got many more words to look up and pages to fill.*

*Yours Literarily,*

*Savannah*

# **Where Dreams Come True...**

**Middle School Entry**

*Maya Ramani*

Pierre was snapped out of his reverie by the sound of footsteps approaching him. He had been daydreaming about a restaurant. Not just any restaurant, he had been dreaming about the Jules Verne restaurant on the top of the Eiffel Tower. Oh, how he longed to go there. He had heard the human tourists talking about the wonderful, scrumptious food the restaurant served. The bread, crisp and buttery. The meals, cooked and seasoned to perfection. The thought of it just made Pierre lick his lips.

The footsteps Pierre had heard were the *marchand's*, the man who owned the *Boulangerie*. Pierre, who had been sleeping in the *Boulangerie* kitchen, quickly scrambled to his feet, and ran towards the exit as fast as his little French bulldog legs could carry him. Unfortunately, the *marchand* spotted Pierre, and chased after him with his spatula. Pierre deftly dodged the *marchand*, and sprinted through the front door, as the bewildered early morning customers stared at the scene unfolding in front of them. The *marchand* chased Pierre out the front door and angrily closed the door as the little French bulldog took refuge under a bench.

As Pierre sat under the bench, too scared to come out in case the *marchand* was still there, he heard some American tourists conversing.

“The Eiffel Tower is beautiful,” said one of them.

“Yes it is! My favorite part was eating at the Jules Verne, though,” said the other.

“Oh yes! The food there was delicious. The best I have ever tasted!” the first tourist replied.

Pierre sighed. Every time he heard someone speak of the restaurant, his longing to eat there increased. But then, a thought struck him. Why couldn't he go to the Jules Verne and eat the best meal of his life? *I am a clever bulldog*, Pierre thought to himself, *I should be able to find a way to get to the restaurant*.

All day, Pierre trotted along the streets of Paris and devised a plan. By the time the sun had set, he had formulated most of it. He decided that he would follow through with it tomorrow. Pierre found a cozy alcove on the street, settled down in it, and drifted off to sleep.

The sun was just peeking over the horizon when Pierre awoke. Even though it was early morning, the streets of Paris were abuzz with people doing their morning grocery rounds. As Pierre blinked the grogginess out of his eyes, he remembered that today was the day. The day that his lifelong dream would come true. Today was the day Pierre would finally get a chance to dine at the Jules Verne restaurant.

Pierre trotted over to the base of the Eiffel Tower. He stared at the iron masterpiece. The 7,000 tons

of metal had been constructed into a true wonder. *I need to concentrate if my plan is going to work*, Pierre thought to himself. His plan was simple, but for it to work it had to be carried out precisely. First, Pierre was going to search for a lady with a large handbag, which should not be hard, since there were many. He was going to trail her until security, where right after her bag was checked, he would sneakily hop inside. Then, he would ride the elevator up with the lady and go on the tour with her, being careful not to make a sound. When the tour group reached the top floor, Pierre would sneak out of the lady's handbag and quietly plod over to the Jules Verne. He would sneak in and eat the best meal of his life.

Pierre sat next to a lamppost, squinting in the bright sunlight, searching. Then he saw it. The perfect handbag in which he would fit snugly inside. The owner was a tall, blonde lady wearing a turquoise dress and a fluffy black feather boa. When she walked past the lamppost Pierre was sitting at, he got up and started following her. He trailed her black high heeled shoes up to the Eiffel Tower until security. When the lady handed the security man her bag to be checked, Pierre silently walked behind the man, careful to stay behind the security desk so no one would spot him. Then, the man placed the lady's bag on a lower desk for her to pick up, as it had passed inspection. When the lady began speaking with the man, Pierre knew it was his chance. He squatted low on the ground, sprung up, and landed in the lady's large handbag. He quickly pawed around in the bag and found the lady's scarf. *Perfect*, Pierre thought, *this will cover me just in case she looks in her bag*. He threw the scarf on top of him and felt the lady lifting the bag up just as he was setting down. Pierre let out a sigh of relief. He had completed phase one of his plan with no problems.

*Bounce, Bounce, Bounce, Bounce.* Pierre was bouncing up and down in the handbag as the lady walked. The inside of the maroon handbag was extremely soft and comfortable, and the rhythmic bouncing was relaxing. Pierre felt himself almost drifting off to sleep. *No*, he told himself. If he fell asleep his whole plan would fail and he would never get to eat at the Jules Verne. He had to stay alert. He decided to look at the objects in the lady's purse to pass time. Lifting the scarf up a bit, ever so carefully so the lady wouldn't notice, Pierre gazed at the bizarre array of objects in front of him. There was a crumpled piece of shiny paper that carried the slightest scent of mint. A small, flat, circular object which had a gleaming surface. When Pierre took a closer look at it, he realized that it reflected what it faced. He also found a glass bottle with some gloppy, sweet scented, stuff inside. Pierre continued to explore, when suddenly the bouncing of the bag halted. What had happened? Pierre lifted his paw and moved the scarf aside enough so that he could peek through. It was a peculiar sight. The sky seemed to be getting closer. Then it hit him. The lady was riding the elevator! The elevator stopped with a ding, and the lady got off. She walked for a few seconds and then stopped again. After a few seconds a woman's voice started speaking.

*“Bonjour* everyone, and welcome to the Eiffel Tower! I am Annabelle and I will be showing you around one of the most famous buildings of the world, the Eiffel Tower! Now, before we begin, I would like to remind all of you that writing on the tower is not permitted, so please refrain from doing so. Also, if you have any questions during this tour, please feel free to ask me! Now, shall we get started?” the voice said. It was the tour guide! Pierre decided to listen to her so that he would know when to sneak out.

“All right, let us begin with some history on the Eiffel Tower. The Eiffel Tower was designed by France’s premier Architect and Engineer, Monsieur Gustave Eiffel. Monsieur Eiffel actually resided on the top floor of the tower during the first year after it was constructed. It was built in the year 1889. When the industrial age began in Europe, the French built the Eiffel Tower. When the Eiffel Tower was going to be constructed, the French people were worried. They thought the Eiffel Tower would fall on their houses. They also thought the Eiffel Tower would ruin the Paris skyline.....” the tour guide continued speaking as Pierre sat with his little ears perked up, not missing a single word. She talked about the role of the Eiffel Tower during World War II. When France had been taken over by Germany during WWII, the Eiffel Tower was used as a Nazi radio tower. The French people damaged one of the elevators in the Eiffel tower to stop the Nazis from completely controlling it. When the Eiffel tower was taken over by the Nazis, French people saw it as a symbol of hope, freedom and liberty. Hitler ordered the Nazis to bomb the Eiffel Tower when WWII was coming to an end, but a German General overruled his order because the General had fallen in love with the beautiful city of Paris. The Allies drove the Germans away from France. The tour guide then began talking about how the tower was constructed and told the tourists other facts about the Eiffel Tower as they moved around to view different parts of the tower.

“The Eiffel tower weighs 7,000 tons and is built of iron. It has 1,710 steps and is over 300 meters tall. The first phase of the construction of the Eiffel Tower was extremely important, because if the four legs of the tower were not built simultaneously, the tower would collapse. There were zero deaths in the construction of the tower. It took exactly two years, two months, and five days to complete construction of the tower. The tower was actually supposed to stand for only twenty years and then be torn down, but it was not destroyed because it served as a very good radio tower,” Annabelle said.

Pierre was so curious to learn more that he almost forgot that he had to finish his plan when the tour group made its way to the top floor. Anytime now, Pierre would have to sneak out of the lady’s handbag and into the restaurant. Suddenly, a feather from the lady’s boa landed inside her bag and on the tip of Pierre’s nose.

AACCHOOOO! Pierre sneezed.

“AHHH!!!! Something sneezed inside my purse!” the lady screamed. Everyone in the tour group turned to look at her. She undid the clasp of the maroon handbag and screamed even louder. “THERE’S A BULLDOG IN MY PURSE!”

Pierre leaped out of her handbag and scanned the top floor. He found the Jules Verne and made a mad dash for the restaurant.

“SECURITY!!!!!!!!!!!!” the tour guide yelled.

People were chasing Pierre, but he didn’t care. He had come so far and was so close to eating his dream meal. He was not going to give up now.

Pierre dashed through the open door while evading capture by the security guards. The people inside the restaurant looked flabbergasted when Pierre came running in and they started screaming. The security guards sprinted in seconds after Pierre did. Pierre ran in circles around the restaurant, upsetting chairs and tables. Utensils clattered all over the floor. Bowls, plates, and glasses landed on the floor and broke, spraying glass pieces everywhere. Meals flew through the air landing on the floor, walls, ceiling, and the customers. Pierre located the kitchen door and ran inside, surprising waiters and waitresses, who screamed and dropped the food they were holding. As Pierre ran farther into the kitchen, the astounded chef yelled and stared at the dog in his restaurant. Then, Pierre found what he had been looking for. A table full of completed meals, waiting to be served. He sprinted towards the table and jumped upwards as high as he could and landed on the table. He bit into a fresh baguette and sighed dreamily. It was like heaven. He continued trying the variety of foods on the table. Soups, meats, breads, pastas, even desserts. They were all so delicious; it truly was the best food he had ever tasted. Pierre was eating to his heart’s content, and just when he had bit into a creamy, rich, chocolate cake, security rushed in.

“THERE HE IS!” one of them screamed.

“GET HIM!” another yelled.

Five security guards ran simultaneously to Pierre and tried to grab him. Pierre evaded capture and resisted the best he could, but this was one battle he could not win. One of the guards scooped him up and was leaving the restaurant with a frightened Pierre firmly in his grasp when something happened.

“Wait!” the chef yelled to the guard. The guard stopped and turned. “Let me see the dog,” the chef said.

“Careful, monsieur,” the guard said as he handed Pierre over.

“Did you all notice how he ran straight for the food in the kitchen? I think this dog only came here to eat the food, and that he would not have caused this much havoc otherwise,” the chef proclaimed to the crowd that had gathered. Then the chef turned to Pierre and asked, “Is that true?” Pierre whimpered and nodded. “Do you have an owner and a home?” the chef asked Pierre. Pierre shook his head. The chef now addressed the guard. “I would like him to stay here with me,” the chef told the guard.

“W-what?” the guard exclaimed, astonished.

“Yes, I would like him to stay here with me. I have always wanted a dog. As long as it is okay with him, of course,” the chef said, “Would you like to stay here with me?” Pierre’s face lit up and he wiggled around in the chef’s arms excitedly. “I think the dog says yes,” the chef said. “So can he stay?” the chef asked the guard again.

The guard consulted his walkie-talkie for a few seconds and said, “It is okay with the Eiffel Tower manager as long as he does not cause another mess like this.”

“I promise he will not,” the chef said.

Pierre could not believe what he was hearing. He was going to stay here, at the Eiffel Tower restaurant, with the chef every day! He would get to eat the food at the Jules Verne every day, and would finally have an owner and a home. The best day of his life had turned out to be way better than Pierre had ever expected.

# **Room For One More?**

**Middle School Entry**

*Carly Shaffer*

It all started the first day of ninth grade. That was when my whole life changed. All I needed was a popularity competition with the new girl, but that was what I got. I already had enough to worry about. There was high school, for one thing. As much as I hated to admit it, I was very nervous about that. I just had to keep my position as the leader of the A-clique! And then there were my grades. This year, my mom is expecting an A or a B in every class. Every single class! With this much pressure, the arrival of the new girl was the last straw. Instead of being a warm, welcoming friend, I made an enemy.

The morning bell had just rung, and I was sitting in geometry class. That was when *she* walked in. The door flew open, and a tall, striking girl entered the room. The whispers started almost immediately.

“Who’s she?” my best friend Annabelle murmured. “I don’t remember her from last year.”

“Me neither,” London, another member of the A-clique, whispered back. I knew then that this was no shy, timid, stereotypical “new girl”. Oh, no. This girl had potential to be popular. And she also had the potential to knock me right out of the A-clique. I wasn’t about to let that happen.

The new student strode across the room and plopped herself down in the seat next to me. She had beautiful, silky blond hair and sapphire blue eyes. I couldn’t help but notice her earrings. They were chains of pure gold with a silver link attached at the end. Instinctively, I reached up to touch my earrings. I was only wearing pink studs.

“Hi! I’m Kenley. What’s your name?” she asked amiably.

“Charity,” I merely mumbled in reply.

“Cool name. Are you excited to be in high school? I know I am!” she exclaimed brightly.

“A little,” I admitted. I refused to be nice to her, no matter how friendly she was to me. After all, I had worked hard to earn my status as the leader of the A-clique. She couldn’t take that away from me.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. I spent most of it thinking about Kenley. I was dismayed to learn that she was in science, English, and Spanish with me. I’d never be able to get away from her and her gorgeous blond hair and her silver-and-gold earrings. Life is so unfair.

At lunch, I sat at the popular table next to Annabelle. I watched smugly as Kenley took a seat by herself at the opposite end of the cafeteria.

“So. What do you think of the new girl?” Annabelle prodded.

“Ugh! She’s so clingy. I think she’s desperate for a friend,” I complained.

“Actually, I think she seems nice. And she’s got the greatest earrings. Maybe we can invite her to sit with us tomorrow,” she suggested. I looked at her in surprise. Was this really the Annabelle I knew? Or an imposter from Mars? There was no way I would let Kenley sit at our table. She didn’t belong with us!

“Absolutely not. Are you kidding me? She hasn’t even been here for one day!” I snapped.

“It doesn’t matter. I think she’s nice. I want to be her friend,” Annabelle shot back. There was a look on her face that I couldn’t quite figure out. Surprise? Hurt? I packed up my lunch and prepared to leave the cafeteria.

“I’m not really hungry anymore,” I fibbed. “See you in choir.”

“Charity...” Annabelle began. I walked off before she finished her sentence.

The next day was even worse than I thought it would be. Kenley sat next to me in all of our classes again. Why couldn’t she just go make friends with someone else?

When lunchtime rolled around, I naturally expected Annabelle to have saved me a seat at the A-clique table. But when I approached our usual location, my seat had been taken by none other than the blond-haired new girl. I was furious.

“Well, well. It seems the new girl has finally found a group of friends. What took so long?” I heard myself say. Kenley blinked in surprise. She looked like she was about to burst into tears. My friends were taken aback.

“Would you like to join us, Charity?” she asked me softly.

“No, thank you!” I retorted. I stormed off to the other side of the cafeteria and took a seat by myself next to the C-clique table. I couldn’t believe Annabelle had betrayed me like that. I thought she was my best friend. I glanced over to where they were seated. Kenley was laughing about something with London, Skylar, and Rachael. How could she just replace me overnight?

The rest of the school week was miserable. I felt like an outcast. Less popular than a member of the D-clique, if there even was one. Kenley continued to sit with the A-clique, and I continued to sit alone. I would run into her in the hallways occasionally. One time, I saw her when I was getting my history books out of my locker.

“Hey Kenley, have you looked in the mirror lately?” I teased. Kenley’s mouth dropped open. Her eyes filled with tears. She shook her head and walked away. I did a silent cheer. Go, Charity!

Later, in Spanish, while I was finishing an activity in the textbook, I noticed her looking across the room to mouth something to Rachael. I took the opportunity to humiliate her.

“Mrs. Gomez! Kenley’s trying to copy my paper!” I tattled.

“Kenley Miller! I expected better from you. Join me for detention on Friday after school,” the teacher reprimanded.

Kenley shot me a sad look. She mouthed ‘How could you do this to me?’

As much as I hated to admit it, I was having a lot of fun picking on Kenley. It felt good to get back at her. The downside was that none of my friends from the A-clique were speaking to me. Even the B and C-cliques had terminated all contact with me. They used to worship me. What happened?

At lunch on Thursday, I went to the office to receive a pass to the computer lab. I had a plan, and I was ready to put it into action. When I entered the room, I saw Brooklyn Sanchez sitting at one of the computers. Great, I thought to myself. She’s the only other one in here. She’ll see what I’m up to for sure. I took a seat at the opposite end of the room, as far from Brooklyn as possible. If she knew what I was doing, she’d be sure to

run and tell one of the assistant principals. What a goody-two-shoes.

As soon as I turned on the computer, Brooklyn's school email account showed up on the screen. This computer must have been too slow, so she got on to the other one and forgot to log out. I wanted to do a victory dance. This way, I could send the message I was planning to send without anybody knowing that I had anything to do with it! I hit the 'compose' button and began to type my email.

Have you heard that Kenley Miller was raised by ogres? No wonder she's so ugly and can't do math!

I read the email and smiled to myself. I moused over the 'send' button. Should I? A little voice inside me told me that I was going to regret this. I ignored it. I counted to three and pressed send. It felt great to get such a heavy weight off my chest. I could hardly wait for school the next day. This was going to earn me back my popularity, and my seat at the A-clique table. This was going to mend my friendship with Annabelle. This was going to demote Kenley Miller, once and for all.

The next day, I took my usual seat in geometry and pulled out my notes to review for the quiz. But just as the bell rang, my math teacher called me up to her desk.

"Charity, you are wanted in the principal's office," Mrs. Michaels reported to me. My heart skipped a beat. The principal's office? I had never set foot in the principal's office in all my years of school. What could I possibly be wanted for?

"Yes, Mrs. Michaels. I will head there right now," I responded. While walking through the hallway, I racked my brains as to why I was being summoned to the principal's office. Maybe I made the honor roll or something, I mused.

Perplexed, I entered the front office of Canyonville High School. One of the secretaries was waiting for me to arrive.

"Charity, please go back to Mrs. Freeman's office," she directed. I nodded and complied. When I arrived, I learned that the principal had been expecting me as well.

"Sit down, Charity," she ordered. What was going on?

“Charity, I would like to talk to you about an email that I was forwarded early this morning,” she stated. My heart stopped. She had seen the email. How on Earth could she have seen the email?

“This message was sent out to a group of people via Brooklyn Sanchez’s school email ID yesterday during your lunch period. I called Brooklyn in earlier this morning and she said that she did not send the email, and that you were the only other person in the room with her at the time. Were you the one behind this scheme?” she interrogated.

Even I knew better than to lie to the principal. She’d find out one way or another.

“Yes, Mrs. Freeman,” I sighed sulkily.

“I was extremely disappointed to see your insulting email as a form of cyber bullying directed at Kenley Miller,” she informed me. I shivered when she said the word ‘bully’. Was that what I was being? A bully?

“I know very well that popularity and friendships mean a lot to you, Charity. However, your previous teachers have never known you to be mean. There will be severe consequences for your actions. That will begin with detention this afternoon. And, I would like for you to apologize to Kenley face-to-face.”

I wanted to protest. This was incredibly unfair. I couldn’t believe that she was actually going to make me apologize to Kenley!

“Yes, Mrs. Michaels,” I agreed reluctantly. I walked silently out of her room, and back to math class. The rest of the day was a complete misery. Nobody talked to me, and all of my teachers yelled at me for random reasons. At the end of the day, I approached Kenley.

“Hi, Kenley. I wanted to apologize for sending that email. It was wrong of me. I won’t do it again,” I apologized, trying to sound sincere. What Kenley said next surprised me.

“Charity, we need to talk more about this. I thought you were going to be my friend. I was shocked when I received that message. We’re going to have to discuss this when you come over to work on our geometry project this afternoon,” she addressed.

“Okay. Thank you. I’ll be there,” I replied.

After three hours of miserable detention, my mom picked me up and we headed for Kenley’s house. I had already been dreading having to work on the project with her, but I was nervous as to what she was going to say about the email. What did she have in store for me?

I knocked three times on her door and waited. I took a deep breath. Then, her mother finally opened the door.

“Ah, hello Charity. Kenley has been expecting you,” she greeted me. I could tell that she was not happy to see me. “You may head upstairs to her bedroom. It is the second room from the left,” she added.

“Thank you, Mrs. Miller”, I responded politely. I trudged up the stairs to Kenley’s room. She was sitting on her bed, playing a game on her phone. She looked up when I entered the room.

“Sit down, Charity. We need to talk,” she said icily. I sat down.

“Charity, I cannot tell you how upset I was when I received that email. It has been very hard for me to start this year at Canyonville High School without knowing anybody. I know that Annabelle, London, Skylar, and Rachael are your friends, but that does not mean that we can’t share them. I have been so hurt by your name calling, your shocking insults, and your grimacing faces. Why were you so mean to me?”

“Uh, well, I’m not really sure,” I hedged. It was none of her business anyway!

“Charity, I want to know the truth, and I know that that’s not it,” she commented knowingly. I took a deep breath, and began to pour out my whole story.

“Kenley, as soon as you walked in the door on the first day of school, I completely changed. I knew right away that my popularity at school was in jeopardy. Instead of welcoming you as a friend, I put you down so that I could boost my own confidence. You never did cheat that day in Spanish. I was worried that you might get a better grade than me, so I wanted you to get an F for cheating. I never really did think that you were ugly. I was jealous of your beauty,” I confessed.

“You were being a bully,” she said honestly.

It hit me when she put it like that. That was the second time that I had been described as a bully in just one day. I finally realized that I had turned into one. I couldn't believe I had actually done all of those things.

“Kenley, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I just realized how mean I've been being. I didn't mean to bully you. I will never, ever do anything like this again,” I said to her. This time, I meant it.

“Charity, I want to be friends,” she said sadly.

“I do too,” I told her. I really did.

“I want a friend who isn't going to pick on me just because I'm pretty and smart. I want a friend who is going to appreciate me for who I am,” she stated.

“Kenley, I understand if you're not ready to trust me yet, but I would love to be that friend,” I suggested, surprising myself.

Kenley nodded. There was long, awkward silence. Then, she piped up again.

“Well, in that case, could you stay for dinner tonight? I'd like to get to know the nice Charity a little bit better,” she said to me, a small smile creeping across her lips.

“Sure,” I said, grinning. “I'd love to.” Right then, I knew that there was room for one more seat at the A-clique table.

# High School Stories

# **The Tartan Scarf**

**High School Entry**

*Grace Richardson*

The Tartan Scarf  
*Inspired by a true story*

A cold drop hit Richard's chest and slid down under his shirt. He started up and grabbed his collar, trying to dry away the uncomfortable wetness. It was not biting cold, for which he was thankful, but it was wet. His helmet required him to sit perfectly upright, or the light rain striking it would dribble off into his clothes instead of down between his feet. Glancing around the group of wet, uncomfortable men, Richard adjusted his rifle, his damp clothes clinging to his body like clammy frog-skin. If there had been room, he would have stretched his aching shoulders, but he had to content himself with simply rolling them around and rotating his neck a few times. He shook the water from his helmet and took a moment to stare up beyond the pattering rain to the dark sky.

Though night was waning, the sky was still sinister. Clouds enwrapped its surface, and they rolled and fluttered angrily, like fields of heather under a harsh moorland wind. The sea resembled this movement, and many of the men were seasick. At home, Richard had been used to the sea, helping his father with the fishing. So here, it was not the sea which troubled him. The wind was strong in Richard's ear, a biting ocean wind.

Taller than most, Richard enjoyed the advantage of looking over the other men's heads toward the bow of his landing craft, toward the distant beaches that he could not clearly see, due to the fog. It occurred to him then, with a pang of fear, that this height advantage might single him out as an easy target once they landed. He gritted his teeth and took to examining the stitching on the shirt of the man in front of him. The men were quiet. It worsened Richard's anxiety, and he knew his nerves were on end. He could feel each crinkle in the uniform on his back, each defect on the surface of the gun under his fingers, each frayed end of the Tartan scarf against his chest.

It was not an entire scarf; only half of it rested in the inner pocket of his shirt. The other half, he knew, was lying in his twin brother's pocket. The morning he and Duncan had left to join the infantry, some months before, his father had cut the beautiful, old, red scarf in half and given one half to each of them.

"When you come back, safe and unharmed," he had said, "then, you bring back the old scarf, and your mum will sew it together again. May God keep you, and may He see that we unite this little clan again."

Richard moved his hand to his chest, tracing the edge of the scarf and feeling its woolly itchiness

against his skin. Before he had boarded, he had chanced to see Duncan board the transport just before his own. They were in different companies, and he was not sure that they would be landing on the same beach.

Together he and Duncan had defended themselves as the youngest of the family. Together they had studied, slept, ate, worked, and fought. Together they had listened to their father's stories of the Great War. Together they had played at war along the rocky beaches near the fishing wharf. Together, now, would they die at war along this foreign beach? Or worse, what if only one half of the Tartan scarf made it home?

Richard felt a huge, clutching stone form in his stomach. Pursing his lips, he refused to open his mouth and give voice to the anxiety he wanted to release.

He remembered waving farewell to Duncan as his brother's back merged with the sea of other beige uniforms. That was only a few days ago, but what if it was the last he had seen of Duncan?

"Remember," their father had said, just before they were separated, "remember that the bone that is broken heals stronger than it was before."

*What if it never heals?* Richard thought now, echoing the fear his mother had voiced then. The wind gusted past him, and a shiver spread through his body.

"It will heal," his father had responded then, gazing directly into his mother's uncertain eyes. Richard remembered the tears that had glistened in his father's own eyes as he continued. "Even if it is broken longer than any of us would wish, one day all things broken will be made new. Be strong, my sons."

Richard closed his eyes and remembered his father's rich voice and deep sincerity. He tried to drive out the fear. He was fighting for that man, for his father, and for his mother, and for the clan whose scarf lay against his chest.

He opened his eyes and realized that the rising sun had just broken through the clouds. It was bright and distant, touching everything with a white light. Richard still felt cold inside, and the stone in his stomach was bigger. Hearing the drone of aircraft, he glanced up at the billowing sky and saw a squadron of bombers rumbling across it, charging toward the shore.

The troops rustled and murmured. The barge lurched to the side, and each man steadied himself by grabbing another's shoulders. Richard leaned forward, straining his eyes, trying to pierce the mist. The rumble of bombs and the spatter of anti-aircraft fire grew louder and more menacing as they drew closer, and underneath it all was the churning and crashing of the sea about the boats and against the shore.

It was coming. Richard grated his jaw back and forth against his teeth, his eyes skimming from face to face and then out to sea, and he could distinguish the myriad of black shapes that were the other landing craft. Richard heard them plowing through the water, but he still felt very alone in the mass of men.

The sea rose up and slapped the boat, shoving it along viciously. Richard felt the cold spray and fingered the scarf in his pocket. He glanced again at the hundreds of boats around them.

*Duncan must be in one of them*, he told himself. If he could only see his brother now, and together they could charge the enemy.

*It must be done*, he reminded himself. *Nothing else is an option. This must be done. Alone or together, it must be done. Courage, courage!*

The tanks had landed, and the gunfire became a roar, a loud sound, without cadence or order or life. They were closing in. Richard could hear the sputtering of guns, the shouts of men, the splattering of bullets on water. Each man hunkered down and prepared to jump out. As Richard crouched over, his gun clanked against his helmet with a dull thud.

The command ripped through the air, and suddenly, with great splashing, Richard leapt into the water. It was very cold, and he sank up to his thighs, but before he could think any further, he was charging the shore. The troubled water was riddled with bullets, and Richard felt the splash they created when they hit the water. Screams accosted his ears, and he saw his companions fall into the waves, the foaming blue sea suddenly accented with crimson.

*It must be done!* He heard it shouting in his head. Through the sloshing waters, he charged forward, feeling the whiz of bullets as they passed his ear. His comrades ran beside him. Richard emerged from the water, coming up onto the shore, and he felt completely exposed. Stooping low, he ran up the sandy embankment, trying not to think or fear, but the adrenaline coursing through his veins made all of his senses

even more acute. The sand encrusted his wet body, filling his mouth with grit and salt as he scrambled over the beach, trying to avoid the barbed wire and debris piled up everywhere. With his companions, he topped the first rise of beach and could see the torn landscape beyond—the trampled grasses and sand dunes that were oddly carved by gunfire and tank tracks.

A blood-curdling scream ripped through his consciousness, and the man beside him fell writhing to the ground. Richard looked, terrified, toward the grasses and the cliffs above them, and vaguely he saw the cruel black mouths of machine guns sweeping across the shore. He flattened himself against the sands, hiding behind the dead body of his comrade. Fire from the battleships screamed overhead, and Richard heard bombs deploying somewhere in the distance. The men behind him had gotten up and were running forward.

He jumped up, firing into the grasses which hid so much death. The machine guns roared in spiteful fits. Confusion dominated the beach. Richard suddenly felt a tremendous blow to his head, and he was flung backward, landing hard on the solid sand.

Stunned, he lay for a moment, trying to regain his breath and make the ringing in his head subside. As the reality of the battle flew back into his consciousness, he rocked on the ground, cupping his ears with his hands, fighting to shut out the roar and death and fury of the battle. His finger crept up to the nick in his helmet where the bullet must have hit and ricocheted away. Hugging his gun to his chest, he looked around the body behind which he found himself lying. The mouths of the machine guns were still looking down at him.

*It must be done!* He heard it again. He readied himself to leap out, but his body would not respond, and it remained frozen on the sand. Every muscle ached with adrenaline, but he could not move, and Richard dug his forehead into the rough, dirty, broken sand.

*It can't be done.* He shook in agony, trembling and sweating. He knew he was moaning, but he had no control to stop it. All was dead. What if this body behind which he hid was Duncan's?

The shock of the thought moved him to action, and frantically, he rolled the body over to see the bloodied face. It was not his brother's.

Suddenly, upon a burst of fresh fire, a nearby soldier threw himself to the ground next to Richard, huddling close to him behind the shelter of the body.

“Soon as that gun’s quiet, let’s make for the next bank,” the soldier muttered fiercely. Richard whipped around to look into the intense face.

“Duncan!” he whispered in disbelief.

Duncan turned quickly.

“Richard!” For a stunned moment, the two were frozen in shock. A shell whizzed over their heads, and they cowered under the sound, wrapping their arms over their helmets. When it exploded in the water behind them, Duncan threw his arms around Richard’s shoulders, and they held each other in desperate relief.

“Stay with me!” Duncan breathed fiercely. “Stay with me, Richard.” He paused and then whispered ferociously, “Let’s take the next bank, together!”

Richard raised his eyes above the body, staring at the confused and wild beach. He saw the dead bodies; the shreds of cloth strewn on wire; the abandoned guns lying ownerless; the sightless eyes and writhing injured. He heard the wailing of bereft mothers, the moans of crippled soldiers, and the cries of families never to be united. He felt the stone inside; he felt the freezing of his muscles.

*It must be done!* He saw through a haze that his hands were white, as one clutched his gun, the other his brother’s shoulder.

*It can’t be done.* The thought dropped down into the pit of his stomach with a dull thud. Richard lowered his head, succumbing to the despair.

*Perfect love casteth out fear.* He opened his eyes. That was his father’s voice.

“Let’s do it, Richard!” Duncan said again, preparing to jump out.

*Perfect love...*Richard hesitated. For his father. For his mother. For the clan whose scarf lay against his chest. For Duncan. Richard looked straight into Duncan’s eyes. He paused. Then he took a deep breath and shouted.

“Together!” he yelled fiercely. Richard tightened his grip on his brother’s shoulder, and they nodded at each other. Then, with a tremendous shout, they grasped their guns and charged the bank.

## Epilogue

While the events of this story are fictional, they were inspired by a true story. Richard ("Dick") and Duncan were real twin brothers. Of Scottish heritage, the two joined the British army shortly before the outbreak of World War II. At first, they held non-combatant, administrative positions, but upon necessity, were put into an artillery unit and stationed in France in early 1940. During the frantic evacuation of the British from Belgium, as the Germans were quickly advancing across the little country in May of 1940, the twins were separated. Their miraculous reunion occurred not at D-day, but during the British retreat to Dunkirk. They boarded the last battleship at Dunkirk before the jetty collapsed, but they both made it safely home to England. Richard did not return to combat, but Duncan went on to participate in the two years of training which lead up to D-day. On June 6, 1944, his artillery unit was one of the first units ashore at 7:30 A.M. He ended the war in Germany as the Allies took over the country. After Richard and Duncan left the army in 1946, Richard came to America and worked for Chrysler, later living in Switzerland, working for Chrysler's European branch. He passed away in 1986 at the age of 72. Duncan went on to work in accounting, working mainly from the UK, but also spending a few years working in Cyprus during the Turkish Cypriot/Greek Cypriot tension. He died in 2005 at the age of 90. The twins were my great-great uncles.

# **The Polyglot**

## **High School Entry**

*Tori Whelan*

Moureen Maudlin's long face was pulled even longer than usual, with her sometimes attractive lips drawn into a not particularly attractive pout and her hooded eyes narrowed, holding poor Milquetoast captive to her newest sob story. Milquetoast was visibly uncomfortable, as he was in every social situation, but politeness and diffidence forbade him from doing something rude, like walk away, or point out her obvious drunkenness and her silver pocket flask in a place with a sign on the door that clearly said "No-Alcohol Room". Moureen, or Moue to those who knew her well enough not to call her by her given name, was never completely sober, it seemed. She was the ultimate extrovert, and simply adored meeting new people, but as she was in an incessant state of inebriation, she was a tad overbearing and tended to not notice (or ignore) whenever people wanted to get out of a conversation.

The famous, ever-crowded and ever popular Lexicon Lounge was hopping, and it was the perfect night for a con to go out and charm the wallet off of someone, or for them to find a pickpocket to do it for them. There was a hierarchy within the Lexicon itself; it had a hotel, as well as various restaurants, study rooms, penthouse apartments, private rooms, bars, nightclubs and nightly entertainment in certain places – this particular night it was a debutante ball for some newcomer into Lexicon society in the Ballroom. The Appendix, the most lavish room of the Lexicon, was the place that Milquetoast was currently trying to find an out of, however unsuccessfully.

Milquetoast fidgeted, and his hand stretched every few seconds to his pocket where his handkerchief resided, evidently longing to take it out and clean his spectacles, one of his many nervous tics. He was not one to go out and party, in fact, he rarely graced his peers with his presence outside of his library sanctuary, so it was anyone's guess why he was downstairs in the Soiree Salon, a corner of the Appendix, and not hiding upstairs like he usually did whenever there was any slight chance of social interaction. If there was one thing Milquetoast hated, it was being forced to talk to other people, and it wasn't vanity or snobbishness that made his condescensions into the realm of social interaction so infrequent, it was his shyness. As an extreme introvert, Milquetoast was dreadfully awkward. Talking to living, breathing human beings, especially young nymphets like Moue, terrified the man, and as she took another swig of liquor from her conspicuous flask, he was looking at her like she was insane.

Well, Moue probably was what Milquetoast considered insane, with her filthy clothing (doubtlessly to look more pitiable), silver hipflask, drunken mien, and sentimental sob stories; she was perfectly scandalous to a man like him, and presently, she was at the point in her tearjerker tale when she usually broke out faux-sobbing. And there she went, bawling into her manicured hands, black kohl running down her cheeks, staining

her shirtfront. Milquetoast froze like a deer in headlights, staring at the weeping girl, completely unsure of what to do. He stuttered for a few moments, fumbling with his pockets, until finally, hands shaking with nervousness, he pulled out his handkerchief, presumably to wipe his glasses and think of what to do with the howling Moue in front of him. Moue grabbed the hankie, assuming it was for her, and blew her nose into it, soiling it with black mascara and smudging her face further. She was a terrific mess.

Milquetoast continued stammering, changing it up occasionally by switching his umms for uhhs or ers for nervous coughs, utterly distraught. The sob story that Moue had been feeding him was about how her scummy fiancé had moved her checking account into his a few days before their wedding, getting their finances together, and then promptly skipped town, gone, leaving the bride at the altar. She shared her woes profusely, rather overplaying the damsel in distress part, speaking about her broken heart and the pain of it all, how she was left penniless, a young orphan with no job or family to help her, and had come down to work as a dancer at the Soiree Salon, but had been fired because of a rumor another spiteful dancer had told the boss. When she got to the part of the story where she was told what the rumor was, that she had stolen from the boss, and how the boss had beaten her, that was the part when she began to cry. And cry she most definitely did. Milquetoast was abysmal at comforting or anything to do with communication, naturally, but he was very courteous and mannerly, overly so, and of course, he offered her money.

“I, uh, um, I, er, I’m, well, I’m s-sorry, ma’am, uh,” he managed. He cracked his shaking knuckles, another nervous tic, and tried again. “Um, I’m v-v-very sorry, uh, I-I could, uh, succor you, you know, uh, if you need it.” Now, Moue was not nearly as educated and erudite as Milquetoast, and the word succor sounded rather allusive and exciting to her sloshed and foggy brain. She thought he was offering something quite different, so with substantially lessened tears, she glanced at him.

“Well, I don’t know,” she coyly responded, spare eye drops, er, tears still running down her face. Milquetoast’s still-shaking hands brawled with his pocket until he finally pulled out his wallet, relinquishing a fifty-dollar bill as his quivering hands dropped several coins. Moue was quick to pick them up for him, batting her eyelashes still, oblivious to the fact that they were very gloppy from the earlier waterworks. “Oh, well, what’s the moolah for, mister?” she giggled as she got back up, stumbling and still drunk as she handed his change back to him. “Didn’t you hear, I was a dancer, not a -” and then she said a word that made Milquetoast turn absolutely lobster red. “N-no!” he spluttered. “I w-was, uh, um, uh, I was g-giving you money because y-you, y-you said you were broke! N-not for a-any-t-thing else!” he cut off, blushing in silence, completely mortified at the situation.

“What? Oh, well, thank you, sir!” Moue grabbed the bill out of his hand, hurrying away as she noticed a new sucker come through the door. She slipped into the ladies room to powder her nose, or rather, her entire face, erasing any trace of earlier crying, and began on her next dope to dupe.

Milquetoast did everything short of sprint up to the library, still up to his socks in Moue’s tears mixed with his perspiration from going into fight or flight mode when she began to cry. That was why he rarely went out of his library; the one time he did leave, it was inevitable he would meet someone that would scar him for the rest of his social life or lack thereof. The poor man went and studied microbes in his microscope, one of his favorite activities, but nothing would shake the humiliation that he felt. *Why would you even bother?* He asked himself, chagrined. *You don’t belong in that world*, he shook his head sadly. *Never have, never will. Just stay up here. The microbes won’t cry, at least.*

He made a firm decision never to subject himself to any more humiliation; he would no longer bother returning downstairs, where people just didn’t understand him at all. Sighing, Milquetoast heard a knock on the door. He grappled internally on whether or not to even bother opening it. After all, it probably was someone from downstairs, but did that break the rule of going downstairs if downstairs came up to you? He determined that it did not, in fact, break the rule, and that it was a technical loophole.

He trudged dutifully to the door, and cracked it open a smidge.

“Well, howdyado, good sir?” a short woman said very quickly, blending her words together. She flipped her long locks over a shoulder and smiled brightly, revealing the cigarette in her mouth. She took a drag and the smoke settled around her like a cloud. It was hard to see her face, or breathe, for Milquetoast, who never had the courage to try anything like tobacco, and he could hardly make out her very red lips and very colored cheeks, or even her false eyelashes and gaudy metallic eye makeup. He could still see her exceedingly short cheetah-print miniskirt, however, quite clearly indeed. Milquetoast averted his eyes from her outfit out of courtesy, and tried to see her eyes.

“Miasma Meretricious, at your service, good sir,” she held out a jaundiced hand out of the smoke cloud around her. It looked rather like disembodied fingers coming out of the fog, and it was somewhat disconcerting to Milquetoast. He took her hand and shook it gingerly, flopping his handshake like a fish, and pulled back just as fast, if that was possible.

“Uh, hello,” he uneasily waved at her. “M-may I ask, um, er, do you r-require something, uh, from me?”

he finished, reaching for his pocket to fish out his handkerchief and then to his dismay, he realized that it was no longer there.

“Well, yes, I do require something from you. You were at the Soiree Salon earlier this night, yes?” she asked, direct to the point. Milquetoast nodded slowly, unsure of where this was going. “And you, Mr. Milquetoast, bought a drink, did you not?” Milquetoast nodded again. He had bought a nice glass of vitamin fortified mineral water, which he had read in a scientific article was good for the health. “But did you pay for it, sir?” Miasma asked, her cloud of smoke moving, so she must have been shaking her head. Milquetoast thought back and shook his head. “No, ma’am, I am a t-tenant of the Lexicon, um, uh, so, er, anything I b-buy here goes on my bill t-that I pay at the end, um, of the m-month.” He mumbled self-consciously. He probably should have explained that to the bartender, but he was too timid to approach the muscular, formidable man again after he ordered.

“No, that is not correct, Mr. Milquetoast.” She shook her head again, the cloud moving with her. Miasma took another drag from her cigarette, and continued. “You are required to pay for your drinks on sight, so that you are accountable for them. What if, for instance, you gave a fifty-dollar bill to one of our ex-employees and she ordered drinks under your name, hm?” That was oddly specific, he mused. Did she know about the money he gave to Moue? “No one would stop her since you are not a regular at the Salon, sir, or any of our nightclubs, and she could go to town with drinks under your name. That is why you must pay up front. You have, however unknowingly, committed a class one misdemeanor, petty larceny, by not paying for your order. We have two options here, don’t we?” she paused to take another cigarette drag, but Milquetoast stayed mute. He could not believe his ears. “We could kick you out of the Lexicon. Or, you could pay up.”

“I-I-I, um, uh, I’ll p-pay up! Just h-hold on, um,” he struggled, pulling out his wallet once again, but found it missing. Where had it gone? He mentally retraced his steps and then it dawned on him. Of course! Moue Maudlin had stolen from him! What a fraud! “I seem to, um, have, uh, I-lost my wallet, er,” he scratched the back of his neck.

“Oh, no, sir, you’ve lost your chance. Boys,” she called out to something behind her. Two hulking men marched up past her. Had they been there the whole time? Milquetoast had no idea, but her “boys” were coming his way.

“L-look, sirs, I’ve, um, I’ve j-just lost, uh, my wallet! I h-have money, uh, in-inside!” he stuttered violently

turning to run away, when the henchmen descended upon him.

The lexicologist woke up with a start. What a strange dream he had been having! Of course, it was because he was in the M's. He always fell asleep when he was categorizing, and only when he was in the M's. He shook his head. What had he been doing before he fell asleep? He lifted his head and wiped the drool off of the dictionary, sheepishly, and looked at his steno pad beside him. What was that for? He glanced down the list...Milquetoast, Moue, Maudlin, Meretricious, some of his favorite M words. What was the list for, though? Oh! He remembered. It was the list of words that they were going to abolish from the dictionary, they being the Word Board. He shook his head. No, he would not let them take these great words from the English language. Even if he was the only one who felt like words had thoughts and personalities, he was too attached to them to let them go. Many of his dreams had been about the Lexicon Lounge and its inhabitants; words on the abolish list were often there, in the most random of situations, and as long as he had authority over words, he would be their savior.

The lexicologist loved words in the way that folks on the street liked to breathe, and he would never stop loving them as long as he lived. He would never stop working for a cause he believed in with all of his heart. And with that thought in his head, he raised his steno pad, ripped off that page, and continued onto his next word, methuselah.

# Searching For Answers in a Coffee Cup

**High School Entry**

*Sarah Smith*

Looking through the storefront window, one might see a woman huddled by herself at a table, cup of coffee in hand. It was dark outside, the neon lights of the other storefronts fluttered, illuminating the cracked, smog stained sidewalk. Cars rushed up and down the busy streets, keeping time for the city. The rain trickled down, not slowly enough to be pleasant, but not quite pouring either. Inside this little corner diner was a girl trying to stay out of the cold.

The woman was sitting at an old table; its red table top once shiny was dull, only a faint reminder was left of its happier past. She was clutching her mug of coffee, motionlessly. She sat staring into the coffee, hoping to find answers in the warm, brown liquid. Music played softly in the diner, not loudly enough to mask the sounds of the rain hitting the pavement or the symphony of street noises outside. She blinked back a tear, and shivered from cold.

She studied the table top closely, looking at names etched onto its surface, and stains from coffee long ago. A few tears rolled down her cheek and plopped onto the table, rolling on the silver edges, distorting her reflection. She moved her mug aside and rested her head on the table; its cool surface welcomed her face. She was too weary to question the germs that surely were on the table and the gum pressed underneath.

Outside, car horns honked and tires sprayed water up onto the sidewalks. The black sky seemed to suffocate the diner and its few inhabitants all sitting by themselves. One tired looking waitress methodically brushed crumbs from the table, scrubbing it in hopeless attempts of restoring shine. Weariness was evident on the faces of all the customers who seemed to be silently conversing with their tables, searching for answers and sympathy.

The woman remained there, moving her cup back and forth in her hands. Startled by the unexpected burn on her hand, she realized the coffee had sloshed over the edge of her cup, a warm river down her pale hand and onto the table where it puddled. She made no immediate movements to wipe it up; the reach to the dispenser seemed too far away to be worth it. Instead, she studied the coffee spill, how all the drops clung together, fighting as one to survive. She sighed, pushing a piece of damp brown hair behind her ear, and for the first time that evening, noticed the new bruise marking her forearm.

Her thoughts wandered to earlier that evening. In her head she hears the jazzy music she is waltzing to around the kitchen, smells the aroma of the dinner she has in the oven. She sees the glow of her husband's headlights through the kitchen window as they turn into the driveway. She hears the sound of his footsteps

thumping up their few concrete steps, and the key in the lock as the door opens. She remembers turning around, smile on her face, only to be greeted by a look of sorrow masked with anger.

She sees the anger in his eyes, the way his hands are clutched in fists at his sides. She hears the echo of his determined footsteps as he approaches her. She feels the sharp pain in her arm where his fingers dig into her, as he demands answers for his day's misfortune. She remembers stepping back, and seeing the look of realization on his face, immediately followed by one of horror. She hears the sob, catching in his throat, and the sound of her own footsteps running out the door.

She remembers the cold rain, jolting her back to reality as she struggles to unlock her car. Only once she is inside does she feel her tears warm her face.

Then her mind goes blank, and she is in the diner, shuffling in the door, greeted by the indifferent ding of a bell, used to announcing the monotonous comings and goings of the same individuals.

She let herself mentally retrace her steps, shuffling to the farthest booth, sliding into the vinyl seat and resting her head in her hands. She was only acutely aware of how damp her hair is and the purple tint to the skin on her arm. All she could concentrate on was the throbbing pain in her temple exacerbated by the ache in her heart.

A tired old waitress cleared her throat, bringing the woman back to where she currently is, examining a coffee puddle on the table, one that will mark itself as a star in a constellation of sad stories. The waitress poured more coffee into her cup, and gracelessly shuffled away. The steam from the fresh coffee starts to relieve the woman's pounding headache, which is brought back by the incessant buzzing of her phone.

She digs around in her purse, after having completely forgotten that it had been by her side the whole time. Holding her phone in her hand, cognizant now of both her phone's presence and that of the bruise, she answers the phone, holding back tears. From the other end of the phone she hears the voice of her husband, sobbing heavily. She sighs, not unfamiliar with his rage. Nor is she unfamiliar with the deluge of tears that she can tell are pouring from his steely gray eyes. But this time, she has been bruised a little too deeply.

Upon hearing his flood of words, she hung up. She removed the ring from her fourth finger, slipping it into her purse. She sat there then, in stunned silence, suddenly emboldened but yet terrified by her rebellious

actions. She was unsure what to do with her newfound freedom. The only life she had ever known had been with him. She knew no other town, no other house, except the one of her childhood. His face was the one she woke up to in the mornings; he was the one she cooked meals for, the one to whom she professed her love. She thought she would be ecstatic from the possibilities the free reign she now had over life presented, but instead, she felt like she was being held back by invisible ties she could not cut.

Outside the rain was now pouring. Cars and taxis filled the streets; a once harmonious symphony was now a cacophony of loud noises. Pedestrians lined the sidewalks, their hunched backs offered protection from the harsh wind and rain. The streetlights flickered, casting an almost eerie glow over the somber scene outside the diner. The window of the diner allowed those passing by to see inside, and to see the tired, listless expressions on the faces of the customers.

Inside the woman was playing with the lukewarm coffee in her cup. She has no desire to drink it, just like she has no desire to leave the bubble of the diner. She has no idea where to go. She wants to ask for help, for money, or for a place to stay. However, the people in this little secluded diner do not look like people who had the time or energy to help.

She lets her mind wander off to the dark parts of her brain, the places that she feels guilty venturing to, but deep inside feels like she has the right to plot such macabre revenge. She hears the key in the door as she opens it up, feels the warmth from the fireplace in the living room. She sees the light from the kitchen, reflecting off the window, and hears her footsteps, determined as she walks through the door. She sees her husband dead, on the floor. Immediately, she knows her thoughts are wrong. Just flickers of a dark fantasy she lets play inside her mind, where no one else can see. She knows she cannot do this, so instead, she went outside, and sat inside her car, not sure where to drive.

With a sigh of finality, she digs inside her purse. She pulls out her ring, placing it back on her finger. She started driving, with a destination in mind. As she passes through all the too familiar neighborhoods, driving past all of the cookie cutter houses, she realizes that she must go home, because she knows no other life.

She is welcomed into her home by her husband, someone all too happy to see her return. She goes inside, hearing the déjà vu in her footsteps as she walks into the kitchen, and slumps into the kitchen chair. She sits there and sobs until she falls asleep.

Back at the diner, the same tired customers sit there drinking their coffee, still searching for answers they will never receive. Waitresses still serve them; shuffling around a diner they have known their whole life, knowing they will never know anywhere else. And the diner itself drowns in the tears of a weary world.

# **What You Left at My Place**

**High School Entry**

*Natalie Marie Lucia Bennett*

From: Annissa Perovic

To: Ian Woods

Date: 9/12/13

Subject: It's been too long!!!

Ian-

Hey man, I can't believe I'm finally out of that facility! It took me long enough, but the dumb ass tyrant psychologists and doctors finally gave me my pass outta here after I managed to go two weeks without sneaking a cigarette. They thought I snatched them from some nurse, said that I'd "re-routed my addiction to kleptomania" or some shit. You know that isn't me. I would never steal anything, ever.

But, I digress. I'm finally out!! OUT OUT OOOOUT!!! It's been six months since I first got to West Argenon Addiction Rehabilitation Center, and seven since the accident, and that's far too long to have gone without talking to you. I was too afraid to e-mail you through the W.A. internet system, I'd figured they'd see everything I would write, and when I asked they wouldn't let me mail anything to you, even when I asked super nicely. They said it wouldn't help me accept the accident. LOL, sorry digressing again. I'm so excited to be able to talk to you again, and I might even try to talk to Polly (even if she IS the one who got us in the crash in the first place).

I don't expect you to write me back, not for a long time. If I had your side of the situation, I wouldn't want to write back to me, either. In fact, I'd probably hate myself. A lot more than I already do.

- Nissa

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From: Annissa Perovic

To: Ian Woods

Date: 9/18/12

Subject: School blows ☐

Hey hey,

I was back in school today, which I can tell you right now SUCKED so badly. It's bad enough at home with my dad breathing down my neck every second and mum trying to make me into some born-again bible banger, but now the entire graduating class thinks I'm the most pitiful excuse for a human in the world. And Ian, it's okay you think that, I understand, I really do. But I can't have people who don't even know me giving those condescending looks wherever I go, I can't. And the Assistant Principle had me in for a "talk" but you know what a tyrannical fuck that guy is, so the entire spiel was about how I should respect him as an authority figure,

and better have a good attitude or I won't graduate on time blah blah blaah...

Like, seriously dude, I'm a fucking American, a GED will get me through life fine.

So I guess you got lucky when you didn't have to go back to school after the crash :P I really miss you, Bumble B-Ian, I hope one day things will be alright with us again.

-Annisia

P.S. Guess what I saw on television this morning? "Teen Titans"! You remember that show?

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From: Annissa Perovic

To: Ian Woods

Date: 9/22/13

Subject: Polly

Ian,

I talked to Polly today. I called her in the morning and she came over for coffee. She offered to take me to the café, but the idea of being in a car with Polly again was just too sickening this soon.

So Mom and Dad went upstairs to watch a movie or something (while closely listening to me and Polly talk, I'm sure) and me and Polly are on the couch and that's when she just starts BAWLING HER EYES OUT! I couldn't believe a girl like Polly, with her dead-pan humor and nonchalant attitude, actually had the capacity to cry! And with such intensity!

She started apologizing after that. She apologized for ever getting us into the drug scene, for driving us when she was so obviously shit faced, for getting me near addicted and landing me in the hospital and W.A. And then she started talking about you.

"And Ian... Oh God, Ian, h-he was wearing the seatbelt and everything... Nissa, If I hadn't have offered to d-drive he would... Oh.." and she started sobbing again.

I did, too.

We both just sat there crying, holding each other. Red eyed and red faces, nothing but black, black, black on the inside from the whole disgusting memory.

It was a near eternity of tears and regret, till finally nothing more came out. Polly re-applied her makeup then left.

You're my best friend Ian, so I understand that being around me, hell even being in CONTACT with me, would be too painful right now, after I practically dragged you to get in the car with me and Polly when we all were high out of our minds. But it's been almost a year, Ian. I miss you so much it's almost too painful to bear. I want to see you again.

-Annisia

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From: Annissa Perovic

To: Ian Woods

Date: 10/23/13

Subject: F in Math >:[

Heyyy!

Sorry I haven't written to you in a while, I was still a little shaken by the whole Polly thing that happened. Me and her are okay now, though we aren't hanging out anymore. Ha, dumb bitch is STILL doing cocaine and acid, can you believe that???

Anyway, I was talking to Amir today and he said he misses you too, so I'm sending a bazillion Amir hugs (but "no homo" as you two would say xD). Me and Amir are talking more and more, which I'm glad about, cause the three of us were so close before we met Polly, and he's the only person in school who doesn't resent me for the accident. Guess it takes a trashed reputation to show you who your real friends are LOL!

Amir is still doing the whole art thing, which would be awesome if he wasn't always drawing me weird shit in math class. It distracts me, and could very well be the reason I have an F in that class ha-ha.

He's been drawing these things called "Mandalas". They're like Incan designs or something, and they emphasize a lot of color and symmetry and weird shapes all collaborating into one big beautiful picture. One of them reminded me of this girl, Penelope, in the kids' ward at W.A., cause she'd always stare at some point in space and talk about how pretty "the colors" were. She's on some kind of permanent trip; she has brain damage, but I remember a few things she would say that we could understand. "UNO was my favorite game, but no one here plays with me." That was the first semi-sane thing I'd ever heard her say.

And I'll tell you, Ian, I had played so much UNO in those six months that colors and number started to repulse me, LOL. You probably would've wanted to play with her all the time though, you're always ready for a

good card game.

You've always been fun like that. The possibility of you writing me back is what's keeping me going ☐

I can't hope for you to ever forgive me, but maybe you'll hate me a bit less if I bring some old stuff over to your house. Your green jacket, an old Beast Boy action figure, the Harry Potter novel, Mortal Kombat, ya know, what you left at my place over the years.

TEEN TITANS, GO!

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From: Annissa Perovic

To: Ian Woods

Date: 10/31/13

Subject: Happy Halloween!

Hey man, Happy Halloween! :D Hope you're totally loaded with candy, cause me and Amir cleaned out the shelves at Wal-Mart for a shitty Monster Movie Marathon! I know we usually would all go out and look at decorations and smoke and shit, but like Hell the parents are letting me out of the house on the most "tom fool-eristic night of the year" (no joke, my mom actually said that), so he'll be over soon. I think he's starting to see me as some victim who needs saving, which is nothing short of ridiculous. He sees himself as some kind of super hero in those comics he's always reading, trying to keep me away from all the bad shit and the drugs and everything. He's always going into melodramatic prose about how he doesn't see me as a different person, but more vulnerable and misguided, or how the physical need for anything artificial is just excess. All that moral shit he's always been crazy about. Though it isn't like I don't listen or anything, he managed to convince me to quit smoking, so I guess that's good, even if I am gaining weight and getting WRATH OF GOD STYLE headaches!

I hope you'll get back to me one of these days.

-Annissa

P.S. I left the box of your stuff on your porch. Did you see it?

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From: Annissa Perovic

To: Ian Woods

Date: 11/12/13

Subject: Nothin' new to report

Ian,

Hey man, nothing new to report as of late. I'm in my room listening to Neko Case. I remember that you really fucking HATE her, thought she was boring and everything LOL. I played her when we were taking hits with Polly once and you got up and tried to dance and you didn't know the words, but improvised with your own. Haha I don't know if you remember, but I like thinking about that. How much fun you had being a dumb ass and stuff.

Oh! So I forgot to tell you, but those mandalas Amir has been making are now taking residence on the walls of my room. He made a shit ton of them for me while I was at W.A. and we put them up when he came over on Halloween. My favorite (it was so great, I almost cried) was a big green and purple one, 'cause he drew this picture of the three of us in the center. Back when you would wear those big blue sunglasses all the time and I still had red in my hair. Before we met Polly.

Have you and Polly tried talking to each other since the crash? I haven't talked to her since she came over a few months ago.

I remember that she broke your big blue sunglasses and you looked so hurt when she laughed and told you they were stupid and pretentious. I never thought sunglasses could make a person as sad as you became after that. The stupid bitch didn't show any remorse, and just kept on laughing.

Is that what ended up making her so magnetic to us? That she pulled out all of our vulnerabilities and denounced them? Or how every little substance she offered seemed like a tangible epiphany, that once we took a line or downed a tab, it was making us stronger?

I don't know, but at least she's out of our lives now, LOL. I hope you're doing well.

-Nissa

P.S. Why is six afraid of seven? BECAUSE SEVEN EIGHT NINE!!!

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From: Annissa Perovic

To: Ian Woods

Date: 11/22/13

Subject: Im so sorry, Im so so sorry

Ian, I just fell off an amazing high. It was the first time I've felt that sensation in almost a year, and now that it's over I just want to die.

I broke plans with Amir and Polly got me the fix.

How stupid.

How fucking selfish of me.

All those fucking months I spent trying to get better, trying to prove to myself, to Amir and especially to you, that I could be better. After everything that happened, and I still couldn't learn a god damned thing from it all.

Ian I know wherever you are, you're crying while you read this. Crying because I'm so fucking weak and shameful. Because I'm just a waste of a human being now. Because even after the crash, I couldn't learn that cocaine is bad for you.

I wanted this all to go away so badly. I wanted to stop wanting it.

God, Ian I wish you were still here. I wish I never met Polly. I wish I never shoved you into that van she was driving, when I knew she was too shit faced to operate. I wish I had been sober enough to notice you asphyxiating in the back seat.

I'm in love with you Ian Wallace Woods. You shouldn't have died and left me here after the crash.

-Annisia

# **The Last Day**

**High School Entry**

*Emma Gillies*

Clara

It's the last week of summer vacation. Soon, my best friends, Avril and Emily, will be leaving for college, and so will I.

"Hey Clara, pass me a granola bar, would you?" Emily says, her bright green eyes flashing.

I toss her an oats and honey one, the crunchy Nature Valley kind.

"Thanks," Emily says, unwrapping it.

"So, which trails should we take to get to River Run Falls?" Avril asks.

"Hmmm..." I say, biting into an apple. "We could take Oakwood, then Alpine, then River Run—that's the best trail, apparently, because it goes right by the river—and then, what about Cheshire?"

"Works for me," says Avril.

"Mmm too!" mumbles Emily, her mouth full of granola.

Avril and I laugh. Typical Emily.

Today, we're hiking at River Run Park, whose main attraction is River Run Falls. We plan to eat lunch there, enjoy the view, and then descend. Right now, we're standing in the dusty car park, a couple hours after dawn.

"But there's one thing I'm worried about," Avril says, her braided auburn hair shining in the sunlight.

"What is it *now*?" Emily asks, smiling.

"Well, the weather app on my phone says we're in for a thunderstorm this afternoon."

"So?"

Avril and I exchange looks.

"It means it's a bit dangerous to hike," Avril says.

"But we're only going for lunch. We'll be back here by mid-afternoon, tops!" Emily replies.

"What do you think, Clara?" Avril asks me.

"Well...what time is the storm supposed to roll in?"

"About three."

"We should be back before that." I look at my watch, which reads 8:07 AM. It takes about three hours to get up, a bit less to get down.

"Yep, I'd say we'll be fine," Emily says, looking straight at Avril.

Avril lets out a sigh, and then grins.

"OK," she says. "But we have to leave now."

"Let's go!" I say enthusiastically. I check my bag to see I have everything; the others do the same.

The sky is blue and clear, except for a few grey cumulus clouds here and there. There's nothing to be worried about.

## Avril

Emily's in front, skipping energetically up the path.

"Emily, calm down!" I say with a laugh. "You look like a ten-year-old!"

Emily looks back, a huge white grin plastered on her face.

Clara, walking beside me, leans over and says, "I've always thought she was a fifth grader stuck in an 18-year-old's body."

"Hey! I heard that!" Emily shouts, dropping back to join the conversation.

On either side of the trail, the deep green of the grass contrasts with the light purple of lavender, and the oak trees stand tall. This trail, Oakwood, is named for its trees.

Clara snaps a photo with her iPhone and we continue hiking, listening to the birds chirping, admiring the greenery, and chatting.

Not to mention Emily attempting to get a close-up shot of a squirrel which ends in failure.

My digital clock reads 9:31. We've come to a clearing, with a wooden signpost planted in the dirt.

"It says that Alpine Trail is to the left," Clara says, reading the sign. There are three trails in front of us: one to the left, that has a wider path but a sharper incline; the next that snakes into the dense forest again; and the last, on the far right, that winds its way through the woods until it reaches the small sand dunes by Cattail Lake, at the very edge of River Run Park.

"OK, let's go," I say.

We start off at a brisk walk and enter the forest again, immediately surrounded by a mixture of deciduous and coniferous trees and dense vegetation. The path is just dirt, smoother than Oakwood, but much steeper.

"This is fun," I say, leaning up the steep hill and grinning.

Emily drops to her hands and knees, dramatically reaching up the hill.

"Can't ... go ... much farther."

Clara and I laugh as Emily gets up, her bare knees now covered with dust.

It's turning out to be a great day.

## Emily

I can't wait to get to River Run Falls. But it's nearly 10 o'clock, and I know Avril will be worrying a bit.

"Finally!" I say with relief, legs burning from the mile climb up Alpine Trail.

"That was hard work," says Clara.

“Avril, how are you doing?” I ask.

“Pretty good. Kind of hungry. And a bit...”

“Worried,” Clara and I say in unison.

“Yeah, that,” Avril admits with a smile.

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine,” I say, continuing on the trail, now flat as a pancake but turning rocky.

The trees are starting to clear, and the trail splits into two up ahead. A wooden post reading “Alpine Trail” in red letters is by the left trail, and the other reads “River Run Trail”, leading down to the river.

“This way,” I say happily, choosing the trail to the right. “We should be at The Falls by 11:15.”

We all walk side by side as the path leads us down a short hill. Suddenly, we’re at the river, stretching twenty feet across but still dangerously deep, sparkling on the surface. The trail is straight and rocky, with the river to the right and the woods to the left.

The sun is shining, but grey clouds are starting to cover the sky, weirdly fast. I can see Avril looking up at the sky, a worried look on her face.

“Don’t worry,” I say cheerfully. “We’re making record time.”

An older couple and their dog pass us, smiling as we walk by. And soon, we’re chatting away, excited to reach The Falls.

### Clara

It’s 11:20, five minutes later than we’d planned on getting to River Run Falls, but we’re nearly there. The last bit of Cheshire Trail is very steep and rocky, and I feel like a mountain goat as I jump from rock to rock.

“Nearly there!” I call behind me to Emily and Avril. I can hear the gentle swooshing of River Run Falls. Sure enough, the trees on both sides of the trail thin out into a flat, circular grassy area. The Falls spill down rocks into a deep pool to the left, and to the right the grassy land drops off a rocky cliff, revealing Cotton Valley far below, nestled between hills and trees. Trees surround the plateau, and a sign reading “Caution--Steep drop” sits by the cliff. Nobody else is here.

“Wow,” Emily says, looking around.

Avril joins us, also in awe of the place.

I look up at the baby blue sky, now growing just a little darker.

“Hey guys, let’s eat,” I say, a pang of worry pushing its way into my head.

“Good idea!” exclaims Emily. “I’m starving.”

Avril looks at the sky, but she quickly glances away when she notices me looking at her, and gives a quick smile.

We settle down right next to The Falls, the water making a gentle splashing against the rocks. The deep blue of the water is magnificent, and contrasts with the green grass and grey boulders by the side of the pool, which feeds into a fast-moving stream that twists and turns its way downhill and out of sight.

I sigh happily as we take out our packs and lay out the food. Granola bars, PB and J sandwiches (and just J for Emily, who has a profound dislike for peanut butter), trail mix, flasks of water, and Avril's famous carrot cake.

"Mmm," Emily says, biting into her jelly sandwich. "I do love me some good grape jelly."

Avril and I laugh. Emily has a way of doing that to people.

Pretty soon, we're done with lunch. I lick my lips, the last bit of frosting dissolving in my mouth, and lie down on the grass, cushy and warm. Avril and Emily do the same. We're facing the sky, which is cloudy, but not worryingly so. Besides, it's only a quarter to noon.

"I could get used to this," I say.

"Me too," says Emily.

"We should do this every summer," Avril says.

A good idea. The Falls whisper gently, playing peaceful music. The breeze pushes through the trees; leaves rustle; the birds tweet every so often. The heat of the day forces me to close my eyes for just a second

...

I awake with a start. A raindrop plops on my face.

*Oh no.*

I sit straight up, seeing Emily and Avril dozing peacefully to my side, and look at my watch.

12:59.

"Wake up, wake up!" I cry to my friends.

They stir abruptly. I've obviously disturbed some happy dreams.

"Wha-?" Emily says. Then, a look of realization: "Oh no. We fell asleep."

"What time is it?" Avril demands.

"One o'clock now."

"Crap."

"We have to go," I say. "Now."

I look up at the sky, suddenly a dark, menacing gray.

"Avril, when's the storm supposed to hit?" Emily asks.

Avril checks her phone while we gather our things hurriedly.

"The thunderstorm's supposed to be here in the next hour!" Avril says, voice shaking.

“Don’t worry,” I say for the fiftieth time today. “It shouldn’t take too long to get down.

We set off at a jog back down Cheshire Trail.

### Emily

I’m not too worried about the thunderstorm. After all, how bad could it be? We’ll get a bit wet, but we’ll be down in a flash.

I didn’t take into account the fact that we might get lost.

“Ugh, where are we?” Avril groans, her hair hanging in strands around her face and clothes stuck to her skin. The rain is coming down in sheets now.

We’ve hit a dead end. Avril takes out her map, trying to figure out where we went wrong.

“Ugh,” she says again, wiping water from her eyes. “We’re on Cottonwood Trail. We went left instead of right.”

Clara sighs. “We never should’ve done this.”

“Don’t worry,” I sigh. The rain comes down harder. “It’s just a little rain.”

“A little,” Clara says sarcastically. “We’re soaked.”

“OK, just follow this trail and we’ll be on River Run again,” Avril says, focusing on the soggy map.

“Let’s go, then,” I say, and we continue walking—or should I say slipping—down the trail.

Sure enough, the trail soon meets River Run, and the path flattens out. The river has risen a bit, and its waters are black. It’s getting very difficult to see.

Thunder booms, rocking the earth. The rain is like being in a shower, and I’m forced to keep rubbing my eyes.

We walk briskly side by side, with Avril on the right, Clara in the middle, and myself by the river.

“Maybe we should run,” I say.

“The path is too slippery,” Avril remarks. “There’s no traction.”

“We’ll get back faster.”

I break into a jog. It’s slippery, but doesn’t seem too bad.

“Come on!” I shout.

Suddenly, a patch of mud sends me flying as my feet slip out from under me and my ankle makes a sickening crack.

I scream as momentum carries me over the banks and into the river.

“Emily!” Clara and Avril scream.

And then, water consumes me. It’s so cold, I can’t breathe. The strong current pulls me under. My ankle is agony, and I struggle towards the surface, but my head hits something hard and I feel dizzy. I scream, but

only bubbles come out ... no ... no ... my legs burn and the river's pull is relentless. My head is throbbing, shuts down, and blackness envelops me.

### Clara

"Emily!" I scream, as I see Emily crash into the water. I run to the edge. Where is she?

"Clara, no!" Avril screams.

I can't see anything. Suddenly air is under me and I, too, am crashing into the river.

I hear Avril scream again as I go under. The cold is horrible, paralyzing my body, but I manage to blindly reach out. My hands catch something. Pure luck. It's a log.

I feel something hit my leg.

"Emily?" I cry, water rushing into my mouth. My head surfaces and I gasp for breath.

I cry out for Avril, Emily, anyone, but the roaring river and pounding rain makes it impossible to be heard.

I sob, freezing, panicking, and wondering if I'll see my friends again. The log is stable and I pull my body up on it. I want to just lie there, but I know it's not safe. I clamber onto the muddy bank, cold water up to my waist, and pull myself onto the flooded path.

I just lie there.

### Avril

I scream for Clara and Emily but I can't hear anything—or see anything—in the storm. I take out my phone, but it doesn't turn on. The water has damaged it.

I stand in the rain for a moment, panicking. What should I do? I can't go in the water: it'll pull me under. So I turn on my heels, keeping away from the river, and sprint down the path to get help, all the while slipping and sliding.

An hour later, I reach the park entrance. I'm frozen, soaked, muddy, and exhausted. I sprinted the whole way here. The ranger station is just ahead, lights glowing inside. I run up to it, breathing hard and splashing through puddles, and pound hard on the door.

"Help!" I cry, my voice like a frog. "Help me!"

The door opens. A ranger, tall and well built, is there.

"My friends ... " I sob. "River Run ... Trail."

"Hey! Little help!" The ranger calls inside. "What happened?" he says kindly, steadying me with a firm grip on my shoulders and leading me into the warm station.

“They fell ... in the river.” My voice is barely audible.

Everything is blurry, and I feel myself being wrapped in towels. And then the world is black.

### Clara

I wake up in a bright room. Mom, Dad, and Avril are all sitting by my bed.

Mom notices that I’m awake first.

“Oh Clara, how do you feel?” she asks.

I try to smile. “Sore. But other than that, OK.”

I see Avril and say, “I’m so glad to see you. Where’d you go?” My voice sounds faraway, distant.

“I didn’t know where you were,” she says. “So I ran to get help.” Her eyes fill with tears. “I thought you were dead.”

Suddenly memories of the storm come swirling into my head. “Wait, where ... where’s Emily?” I ask.

My parents glance at each other. Avril pauses. She takes a shaky breath.

“This morning, her body was found downriver,” she says, her voice breaking.

I stop breathing. “She...she’s...?” I can’t say it.

Mother takes my hand. “It’s OK, Clara.”

I shake off her hand and turn on my side, mind numb, tears suddenly flooding out.

I want to curse the storm.

I’m alive and so is Avril. But Emily is dead.

“We should do this every summer.” Those words, once happy, are now sickening.

# **Surviving Sandy**

**High School Entry**

*Megan Gingerich*

“Ally! You in there?” A loud pounding on the front door wakes me up.

I race to the door, my bare feet freezing upon sudden contact with the tiled floor. I open it quickly and my boyfriend Jason scrambles inside without even saying hello, his hair and clothes soaking wet. Once the door is closed, he shakes himself out like a dog and buzzes his lips, referencing the cold weather outside.

“It’s raining,” he states, grinning broadly.

“Uh-huh,” I laugh. “So why the urgent call?”

“My parents evacuated like, two days ago. This whole Sandy thing’s got ‘em freaked. I thought they were being stupid and I didn’t wanna go, so I said that since I’m eighteen and have freedom of choice, I was gonna stay.”

“Yeah, I know,” I sigh, rolling my eyes. “You threw a house party yesterday. I was there.”

“I know that, Ally,” Jason exhales, exasperated. “But they called about an hour ago, said they were watching the weather and it’s gonna be really bad, so I’d better hurry up and find someone to stay with so I don’t get panicked and hyperventilate and die or something.” His speech is rushed and he’s breathing hard. He must have run all the way here; I don’t see his car. The traffic’s too bad to get anywhere with all the last minute evacuees.

Everyone’s totally spazzing out about Hurricane Sandy. My parents are both out of town on business trips, and because I’m so incredibly fortunate, I have no car. Otherwise...I’d be long gone by now. They called to tell me to be careful, but unless I’m stupid enough to actually walk out onto the streets, my being careful won’t matter. Mom and Dad said it’ll be just like Irene, which was a wimp of a hurricane, and that I’ll be fine. I sincerely hope they’re right.

“You can stay here,” I tell Jason. “Mom and Dad won’t mind. I’ll try to find you some of my dad’s clothes or something.”

“Awesome.”

I make him take off his squishy Nike running shoes and socks and hang his flannel jacket on a towel rack in the bathroom before grabbing his wrist and leading him to my parents’ bedroom. There is no way he’s getting mud all over the white carpet. I’d be dead in a second.

There’s not a whole lot in my dad’s closet except his work clothes, but I manage to find a plain gray t-shirt and sweats. I toss them at Jason and promptly exit the room, like a respectable person.

Once Jason's all dressed he comes to the family room and plops down on the couch beside me. I'm typing away at an essay I have to write for AP Psychology and the weather channel is on the TV. Everyone seems very tense on there, and I'm scared out of my mind for what the storm's gonna bring, so I choose not to watch.

"When's it supposed to start?" Jason asks me softly.

"This is it right now," I answer, waving towards the rain-streaked window. Realizing the truth in my statement, I slam my laptop shut and stare at Jason. "Holy crap, this is it."

"Ally, it's been raining for hours."

"Well, yeah...but I was so busy with this essay and I'm so used to rain I guess I didn't notice..."

"How long is it supposed to last? I haven't even looked at the radar."

"Forty days and forty nights," I grumble, putting my laptop aside and snuggling up against my boyfriend. He wraps his arm around me and squeezes my shoulders tight. He's scared too, even though he doesn't show it. Guys never do, for some reason. I twist my neck to look up at him. "Beginning to wish you'd evac'd with your parents, big guy?"

"What? And miss spending this beautiful night with you?" he jokes. I don't laugh. Taking the hint that I'm serious, he leans down and kisses my forehead gently. "Don't worry," he says. "It won't get bad until sometime later tonight."

"Jason, it's raining cats and dogs out there," I protest, scared to death now that Sandy's arrived. "And think about it, they shut down the subways. And the stock market's closed for the first time since 9/11. New York is the city that never sleeps and it's like...dead. I know we're in Queens and that's not technically the city, but..."

Sensing the raw fear in my voice, Jason does what he's good at. He doesn't offer any words of comfort, but he does turn off the TV, therefore eliminating any and all words that are anything but comforting. He strokes my hair and whispers "Shhh" over and over, like he's calming down a dog. And call me part canine, but it works. Gradually, my heart returns to its normal position in my chest. My breathing regulates itself, and I lose myself to unconsciousness, safe in Jason's arms.

CRACK.

I awake with a start.

“What the heck was that!?” I shriek. Jason’s wide awake. He stands up, practically tossing me on the couch, and opens the curtains. “Jason! You’re not supposed to do that in a storm! Especially not this storm!”

“Well that sucks, ‘cause I didn’t take my storm etiquette class and I want to see what in the name of William Shakespeare is going on out there!” Well, that’s just swell, but I don’t give a crap. This thing is gonna blow the windows in; the wind sounds like a pack of hungry wolves, and he is not going to be standing next to the window when that happens.

“Jason, get over yourself and get away from there! NOW!” I’ve never felt so panicked. Jason’s parents had the right idea sending him here.

“Ally,” Jason says, his voice dangerously calm, “the streets are flooded.”

*“Excuse me?”*

“The streets are flooded. If we were to go outside right now, well, I hope you know how to swim.”

*“WHAT? This is a freakin’ one-story house!”*

“As long as water doesn’t start pouring in, we’ll be fine.” It’s both amazing and infuriating how he manages to stay calm in a situation like this.

I don’t even want to go check for leaks; I wouldn’t know how to fix them anyways. All I do is get up and drag Jason back to the couch. Both scared out of our minds, we hug each other as tightly as we can, as if the other person’s body will protect us against the storm. I didn’t know it would be this bad. People were freaking out, and so was I, quite honestly, but my parents said it was just another Irene. Irene didn’t do anything. But this has renovated my street into a neighborhood pool.

Jason and I sit together in a tense silence for what feels like centuries, jumping at every crack of lightning, every roll of thunder. I want to cover my ears every time the wind howls. There are times when I think it’s not the wind at all, but a human scream, crying out in the dark for a rescuer that won’t come.

It's around eleven o'clock at night when a light comes on outside that won't go away. For one blissful moment I think the sun has come out, and then I hear the pounding rain and decide otherwise. But when the orange glow behind the curtains doesn't go away, I realize what it is. Fire.

Jason sees it too. He stands up again and rushes to the window, and I wrap myself in a down blanket, praying with everything in me that it's not true. But Jason looks back at me and says simply, "It's coming this way."

That's when I break down. We're trapped. We are going to die in this wretched excuse for a house. And we're not going to drown, we're going to burn. My body shakes in fear and I'm sobbing hysterically. Jason's shaking too.

"W-w-we need t-to get out of h-h-here," I manage. Jason nods stiffly and we both start running for the door without even bothering to get shoes or coats. That fire chasing us is all the heat we need. Jason pulls open the door and is immediately thrown back by black waves. He stands back up quickly, though, and makes his way to the door. I manage to slip outside.

The water is almost up to my chest, and it's freezing. My feet instantly turn numb. It's pouring into the house, and suddenly a gust of wind creates a wave that knocks me under. I crash under the waves and completely lose my sense of direction as the water pummels me, but manage to stand back up when I hit the outside wall of my house. The fire lights up the night sky, jumping from roof to roof, somehow unaffected by the rain. But I can't see Jason.

"Jason!" I shriek. "*JASON!*" There's no reply, and my crying becomes uncontrollable, but the bright, menacing light shining in my peripheral vision forces my feet forward. I cling to the porches and cars to avoid being swept away by the current, all the while screaming Jason's name, and never getting an answer.

He'll be okay, I console myself. He probably thinks I'm dead right now too. Just think of how happy we'll be when we realize that we were both wrong. The thought of a Hollywood-worthy reunion with Jason makes me smile, but only for a fraction of a second. The tears keep coming.

Suddenly, little glowing lights in the distance catch my attention. They're not fire; they're rescue boats. Firefighters. Without a second thought, I dive into the water and swim for my life.

~

By dawn the firefighters had dropped most of us off on an anonymous street a few blocks away from my house. The streets are still a little tiny bit flooded, but the waters are gradually receding. The boats brought me back here thinking I would want to go back to whatever's left of home. The fire burned through an entire corner of Queens; Breezy Point, to be exact. What were once beautiful houses are now mountains of blackened ash, and even the ash is slowly being washed away. My house is probably halfway to sea by now.

I've lived in that house my entire life. Everything was in there, all the way from my childhood teddy bear to my junior prom pictures. I went with Jason.

Jason.

I blink fast to dry the oncoming tears. I've lost so much water from crying over him that I'm starting to feel dehydrated, and yet it doesn't seem like I've cried enough. The thought of him being gone is unbearable. I never realized that I love him until now, and now it's probably too late to let him know.

I break again, bursting into tears. No one comes to comfort me.

I'm sitting on someone's front porch steps right now. Everything that made up this house is a pile of debris, save for these steps. People aren't really in a panic; mostly they're shocked, horrified, and grieving the loss of their homes. Possibly even members of their families. I haven't heard of any confirmed fatalities, but it's not possible that everyone survived the Frankenstorm. I mean, its nickname practically *stands* for death.

I tried calling my parents several times, but my phone was damaged in the water and doesn't work anymore. I really should try asking around, but my body feels like lead; I can't move. Even if I could, I wouldn't want to. All I want to do is sit here and sob, letting my misery overcome me.

~

"Honey? Honey, wake up." I'm shaken awake by a middle-aged woman. Her face is careworn, and her brow is furrowed in concern. "Honey, you okay?"

"Oh, I'm fabulous," I grumble. "You?"

“Are you Ally Rayes, by any chance?” she asks, completely ignoring my question. The fact that she knows my name alerts me enough to sit up.

“Uh-huh. Why?”

“There’s someone a block or two away who’s been asking for you. He’s got an awful sprained ankle and can’t walk, so I thought I’d try to find you. Nothing else to do,” she huffs. “Anyway, he says his name is Jason?”

“What?” I stand up straight, my eyes opened wide. “He’s not dead?”

“No, honey, he’s going to be fine,” the lady says gently. “Do you know where the Roberts family used to live?”

“Yes!” Without waiting for any confirmation that that’s where Jason is, I run. I speed through the ashen streets as fast as my tired legs will carry me. The streets are still dotted with puddles, so naturally, my feet get soaked- but I don’t care.

The second I round the corner I see Jason’s black hair, easy to spot in contrast with the light-colored sky. He’s sitting on the side of the road next to a giant puddle, looking distressed and bedraggled, but alive. He’s almost too alive to be real.

“Jason!” I holler without stopping. “JASON!” He lifts his head, and his eyes light up when they land on me.

“Ally!” he screams, his voice cracking. He stands and tries to meet me halfway, but his ankle won’t support his weight, and he collapses into the giant puddle. I run even faster.

I fall on my knees in front of him, unable to control my sobbing. His eyes are wet with tears of joy, too. I collapse on him, wrapping my arms around his neck and squeezing as tightly as I can without strangling him. His shirt smells like a mixture of salt and dirt, but it doesn’t matter. I can’t get enough of him. I will never get enough of him.

“You jerk!” I gasp, still clinging to him. “Don’t you ever do that to me ever, ever again!” He laughs and buries his face in my hair.

“I’m sorry,” he apologizes sheepishly. His voice is muffled by my hair.

I pull away from him and stare into his eyes, making sure it's really him and I'm not hallucinating. He traces his fingers all over my face as if he's testing the same theory. Finally convinced, I grab the collar of his shirt and kiss him hard without thinking, allowing myself to be completely enveloped in his strong arms.

I have no idea how long we sit there, but when we finally break apart, neither of us can wipe the smiles off of our faces.

"Love you," I say as casually as possible. Unfortunately, my voice cracks, betraying my true emotions. If it's possible, his grin widens.

"Love you too," he whispers, kissing the wet tip of my nose. After a few moments of just sitting there staring at each other, I break his gaze and look at our decidedly bleak surroundings.

"So what happens now?" I ask.

"We try to forget?" he suggests.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "I don't want to forget."

Jason smiles. "Me neither."

# Chess

## High School Entry

*Leigh Hoover*

Vlad wiped the oil from his fingers on a paper towel and continued working at dismantling the ancient grandfather clock that resided in the living room. All around him, an array of different-sized gears lay in a neat arc, arranged from largest to smallest. He looked at them for a moment, then continued his work unscrewing a particularly greasy set of equipment.

A deafening *BANG* rang out through the house, and Vlad froze, his ears ringing.

The weights had come detached from the mechanism that depended on them. The boy looked down at the resultant damage.

“Curses,” he murmured to himself--and for good reason. As he inspected the splintered and dented cabinet floor, Vlad became distinctly aware of another being’s presence in the room. He already knew who it was without looking up, so instead the boy closed his eyes and sighed.

“Hello, Mother.” He intoned, not without a hint of sheepishness.

“Vladimir Adonis, look at me.”

Vlad hesitantly obeyed, not knowing what exactly he was fearful of; for as long as he could remember, his mother had never been outwardly angry with him, but instead had redirected his curiosity--and resultant destructive energies--elsewhere. These outlets had grown increasingly creative through the years to sate Vlad’s undying search for mental stimulation.

Mother was holding a hinged box with a top of alternating light and dark wooden squares. As she handed it to her son, the contents inside shifted, making a dry scratching sound.

“What’s this?” Vlad answered his own question when he opened the box. Numerous pawns, rooks, knights, bishops, two kings and two queens rested toppled on top of each other in the corner.

“A chess set,” Mother replied, “I want you to find someone who will teach you to play with it. Come back by dinner.” Mother kissed Vlad on the forehead and left the room.

Vlad gazed at the set thoughtfully. He picked up a piece; one of the black knights. The boy glanced back at the dismantled clock, wondering what would happen if he disobeyed Mother, and realizing that he did not really want to find out.

“Well.” He sighed to himself, “Several adults live in this house; it shouldn’t be too hard to find someone who can teach me.”

After thirty minutes of searching, asking, pleading, and then moving on to the next person, Vlad found himself back in the living room, the black knight still in his clenched fist.

He chewed on his lip for several minutes, staring out the window without really seeing what was beyond. Outside and across the street, a small park with several trees, a duck pond, chess tables, and a walking path with a few benches sprawled.

Then it dawned on him.

Vlad had visited the park many times before, but had never thought much of the pairs of people locked in silent struggles at those tables; he had been more intrigued by the intricacies of duck life, and had even befriended a drake and his hen. A bitter, blustery wind that rattled the window frames reminded Vlad that Old Man Winter still had his grip on the city, and consequently the ducks would most likely not be there.

*Just as well*, thought the boy. Distractions were not needed at a time like this. He donned his wool coat, swiped a handful of coins from the swear jar--just in case--and was out the door in a matter of minutes.

Outside, the ferocious roar of car engines was amplified by the chilly air. Steam wafted from their exhaust pipes and made the atmosphere thick with the smell of ozone. Vlad sneezed and pressed the crosswalk button, crossing when the vehicles stopped.

Naked trees twined their stunted, dormant forms into the sky around Vlad as he sat down at one of the chess tables. No one was here today, not even the drake and his hen. Ice laced its hyperborean fingers towards the center of the duck pond, and a cutting wind wound its way through the weave of his coat, chilling him to his bones.

Just as Vlad was about to give up all hope of ever learning chess and go home, he heard a person coughing behind him.

“What’s that ya got there, son?”

Vlad stiffened in surprise and turned around. Before him stood a man wearing several tattered coats that reeked of the city. His beard was matted with dirt and oils, and was collecting condensation from his mouth. His right hand was bound with soiled linen, the other encased in a glove; Vlad noticed the man was missing his left pinky by the way the glove hung limp in its place.

The stranger invited himself to the other end of the table, and sat down with a sigh. Vlad watched him warily.

“If you give me a quarter, I’ll teach you to play chess.”

Vlad narrowed his eyes. “How do I know you aren’t going to make off with my quarter without teaching me a thing?”

This must’ve amused the man, for he burst into a wheezy laugh, which escalated into a wet, rattling cough. “Son,” he uttered after he was done, “you could probably run circles around this old man. I will not steal your quarter.” He raised two fingers “Scout’s honor.”

That was good enough for Vlad, so he dug in his pocket and handed the man a quarter.

“Thank you kindly. Now, here’s how you set up the board. You use the outer-most two rows, and fill the row farthest away from you with pawns.”

Vlad did as he was told, compulsively aligning them to all face the same way. The man did the same with his pieces, only not as neatly.

“Good. Here’s the trickier part, but I think you’ll catch on quick. You look sharp. It goes from left to right: rook, knight, bishop, queen, king, bishop, knight, and rook.”

“Which one is the rook, and which one is the bishop?” Vlad asked furrowing his brows.

“This guy,” the man held up what appeared to be a miniature version of a castle’s bartizan, “is a rook. The two with knobs on the top are bishops.”

Vlad nodded and set up his board while the man did the same.

The man went through all the movements of the board pieces, then urged Vlad to make a move. He decided to move a pawn first, and did so tentatively.

A few turns later, the man chuckled and leaned back. “Check mate.”

Vlad was astounded. “How did you,” he paused, still in shock, “how did you *do* that?”

His opponent chuckled again. “I won’t count that against you. Think of it as a pretest. Here, set up the pieces again and I’ll show you an easy strategy.”

Again they played, and again Vlad was beaten.

“How in the world did that teach me anything?” Vlad demanded, becoming frustrated.

“Be patient, because believe it or not, I just taught you something: to think on your feet. Planned moves don’t always work.” The man set up his side of the board while Vlad fumed.

By now, the bleak winter sky was darkening and turning vibrant hues of pink and orange. Vlad looked westward towards the setting sun. “I have to go. My mother wanted me back by dinner.” He looked back towards the man. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

“Only if you want to learn.”

Vlad nodded his agreement and cleaned up the set. As he made his way towards the crosswalk, he remembered his manners and turned to wave goodbye to his tutor.

The man was gone.

The days turned to weeks, the weather warmed, and Vlad continued with his ritual of meeting his tutor at the same table every day at five o’clock. Every day the man was waiting for him, and every day Vlad had a quarter; sometimes sneaked from the swear jar, sometimes from under a couch cushion. They had an understanding--one that Vlad never quite remembered agreeing to--of not asking the other any questions that did not pertain to chess.

Vlad walked across the street and met the man again, greeting him with the usual “hello”.

The man merely nodded back--as had become customary between the two--but then coughed violently into the crook of his elbow. When he looked up at Vlad, the sleeve of his outermost jacket was wet with blood. The boy noticed his chess partner was more pallid than usual, with dark circles under his eyes.

“Are you alright?” Vlad asked, concerned.

The man looked at him, and Vlad caught a hint of emotion in his eyes that hadn't been there all the times before. He didn't answer, so the boy did his best to shrug it off and sat down to begin their normal round.

But this time, it was different.

About ten minutes later, Vlad blinked in surprise and moved his knight before the man's king. "Ch-check mate," he said, astounded. Unable to believe it, he narrowed his eyes at the man. "You let me win."

The man shook his head. "If I were to do that, I wouldn't have let it drag on for that long. I gave it my all and so did you. And now we know who the better man is." He smiled, but his weathered face looked sad.

Vlad left for the night and ate his dinner in silence, trying to think of the match; but he could only think of the man's eyes. He pondered it into the early hours before dawn, his gaze almost burning holes into the ceiling from its intensity. It was almost time for him to prepare for school--6 o'clock in the morning--when the right words for what he saw came to him.

It wasn't completely fear, no, there was a certain calmness to it, almost like acceptance--but not quite.

It was resignation to the inevitable.

*But what was the inevitable he was resigning himself to?*

That question plagued Vlad throughout the day; always biting at the back of his mind should his thoughts wander elsewhere for even a moment.

Something was different about the man when Vlad approached him. His whole demeanor had shifted to something a lot more sullen. Again, Vlad attempted to ignore it, setting the chess set down on the table before them.

The boy handed him their customary quarter, and they began to play.

Five minutes later, Vlad surprised himself again. "Check mate," he croaked--he was close to tears and not completely sure why--as he looked up at the man he had come to look forward to meeting.

The man gazed back, and there it was again: resignation. He coughed and sputtered a bit, taking a greasy paper bag out of the inside pocket of one of his jackets. "Here," he muttered, "I want you to have this."

Vlad cocked his head and cautiously took the bag. "What's this?"

"Look inside."

Vlad had a lump in his throat that swelled when he saw the bag's contents.

Quarters.

Vlad looked up as the man rose to his feet.

The man met his stare. "You taught me much more than I taught you. It just felt wrong to spend 'em when I owe you much more. You gave an old man something to look forward to, and I'm sure that will come back in your favor sooner or later. Well, son, goodbye." He nodded again and lumbered stiffly off.

"W-wait!" Vlad started to run after him, but something made him stop in his tracks, turn around, and

clean up his chess set.

He looked back, but the man was gone.

# **A Brief Excursion into Madness**

**High School Entry**

*Iris Hyon*

Ivy Waldorf was a firm believer of books. She cherished them as her portals to worlds beyond reality; as she read, Ivy envisioned herself crossing a threshold to universes crafted carefully by the imaginations of authors. Ivy likened reading a fantastic book to opening a wardrobe, falling out through the back of it, and leaving the often mundane reality behind for fantasy, adventure, romance, and the singular satisfaction that results from the completion of an exceptional novel. While the Pevensies discovered but one wardrobe (though to be fair, it *did* lead to Narnia), Ivy concocted a “wardrobe” for each of her beloved books. She would eagerly dash through the medium of her choice and spend a few hours with her friends—whether they are Ramona and Beezus or Huck Finn and Jim—and reluctantly return, exhilarated from their escapades.

Despite the emergence of handy reading tablets and nooks, Ivy remained steadfast in her love for books printed on paper. That’s not to say that she actively resisted using technology—she was, after all, a sixteen-year-old girl living in the twenty-first century. There was simply *something* intangible about cracking open a book that no current or future technology could even remotely compete with.

Our heroine was indulging in this simple pleasure after suffering through a taxing day at school. Ivy was feeling especially dreadful after blundering her way through several confounding tests, forgetting her lunch, and just barely tolerating the obnoxious screeching freshmen on the bus ride home. It was a frigid autumn afternoon as she struggled home against the wailing wind, her hair whipping across her face and her eyes watering from the piercing gusts; to top it all off, she had forgotten her house keys and was consequently forced to shiver impatiently on her steps, the chill of the concrete gradually seeping through her jeans until she couldn’t feel her rear end. When her brother finally sauntered up the driveway, waving his keys mockingly with a crooked grin, it took all of her remaining patience to restrain herself from smacking him.

It was with good reason, then, that Ivy felt that she had never been so glad to be home. After plucking *Anne of Green Gables* off her bookshelf along with a fuzzy blanket, Ivy settled herself on the window seat and toed off her boots with a groan of relief. A small smile began to form on her face as she peeled open her dog-eared copy and silently relished in the crinkling of the pages. She inhaled deeply, breathing in the musty, vanilla-scented moment and squirmed to get more comfortable on her perch, the muted sunlight filtering in through the window. As voices from the television began to strike up a muffled conversation down the hallway, Ivy cast her eyes down to the worn pages and began to read: “*Mrs. Rachel Lynde lived just where the Avonlea main road dipped down into a little hollow . . .* (Montgomery 1)”.

Her eyes drooping languidly, Ivy began nodding off as her hand fell from her lap and the book tumbled

onto the floor with a muted thump. She could hear the strains of faint laughter emanating from the television and glimpsed the mosaic of colorful leaves on her front lawn before her eyes slid shut completely.

When she opened them, she didn't immediately register where she was. With a start, she realized she was lying in a bed that was completely unfamiliar to her. Ivy sprang up in fear and shook off her sleepy haze, her eyes wide and her mind racing frantically as she struggled to recall if she had ever gone to bed. Looking down at her own attire for the first time since she awoke in the strange room, she tugged at the modest white nightgown in utter bafflement. *Where was she?*

Light footsteps sounded from outside her door, and as they came closer Ivy reflexively grabbed a pillow and clutched it in front of her as she waited tensely. Exactly how the pillow was supposed to defend her was a mystery, but luckily for our heroine she never had to solve that particular puzzle. For Anne Shirley had entered the room, bestowing a blinding smile upon an increasingly bewildered Ivy.

"Ivy! How did you like the spare room? I'm incredibly jealous, of course—I've always wanted to sleep in one," Anne sighed as she looked at Ivy with earnest gray-green eyes. "I'm sorry if I barged in on you before you were ready, but Marilla and Matthew were beginning to worry something had happened. They're waiting downstairs for you and Diana, who is just *dying* to meet you—I know you two will get along just splendidly," trilled Anne enthusiastically, clasping her hands dreamily.

Ivy positively gawked. She opened her mouth to say something and, discovering that her brain had provided nothing, closed it again. Anne didn't seem to notice anything unusual and all but flew across the room to link arms with Ivy and escort her downstairs. As Anne deluged Ivy with chatter about the White Way of Delight, the detestable Josie Pye, and the new minister's wife, Mrs. Allen, Ivy concluded that she was either dreaming or going insane from school-related stress. In any case, she was not one to waste an opportunity to interact with one of her favorite fictional characters.

"What about Gilbert Blythe?" intervened Ivy with a sly grin after Anne had finally paused in her monologue to take a breath.

Anne stiffened and sniffed derisively, her much-admired nose crinkling with distaste.

"What about Gil—him?" she inquired haughtily.

"Well, I thought that maybe you'd have gotten over your grudge by now. You two would be great friends," Ivy shrugged simply. Anne scoffed and, with a toss of her auburn braids, dismissed the subject. She

imparted Mrs. Stacy's latest gem of wisdom to Ivy as the pair entered the kitchen and greeted Marilla and Matthew cheerily. Ivy skipped to answer a knock at the door, which swung back to reveal a beaming Diana. Ivy's answering smile faltered as she looked over Diana's raven hair to see the Hogwarts castle looming impressively in the distance.

She stepped around Diana in dumbstruck silence, ignoring Anne's confused queries as to where she was going. Ivy strode eagerly toward the castle but was stopped short by a sight that left our typically verbose heroine speechless yet again. Surrounding her were the back exits of all her "wardrobes": Hogwarts castle, the March household (*Little Women*), 221B Baker Street, Camp Half-Blood (*Percy Jackson*), Pemberley, the Capitol (*Hunger Games*), and countless other settings that she cherished.

Giggling madly, she ran toward the Hogwarts castle. As she approached the castle, it grew as the other settings shrank to make room for the massive school. Ivy waved giddily to Hagrid and couldn't contain an incredulous laugh as he and Fang enthusiastically returned the greeting. Ivy spotted Harry, Ron, and Hermione trekking to the quidditch pitch and ran to intercept them.

"Oi, Ivy! Tell Ron he's being completely daft—he won't listen to me," Harry teased.

"Ron, you're being completely daft," Ivy said with a wink at Harry.

"The Chudley Cannons *are* gonna win their division this year, I'm telling you!" insisted Ron loudly. "I know that sounds crazy but I'm absolutely sure of it," Ron finished defiantly.

Hermione rolled her eyes and brushed a bit of frizzy hair out of her face.

"Anyway, I think you two should stop worrying so much about quidditch and start studying for your OWLs. They're only seven months away," Hermione warned. The boys groaned in unison.

"Bloody hell, Hermione! It is way too early to be thinking about that," Ron exclaimed indignantly. As the two began to argue heatedly, Harry and Ivy looked on in amusement. Ivy made to interject and suggest they just go fly on the pitch when someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned and came face to face with Percy Jackson and Annabeth Chase.

"Ivy, what are you doing? We have to go kill Kronos or he'll destroy Olympus! And if Olympus goes down, we go down," Percy shouted as he brandished his sword.

"Calm down, Seaweed Brain. We've got this, okay?" Annabeth soothed. "Ivy, what are you doing? Come on!"

"What? I don't—"

"Ivy, why are you out here? And who are these people? We have a church picnic to get to and they're

going to be serving *ice cream*. We can't miss it!"

"I don't know—"

Suddenly, all the characters began moving closer and closer to Ivy, all beseeching her to come with them right away. As each character tried to be heard over the others, the din grew louder and more chaotic until Ivy couldn't distinguish what anyone was saying any more. She saw Katniss smack Sherlock Holmes with her arrow, Elizabeth Bennet stomp on Harry's foot, and Jo March elbow Atticus Finch in the eye as they formed a tighter and tighter ring around Ivy. She couldn't breathe or think or feel her arms as they pushed closer and closer and the noise grew unbearably loud until she closed her eyes and screamed for everyone to stop talking—

Instantaneously, it went silent. Ivy stood with her eyes clenched for a few seconds, and then cautiously cracked one open at a time. All the characters had vanished along with their fictional universes, leaving nothing physical behind. There was no way to tell what was up or down or right or left—just blinding, never-ending whiteness. Ivy rather thought she understood what Ishmael meant about white being frightening.

She turned her head to the sound of clicking heels and saw a familiar figure approaching her.

"D-Dumbledore?"

Ivy wondered in the back of her head if this dream—or whatever she was experiencing—could get any *weirder*.

The headmaster smiled kindly at her, his blue eyes twinkling merrily behind his half-moon spectacles.

"Um, where am I? And *what* is happening?"

Dumbledore merely smiled at her, stroking his long beard meditatively. Ivy found herself growing irritated with his benign silence.

"Is this happening inside my head? Are you real? Was any of this real?"

Dumbledore opened his mouth but his figure began to fade as though he and this entire bizarre hallucination were melting away.

"Of course it is happening inside your head, Ivy, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" (Rowling 723).

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# **Opportunity**

## **High School Entry**

*Kathryn Vanek*

Nine dollars. Nine dollars lie motionless at the bottom of my bucket. The strangers milling by have become a blur, and their voices rise up to the high ceilings without forming sensible conversations. I pull my knit cap down over my ears, but it doesn't do anything to soothe the numbing pain spreading further through my extremities. My ears, nose, fingers and toes have slowly succumbed to the cold air rushing through the subway tunnels. I endlessly strum my fingertips across my guitar strings, trying to hone in on the serene riffs I create. An oncoming train rumbles the floor beneath my feet, and I take the opportunity of the deafening roar to rest my weary fingers and take a drink from the bottle of water sitting at my feet. I tilt my head back and wince as the frigid water brings my throat to the outside temperature. My tired hands shake as I try and steady the bottle against my lips.

Now the train has passed, so I wearily pick up my guitar and start playing again. A small boy breaks away from his mother's grasp to drop a quarter into my bucket. It makes a soft clink as it hits the bottom, and he flashes me a shy smile. I give him a friendly tilt of my head, and he hurries off when his mother calls out to him. I've made nine dollars and twenty-five cents in four hours. I can't go on like this. I dive into another song, this one a little more melancholy. I mindlessly strum my chords, A, G, A, E minor. Suddenly, I notice a figure scuttle out from behind one of the pillars. I glance up from my strings and see a man, obviously homeless, kneeling at my feet.

His hair is long and greasy, and I notice a wrapper for a candy bar stuck to the ends of one of the strands. He has a straggly beard sprouting from his chin, and his dull eyes look up at me. I see the desperation hidden behind his dark pupils. I look down at my small bucket with my entire day's worth of earnings sitting earnestly in the bottom. The man clasps his hands together and bows at my feet. I slowly set my guitar down. My head and my morals, and my stomach twisted in hunger, all press against me, threatening to burst me open. I reach towards my bucket and then pull my hand away. I can't afford to give this man my money. These nine dollars and twenty-five cents may be all I have for the next two days. I, like the man, have no home. I am currently living with my best friend, who supports me as much as she can. I live only off what I can earn from my guitar, which averages about a hundred dollars a week.

I have a flashback of my childhood. It is summer, and I'm walking down a busy New York street, my hand sweating in my dad's gentle grasp. The sun beats down, and heat shimmers off the top of cars and pavement. The noise of a busy city clouds the stuffy air, and I cough as I pass a cluster of women smoking. My dad has stopped walking and I accidentally bump into him. He silently points out a scene that will be forever imprinted in my memory. A small child, probably around my age, sits cross-legged over an air vent.

His torn shirt plumps up around him as the powerful air rushes past his scrawny body. Sweat glistens on his forehead and upper lip, and he wipes his face with the dirty rag fluttering next to him. He clings to a grubby cup, gently offering it to all the passers-by. His dirty brown hair is matted and the tips stick to his face and neck with sweat.

My dad reaches into his pocket and pulls out a twenty-dollar bill. He hands it to me and raises his eyebrows. I walk up to the boy and shyly drop the money into his cup. His eyes grow huge and I see them start to shine in the harsh afternoon light. He delicately sets the cup down and stands up. He is just about my height, and his skinny arms cautiously reach around me. I get nervous and turn my head around to see my father's reaction. His arms are folded and he has a sad smile on his face. He gives me a small nod, and I so slowly return the boy's hug. When I pull away I see tears brimming in the boy's eyes, and he mouths a silent 'thank you.' That image, of a boy so desperately thankful for a mere twenty dollars, is forever burned into my memory.

That image is now swirling through my head as the man begs at my feet. I see the same humiliated pain emanating from this man as I saw in the young boy. So I swallow my hunger, my worries, my own problems, and I hand him the entire contents of my bucket. I even hand over the quarter. The man shakily accepts the money, gives me another gracious bow, and stands up. He looks me straight in the eyes and I get the strange feeling that I'm being analyzed. Without breaking my eye contact, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small folded piece of paper. He silently reaches down and slips the paper into my bucket. He stands back up, raises a finger to his lips, and winks at me. Then he turns away and seems to melt into the rush of the people exiting the nearest subway train.

So there I stand, having just exchanged my days work for a tiny slip of folded paper. I have a strange sensation of pride for sticking to my morals, but fear of what that will mean for me. Conflicted and frowning, I snatch the paper resting in my bucket. I scan the crowd for signs of the mysterious man, but can't find him. I place my now empty bucket on the ground next to my guitar and carefully unfold the paper.

I can't believe it. I feel dizzy. It's a check. And not just any check. I can make out a one, but the long line of zeros following it has become a blur. Two zeros become three. Three turn to four. I flip my bucket over and sit down. Resting my elbows on my knees, I take a deep breath, and re-read the check. Ten thousand dollars. Ten thousand dollars is scrawled onto a measly slip of paper. Because I had given up all I had, nine dollars and twenty-five cents, my life will be changed forever, changed in a way I could never imagine a random act of kindness could do.

# **Magnum Decisionem (“The Great Decision”)**

**High School Entry**

*Zachary Wood*

**Tuesday, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

I hate Tuesdays. Yeah, right, I know that's ripping Garfield off, but I think it suits me better. After all, Garfield has it easy. He just lounges around the house doing nothing. I get to help build the American economy. Let me explain why I'm writing this. My wife, Susan, said that because I would be gone for work, she wanted me to keep a journal of my day, so that every day she gets a new report, and when I get home, I can tell her just how my days went. I think the idea is silly, but I'll go along with it. After all, she's the one putting up with my job, and the frequent trips it requires. This quarter I'm working on a 5<sup>th</sup> gen, deep-water, dynamically positioned, column-stabilized, semi-submersible unit. Otherwise, it's known as a 9-year-old piece of junk.

Back to my day. So, after setting up my bunk area, and connecting my laptop to the Wi-Fi to sync my fascinating journal entries, I was shown around by my new boss, Sean Powell. He's about 5'11", with salt and pepper hair, blue eyes, and dresses in clothes that are too upscale for the environment. He seems ok, but likes things to stay on schedule, which may not go over too well if we have any delays. The derrick is a bit of a mess, though. It seems like Powell's obsession about efficiency may be bypassing some inconvenient protocols.

I can't wait to see Susan again. When I'm with her, it's like nothing else matters. The rest of the world fades to grey, and she is the color. I get a few weeks leave at the end of April, and can go back to our house in Gulfport. I also miss our daughter, Jenny. If Susan is the color, Jenny is the light. They are probably in the townhouse, finger painting, or maybe drawing with crayons. I'll bring Jenny some new art supplies, maybe an easel, or new paints and markers. Susan has been wanting to redecorate, and a Bed, Bath, and Beyond gift card would certainly bring her some time to work on the art form she enjoys.

During my tour, I also met some of the workers here. There is Aaron Bryant, who has worked for Transocean for over 10 years, and is about 4'10, David Bell, who apparently hates his job but doesn't quit, and is quite tall, and Carl Powell, who looks like his father, and is following his example, and spending his life isolated from the rest of the world. I wonder why David doesn't quit. I mean, there are other similar jobs, like fracking, that don't require such commitment, and that pay better. What other answers don't I know?

The ocean looks beautiful from here. Water as far as the eye can see. The sky is turning grey in the south though. Maybe it will rain tomorrow. Yuck. Rain is very nice to look at from inside a car or inside a house, but ugly when you're in it. Our house gets lots of rain, and hurricanes don't help with staying dry, either. When

Katrina hit, several homes in our neighborhood were destroyed. This was before our subdivision was built, though.

### Wednesday, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010- Morning

This morning I didn't get coffee. Now, without coffee, I am not quite myself; maybe it's purely psychological, but coffee just keeps me happy. I came into the mess area, and the cook, Benjamin, told me that they are expecting food and other supplies later today. Great. First day, no coffee. I did have concentrated OJ, and some scrambled eggs.

The food area has a pretty limited selection. There's a red Douwe Egbert's coffee machine (out of coffee), an OJ/apple juice machine that only has OJ, a beat-up stainless steel toaster, an Amana Industrial microwave, a GE mini-fridge full of milk cartons, bread, jam, margarine, boxes of cereal, and the other usual culprits. After breakfast, I started to work on the rig. This is one of the deepest ones that I have worked on. Sean wished me luck, and reminded me to try to stay on schedule. Aaron seems to have everything down pat. The piping, the sand, the cement, he handles all of it with apparent ease. He gave me some pointers as to how to run most of the machines. I learned this in training, of course, but each machine has a "soul," so to speak, where it seems to have different ideas as to how it should be operated. All machines are like that- Cars, toaster ovens, drills, and bulldozers.

David doesn't work like Aaron. He likes to get stuff done as easily and quickly as possible. He will work the machines hard, saving a few seconds now and losing time repairing them later. I guess that attitude makes Sean happy, but I don't like it as much. After all, when an employer looks at a record of holdups per person, I'd say David is either going to have some explaining to do, or need to locate a new line of work. Sean kept encouraging us to work efficiently, which was irritating. I *know* we need to work quickly; we're behind schedule. I sometimes used to work like David in school. My English teacher, Mrs. Turner, would hand the class quite a lot of large & difficult homework assignments. I would just try to get them all done with as little effort, creativity, or used time on my part as possible. Once, she gave the class an assignment to write a 5,000-word short story in one week. Around word 1,100, I started trying to fit in as many words as possible. I didn't really care whether my writing had any influence on the storyline at all, or if it was just random, sarcastic tangents that were designed to take up as many words as possible, to complete the assignment.

Anyway, David is a talker. Not only that, but he's a complainer. Mixing the traits creates an obnoxious, tiresome

person to work with. He complains about seemingly everything. The lack of coffee (I agree with him on that one note), the surely bad upcoming weather, his childhood cat, the concrete not flowing quickly enough, and, of course, how machines seem to hate him, because he's the only one they break on. He went on with this chatter until I put my OSHA-approved earplugs in, which then effectively ended the monologue.

## Later

I forgot to write about Carl Powell. I guess that I don't really notice him, except one thing about him makes me notice him. He's not noticeable. He is always doing his job properly, never spends too much break time, or socializes with others unless approached. I don't know, maybe he's shy. Alternatively, he could be antisocial or starting to crack from the lack of outside contact. I'm going to keep an eye on him.

We're getting close, everyone says. Personally, I think that the Macondo Prospect is not worth the time, but that's just me. Sean says it is, though, and as long as I get my paycheck, I don't really care that much. After all, if Sean's right, both the US and Transocean will be happy.

Susan sent me an email. *"Hey, I got your Tuesday entry. I'm glad that you are enjoying the view of the ocean. You think that Bell is an undercover government agent or something? Sweetie, you need to relax. I hope it doesn't rain. Jenny is working on learning to ride her tricycle. We both miss you a lot. Be safe! Susan"* I miss her so much.

After I work here for another couple of years, maybe I'll transfer to Texas, and work for Conoco-Phillips. Susan would probably like an actual house, and some land. My having to take longer than 10 minutes to mow the lawn would be nice. Eventually getting Jenny an ATV would also be fun. Actually, they are too dangerous. A UTV, with seatbelts and a safety cage, would be safer, and a friend could ride with her. Susan too, could use some wheels. Maybe we can trade her Civic for one of those new Hyundai's- the Azera, I think; they are supposed to be good family cars.

I don't know how much writing I'll be able to do over the next few days; work is pretty time consuming. Carl is apparently a super-cautious worker, always pausing to inspect his work, always double-checking for the proper procedure. I bet his cautiousness causes some family tensions, what with his father insisting on the greatest efficiency possible. I suppose that Carl and his father just have different work methods. Sean likes to save time and money by going as quickly as possible, whereas Carl tries to do the best job possible.

**Friday, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

Good news! We are definitely on the right track, because all the signs are there. I really hope that the work goes quickly, that way I can go home faster. Bad news: Sean and David got into an argument today, over David's dropping some cement pallets into the ocean by accident. Yeah, right. *"Oh, I was just driving the forklift when WHAM! Out of nowhere, the wall was right there! Who designed this stupid rig anyway!? I wouldn't design it with a wall there."* A wall at the edge of the platform, imagine. At least we have enough to complete the job, if we thin the mixture. Carl is a little concerned about the density and it's relation to the strength of the concrete, but Aaron said it should be fine, which soothed him. The rest of the entries I'll try to do every other day.

A very random subject: Why do we not drink tea around noon? I went to the cafeteria looking for something caffeinated (still no coffee), and asked for tea. The cook looked at me as if I was nuts. I explained that the lack of coffee was messing with me, and that I wanted a hot drink, which could make me more alert. The cook gave me caffeine tablets, and hot water. He explained that tea is served at breakfast only. I asked why not always, and he said, "This is 'merica, not England, bud." Humph. I'll just have to suffer through.

**Sunday, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

I got another email from Susan. She said how she thought my Texas ranch idea was sweet, and that Jenny wants the UTV now. Susan took her to the store, and asked how she would drive it if she couldn't reach the pedals. In response, Jenny stood up, with her feet on the pedals, and her hands just reaching the wheel. The picture she sent is so adorable; I wish I could include it. Susan is excited we may be finishing soon, and that we can see each other. She suggested going to the Chuck E. Cheese's on Crossroads Parkway to celebrate my return. Frozen, then microwaved pizza, and watered down soft drinks. I couldn't possibly want a better reunion dinner. Jenny loves Chuck E. Cheese, and I love making Jenny happy.

I had my first real conversation with Carl early this morning. He's secretly a nervous wreck. You know, like one of those little dogs that you can't help but pity, because cats beat them up. Apparently, there are problems with the rig. Carl said that the blowout preventer may be damaged, the generators don't have automatic combustion inlet shutdown valves, and that a kill switch is broken. He said that he didn't tell his father because employees that complain typically are fired. I wonder if I should tell Sean of his son's concerns. I'll have to think about it; after all, I don't want to lose my job.

Tuesday, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010

We are nearly done. I can take leave after we're done here, and visit Susan and Jenny. Maybe I'll transfer to Conoco-Phillips now, and not wait for two more years. That way I could be there for Jenny every evening, every birthday, and every school play that there is. I could be a better husband, be there for Susan on each anniversary, Mother's Day, movie night, and weekend. Maybe I'll do just that. I'll work the night shift for operation of the equipment.

I decided not to tell Sean. He probably already knows about the issues, and we're going to be done soon anyway. The *Deepwater Horizon* has more exploration to do, even if I'm not on it. After all, the ocean is a big place.

**“(CNN)** -- A 1-by-5-mile sheen of crude oil mix has spread across the Gulf of Mexico's surface around the area where an oil rig exploded and sank, a Coast Guard lieutenant said Thursday. *Officials do not know whether oil or fuel is leaking from the sunken Deepwater Horizon rig and the well below, but BP Vice President David Rainey said, “It certainly has the potential to be a major spill.” Meanwhile, the Coast Guard continued to search for 11 people missing after an explosion late Tuesday set the rig ablaze forcing workers to be evacuated from the vessel. Adrian Rose, a vice president for rig owner Transocean Ltd, told reporters that the missing workers might not have been able to get off the rig. “Based upon our reports from crew workers we met as they came in last night, they believe that they may have been on board the rig and not able to evacuate. We have not confirmed that yet,” he said. The mobile rig was about 52 miles southeast of Venice, Louisiana, when the explosion occurred Tuesday night.*”

Note: Though edited, the CNN article is real- <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/04/22/oil.rig.explosion/index.html>