

It's All



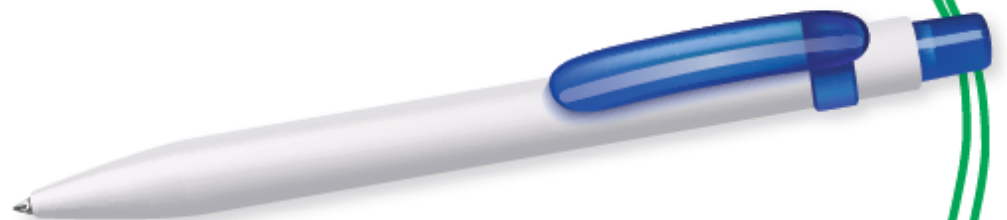
WRITE

Short Story Writing Contest for Teens

MIDDLE AND
HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS



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These stories are included in their original format and text,
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A special thank you to the author who ranked this year's winning stories.



Photo by Elizabeth Moon

Olivia Hinebaugh is a multi-talented author, actor, illustrator, musician and so much more. Check out her debut YA novel *The Birds, The Bees and You And Me*.

A special thank you to our keynote speaker at this year's It's All Write Awards Ceremony.



Photo by Hannah Bjorndal

Christina June writes fiction for kids and teens when she's not writing college recommendation letters during her day job as a school counselor. She loves the little moments in life that help someone discover who they're meant to become – whether it's her students or her characters.

Christina is a voracious reader, loves to travel, and hopes to one day be bicoastal – the east coast of the U.S. and the east coast of Scotland. She lives in Virginia with her husband, daughter, and Boston Terrier, Winnie Cooper.

Christina is the author of *It Started With Goodbye*, *Everywhere You Want to Be*, and *No Place Like Here*.

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MIDDLE SCHOOL WINNERS

First Place: Strangeday

By Norah McCormick

“Where did we come from again?” Oren put his feet up on the truck’s dashboard and took a swig of lukewarm soda.

“I remember a city,” Adonis said softly, “And I remember a disaster. Maybe a hurricane, maybe a war. Does it matter?”

“I guess not.” Oren gazed out through the windshield towards the setting sun, an angry red bruise on the horizon. Adonis also remembered a plague and a fire, the squares of glass and metal whose low blue light haunted every darkened window.

Those were gone now. Adonis hadn’t mentioned them since.

“Is everyone alright back there?” He called, swiveling to face the back seat, where two more passengers lounged in silence.

“Just bored,” was the languid reply, “That’s all. You’re sure we’re really headed *somewhere* now, not just more ruins like the past decade we’ve spent scrambling all over the continent?”

“Lei, I promise if there’s no one there, we’re the last living people on the planet,” Adonis returned sharply. “And unlike you, I’m old enough to remember the place.” Rummaging through the glove compartment, he found the tattered atlas he’d been using to navigate. “Ahem. Nightfall is coming, fast. Oren, I’d strongly recommend we get our butts on the road before we lose light.”

“Oren this, Oren that, Oren drive us places or we’re all going to die horribly right this instant,” The boy in the driver’s seat snarked, yawning theatrically. “Whatever you say, Adonis.”

“He’s right, Oren. The last four times Adonis has told you to get a move on, you’ve put on the skids and gotten us stuck in a reality storm.” An irritated voice piped up from behind Adonis.

“Thank you, Sun. See? I’m right.” Adonis protested, folding his arms expectantly. “Look. We’re all just trying to find other people, assuming they still exist. The last thing we want is another near-death experience on a Strangeday.”

Oren sighed and stomped on the gas pedal. The truck lurched forward with a jarring *bump*.

Adonis stared out the window absently. Sun was right: he could feel a reality storm brewing. Since a time he could barely remember-- the time of cities and families and relative safety-- there had been Strangedays, nightmarish projections of reality where (like a fever-dream) anything could happen: but (unlike a fever-dream) their effects were always permanent. Oren’s hair was still a perky shade of bubblegum pink from a Strangeday long ago. Lei had lost a finger, and Sun had lost a tooth. Adonis did his best to navigate the Strange realities, but there was only so much he could predict.

“Stop,” Adonis said suddenly, noticing an odd sign by the side of the road. “Back up.” Oren rolled his eyes, but begrudgingly obeyed.

“Rules of the Road,” Sun read aloud. “There are rules to this road?” Adonis’ heart sank.

“Oren, where’s the compass?”

The pink-haired boy fished the black camping compass out of his coat pockets and groaned. “Oh, splendid. Look.”

Adonis watched the needle grimly as it spun erratically in Oren’s palm. “Strangeday. Erm, Strangenight? Either way, if there’s one thing about Strangedays...”

“If they give you rules, you follow them.” Lei finished the sentence, rubbing her temples in resignation. “Oren, we could have avoided this one if you’d gotten off the road sooner.”

Oren shrugged and tossed his soda bottle, now empty, out the window. “Chances are it would have gotten us anyway. Besides, what’s another Strangeday to four kids in a stolen truck-” he slapped the steering wheel emphatically, “full of a century’s worth of salvaged junk?”

“It’s another opportunity for us all to die, for one,” Sun hissed, driving her knee into the back of his seat.

“Besides, stealing doesn’t count if the owner is dead,” Lei added wisely. “Guys. We’ll be fine,” Adonis reassured them weakly. “Sun, read those rules before we lose daylight completely.”

“Sure-can-do. One: stay on the road at all times. If it becomes necessary to rest, pull over and lock your vehicle.” Sun announced. “That sounds fairly normal. Maybe it’s a milder reality storm than usual.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Adonis warned. “Keep reading.”

“Two: if you are to encounter an unmapped fork in the road, always take the path furthest to the left. Up to eight other side roads may appear. Adonis, do you have the atlas?”

“It’s right here,” Adonis said, patting the book on his lap.

“Three: do not attempt to turn back and retrace your route.” Sun gulped. “That’s a little ominous. Are you sure we don’t want to sit tight and wait here until morning? It said we can do that if we lock the truck.”

Adonis shook his head. “Our last hope is just ahead. The faster we can get there, the better.”

“Four: if you encounter any traffic signals while driving, you must obey them. A key is included below. Oh boy, these are getting weirder.”

“Green traffic light: Proceed as normal. It may be best to turn on your headlights.”

“Yellow traffic light: Proceed very slowly. Do not exceed 13.9 miles per hour.” “Red traffic light: Do not proceed. Tune your radio to Channel 82.7. If any song by the Beatles or ABBA begins to play, honk until the light turns green. If classical music begins to play--” Sun produced a subtle *oh!* “--it says to hide under the seats and pray for your life.”

Sun paused. No one spoke for a while.

“Blue or Violet traffic light: accelerate. That’s all it says.” Sun finished, slumping against the back of her seat.

“Just four rules?” Lei said hopefully.

“No, just five lights. Rule five: do not take the toll road.” Sun leaned forward and squinted at the sign. “Ugh, it’s getting dark fast. Six: do not allow all lights in your vehicle to be turned off at any given time. Seven: if you hear a scream from somewhere off the road, roll down the windows and scream back.” She giggled. “That one’s fun. Eight: if you encounter a group of hunters in camouflage attire, exit your vehicle and ask for directions. Trust information only from the violet-skinned humanoid about-- whoa!-- two and a half meters tall. Isn’t that like 9 feet? He will lead you to safer destinations. If he is not present, re-enter your vehicle and drive away.”

Lei chuckled a pencil at Oren’s head. “Thanks for the pencil, doofus. I wrote all the rules down in case we need them.”

Oren caught the pencil and glared at it. “Lei, I was looking for that!”

Adonis sighed. “Alright, alright. Turn the headlights on, Oren. If we can navigate out of this storm, we might never have to face another one alone.”

Lei whistled in admiration. “Imagine.” Oren scoffed, but his eyes were shining.

The sky was pitch black and filled with fireflies that shone the same crimson red as the setting sun. One landed on the outside of the window closest to Sun, and she tapped the glass to scare it off. Oren turned on the truck’s headlights, then the high-beam headlights. His eyes stared straight ahead, frozen in steely focus. Nobody spoke for what felt like a long time.

Then Sun shifted restlessly in her seat. “This is giving me the heebie-jeebies. Adonis, tell us a story or something. Not about Strangedays, please, unless it’s the one about Oren’s hair again.”

Adonis chuckled. “That *was* funny. If it would help lighten the mood...” Oren grunted. “I hate that story.”

Sun giggled. “That’s why we like it.”

Adonis caught something out of the corner of his eye. “Oren, hit the brakes.” “Why should-- oh.” The truck lurched to a halt, revealing in its headlights seven identical branches of the road, each disappearing into a different section of a thick forest.

“The map doesn’t show a fork in the road here,” Adonis said in a low voice. “Lei?”

There was a rustling of papers as Lei searched for her copy of the Rules sign. “It says to take the path on the far left.”

“Simple enough,” Oren mumbled, knuckles visibly white against the steering wheel. Hesitantly, he turned the truck towards the leftmost branch and crawled down the road slowly enough to count every passing tree. All four travelers held their breath. Sun took hold of Adonis’ hand and squeezed it.

Oren exhaled in relief and eased back to a normal speed. “Not to jinx it, but... that could have been a lot worse.”

Adonis nodded gingerly. “Let’s hope the rest of the Strangeday goes like that. It’s not impossible; remember that one years ago where the only oddity was the giant squirrels?”

Lei snorted. "Yeah, Oren was totally expecting the worst."

"No comment." Oren stared out at the road and drove wordlessly while the others revisited the tales of past Strangedays. The chorus of crickets became louder as they drove on, so gradually that Adonis didn't realize until they drowned out the hum of the truck's engine.

"These fireflies are kind of nifty," Sun mused. "Bright red. Is it just me, or is that one bigger than the rest? It's not moving much, either."

Oren swore under his breath. "That's not a firefly, it's a *traffic light*. Adonis, please tell me my vision is worse than I think it is."

Adonis shook his head. "No, that's definitely not a firefly."

Without missing a beat, Lei flipped through her notes. "Somebody tune the radio. Adonis, you have long arms. Find channel 82.7."

Hands shaking slightly, Adonis found the dials of the radio and fiddled with the controls until the correct number appeared. At first there was only, then a couple scattered notes, then...

Oren's hands released the steering wheel. "Good, sweet mother of biscuits," he wavered, "It's playing Beethoven."

"Hide!" Lei barked and whacked him over the head, forcing him under the cover of the seat. Adonis ducked, tucking himself in the space between the glove compartment and the floor. Oren, who was larger, shifted himself mid-fall and landed on the brake pedal instead of the gas.

All of a sudden, the crickets became deafeningly loud. The red fireflies swarmed the traffic light, simulating the effect of a miniature scarlet sun. Sun produced a strangled whimper.

Then there was a *crash* that broke the windshield. A glowing red projectile rocketed through the glass straight through to the back of the truck, sending shrapnel flying through the air. Oren collapsed limply against the driver's seat-- then Adonis realized where the arrow had gone, and saw the sanguine stain growing on his jacket.

"Oh my..." Adonis couldn't even finish the sentence. His heart rate skyrocketed.

His breathing sped. "Oren. *Oren.*"

Sun screamed. She couldn't help it, and Adonis couldn't blame her. *This is the worst reality storm we've ever seen.*

"Stay calm. Sun, stay calm." Lei gasped. "We'll be fine. We are going to be okay!"

Then a sharp *pop* sounded from the backseat, and Adonis heard a shriek-- then a wall of fire erupted from the backseat in an enormous explosion. He shielded his face with an arm, crying out as the heat scorched his hand. "Lei!"

The crickets died out. The red light dimmed. Adonis was alone.

He sat there in shock until a song came on over the radio. "Take a Chance On Me," he whispered, "ABBA." Standing up in his seat, he reached over Oren's body and punched the horn, which echoed into the night. Climbing over the console and removing the lifeless boy from the floor, Adonis attacked the horn with an animal fervor. "Come on!"

At once the light turned green, a lovely, pleasant shade like polished jade and forests and emeralds. Adonis almost collapsed, but instead he swept the broken glass off the chair, floored the gas pedal and sped off into the night. To the right, he saw a sign reading *Toll Road-0.5 Miles, Nearest Exit*. He grit his teeth and accelerated past it.

There was a quiet groan from the back seat. "Head hurts..." "Sun!" Adonis whipped around with desperation in his eyes. Sun curled up into a ball and sobbed. "Leila... Oren..."

Adonis felt himself shaking at the wheel. "We can grieve later. It's hard... but they'd want us to live..."

Then Adonis heard a bloodcurdling scream from somewhere deep in the woods. "Oh, gracious... actually. Sun," He decided, "This could actually be a very good thing right now. Roll down your window and scream back, like the rules said.

Sun raised a singed arm and flailed for the windowsill. Groping for the button, she rolled down the window and screamed into the night, louder and longer than Adonis thought possible for someone with lungs that size. Then Adonis joined her, and they screamed into the night until they were sure the source of noise was long gone.

Then Adonis saw a movement in the woods. "What's that... oh my word, Sun, look!" A party of hunters in camouflage jackets and pants patrolled the edge of the forest, rifles at the ready. Few of them looked entirely human. Among them was a staggeringly tall man with violet skin and four dragon-like horns protruding from his white hair.

"That's the one the rules told us about," Sun realized. "Signal them!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Adonis leapt from the truck and yelled as loudly as he could, his voice already spent from screaming. The violet-skinned hunter turned, startled. "Do you need help?" He called out in a thundering but benevolent voice.

"Yes!" Adonis yelled back. "Two dead, one wounded! Help us!"

The hunters approached, replacing their weapons. One removed her backpack, procured an assortment of first aid materials, and immediately began tending to Sun's injuries.

"We need to get out of here," Adonis pleaded. "We heard you knew the way."

The hunter nodded understandingly, shifting a lock of white hair over his shoulder. "Keep driving. Go as fast as you can. There's a city not far from here, where you can find better care and replenish your supplies. Good luck."

And that morning as the sun began to rise, Sun shouted "Look!" Not far ahead, the outline of a city filtered the rays of the yellow sunrise, broken but rebuilt, lights shining through the windows of the buildings.

Biu shook her head. "You've traveled a long way. Best I can surmise, all the way up the East Coast."

Adonis sighed and flopped back on the bed. "I suppose so."

Biu bent over him and smiled. "Kid. If it makes a difference, I didn't grow up in a normal time either. For what it's worth, no one's world is normal. We'll all suffer some losses, we'll all suffer some scars, and exactly who and where can't be controlled. Best we can do is roll with it, be

strong, and grow with the friends we do have. Rest. Strange or no, every day deserves a good night's sleep.

Second Place: That Café Charm

By Sofia Lupas

Walking into the tiny corner cafe three blocks from your house, the aroma of coffee, cinnamon, and cream cheese envelops you in a warm hug. As you look for an empty seat, you spot cappuccinos and lattes being passed around by waiters, cinnamon rolls, and bagels with cream cheese. Yes! The music swells: you see a small two top near the cafe's windows. It also has those tall chairs that you like. And it's near a charging port.

Perfect.

You walk towards the small table and place your computer and charger there. Taking a few seconds to plug the charger into the port, as you forgot to charge your laptop overnight, you crane your neck to glance around the cafe again to see if any of your friends are there. Of course, they aren't. Your friends live near that shiny new Starbucks. There's no reason for them to come here. Sigh. No reason for them to distract you from writing your rom-com.

You open your computer and continue the romantic comedy draft you've been working on. It's not titled anything yet, just a too short document called "Elizabeth Katz - RomCom." You have no clue why you're writing a rom-com. You've never even been in love. Brushing the hair out of your face, you look again to see if any of your friends have arrived since last you checked, five seconds ago.

You see something better.

Your face turns hotter than the back of your overheated laptop, and you bury yourself back in your draft. You lose any and all motivation you had to write, and how could you? She's... overwhelming.

A waitress spots you and walks over to your table to take your order. Seeing that you can't deny social interaction anymore, you quickly look around for something socially acceptable to bury your furiously strawberry face in. You grab the menu you put on the windowsill and shove it in front of your face. You've already memorized the entire menu and ordered the same thing every day anyway. You don't even look at it until the waitress comes over.

"Anything for you ma'am? ...Do you need more time to think?" The waitress asks. You shake your head the most you can without toppling over from how *cute that girl is-*

"Ma'am?" The waitress asks again. You snap back to reality and lower the menu enough to see the waitress tapping her pencil impatiently.

"I'd... uh... like the... uh..," You can't speak. "The cappuccino with a cube of sugar... and a lemon pound cake on the side. For Elizabeth." You finally get the words out with a sigh of relief. The waitress nods and walks away to prepare your order. You attempt to shoo away the butterflies in your stomach. You fail miserably but still try to focus back on the novel you were writing.

After your order arrives, you are able to concentrate more on your writing and start your routine procedure of taking much too long breaks to regain motivation, drinking the coffee, eating the pound cake, having random spurs of inspiration, hunting for word echoes to

make your writing smoother, and cutting off run-on sentences before they go on too long. All the while you sneak peeks at that girl, her gorgeous red hair. You wonder how someone so beautiful finds their way to a coffee shop in the middle of nowhere.

While scanning her striking features, you also sneak a look at her stuff. Her backpack, the pins on the shoulder straps, and the stickers on her tablet all had rainbows on them. All of them. So many rainbows.

...

Maybe she just likes rainbows.

It doesn't mean anything.

Rainbows are cool. Rainbows are... fun. Rainbows are also very ga-

Nope, it doesn't mean anything,

You keep the cycle of motivation, nonmotivation, coffee, word echoes, snacks until, eventually, you reach for your coffee and take a sip – nothing but a loud slurp comes out. You know no one noticed, but your face still burns a tomato red.

There's a lot of movement going around in the cafe, as you look around it once more. People exiting, entering, moving places, walking away from you, walking towards you, she's walking towards you, oh my god, she's – WALKING TOWARDS YOU.

She just relocated all her stuff. And herself. There's only one problem. Well, if problems could be surprising, happy incidents.

She relocated to the seat. Right. In front. Of you.

You stare the hardest you've ever stared into the blue light machine holding your precious writing.

"Uh... hey? Hello? Are you there?" You look up at her and fail to relax your face. She's so much more beautiful close-up. "My name's Madeline, your name's... Elizabeth? Based on the sticker on your computer. I was... going to ask if I could use your port, but if you're too busy, I can just mo-"

"NO-" You say just a little too loudly. Don't you dare lose this opportunity. She looks at you weirdly, and you start sweating all over. Your hands start shaking, and you look back from your charger to the girl to your battery to your charger, over and over. She starts to pack up her stuff again, and you go into full panic mode and yank the charger out of its port. The charger clatters on the ground. Her eyes go wide in response to the sudden noise from under the table.

"Uh, you can g-go ahead and use it, yeah. I charged my computer overnight anyways I don't know why I'm using it now. What I'm... saying is..," you take a deep breath, "you can go ahead and use it."

She nods, and you duck under the table to pick up the charger. You see the top of her head, but by then it's too late. Your foreheads make contact, and you ferociously blush. You try to get back to your computer, and slam your head into the bottom of the table. While your head is pounding, the girl laughs at your silly antics, picks up your charger, hands it to you, and puts her own charger into the port.

She touched your charger. She touched something you own!

You will treasure this moment for eternity.

Your computer screen turns a bit dark, but that's fine. After shifting your computer towards yourself so that everything you're both using can fit on the small table, you continue writing for a bit. You're taken off guard by the girl speaking up.

"Sooo... what are you working on?"

By golly, she's interested in what you do.

"Oh, nothing big, haha. I'm just writing a little romance... thing. It's a hobby of mine. What... uh... what are you working on?" You ask her, returning the question as a pathetic attempt to get the small talk going.

"Oh, just writing a song. It's going pretty well so far." She says. You nod and try to think of conversation topics to continue the conversation. Suddenly, she speaks again.

"Wanna hear it?"

You can't believe it. You nod vigorously, but not too vigorously to not scare her or make her think you're weird. She pulls up her tablet and switches the tab with the song lyrics and sheet music.

Then, she begins.

You're mesmerized by her voice. You don't even pay attention to the song, just her. Everything else seems to disappear until it's just you and her.

Her beautiful blue eyes are filled with a focus on the song's lyrics she's singing. She's frequently brushing her red, velvety hair out of her eyes and repositioning her glasses so that she can focus on the task at hand. While brushing the hair out of her face, she also shifts the jean jacket she's wearing.

Apart from that, the sound of her beautiful voice fills the air. You're not very experienced with singing, but you know just enough to see how technically beautiful the song is. Even as an acapella, the piece is breathtaking. The legatos, syllable placements, and melody fill the air, projected all by her stunning voice. Aside from the technical beauty of the piece, every note is hit well. The words all fit together in the beautiful puzzle that is the song, and it feels like a story told by solfege.

Thinking it would last forever, it comes as a shock when the song finishes. The last note is left suspended in the air, like a cliffhanger at the end of a chapter. The bustling crowd of the cafe and the aroma of coffee, cinnamon, and cream cheese suddenly sink in again.

"Soooo... what do you think? I'm not that good at singing, I'm just a songwriter, but-"

"It was amazing. So good. I LOVED it."

"Hah, thanks! Oh, do you wanna keep in touch?"

...

Walking hand in hand into the tiny corner cafe three blocks away from your houses, the aroma of coffee, cinnamon, and cream cheese envelops you both in a warm hug. As Madeline looks for an empty seat, you spot cappuccinos and lattes being passed around by waiters,

cinnamon rolls, and bagels with cream cheese. Yes! The music swells: Madeline sees a small two top near the cafe's windows. It also has those tall chairs that you both like. And it's near a charging port.

Perfect.

Third Place: Beat of Silence

By Joelle Dykstra

Hi. My name is Myrtle Stean. I'm 13 and my favorite color is blue. The most interesting person I met this summer is actually a dragon.

Hold on Myrtle! Dragons aren't real. Sure they are. In fact many so-called "fantasy" creatures actually exist and live among us. I should know. I plan to be a cryptozoologist and want to finally prove that Bigfoot or Nessie are real.

The day I met Holly (that's the dragon) started out like any other day. I ate oatmeal for breakfast. I put on jeans and my favorite t-shirt (the one that says "Stand back, I breathe fire"). I braided my long red hair. As I stepped outside, I took a deep breath and smiled. The woods around the cottage where we spent summer smelled like earth and flowers, and the gentle breeze carried the scent of water. I walked down the dirt path, watching the squirrels leap around. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, and that's when I saw a small side path. I had never noticed it before. Being the explorer that I was, I started down it. It was dark but the path was lined with flowers.

After walking for about twenty minutes, I came into a clearing lined with butterfly bushes. Suddenly the bushes on the other side of the clearing rustled and a creature came half-way into the clearing. It seemed slightly larger than a horse and was dark green, scaly and elegant. Summer green scales covered its underbelly. Intelligent brown eyes stared into my own. It was a dragon. *He* was a dragon. I wasn't sure how I knew he was a he but I did. There was a beat of silence. Then as suddenly as he came, he left.

I returned home in a daze, but the next day I went back. The dragon was there, almost as if he'd been waiting for me. He watched as I sat down and took out my colored pencils. I had gotten Merryweather's Guide to Drawing Dragons for my birthday and this was the perfect opportunity to practice. The dragon watched me sketch with what seemed like curiosity. I studied the dragon's face, his large eyes, his curved horns, and his horse-like ears. Then I felt the same beat of silence. *One... two...* he was gone.

I arrived the next day to find the dragon pacing. This was the first time I had seen his wings fully. They were huge and leafy, and somehow reminded me of Christmas.

The dragon held up a stick that looked vaguely pencil-like and a piece of something like paper. I decided to see if he could understand me.

"Hi. My name is Myrtle. Do you have a name?"

The dragon ran into the brush, returning with a branch of holly. He pointed to the leaves.

"Leaf?" I guessed. The dragon just pointed more insistently. "Green?" He seemed frustrated. "Holly?" The dragon brightened, setting the branch down and picking up the drawing supplies again. Holly, what an interesting name for a dragon. I sat down and continued my sketch, and to my surprise Holly started sketching too. I pulled out my colored pencils to fill the dark brown horns. A shadow fell across my paper; I looked up to see Holly waving his paper in front of my face. It was me. The details were stunning: my braid over my shoulder, my freckles dotting my nose. Butterflies all around.

“Wow, Holly this is amazing.” He looked pleased with himself. He picked up his pencil and *one... two... three...* beats of silence. Then Holly was gone. I gathered my stuff, rolled up Holly’s picture, and meandered home.

I visited the clearing every day to see Holly. We both spent the time drawing until the beats of silence when Holly disappeared. Each day the beats stretched longer.

“What do you think of this, Holly?” I held up my drawing of a butterfly bush flower.

Holly looked up and then moved so that his snout was almost touching the paper. I giggled. Holly sat back and smiled at me. Then he picked up his drawing and shoved it in *my* face.

“Holly, I can’t see it if it’s in my face.” Holly snorted like he couldn’t *possibly* believe it. Then it must have been time to leave because... *one... two... three... four... five... six...* beats of silence. This time something was different. When Holly left, I caught a glimpse of somewhere that wasn’t here. I couldn’t tell what it was. That’s when I realized Holly didn’t just disappear, he teleported.

I was heading out the door on the tenth day when my mom caught me in a sneak attack hug. She was wearing her “Mama Bear” t-shirt.

“Going to work on your butterfly manual?” she asked. “No scientific inquiry today, just going for a walk.”

“Wanna go clothes shopping after? I saw some cool t-shirts at the store downtown.”

“Sure! See you later!”

I was excited for today because I was planning on asking Holly about his family. I was also bringing the largest colored pencils I could find for Holly. I entered Butterfly Place, and Holly jumped up when he saw me.

“I brought you something!” I held out the large pencils. Holly grabbed them and started drawing while I worked on a sketch of Holly’s wing in detail.

Later Holly held up his picture: it was two dragons. One red, one pink and green. That's when my life changed completely. The beats of silence came: *one... two...three...* On the tenth beat the world went blurry, the trees shifted and grew, the butterflies were dusted with glitter, the flowers grew more colorful and changed shape. When the world settled down I was somewhere very different yet also familiar. Two dragons who were larger than Holly stood in front of me. One was red with spots of yellow-orange around her eyes. The other dragon was pink and green with thorny horns and wings like rose leaves. I recognized them from Holly’s picture. I looked at the red one’s wings or rather *wing*. She had only the right one, but flames in the shape of a wing flickered into view periodically. I felt the heavy stares of all three dragons on me. *Humans...non-magical...month...portal*. The pink dragon was not talking but...radiating words? That is the best way to describe it. She was *radiating* words at Holly. I only caught a few. The red one turned to me.

Sorry Human, you are stuck here. The Birchwood portal for non-magical species closed yesterday, it opens in one month. I am Inferno, that's Briar. You know Holly.

I must have blacked out because I opened my eyes somewhere else. I was looking at the sky and the walls around me were wood. As I sat up, Holly came bounding up stairs I hadn’t noticed.

Awake! he radiated at me. “Hi Holly. Where am I?” *Home.*

“This is your house?”

Yes! Okay?

“Yeah, I’m okay, but why didn't you talk to me before?” Curiosity has always been my friend. Holly sighed and radiated,

Words hard. Mom tell. He gestured for me to follow him. I stood up, climbing out of the nest-like space. Following Holly down the stairs, I wondered if we were in a tree; everything seemed to be a part of the same structure. At the bottom of the stairs was a living area and kitchen. Holly walked into the kitchen where Inferno was cooking. A huge table was near the kitchen and Briar was sitting there sewing something.

Mom, Myrtle, question, tell. Holly was directing his words at Inferno. She turned to me, wiping her claws on a piece of cloth.

Your world has little to no magic. This world has magic. It’s hard to communicate in non-magic places and to non-magic creatures but I am a Communicator.

“How did I get here?” I had been wondering about this.

Dragons are magic. Humans are not. Magic sticks to non-magical things but the world where we belong pulls at us. Some of Holly’s magic stuck to your world, making it harder each time to bring him back. We had to pull hard and you got stuck in the current. Now you are here.

Ta-da! Briar held up what she had been working on. It was a small pair of purple shorts and a yellow shirt.

“What are those for?”

You! Briar answered. Then Inferno explained,

You stay here until portal opens and you can go back. Time passes differently here; family won't be worried. You will need things to wear. And one more thing, the Council is upset you are here, they will meet later this month to discuss what to do. Humans have a tendency to destroy things they don't understand. You might tell humans about us. If some dragons have their way, you may never leave. She handed me a bowl of fresh fruit—nothing I recognized—and I sat on the bottom stair to eat and process Inferno's words.

The next day, Holly and I were eating breakfast, fruit again, while his moms bustled around us.

Friend! Coming soon! Excited! Holly radiated. "Your friend is coming?"

Yes! Holly jumped up as someone knocked on the door. He opened it, and in bounced an orange dragon with brown flecks scattered across her scales. Her eyes were golden and her two pairs of wings looked like delicate tiger lily leaves. I wondered if she could fly.

My dad made fried leaves. Again! Blegh! She stormed in, radiating furiously. I was surprised I could understand her so clearly.

This Tiger Lily. Holly told me.

Oh wow! Is that a human? asked Tiger Lily.

"Yeah, my name is Myrtle." Tiger Lily's eyes sparkled. *I love learning human stuff! Humanology is my thing!* "How are you communicating with me so clearly?"

Work hard at it. I can't fly. Inferno teaches me communicating. Tiger Lily explained.

Tiger Lily couldn't fly, but her brain did; she radiated faster than my mind could keep up.

She quizzed me about humans and I learned more about the dragons. Holly, Tiger Lily and Briar were plant dragons and Inferno was a fire dragon. Tiger Lily's dad was a doctor and

her mom was a chemist. Inferno was head of Communicating with Non-Magical Species, Briar made curtains and tapestries. Over the following weeks I got to meet each of them.

I also learned I was in trouble. The Council didn't want me to leave. They worried I would tell the whole world about everything I've learned here. The problem is, they were right. I wanted to write about the world of the dragons when I got back and publish it. No one would believe me though.

I went to see the Council, riding on Holly's back. Briar came too. Inferno walked ahead. We came to a large amphitheater where the Council was meeting. As we landed, Inferno came up to us. I slid off Holly's back. I had never seen so many dragons in one place. One of the dragons stepped forward. She was stocky and dark brown-gray like a rock.

You have been brought before us so we may tell you that you cannot leave. You might tell humans dragons are here.

"No one would believe me! They will think it's my imagination! Please let me leave!"
Only two days until I could go home. I missed my family.

Too risky. You stay. This final. Two guard dragons swooped down, picked me up and brought me to a cave in the side of a cliff. They left and took up their posts at the bottom of the cliff. I was trapped and I wasn't going home.

The dragons brought me food and water, and a nest-structure had been set up for me. Thankfully I always had my drawing supplies on me. I spent the next day sketching all the dragons I had seen and writing notes about my stay in the dragon world. I was working on a sketch of Tiger Lily's dad when I heard commotion by the bottom of the cliff. It was dragons. Inferno, Briar, Holly, Tiger Lily, Tiger Lily's parents and more. The Council was there too. I caught

snatches of words as they radiated back and forth at high velocity, and suddenly realization coursed through me. The dragons were fighting about *me*. Then Holly landed in the mouth of the cave.

Trying to let you go. Pack stuff. Holly informed me. I quickly put all my drawings and notes in my backpack and slung it on my back. It was getting dark and soon the moon would rise and the portal would open.

“Is it working? Are they going to release me?” I asked. I ached with longing.

Don't know. Hard to tell. Holly answered. Then the moon rose, bathing everything in silvery light. I felt something pulling me toward a mountain in the distance, and suddenly I was airborne. The dragons below stopped arguing as I was pulled through the sky. As one, they took off into the air behind me. I was trying to figure out why I was flying. I suddenly remembered what Inferno had said about the magnetic pull of the place where you belong. Forests sped by under me, dappled with moonlit shadows.

Ahead of me on the top of the mountain, surrounded by birch trees, a misty swirling hole the size of a bathroom mirror hovered in the air. I was being pulled straight towards it.

Suddenly my vision blurred, my body twirled and all I could think about was the clearing where I met Holly. The clearing that changed my life.

Then my vision cleared, my feet touched the ground and I was there. The hole was gone. I raced through the sunset-tinged woods and burst out in front of my house. My legs carried me inside to my mom in the kitchen. She was still wearing the same silly t-shirt she had on when I left. I threw my arms around her, and she turned and saw me, her eyes widening. She hugged me back,

“Where were you? I was getting worried!” she exclaimed.

“I-I got lost, I went further and saw a path and then I got lost,” I said. It was a little true anyway.

The next few days my parents kept me close to home. I worked furiously on my book which I named Myrtle’s Field Guide to Dragons. My parents worried about it, since they know I don’t write fiction. One night, after I’d gone to bed, I overheard my parents talking.

“I’m worried about this book of Myrtle’s, it’s a dramatic change from her other scientific guides and journals,” my mom said.

“Maybe she just got inspired to write fiction for once,” my dad replied. “Yeah, I guess that’s not a bad thing. Everyone knows dragons aren’t real.” I drifted off to sleep with one thought in my head.

If only she knew the truth.

First Runner Up: The Butter Knife

By Ariana Blake

It was a cold night in a large manor in the French Countryside. Bernard and Nicole Charleson were seated by a fire engaged in a lively conversation about a book they had both recently read. Their two daughters, Charlotte and Nicolette, were playing by their parents' feet on a plush carpet, and Bernard Junior, a baby boy named after his father, was asleep in his crib in the nursery, being watched by the governess.

This scene of domestic tranquility was the norm for the family. They lived in relative isolation, being a day's ride from the nearest town. That journey was made once a month by their maid who went off to fetch groceries and Mr. Charleson's pay from the publishing house. He had written a popular book some time ago, and the family lived off the profits.

The one thing amiss about the family was a butter knife that disappeared and reappeared at random. It was a seemingly ordinary knife, with a pewter handle and blade. No one could remember buying it or receiving it as a gift. It was never acquired, just simply had.

However, returning to the nighttime family scene, the family began to prepare for bed after a short while longer of quiet conversation and pleasant games. Faces were washed, pajamas put on, and children were kissed goodnight. At last, it came time to check on the baby. Nicole sent Charlotte to go see him.

As she walked down the hall to his nursery, Charlotte felt a chill shiver down her spine. She sighed and wished this part of the house wasn't so cold, or that her nightgown wasn't so thin. When she had nearly reached the nursery, Charlotte heard little Bernard Junior's familiar

cries, but something was off. She didn't hear the usual accompaniment of shushing sounds from the governess and there were no lullabies being sung, no stories being told.

Cautiously, she opened the nursery door. Her hand flew to her mouth from the door handle. A scream kept shooting up her throat and sliding back down. She couldn't move, or even breathe. The baby was crying in the governess's arms, sticky with blood. The governess sat unmoving, with the disappearing butter knife lodged in her throat. Her face had been caked a shade of burgundy, stained with blood, while her dress was covered in splatters and her jaw hung open ghoulishly. She had died mid-lullaby with no sign of struggle.

* * *

It was a cold night in a large manor in the French Countryside. Bernard and Nicole Charleson were seated by a fire engaged in a lively conversation about a book they had both recently read. Their youngest daughter, Nicolette, sat in her mother's lap, clutching a doll, and Bernard Junior, a baby boy named after his father, was asleep in his crib in the nursery, being watched by his older sister Charlotte.

After a short while longer of quiet conversation and doll holding, the family began to prepare for bed. While Nicole and Bernard got ready for bed, Nicolette skipped down the hallway, her arms swinging as she went. She felt a draft and remembered how much she didn't like how big and dark her parents' house was. She shuddered and skipped faster to get to the nursery. She knew if she got scared her sister would find out and tease her. She flung open the door to the nursery and called "Charlotte! Time to go sleepy! Last one to th—" Suddenly, she was frozen mid-challenge. Her sister sat with a small smile on her face, with one hand about to flip the page of her book. It appeared she had been stopped by the butter knife, which had

been wedged into her skull. The pages of “Alice in Wonderland” were as drenched in blood as her lace nightgown and her once honey blonde hair. Her graceful ivory neck was stained the color of the wine Bernard drank. A scream was trapped in Nicole’s throat. Her eyes went to the baby, who was cooing and seemingly undisturbed by the death.

* * *

It was a cold night in a large manor in the French Countryside. Bernard and Nicole Charleston were seated by a fire engaged in a lively conversation about a book they had both recently read. Their two young children, a girl named Nicolette and a baby boy named Bernard Junior were in the nursery.

After a short while longer of quiet conversation, Bernard and Nicole began to prepare for bed. While Bernard washed his face and put on his pajamas, Nicole went to the nursery to check on her son and send her daughter to bed.

Nicole walked calmly through the hallways of the manor. She noticed a certain chill in the air like something was off that put her on edge, but she brushed it off as a draft. As she approached the nursery, she didn’t hear her daughter’s usual cheerful laughter and murmurs and assumed she fell asleep. She smiled slightly to herself thinking of her joyful young daughter. When she reached the door, she was careful to open the door slowly and quietly so as not to wake her sleeping daughter. What she saw when she opened the door wiped the smile right off her face and planted a scream in her throat that, try as it might, never escaped her throat. Her daughter was laying on her stomach on the floor, her chin propped up on her hands, looking at her doll house. Her once pastel pink nightgown had turned a shade of red so dark it was almost black, with the disappearing butter knife plunged in her back.

* * *

It was a cold night in a large manor in the French Countryside. Bernard was sitting by the fire thinking about a book he had recently read. He had found the philosophy in the book rather interesting and the writing style innovative. He thought about implementing similar elements in his next book. His wife Nicole was watching their infant son Bernard Junior in the nursery.

After a short while longer of quiet contemplation, Bernard decided to go to bed. He decided to check on his wife and son first, so he went to the nursery to do so.

As he walked through the hallways, Bernard noticed a strange chill in the air and made a mental note to check for any open windows after he checked on his son. He thought more about the book as he approached the door to the nursery. When he saw what was behind the door, he tried to cry out but the scream couldn't escape his throat.

His wife was holding a cross stitch pattern that she had been working on while sitting in the rocking chair next to Bernard Junior's crib. Her needle was mid-way through the fabric, in the middle of stitching a flower petal, and the disappearing butter knife was embedded in her chest. Blood flowed from the wound, covering her nightgown and needle work. She had a look on her face as though she had been recalling a pleasant memory, not the alarm one might get from being stabbed. Bernard Junior was sound asleep, oblivious to the gore next to him.

* * *

It was a warm morning in the French countryside. A maid holding a basket of food and a paycheck knocked on her boss's door, and accidentally pushed it open. She screamed at what she saw; her boss lay dead with a pewter butter knife in his stomach. She heard the cries of an unattended baby, and she ran to tend to him. At last, she came upon the nursery door, behind

which little Bernard Junior sat in his crib. His cries had been replaced with cheerful burbles. He was playing with a blood stained pewter butter knife that had been in his father's body just a moment earlier.

“Bye bye!” he chirped.

Second Runner Up: In Between Place

By Lily Peterson

The sun is setting. The ground is dry. You are going to die. These are all facts. Not silly opinions that mortals oh so love, but cold, stone-hard facts. The sort of things that you don't mess around with, 'cause you *can't*.

And there I am, standing no more than seven feet away, watching your dying body wither on the ground. A mortal would sigh and moan and try to save you, or cry and plead and ask why.

But I don't. I just wait. I always wait.

"Hey, kid!"

You don't turn around. But you would've, if you could still move. By now, your body's so frail, a gust of wind could blow you away. And only leave tiny specks of atoms.

"Sucks, doesn't it? You get used to it, eventually. Probably." I think you can hear me, but that doesn't exactly matter. I'm mostly musing to myself. I walk forward, the ground burning my feet. Pleasant, to experience pain again. I missed that, up there.

The sun's colours are spectacular. The violent red, the flush of pink and orange, the gold that sears holes in the atmosphere...

"Well?" I snap, perhaps a *tad* impatient. Not that I have reason to, but maybe I enjoy the feeling. I don't feel it very often. "Hurry up already." Huh. It does feel good. I should try to boss people around more often.

But, quite rudely, you hold onto life for twelve gasping breaths. Exactly. I counted. I suppose I must forgive you, for life is all you know. But, it is quite different to hold on to

resentment, however small. I enjoy different; it breaks routine. So I waited. Some more. You must think me tardy, the time I've spent waiting.

You misunderstand, of course. I'm never late.

And now, with these forgotten emotions piling up inside, my patience wanes.

So I pull you from your body, and it shudders once, then stills. "The vultures will find it soon enough, so don't worry." I give you a hearty pat, then set you up right. I'm trying to be really polite now, a different thing. I consider smiling, but that doesn't go well most of the time. So I don't. I merely speak to show my kindness. "Great job coming out, some stay stuck until night. *Then*, it goes on for a while. Darkness keeps you alive longer, after all." I try to joke.

You stare at me, awe-struck. You all are, in the beginning. But, then everyone always asks-

"Am I dead?" Numb. Shocked. Empty.

"Yep." A fact, cold, stone-hard. "And I killed you."

"W-what?!"

"Yep." I raised my eyes to the horizon. "And it looks like we should go now.

C'mon, kid. I'm never late."

"B-but-" You're *still* sputtering? Why? "You-you *killed* me?!"

"It's called being *nice*, idiot." I'm tired. Yes, I missed this feeling too. "You were dying too slow, and I decided to feel compassion. Duh. And I'm never late, so technically, *you* were the one that died. I just helped."

You get mad. How nice, it must be, to have these emotions so fresh, so remembered. I only have memories now. You scream and kick and fight and rage, for a long time and for only a

heartbeat. You wail for a family you lost, and life you had, and the things you never did. The things you wished you did. I'm quiet, for all of it. I've dealt with others like you. The sun warms me, and I wish to stay here, in this moment, for a little while more. So, I let you throw a fit for a while.

Time's odd that way. It lets you drag it out forever.

Finally, you calm down a bit. They always do, eventually. You sit, exhausted. Or, merely you think you're exhausted. You don't have a heart, or lungs, or breath, or anything anymore.

Just you. The bare you.

"Who are you?" You demand. "Are you God?"

I laugh. I laugh and laugh and laugh. I laugh, because crying I've tried before.

Laughing is different. Laughing is... good.

"Kid, I've heard that more times than I want to count. And, no. I'm not. Sorry.

Well, maybe. I don't know what you think when you think 'god'." I shrug. "Mortals have very opposing aspects of higher beings, after all. I mean..." I don't know how to continue. Mortals make me confused. It's different. "I'm not even entirely sure *what* I am. I guess you could call me... the carrier. The elevator man. The go-between-guy."

"Okay..." You're confused too. "So do I go to some hell or paradise or whatever?"

"No. You'll come with me."

"Where?"

"...it's hard to explain. It's kinda like your world here, but like a meeting place. A waiting place. I kinda just call it... the Next. You'll like it there, I think. I'm never allowed in, but I assume

it's great. I see a lot of people coming back all smiley and happy and tearful and stuff. Yabbering about all the family they met. All the friends they've missed."

"Wait. You mean... they don't stay there?"

"Sure. For a while they stay there, doing whatever they do. Catching up with dead relatives or something. Existing. Talking. Then- then they decide it's time to move on. Bored, I assume. So, I escort them to the Next."

"But-" Your brow furrows. "There already in the Next."

"Yep. I move them onto the next Next. That place is another world, and a new start. They forget a lot, and get a new body and stuff and live and die."

"Hold on- and after that?"

"The next next Next. Another meeting place. And after that, another world. And then another meeting place."

"Does it ever stop?"

I think about that. Consider the millions of souls I've carried from place to place.

The billions that have asked me the same questions. The uniqueness and uniform greatness of each individual.

"Yah. Eventually."

"When?"

"When you're ready to move on."

"What?"

Sighing, I kick the sand. It scatters and makes pictures that last only a blink of an eye.

"When you're ready, the others come to get you and take you away. Somewhere else. I've

never followed them; I can't. I bet it's great, though." This isn't a lie, not totally. Because I don't know the truth.

I let you have your peace for a bit. But, like all things, time moves on.

"Are you ready now?" I yawn, feeling the last of the sun's rays on my neck.

They're turning blue and violet now, bruises. Darkness has started its slow, slow march on the edge of the desert sky. Always creeping. Always growing a little bigger. "I bet there must be someone waiting for you. There always is."

You're staring at your hands, only black silhouettes in the night. "Why?" You ask.

"What's it all for?"

"To experience something. To learn. To choose. To live. To grow." I list the facts. The facts are cold, true, and never changing. I do not always like the facts, but cannot deny them nonetheless. "To love. To hate. A little knowledge is gained each life, remembered when in a meeting place, and forgotten when moved to a new world."

"So..."

"You'll remember your past lives when you get there." I reassure you. "And then forget for a while when you get born again. Lucky kid. I have to remember everything. Kinda my job."

"What job?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you ask a lot of questions? Oh well. You always do. Yeah, I've got a job. More of a purpose than anything else. A meaning of my existence. And in the end, isn't the whole reason? To find a reason to exist? So, I carry over everyone to the Next. And the Next after that. Kid, we've met before. You don't remember it now, but you will. Soon enough. And I'll see you again, when you decide to move on to your next life."

“Why can’t they go by themselves?”

“They’d get lost?” I guess, scooping up a handful of dark sand. The grains are soft, trickle like water past my fingers. Tiny little shadows in the night. “How should I know? It’s just something that must be done; it’s a fact. It. Must. Happen. The carrier before me did it, and the one before, and the one before that. And when *I’m* done, the one after me and the one after that. It passes on and on and on. Forever, I’ll assume.” I look you up and down. “And you are forever, while I am not. Yet, *I’m* the only one with the ability to live out each moment until I’m sick of it! Typical.”

“But...” You say, “How- Aren’t there other people dying right now? Like me?”

“Oh, definitely. Lots and lots and lots.”

“Then... don’t you need to go visit them? Like you did with me?”

“Of course.”

“Then, don’t you need to go *now*?”

“Oh no. I’m never late.” I stretch my arms out, popping the joints back into place with a satisfying *crack*. “Time is irrelevant to me, but defines my existence. The worst paradox, I suppose. Since I control it, I go back and forth and stop and slow whenever I want. Right now, this universe is just me and you. A loop, a stretched out moment.”

I shake my head slowly in the darkness. It waves along to a forgotten melody. “You see the sun setting and the night come, but it already is morning, in another place, in another time. This... isn’t really real. Not truly. You see, time is my master and slave. And you are dead, but not totally yet. This is an “in-between-place”. Where I can think. *When* I can think. Be myself. So, technically, I am everywhere and nowhere at once.” I laugh again.

“And... you remember *all* of it?” You ask, incredulous.

“Yep. Every death, every birth. Every word, every pain. Each joy and memory. Each tear and suffering. Each name and song. Each hope and wish that has ever been dreamed. Each fear and loss that has ever been felt. It is the burden all carriers must carry.”

You think about that, and a beam of moonlight finally breaks through the shadows.

“Well,” I look up at the moon, peeking over the horizon. “I’m always on time. Let’s go.”

You do not move.

“...I’m afraid.” A tiny crystalline drop, reflecting light and bending the world around it, rolls down your cheek. Carving an invisible line through the flesh, through reality.

I look at you. Mercy, compassion, empathy... were all taken from me. Only hollow flickers of emotion masquerade as *feelings*. As *real*. I know I’m not real. Not dead, not alive, certainly not divine-

I know I am nothing. Only a fragment of something that *was*. *Real*.

But you...? You are not. You are real. You *can* feel, you *can* make mistakes. Can *choose*. You can cry, can laugh, can smile. Can *be*.

You are so much more... than me.

“Good.” Barely a breath, the words fall in the deepness, the silence, the stillness of the night. “Good.”

And we leave a world of darkness, and rise towards the stars.

MIDDLE SCHOOL
HONORABLE MENTIONS

Childhood

By Hannah Visser

The girl darted through the hallways of her house, passing the spiky plant in the corner of the foyer and the picture of a joyful-looking family. There was a man and woman, their arms wrapped around each other with a baby in their arms, cocooned in a blanket. A small girl was in between them, grinning widely, with her father's hand on the side of her head.

A cry startled the quiet house and became louder as the mother dashed down the stairs after the little girl, clutching a small boy in her arms. He hiccupped and let out another shrill scream. The mother rushed into the kitchen, finding the girl laughing with her father. The boy was passed to the father as the mother grabbed her purse, taking hold of the girl's hand. She didn't budge, only sat stubbornly until she was promised a treat if she moved. Gleefully, the girl skipped towards her shoes, slipping on orange polka-dotted flip-flops. Her mother shook her head and nudged the girl out the door and into the car.

Cool air hit the mother and daughter as they walk into the supermarket, away from the humid August heat. Too big to fit in the small seat in the shopping cart, the girl walked as fast as her short legs allowed her to, her mother pushing the cart just behind her.

For every healthy item her mother picked out, the girl tried to throw a salty or sweet snack in, beaming deviously as she did it. It's routine; her mother fished the bag of chips out, and somehow, something else was added in its place.

Finally, *finally*, they reached the freezer aisle, and the girl threw boxes upon boxes of multi-colored ice-pops into the shopping cart. This time, her mother just sighed, letting her do it.

After they'd bought the items, which was strangely delightful to the little toddler, they went home. The first thing the girl did was open a strawberry and tangerine flavored popsicle. Her mother hadn't let her eat it inside, since the girl always made such a mess, so she ate it on the front stoop's stairs.

The hot asphalt burned her bare feet, but the girl didn't care. She was as content as could be. Her sticky fingers wiped across her chin as she watched a butterfly flutter past. A lawn mower growled in the distance; the air smelled of grass clippings and fresh mulch. Unfortunately, the ice-pop did little to cool her down, and she fidgeted uncomfortably. The heat could make someone delirious - it hadn't dipped under ninety-five degrees that summer.

Tomorrow, she would start pre-school. Not that she knew it; adults don't really care to share important information with small children. It didn't really matter anyway. Pre-school was just where you learned how to count to ten and that 'sharing is caring.'

So, as the girl got into the car with her purple metal lunchbox the next day, she had no idea what was going on. She didn't exactly mind, either; there wasn't a worry in her head.

Her parents hugged her tight, both eyes so sad while they smiled. The little girl gave them a big wave as a teacher gently pulled her along. What she hadn't understood, couldn't even comprehend at the time, was that it was the end, but also the start of something new.

The bus ride home was smelly, but fortunately not hot. It was late March and felt blissfully like spring. The girl was fourteen now.

Ah, middle school. Where she just began to figure out who she was and who she wanted to be. Where she figured out how the people around you worked, how the world worked. It was also where she got a reality check.

She swiped back and forth on her phone. Oh, how nice it felt to be a stereotypical teenager; one who was 'always on that phone,' or heading from activity to activity, busy as can be.

There were a lot of difficulties about being in eighth grade. Not as many, most would say, as being in high school or college, or being an adult. The teenager supposed that could be true, but she also made mental lists of just how many things were hard about being her age. Friends who weren't really friends, the anxiousness of getting that test back (*especially* in math) and figuring out where you sat on the social hierarchy. She always reminded herself that it wouldn't matter, not later in life. So why did she care so much?

That was kind of the plot of every teen movie, 'be yourself.' It sounded easy enough when she was younger. But as she got older, she thought more and more about how ludicrous it sounded.

She also recognized that there were a lot of things that, mostly, only her generation had to deal with. The threats posted online about her school and many others that called police officers to roam the halls that never amounted to anything. The lock-down drills, where people whispered and told jokes in the quiet, dark room when it wasn't, in reality, all that funny.

Oh, and she couldn't forget that sinking, sick feeling she got in your stomach when she saw someone online having a way better day than she had. Seeing people, friends, who were having fun without her. Overthinking every text, so that even just a simple 'hi' seemed

ominous. Rumors spread that weren't true, only made out to be, because it was just that easy to do so online.

If people said that it only just got harder, how much more difficult could it be?

When she got home, she went straight to her homework. Most of the time, it seemed like the most important thing to her. That was another thing that scared her; while she was taking the hardest classes she could, she knew that, like everything else, it would only just get harder.

Dinner wasn't quiet that evening, but when was it? Her brother was quite the character; twelve, and in the sixth grade. He made her whole family laugh with most of the things he said, and the girl was grateful for it. He wasn't exactly perfect, since he was her little brother and most little brothers were found to be annoying by their older sister, but he made her smile. That mattered most.

What also mattered to her was music. Music was beautiful; a flash of sunshine, a splash of sadness, everything could be translated into a tune, a melody, a lyric. Sometimes, it helped her to imagine her future. She'd be living in a gorgeous apartment in a big city, with a job she loved. Sometimes it seemed like this life she'd imagined up for herself couldn't come fast enough. Other times, it felt like it was coming all too quick.

She never knew whether or not she wanted to grow up.

The drive to school was short. It was precisely seven minutes to her high school, which meant she had seven minutes every day to dread the seven hours ahead.

A lot of people said senior year was easier; a lot of people had already taken the classes they needed to take and only had to stay for two or three hours. Not her. She was taking college courses that were offered at her school, eager to just get it over with. Unfortunately, it was taking every inch of her willpower to keep up with all the work.

The young woman sighed as she walked into school, being careful not to slip on the ice. December, where she lived, was awfully frigid, but it never snowed. She'd always wanted it to snow on her birthday; she waited every year for it. Today, her birthday was here, and yet again no snow.

Big eighteen. People wished her a happy birthday all day long, each giving her a tired smile that she returned. Maybe it was the winter that made everyone so exhausted and drained.

The teen had decided not to do anything for her birthday. It was the day before winter break, and most people were busy or out of town during this time. She also really wasn't in the mood to celebrate; she'd felt down the past few weeks.

Maybe it was because she wasn't a kid anymore. She was legally allowed to own a house now, which seemed terrifying and exciting all at once. She could get a tattoo, if she desired, even though her parents would probably still ground her.

She drove back home, glancing at the already-setting sun. Brilliant shades of rose-gold and dusty maroon were stained across the sky. Music was playing quietly from the old radio in her beat-up car (her parents told her to buy something she could crash a few times), and she felt herself start to relax. Her family would be waiting at home, probably with a lemon cake decorated shakily with chocolate icing and enormous smiles.

But when she walked through the door, the house was dark and quiet. She blinked once, shutting the door hesitantly.

“Hello?” She called out timidly, jumping out of her skin when the lights suddenly flickered on everybody screamed “Happy Birthday, Julia!” She laughed, her friends coming to greet her with hugs and more words of celebration.

The rest of the night was the beautiful pain of an ending childhood. Friends, ones from preschool, middle school, and high school alike had come, even if only for a moment. Her favorite music played, and, as she’d predicted, lemon cake was served.

The party ended at one in the morning, with bitter-sweet good-nights to her loved ones and friends, even though she’d see them all after winter break. Though it was late, and though the young woman had been going since seven in the morning, she was more energized than she’d been in a long time.

Julia’s bedroom window never had much of a view; she could just barely see the other houses down the cul-de-sac, and through the trees, the big road that never silenced. Yellow streetlights that would sometimes flicker off and stayed off, since nobody ever came to fix it. But even though it was nothing spectacular or unique, she always thought it looked so pretty at night. Especially with the snow that had covered the ground and tiny, angelic flakes swirling in the wind.

College would be soon, with more stress and leaving her old life behind. She still hadn’t written her essay for her dream school, because she couldn’t come up with the answer for the question.

What or who is your biggest enemy in life?

She stared at her screen for a moment, pondering, before she tapped out her answer.

Time, Julia wrote. I believe that time is the biggest challenge in our lives we will have to overcome.

Miss Margaret McCormack and her First Grade Class

By Abeni Smith

Miss Margaret McCormack was not a patient woman. Upon seeing her short, stout frame, one would immediately be hit with a wave of disappointment, frustration, and exasperation, all packaged into a well-mannered glare. Several times a daring young man or woman had asked Miss Margaret McCormack why in the world did she choose to teach first graders, a particular subsection of humans that require patience, especially when dealing with for more than approximately 30 seconds. Then again, perhaps Miss Margaret McCormack could use a bit more patience, considering the fact that as of the moment she was watching the remainder of her lesson plan disappear into a void of poor internet connection and bad planning. And so, Miss Margaret McCormack ended up staring mournfully at her aging desktop as the chorus of wails of her first grade class crescendoed around her.

“Miss McCormack, Micheal is pulling my hair!”

“Miss McCormack, Lacy won’t *talk to me.*”

“Miss McCormack, Miss McCormack, Miss McCormack... I’m bored.”

Slowly, painfully slowly, Miss Margaret McCormack withdrew from her desk and walked to the center of the room, her heels clacking against the floor. Slowly, painfully slowly, Miss Margaret McCormack brushed random gray strands of hair back into her tight bun. Slowly, painfully slowly, Miss Margaret McCormack took down her black thick-rimmed glasses and cleaned them with the hem of her blouse. She took a deep breath. Deep breaths are very important when teaching first graders.

“Class,” she finally announced, putting her glasses back on her face before pushing them up the bridge of her nose, “please... *sit down!*”

The class sat down, as Miss Margaret McCormack walked through the classroom.

“First of all, Jim, I am going to give you exactly one chance to answer my question... Are you *sure* that you are...” Her lips were pressed into a disfigured interpretation of a smile, “*bored.*”

Jim was a very smart child, he stayed quite.

“Now, Lacy and Layla. Please, apologize to each other so that the entire class can stop having to hear your insufferable whining.”

“Sorry, “ they muttered.

As Miss Margaret McCormack turned to face Micheal, she found herself balling her fists. Micheal was a short child with long curly brown hair that spilled onto his face, big brown eyes, and a large gaping hole where two of his front teeth should be. He was and likely will ever be the most annoying creature on this planet. At the moment, Michael was staring up at her with those eyes filled with insolence and impertinence, she suppressed the urge to glare at him.

“Micheal, for the love of-.” She took a deep breath and massaged her temples, “Micheal, go sit in the corner.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Even Micheal, the personification of evil, the bringer of doomsday, the most annoying of children, knew that Miss Margaret McCormack was not to be messed with when she was in a bad mood.

Miss Margaret McCormack returned to the front of the room, “Class,” she began, in that

sickly sweet voice, “due to unfortunate circumstances, we are going to do something a little bit different for class today. Isn’t that exciting?”

The class did not respond.

“Today, we are going to READ!” Miss Margaret McCormack shuffled through the library at the very back of her classroom, and quickly pulled out a stack of textbooks. “Now children, you will read these... interesting *stories* for the remainder of today's class time, is that clear?”

The class did not respond.

“Is this clear?” she repeated, her lips once again pressed into a twisted sort of smile.

Thankfully, Miss Margaret McCormack's first grade class was quite bright, “Yes Miss McCormack,” they replied at once.

Miss Margaret McCormack happily walked around the classroom, taking great joy in her students' silence as she slammed the thick books on their desk. She practically skipped to her desk and sat down in her small leather chair. She allowed herself a moment of relaxation. Nothing could be heard, nothing but the soft rustling of paper and the whimpers of children.

“Wow! An octopus can... change... *colors!*” a random first grader shrieked.

Nevermind...

Miss Margaret McCormack immediately jumped to her feet and scanned the room for the offending child. Unsurprisingly, it was Micheal. The young boy was decidedly not in the corner, rather, he was sprawled over Jim’s desk, nose deep in a life science textbook. Jim was looking over his shoulder trying to look at the book, and failing to see the book due to Micheal’s head blocking his view.

“Hey! I wanna see,” Jim whined.

Micheal ignored him. However, the commotion caused Lacy and Layla to finally look up from their Social Studies textbook.

“See what?” They asked.

“Micheal has a book and he won’t let me *read it!*” Jim replied, clearly upset.

“Micheal,” Layla whined, “just let me *see it*, just for a moment.” Lucy nodded her head in agreement.

“Come on guys... it's not even that interesting.” Micheal was clutching the book to his chest, trying to fend off the growing crowd of first graders. He was failing miserably.

Miss Margaret McCormack was watching this entire situation with a rather amused look on her face. Sadly, it would not be appropriate conduct to allow her class to form a riot, so she was forced to intervene. She crept up to her class, who had backed Micheal up into the reading nook. Micheal was pressed against the bookshelf, gripping onto the textbook with his life.

Miss Margaret McCormack cleared her throat. Immediately, the entire class turned around, including Micheal, who dropped his book in surprise.

“It wasn’t my fault this time,” Micheal said instantly.

Miss Margaret McCormack rolled her eyes. “It's fine Micheal, this time anyways”

Miss Margaret McCormack silently regarded her class, she carefully bent down and picked up the book Micheal was reading. Her class at least had the decency to look ashamed.

Miss Margaret McCormack polished her glasses once again, on one hand, she could make her class go back to their seats and continue their silent reading time, on the other hand.....

“So... class,” Miss Margaret McCormack began, “would you guys like me to.. read this

book to you guys?"

"Yes Miss McCormack," the class responded enthusiastically.

"Well, okay then." Miss Margaret McCormack stiffly sat onto one of the beanbag chairs, "Class, please form a circle. Now firstly, no talking to your peers, not even whispering. If I hear so much as one mutter this entire thing ends. Understood?"

"Yes Miss McCormack," her class said immediately.

"Also, if you have any questions, either wait till the end of the book, or raise your hand, patiently, quietly raise your hand."

"Yes Miss McCormack."

"Well then... let's get on with it." Miss Margaret McCormack opened up the life science textbook, trying and failing to hide the small smile gracing her face, "Ahem, Chapter 1, the history of the atom..."

And that was how Miss Margaret McCormack and her first grade class spent the remainder of the day, quietly, calmly, and peacefully reading a science textbook. It was also this particular moment that Miss Margaret McCormack brought up whenever anyone dared to ask her why she would bother to teach first graders, considering her impatient personality. It is because Miss Margaret McCormack knew that while first graders were some of the most annoying, insolent, impertinent, disgusting, and downright rude people on this earth. There is also a certain marvelousness about children, a marvelousness that only a select few adults have the fortune to discover.

The One-Minute Wish

By Beatrice Elliott

George never thought he would work in an antique shop to pay for college, but it was the only job available. He *had* applied to work at a used bookstore, The Pages of History, but they “already had enough help.” George had no other choice but the musty, quiet antique store, Pearate Treasures.

“We would help more if we could,” George’s parents said, encouraging him to find a job. With five other children, they could hardly afford to pay for college.

George wanted desperately to be elsewhere. Anything would be better than hours rearranging stupid Peanut’s glassware on cracking wooden shelves or chasing the whims of the horrible shop owner, Ruby Pearate.

Sighing, he tossed yellowed stuffed animals into a large basket labeled “Antique Stuffies.” Ms. Pearate had a weird thing about labeling everything in her store as Antique-this and Antique-that.

“Oh, Geooorge!” called a dreadful voice, “Come heeeere!” He reluctantly trudged toward the front of the store to see what Ms. Pearate was “yoo-hooing” about.

Seemingly a sweet, grandmotherly lady, Ms. Pearate was actually his job’s worst part. She acted friendly in front of customers, but her true self was menacing.

George found the scowling shop owner ringing up a customer’s purchases. “What took you so long?” said Ms. Pearate.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” George mumbled, “What was it that you needed?”

The customer looked nervous, shocked by Ms. Pearate's crusty side. "I want you to carry this box labeled "antiques" upstairs and put its contents on the 'antique house decor' shelf," she said, waving a hand at the boxes stacked behind the counter.

"Um, which one?" George stuttered. All of the boxes on the teetering stack were labeled "antiques." None specified what exactly was inside. *Typical Ms. Pearate*, George mused, shaking his head. *Crap!* George realized she had seen him. Ms. Pearate glared daggers at him as the customer flicked his eyes anxiously back and forth between the two.

"This one, foolish boy!" she barked, pointing to the largest box.

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry ma'am," George mumbled, scurrying away, the box clutched tightly in his arms. As he headed for the red-carpeted stairs, he heard the anxious customer burst out the jingling front door and shout, "Thank God, I'm free!" George winced. That would come out of his paycheck. BIG time.

George slammed the door behind him and heard a muffled and enraged "GEOOOOOOORGE!" from below. George ignored the infuriated Ms. Pearate and walked to the wall-length shelf to complete his task.

George checked his watch to see how much longer his torture would endure. *Thirty minutes*, he thought, *Only thirty minutes left of another day at the worst job in the world.* "Better make sure *the Pearate* is happy with my work," he said to himself, shuddering at what might happen otherwise. She might make him work longer to fix it. She might cackle evilly while turning George into a frog. He didn't want to find out.

A dull glimmer caught George's eye. He crouched to examine the mysterious object and guessed it was an antique lamp. "An appropriate use of the word," he muttered, his mind

wandering back to Ms. Pearate.

Weird. George didn't remember seeing the brass lamp before. Smiling, he thought about how ridiculous it would be if a genie was inside.

Even though he knew nothing would happen, George picked up the lamp and rubbed it. Surprised at how disappointed he felt when nothing occurred, George shook his head and moved towards the stairs. A voice boomed, "WHO RUBBED THE MAGIC LAMP OF DESEOS DE UN MINUTO?!"

The Magic Lamp of One Minute Wishes? What? George thought as he spun around. In front of the shelf stood a purple man made of mist.

"I... uh..." he said, his mouth gaping open. The man raised a golden eyebrow at the stuttering boy and sighed, knowing what would come next. "Are you a genie?" George asked, afraid, excited, and nervous all at once.

"Obviously," the genie said, rolling his eyes. George furiously ran his fingers through his dirty-blond hair, screwing his face up in confusion. The genie cocked his head, wondering why *this* was always the expression on humans' faces after meeting him.

A thought illuminated George's face, "This means I have three wishes, right!?!?" Ideas of wishes ran through his head. A car? Money for college? There were so many possibilities!

"Stop, just stop," groaned the genie, "No, you don't have three wishes. You have one."

"Wait, what!?! You said you were a genie!"

"I am a Time Genie," the purple man sighed again, "There are Number Genies and Time Genies. Number Genies give a certain number of wishes. Time Genies are a bit more... complicated." He blew a wisp of violet hair from his face in frustration. "You may call me

Zerekate.”

“Zerekate. Zerekate. Zerekate,” George tried the unfamiliar name on his tongue. “Oh, come on already,” Zerekate moaned after the 20th “Zerekate” from George,

“It’s *Zerekate*. Pronounce the ‘a’. Are you ready to start your time?”

“What do you mean... time?” said George, screwing up his face yet again. “Did you even listen when I said ‘The Magic Lamp of One-Minute Wishes’? I know you know Spanish. Your family is from Mexico, and you’ve been taking classes for Genie’s sake!” said Zerekate, grumbling in annoyance.

George just stood there, dumbfounded. He DID know Spanish. But how did this stranger know that?

“Oh, FINE!” muttered Zerekate. “I’m a Time Genie, and I’m a Genie of One-Minute Wishes, meaning you have one minute to decide on your wish. Got it?”

George nodded. He understood. He understood this was the opportunity of a lifetime!

“Alrighty, then!” said Zerekate, already in a better mood, happy this would be over soon. “Your time begins 3...2. 1... NOW!” he said, clicking a dark purple timer he pulled from thin air.

George’s mind started whirling. Cars, money, college, books, games... His brain swam with greed. He wanted it all but could only pick one. How would he decide?

Meanwhile, Zerekate watched with hopeful eyes. After millennia stuck in a stupid bottle, maybe this would be the time his master wished for his freedom.

George’s eyes came to rest on the timer, which read “15”. “I just wish I had more time to decide!” he moaned. As soon as George said this, he clapped his hand over his mouth.

Zerekate's eyes widened. Boiling with rage and sadness, he boomed, "YOU FOOLISH MORTAL! IF TIME IS WHAT YOU WISH FOR, YOU GET NOTHING!"

As the purple genie faded and shrank, he sobbed, "I only wanted freedom. All I get is greedy people who think only of themselves." With a final tear, the genie disappeared. George stared in disbelief, shame, and misery. He wasted his wish on something foolish and greedy and hurt another in the process. What was he going to do?

George stood in front of Pearate Treasures, gazing at the weather-beaten sign reading *Antique and Retail Shop since 2008! Find treasures that will last a lifetime!* Circling the main sign were smaller signs of different shapes; circles, squares, rectangles, diamonds, triangles advertising things in the store such as toys, books, movies, and games, but they all started with the word "antique."

He sighed—someone needed to tell Ms. Pearate she can't slap "antique" on everything. George's stomach rumbled as his thoughts drifted back to the previous evening.

"What's up, honey?" his mother asked, looking worried.

George's beef stroganoff was untouched despite being one of his favorite meals.

He couldn't think about food after the afternoon's events.

"Nothing, Mom. I'm fine," he mumbled over the commotion of his five younger siblings sitting at the large pine table.

George retreated to his small bedroom. Flopping onto his bed, George sighed miserably. How could he have been so greedy? That poor genie!

George imagined being friends with the sassy creature if he had freed Zarakate. But how could they be friends now?

He bolted upright with an idea, leaping from his bed and scrambling to his desk. The mint-condition Chromebook, a treasured gift from his parents to celebrate his eighth-grade graduation, sat waiting. Logging into his device, he opened a tab on his browser and searched “The Magic Lamp of One-Minute Wishes.”

After forever scrolling through 1,234,375 results, George found a “GenieNerds” blog article titled, “So U Want 2 Know About Time Genies” by the user “KatBarf.”

“Here goes nothing,” George muttered, clicking the link. He scrolled through the lengthy article, finally reaching a section titled “How Often Can a Time Genie Grant Wishes?”

It read, “Like Number Genies, Time Genies can only give wishes to the same person once. Unlike Number Genies, Time Genies don’t have to wait for a set time between wishers.”

This is it! thought George excitedly. *All I need is to get Ms. Pearate to wish for Zerekate’s freedom...*

George’s shoulders sagged, realizing the holes in his plan and the low odds Ms. Pearate would help him. Nevertheless, he had to try for Zerekate.

George shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts about yesterday while inserting his employee key into the lock of the glass front door. Ms. Pearate was early, as usual. She scowled at George as he smudged the welcome mat with mud-caked boots.

“Early for once, are ya?” she frowned. “Whaddaya want?”

“I thought you might want extra help on your *antique* store’s anniversary,” he said, buttering her up. He needed to be on Ms. Pearate’s “good” side if his plan was going to work.

“Why, that’s very nice of you, dear,” said the old woman, cracking a genuine smile for the first time in ages. “Come along, and I’ll show you what you can help with.”

George was astounded. He had not thought his plan would work *this* well. “Actually, I had something particular in mind.”

“Yes?”

“Well, upstairs, there was a *lovely* brass lamp that will sell in a snap if it’s polished. Give it some pizzazz.”

Ms. Pearate looked skeptically at her employee, who never shared an interest in doing better than required.

George hurried on. “I thought polish and a polishing cloth would be in the cleaning closet, but I looked everywhere and couldn’t find it! Maybe you could help?”

Ms. Pearate studied George closely. He started sweating. If this didn’t work...

“Of course, dear!” she said, smiling warmly, “I’ll be right back!” She disappeared behind the counter and reappeared with polish and cloth. “Here we are!”

“Umm...” George made a show of staring in confusion.

“What is it, George? I don’t have all day,” she said, tapping her foot impatiently. “I... don’t know how to use polish,” he said meekly. Of course, this was a lie, but he had to get Ms. Pearate to rub the lamp somehow.

Ms. Pearate was taken aback and nearly snapped in disbelief but stopped herself. “You poor thing, what are they teaching you these days?” She tsk-tsked and said, “Go fetch me this lamp, and I’ll show you how it’s done!”

As the teen hurried up the stairs, he started feeling more and more confident. His plan was working so far with just a few more critical steps.

“Here it is!” George said, presenting the brass lamp to his boss.

Ms. Pearate picked up the lamp to examine it with her red, pointed glasses. “Oh my, this really *does* need polishing.”

“Now, dear, watch closely, and I’ll show you how to polish!” All of Ms. Pearate’s words drowned as George focused on her slowly opening the container of polish, dabbing the cloth, and rubbing the fabric back and forth against the smooth brass surface. He held his breath.

“WHO RUBBED THE MAGIC LAMP OF DESEOS DE UN MINUTO?!” a voice boomed, rattling a nearby shelf of expensive glassware. Ms. Pearate stared petrified at the sudden appearance of a purple man.

Zerekate surveyed her and the shop around him, his eyes finally resting on George. “YOU!” he snarled.

George bowed shamefully, “Yes, me.”

“But you couldn’t have summoned me again, so...” Zerekate’s eyes drifted back to the shopkeeper and sighed.

“You’re... you’re...”

“A genie, yes,” Zerekate said sarcastically and explained the laws of a one-minute wish genie. “Ready to start your time?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. George winced. Had he really looked that greedy? “You may begin,” Zerekate said, clicking his signature timer.

“Ms. Pearate!” George burst out, “We don’t have much time. I made a horrible mistake, and I need you to ask for this genie's freedom. Please!”

Ms. Pearate dismissed him with a wave and snapped, “As you said, I don’t have much time. Let me think!”

“Ms. Pearate, PLEASE!” he begged, nearly to tears. Zerekate watched on the side with fascination. He had never seen anything like this in his centuries tied to a lamp,

“I wish for a new shop sign more attractive than my old one,” she said, crossing her arms and glaring at George.

“Wish granted!” Tears bloomed in Zerekate’s eyes. “Goodbye!” he said to them, shrinking back into his lamp. At that moment, he lost hope of freedom for good.

“NOOOOOOO!” cried George, sinking to the ground, “I’m so sorry.” George sobbed, “I tried to make things right and free you. I’m sorry I was so greedy.”

“Get off the floor and help me get things ready for today, young man,” Ms. Pearate commanded, shaken by the experience of a mythical creature and her employee crying hysterically on the floor.

George nodded and wiped his eyes with his sleeve. He turned his back on the lamp to face Ms. Pearate.

A sudden burst of bright light flashed throughout the shop. Golden rays of light streamed from the lamp. There was a boom, and the light disappeared.

George turned back to face the magical object. The lamp was gone! Standing in its place was a flesh-and-bone man with violet hair beaming with happiness.

“Wha-what happened?” George stuttered.

“You freed me,” the man said, arms spreading wide.

“Zerekate? Is that really you?” George said, astounded, “How did I free you?”

“You realized your mistake and tried to make it better. You showed you could change. The Power of Change is strong enough to break a genie prison,” Zerekate said.

“Wait, wait,” interrupted Ms. Pearate, looking confused, “Why did that ‘Power of Change’ or whatever break my lamp? Weren’t they supposed to break your cuffs?”

“Those are just *decorative!*” Zerekate snapped.

Ms. Pearate blushed and murmured, “I’m going to go look at my new sign,” and hurried over to the door.

“I’m so glad you’re finally free,” said George, hugging Zerekate. “I’m sorry it took so long for me to get there.”

“But you did, and that’s what matters,” Zerekate said, beaming and hugging George back.

“Thanks for everything,” they said at the same time. They laughed. Suddenly, a high-pitched scream erupted from outside the shop.

“WHAT HAPPENED TO THE ‘ANTIQUES’ ON MY SIGN?!?!”

“I guess some things never change,” said George, smiling.

Under a Light Blue Sky

By Acadia Kincaid

The coffee was a dark brown, almost a black, like the depths of a viper's eyes.

"Stop writing about coffee. That was not what I asked you to do," Mrs. Elspeth told me, sighing as she looked back down at her clipboard after smoothing down some stray hairs from her bun. Mrs. Elspeth was a stern therapist- don't get me wrong she definitely was kind, just in a loving strict way? Oh! And don't forget the soft sweaters she always wears that gives a hint of her secretly gooey inside.

"Sorry, sorry!" I said putting my hands in the air, "You're right, it was actually chai tea. Just checking if your new therapy book was put to good use."

"I'm a therapist, not a mind reader," she glared, "if I was a mind reader, we would be done with these sessions quite quickly."

"Ha. Ha. Very funny. You know, your charming attitude is my most favorite thing about you." That comment got another pencil mark on the board. Dang, I think I hit my own personal record on *How many marks can Mrs. Elspeth make on her clipboard today?*

"Wren," she looked back up, "what did you feel when you got the call at the coffee shop?"

"You mean when the police called to tell me my mother and father died in a car accident? Oh, and that my younger sister was in a coma because of a diffuse axonal injury?" I told her while folding my hands in my lap. "Yeah, it's kinda hard to write a poem about that."

Mrs. Elspeth's eyes saddened. "Wren, I'm so sorry. We've gotten so far... writing poems will help."

I started not to feel well. "I think I'm done for today." Mrs. Elspeth nodded as I picked up my bookbag and walked towards the door.

"Wren..." I paused with my hand at the door. A sigh, then, "see you tomorrow."

• • •

"Wren!" Alice calls me from down the hall. "Are you making lunch?" Alice questions as I walk into her room.

"Yes, does a peanut butter and jelly sandwich sound good?" I ask her, kneeling by her bed. I do not tell her that this is the second time she has asked me because I hate seeing her get upset, plus, this was a very rare moment that she wasn't suffering from a headache. I hurry to finish up the sandwich I was already making and run to give it to her.

"Mr. Jonathan will be here shortly to watch you. Today is a Tuesday so I will be with Mrs. Elspeth," I told her. She smiles, shooting me a thumbs up. Most kids her age would be in 8th grade, but due to her injury, Alice is a couple years behind. Mr.

Jonathan helps take care of us while also catching her up with school. I give her a small smile before getting ready to go.

Alice asked me if I

I

was doing all right.

I told her of course.

How can little

kind

Alice ask me

if I am doing okay?

I wrote this in my journal and handed it to Mrs. Elspeth.

“This is wonderful Wren.” Mrs Elspeth smiles and I shrug. Writing poems was hard. Mrs. Elspeth knew this, she knew that I can not hide beneath laughter when I write a poem. I guess that’s a little thing they teach at psychology school.

Suddenly, Mrs. Elspeth’s phone rings.

“Well please do go interrupt our session,” I joke as Mrs. Elspeth answers her phone.

“Hello? Umhm,” Mrs. Elspeth says. She holds the phone by her ear for a while before saying, “Oh no. Yes, we’ll be there right away.” Mrs. Elspeth hangs up the phone staring down at it for a moment.

“Your sister is in the hospital dear. She had a sudden seizure and is currently unconscious,” she tells me. “We can leave right away.” I nod wordlessly while she grabs her purse. Reality sets in and we both run to her car. I never felt comfortable in cars since that day, I hate how Alice must feel, especially since she was in the accident. *Alice is in the hospital.*

Unconscious. Again. Shhh, everything will be alright. I try to console myself while firmly holding the sides of my seat as if that could protect me from a car crash.

Mrs. Elspeth pulls into the hospital's parking lot and we run through the automatic doors.

"Mr. Jonathan said room nine," she said, counting the door numbers until we found the correct door. I inhale sharply as I see my younger sister lay asleep in the all-white hospital bed. Mr. Jonathan stands up from his chair when we get in. He backs away as I walk to her bed.

"She's going to wake up, right?" I ask, kneeling by Alice's bed, taking her hand in mine.

"Doctors said her vitals are good and she should wake up soon," Mr. Jonathan tells me. I nod while staring at Alice's calm face.

"Alice," I whisper, "wake up please, I already miss you."

• • •

I slept at the hospital that night. Well, lie. I didn't really sleep at all, and I definitely didn't go to sleep when Alice woke up at four in the morning. She was a bit confused when she woke up, I guess me repeatedly asking if she was alright didn't help either.

Alice ate pancakes for breakfast. She offered me some, but I declined.

"How do you feel?" I asked her.

"Good. I don't remember much, but I have remembered the last twenty times you just asked me that," she replied with a smile.

“Well at least you’re feeling good enough to tease me,” I joke.

After a too-long silence Alice says, “You know I can hear you cry at night.” I quickly look up at her. “After you think I’ve gone to sleep, when all the lights are out, I can hear you.” She looks down and rubs her hands together. “Mom always said to not hide your sadness. She said that it always made you sadder the more you pushed your feelings down. You can cry in front of me,” she says, meeting my eyes.

My voice gets raspy and I whisper, “I’m the oldest and I cry the most.” I wipe my nose, “How can I cry when you have it so much harder, Alice? I *hate* how most of the time you are the one taking care of me, it should be the other way around.”

“Wren, you’re not Mom or Dad, you don’t need to take care of me; you’re my sister and I think you are doing above and beyond what is expected of one,” Alice pauses, biting her lip, “and if it helps, I think you’re the toughest person I know.” She gains confidence and says, “You think crying is a weakness, but I think if you accept that you can cry sometimes, you’d be the toughest person in the world.”

“Do you cry?” I ask her, wringing my hands in my hoodie’s pocket, feeling a bit stupid.

She smiles and shrugs, “Maybe.” After that, we both look at each other and laugh. I wonder why I ever felt stupid, because in that moment we were together, and that’s all that mattered.

• • •

“Wren, come on!” Alice shouts from the backyard. It was mid-summer and definitely 100 degrees out. I pushed the backdoor open with two orange popsicles in hand.

I lay down in the grass next to Alice, handing her a popsicle. I finish mine quickly, but Alice licks slowly, despite the sticky drips sliding down her wrist. I rest my head on the ground and watch fluffy white clouds float across a blue sky. After a while, I felt Alice lay down too, and take hold of my right hand. I smiled because I, and I knew Alice could too, felt our mother lay down on my left and our father on her right, both clasping our hands tightly. All connected, we watched the blue sky get a bit lighter.

Your Friend, the Hero

By Annie Sun

In a land far from here, there lived a little girl.

The little girl lived in the second apartment on the seventh floor of her apartment complex, which was one of many in the bustling streets of the busy city. Her father worked as a police officer, and was almost always very busy. Her mother...well, she left them a long time ago, and she's not coming back.

The two of them don't like talking about her mother.

The little girl was the quiet type; very shy, and very sweet. She minded her manners and respected her elders. And she loved to draw. She would spend her time filling up notebooks with all kinds of pictures: pictures of serene flowers and calming fields. Pictures of imposing warriors and majestic dragons. Pictures of her home. Her father always called her his "little artist."

But the kids at school didn't know her as the little artist. They simply knew her as the girl whose mother left her. The girl whose father wasn't good enough. The girl who cried in fourth grade when her father couldn't show up for career day. The girl who doesn't talk. The girl who has no friends.

And no one tried to change that. No one tried to talk with her. No one sat with her during lunch. No one invited her over to play with them during recess. And she was too shy to ask or say otherwise.

And so, the thing the little girl liked to draw the most was heroes.

Heroes that would come down and play with her when no one else would.

Heroes that would stay and accompany her at home when her father was busy at work.

Heroes that would be her friend.

She liked to dream, sometimes, that a hero would descend from the sky and whisk her away to a place where the two of them could stay, drawing and laughing and playing. "It's just a stupid daydream," she would scold herself. "It's not like it'll magically come true."

One day, while the little girl was at home doing her homework, a strange figure appeared sitting on her desk. The little girl jumped and asked in surprise, "Who are you?"

The stranger paused, thinking. He simply replied, "I'm...a hero."

"A hero?" the little girl repeated.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for a friend," the hero said.

At this, the little girl grew excited. "Will you be my friend?" she asked, very politely.

The hero smiled amusingly. "If you want me to."

At this moment, the front door swung open and slammed shut as the little girl's father came home, a little earlier than usual.

"Honey, where are you?" he called.

"In my room, doing homework," the little girl answered, turning to face her doorway.

When she looked back at her desk, the hero had disappeared.

The little girl didn't think much of it after it happened. She dismissed it as her imagination and went on with her business. On the next day, however, she was sitting in the corner of the playground when a voice said, "Hello."

The little girl jumped and turned to see the hero sitting behind her, a playful smile on his face.

“Are you...are you real?” the little girl asked, for now it was the second time the hero had appeared.

The hero laughed pleasantly. “Of course I am, silly. So what do you want to play?”

The little girl frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, don’t friends normally play with each other?” the hero said. “So what do you want to play?”

“Um...” The little girl pressed her lips together and thought. She glanced over to where two kids were playing volleyball. “Do you know how to play volleyball?”

And so, it was from here that the two of them started to become very good friends. During recess, they would play all sorts of games together, and every day after school the hero would appear in her window to help her with homework, or just hang out and have fun. On the weekends, the hero would accompany her when her father was working. He’d make the little girl laugh, telling jokes and making up stories. The little girl would draw the two of them playing together, and laugh whenever the hero tried to draw as well.

Having a friend brightened her entire life. The little girl would smile more often, and she looked happier than she usually was. At first, the other kids didn’t notice. After all, who would pay attention to the quiet girl who draws all the time? But slowly, after some time, one kid noticed. A little boy, in the same class as the little girl. He noticed how her smile seemed brighter. Her laugh seemed warmer. She no longer hid in the corner of the classroom anymore, and even answered the teacher’s questions sometimes.

One time during lunch, the little boy sat down next to the girl and said, "Hi." "Hi," the little girl replied.

"I was wondering if you wanted to be my partner for the group project," the little boy said, rather sheepishly.

"Okay. Why?" the little girl asked.

The little boy blushed. "Well, you seem smart. And I noticed that you didn't have a partner yet, so..."

The little girl sat there, surprised. "...Oh. Uh, well, thanks. You seem smart too."

"Thanks."

That day after school, the hero was sitting where he usually was on the windowsill when the little girl came home. As she brought out her homework for the day, the hero hopped off and landed lightly on her desk.

"I heard you have a culture project for school," he said, tilting his head. "Mhm," the little girl confirmed, swinging her legs.

"Need any help on it?" the hero asked.

The little girl shook her head. "No, thank you. I already have a partner; a boy in my class."

"Oh, really?" the hero said, pleasantly surprised. He smiled a little. "That's good." He sat silently as the little girl did her homework.

Every day during class after that, the little boy and girl would work together on their project. As it turned out, the little boy liked to draw as well! The two of them would bring out their colored pencils and cover their poster with little drawings of different foods, clothes,

animals, and all kinds of other things. And while they did, they would chat. The little girl found that she had a lot in common with the little boy. He also didn't have a mom, instead living with his father and grandparents. He liked to draw big, scary dragons fighting against knights, monster squids attacking pirate ships, and alien ships battling each other in space. The little girl and boy quickly became fast friends.

On the day of the presentation, the little girl was nervous. She didn't like standing up and talking in front of the entire class.

"It's gonna be okay," the little boy said, smiling. "You've got me with you."

The little girl nodded nervously. "Okay."

The teacher called them up, and the two of them held their poster and stood at the front of the room. The little girl felt her stomach drop; so many eyes were looking at her! She shuffled her feet and glanced at the little boy, who nodded encouragingly. Then she looked up and noticed the hero sitting on the table at the back of the room. No one else but her could see him. He smiled, big and wide, and gave a thumbs up.

The little girl gave a little smile back, and took a deep breath. "Our presentation is about the different cultures of Asia."

With a pep in her step, the little girl skipped all the way home, a large grin on her face. The presentation during class had gone really well! Everyone in class loved it, especially the drawings. Some of her classmates even came up to her after the presentation and said they hadn't known she was so good at drawing. The little girl had blushed and said, "Well, my partner can draw too."

She hopped up the stairs to her apartment and burst into her room, expecting to see the hero sitting where he usually was. But when she looked up at her windowsill, he wasn't there.

The little girl put her backpack down. "Hero? Are you here?" She looked around everywhere. "Hero?"

"Hello," a quiet voice said.

The little girl jumped and turned around to see her friend sitting on her desk. "Oh, there you are," she said, and sat down in her chair. "Did you like our presentation?"

The hero laughed a little. "Oh, yes. It was very good. I can tell you two worked very hard on it."

The little girl beamed. But then she noticed that there was something different about the hero. He didn't seem as energized as he usually was, and his face looked...sad. Her smile faded. "What's wrong?"

The hero exhaled and looked out the window. "I...need to go." "Oh." The little girl swung her legs. "Where are you going?"

"Somewhere...far away from here," the hero said quietly. "And...I won't be coming back."

The little girl frowned. "Why?"

The hero turned to look at her. "You don't...need me anymore. I came to be your friend, but I also came to help you make your own. Now that you have a new friend, you can always make more. You don't need my help anymore."

"So you're going to leave me?" the little girl asked. A small tear formed in her eye.

“No, no, no, of course not,” the hero said gently. He slid off the desk and kneeled in front of her. “I won’t really leave you. Not if you keep me here.” He placed a hand lightly over her heart. “And here,” he added, lightly tapping her forehead.

The little girl giggled and sniffed. “Will you still be my friend?” “Oh, silly.” The hero smiled. “I’ll always be your friend.”

He faded into a light and whisked away in the breeze.

HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS

First Place: College, Cruelty, and Other Things That Eat People

By Hanaan Kazia

Fourteen days before she left, we were in her bedroom. I remember less about what was actually in her bedroom than the way it made everything look, the image it all created. For example, there was a curtain made of shiny tassels over her window that made the summer sunlight stream in in fractures and thready little beams, criss-crossing her face in golden lines.

“It’s so weird,” she said, probably for the tenth time, because it *was* weird. She was lying on her bed, staring straight up at the ceiling -- this I recall, since I was sitting on the floor. “I can’t believe I’m leaving.”

“Me neither,” I replied, honestly. I can’t remember what I was wearing, but I must have been fiddling with my sleeve. That summer day was not particularly cold or particularly warm; it was really nice, actually, but it sort of made everything feel worse. Like that day, it was the kind of summer you never really wanted to end. But it had to, because all things ended, especially summers.

Our town knew a lot about things ending.

Sometimes, the singular year she had on me looked like much more on her face.

I remember the nearly permanent crease of her dark brows, the pinch of her lips. “My parents are happy,” she said, like that was all that mattered; often, it was. “The town is happy. Or they will be.”

I remember frowning, because I always frowned when she said these things.

“Everyone’s going to miss you,” I must’ve said, because it had to be true; I would. “We always do.”

A strong wind buffeted the window, making it shudder. It was not particularly cold or particularly warm.

She smiled at me, sunbeam across pearly whites. Four years ago, she had braces to straighten out her relentlessly crooked teeth. I don’t think they were metaphorical, since her parents paid a fortune for them, but something in her nature changed after all those orthodontist visits; straightened out, too. “I can only hope,” she said, wry. “They’ll get to brag about me.”

“They’ll put you on the plaque.” I hated the plaque, I still do; a little trophy of the people who escaped the town to make it better.

“Mm.” She only hummed, shutting her eyes briefly. “The creamery is doing a new thing. Ice cream nachos.”

It seemed absurd for her, at this period in her life, to bring up ice cream nachos.

“What?” I think I laughed. I hadn’t cut my hair that summer. I remember how long it was, brushing over my shoulders as I shook with mirth. “What’s that?”

She sat up, shrugging. Her hair was shorter, cropped curls bouncing with enthusiasm she no longer had. “Like, ice cream on pieces of cones, or something. You wanna check it out?”

“I’ll pay,” I offered immediately.

Her smile stuck. “I won’t have any money to spend, soon,” she said. “Let me.”

Ten days before she left, it was very warm, true summer: boiling humidity, unforgiving heat, searing blue sky. We sat under the shade of the big oak tree behind her house, leaned up against the trunk. We used to carve the date every so often into the bark, like passing time was a thing to celebrate. Now, time was slipping through our fingers, like water, like little grains of sand. My hands were almost empty, but my heart felt like it was bursting, deep in my chest. I didn't say this. I never did.

"I think," she began, and then stopped. I turned to her, because I always did. "I think it'll be cold there."

I paused; not just me, but the whole world seemed to, like it had to hold its breath in reaction. "Do you?" I asked, noncommittal. I had a hard candy in my mouth, I think; this memory is colored in amber-coffee-caramel sweetness, and the library was giving out sweets that year.

"Yes," she said, quietly sure.

For all the talk of her leaving, we never quite acknowledged the place that she was going. It seems cruel, looking back; all the potential she had, enough to fill the dome of the sky, enough to get a dozen offers from fancy institutions and programs, only to throw them away for the place so close to home. Sure, she would be away from her parents, but she was still moving away in the image the town expected her to: eighteen year old girl, pretty, smart, a too-big heart, a life of giving. Of all the things I expected her to do, I never expected her to do something like this for the town. No one ever expected it; sometimes we could forget where we lived. Looking back, I should've expected it. I should've done a lot of things.

Looking back, that day was far too much, the sunlight was too harsh, the grass under our feet was too dry, the world was too contradictory. See: she had been a part of my life forever. See: she was leaving.

“You never liked the cold,” I finally replied, candy dissolved in my mouth. In my head, her future home was not just chilly, but dark. It would swallow her whole.

The set of her chin was a determined thing, round curve engraved like marble. “No,” she said, quietly sure.

Seven days before she left, we were in the grocery. There were two groceries in the town, still are: the big shiny one with all the name brands, and the tiny cramped one with every miscellaneous ingredient you could think of. I think I was looking over a frozen package of scallion pancakes. I supposed I would have to learn to live without the flatbreads she made for me: rolled and kneaded by small, sturdy hands, gently pressing dough into perfect circles.

She came from the side of the store with fruit, holding a bunch of rambutan. I always thought rambutan were more trouble than they were worth; harder to cut than lychee, and with half the flavor. But she loved them, maybe for how they looked more than anything: vibrant, like a strange lion’s mane.

She saw me holding the packet. My smile must have been watery, because of course she could decode every one of my smiles. She knew everything about me, because she closed me into a hug after seeing my face. I didn’t know everything about her, because I didn’t know why she left. I still don’t.

“I’ll leave you every single one of my recipes,” she promised. Outside the grimy shop’s windows, there were cotton balls of clouds racing across the sky at breakneck paces.

“You don’t use recipes,” I protested with a laugh that shook like a sob. “And I’d mess them all up.”

I remember the way her eyes crinkled up as she looked at me: brilliant, broken brown. “I’ll teach you.”

“You have a week.” “I’ll teach you.”

I could never argue with her, even as she turned away.

Five days before she left, we were elbow-deep in flour. Dough had clung to every inch of my arms: under the fingernails, onto the little hairs on my hands, over my palms. Somehow, she had pulled flour and water into tortillas. She told me that we could freeze most of them, I could eat them when she left. The thought made me feel nauseous.

There’s still a ziploc of frozen tortillas in my freezer. I haven’t opened them. I can’t.

Halfway through cooking the batch, it started raining. It was one of those summer thunderstorms that lasted maybe ten, twenty minutes, so concentrated that you could see the sun on the horizon while rain battered the earth. It was fierce, though, so fierce that the oak tree shook, that the window screens hammered against the glass. The lights flickered a few times. I remember looking up in concern. She kept flipping the tortillas, white and brown and flecked with charred spots.

Her mother passed through, looking over us to see if we kept the kitchen clean enough. As thunder rumbled, I flinched. Her mother clicked her tongue. "Soon," she told her daughter, "we won't have to deal with this."

She smiled. My hands shook as the house did with the next *boom*, as I peeled rambutan for her.

Four days before she left, she gave me a little ring of note cards, like the ones she used to study for those exams that ended up never mattering. In her curving, clever print, there were words in a flourish of colors and inks: *naan, pita, papusa, chapathi, shaobing, lavash, paratha, frybread*, a dozen others. Sometimes at the end of sentences, the writing went crooked, shaky.

That afternoon, there was a hailstorm. Ice chips fell, sharp as blades.

"I know you can do it, make them all," she said, beatific. I remember thinking that it wasn't fair, it all wasn't remotely fair. "Remember me when you do."

As if I could never forget her. There are a few things I am certain of, but there is this: I have never forgotten her, and I never will.

Three days before she left, we were not together, at least not in the morning. As dawn curled like a young flower on the edge of the sky, I drove out in my old, coughing car to the canyon. She loved that god awful car in its bright blue, wheezing glory, cracked leather sheets and faulty CD player and all. *Character*, she used to say, *it gives it character*.

The town looked funny when I drove out of it, just a few miles away. It looked so small, innocuous, ordinary, if not for the way the greenery sprouted just in its area, only to give away

to dry drubbery and warm rocky land. Maybe it was just some kind of oasis, you could think. I scorned this. I still do. It was so early that nothing had gone wrong.

To call the canyon 'a canyon' would be generous. It is generous. It's an orangey scar of the earth, a wound in the rock. This summer, it was a gaping scar, bleeding. That is not an exaggeration. At the edge of the gash, where it gave away to the fall, to the dark, there were little cracks appearing in the ground, spidering out like a woven web, colored dark rust-red. This happened every so often. The occasional geologist who took a passing interest in our town said it was some tectonic phenomenon.

If only. They always left. Those who can always do.

I stared into the dark from the edge, the tender cracks under my sandaled feet. I remember the early morning breeze, the way pink and yellow exploded into the sky, a blooming rose. I remember the almost coppery smell, I remember the way dust hung on everything. I remember looking. I think there might've been a river snaking down there, deep, deep, down.

Adulthood was the ordinary thief, the cruel, specialized companion of time. This is what I had grown to expect. This is what I had grown to know, to confront; it was coming up with my senior year of high school. Senior year -- what a strange way to speak of a young age. Look what her senior year gave her. Look at what it was taking from her. From me.

She's eighteen, I thought, so loud that it felt more like screaming. It was the first time thought ever felt heavy to me, felt like it had shape and volume and it could weigh me down.

She's eighteen, why does she have to be eighteen, why is it her?

The canyon which was not a canyon did not respond. It never did. It only swallowed, and then abated.

Two days before she left, we played her favorite music in my old, stupid car. I have a CD, still, with her writing on it. I feel like her handwriting is on everything, somehow. Maybe some things last forever. There was rain that day, but it was gentle, chaste. It was cruel.

Carry on, she sang in her off-key, beautiful voice. I remember it cracking. *If I'm not back again this time tomorrow, carry on.*

I could not if I tried, if I found whatever tied me to her and cut it with a knife. So I told her: *No, we will not let you go.*

The day before she left, an earthquake shook the town. The canyon crackled open a little more, wide as a grin, loud as a taunt.

The day before she left, I shook like the earth.

The day before she left, she was the most beautiful: golden and emboldened, knowing and final. I remember that she wore an old sweatshirt and jeans. I had never seen anyone like her then, and I don't think I ever will.

The day before she left, the earth quaked in only the border of the town. The earth quaked, calling for blood to water it. The earth quaked, like it always did every ten years, looking for a new adult to never know what it was like to grow up.

The day she left, I told her, "I wish you had just gone to college."

The town saw her off. This was a courtesy. Maybe an old teacher wished her well, maybe her parents hid their tears.

They put her name on the plaque: *Those who gave themselves for this town. We honor their memory.*

I could've cursed a thousand things. I wished she was a year younger, a year older. I wished I was a year older. I wished there was some courageous youth who hadn't already left the town, freshly eighteen, someone who could've gone to the canyon before she did. I wished that the town was not made of cowards.

The day she left, I could only curse her. I cannot remember the last thing she said. I only remember her smile: straight teeth, crinkled eyes, brow finally ironed out.

The canyon swallowed her with a smile of its own. I remember wishing that the river softened her fall, that she left with all the gentleness that she had lived.

The day after she left, it was an ordinary summer day.

Second Place: Unmarriagable

By Miriam Gale

I am forever forbidden from marriage.

It is a tradition, in our country, that has stood for years. Only the oldest two daughters of a family may marry. I understand why this is law—our country has been stretched almost to bursting in recent years. If we are not careful, the population may grow to be too much to sustain.

There are exceptions, of course. If one of the two Marriageables dies before her eighteenth birthday, the next eldest daughter is allowed to step up.

My mother had only the three of us. She always cautioned my older sisters to be careful, to not injure themselves. I received no such cautioning.

The tradition is older than I and I have known since birth that I may never marry. But I wonder, often, what if. What would happen if I could marry? What if I was not Unmarriageable?

What if I had been born only twenty minutes earlier?

I confess I can never halt my thoughts of such matters. I always wonder what it would be like to become a wife, raise a family, love.

When I was fourteen, I mentioned these thoughts to my mother. We crouched together in the garden, weeding around carrots and tomatoes.

My mother looked at me, appalled. “Lita!” Her voice was high and scolding, and she looked around in fear. As if the military would hear and take me away from her.

She lowered her voice to speak to me. "You must never think of such things, Lita! You know you are forbidden!"

"But Mama," I said, "I cannot stop my thoughts. I am always wondering."

My mother glared at me, tight and almost afraid. "If you cannot stop your thoughts, then never share them again. And you must *never* act on them!"

She held my gaze, her eyes serious, until I nodded in acknowledgement. I never revealed my heart's wishes again.

When I was fifteen, however, I fell in love with a boy. He hardly knew me. We went to school together. I was captivated by his dark eyes and black hair, by the way he could make anyone laugh.

He never noticed me. He knew my name, I think, but cared for little else about me. And why should he? I was, after all, forbidden from marriage. He would do well to know my sister instead.

After several months, he abruptly moved away. I nursed my broken heart in secret, unable to ever reveal my misery. No one noticed, not even my twin sister, who was often kept apart from me. She learned from our mother domestic work needed to be a good wife.

I received no such training.

When I was sixteen, I asked her how she felt about marriage.

"Are you excited, Sari?" I sat on the swing, rocking slowly back and forth.

She lay on the ground beside me, her skirts spread around her, staring up into the blue sky. "Excited? I can't say I am."

"Who do you think you'll marry?" I asked.

She shrugged, the gesture awkward from her reclined position. “How should I know? I’m still two years away from marrying age.”

I sighed, a little frustrated. “Even so, surely there is someone you like.”

“Hmm...” Sari didn’t think much of the question. “Not really. I’ll most likely end up marrying whoever our father chooses, so why should I worry about who I like?”

Before I could speak, she sat up, looking to me abruptly. “Marriage isn’t some fantasy, you know. I’ll probably be miserable.”

I stared at her in shock. “Miserable?”

She nodded. “I’ll end up with a brood of children who shriek and sob and squabble all day long. I’ll have to care for them every waking hour of my life, never given a second to myself.” Her eyes narrowed at me, and suddenly I saw something like bitterness in her gaze. “It must be nice to know you’ll never have to worry about *that*.”

I wanted to ask what she meant, but she was getting up and striding away before I could. She actively avoided me after that, and I never had another chance.

Later that same year my older sister Ilva got married. At the wedding, I sat on the end of the row. Sari was between my mother and me. It was clear who was the older sister, no matter how close in age we looked.

I watched Ilva walk down the aisle, but all I could imagine was myself in her place. Myself in a beautiful, elaborate gown. Myself smiling as my eyes rested on the man whom I was about to marry.

The ceremony went on. My vision blurred. Ilva no longer existed, only a fantasy where I was the one in her place, a handsome but faceless man at my side.

Every time the priest said my sister's name instead of mine it wrenched at my heart. I stared at the podium, where Ilva stood resplendent, and I began to hate her.

When I was seventeen, a young man only a year older came to visit us.

He smiled at Sari and me. "You are both beautiful," he said. His words were kind. In my imagination, the faceless groom began to resemble him.

Then he turned to my father. "Which is the elder again?"

"Sari," he said.

My mother was excited by the young man. She fussed over Sari, fixing her hair and her gown to make her look perfect. "He called you beautiful. He surely will choose you for his bride."

He had called me beautiful too. I was not fussed over.

The man came regularly. My father always took care to remind him. "Sari is the elder."

I was ignored. The groom of my fantasies grew faceless again.

Later in the year, a few months before my eighteenth birthday, Ilva returned for a short visit. My mother asked her about her life. She responded, laughingly, joyously.

I hated her even more.

At one dinner she spoke about her husband's awful fashion sense, and how she had to help him choose clothes to wear. She was smiling and chuckling as she explained.

I wanted to help a husband choose his outfit for the day.

Ilva turned to Sari then. "Husbands are a lot of work," she said. "Make sure you're prepared. Men can be so careless sometimes!"

Sari pressed her lips together. "Maybe I shall have to teach my husband to take care of himself."

Everyone laughed at this joke. I knew it was no joke. Sari did not want to take care of a man.

I would have worked my fingers to the bone for my husband.

After that dinner I went out into the garden to weed. My fury seethed. I ripped weeds from the ground, and I relished the ones that resisted.

It was all the more satisfying when I finally tore them up.

Ilva found me in the garden then. I could tell it was her. She was wearing the bangles her husband had given her on her wedding day.

I wished the bangles would shatter. I wished I could tear them from her wrist and fling them to the ground, stomp on them until they were bent out of shape.

"You must be delighted," Ilva said, flippantly.

Delighted? I was furious. I pulled a weed from the earth, hating her and her stupid bangles and even the man who had given them to her.

"Soon, your freedom will be guaranteed," she continued. Fully unaware of my feelings.

Freedom? She, as had Sari, dared to speak of freedom? In a few months my freedom would not be guaranteed. In a few months my life of isolation and ostracism would begin.

I would begin to wear the gray dresses reserved for Unmarriageables.

I hated that color.

Ilva crouched down beside me. Her bangles jingled. I pulled another weed from the ground, imagining I was ripping the bracelets from her wrist.

“You’re quite lucky, you know, Lita,” she said.

My eyes narrowed. I wanted to scream and hit her. I bit my tongue to stop myself. Blood filled my mouth.

“It’s exhausting, being a married woman,” Ilva continued. She reached out to pull up a weed. Her sleeve entered my view. She wore white, as if it were her wedding day again.

Those golden bangles shimmered and clinked together.

She added her weed to my pile. I hated that weed, simply for being touched by her. As she reached for another I said abruptly, “I don’t need help.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said. “It’s no trouble. It must be hard, tending the garden all yourself. Sari is busy elsewhere, I understand.”

Learning how to be a wife.

“I don’t need help,” I said again.

Ilva finally sat back on her heels. “Oh, all right. I suppose you know this work better than I, anyway.”

Yes, because I’d been doing it since I was a young girl. I knew it better than she and I knew it better than Sari. They had no need of gardening.

Not when they were going to be married.

Ilva stood. Her bangles clinked together. The sound clattered at my mind. I didn’t look at her, hating the bangles and cursing the owner.

“I almost envy you, Lita,” Ilva said.

I wanted to laugh in her face at her insolence. Envy?

“You won’t ever have to wish for your youthful freedom and innocence back,” she continued. “Sometimes I wish I weren’t married.”

She left immediately after that. If she hadn’t, I would have flung myself at her. I went back to weeding, cursing her and Sari and my mother for birthing me last.

My eighteenth birthday was approaching. My fate was all but sealed.

A week before my birthday, the young man came to speak with my father, privately. They came out together, smiling and chatting.

Sari raised her eyebrows at me. I ignored her look.

I knew what was happening. I went to the garden to weed. There were no weeds left. I had nothing to take my hatred out on.

The next day, Sari was found dead.

The next week, it was my birthday.

And the next month, it was I, instead of Sari, who married.

I went to my new home with my husband. The house was bare and masculine. It needed a woman’s touch. I carefully rearranged furniture and ornaments.

My husband was subdued. I let him be. He would get over Sari quickly enough. Perhaps he already had, and was showing sympathy for me.

I needed no such sympathy.

Soon after my marriage, Ilva came solely to speak with me.

“Do you miss Sari?” she asked me.

We were outside in the garden again. Except this time it wasn’t my mother’s garden. It was mine. She was wearing white again, her bangles on her arm.

I didn't hate them anymore.

"Yes," I said in response to her question.

That was a lie.

Ilva was quiet for a long moment. "So do I. She was so healthy and energetic... I never expected she would die."

Neither had she.

Abruptly Ilva looked up at me. "I'm sorry for you," she said. "I'm sorry that you've lost your freedom, especially after our conversation." She shifted, and her bangles clattered together.

Suddenly I hated them again.

"I don't mind," I said. "I don't feel like I lost anything." I pulled up weeds, sharply.

Ilva knelt to help me. "Neither did I, in the beginning. I was so eager and excited. But later, it got worse." She sighed. "You'll realize."

I didn't think I would. I had lost no freedom. Only gained a life, the ability to have a family and love.

She reached over, near me, and I saw those golden bangles. Something hot and painful filled my heart.

"When you do, you can talk to me," she said. "I understand what it's like."

How dare she talk as if she understood the years of loneliness I had seen in my future, suddenly and miraculously replaced with a husband and a family?

Ilva stood, brushed her skirt off. Her bangles jingled. "I'll always be here."

She wasn't.

She died on her way back to her husband's house.

"Two sisters in such quick succession," my husband said to me. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. "I will be fine." I was already fine. Neither sister had understood. Both had talked so callously about the thing I loved.

Three years later, I had twins. Two girls. The year after that it was a son. I had a husband and a family. I was content.

Then I got pregnant again. I gave birth to a third daughter.

She died soon after.

My husband was shattered by grief. "Don't you feel anything?" he asked. I seemed too calm. "Our daughter has died."

"One of them had to," I said. "Or two of them would, later."

He understood. Too well.

He died the next day, and I searched for a new husband.

Third Place: Plumbism

By Salonee Verma

What do you do when the world is ending? The apocalypse is supposed to arrive flamed and deafening, but the plague came quietly enough that it took three months for humanity to realize what was going on. Three months to finish a bucket list, except they didn't realize they were supposed to be finishing bucket lists and holding their loved ones. They kept working.

In January, Karishma waves goodbye to her roommate and rides the train home to Virginia Beach for her little sister's birthday. She doesn't come back.

Mum remains a librarian until the very last day. She comes home to the apartment with stories of children with blue fingers, and then takes three showers just to be sure.

Junior high doesn't close until March, so Pushpa walks to school every morning and hugs her best friend every day because she doesn't know which one will be her last. There's a time bomb there, but she doesn't know it yet.

Ba is the easiest, since he just stops coming home late at night smelling of machine oil and starts sitting at his computer all day, headset turned to the maximum volume.

And then, lockdown.

There are four of them. Nobody knows quite how long it will take the world to end, so like a murder of crows, the Jha family migrates indefinitely out of the city proper into the rickety house they'd bought when Karishma went to college.

A small interlude: this house is its own mythology. It has been at the beginning and end of the world so many times that it's lost count. It has watched the oceans come closer and closer, snaking up the beach like a strangle. It has adored and been adored.

Every so often, a family is lured in by the cheap prices and beautiful view overlooking the neighborhood.

Every so often, the windows scream with anticipation and the doors start to whistle.

Every so often, the house comes alive.

But they don't know this yet.

Karishma thinks suburbans are a more nerve-wracking breed than anyone in the Jha family is used to. They look away when they pass the house and no one smiles through a mask at them on the street

Pushpa slides her jacket on and goes out to play, but she comes back empty-handed.

"D'you find anyone to play with?" Karishma asks, looking up from her homework.

Classes have continued online, more overwhelming than ever. Karishma's English Lit professor doesn't seem to understand how to use Zoom.

"No," replies Pushpa, shrugging. "But you *have* to see the trees here, they're bleached at the tops. We couldn't see them in the city."

"Maybe some time after I finish this project, yeah?"

"Alright," says Pushpa, satisfied. She skips out of the living room to hang up her coat in the closet.

So, even though Pushpa always comes back without a hand in her own, she goes out every evening when the sun is just about to set. She says the trees are beautiful right then, that she thinks she could fall in love with them. Karishma doesn't really pay it any mind.

Ba disappears into his room for hours on end and comes back downstairs with a vengeance, cleaning every surface in sight with scrubs on. He stocks up with hand sanitizer and tries to isolate the entire Jha brethren inside the house.

It doesn't really work, because Mum is a social creature at heart. She doesn't have anyone to talk to here, so she goes out on morning walks and calls her friends in India at awkward times. She is restless, so she doesn't sleep.

The libraries closed down for substitutes first, so she can't go back to work. Sometimes she puts on two masks and makes the trek to the public library, where she picks up dozens of books and has to call Karishma to pick her up. She's not built for a life at home.

On the days it gets really bad, Mum jumps into the car and drives out to the sea, watching the birds flock to the pier. It makes her feel sick with anger. She hates the calm.

In April, Ba and Pushpa have their first real fight, a big one full of acerbic words slapped back and forth.

The entire house had been painted before they bought it with large, beautiful murals. The paint is gorgeous, but peeling off at the edges. Pushpa thinks it adds character. Her room is embellished with a forest of sycamores with faces. Ba thinks it's a safety hazard.

"You're going to get it in your eyes," Ba argues, slamming one of his hands down on the table. He sighs and takes a deep breath. "I'm your father. I know best."

"Do you *really* want someone new coming in here to paint our house, Ba?" Pushpa replies, shrugging to seem innocent. "I thought you didn't want to get infected."

Ba considers it. He tilts his head, then grunts. "Fine," he spits. "But I don't like your tone."

Karishma, at the moment, is trying her best to block out all the sounds with her headphones. Her discrete mathematics professor has given them five assignments, trying to make up for lost time. More than anything, she is tired. Out of the corner of her eye, sometimes, she sees tiny orbs of green light, like baby dragons bursting from their eggs. But it's just sleep deprivation.

Mum lays on her bed, staring up at the ceiling, which is painted with a choppy gray ocean. It's not a calm scene-- there are boats and sailors getting swallowed alike, birds divebombing into the water, sirens swimming to safety. On top of that, the entire thing is surrounded by flames. Mum still thinks it's suffocating. Sometimes, she can see the pictures move, the sailors opening their mouths to scream. It's much more interesting. It keeps her entertained.

Pushpa starts cooking in July, a little later than the rest of the world. After the first disastrous grocery trip outside, they've gotten into a system of rigorously cleaning everything that comes into the house. They make the trip to E-Mart every three weeks, where Pushpa's eyes light up whenever she sees something new.

She makes zucchini bread and every evening, she takes a slice out to the trees when she thinks nobody's paying attention to her.

One evening, Karishma calls her old roommate. They're complaining about the lead acetate class Karishma missed, since her Wi-Fi blacks out every now and then. They're so mesmerized in the conversation that Karishma only spares a tiny glance at her sister sneaking out, hoodie loose around her shoulders.

"Hey," Karishma calls out, muting herself. She smiles at Pushpa, watching the green lights sparkle around her sister's head. She wonders, briefly, how Pushpa managed to make them follow her around. "Come back before dark, yeah?"

"Yeah," Pushpa replies flippantly. She stuffs her hands into the pocket with a stolen slice resting inside. "I'll be back in ten minutes."

Pushpa's not back until dinner, but Karishma's so glad to talk to someone outside her family that she doesn't notice. She takes a few last notes and starts setting the table.

Sometimes, the fights get worse.

Mum and Ba are rumored to be a love marriage, but you wouldn't know it just looking at them. They're the type of lovers that would share mint leaves while dangling their legs off a skyscraper roof at night, and then wake up horrified at the prospect of spending their lives together.

After twenty years of monotony, they've gone bitter. Ba retreats further into himself, throwing everything he has into spectroscopic parallax and blackbody radiation. Mum drives off for longer and longer periods of time. They always come back to each other, though. They hate each other, but they understand each other. Hate's always a sister to love, anyways.

It's August when they have their most explosive fight. It's about Mum almost drowning in the sea last week and Ba forgetting to eat for two days. Karishma and Pushpa climb up to the attic and wait for the storm to subside.

The attic is painted creamy maroon, cheap gold accents bobbing the edges of the sloping ceiling. There's only one mural here, a tiny silver dragon breaking out of a fire. If Karishma looked closer, she would see that the fire was a pyre and the dragon was streaked with blood. As it is, she's too enamored by the way the dragon looks like an escape.

"Do you remember when we used to go to the beach on the weekend with Ba's friends?" Pushpa asks plaintively, dragging her feet on the hardwood. She's sitting on the singular wooden chair in the attic, gripping its leg tightly.

Karishma nods.

"Auntie said everyone thought they'd be in love forever." Pushpa's mouth turns down at this, like she's betrayed by the concept of transformation. "Do you believe in that?"

"No. People change, Pushpa."

'You're right," Pushpa sighs, stroking the leg of the chair lovingly. "Sorry. I'm just tired of them fighting all the time."

"It's just quarantine," Karishma says, smiling thinly. "Everyone's feeling it. When this ends, we'll be back to normal."

The thing about places of living becoming immortal is that they tend to become mercurial in their old age. This house, specifically, gets tired of one family living in it too long.

But they don't know this yet.

When Karishma lived on campus, she and Pushpa used to send pictures of birds back and forth to each other. It was an easy sort of conversation tactic. They've always been comfortable in silence with each other.

Nowadays, Karishma wishes she knew what was going on in Pushpa's mind when she's out all the time. So, she agrees to go with her to the forest just once.

As Pushpa pulls her down the street, the air is crisply humid. It clears her mind. She realizes that she hasn't seen the lights in a while. They don't follow her out of the house, most of the time. She misses them like a limb.

"Look," Pushpa pleads with barely contained excitement once they reach, about half a mile away from the edge of their neighborhood. "They're beautiful."

To Karishma, it just looks like a forest. They've grown their leaves, but they haven't gotten rid of that ghostly bleached look yet. The leaves are orange, too. It's too early for them to be turning orange; there must be lead in the soil. Karishma dropped her botany class last semester, but she remembers at least that much.

Karishma smiles at Pushpa and takes a picture of her hugging one of the smaller trees. It's not birds, but maybe they'll be okay.

While they walk back home, hand-in-hand for once, Karishma spies the orbs dancing on the first floor and smiles.

Although the Jha family is more often halved and quartered than whole, they come together each night for family dinner. They have a round table covered in flaking blue paint left over from the old owners.

Come to think of it, they never met the old owners, a family of seven ostrich farmers who had moved into the suburbs for a change. Everyone comes to this house for a change.

In March, family dinner had seemed like a novelty. They hadn't had a proper dinner since Karishma was fourteen and Ba used to come home early. It was exciting. Mum put a pot of rice on, Ba chopped cucumbers for a salad, and Pushpa set the table.

"So my teacher said we're going to cancel our poetry test," Pushpa said between mouthfuls, tapping her fingers on the table.

"Oh, wonderful," replied Mum. "Now that you have the time, you can clean your room."

Pushpa had pouted, but ended up smiling when Karishma put cubes of chicken on her plate. Ba told a story about some cocky engineer who couldn't shut up. Mum interjected with her search for a neighbor to be Pushpa's emergency contact. The neighbors hadn't been near their house since they moved in, but surely there were some around.

All in all, it felt safe.

In November, though, family dinner becomes a chore. They can't seem to get through a single one without a conflict.

"We can't eat this, Mum. It's burnt," Pushpa says, hand wrapped around the chair leg.

Mum wrinkles her nose. "Yeah? Why don't *you* make dinner?"

"Maybe she should," Ba retorts. He squints at his burnt rice. "This tastes so sweet. Sickeningly."

"You don't eat my cooking anyways, what do you care? You hate me," Mum says. She sighs and sticks her fork in her food.

"Stop putting words in my mouth." Ba likes to yell, but when he's truly angry, he's quiet and deathly calm.

What follows is the same thing that has followed every family dinner since August: a crush of brittle moments so vinegary they could curdle milk. Karishma orders pizza on her phone during a rare calm moment. Pushpa blinks back tears.

At the end, the house remains in love with narratives. It's melodramatic that way. Instead of dying as a singularity, the Jha family disintegrates.

Later, they'll find Mum's body washed up on a shore in Delaware. Later, a little boy will come across Pushpa's in the forest while he's exploring. Karishma will dissolve into a gorgeous green light, joining the halo of orbs surrounding the house. Ba will take the longest, but eventually, he'll melt into machine oil.

But they don't know this yet.

The doorbell rings. Delivery Girl is standing outside, shivering. She's a little disappointed that it's taking so long when it's so chilly. They better leave her a good tip.

But as time goes on, nobody answers the door. It's immensely quiet in the neighborhood--the lights have gone out. Delivery Girl swears. The air turns to tar. They're definitely not paying her enough to keep her working in a pandemic in conditions like this.

“Hey? Your pizza’s here,” Delivery Girl calls, rapping her knuckles on the door. “It’s real cold, man. Is anyone home?”

This house is infatuated with miracles, so it creaks the door open. It strokes Pushpa’s sleeping face with a wooden touch. She’s so fatigued nowadays. She doesn’t eat, she just offers her uneaten dinners to the grove down the hill.

Delivery Girl knows none of this. The wind is scraping her knees with kiss-tinted fists. The pizza has gone cold. She just wants to leave.

The house, unfortunately, has other plans.

What do you do when the world is ending? It depends if you’re the only one there to witness it. Apocalypse is supposed to arrive flamed and deafening but the Jha family stutters out of existence with a whimper.

But they don’t know this yet. Nobody does.

And in two months, the house will rise in anticipation once again as the Hassans sign a one-year lease for a cheap old house on the outskirts of Virginia Beach.

First Runner Up: Baby Birds and Black Dresses

By Maggie Chang

The cliff faced the winds of a hundred miles of the unbent stretch of the river in three directions, the joint of three channels of water, carving through the continent's oldest mountains lethargically, in the way that only a stream that has existed for millions of years — with no plans of suspending its life — can flow. Unhurried, unbothered, powerful. I sit above the intersection of hundreds of miles of landscape-altering strength and I am grounded by how small I am. There is no ability which I possess that could alter, in any way significantly, the land which I have grown up exploring. These mountains have taught me more than any but one person has ever known and articulated to me. The land embraces me in her bitter gusts of mountain air and wraps me in the shelter of her trees. This overlook, this view of the sky and the green peaks and the water crafted of fragmented mirrors, is my home.

From a branch above, a mother noses a fledgling towards the edge of the nest. It takes an apprehensive look back at her, but her chest is out, proud, and she does not hesitate. The child plummets to the ground.

The priest tells the children, as he told me when I was younger, that the church was the first structure built in our town. A beacon of hope. A place for families, a place for conversation, a place for friendship and love. My footfalls echo against the ancient walls, as if the stones themselves are acknowledging me. They know what has been lost. The string lights on the eaves were hung by a stranger. The hands that wound them around the familiar nails were new

and coarse, scratching what was once stroked, forcing what was once welcomed. The twenty-fifth of December will come in a matter of days, but Christmas is long gone.

I make it to my seat at the first pew before anyone dares look at me. I am five minutes early for the ceremony, but with everyone seated already, I might be an hour late. I am a nail poking through the plaster, abrasive and sharp, inconsistent with the straight faces of the church. They are quiet, their hands are in their laps. Mine are on my face, slick with tears. I have no makeup today. My grandmother will criticize it later. Now, I am glad that when I pull my hands away from my eyes, there are no black streaks on my palms. I wipe the grief on my skirt, smearing moisture on blackness. It fades away without a trace. Beneath the fabric, I feel my tears seep onto my skin, a private reminder.

After the final baby bird fell from the nest, the mother took off into the sky, only a few wingbeats behind her other children. I had seen each fledgling before the last take off almost immediately, soaring into the infinite sky and fading away into nothing. They have found their place in nature. The mother was gone, and the childhood of her babies ended indefinitely. They must face the bitter winds on their own.

Men in white clothing spoke without end. A lifetime ago, I could have told you the significance of each word they read from leather bound books. Desperate people find faith, I am told, but my desperation has only torn me away from it. They recite gospel and it sounds like poetry, beautiful and empty. The meaning of a moment exists in the eye of the beholder, but I saw no meaning when the beholder of my life was absent. The stringer of the Christmas lights, the maker of school lunches, the camper and the fisher and the hiker and the watcher of the sun and the moon and the stars. The woman who took me up on that cliff twice a week

since I was old enough to be safely carried and then walk alongside her. We went to see the sunrise, or the sunset, or the night sky lit by a full moon. She loved it all, the very marrow that made the bone of life worth chewing.

“My dear,” the priest said, and I was called back to the church. He was looking at me, straight into my soul and past it, into empty space. This man who had been a close friend of my family. “My dear,” he told me, “your mother was a gift from the heavens. We mourn her loss at this church, and in this town, and she will be missed.”

I swallowed a thick mass in the back of my throat and sucked back the languid stream of my nose. I did not wipe my tears. Watching the priest through a kaleidoscope of grief was fitting, and while each droplet distorted it, everything became more clear.

“You cannot take the sting out of death,” he said, “Without taking the love out of life.”

The nest of birds on the cliff had been full of chirping, fuzzy hatchlings all of December. Birds are not supposed to be born in the fall. Mothers should not leave their children.

The wake was a swarm of black dresses and gray and blue suits bound with the vaguely pressed ties of men that owned only one. Hair, tamed in gel, that normally resided, tucked away, under a baseball cap or wool hat. A buffet, which I did not touch.

“We loved your mother,” said the Baker couple, who owned the cafe on the east side of town. I thanked them, and moved to step away, but the wife, whose name I cannot remember, stopped me. “Tell me, dear, what are your plans for the future? Now that you are not bound to our little town? You are eighteen, correct?”

I shook my head, frustrated, but corrected to a nod after the woman frowned. I was eighteen, which she knew, and so my gesture was accurate, if contradictory to my mood. “I

have plans," I mumbled and escaped. My mother was a binding, thought Mrs. Baker. My mother weighed me down.

I slipped into the basement, where some distant cousins and family friends' youngest children were playing ping-pong. Since my brother and I were their age, this same table had not moved from its bed on the concrete floor, embraced by shelves of hardware and knick-knacks within a stride of each side. We once stood, impressive heights of four and five feet at ages eight and eleven, playing the same game they were playing. We were better. We were the originals.

The table was on the opposite side of the stairs from the workshop. We were ping-pong age; we were not allowed near the "dangerous" equipment. That never stopped my brother and I, and it would not stop me now. The panel behind the circular saw, on the singular finished wall in the basement, was still loose along the seam of the bottom right corner. I crouched, wedging a flathead into the crack, and popped open a space just wide enough to squeeze through.

Pushing cobwebs out of my path and squeezing my mouth shut to spiders, I could almost feel the cold of the flashlight on my scalp, my brother balancing it on my head as he forced me to walk before him on the day we first discovered the tunnel. The echo of my own footsteps could have been his, a foot behind me. When I reached the panel, splintered at the base from the day it got stuck and my brother had to kick through it, I pushed it open easily and stepped into my own basement. The silence in the empty house was more than an absence of sound. It dripped down the wood paneling and stained the beige rug, its unfamiliarity soaking into the floor beside the brown splash of beer my brother dropped when he was sixteen. I told

Mom it was Coca-Cola. The silence flooded the bathroom tile, rushing over the purple splotch on the grout where my brother killed a spider for me when I was fourteen—too old, he said, to not be killing my own spiders. The silence lifted into the air in ringlets of steam, and I inhaled it, and I wept.

In my room upstairs were three boxes and two suitcases, each two-thirds full of my worldly possessions. My car keys were on the dresser, next to the lamp by the light of which I once read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *Diary of a Spider*.

What I did not tell Mrs. Baker — what I had not told anyone but my grandmother— was that, in deferring my acceptance to college in order to take care of my mother, I had requested a semester, not a full gap year. In October, when Mom was bedridden and everything had fallen apart in exactly the way I predicted and dreaded, I knew I would be gone in three months. I had known since the bulbs rose as blossoms from the ground, almost a year ago, when we had to drive toward the city to visit a bigger doctor's office. I started to count the time we borrowed — from God or from death, it made no difference the name of the bank — since the moment I saw the mammogram. I felt it in my gut.

I could blame myself, thinking it was the surety of her death in my mind that brought it to conclusion, but that was superstition and faith. Faith, I knew, was a lie we told ourselves to sleep at night. Churches were centers of community, not places of God. They were warm buildings where children hugged their mothers's legs and songs taught them how to dream and hope and plan. They were tethers to the sky when the tide of reality dragged you downstream. They told you everything you asked for would happen, and if it did not, something better was in

the works. In many ways, I still believe this. In many ways, this is true. But as plans change, dreams die, and the long end of the stick can still be too short.

In less than two weeks, I would be sitting in a dorm room, California sun pooling onto the floor, two thousand miles away from the icy winds and stone church walls.

Six hours ago, I was sitting on a cliff, watching a baby bird be thrown out of a nest. She was unprepared. She wanted to stay, I knew from the darting of her tiny eyes, but she could not. Her mother was leaving the nest, and she would either learn to fly or splinter into a splatter of tiny bones, delicate feathers, and an unbeaten heart, crushed on the stone from the weight of the world.

Many fledglings die on the drop from their nest. They are not ready, or not willing to make themselves ready. The act of spreading their wings has not been taught to them. Discovering it is more daunting than letting gravity carry them to the end.

I would return to the intersection of the rivers the night before I left for California. I came back to the only place in the world where my childhood still lived. As I sat beneath the branch where the baby bird fell on the morning of my mother's funeral, though the nest had already been picked apart or scattered by the wind, I could see it above me, the carbon of the morning still pressed into my mind.

I watched the child fall again.

She turned and twitched in the air, making a thousand movements in a thousandth of a second, then, finally, opened her wings.

Second Runner Up: Coffee, Kardashians, and Teenage Demons

By Teah Sargent

That night, beyond all else, was honestly a blur. I can't remember anything that led up to our sloppy attempt at summoning a demon, other than getting so wasted that I thought it was a good idea to summon a demon. Most would look at my situation and wonder why one would get drunk and attempt to do such a thing. Why not puke, pass out, or go have a fling that results in the worst mistake of your life and eighteen years of unrelenting commitment and financial strain? It was my idea, to begin with, though my befuddled friends thought it was a spectacular plan as well. My drunken intentions were fueled by the ever-present rage I felt that night, the same rage that inspired me to go partying (as I am not a party person in any respect). Just an hour before I got dressed up and ready to get wasted, I made the pleasant discovery of my boyfriend of four-plus years cheating on me with my sister.

The summoning itself was beyond anticlimactic. My friends and I hobbled over to the women's restroom, where we proceeded to draw a pentagram on the floor using an old red lipstick my friend once said: "made her feel sexy." After our pentagram... sort of pentagram... was complete, we put our cell phone flashlights on and arranged them where the corners of the star met the edge of the circle. The classic setup had been completed, all that was left was some form of demonic chanting, of which none of us knew. In the end, we settled for a botched attempt at singing "Baby" by Justin Bieber. If you can imagine, five women in cheap club outfits crouched around the most disgraceful pentagram one has ever seen, singing "Baby", while flailing our arms to mimic cultic dancing. All of this being done in a women's

restroom at a club that smelled like stale wine, sweat, and desperation. Needless to say, no demon was summoned that night, and we returned to the dance floor defeated.

By the end of our venture, I had a splitting headache on top of crippling exhaustion. My last unaccompanied friend left in a taxi, and I sulked at the bar, having remembered why I came here in the first place. I swirled my tenth glass of water in my hands, watching the bartender tidy up his area before the next wave of drunkards approached. We conversed a little, though I'm sure he got tired of hearing my sob story. My make-up was running down my face, my sparkly dress clung to my form having been plastered with sweat, what was left of my nice curled hair had fallen flat, and above all else, I really needed to use the restroom. The club was emptying, the only remaining patrons were the bartender and myself. I went to use the restroom before heading home... home. *He* would be there, the cheating scum who degraded me to using a lipstick pentagram. I hadn't gotten the courage to kick him out yet, having stormed out after our argument, I went straight to my friend's house, got dressed up, and here we are now. I returned to the bathroom, the lipstick star was still there, though badly faded from foot traffic. The bathroom was still musty, stickers and graffiti-covered the walls, though there was this heavy presence I felt before leaving the restroom, something that simply felt off. I promptly brushed this feeling off, justifying it with the alcohol, and I called a taxi to take me home. The drive was slow, painful, every landmark I passed and recognized on the path home made me feel queasy. I didn't want to see him, his face, I didn't want to look the cheater in the eyes. The eyes I had once admired with such great ferocity. The eyes that once entertained me for hours on end. It hurt to even imagine.

It was 10:00 a.m., at this point my boyfrie-- ex-boyfriend, would be up playing Call of

Duty or some other senseless game. When I unlocked my door I fully expected to see him, half-clothed and splayed on the couch with Cheeto crumbs all over himself, but I didn't. I entered the house, it was dark, the only light coming from what little crack there was in the blinds. The television was on, and the brief flashes of color coming from it illuminated a silhouette on the couch. My greater instincts told me to turn around and leave, something wasn't right, but I convinced myself that it must be my ex.

"I want you to pack up your crap and leave right now! I'm calling the cops if you don't!" I shouted out. My threat was only responded to by silence. I approached what I thought to be my ex, but as I got closer to the couch, I was gravely mistaken.

Lying on its side, arms folded and face intently focused on the TV, was a creature I couldn't even begin to describe. Somewhere between a boy bander and Satan. There was a boy, who looked not much older than seventeen, dark bangs swooped over one eye, the only exposed eye a glaring red. He had small horns on his head and a pinkish-red skin tone, however, he was mostly covered by an oversized sweatshirt and black sweatpants. What I thought to be a tail hung limply by his side, a spade at its end. The creature turned to me, "Took you long enough, I've watched every episode of the *Kardashians* twice now, and it's as awful as my father says it is. No wonder he uses it as a punishment," it quipped. I stood in awe, unable to formulate a proper response. The boy's voice was venomous, every word felt so flawlessly unsettling.

"Who... what... why. I...?"

"Look, you summoned me. Remember? You and your girl scout troop. You wanted me, and here I am. Stop staring at me like you just saw your boyfriend sleep with your sister."

I glared at the demon, only to soften my gaze upon the realization of what he just said.
“I summoned you? How?” I questioned.

“Are you gonna be stupid this entire time? Do I need to play it back for ya? Because I’d rather not have to listen to you belt “Baby” again.”

“No, I just figured-- well... Don’t you have to put an actual effort into summoning a demon, I mean, I didn’t think lipstick and phone flashlights were... I don’t know... good enough?”

“They aren’t, that is why you have me,” the demon explained. “And who are you?” I asked.

“I’m the son of Satan, Prince of Hell, and I really don’t want to be here. Dad said get a job, he threw me with you, and now I’m stuck. Thanks, idiot.” I couldn’t believe it, there is a demon on my couch... calling me an idiot.

“Where is my boyfrie--”

“Ex-boyfriend. I disposed of him, like you wanted.” “What! I never wanted-- what did you do!”

“For the second time, I killed him, just like you wanted. You didn’t have to say it aloud, you summoned me, and deep down you wanted to watch him suffer. But you took too long, so you didn’t get to watch. I have it on film if you want--”

“Oh my god,” I muttered while sinking to the ground. My body shook with the rapid pace of my shallow breath. “Why me?”

“You were the only one with motivation to summon me, so, naturally, I was sent to you. On top of that, my father thought offing some chump to satisfy a drunk girl would be simple

enough for me not to screw up.”

There was a long silence between the two of us before the demon added, “You want me to kill your sister too?”

“NO!”

I sat down on the couch, rubbing my forehead, praying this is a dream.

“You know, praying is quite rude. You clearly didn’t think to pray before summoning me, now I’m here, and you’re going to worship my worst enemy? That is harsh, and I’m from Hell.”

“Will you shut up kid!” I cried out.

“Kid? Excuse me, old lady, I’m 21,700 years old, I won’t have a 25-year-old human telling me to shut u-”

“What did I just say! Shut up!” I yelled. The demon went quiet and stared at me, flicking its tail in what I can only assume is agitation. “How did he die?” I asked, a soft pain in my voice that was present enough for myself to notice.

“I booped him in the nose and he went to la-la-land,” the demon retorted. I glared at him once again, prompting him to add, “I figured you’d rather hear that than what I really did. Boy, it was amess!”

We continued to sit in silence before he snaked his hand back over to the TV remote and turned on the *Kardashians*. I felt the same heavy presence there as I did in the restroom at the club, now with an overwhelming sensation of guilt. Sure, he cheated on me, but he didn’t deserve whatever the demon did to him. *The demon*. What am I supposed to do with him now? I can’t just harbor a demon in my house. Besides, if he did what he was sent to do, why hasn't he left yet?

“You owe me, by the way,” the demon stated without breaking eye contact with the television.

“Excuse me?”

“You wanted to know why I haven’t left. You owe me, and I won’t leave until your debt is repaid.” He spoke as if he read my mind.

“I didn’t know there was a debt when I summoned you. Additionally, I didn’t even really want to summon you.”

“That is cold. But, yeah, um... you’re in serious debt.”

“And what is it that I owe?” I questioned further.

“Your soul.”

His words hit like a brick, I lost breath and felt the buzzing return to my skull. “Soul for a soul. That is how this stuff works,” he added.

“I didn’t know...”

“Of course you didn’t, if you did you wouldn’t have asked me to kil-” but before he could finish I cut him off.

“I didn’t want you to kill him!” I cried out. The stress of the day was overwhelming enough, and I’m definitely not prepared to give my soul to some demon I’ve known for less than an hour. Taking heed to the tears that were falling off my cheeks, I wiped my face in a desperate attempt to appear as if I was still composed. I noticed the demon's facial expression change from one of indifference and slight annoyance to something I might have interpreted as sympathy. His tail flicked ever so slightly, his posture reminded me of a cat, observant and inquisitive.

He sighed and mumbled, "This is why my father hates me." I looked up at him, the conflict evident in his face. I was unsure what he was about to do, but I knew it wasn't right.

"Look, I can make you a deal. You can keep your useless soul, it's yours to be burdened with. I do need payment though..." the demon looked over me judgmentally, I squirmed under the heaviness of his gaze. "Every Sunday, 10:00 a.m., I'm going to come back here. I want a cup of coffee, three tablespoons of heavy cream, and a sprinkle of sugar," he demanded.

"That's it?" I inquired suspiciously.

"Well, no. I'm also going to need you to have someone with you when I arrive. A friend, stranger, doesn't matter. If I'm not taking your soul, I'm taking theirs," a grin spread across his face, all the while mine contorted in horror. I had to make a deal with the devil, well, his son to be specific. I was left with a choice, sacrifice myself, or countless others. Everything I had learned about moral righteousness, every ounce of my humanity, I had to use it all when weighing my options. So I did the only thing that made sense, the only choice one can make if they find themselves in my position. Now I only have one small issue: who do I start with?

HIGH SCHOOL
HONORABLE MENTIONS

It's Just Not Wright

By Anvitha Yalamanchili

"Show yourself, beast!" the man called into the cave. Silence.

The man wandered farther into the cave, a sword in one hand and a shield in the other.

He was a noble knight, here to slay a beast that resided in these caves. The beast was said to have the wings of a dragon, the body of an alligator, the skeletal face of a banshee, and the teeth of a python.

The knight wandered deeper into the cave and soon he heard a scuffling sound.

He held his shield closer to his body and raised his sword up in defense, "Come out and face me!"

Suddenly, the entire cave lit up like a lantern, and a shadow walked out behind the knight, soon followed by the beast. The cave shook with every thunderous step it took.

"Staying for dinner?" It called out with a deep, gravelly voice and a sinister smile.

The knight whipped around, his face painted with shock, awe, fear, and courage all at once.

The creature cleared its throat, "Ahem. Sorry, are you staying for dinner? I make a mean caesar salad," it asked. This time, its voice resembled that of a teenager.

The knight looked at it with confusion, "I'm sorry, what?"

"Are you staying for dinner? I never get any guests down here, and when I do, they usually run away screaming as soon as I say hello. I wonder why," frowned the beast.

The knight simply blinked silently in shock.

“Hello? Is that a yes to dinner?” questioned the dragon-alligator-banshee-python.

“Aren’t you supposed to be trying to eat me?” the knight queried.

“Why would I do that? Human meat is so gross,” asked the creature, confused, “If I wanted non-veg today, I’d look for a deer or a mountain lion. Humans taste way too unnatural. It’s probably all the artificial sugar, coloring, and growth hormones.”

“Artificial?” the knight blinked, still processing everything. “Oh, we’re not in the 1900s yet?” the creature asked.

“I- what?” the knight furrowed his brows.

“You guys haven’t started counting years yet? When even are we? Wait, don’t answer that. Judging by your clothes, I’m guessing, like, medieval times?”

“I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean,” the knight scoffed, “You’re spewing nonsense. Is this some type of confusion tactic? To distract me?”

“Why would I want to distract you?” the creature responded with annoyance, “You’re the one who broke into *my* home. And if we are in medieval times, why don’t you talk like Shakespeare?”

“I don’t know, plot convenience?” the knight responded, “Who’s Shakespeare?”

“Don’t worry about it,” the beast sighed, “Anyway, are you staying for dinner or not? Because if you’re not, you’re kind of just wasting my time here.”

The knight stood up straight and proud, “I am Bartholemew Wright, a noble knight, and I’m here to slay you. I will not be staying for dinner.”

“Look, kid,” the creature rolled its eyes, “That’s not gonna happen.”

The knight scoffed, "You don't even sound like a beast, this should be easy." "I don't think judging me based on my voice is very knightly," the creature countered, "And you sound pretty arrogant and misogynistic."

"I don't even know what the second word means," Bartholomew narrowed his eyes, "What's your name? I'd like to know the name of my enemies before killing them."

"You can call me Freddy," Freddy replied, "Do you have a nickname or something? Like Bart? Or Barry? Bartholomew's kind of a mouthful."

"Call me whatever you want, you'll die soon anyway," Bart responded arrogantly, "and Freddy doesn't sound like the name for an intimidating beast such as yourself. I was thinking you'd be a Hawk or a Gregory."

"You're the one that goes by Bartholemew Wright," Freddy shot back, "And Gregory? That doesn't sound intimidating at all. Sounds like a grandpa's name to me."

Bart rolled his eyes, "Either way, Freddy doesn't sound right."

"You mean it doesn't sound Wright?" Freddy wiggled his eyebrows.

"Did you just make a pun with my last name?" asked Bart in disbelief, "That was unbelievably corny."

"How'd you even know? Right and Wright sound the exact same," Freddy replied, "You're acting like you're reading this in a story or something."

"Well that'd be something," muttered Bart, "And anyway, what do you even do in here all day? Practice being intimidating?"

Freddy scoffed, "I don't need to practice. I'm just that awesome. What do *you* do all day? Annoy someone else?"

“At least I act like I look,” Bart countered, “You look like an evil beast and act like an insufferable child.”

“I’d rather look and act differently rather than look like an arrogant man with a superiority complex and act like an arrogant man with a superiority complex.”

“I don’t have a superiority complex, I just am superior,” corrected Bart.

“You’re just proving my point!” Freddy exclaimed, “I feel bad for whoever gave birth to you.”

“Well, I feel bad for whoever gave birth to you!” spluttered Bart angrily.

“No one gave birth to me. I just, like, poofed into existence or something,” Freddy shrugged, “Or maybe it was a plop. Actually, no, it was a zap.”

“Well, I have twelve toes!”

“Ew, why would you tell me that?” Freddy questioned. “To prove that I’m cooler than you,” shrugged Bart.

“It wasn’t a competition!” exclaimed Freddy in annoyance. “That’s what they want you to think,” Bart claimed.

“What who wants you to think?”

“The hierarchy,” Bart stated as if it was obvious.

“I live in a cave! I’m not part of it,” Freddy said, annoyed.

“They’re always watching you,” Bart says eerily, “And you need to watch that ‘pit hair. It’s disgusting. For someone with the body of a reptile that doesn’t grow hair, you have a lot of it.”

“You’re insufferable,” Freddy pinched his nose and shut his eyes in annoyance, “I don’t even know why I invited you to stay for dinner.”

“Speaking of dinner, I’m pretty hungry,” said Bart.

“Well then maybe you should’ve agreed to stay for dinner when I asked,” Freddy said.

“Hmm, can I agree now? We can fight later or whatever, I’m starving,” Bart rubbed his armor-covered stomach.

“Why not, I have caesar salad for two,” shrugged Freddy.

“For two? You knew I was coming?” asked Bart.

“Nah, but I always make dinner for two in case I get guests,” Freddy explained, “Even though I never get them anyway.”

“Now that’s just sad,” Bart shook his head, “And wasteful. Freezers haven't been invented yet.”

Not Broken

By Dani Vitello

The silence was heavy as we walked into the church, as if a wet blanket was draped down on everyone. It wasn't complete peace. I could hear only the sound of an organ playing faintly in the background. We walked into a pew, my dad, my sister, and I, and sat behind a man who seemed to be in his late fifties. Everyone was silent as we waited, perhaps waiting for an answer from God, or just waiting to use the confessional like my father, like my sister, like me.

Time moved both quickly and slowly. I could count the seconds that I waited but then see that we moved forward in line by a whole pew. I passed the time by staring up at the altar, looking at Jesus as he was crucified, seeing him immortalized in granite and gold; I couldn't help but think that he wouldn't have wanted to be crowned in gold—why would he?— when people are starving and the people who could help did nothing?

I felt a tap to my knee, startling me out of my thoughts. My sister motioned to me that we were going to be up soon. I breathed in deeply, catching a whiff of the incense that filled the church, and nodded.



Time went by too quickly. Parker, my sister, already went and did her confession, Dad was currently doing his, and here I was, running through what sins I am going to tell the priest. *Fighting with my sister, accidentally hurting my dogs, saying curse words both inside my head and out loud.*

I could hear my dad's footsteps coming from the direction of the confessional. I look up and see him nodding at me, and then to the restroom, a silent way of saying *'I'm going to head to the bathroom while I wait for you.'*

I gave a slight smile, which to me, felt more like a grimace, as I walked by him on the way to the confessional. It had a plain white door with a small light above it. It was green for now, but when I go in, it will turn red.

The room was small, barely large enough to be even called a room, with only part of a pew in it, the kneeler and the screen, where the priest sat on the other side. On the wall, there was a note card with the different ways you can finish your confession; I normally went for the shortest one.

"Good evening."

I kneeled down upon the plush kneeler and said, "Good evening, Father."

"May the Lord help you to confess your sins," he said through the screen.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned. It has been two years since my last confession." I paused, "As for my sins, I have fought with my sister, I've hurt my sister with words, and I've accidentally hurt my dogs, by stepping on their feet or tails, saying curse words in my head and out loud, and saying His name in vain.

"Oh, and if the church believes that asexuality is a sin, then that as well." I don't know what compelled me to blurt it but I regretted it as soon as it came out of my mouth.

"Do you mean to say that you had sex?"

"What? No!" I gave an involuntary shutter. "It just means that I am not sexually attracted to *anyone.*"

Then there was a short, tense silence, then, “Yes, I believe that would count as a sin. I would suggest going and talking to someone on why you are rejecting God’s gift to you, and how to fix it?” Fix it? *Fix it?*

There was a million things that I wanted to say;

“Why would someone need to fix me? I'm not broken.”

“If God made everyone in His image, then He must have been the one that made me ace!”

“My parents accepted it, why can't *you?*”

But I stayed silent. I said the closing prayer and “Amen,” and I thanked the priest and the Father for their guidance. I stayed silent as the anger, the spite, the feeling of: I was expecting this, but I didn't expect it would hurt so much.

I know God has a reason to make everyone the way they are, so why can't people understand? Why do people get to say that what I identify as is a sin? What gives them that right?

So I made a voiceless promise to myself that whenever I go to a Catholic church, my heart will be filled with spite and determination saying; “I am here. Even if you say I'm a sin, I am here, unbroken.”

I will sing their hymns and prayers, I will kneel before the cross and do the “Father, son, and the holy spirit.” I will do all of those things and never repent for being ace because I would rather be in Hell for being who I am, than to be in heaven, and be someone I'm not.



I step out of the confessional, and see my father and sister waiting for me. “Ready to go?”

I nodded and plastered a small smile on my face, as if there weren't cracks where my heart was. I could see my sister looking at me, trying to figure out what was wrong.

The walk back to the car was a quiet one, and once we were in it, dad put on some sports station to ease up the silence that hung over us like a woolen blanket.

I was looking out the window to the cemetery we were passing, when I felt my phone buzz.

Parker:

You okay?

Me:

Guess what?

What?

My whole existence is a sin in the eyes of the Catholic church

I'm sorry :/ we don't believe everything the church preaches obviously

If God is truly who they say he is, then he loves everyone no matter what



It felt good to tell her; even that little bit helped. I could still feel the anger, but it was sizzling inside of me now, cooling off instead of burning. It felt a bit funny now, making that cruel promise to myself, but at the same time sort of right. Perhaps, I will go to church with my parents, but I won't drown in anger. Maybe instead of making that priest's words something that doesn't fester inside of me, I use the time to think about things and people I care about.

I don't have to agree with *anything* they say about people, people like me, people like my friends. And I won't agree with anything they say if it's about another person, if it's something a person is or is not allowed to do, or if they say someone is superior to someone else, because I know that deep down none of that is true. Maybe they are lies told by men who want to seem stronger or more powerful than they are.

Then the garage door was opening and I snapped out of my thoughts.

Retrospection seems to have some strange time warping powers or I just didn't realize how fast getting home truly was.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I look up, still hazy from going deep inside of my brain, to see my dad asking me a question.

"There's nothing interesting, I assure you." I said, stepping out of the car.



It was after dinner when Parker found me alone. I was up in my room, reading, when I heard a small knock on the door.

"Come in."

She stepped in hesitantly, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine." I said, putting a piece of paper in my book.

"You don't have to lie, you know." My eyes caught hers then, searching for something. Maybe some sort of tell to show it was a trick, but I found none.

"Fine. Fine! I'm not okay!" I broke her gaze then, feeling more defeated than before, as if I was a marionette and someone cut my strings. "The priest said something to me when I was in confession."

I could feel her watching me, waiting for me to go on. The bedframe squeaked a bit, as her weight settled down upon it.

“For some reason, my brain thought it was a *fantastic idea* to come out to the priest. And you know what he said? He said that I should go talk to someone and figure out why I'm rejecting God's gift and how I should fix it. *Fix it-*” I cut off as I held back a short, choked, gasp and felt my nails dig into my palms.

“Sam, you don't need to continue telling me, if you don't want to.” She laid her body next to mine, me on my stomach, her on her back.

“No, *no*. I'm fine.” I said, “ The worst part is that I wasn't expecting it to hurt so much. I mean, I *knew*. I *knew* that Catholic churches are like the least accepting of LGBT folks, but it still *hurt*.”

“What do you mean by that?” “Mean by what?”

“How are Catholic churches the least accepting?” I raised my head and looked at her, and she just stared back at me.

“They think that men should not lie with another man, same with women. I mean, come on! You would think with the ‘Love thy neighbor’ and stuff they would be fine with it, but no!” I paused, collecting my thoughts, “They are right up there with the Mormons as least accepting.”

“Well, at least we're not Mormon,” she offered, as if a light joke would help ease the tension from my rant. It kinda worked, for a moment, as my quiet chuckles filled the room. Once it wore off, we lapsed into a comfortable silence.

““So, you're pretty much like my rainbow sister,” Parker said, staring up at the ceiling.

“I'm not gay though?”

“My purple sister then,” she nudged my shoulder, so naturally, I nudged her back. This eventually turned into a nudging war that had left me on the carpeted ground of my room, with both of us wheezing for a breath.

“Moron.”

“Idiot.”

“Dork.”

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”

- ***Peter 4:8***

The Target

By Varunika Miryala

I concentrate. Aim. Fire. The shot booms in the quiet air and strikes the target, right in the heart. A woman's scream follows, and the target falls to the ground with a thud.

Unflinching, I move on, my brown eye peering at the next target, and I repeat the steps.

Concentrate, aim, fire. A scream and a thud. The sounds repeat three more times until I have pierced every target's heart.

"Pause shooting," a voice speaks into my ear through my headset. "You are finished with your duties for today."

"Yes, sir," I say in a monotone voice and walk past the fallen dummies I shot, out of the practice firing room. The doors automatically open, detecting my presence, and I enter the armory. I place my rifle in a glass case and exhale. The screams. *They were so realistic*, I think. I shudder off the memory and turn toward the exit, joining the river of people flowing through the hallway. I am just about to slide into the cafeteria when someone yanks me to the side.

Rex smiles again, in his unique way that puts all my emotions to rest. He pushes his reddish-brown hair away and lowers his voice to a faint whisper. "Come on, let's go to the Den."

I nod my agreement, and we change direction. The Den is a small pocket of woods, impervious to the scanning technologies of East Zone's military center, Command. It is a place where Rex and I can talk freely about Command, without having to fear someone overhearing us and reporting us. It's not that we don't support Command—of course we do, not only for the

fear of our lives, but for the prestige. We discovered the Den in the nearby forest when we were younger. The woods are a beautiful place; birds chirped and leaves rustled when rabbits or squirrels ran across them. It was a change from Command's blue, futuristic-looking hallways and rooms, the sunset-orange walls of the practice firing room, and the constant, low hum of machinery whirring.

Rex and I put our Command-issued SmartWatches in our rooms to avoid tracking and head out to the Den. We sit down and make ourselves comfortable, when Rex asks,

"So, how was the training session?" When I didn't reply, he said, "I can't handle the screaming. They replicate it so well."

I feel a small jolt of surprise, since admitting weaknesses is frowned upon in Command. Rex must have seen me bristle, since he laughs and says, "Come on, Moira. We're out of Command now. It's just us. And we can tell each other anything, right?"

I give him a small smile. "Right. I guess I just got used to the screams," I lie. "Well, you're brave. I don't know if I'll ever get over them. No wonder you're the best in the class. Or in the history of any war training class. You'll definitely be promoted early."

"I'm 18. A soldier-in-training is promoted to soldier at 21," I stress the number. "That's a gap of three years. I won't be promoted that early."

"You still have to accept that you're extraordinary, Moira," Rex says, then changes the topic.

Rex and I continue to talk and relax for a while until the light starts to fade. We head toward Command, avoiding the cameras, and go to our rooms to reactivate our SmartWatches. My SmartWatch immediately beeps. A message appears, and I read it out loud to Rex.

“Soldier-in-training Canum, your presence is requested in the Command Awarding Room at 1800 hours.” I face Rex with my mouth wide open in surprise. “I’m called to the Awarding Room!” I say excitedly. Then I regain my monotone composure. Expressing emotions is not looked on favorably in Command.

“What?” Rex says, looking as if I told him what I ate for lunch, although I can still detect his enthusiasm. “That’s amazing!” he adds with a little more emotion.

The only reason I would be called to the Awarding Room is if I’m being awarded.

In my case, I can only be given one award: being promoted to an official Command soldier. There have been rumors of promoting me early, but they remained rumors; now, they might become true.

“It's 5:50! Go!” Rex urges.

As I tread toward the Awarding Room, I finger my long, black hair. My mother always tells me it is beautiful, but I hate it. It constantly reminds me that I’m not a soldier yet, for true soldiers have perfectly trimmed buzz-cuts. *That’ll change*, I think. *Maybe even right now*.

I shift into a rigid, soldier personality and open the doors to the Awarding Room. I expect to be whisked off to an office to complete the boring paperwork required to become a soldier, but instead, I am greeted by Commander Thale, the commander of the entire East Zone military and equivalent to the president.

I urge my mouth not to fall open as the commander addresses me, “Soldier-in-training Canum.”

“Yes, ma’am. I mean, commander.” I stutter, and give her the East Zone salute.

“You’ll be coming with me today,” she orders, and strides out. I snap out of my astonishment and follow her.

As we walk, Commander Thale explains, “I wanted to meet you personally, Canum. You are very impressive at a young age, and you are close to becoming a soldier. Yes,” she affirms as my eyes widen. “But there is one final test to prove you are ready.”

The commander exits the Command building and leads me toward the residency areas. She tells me to crouch in a bush, and hands me a gun. As I am about to ask her what I need it for, she points to a man sitting on a chair on his porch and says, “See him. He is your target. Shoot him.”

“What?” I stammer. “Did he do something wrong? Is he a traitor? What—” “No. Soldier-in-training Canum, you have your orders. Shoot. Him,” she enunciates the words. “No more questions.”

As I aim at the man, a horde of thoughts rushes in my head. *Who is he? Why does she want me to shoot him? Can I shoot him, and just walk away? A small voice says, Can I handle this?*

The aggressive part of me jumps in, *Of course you can.* It tries to lower the importance of the action. *Come on, Moira. Just think of this as practice in the firing room. Concentrate, aim, and fire,* it encourages me.

The logical part of me pushes further. *You can’t ignore a commander’s orders.*

You need to become a soldier. You need to do this.

Finally, the voice I’ve tried so hard to hide, whispers, *For the power.*

The small voice starts to speak, but it's too late. The shot rings out, and hits the man, right in his chest. He slumps down, and after a second, doesn't move. He went quietly; he didn't scream like the targets in practice, which makes it worse. He couldn't react. He didn't know he was shot by a person sworn to protect him. I fight to stifle the noise coming up my throat.

Commander Thale speaks, interrupting my thoughts. "Good. I have to say, I'm impressed."

I try to rejoice—after all, the *commander* is impressed by me— but I can't. Not when I can see the man's lifeless body. I gulp down my anguish and squeeze out, "Thank you, Commander."

"You are free to leave," she releases me, and as soon as I am out of her sight, I take off. I sprint with no sense of direction for a few minutes, trying to outrun all the guilt and shame taking over me. Then, I head to my room and plop down on the bed, only sitting for a couple of hours until a chime from my SmartWatch reminds me it's time for bed. I crawl into a sleeping position and will my mind into a state of numbness and tranquility.

Sleep was not pleasant. My guilt chewed me from the inside more easily than when I was awake as I lay in the bed, helpless. I writhed as nightmares racked my body as I watched the man, the clueless, innocent man, slump down and close his eyes in slow motion, the man who had no reason to die so horribly. The man I shot to further my career, to gain more power.

I wake up in a pool of cold sweat. *Power*, I think. *All I wanted was power*. My guilt swelled. I never confided to anyone, not even Rex, what drove me to become a soldier. Power pushed me. I relished the feeling of control; I craved the ability to make anyone do anything. Of

course, a soldier doesn't have much power. Becoming one was only a stepping stone to the real position of power: Commander.

But I have no interest in power anymore—not if it makes me feel like this. Now, I am not sure if I even want to become a soldier. I silently applaud all the soldiers who were able to overcome this test; they are brave. But I cannot step out of the military now. I would lose my reputation and be seen as a weakling. So I decide to make my life as normal as possible.

For the next month, I attended all the required war-training classes and shot all the targets perfectly in the practice firing room. I talked with Rex, went to the Den, and slept, still trying to quell my nightmares. After a while, I convinced myself that the man was just an unliving target; someone in the practice firing room, just more realistic than the usual mannequins. The frequency and cruelty of my nightmares reduced, but they never stopped. I anticipated a soldier job offer, but I never received it, which didn't hurt me. My thirst for power had long evaporated. I began to feel like a normal soldier-in-training, when I was called to the Awarding Room again.

"No," I whisper to myself. "Not again." But I know better than to ignore the order. So I dawdle to the Awarding Room, my guilt and terror and shame growing bigger with every step.

This time, when I arrive, I'm taken to the actual Awarding Room. It is a huge space with a stage in front and seats facing the stage, similar to an auditorium. The seats are filled with medium- and high-ranked military officials. *What's happening?* I wonder, looking at all the important people. *Why are they here?*

An assistant leads me to the stage and instructs me to stand to the right. After a few moments, Commander Thale comes out from the left.

“May I have your attention, everybody,” she says through a microphone. The crowd quiets down. “Thank you.

“We are here today because of the promotion of soldier-in-training Moira Canum.

She has shown exceptional skills and promising talent. She has proved that she can become a soldier. But I believe she is more than that.” She gives me a smile that makes me nauseous. “I believe she has the potential to become something more than just a soldier. I think she is ready to become a general.”

I could not hold my surprise. My eyes widen and my mouth drops open. My eyebrows shoot up as I let out a gasp. A general was one rank below Commander. Everyone looks around incredulously. A general at 18! I am the youngest to accomplish such a feat. I am brimming with pride when the commander continues.

“Canum has proved she can follow any orders, no matter how outrageous,” Commander Thale says. “Usually, soldiers-in-training are ordered to shoot an enemy. But Canum shot an innocent man when I ordered her to.” A few gasps go around the room, and some faces look shocked. Only now, I notice my family—my father and mother— and Rex’s family, sitting in the front row. I look away in shame as Commander Thale keeps going.

“Although she has proved exceptionally well, she is about to be promoted, at a young age, I should add, to General,” She pauses. “And she needs to be able to handle the pressure of such a responsibility. That requires another special test.”

An assistant comes out from backstage and hands me a gun. *The test*, I inwardly groan. The commander snaps her fingers, and two assistants come out holding a person in between them.

“Soldier-in-training Canum, you are required to shoot this person to be promoted to the status of General.”

As I face who “No,” I whisper. “Not him.”

Commander Thale orders me to shoot my best friend, my closest confidant, the only person in the world who truly matters to me.

“Rex Wharter,” the commander confirms. “Shoot him.”

I look into Rex’s panicked eyes. As soon as I make eye contact, his eyes soften. *For me*, I think. *To calm me. It’s okay*, he mouths. He knows that if I refuse to shoot him, not only will my career end, but also my life. They won’t kill me, but they’ll ridicule and torture me so that I wish I’m dead. I glance at Rex’s family, who look devastated and scared. They’re scared. *Of me*, I think. *Of what they think I could do to their son. How could they think I would do that?* A part of me didn’t blame them. After all, I had shot an innocent civilian. What says I wouldn’t shoot their son?

I shift to Commander Thale, who watches our exchange with a look of interest. *She finds this funny*, I think. Anger swells inside of me. I wish to punch her, to wipe the smug smile off her face. *This is all a game for her. A source of enjoyment.*

I glance back at Rex. As I hold the gun, a horde of thoughts rushes in my head. *How can I save him? How can I shoot someone who would sacrifice themselves for me? How can I shoot Rex?*

The voices in my head begin to confer.

We’ll lose being General! We’ll lose Rex!

We’ll lose our life!

After a few moments, I reach a verdict. My palm begins to sweat as I grip the gun. I concentrate, aim—*you're just in the practice firing room, I calm myself, and you're shooting a target. An already lifeless mannequin—* and fire.

The shot rings out and punctures the heart. The victim drops dead. Once again, it's perfect.

Complete silence. I imagine everybody is too shocked to say a word.

Then, chaos breaks out. Some people are clamoring toward the stage, some toward me, but I am too quick, and I slip out in the confusion.

As I run, I exhale, fully realizing the extent of my actions.

I shot Commander Thale.

No One Can Hear You

By Ilana Goldman

Gregg Finney awoke alone between the satin sheets of his king-sized bed, torn from sleep by the sound of his screaming daughter. Not that this was out of the ordinary; little Isla's night terrors had become something of a routine for the family of two, just another norm of six-year-old parenthood.

Single parenthood, the widower reminded himself, that distinctive floral scent of Elizabeth Finney still blanketed over her untouched belongings. His Eliza hadn't been sick; not in a million years would she abandon the only family she had left if the battle was hers to fight.

No, it had hurt so much more.

Gregg's thoughts were interrupted as half-orphaned Isla's wails only grew, so he rolled off the mattress with a hefty sigh, futilely trying to rub the drowsiness from his eyes as he carefully descended the first set of stairs.

Some part of his heart tugged as Isla's cries continued to echo throughout the house, still beneath him even after he'd reached the first floor. To many people, Gregg supposed the idea of keeping a child locked in the basement of your home was rather strange—concerning, even. He himself had not initially been fond of the idea, but God knows he did it only for his daughter's own sake. The day one's mother passes should never be endured as a young child, much less a six-year-old girl unfortunate enough to have gotten the full, uncensored version of things.

It was a memory he visited often.

Fluffy rain, Isla had called it. In short—snow, ripe for sledding. As soon as Eliza got home from work, they'd find the tallest hill in town, Gregg promised.

The universe had other plans.

DING-DONG.

Isla looked to him with confusion.

He bit his lip, then said with a gentle smile, "Why don't you go find your earmuffs? The pink fuzzy ones?"

The girl hesitated, but—ever the short attention spanned child—offered a mirroring grin in confirmation and dashed off.

His own beam faded when he beheld the pair that waited for him on the other side of the front door.

"Greggory Finney?" a uniformed officer—the first visitor—questioned. "Husband of Elizabeth Finney?"

A nod.

"You may want to sit down," suggested his travel companion—a doctor?

Gregg glanced over his shoulder, then ceding, "I'm fine. What's going on?"

The medical examiner and officer exchanged a look.

Finally, "I'm terribly sorry, sir. Your wife was in a car accident today. She was pronounced dead at the scene."

The words took several minutes to comprehend.

No.

What?

No.

He... had just held her. Had just heard her laugh and seen her smile and watched her cherish their daughter. And now she... she was...

No.

No no no no no—

A gentle tug on his pant leg brought him back.

Little Isla—with her bouncy curls and pink fuzzy earmuffs—stared up at her father with wide, fearful eyes, only voicing one question: “What happened to Mommy?” He could only gape as the six-year-old’s eyes moistened at the lack of response, and she asked again, “What happened?” She buried her freckled face into the fabric of his pants as the tears took on form, the cries leaked out, repeating over and over in a cascade of choked snivels, “What happened, what happened, what happened?”

He had no words.

None.

What do you say to a child who’s just lost their mother, their youth and innocence? He was barely keeping it together himself, and yet...

Gregg’s eyes found their family portrait hanging next to the door, a joyful moment in time of two parents and their daughter cradled between them, each smiling wider than ever before. The same girl now clung for life to his leg, traumatized, as though he too would slip right through her fingers.

That was enough.

He heard, more than felt himself say, "It'll be okay, Isla." She blinked up at him for a brief, fleeting pause, again shoving her face into his embrace with fitful sobs. "I'll protect you."

From that moment forward, he'd sworn a vow to, by any means necessary, keep his daughter from meeting the same untimely fate as his wife.

So he had locked her in the basement.

And she had not stopped crying since.

Gregg quietly approached the door that separated them as Isla's wailing waned into a soft whine, stopping entirely as exhaustion overpowered her and the final lock clicked open. A thick layer of dust danced on the narrow stairs as he crept down, sure to avoid the spots that would groan under his weight so as not to disturb the now-slumbering girl below.

Frowning as he instead seemed to step *directly on* those creaking joints, Gregg scolded himself for not remembering the exact footholds, which turned into a daunting realization as he tried to recall the last time he'd come down here.

The autopsy, he reminded himself; right after he'd first initiated this particular course of action. But how long ago had that been? After that was the funeral, then the reception, and...

Oh God.

Gregg raced down those stairs, squeaking *be damned*, and desperately surveyed the room for any signs of life, of the little girl whom he'd left down here in the dark, thrown to the jaws of this nightmare-ridden abyss—

But there she was, just where he'd left her, curled in the corner while her father fell to his knees, whispering a breathless cascade of apologies. Isla didn't stir, though the single parent

wasn't looking for any sort of validation, simply content to be in her presence as she rested peacefully.

The next few nights resumed in a similar manner, the girl on the floor unresponsive as Gregg told stories of her once-mother, complete with various failed attempts at what were once Isla's favorite dishes. *Never really been one to cook*, he thought with regret as he routinely replaced the untouched meals. Still, his daughter would not meet him in the eye.

Still, her screams grew.

Each night brought a new nightmare, and though he had received no word of these dreams that continued to haunt her slumber, each one seemed increasingly worse than the last.

Days turned into weeks, weeks to months, and Gregg saw no changes in his daughter's wordless resentment, her stillness all the indication he needed to keep his distance. It was understandable, he supposed; it wasn't uncommon that a child's failure to see the bigger picture would lead to bitterness of some degree. But the empty house, still cursed with the phantom of his dead wife—of Eliza—was in no way an easy place to live while his daughter rotted away in the basement.

So he stared at the young girl whom he'd raised and cherished, gently placing a palm on the crook of her shoulder, and spoke.

"I know it isn't easy," Gregg heard himself say. "This isn't the life your mom and I wanted for you, not ever. Accidents... accidents happen all the time. Mommy just wasn't able to fix this one." No response, so he went on, "I hope you know just how much she loved you and,"—he bit his lip—"...and I'd do anything to be in that car instead of her. So she could be

here and you could laugh again.” He watched as his fingers wandered to the crown of her head, brushing those wavy locks so similar to that of his wife’s. “Say *something...*”

Gregg looked down at his closed hand, some sort of clump having found its way inside. He blinked at the fistful of hair, when something in Isla suddenly shifted, and for the first time since he’d confined her to the basement, the father smiled—muscles aching with disuse—reaching out with a cry as she turned to face him...

But the yellowish skin along her cheek peeled back, the thin locks in his grip still attached to her scalp tearing further as the body slumped down with the weight of gravity. He let out a sigh at the sight of her disfigured head, ignoring the familiar rotting stench as he returned the limp figure back to its original position, then rising to brush any lingering maggots off the front of his sleep pants. “Maybe tomorrow, then.”

And so Gregg Finney once again returned up the creaking stairs, past the three smiling faces of a family portrait taken lifetimes ago, and to his bed, unbothered by the sound that continued to plague his memory—the sound of a forgotten girl’s anguished screams when her father had left her alone to die.

The decomposing skeleton in the basement remained silent.

Earth's Halo

By Sophie Matthews

If anything good can be said about the end of the world, it would be that I am ridiculously prepared. Guess Baba's crisis training paid off. *God*, I miss them.

Baba left two months ago, on the first manned mission to Mars. I cannot fault them—that was their lifelong dream. But my baba is my world. Or was. I do not know if they are alive, but if the spaceships dotting the sky like goddamn mosquitos are any indication, Baba is dead, and I am completely alone.

That is not entirely true. Auri, my long-loved cat, nudges my leg. Baba got him for me for my eleventh birthday, right before they started their nine year, extremely rigorous training program for the Mars mission. He is getting pretty old.

My phone buzzes. My heart leaps in my chest. It is an automated message. I have gotten the same one countless times before: *You have one (1) new message. Please visit your local International Space Agency office to review it.*

Of course. I get a message from Baba, the last one I will ever get, and I cannot even listen to it.

The closest I.S.A. office is on Market Street, miles of downtown Philadelphia away. The roads are packed; I can hear the car horns from here. I doubt the subway is working.

But I have to try.

I grab my backpack, freshly void of college textbooks, and close the apartment door for what will likely be the last time. Auri jumps up and settles on my shoulders as I twist the key in the lock.

I almost leave it there. I will not have use for it again. But I pocket it anyway.

The apartment is on the third floor. I do not bother with the elevator. Thirty-seven stairs later, I step outside. The wind roars in my ears, whipping my hair about and sending jagged blue bangs over my eyes. I shove them back.

The street is quiet. Eerily so.

Cars sit abandoned. Some idiot tried driving on the sidewalk to get around the build-up. They got their hood wrapped around a fire hydrant for their trouble.

Auri jumps onto the wreckage. He trots along, leaping from car to car. At least someone is happy.

He pauses with a *mrrrp* at the corner we usually turn on when I take him for walks. I click my tongue. He runs over and jumps back onto my shoulders. His purrs roll down my spine in waves.

I take the subway. I know it is not working the moment I step underground. The usual soul-rattling thrum is absent. Bags sit abandoned on the browning tile floor; no one in sight. I swipe my metro card. The turnstile clanks, letting me through.

The trains may not be running, but I have travelled this route dozens of times before. The orange line will take me beneath Broad Street for a couple of miles.

I stand on the edge of the platform, just past the black and yellow warning lines, the tips of my feet suspended above the chasm. I jump down onto the tracks and turn on my phone's flashlight.

"You see this, Auri?" I point at the third rail. It looks as innocuous as the rest, but it is pulsing with lethal amounts of electricity. With the trains dormant, it might be deactivated, but I am not willing to find out. "Stay away from it."

A rank smell wafts up. I wrinkle my nose and try not to breathe it in. Blackened bags of chips and other litter I would rather not think about crunch underfoot.

At one point, I think I hear voices: "It's this way, Gem. The map says—"

"No, Tommy. You're reading it wrong. It's this way."

But they fade as I keep walking. I never see their faces; I have no clue who they are or what they are trying to do. I do not know if that is a good thing.

The darkness around me begins to lighten ever so slightly. My phone says I have walked just about a mile and a half—I am here. Well, almost.

I find the maintenance ladder on the side of the platform. Once up, out of that hole and away from that murder-y rail and its deadly trains, I can finally breathe freely. The air freshens slightly as I climb the stairs, but I am still in downtown Philly, so the air is not great. The scent of cigarettes lingers long after their smokers are gone.

Auri drops down and trots to keep up with me. He looks up every so often, as if checking that I am still here.

We step out onto Eighth and Market Street. The sky is rapidly darkening, filled with tiny, black spots.

The explosion blinds me for an instant.

Fighter jets rip through the sky, leaving trails of smoke in the clouds. The only sign humanity is putting up a fight.

One by one, they all disappear in fire.

I set my jaw. One Liberty Place looms, only a few blocks away. Two Liberty Place sits just behind it, slightly shorter. I am too close to turn back now. I resist the urge to break into a run.

“Come on, Auri.” I set off briskly. My eyes are trained on the sidewalk in front of me, sometimes drifting down to check on my tabby, but never up.

I make it to Two Liberty Place. The door is locked. My heart drops. My nose stings a bit. I blink back tears. “Come on. You’ve got this.” I give myself a pep talk. “It’s just a stupid door.”

Taking a step back, I look around. Aside from the frame and handle, the door is entirely glass. I grab a rock from a topiary bed and fish a screwdriver out of my backpack. I kneel down and position the tip at the bottom corner of the glass. I tap the handle with the rock, like Edmonia Lewis chiseling the faces of Minnehaha and her star-crossed lover.

Cracks spread from the tool’s head to each corner.

The glass shatters. I flinch as it rains down on me.

“Auri?” I pick him up and look him over. “You okay, buddy?”

He looks fine, just annoyed at the sudden inspection. I set him on my shoulders.

My heart thuds in my chest. I do not think I can take this much longer: this uncertainty. I *need* to know what is in Baba’s message and I need to know *right now*.

The I.S.A. office is on the fortieth floor. That is too high up to take the stairs. I have to risk the elevator. I cross the atrium and press the call button. I just pray it is working.

The elevator dings. I step inside.

As I get higher, I start feeling more and more sick to my stomach. I am half convinced my face is turning green. I do not want to get close to the spaceships in the sky. The taller the building, the bigger the target. Skyscrapers like this one will be the first to fall.

But we reach the floor, and the door slides open.

The entire level is devoted to Philadelphia's International Space Agency office. It is empty. And I am alone.

"Miaow?"

Right. I am alone, at the end of the world, with my forever-loyal cat.

There is a desk by the window, overlooking the tiny parking lot and a lineup of food trucks far below. I sit heavily in the chair.

Auri climbs down and curls up in my lap, his little face tucked into his tail.

The guy who usually helps me with this is not here, but I remember the steps: login, username, password, long complicated non-disclosure agreement, scroll through the data that makes no sense to me, and then play the message.

The cursor hovers over the button, my finger hovering over the mouse. The world freezes. A century passes between each of my heartbeats.

What if it is something I do not want to hear? What if they are gone?

What if Baba is gone? What do I do?

Where do I go?

Auri grabs at my wrist and gnaws it playfully. His weight pulls my finger down.

The mouse presses *play*.

"Hey bean," Baba's voice radiates from the speakers. I almost cry at the nickname I always claim to hate. *"I miss you. Give the little man my regards."*

They mean Auri.

"I...I don't know if you will get this. I kinda hope you don't. I don't want you crossing the city on your own. Who knows what kind of chaos is going on down there right now?"

"I guess you do."

"Look, I need you to promise to be careful, okay? I know I promised to be home for your birthday, but I don't think I will make it. But I need you to make it. Okay?"

"Baba..." I cannot stop myself this time. Tears slip out of the corners of my eyes.

I wipe at them with my sleeve.

"You've got this. You can survive. I believe in you. I always have. Believe in yourself now."

They pause, listening to a voice just out of range. *"I know Maura, but I'm talking to my kid. I need just a couple more minutes."* A pause, and then, *"Sorry bean, but I, uh, I have to go soon."*

The other person—Maura—comes closer to the microphone. *"Sacha, I'm not kidding. We're out of time."*

"No, no, no, no, no." It cannot be ending. It cannot be over. I need them. I need them.

"It's gonna be okay." Baba says. *"I promise."*

"Baba, no. Please, no." My voice cracks.

"I love you, Halo."

The recording ends. It is over. They are gone.

I do not know how long I sit there, but when I finally stand, my knees creak in protest.

I have always been afraid of failing, of letting people down. Baba is relying on me. They need me to make it.

I have to make it. For them.

There is a small balcony. I step out onto it. The wind caresses my hair. Auri follows me out.

The sun is setting. I can see bits of fiery orange on the horizon.

I sit on the edge, slipping my legs through the railing and letting my feet dangle.

Auri sits beside me. His tail curls around my wrist. We watch the sun set on the life we knew. But it will rise again tomorrow.

And so will we.