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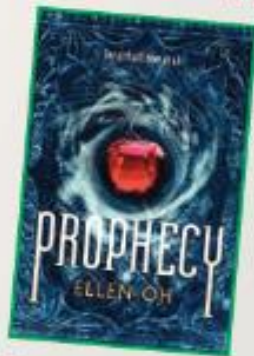


SATURDAY, MAY 12, 2 p.m.
Brambleton Middle School
23070 Learning Circle, Ashburn, VA

The Prophecy trilogy author will discuss her "We Need Diverse Books" movement and announce the winners of the It's All Write teen writing contest. Book sale (courtesy of Second Chapter Books) and signing after the ceremony.



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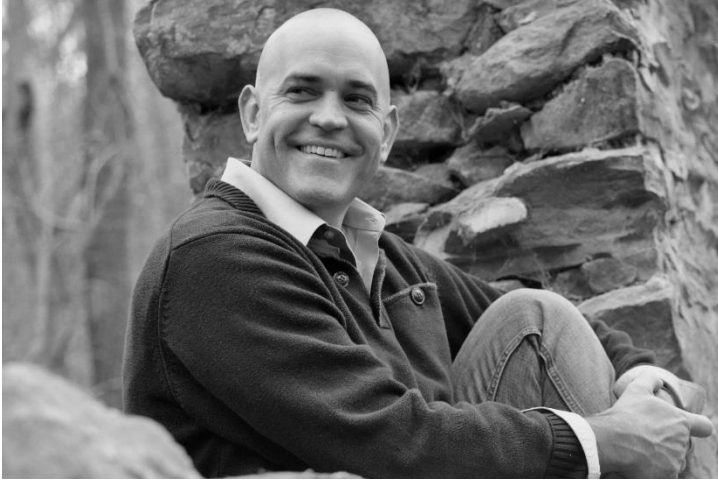
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Ernest Solar has been a writer, storyteller, and explorer of some kind for his entire life. He grew up devouring comic books, novels, any other type of books along with movies, which allowed him to explore a multitude of universes packed with mystery and adventure. A professor at Mount St. Mary's University in Maryland, he lives with his family in Virginia.

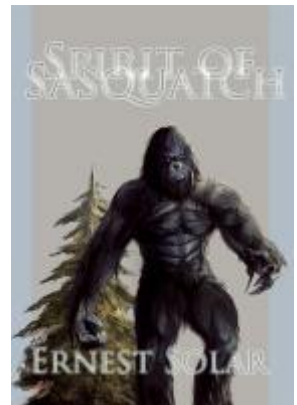


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MIDDLE SCHOOL WINNERS
AND HONORABLE
MENTIONS

Old Blood

1st place

Middle School Category

by Catherine Kelly

The people in this town are nice as all get out. That's what everybody who comes to Mosby says. And every time she hears this, Ella Rose's mom laughs.

"It's just the Southern manners," she says. "We ain't nice people, it's just the Southern manners."

Ella Rose knows all about Southern manners. She was born here, in Mosby, and then she and her mom went down to Louisiana for a little while, and now they've ended up right back here. Little old Mosby, Florida, with all its Southern manners.

Mosby's weird, in Ella Rose's opinion. It's in the swamp, and the outer edges of the town have boardwalks instead of sidewalks because the ground is barely solid. Moss hangs from the trees in sheets, and the noise of the cicadas is a constant drone in the background. There's only one road in and out of the town, and it's always busy because of the tourists. Ella Rose is pretty sure it's only used by the tourists – none of the residents of Mosby ever seem to come or go.

And of course, there's the little things that make Mosby even stranger. Ella Rose has never quite been able to put

her finger on them, but they're there. They hover right on the edges of her vision, like heat mirages.

"Hey, mom," Ella Rose says, flicking her head to dismiss one such apparition. "Can I go biking?" When she was little, she loved to bike around town. Now that she's unpacked from the move, she wants to do it again.

Ella Rose's mom glances outside. "Be home before dark."

Ella Rose smiles and gets up to go outside. Just as she opens the door, her mother's voice stops her.

"Hold on a second, honey." Her mom rustles around a little in the drawers by the fridge kitchen. "Keep this in your pocket." She holds out a small object, sparkling in the afternoon sun.

Ella Rose steps forward. She takes it.

It's a knife, one of those switchblades that folds in on itself and is debatably illegal.

"Why?" She asks curiously. The blade is small, half the size of a cooking knife, and etched with patterns and symbols.

"Just keep it with you," her mom says. "And," she pauses.

"Call it by its name – Chouette."

Ella Rose tilts her head. "Chouette?" She asks, testing the word out.

Her mother nods. “An unnamed blade may turn on you, but a named blade owes you loyalty. Call it by that, and it won’t ever harm you.”

Ella Rose puts Chouette in her pocket hesitantly. She feels like she should be questioning it, but she’s starting to remember more and more from the last time she lived in Mosby. And if there’s anything she truly remembers, it’s that there was always a pocket knife hooked to her belt loop.

She dashes through the door to grab her bike from where it’s leaned against the side of the house. Outside, the heat is almost a living thing, pressing on her shoulders. The sun beats down, but as Ella Rose shades her eyes and looks towards the sky, she notices a vaguely threatening wall of dark clouds in the distance.

She shrugs. She’s been rained on before while biking, so she might as well get going.

She bikes through town. It is bright, the main road made of dirt, and the only place away from the ever present trees and moss. The buildings are old but well cared for, plantation style, with their wraparound whitewashed porches and open front doors, letting air in through the

screens. As she bikes past the buildings, she notices there's only one General Store in town, much like there is only one road in and out of town.

Ella Rose wonders when she started thinking of Mosby simply as 'town'. She shrugs again and feels the already familiar weight of Chouette in her pocket.

There's not many kids in town, she sees. It's mainly just a lot of old people. They're all out on their porches, sitting or swinging or knitting, depending on preference, and also watching. They're all watching. Ella Rose isn't sure what they're watching for, but she starts watching too, just to be safe.

Of course, there are also the tourists. Ella Rose can tell who the tourists are. They've all got heaps of sunscreen on, and clothes that are barely going to hold up under a light jog, much less a walk through the surrounding trails. Their eyes are bright, and they chatter too much about graves and Confederate battlefields for them to last much longer.

Ella Rose kinda wants to warn them. They're talking too much about dead things - soon they're going to be dead things themselves if they aren't careful.

As if he's read her mind, an old man calls from the porch nearby, "Don't even think about it, young lady."

She brakes and swerves to turn around. She climbs off her bike and goes up creaky porch stairs to get a look at the old man.

They're a strange sight, the two of them. He's squinting up at her from his seat, old and grey and missing a few teeth. She's squinting down at him, hands in the pockets of her short overalls and dark strands of hair starting to escape from her ponytail.

"Well then, Miss Ella Rose," he says finally, breaking the staring contest. "You've come back."

"Yes I have, Mr. Hayes." Ella Rose knows him. She wasn't aware until this moment that she knows him, but she does.

"Now then," Mr. Hayes nods his head towards the flocks of tourists. "Don't go talking to them. Nothing good comes from getting friendly with the out-of-towners."

"I wasn't 'getting friendly'," Ella Rose protests. "I just feel guilty, not warning them about the dangers of talking so much about ghosts."

Mr. Hayes' face darkens slightly. "Be careful what you go talking about yourself. After all, we wouldn't want you dead too, now would we?"

Ella Rose hears the little bit of threat in his voice and nods, looking down at the ground and poking a finger through one of the holes in her overalls. "I won't talk no more," she says, not mentioning that she hasn't even spoken to any tourists yet.

Mr. Hayes nods approvingly. Then, "You got a weapon, young lady?"

Ella Rose nods. She thinks she should be more disturbed by this conversation than she is.

"Watch yourself then," Mr. Hayes says. He sits back in his chair, and it creaks, just like the stairs, just like the trees.

"The trees don't want old blood, and we'd hate to go spilling yours."

Ella Rose nods again, and darts back down the stairs, clutching Chouette in her pocket.

The next day she goes around town again. There's a man down the street selling oranges. Ella Rose goes to get some for her and her mom, and finds that she doesn't know who

the man is. She says this to him and he laughs, showing very white, very pointed teeth.

He offers her a free orange. She stuffs it in her pocket as she wheels her bike towards Mr. Hayes' house.

He's already sitting in his chair on the porch. Ella Rose isn't sure he got out of it yesterday.

She sits on the steps in silence, peeling her orange. Upon closer inspection, the orange is a strangely reddish color.

She resolves not to think about it too much, and peels it carefully, before putting a bloodred slice in her mouth. She shrugs. It tastes like any other orange, if you can ignore the slight saltiness.

She and Mr. Hayes watch the tourists cackle as they flutter about and follow their tour guides. Ella Rose isn't quite sure who the tour guides are either, but their smiles look forced and their eyes look terrified.

That's reasonable, she supposes. She'd be scared too, leading some group of beady-eyed tourists across a sinking boardwalk and down to the sight of a Civil War massacre. Those spirits don't like their bones disturbed, and the trees always demand more blood.

Ella Rose eats the last of her orange, and sends her prayers with the tour guide.

Some days Ella Rose sits on the steps with Mr. Hayes. Some days other residents of town join them. Some days, Ella Rose sits in silence and listens to the elders of town talk about seemingly normal things that hold undercurrents of the unusual. They talk to her about bones, and knives, and rituals of spiritual significance. One old woman tells her with very white eyes of the time she met the Devil in the swamp and lived to tell the tale.

Other days, Ella Rose bikes around town. She gets books from the library, and ignores the books that move. She goes to the playground, and climbs on the monkey bars or the slides with the few other kids that live in town. (It doesn't matter if half the kids are dead, they get included in the games anyway.) She learns to throw Chouette in a quiet place off one of the trails in the swamp, where sometimes the birds speak and the insects listen.

On one such day, she's back at her usual spot, tossing Chouette at a fallen log. She doesn't dare toss the knife at a living tree – she doesn't want to pay that price – but she assumes the dead trunk is safe enough.

In the distance, there's the sudden sound of people trying very hard to be quiet (which of course means that they are very loud), and walking through the swamp.

Ella Rose makes a brief noise of surprise in the back of her throat and scrambles to hide her bike and herself behind the log.

The noisy group of tourists pass by agonizingly slowly. Ella Rose stays crouched behind the log, attempting not to sink too far into the soggy ground. She breathes in slowly, trying to be quiet. Chouette is clutched in her hand.

The tourists go by without noticing her. She's relieved.

They noticed her once before, a while ago. They had too many questions about why she was here and who she was and why she had a knife. They had too many cameras, trying to take pictures, with their little black eyes squinting behind the flash.

It's best not to be noticed, Ella Rose decides, in the case of the tourists.

She resumes to throwing Chouette, keeping an ear out for any more tourist groups. She figures the birds will warn her, but she's going to listen anyway.

Of course, because she is listening so intently, she hears the screams.

They're agonizing wails, and they make Ella Rose want to claw at her head.

She grips Chouette tightly, her knuckles white. She slowly and carefully lifts her bike off the ground, and back onto the path.

The screams stop for a moment. Ella Rose quickly climbs on her bike and pedals as hard as she can down the trail, back towards town.

She gasps and swerves as the cries start up again. Despite the break in her rhythm, she bikes furiously in the direction of town.

The screams rise in cadence and volume. Ella Rose slams on her breaks and nearly flies forward over the handlebars. She slowly turns her head.

It's one of the tourists. Like a fly caught in a spider's web, he's been pulled off the path and into the swamp by the roots of one of the trees. His eyes are rolling, and he's screaming. The roots are strangling him, pulling him apart. Ella Rose chokes. Her hands are shaking, and she's frozen staring at the tourist in mute terror. She knows logically he

can't see her, but she almost feels he can anyway, as she's watching him slowly and painfully die.

She thinks of what the elders have told her and shudders.

They've told her over and over, this is what the trees do – they demand new blood. They must be satisfied.

That doesn't make the torture easier to watch.

Ella Rose glances down at Chouette in her trembling hand.

She swallows, and remembers what Mr. Hayes has told her.

The tourist is already marked for death, the tree's claim laid. She looks at Chouette in her hand again, the blade sharp. It would be a kinder death than this slow tearing of limbs.

She takes an unsteady breath, and throws the knife.

Chouette strikes true, and Ella Rose squeezes her eyes shut as the tourist's screams are cut off with a gurgle. She nearly gags. The trees seem to hiss, and the tourist's body is drawn into the swamp. The roots stop thrashing.

Everything is silent.

Then the birds begin chirping again, and with a splash of water, Chouette is tossed onto the path at Ella Rose's feet.

She slowly kneels down to pick the knife up. With detached disgust and repulsion, she realizes she's kneeling in blood.

She carefully puts Chouette back in her pocket and climbs onto her bike. She heads back to town. She can't get the tourist's eyes out of her head. Down the street she bikes, eyes wide, hair tangled, overalls spattered with dirt and blood.

The elders are all out on their porches. They watch Ella Rose with blank expressions and dead eyes.

Ella Rose is starting to think that nobody here is very nice at all. They're all just extraordinarily good at lying.

Hope For Life

2nd place

Middle School Category

by Genevieve Gillispie

Mother's Heart:

“Huff, huff, huff...” Mouth starts to pant and Lungs and I pump faster. Mouth yells out, “What?” as tears pour from Eyes and I start to ache with pain. It is not a physical pain, more like a mixture of sadness, fear, and confusion. Thoughts pour through Brain. One after the other they pop up and disappear. Body starts to panic. Mouth speaks again, “What is wrong with my baby?”

“Brain, who is mouth speaking to?” I ask eagerly.

“I think she is talking with a doctor,” she replies.

“Ears, what is the doctor telling her?”

“He is telling us that our baby's heart is not working correctly.”

I ache more as I feel the pain going through our husband's heart. “Eyes what do you see?” I want to know.

I think they knew what I was talking about because they told me, “A single tear is rolling down his cheek.”

He is being brave I thought to myself as a tiny streak of strength passed through me. “Ears can you tell us what is happening?” I ask them.

“Our husband says that we should start for home now,” they informed me plainly.

We toss back and forth all night and Brain probably thought up every possible remotely upsetting thing that could happen to our baby. It is now early in the morning and we can't fall back to sleep. Suddenly Brain had a thought and whispered only one word, "ABORTION..."

All the emotions from the day before rushed back: sadness, confusion, panic, and fear. I felt something odd inside me like our baby pleading that we spare it's life for it had only just begun. Our body shoved our husband trying to sleep next to us.

"Wake up, wake up!" Mouth exclaimed loudly. "I just thought of something!" It wasn't an excited or joyful exclamation. It was poor and solemn. "We do not have the money to pay for our baby's medical bills." Mouth told our husband. "Maybe we should abort the baby." Mouth's words felt like a sword crashing through me. I felt it crash through husband's heart also. I heard the cry of a newborn baby and a tear rolled down our body's cheek.

"What is his answer?" I ask Ears.

"He isn't answering anything, Heart." they tell me. We lay in bed for a long while. Not sleeping, but thinking and feeling.

“Ears?” I ask after a while. “Has he said anything?”

“No.” they tell me.

As the sun rose, body clambered out of bed. Mouth drank some coffee and we snuck back up the stairs. “Is husband still up here?” I ask Eyes.

“Yes.” they tell me. I feel the pain in his heart like his heart was speaking directly to me.

“He is telling us that he thinks maybe we should abort the baby,” Ears speak up. We collapse to the floor and tears flood rapidly from Eyes. A few moments later, strong arms wrap around our body, and we cry and cry for a long time.

“I don't want to,” Mouth speaks, “but I don't know what else to do.” I feel the pain of a whip in husband's heart and in me. As I hear the pleading of a baby, Mouth yells out, “NO!!! I won't do it. I will not murder an unborn child!” she blurts out.

“He asked, 'How do we expect to pay all of the bills? What if the baby dies during the surgery despite the fact that the doctors try to keep it alive?’” Ears tell me.

“We will figure it out. We have to have hope. I will not do it!” Mouth yells as Body jerks away from husband's strong grip.

“He suggests that if we don't want to then we shouldn't. We should not kill the baby if we feel it's not right. We can figure something out.”

Although he does not feel much better, I do. I hear an unborn baby's, “Thank you.” as I get up and leave the room.

Later husband drives us to the doctor. We will need to figure out how much money the surgery will cost after the baby is born.

“It costs too much,” Brain explains plainly, “We will not be able to afford it. We will be in terrible debt,” but what Brain suggests and what I feel are completely different. I still want to figure it out. I will not let this baby die!

“What do you think?” Mouth questions husband in a hopeful voice.

“He doesn't believe we will be able to pay the bills.” Ears tell me.

“But we have to!” Mouth asserts , “I will find a respectable job. With that and your work we will pay those bills. I won't let my baby die!”

“He says we will try!” Ears exclaim. I have not felt this much joy for a long while. It's almost like the feeling that a mom would get when her baby cries for the first time.

Just pure joy! I am so glad. If he thinks there is a slight chance, there is a chance. Our baby will not die!

OUR BABY WILL NOT DIE!

As soon as we get back home, Eyes search the web for a job. Brain thinks out all the money details and figures out how long we will have to work. We apply for every job possible.

We are that eager. We have that much hope. For almost two weeks, we chase down, apply for jobs, and appear at interview after interview. We hardly get any sleep.

Suddenly, late one night, one of the very few nights that we begin to get some sleep, the phone rings an ear piercing ring. Mouth answers. “Hello?” she asks drowsily.

“Who is she talking to, Ears?” I ask.

“Some lady. WE HAVE A JOB!” she exclaims

“What!?” I ask just to be sure.

“We have a job Heart. We have a job.” I am so overjoyed This means money! Money means paying the baby's bills! That means keeping the baby!!!

Our body works harder then ever at two full time jobs, with hardly any rest for almost four months when... WE GOT FIRED! What did we do wrong? Why does the manager not like us? But the many questions Ears, Eyes, Brain, Lungs, everyone else and I are asking are not to be answered. The one job I still have will not be enough. We should have aborted the baby, but it is to late now for our body has carried the baby for almost seven months. I feel crushed, sliced, diced, and shoved into a pitiful can, lonely, gloomy, and worried.

We made it through two more months of crying and pain, sorrow and fear when finally the time arrived. Our body worked together to give birth to a beautiful baby girl. I was filled with the most joy I have felt in my entire sorrowful, painful, fearful, confused, yet wonderfully joyous life. But also at the same time I was brimming with anxiety

and uneasiness. Not too long from this moment, the baby will be in surgery and unfortunately we will be in horrible debt for a long long time, but we can not think about that right now. Our body is holding our very own baby, something many women would give anything to be doing. I feel joy and love in this baby and I know our husband does also. I can hear this baby's heart whisper, "Thank you" to me. And that is a wonderful feeling. I know our husband feels it too.

Through these nine months, neither Brain nor our husbands brain have thought about names for we have been too worried and stressed about money, but brain thought of one for Mouth speaks one word, "Hope." Our beautiful baby's name is Hope!

Hope's Heart (after her birth):

I am the heart. I am so tired. I think I have the flu or some other weird illness. I cannot do my job today. It is hard to pump blood and deliver it to the lungs to get oxygen. It is hard to deliver oxygenated blood to my body's muscles and tissues. Am I going to kill my body? I am sick.

What do I do? I feel like there are no walls separating my chambers. I feel like all my blood is mixing together.

“Heart! Heart!” I hear Brain yell to me in a weak voice, “Ears tell me that they heard someone explain to our parents that our body has ventricle septal defect and that there are holes in your interventricular septum. Is that true?”

“I guess so,” I tell her.

“Does that mean our body is going to die?” she asks me.

I do not know what to respond. I don't want to tell her that our life is over for it nearly just started. “I'm not sure,” I answer pathetically. “Ears did you hear anything else?” I ask.

“Yes, they say that they are going to do surgery and fix the holes in you.”

“What else?” I ask.

“Shh. Let me listen. No, they are not talking anymore.” She tells me.

We are silent for a while.

“Eyes do you see anything? Eyes?” I ask again.

“I think they are closed.” Lungs say. “Brain?” she asks. “Yeah they are asleep.” she tells me.

A few moments later, after another long silence, we start moving. I feel even worse then before. We move faster. We must be on our way to the operating room. Suddenly I am not doing anything my blood is pumping all by itself and I can rest. “Lungs.” I say “I am pumping blood but I am not doing anything!”

“I know I am not doing anything either. I think the doctors are doing it for us.”

“Well, I guess I will rest now.” I tell her for I am not feeling better and exhaustion is winning.

As I rest, the team of doctors work together on my interventricular septum, much like all the parts of my body work to keep it alive.

During the surgery, the doctors cut through the front of body's chest and divide the breastbone to reach me. They use a heart-lung machine to pump and oxygenate the blood and to discard carbon dioxide so Lungs and I can rest. The doctors are extremely careful patching up the holes in my

wall. They do their very, very best for this process is incredibly dangerous.

They finish with hope that my body might survive and that new cells will form around the patches . All they can do now is pray and hope. My body's parents gather around us to pray and cry. I feel their love. They are scared and worried for me. They stay there for a long time before starting home. Even then, they are reluctant.

As the days go by my body's parents appear and disappear from the side of our cradle multiple times each day. They continue to pray and they continue to cry. They have not given up hope yet and I feel that they will never give up hope. I am glad. I want my body to live.

About a month later, I feel so much better, but not just me, my entire body. I do not know what happened before I was born, but I do remember feeling many times full of love, fear, confusion, and sadness. All I know is at this moment, I feel an abundance of love as our mother holds us next to her chest and I beat in chorus with her heart.

20 years later – a letter from Hope

“Dear Mother,

It has been a while since I have visited you and I can't wait until I finish college and return home. I just want to thank you for everything you and Father did for me when I was young. You went through a lot of stress, but you had hope and you survived. I thank you every day with all my heart for allowing me to live also. Every time I feel lonely or upset, all I have to do is think of what you and Father went through for me and I feel so much better and grateful for everything I can and cannot understand. I love you with all my mended heart. I can't wait to come home. Your daughter, Hope.”

Sad Blue Mountain

3rd place

Middle School Category

by Alia Taylor

I looked at the mountains around me. It was the dead of winter, and the mountains and trees were blanketed in snow. The air was crisp and fresh, and I could see my breath. There were no signs of life, and it was seemingly set in a constant state of twilight.

“Hey, Ash.” The sound came from all directions, but the speaker was behind me. I turned to see that the voice had come from my best friend Sam. Her light brown hair was done in its usual braid, hanging over her right shoulder. Her green eyes sparkled at me from where she stood. She gave me a small half-smile. She was dressed in all white, and let off a soft glow.

Sam and I had had a special connection from the first moment we met each other. We had become the best of friends, with an unbreakable bond. There was nothing I kept from her, and she kept nothing from me. We stayed up late every night texting each other and telling stories. I had never met anyone like her, and I don't think I ever will again.

“Sam, what are you doing here? For that matter, where is here?” The mountains seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place them.

“Ash, we need to talk. You’re in denial. I need you to let go,” she said, ignoring my questions.

“How am I in denial? Let go of what?” I asked. “You’re not making any sense, Sam.”

“You know exactly what I mean. It’s been two years since I passed away. I need you to let go.” She had a deep look of concern in her eyes. I sighed and turned away. She had died in a tragic car accident, and I had never quite recovered. Not that it was any reason for her to be here.

“I’m not in denial. Besides, I let go a while ago.”

“When’s the last time you went out with friends? When’s the last time you left the house for anything other than school? You used to play soccer, and you were on the track team, what hobbies do you have now?”

The last time I had been out with friends was a month before Sam had passed away. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d gone outside to do something other than go to school. I hadn’t gone to soccer or track practice the month she had passed away, and it had become a habit until I got kicked off of the teams. Now I spent my free time doing homework and reading.

“You don’t understand. You were my everything, Sam. You gave my life meaning, and I’m nothing without you. I’m a shell of the person I was. You can’t expect me to carry on as though nothing has changed.” My voice caught at the end of my sentence, and a tear found its way down my cheek.

“You’re right. You aren’t the person you were. Who are you now, though?”

I thought carefully about this. I have no life outside of school. I have no friends to talk to, nothing to do with my time. I don’t stand for anything anymore. My life fell apart when I lost Sam. I told her this, and she gave me a reasoning look.

“You’re blaming your lack of meaning on my death. Is that really a good excuse, though? You say I gave your life meaning, that now you don’t stand for anything, and yet you’re a different person. These are conflicting statements.” I stared at her. For lack of a response, I turned and started walking away. She started singing, stopping me in my tracks.

“Take me home to sad blue mountain,
Take me home to sad blue mountain.”

I started singing with her, our voices blending together.

“Take my breath away, blue mountain,
Take my heart, it’s yours blue mountain,
Blue mountain, blue mountain...”

My voice started shaking, and I turned back to her. I looked away, not able to meet her gaze. My eyes filled with tears, and I started sobbing. That had been Sam’s favorite song, written by her favorite artist, Emilie Lund. I used to sing it to her when she was sad. I hadn’t heard it in two years, and singing it again brought back beautiful memories that were hard to bear.

“You know the truth, Ash,” she said. “You need to face it, or you will never be able to move on to bigger and better things.”

“What is the truth?” I shouted between ragged breaths.
“That I can’t function without you? That my life is meaningless? That I should just give up?”

She shook her head. “Quite the opposite. You should never give up. Life is only meaningless if you lose everything worth living for. You’ve just forgotten how to see the meaning. You’ve forgotten to see the flowers, to hear the birds sing. You’ve closed yourself to the beauty of the world, and for what? How has it benefited you?” I

considered this carefully. All I ever felt was hollow, empty. I was never happy anymore.

“I can’t be hurt by anyone anymore. I’m closing myself to sadness.”

She shook her head once again. “You aren’t happy, though. You try to close yourself to sadness, but it only makes you sadder. It wasn’t me who hurt you, either, it was my loss; but do you really think this is how I would have wanted you to react? Do you think I would have wanted you to close yourself off, to lose sight of the meaning of life, to hurt yourself?”

“No, I don’t,” I said, looking at my feet. “What do you mean, ‘hurt myself?’” She walked up to me, and gently held up my right arm, turning my wrist up to face us. Her skin was soft and delicate, just like I remembered. I looked away, obviously uncomfortable, but she took no notice. She took my chin in her hand and turned my face to hers, and she lightly brushed her fingers over the raw cuts on my wrist with her other hand. I flinched, and she let go.

“That’s what I mean. I don’t want this. I don’t want you to deteriorate. I was your world, but now I’m gone. If you’re nothing without someone... who are you when you lose them? You need to be your own person, independent of

me. You need to give your own life meaning. I can't do that for you. You still have an opportunity to make a life for yourself. Go outside, enjoy the world. You don't have to dive in head first, start with baby steps. Take a run, hang out with someone, but don't keep doing this. You can't hide in your room forever."

"You're right. I just don't know where to begin. I've been locked up for so long." I paused. "I remember where we are now. This is where our families used to come camping."

She nodded. "I forgot how beautiful it is here. This is why I loved that song so much. I love the mountains." She pointed to a fox, the first life I had seen yet. It seemed to be hunting down a rodent of some kind. It crouched down with its belly on the ground, and then pounced, burying its nose in the snow. It must have missed, because it stood up and stalked off.

"You see, sometimes we fail, even when we try our hardest. That doesn't mean that we are any worse for it. We just have to learn from that, and improve next time. It's part of the beauty of nature," she said.

She flicked two of her fingers, and the sun moved to the middle of the sky, the air warming gradually, and the snow

dripping off of the trees. It seemed to be spring now instead of winter. There was now a field of flower buds where we had seen the fox. She slowly moved her hand from left to right, and I watched in awe as the flowers bloomed in front of me. The rose petals unfurled from the center out, and bees came out, buzzing softly. I plucked a red rose out of the ground, and at a gesture from Sam, put it to my nose. The sweet fragrance filled me up, from head to toe, and gave me a tingling sensation all over. Sam held out her hands, and I gave her the rose. She blew over it, and it shimmered gold, then went back to its normal color.

“What did you do?” I ask.

She handed it to me and said, “It will last forever now.”

“Thank you,” I said, and tucked it into the pocket of my pants.

She walked towards the foot of a nearby mountain, stopping fifty feet short of the base. Once again, she flicked her fingers. The air warmed noticeably as it became summer. The trees and grass got greener, and the crickets and cicadas chirped. The sun was setting behind the mountains, turning the sky beautiful shades of orange and pink. I noticed a group of fireflies, lighting up the air around us in a ribbon of yellow and gold. They flew

around our heads, and one landed on my nose, making me laugh for the first time in two years.

We walked closer to the mountains, where the tree line started. She flicked her fingers, and the air got cooler. The leaves changed colors, seeming to be painted in pastels of red, orange, and yellow. I turned around, and saw a pile of fallen leaves. Sam waved towards the pile. I raised my eyebrow, and shook my head.

“Together,” she said. “One, two, three, jump!” We both launched into the pile, and doubled over in laughter.

“You see, this is what life is about. It’s not about our past sorrows, it’s about our future happiness. If we get absorbed in everything that has happened, we don’t pay attention to what is happening, and we squander possibilities. I don’t want that to happen to you.” She took my hands in hers and said, “Please don’t let that happen to you. I need you to promise me.”

I nodded and said, “I’ll try.”

“No,” she said, “that’s not good enough. I need you to promise. Do you still have the rose?” I nodded. “Whenever you lose sight of the meaning of life, or forget the feeling

of happiness, I want you to look at that rose. Remember this, and pick yourself up again.”

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded again. “I promise.”

“Good. Now, I need you to do something more difficult. I need you to let go of me, for good.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, puzzled.

“I need you to wake up, and move on. No more mourning over me,” she said.

“Will I ever see you again?”

“I’m afraid not. This is the end.”

Tears started streaming down my face as I said, “I’m not ready. I need you. Please don’t leave me.”

She wiped my tears away with her hand. “I will never be gone as long as you remember me. Just don’t get lost in your memories. They aren’t real, they only leave you empty inside. Now, wake up.” I looked at her for another second, then took a deep breath, and opened my eyes. I was met with the darkness of my room. I rolled out of my bed and

walked over to my blinds. I pulled the blinds open, and light flooded in through the windows.

The alarm clock on my bedside table said that it was seven o'clock, an hour before I had to start getting ready for school. I went into my bathroom and got washed up. I started to get changed, but as I pulled my pants off, a small red rose fell out of one of the pockets. I bent over and picked it up, careful to avoid the thorns. I looked it over, but couldn't figure out how it had gotten there. That was just a dream, so how had the rose come out of it with me? I figured that was a mystery best left unsolved. I put it on my dresser, and made a mental note to put it into a vase later.

I finished getting dressed in my jogging clothes, and tied up my hair. I picked up my iPod, and looked at my list of songs. As I was scrolling through the list, one song stuck out in my mind. I found Sad Blue Mountain, and set it to repeat. I stuck the iPod in my pocket, and headed downstairs. When I got into the kitchen, my mom looked up, obviously startled to see me awake so early.

“What are you doing up?” she asked.

“I’m going out for a jog around the neighborhood,” I said. She paused as if trying to figure out what I had said, and then suddenly her features flooded with relief.

“Oh, honey. Your father and I have been so worried! We were starting to wonder if we would ever get our daughter back. What changed?” her words came tumbling out, her emotions saturating each sentence. I walked up to her and wrapped her in my arms.

“Everything has changed.”

Oblivion

Runner Up

Middle School Category

by Catherine Maranto

I sat at the table and stared at the oak with crisscrossed patterns of scratches from well-worn use. I was tired, and I was anxious. The knife in a sheathe on the wall was gleaming bright as ever.

My name is not important and I shall not refer to it. I am a struggling writer.

You see the cat in the corner? I call her Catterina. What a name for a cat, you say, what a name. And why? But it is not important. I sat at this desk and plucked at the quill in my hand, starved of inspiration, the fire, the embers glowing in my mind, grasping with their dying smoke hands curving away in the air, spiraling into the starlit night, through my roof...wanting...dreaming...hoping...

I grasped the edge of the desk as Catterina crouched on the ground beside me. Her eyes spoke of a thousand voices and plucked at my heartstrings. I sighed. It was bad enough having to provide for my own malnourished figure. It was a wonder Catterina was alive, this graceful figure, padding around my feet, staring upward. I looked deep into her eyes and wondered a thousand things, poking at the fire in my heart.

“I am impoverished, my cat,” I said softly, grimness piercing my voice, I could barely stop from weeping. I looked out the window. “I shall not survive longer than this.” I pulled myself away from her deep pupils and gazed out into the night. I knew that I was a competent writer, but I had to write something that would pierce the mind, tug at the heart, pull somebody from the book to shed tears, something that would fly off the shelves.

“What would it be?” I asked. Catterina sat on my chair, her paw batting at something in particular that I couldn’t see. I went to the closet and pulled out something that I knew. Eventually it came every single night. I touched the rounded bottle and dug into the cork with my long fingernails. The cork surrendered the sweet flavoring that lay inside, and I doused my panting mouth with the contents of the bottle. Sweet grape. Wine.

I watched a raven perch on the bough of a tree. Somewhere somebody had started a fire, and though it was raining, the fire burned strongly outside. Wood smoke floated through the air, infusing my nose with a smell that was pleasure. But I had rarely known pleasure. It was something beyond my dark mind.

I cracked my knuckles and took the quill out of its ink bottle. The long black liquid dripped like black blood

running through my veins. I needed something powerful that would reach inside somebody's mind and haunt them. Suddenly there was a knock at my door. I hesitated, placing a single pale hand on the doorknob. "Who is there?"

I pulled open the mahogany door and there was a pasty white man. He was clean shaven with hollow sunken eyes. He was dressed well enough but there seemed something wrong about his clothes. They were not out of place; not dirty; perfectly neat and straight; fit him perfectly, but something was wrong.

I moved my head slightly forward to look into his eyes. They were unusually green. Green as mint leaves in the sunlight. He was otherwise normal, with well cut hair, smoothed back, high cheekbones, and a thin moustache a bit like mine. His manner was mild.

"How do you do?" he asked in a deep, rich voice. "My name is Le Diable. That is, Vladimir Le Diable."
Catterina acted strangely. She cocked her head and mewed strangely. I must admit that the man seemed quite...odd...as well, but I was not unnerved as much.
"Yes sir, how may I help you?" I asked him.
"I am very sorry, sir," he said respectfully. "I am simply tired and ask for a bed for one night."

I found the request quite blunt and surprising, and while I would normally refuse him, I felt an odd compassionate compulsion (perhaps it was the wine) and I complied. “I do not sleep in my bed most of these long dreary nights,” I said, trying not to show how much I had been drinking. “I am writing. Treat yourself.”

He smiled. Something in those green eyes shivered the bones within my flesh and I wondered if I had made a mistake.

“Thank you my good sire,” he said, easing my apprehension. “What a delight a bed is, and I have no doubt a warm one.” He nodded and stepped inside the threshold of the door and sat down on a wooden stool. “Are you hungry?” I asked, prodded by the return of that odd compulsion.

“Yes sir,” he said. “But you need not worry about that.” I tilted my head. “Why not, Mister Le Diable?” Was it only my tired eyes, or did he suddenly look uncomfortable? He shifted on my stool, which creaked. I stared at the stool. It was new. I had gotten it not more than a fortnight ago, and now it sounded in disrepair. Something felt not quite right.

He looked intimately into my eyes. "I...am not hungry...enough...to need..." He muttered and acted like he was searching for words out of a memory that had almost faded.

"Sir, I will serve you," I said, feeling somewhat sorry for the fellow. "Do you prefer oleo or butter?"

"Butter," he said. I strode to the kitchenette and retrieved half of a baguette. While I slathered greasy butter onto the baguette, he watched me hungrily.

"What is your profession, sir?" he asked. "You did mention that you...write?"

"I do indeed. I am a poet," I said. "Poet and writer."

"They say that poets are...crazy," Le Diable said, trying to appear jovial.

I looked him and smiled a yellowed smile. "I am that sir. Being insane is not a dreadful state. It is a take on life that most artists, whether painting with words or oils or clay, take up. And it does rather help business."

Le Diable looked at me inquisitively. I hefted a knife and began to cut the bread. As the metal sliced through the bread, he flinched, as if it were him I was cutting.

I slid him a plate with the bread and removed a glass from the cupboard. The air seemed suddenly cold and damp.

I turned to see Le Diable eating the bread. Normally I would have blamed the wind, but when Le Diable opened his mouth, a dark smoky fog completely obscured his teeth. The bread simply melted into his mouth, away into the oblivion of his internals.

“You would like ale?”

He turned to look at me, startled. “Well, I suppose I would not refuse...but...ah...err...”

“Say no more, Mister Le Diable,” I told him. Taking out a glass jug full of golden liquid, I poured him to the top of the glass so that the foam was threatening to spill over the top.

I sat across him at the table. “Quench your thirst, sir.” Le Diable looked extremely nervous now. He swallowed weakly and tipped the glass to his mouth. The foam vanished and the golden ale stayed as if it were ice rather than drink.

Paranoia began to bare its long yellow teeth and turn its head. I looked at him with wide eyes.

“Sir, the ale.”

“Yes, the ale?”

“Tis a sign,” I said.

“Yes.” He smiled and set the ale on the table. When he left it, it suddenly sloshed over the side. He looked at me with those intense mint-rock green eyes. I looked at him with my brown ones. And it occurred to me that what happens in my writings may be far more truthful than what I realized. I was suddenly worried.

Sir, the ale appeared...uh,frozen in your mouth?

“Perhaps I am not at fault,” Le Diable objected. “Perhaps you stored it too cold?”

“The pantry is warm sire,” I said. “Catterina prefers to sit inside when it is a bleak wintry night.”

“Be that your wife?”

That struck a very deep chord within me. I regarded him coldly.

“My wife has passed. Virginia Clemm. Tis my cat I speak of.”

“What is your name?”

I told him.

“Were you not cousins?” He smiled a thin-lipped, cruel, lying carefully smile.

“Yes indeed. But that is not any concern of yours.”

“Of course,” Le Diable sneered. “Not of mine, I am very sorry. And I pay respects to your wife.”

I wondered to myself whether he was sorry about it not being intertwined in his affairs or my dear Virginia having died. The more I thought, the more I lamented that I had ever agreed that he could sleep in my home. “What is the time?” he asked.

“Ten thirty,” I said, gazing at the grandfather clock. “I need not go to bed. You sir, are you not a gentleman.

“Correct.”

“Your manners much so portrayed that,” I said with a hint of sarcasm. “Now then—”

Catterina rushed to my feet. She growled at Le Diable.

“She despises strangers if they are not children,” I said quickly.

“I see,” he said, eyeing the cat carefully, my beautiful tortoiseshell cat, many colors, black, white, grey and ginger. “A thing most cats do in my opinion. Well, good night to you sir.”

I did not know what hellish things awaited me.
At one A.M. I had dozed off at my desk (I blame the wine), but I was jolted by a terrifying sound.

“Tis who is there?”

“RARGH.”

Le Diable stood a few feet behind me. “Hello.”

“Hello, sir.” I was unsure what to say. “Uh... may I get anything for you?”

“Your writings would be nice.” The voice was slipping into a lower, deeper, more gravelly register. Terrifying. Cavernous. It sounded as if his vocal cords were stained with acid and sandpaper.

“You...sir...”

“The cat knew it was me all the while,” Le Diable laughed. But the laugh faded, immediately replaced by a raspy growl. His face was melting away. The pale skin was replaced by red, stained in black splotching like he had injected ink into his pores. His eyes stayed the same color, but they folded into straight pupils and claws began to come out of his fingernails. Glass shattered in the windows

and a shift in air pressure popped my front door open; I heard the creak and groan of the old hinges. I drew a breath.

“You are no man, Vladimir Le Diable.” The words came from my mouth. “I would now know you to be demon.” “I wish no fights,” the demon said. He bared fangs. Blood spilled from his eyes. Horrible gashes. A small teacup Pomeranian ran into my residence through the open door. The little dog snapped at Le Diable. He immediately pounced upon the Pomeranian. It squeaked and screamed horrible wails. But when he drew away, it was a bloody mass of gore on the ground, leaking blood, oozing onto the floor, pus and ripped organs, eyes, and the fur was stained, no longer white.

The demon smiled. “A preview of your fate.”

Catterina climbed on my shoulder. I was so possessed by fear, I screeched, “CATTERINA PROTECT ME PLEASE!” She did so immediately. Giving me a diversion, she leapt at his face and dug into his eyes. Pus and eyeball matter erupted from his sockets, and the blinded demon screamed in horror. Worms and bugs crawled from the sockets, which erupted in fire. Maggots and cockroaches were roasted by the hot flame that shot out from his wounds, the disgusting insect bodies thumping onto the floor.

My cat turned, hooking her claws into his chest and pushing off.

Meanwhile I drew the knife that hung on my wall. Its velvet bloodstains showed, and I reared it.

“To hell with you Satan,” I yelled. “I condemn ye in the name of Christ!”

And I ran at him, plunging the knife in his chest. But he shot me back with a wall of searing flames and I scrambled away. The fire did a dance of black horrors, reaching to the sky, and slept in final ashes on the floor.

“You write of my brethren,” he screamed, following my voice and Catterina’s mew at which to throw power.

“Their secrets must not be read by human eyes! But you, revolting writer, know too much to stay in this dimension!”

“God put me on this earth and only he shall remove me.”

At the mention of God, the devil screeched.

“AAAАWWWWH!”

Tis impossible to describe the scream that came out of his mouth. He was sucked into a hole into the ground. I saw overlapping, stirring columns of lava and horrors, and the

demon was sucked into the pillars of hell once more, to be reprimanded by his master.

The hot exiting wind whipped at my clothes. I shut my eyes and held onto Catterina.

Then all became quiet.

Catterina jumped down, walked over and stood upon the spot he had been.

“I know,” I said. “You were right.”

I crossed to the desk. There was something now I could write. And with my quill in my hand, I began to write something. I called it *The Bargain Lost*.

Until we meet again, Vladimir Le Diable...

In the Woods

Runner Up

Middle School Category

by Afia Paracha

Through the dark, unfortunate woods of Bellingham, full of predators and other dangers, one can find a single protection. Stumbling through the woods, trying to save your life, you may stumble upon a village called Rowel. It is a strange, magical place, where secrets can be found in every nook and cranny. Perhaps one of the stranger happenings in this village is the situation of Eliana White. The girl, to say the least, was a bit odd. She spent much of her time in the woods. While most were frightened, terrified, of the woods and their inhabitants, she was curious. Not afraid, she said when asked, of what they've never seen.

What she did there, only few knew. Her father, an old, silent man, was the village healer. Most of the inhabitants were the picture of health, though the few that were in need of help visited him. His need for herbs was why she visited the mysterious woods. Every day, she set off, walking down the well worn cobblestone paths leading through the village, all the way to the trees. As she passed through, her cloak on and her hood pulled over her head, a basket in her hands, the only things she received from the others were stares.

To them, she was an oddity. Most in the village had been born here, but her mother had stumbled across the village and decided to stay. She fell in love with the healer's apprentice, and they got married a few months later. Her mother, who used to collect the herbs for her husband,

passed away mysteriously. People whispered about how she died, since she seemed healthy, other than her visits to the woods just like her daughter. Another noted fact was that within the village, only two had been seen recently with black hair; Eliana, and before her, her mother.

On a specifically gloomy autumn day, Eliana was seen making her regular trip, holding her head high, as she walked down the paths. The sun was blocked by clouds, the sky heavy with rain. Nevertheless, she went on, until she reached the woods. The villagers watched on from within the shelter of their homes, taking the dark sky as a bad omen. Under the suspicious eyes following her, she continued on, not taking into account the looks following her.

Walking to the edge of the woods, her basket in her hand, she ventured into the trees. Walking at a brisk pace, her eyes scanning the tree line. She moved through the expanse of tall, dark trees, her feet moving over uneven ground. She reached a familiar spot, marked by the growth of many nightshade flowers, and set down her basket. The poisonous plant, with its bright purple flowers, grew all around several oak trees. Tracing the curved growth of the plants, she walked in a wide circle. Completed, it would help keep what lay within held back, trapped, and most likely angered. Once again picking up her basket, she walked back to where she started, kneeling in the soft moss. She looked at the plants in front of her, checking

them for signs of blight or sickness. Seeing none, she moved on, checking each plant, until she reached one unlike the others, wilting away.

Reaching into her basket, she pulled out a seed. She knew she had to be quick when removing the old and planting the new, careful not to let the demon out. As she yanked out the wilted plant, she quickly lay the seed in its place. After covering it with soil, she prepared for the next step. Rinsing her finger, callused and hard, she pulled a small blade from her basket. Using as much pressure as needed, she pressed the blade to her fingertip, blood welling up at the cut. Turning her finger over the empty spot, she let a few drops of blood wet the soil. Instantly, a sprout grew from the ground, growing into a small, yet sufficient, plant. What no other villager, not including her father, knew was that within these woods, a demon had preyed on many. Both her parents, first her mother, than her father, worked on trapping it, saving the village and the outside world from its wrath.

She stood up, scooping up her basket with one arm, brushing the soil off with the other. Every day, ever since her 13th birthday, she came to renew the circle of enchantment. Her parents had started it, both taking care of it, until her mother's death underneath the claws of the demon. She had been a day late to renew the enchantment, and for her mistake, she lost her life. From then, her father had taken over, and when he was older, she had taken

over. Wrapping her finger in a cloth, she followed the familiar path back to the village. While she walked, it began to rain, and she pulled the hood of her cloak over her head.

Once again, she strode through the village, at a slightly quicker pace due to the rain, until she reached the healer's cottage where she lived. Her father didn't ask any questions as she walked in, just muttered a greeting from his desk, recording patients. She prepared dinner, just like any other day, and sat down to a quiet dinner with her father. This was the life the villagers imagined she lived, a repetitive life of collecting herbs and eating dinner, which was basically true. The only difference was that instead of collecting herbs, she was saving their lives.

The next day, a bright, sunny day, she set out once again. Most likely, the enchantment would be the same strength, not requiring any replanting. These were the days that, like the villagers thought, she collected herbs. Her father had scribbled down which of his stocks were running low, and she would collect those herbs after a quick check on the demon. None paid any attention to Eliana as she walked through the village.

A few minutes later, she had checked on the enchantment, which was thankfully still in place. She hated having to cut herself to replace the plants and only did it when necessary. Taking a path used only by her, she found her way to the place where she found most of the herbs.

Quickly collecting what she needed, as the days were getting shorter and darker quicker, she followed her path back to the enchantment. The nightshade was beautiful, though poisonous. Walking the wide circle one more time to make sure nothing was amiss, she headed back to her home, and completed her daily task of making dinner.

She did this most days, some days updating the enchantment, some days collecting herbs. Autumn turned to winter and all was well. The trek to the plants was harder with snow, but still necessary. She had to do it more secretly, as her excuse for collecting herbs would not work when all the herbs were dead. On winter days, she took the longer path, heading behind an abandoned farm, to the woods, and walking all the way around the village, in the woods the whole time, to get to the enchantment.

Aberl was a specifically troublesome teenage boy. He found the most reckless things to do, from aggravating the crotchety elders, to stealing from the market. Today, he had decided to visit the old, decayed farm, and go inside the farmhouse. Most likely, the timber for the floors and walls would be rotten and decayed, but he had this uncanny ability to survive. Accompanied by others wanting to see him attempt this dangerous feat, he set off to the old farm. Walking outback, they found fresh footprints in the snow.

Who in their right mind, other than Aberl, would visit this place? Glancing around, they saw the healer's

daughter, the creepy one. Whispering to his friends, he decided to follow her. Where could she be going, definitely not collecting herbs in the middle of winter? Quietly, he crept after pretending she was his prey. She led him to her destination, to a patch of nightshade growing from the snow.

As he watched, she pulled one out of the ground and replaced it with a seed. Then, to his surprise, she pulled a blade out of her basket, and cut her finger, letting a few drops drip onto the seed. Suddenly, a plant sprung up, replacing the missing one. Blood magic! He knew that the blood could free things, and that seemed like something the witch girl would do. Moving closer to see what was in the circle, he crouched behind a tree, peering into the circle. In the center, was a rotted, black stump. Red and black rocks, no, not rocks, but gems. And in the center sat a demon. He had horns, and seemed like the typical demons found in nightmares. Stumbling backwards, he turned and ran, all the way back to the village. Reaching the largest building, the village meeting hall, he threw the door open, searching for someone to talk to.

“ELIANA IS A WITCH!” He shouted, trying to gain attention. A few faces turned towards him, but quickly turned away, used to his antics. “She’s trying to free a demon in the woods!” Exasperated, he glanced around, seeing the skeptical faces of those around him.

“Is what you say true, Aberl?” asked a voice from behind him. He turned around to see the town mayor standing behind him. He nodded, suddenly scared and nervous.

“I believe you. She has always been odd, just like her mother. Her mother probably started it, and died before she could complete it. That’s why she always visited the woods. Not to collect herbs, but to free the demon, to destroy us all.” She raised her voice, letting everyone hear her. Everyone stood up, ready to take whatever action needed.

“We need to kill the witch!” cried a voice. Aberl cast a glance around the room. Everyone who hadn’t paid attention to him before was now looking right at him.

“Let’s giver her the test!” cried another. Aberl swallowed. He hadn’t thought they’d give her the test. The test would see if she was a witch or not. They’d tie rocks to her feet, throw her into the pond, and see if she floats. If she floated, she would be a witch, using magic to save her life. If she sank, she wouldn’t be a witch. But even suspicion of being a witch was deadly, as you would lose your life during the test. Even though he thought Eliana was a witch, she didn’t deserve the test.

“Maybe we could just ask her?” he questioned, trying to make sense of the commotion around him. Everyone was shouting now, suspicious of the girl that had lived amongst them all the years. No one paid any

attention to him, forgetting that he had been the one to accuse her, now focused on only killing the witch.

“If what Aberl saw is true, then we must submit her to the test. Let us get her on her way back.” called out the mayor, raising her voice over the shouts of the now very large crowd. The answer was a large roar, as everyone shouted their approval together.

They marched out of the door, on their way to find Eliana White, the witch.

Eliana had left the woods and was on her way back to her home. As she trudged through the snow, her breath instantly condensing in the cold air, she noticed lights in the distance. Lights, that were moving towards her quickly, growing bigger and bigger. She continued on, looking straight ahead, as they approached her. She could now see that the lights were accompanied by the villagers.

Aberl was brought along, as a witness of the witchcraft. They were walking at a quick pace, lanterns held by some of the men, towards the witch. She seemed perfectly innocent, walking by herself in the snow. As they moved towards her, he saw that she had a basket in her hand. Though she was far away, it looked empty. Maybe, maybe what he had seen wasn't true.

The group was directly in front of Eliana now. She looked at them and saw the looks on their faces. Looks of fear and disgust. Swallowing, she opened her mouth. But before she could say anything, one of the men lunged

forward, clamping a hand over her mouth, keeping it shut. His other hand was on her wrist, yanking her towards him. She struggled, trying to shake loose of his grip.

Aberl watched as they grabbed Eliana, roughly throwing her into the cage they had brought. It was on a sled, pulled by two horses. As they dragged her along, she shouted at them, asking where they were taking her. No one replied. They had been ordered not to talk to her, since she could use her voice to enchant them. They walked along, towards their destination of the pond.

They dragged her along in a cage. She begged them to let her go, but no one woke to her. As they dragged Eliana along, she realized where they were going. The pond. They were going to give her the test. There was no way to survive the test. As they reached the pond, she shook the bars of the cage.

Aberl stood in front of the cage, looking at Eliana. Her eyes were full of fear as she looked at him.

“Eliana White. You have committed the sin of witchcraft,” he said, his voice as serious as he could make it. In truth, he was scared to death right now. The words he said were not his, but the words he was told to say. “We have changed the test. Instead of rocks, you will be thrown into the pond in your cage.”

Aberl was standing in front of her, dictating her fate. She had given up, not struggling at all. They lifted the cage and threw it into the pond. Instantly, cold water

flooded the cage, surrounding her. She held her breath, trying not to focus on the cold that crept into her. Finally, she gave up, opening her mouth and letting the water fill her lungs, ending her life.

They all stood in silence as the cage sunk below the water. Waiting for the witch to arise, they stood. But within a few minutes, it was clear. Eliana White was not a witch. She had not passed the test. Suddenly, there was a roar from the nearby woods. They all watched, shocked, as the demon emerged.

The demon laughed, and watched as they ran around panicked. The silly humans had killed the one person keeping him trapped. And now, he was free. He roared once again, fire rising from the ground and burning the silly humans. His imprisonment was over, and his reign had began.

Disruption

Honorable Mention

Middle School Category

by Salonee Verma

Annie met Edward for the first time at the beginning of the school year, when he accidentally punched her in the face. It was in Gym, and they were partners in the Tennis unit. He hadn't meant to punch her; it had just happened. It was probably the best thing that happened to both of them, though, since they became the best of friends after that.

Every morning, they would sit behind the tubas, pretending to enjoy the Jazz Band's daily raucous practice. They wouldn't talk of anything in particular, but they enjoyed each other's company immensely.

During lunch break, they would sit separately, each making secret jokes to the other across the room. It simply wasn't normal for a girl like her to sit with a boy like him. It was just unheard of.

Every afternoon, however, they would sit at the top of the bleachers in the gym, under the guise of cheering on the basketball team. Annie would listen patiently to Edward's extravagant stories until it was her turn to rant on and on about whatever had crossed her today. They never touched on the subjects that were perhaps most important, such as

why Annie never fought back against her so-called “friends”, or if Edward’s brother was still alive. They always managed to tip-toe around any conversations that might even elicit the slightest of negative emotions towards the other, since they each thought the friendship they had was too fragile to be broken so carelessly.

That winter, for the first time in her life, Annie did not spend her weekends at the mall or painting her nails at Melissa Evans’ large home. Instead, her mother dropped her off at Edward’s small house just outside of the school borders, where she and the rest of Edward’s friends would spend hours playing video games, watching movies, or even arguing, at times.

And that’s how she became ready for the toughest encounter of her life.

It was at lunch, on February 23rd. The weather was beautiful, and there was absolutely no chance of rain. The high was to be 80°F, and the low was to be 63°F. It started off as normal. Melissa Evans and Elizabeth

Markson rang her doorbell to walk to school with Annie, but she politely declined. They pushed and pushed until she gave in. She was able to shake them at school, when she escaped to the band room, where practice was already in full swing.

At lunch, Annie sat in the middle of Melissa and Elizabeth's table, tuning out to mouth to Edward across the room. Suddenly, there was a hand lightly slapping her cheek.

"Hey! Earth to Annie? Who are you looking at anyways? There's no one there!" Melissa narrowed her eyes as the whole table turned their attention to Annie. "Unless you like one of those nerds. Which you obviously don't, right, Annie?"

"Um..." Annie trailed off, her face flushing red.

"Because if you do... ha! You know that we can't talk to you anymore if you hang out with them, right?"

“I do know that, actually,” Annie said, her voice growing stronger with every word she managed to push out. She made a split-second decision and took a deep breath. “And that’s why I’m leaving. Bye, Melissa. By the way, if you’re going to wear mascara, wear it right. You look like an idiot.”

Annie picked up her lunchbox and strode over to where Edward and his friends were staring at her in stunned silence. She held up her head, resisting the urge to look over at the girls’ faces. Annie sat down at the edge of the group, biting into a bright green apple. “Hey guys, what’s new?”

The next class Annie had was English, which she breezed through. And then came Foreign Language Studies with Edward, which she wasn’t that great at. Edward was helping her with her classwork, while Elizabeth was ignoring her with a passion.

“Hey, Annie?” Edward asked, twirling his pencil. Annie nodded, raising her eyebrows as she struggled with a few irregular conjugations. “Would you... would you maybe....”

“What?” Annie turned her attention from her paper.

“Do you want to watch that new movie? The Marvel one, what’s its name?”

“I...” Just then, screams break out all across the school. Edward’s face paled as he turned his head toward the open door in stunned silence. Chaos erupted in the hallway, and the whole classroom moved to lock the door. Annie started helping people hide, while Edward... well, we’ll never know what Edward was trying to do, since he was shot in the chest right after.

A deafening shriek rose through the classroom, while everyone else waited with bated breath. A moment later, there was an unstable weapon pointed against 21 teenage students. Annie didn’t even have enough time to shed a tear before she was shot.

She didn't even get to say yes.

Edge of the Oak Sword

Honorable Mention

Middle School Category

by Keren Czyra Gonzaga

“That’s the seventh time you’ve sighed tonight, Eike.”

The named boy slowly turned to the one who spoke, his eyes briefly widening in surprise, “Walt, you’re awake?”

“Unfortunately. I’ve been trying to sleep, but you’ve been shuffling around,” Walt said, green eyes glinting in accusation.

“Sorry,” Eike said. “...I can’t relax.”

There was silence before Walt spoke up, “It’s because of the final battle, right?”

Eike nodded, and Walt began to speak again.

“Eike, you’re not the only one. The least our leader can do is get some sleep. Everyone’s depending on you,” Walt was silent before adding quietly, “especially me. Take care of yourself. Don’t nod off when fighting.”

“You know that the medics are saving up on supplies. They won’t give me anything, so probably no shut-eye for me tonight.”

“At least try, okay?”

The conversation died, and Eike looked up to stare at the star-filled sky. The moon shone brightly overhead, illuminating the camp slightly. Walt joined him too, and for a while, no words were spoken until Eike decided to open his mouth.

“Walt, if we somehow manage to both live through this, can you promise me something?” Eike looked his best friend in the eyes.

“That’s a big if,” Walt grimly said. “Continue.”

Eike took a deep breath, “Do you want to explore other lands with me? I don’t mean just Aldegund. I mean other countries, maybe even other continents.”

Walt looked at him in surprise. “You’re planning on leaving?”

“Yep. I knew, even as a kid, that it wouldn’t work out if I stayed too long. Walt, we lost so much, and I at least want to spend the rest of what we might have together.”

There was another long period of silence as Walt looked away, lost in thought. Eike would have missed the small whisper if he didn’t continue to stare.

“...just give me time to think about this,” Walt brought his knees up to his chest.

Eike scooted closer and began to look at the stars once more. This was really the only thing from their childhood that the two friends could do. Clear night skies were, unfortunately, always ruined by smoke. Still, it was one of the few comforts they had.

The twelve-year, ongoing revolution had destroyed Eike and Walt’s quiet days in their rural village. The two were only just seven when the resentment and anger towards the cruel King Eginhardt had finally burst. Riots had started, and Eginhardt had not responded kindly, his soldiers being sent to deal with the unrest. What happened

was a scuffle that ended with twenty deaths on the civilian side, and three on the soldier side.

Predictably, it fueled the outrage. Within a week, a band of rebels had officially formed, their numbers growing fast. Some of their members had gone on horses and traveled from town to town, spreading the news through mouth and paper.

How Eike and Walt found out about the news was not through letters or words, but the experience of being shoved into the basement to hide. Eginhardt's men were passing through town to deal with newly-arrived rebels.

Neither forgot the piercing screams and fire as everything they knew came down, crashing to the ground.

Their hideout fell apart, and soon enough, their hair was dragged by a soldier with rough hands, and they were thrown onto a wagon with other children. The men told them that Eginhardt was seeking new recruits.

There wasn't enough food to go around on the trip. By the time they reached the castle, half of the children were dead bodies, and the rest were too delirious to understand their situation.

Eike remembers that Eginhardt took a one-second glance at them before saying, "Keep the ones with the most meat on them. The rest will be sent to labor."

Walt was one of the "lucky" ones, and Eike was sent to a cramped factory. Alongside others his age, Eike was forced to work grueling hours until revolutionaries

came and liberated them. One of the truly blessed times in his life. What made it better was the fact that Walt was there, having escaped the king. They both noticed how different the other one was.

To Eike, there was no other choice back then. He brought Walt with him, and even though older rebels were against it, they joined. At first, the two only helped around camps, but that had changed when Eike killed someone for the first time.

It wasn't just any loyalist either. It was Commander Bern, a brilliant strategist who had been soaring through the ranks. Eike just needed to protect himself, and somehow managed to pierce the commander in the heart with his blade.

All his first kills were accidents, it was self-defense. It's what he tells himself. The rest were just brutal murders. He rose in popularity and rank, and everyone knew of his achievements. The admiration was utterly uncalled for. Only the gods above know how he could've held on if not for Walt. Thankfully, the mage was always at his side.

Before Eike knew it, he was sleeping, his head lying on Walt's shoulder. The other boy stared at him, a tender expression on his face, before gently laying Eike in his cot. Walt laid next to him in his own cot and slept as well.



The storming of Diefenbach Castle had come both too slowly and quickly for Eike. He briskly walked past fallen corpses, including countless mages, some Eginhardt's

men. His crest was boldly emblazoned onto their foreheads.

He winced slightly as he recognized the pitch black insignias on their arms: powerful magic runes that forced absolute obedience to the one who put it on. The runes were sneaky, as they only appeared after death or when one was following an order. They were in testing when Walt lived in the castle, and he had recounted those times darkly.

"It was a new, experimental magic they were trying out. They put it on, but it disappeared within thirty minutes. Clearly, they've improved."

Walt grimaced when he saw what Eike's eyes were trained on.

"Ignore it, Eike. We need to get moving," he said calmly.

Eike took a deep breath and soldiered on, unaffected by the blood he stepped on.



It all seemed too easy, and for good reason.

The most difficult part of this final battle was actually getting into the heart of Diefenbach. Countless mages and soldiers had tried to resist them on the way, but swords and guns had to be swung down and fired in the end. Eike had heard some of the more religious men and women utter short, quick prayers as both enemies and allies had fallen.

The fact that they still had faith surprised him at times.

Getting to Eginhardt wouldn't be too hard. There were enough rebels with enough energy to take down what little knights he had with him and Eginhardt himself. No one worried about mages; many had been killed near the start, and the royal family was notorious for having absolutely incompetent magic users.

King Eginhardt was clever, some of them forgot that. You don't earn the royal crown by being an idiot, contrary to popular belief. So as countless of allies fell to Eginhardt's overwhelming waves of fire and wind, Eike wasn't as fazed as he thought he should be.

The entire royal family was clever. They were the ones to spread the lies about their lack of magic, probably. Judging by how complex Eginhardt's magic formations were and how their own mages were staggering, Eginhardt was incredibly talented and skilled for it.

The stained-glass panels had shattered, and enormous chunks of the ceiling and walls had fallen or were blasted off. The sunset's bled through the gaps of the room, dyeing everything blood-red. Surprise reinforcements from both sides had come, but Eginhardt had decided to share a special fight with Eike by setting up a barrier behind them. The younger man could barely focus as pain seared through his arm while he deflected

Eginhardt's blows. Under those robes were the muscles of someone who trained every day.

"This is all the face of the revolution can offer?" King Eginhardt taunted as Eike narrowly dodged a swing of his sword. Eginhardt smirked and flicked his wrist, a deadly movement that would've killed Eike had he been less experienced.

Eike grit his teeth and almost cursed. His leg ached, and blood was trickling down his face. Every cell in his body was screaming at him to stop, and when Eginhardt cut his sword hand off, he knew there was no hope of winning. Eike fell to the ground, kicked by Eginhardt. Eginhardt smiled kindly at him and prepared to stab at his neck.

He wasn't going to give up, though. Not when he promised himself, and Walt, that he (or maybe they) would come out of this alive and travel other lands. He wouldn't be able to survive the next sword swing, but he could at least get back at Eginhardt.

Using all remaining strength he had, Eike took the dagger out of the hidden pocket of his pants and stabbed Eginhardt's thigh, where the armor had loosened from previous blows.

"Insolence!" Eginhardt roared. His aim was off, and he managed to stab Eike's good shoulder instead. Eike gave out a pathetic whimper. As Eginhardt prepared to kill him, Eike's gray eyes met with Eginhardt's emerald green. Eike

tried his best to give Eginhardt his most defiant look and spat in his face.

Eginhardt was furious, and Eike let out a cry as he was brutally kicked by iron shoes. He couldn't take it anymore. Eike closed his eyes. He heard the sound of something shattering and a shout.

“Eike!” Was that Walt?

Before blacking out, Eike felt another overwhelming wave of fire and Eginhardt's own scream this time.



“You're an idiot,” the stern, old medic stated. “If I wasn't such a good medic, you'd be dead.”

“I know, sir.”

“Be glad that Walt is a good mage. Actually, Walt, why aren't you scolding the reckless idiot more?”

“I don't yell at patients,” Walt remarked, before turning gentle eyes on Eike. Walt was currently sitting on a nearby chair.

Eike needed to say something. The question had been on his mind for a while, even as he had slowly been accustoming to his stub of a hand, a wrenched shoulder, and a stabbed shoulder. Bandages were tightly wrapped around his head, making it throb a bit.

“Hey, Walt,” Eike's tone was serious. “I asked you before the battle-”

Walt stood up, a flustered look on his face. “Would you look at the time! I need to be helping out. See you!”

Walt promptly ran out of the infirmary, and Eike stared after him as the medic laughed.



On the next day, Walt had popped into the infirmary again, this time with a bulky bag, and persuaded Eike to get off the bed and follow him. Eike had grabbed his crutches and followed after Walt, who had thoughtfully slowed down to an even pace. The two were walking side-by-side in a comfortable silence. Eike was surprised as Walt led him out of the infirmary and into the somewhat lively town center of Diefenbach. Both civilians and revolutionary soldiers were around, already helping to make repairs to the destroyed capital.

When Eike walked out, many paid their respects in vigorous ways (bowing and clapping), leaving him rather unsettled.

“You don’t like the attention?” Walt asked, taking them out of Diefenbach’s exit.

“Never did, never will,” Eike replied. “By the way, where are you taking me?”

Walt paused before answering. The two were now in a dense forest, not far from Diefenbach. “When I was captive here, me and some other children were given some preferential treatment because of our magical talents. We had around twenty minutes of free time a week, and we

could go anywhere we'd like. As long as a soldier was around to supervise, and if it was close enough."

Eike hobbled as they went on rocky ground, a couple feet away from a very large and rushing river that seemed to be getting wider. Surprisingly, Walt sped up and was beyond a mass of trees now. Walt's footsteps had stopped, and his voice was still clear.

"I always came here whenever I could. It's still one of my favorite sights to see, save for some other things."

Eike caught up, and he moved the branches out of the way before making his way to Walt's side. "What're you talking about?"

Oh.

"Diefenbach is on a waterfall."

The river that Eike had been walking near fell far below, feeding into another river that went on for miles. Night had fallen, and the moon shone on the water. Eike was acutely aware of the waterfall's sounds, and he sat down, his body relaxed.

"I can see why it's your favorite sight," Eike said, his tone hushed.

"One of my favorite sights. By the way, take this," Walt handed him the bag and sat beside him, rolling his sleeves up.

Eike opened the bag, and his eyes widened. No wonder it was so bulky. Inside there were forks and a container that held a vanilla cake. Eike opened his mouth

to say something, but nothing came out. It had been so long since Eike had anything sweet, and even before the war, cake was a far-off, impossible dream.

“Happy Birthday, Eike,” Walt smiled sweetly. “You deserve it.”

The two then promptly dug into a cake, which became a mauled mess. The entirety of Aldegund could probably hear their childish screeching and laughter as they devoured it.

The moon was high in the sky, and just like a month before, Eike felt a wave of drowsiness take over him. He leaned his head on Walt’s shoulder and asked a question. “Walt, are you going to travel with me?”

Walt gently shook Eike off and sat in front of him. He smiled that special smile reserved for Eike, and said, “Of course not.”

With speed that reminded Eike of Eginhardt, Walt stabbed a knife into his abdomen. The cold feel of the metal, along with Walt’s words had Eike wide awake now. He tried moving, struggling, but his limbs were asleep.

“The cake was drugged,” Walt said bluntly.

“Walt? Why...” Eike struggled to speak, and for real this time, the world was slowly going black. He managed to stare Walt in the eyes, eyes that he had known for over a decade, and first noticed them. Emerald green. Just like Eginhardt.

“I have to obey all orders, even if I have to kill you,” Walt’s tone was desperate as he twisted the knife deeper. His green eyes glinted with tears as he whispered two final words to him. Swirling, pitch black runes were on his arms.

“Sorry, Eike.”

Perfection

Honorable Mention

Middle School Category

by Hanna Scarlatiou

I'm sitting crisscrossed, comfortably, on my bed. Music is playing loudly from the speaker I had gotten last Christmas. I drop my pencil onto my opened binder and lay back onto my bed. My legs are outstretched as I'm looking up at the ceiling. I stare blankly for a while. No thoughts or people, just a white space and me. Mom suddenly bursts through the door making me sit up. "Hey, honey, just got home," she says to me, brightly.

"Hey Mom!" I respond.

"How'd school go?"

"It was good."

"Great, anything happen today?"

I think for a second. "No, not really. I got 100 on my Spanish test, though."

"Well done." Mom's smiling her bright smile she always has on around me. "Could you also ask Devin what he wants for dinner, when he gets home?"

"Sure thing," I say before she turns away. As she leaves I lay back down. I shut my eyes for a little, again, clearing my mind.

"Oh Ashe," Mom comes back fast. "Could you do the dishes really quick for me?"

"Of course," I answer as I casually get off my bed and follow her downstairs. I hear something fall onto the ground when I close the door. Possibly a book, or maybe my phone.

~~~~~

I hear the sound of metal pieces fumbling together coming from the door. It opens right after the sound stops. A tall, skinny boy wearing black pants and t-shirt comes through with a tired and down expression on his face. “Hey Devin,” I say as I look up to greet him. While doing so I glance at the clock. 5:37 P.M. He definitely got home earlier. My brother looks at me for a short second. His dirty blonde hair droops down, slightly covering his eyes. We make eye contact, for that second. It’s red and puffy around his eyes. He doesn’t say anything, just looks at me, then walks upstairs lugging his backpack with only one of the straps around his arm.

He’s upstairs already by the time I remember having to ask what he wanted for dinner. I stand up, stretching, and walk to the staircase Devin had gone up earlier. I stop midway up the steps, though. It sounds like Dad’s talking. Actually, no, yelling.

“Devin, explain to me what is going on with you! You’re failing all your classes. Even gym. I keep getting calls from your counselor about you giving some of your peers ‘a hard time.’ Now I hear you skipped class and are getting a week suspension?”

I’m still. I had never heard my dad so angry. But what he’s saying about Devin is just as surprising. “You better be working at fixing your life in that room of yours.”

“You never even care to knock on the door! Ever think it might be your fault I act like this?” Devin yells back.

I don’t...no, stop.

“Your mother and I didn’t raise you to be like this.”

Be quiet.

“Didn’t you ever wonder why I’m never home? Did you ever care about how I’m feeling or what goes on in my life?”

Stop.

“It’s hard to help when all you do is lock yourself up and bully your peers.”

Stop it.

“That’s not what I’m doing. They’re the ones laughing at me.”

“That does not give you the right to harass them.”  
Just shut up!

“Hey Dad can you take out the garbage? Mom asked,” I yell quickly, trying to sound as cheerful as I can. I hear him say he’d be doing so now while I walk up and go up to Devin. He’s just looking down, hunched over.

“Devin-” He shakes his head and looks up at me. It’s now redder in his eyes. “Devin, is something going on?”

“Just leave me alone, like you normally do,” he’s looking at the ground again, “you never talk to me

anyway.” I think about it for a second. I sigh, because he isn’t wrong.

“Answer my question, please.” Devin keeps his eyes to the floor and shuts them,

“No, nothing’s wrong.” He runs into his room, down the hall, and slams the door fast.

~~~~~

I end up going to my room after dinner. Devin wouldn’t come out of his. When I walk in I see a book and a yellow file folder laying on the floor. I first pick up the book and neatly put it back onto the shelf close by. Then I reach down to grab the file and turn it over in the process. The name ‘Hynse’ is written in bold words. ‘God, I haven’t looked at this since last year’ I think to myself. I jump onto my bed, holding the file, and decide to look through it. I flip through finding pictures, diary entries, and newspaper articles about people with the name ‘Hynse’. A picture of me, when I was born, is one of them. ‘Asher Hynse’ is centered above my photo. The page after is worn. A sentence in black ink is written in the middle. *“The first child, of the Hynse family, born every 100 years will inherit the gift of a perfect life.”* There’s a signature underneath it. But it’s smudged out and impossible to read.

I still remember how much disbelief I was in when Mom and Dad first showed me this. I mean most people

don't believe in magic. It's a fun idea to talk about, but not real. Though, everyone that supposedly had this 'gift' ended up finding true love, accomplishing all their life goals, and whatever fairytale ending you can come up with.

~~~~~

I see the familiar white ceiling with blurry vision. Sunlight is shining through, filling the room. I look around, slightly dazed. It's comfortable where I am, so sitting up wasn't much of a success. When my head focuses again, I remember everything from last night. I know Devin had said nothing was wrong. But I know that he's lying. It's Saturday, so Mom's busy spending time with her friends. Dad's off on a day trip in New York. Which leaves almost a whole day of Devin and I home alone.

I head to the kitchen, after getting out of bed, to eat breakfast. The clock by the back-door reads '9:58.' That's a little later than normal for me. The sink has a plate and fork in it. I'm guessing Devin had eaten already and is just in his room, again. I prepare eggs, toast and sausage for myself. Fifteen minutes pass of me eating alone at the table, in silence. The house feels quiet and empty. There's no sports channel playing or parents talking.

As I approach the top of the staircase, the sound of running water, from Devin's bathroom, gets louder. I have to talk to him again. He's right about me not talking to him a lot. I hadn't noticed it before, but I'd normally be

doing homework or any normal teenage stuff anytime he'd be home. Guilt is all I feel. Who knows how long he's been hurting? And I hadn't realized until now.

At this point I'm standing in front of Devin's room. Of course, It wasn't until now that I realized I've never even seen his room. At least not since the fifth grade. I still hear water running from a little down the hall. My hand lightly pushes the door a crack. I peek inside and feel a subtle chill brush over me. The next thing I know the door is fully open. I bite the inside of my mouth.

The thing that catches my eye first is the walls. They're covered in the most detailed images. I see beautifully painted trees, skies, people, cities, and hundreds of more things. I step inside to look some more. Walking around, I find an open sketchbook on his desk. As I gently pick it up, a fountain pen rolls off onto the wood. There's a young girl's face with long and wavy hair drawn in black ink. The realistic features somehow blend perfectly with ink streaks. I just stare. All I can think about is how I've never seen any of this, despite living here my entire life.

"What are you doing?" I hear a sharp tone from behind me. I turn quickly, dropping the sketchbook to the desk. I see that it's Devin standing in the doorway and realize the sound of running water is gone.

"Sorry, I just saw the walls then the-

“You never come in here,” he sounds, strangely, hurt. Devin lets out a quick breath. His eyes glance past me. Probably where the sketchbook is laying.

“Devin, I had no idea you were such a good artist,” I say, trying to explain why I came in. “The walls, your drawings, they’re amazing.”

“Yeah no one really knows,” he looks down at his feet, “not anymore at least.” He’s frowning. “Hey thanks, but I need to be alone for a little bit.” I remember why I came in here, but I don’t really know how to bring it up without upsetting him. Should I be direct or subtle?

“Uh, well I can’t really do that. I need to talk to you about...Last night,” direct it is. He looks down. “I know there’s something wrong and I just want to help.”

“There’s nothing you can do to help, Ashe.”

“I can’t if you don’t let me.”

“You can’t bring people back to life.” He closes his eyes shut, quickly. “Fine, you want to help?” He looks up at me, “Then don’t talk, and just listen. Two years ago, when Mom and Dad told you about your little ‘gift,’ I’d read the file 3 years before you did. The file came in the mail one day from Grandma. I saw all those fun pictures. I saw your

picture. But you know, it was as if it explained everything to Mom and Dad. Explained why your first word was ‘verisimilitude.’ Why you could make anyone smile. Why you could play the piano, violin, and sing at age 10,

perfectly. Why our parents could bring you up in a wealthy and safe home. Why I can barely scrape up a 70 on a test. How I can barely make any friends no matter how hard I try. Why I'm never home because anytime I am I'm either being yelled at or ignored. Why the only person I could talk to is gone now because of a stupid car accident. Because you're Mom and Dad's *perfect* little girl. Because you're always happy and wonderful to be around, because you're *perfect*." He walks to the end of his bed to sit down as his head then falls into his hands. This weird feeling brushes over me. My eyes get that scrunched up feeling you have when you yawn. Except I didn't yawn. I can't see too well anymore, everything's just cloudy. There's this, sort of, heaviness in my chest. What Devin said about me, it's all so true. How could I have never noticed that, or him? Through the silence I hear him talk quietly into his hands, "I just want my friend back. I just want to be laughing with him, and saying jokes no one else understands." He spoke with broken up words and a shaky voice. I see Devin's blurry figure move slightly. "You're crying?" He says to me. I wipe my face and respond, "I've done it before." My nasal sound surprises me a little.

"Yeah, when you laugh. You're not smiling." I wipe my eyes, this time. He looks like he's crying too. And he isn't smiling. I look at the ground and just stare. "At least we know you're human," he says. I see that he's

smiling a little, now, so I do the same. Still with tear marks on my face.

“You know,” Devin looks up at me as I talk, “ever since I found out I was, well, *perfect*, I felt that I was just watching everything happen, especially the bad parts. I know how much people are hurting, but I don’t think I really understand. It’s not fair. But I can’t complain because there’s probably so many people who would want to be me. It’s kind of...” I can’t think of the right words.

“Isolating,” I hear Devin say, “I know how that feels.” I look down. “Guess we’ve got one thing in common, huh?” I smile again, still looking down.

“I don’t like watching you be alone,” I feel kind of dizzy.

“Do you really believe what that gift says?” Devin asks.

I shrug, “Depends, I guess.”

He looks around the room. “If you were *perfect*, I don’t think you’d be feeling alone.” I start to think about how those people in the photos felt. I wonder if they felt the same. I wonder if their lives were perfect. I think about the photo that’ll be put in 100 years from now. Then the one 200 years from now. I don’t want them to feel the same.

“I’ll be right back,” I say to Devin and run to my room. I look for the file from my bookshelf. Finding it, I grab it and run back to Devin. When I get back, I pick up

a fountain pen and open the file on the desk, flipping to the last page.

“What are you doing?” I hear Devin ask as he gets up from his bed. He walks to stand next to me, looking at the paper.

“I’m writing a message to the next couple people.” Devin glances at me, smiling.

*“The first child, of the Hynse family, born every 100 years will inherit the gift of a perfect life.” -15<sup>th</sup> Century*

*“This gift isn’t you. It’s whatever you make of it, but this piece of paper doesn’t set up your whole being. And pay attention to everyone else. The more you tell yourself you’re lucky to be perfect, the more you’ll end up isolating yourself. If that’s something you don’t want, then spend more time listening and talking to the people in your life. This gift isn’t you. You’re just you, just like everyone else.” -21<sup>st</sup> Century*

# **The Teddy**

Honorable Mention

Middle School Category

by Gia McKenzie





I am a Teddy bear. It's not that easy.

I belong to a girl. I don't know her name, but I do know  
she loves me

Her bedroom is where I live, and the blue and gold colors  
are my flag. I am a knight

My enemy is her closet, the simple navy door holds terrible  
things, nightmares.

But each night, I still strap on my small wood sword and  
travel to the navy door

December, 2006

When the door opens, there stands the beast. It is a large  
wolf with a red cape in its  
mouth.

The edges of the beast are thin and soft, like paper.  
I draw my sword and I strike. The wolf begins to crumble,  
but manages a large chunk  
out of my soft brown foot. I slowly advance with my foot  
dragging and quickly take the  
beast away, back into the navy closet.

I lug my wounded leg back to the princesses bed and settle  
back in.

She smiles, for her soft squishy teddy knight has defeated  
her nightmares yet again.

The next morning, she finds my wound and calls for the  
healer, her maker. She calls her

“Mom”

The healer takes a large needle and sews up my gash, then  
places me back into the

princesses room, with a pat on my plush head.

Each night is the same, until a new beast steps out.

It is a large board covered with letters, numbers and a yes  
or no. It also had a triangle

with a piece of glass in the middle.

It seems fake and uneven, almost screenlike

I advance toward, my stubby brown paw holding my petite  
wooden weapon.

I slice, and the thing dodges,

Round and Round we go, the board jumping or warding  
each of my blows, before again

and again striking my little shield. I fear I am losing. I  
can't leave my princess, I cannot  
let her be scared.

I find an opening. I stab, and the thing shrivels into black  
and white lines, before it  
disappears forever.

My girl cries out in her sleep. I rush towards the bed, the  
tiny blue and gold shield  
shimmering in the darkness.

With clumsy, stubby steps, I climb back into bed and hug  
her chubby face, my small  
squishy arms around her neck.

The princess is safe.

January 5th 2009

I fight every night, as her nightmares grow bigger and  
stronger. My soft brown body  
begins to wear down. I am going to be reused, ripped open  
and re stuffed into a new

teddy. I won't be able to stay with my princess. But I will  
protect a new princess soon

January 18 2009

A new beast has stepped out. It is a girl, screaming curses  
and how she will never be  
friends with the princess. I slowly pad toward and... fall flat  
on my spongy face. The  
thing laughs, and I hear the princess begin to wake up. I  
need to kill it quickly. My flag  
flying in the wind, I lunge and the thing explodes. I slowly  
and droopily pad back to her  
bed. She's no longer chubby, but tall and slim. I wish she  
was younger. Those  
nightmares were easier to kill.

August 30th 2009

Slowly, her nightmares lessen, then almost never come as  
she grows older. Her

nightmares warp from tall girls saying they don't want to  
be her friend, to a failed test.

These things are easy to fight, and my job is becoming less  
and less important. But I

won't be abandoned, right? I'm still important, right?

July 13th 2011

She never hugs me anymore.

I am sad

She is now not a princess. She is a queen. She has small  
square device that she uses

all the time. It has games and phones and many things my  
soft body cannot do. It can

protect, the way I can't. Her nightmares no longer come.

Maybe she's just taking a

break?

December 1st, 2011

I was wrong.

I'm useless.

She doesn't love me anymore

March 3rd 2015

I have been on the dresser for 4 years

My sword has been gathering dust. My shield is not longer  
shiny.

She has walked in and set the square thing on the dresser.  
It has a screen.

A boy walks in, he has a creepy smile and leery walk. He  
reminds of the monsters I  
fought long, long ago.

“So what's the answers to the history test?”

“If I tell you, you have to kiss me.”

“Todd, I don't like you”

“Why not? I'm a nice guy, I have been your friend forever.  
I deserve you”

“Deserve? I'm not a product”

“Too bad”

He lunges toward her and began to hit her, then attempt to  
kiss her. The queen is in  
danger! I need to act.

No, my sword is useless, my shield cracked.

She screams.

I know what I need to do.

I strap on my small wooden sword, and my rusty shield,  
the blue and gold colors are my  
final flag.

I lunge toward the small screen and fall on it. It lights up  
and I quickly push the different  
symbols

I've seen in a small picture book people press symbols  
when they need help.

I press them, but in the process, I fall apart onto the rug. I  
won't ever be found again,

my soft stuffing flying out of my soft brown fur. I've  
fought for the last time.

I wake up on the floor, the queen is crying, the healer is  
comforting.

She is safe.

She doesn't need me anymore.

I close my big glass eyes and see no more.

December 25 2018

“Mom, what's in this box?”

“It's for you princess.”

“Open it”

I hear the sound of tearing paper and open my eyes. My  
queen, no my princess has  
found me again. She sounds the same and looks the same  
too.

But something is different, her hair is red, not soft brown

I carefully look around as she gently pulls me from the  
suffocating blue paper. This is a

different princess, but she seems almost the same.

She squeezes me, gently at first, but then harder. She  
laughs then begins to dance me

around the room.



It's the same blue gold room. I recognize the bluish carpet,  
the gold curtains that swish  
gently through the room.

The navy door. It's there

I look up, and see my queen. She's older, with more tired  
eyes, but a happier smile.

"Mom, wasn't this your teddy?"

"Yes sweetheart, but he fell apart, I had to sew him up."

"Didn't he save you once?"

"Not once, many many times"

"Will he save me?"

"Yes princess, he is your knight."

"Thanks Mom!"

"You're welcome sweetheart, you know, he saved me from  
being hurt once."

Maybe I am needed after all

I am a knight for a girl whose name I don't know. But I  
know she loves me just the

same.

My enemy is her navy closet, and I will protect her from  
her nightmares.

The blue and gold colors are my flag.

I am a teddy bear. It gets easier.

The End

**Touch the Sky**  
Honorable Mention  
Middle School Category  
by Olivia Sun



Aleister could still hear their voices, even long after the sun slipped below the water and the crew of the Halstead retired to their quarters for the night. Pathetic. Useless. A waste of space and time. The jeers of his fellow crewmates echoed in his ears. Each word was an arrow that pierced through his mind, keeping him awake at night and bleeding through wounds no one else could see. If his father was here, he would wrap his thick, sturdy arms around Aleister and pull him close. You are a dreamer and an eagle, he would say, running his hands through Aleister's mass of thick brown curls. Your hopes are too big and your wings are too powerful for the Earth and those who inhabit it. You were born to touch the sky.

Out of habit, Aleister sat up in his bunk and looked around, expecting to see his father's laughing eyes and chiseled smile; smell his lavender-and-cotton scent and hear his comforting voice. But the closeness of his father was a good fifteen hundred miles away. Out here on the ocean, the only thing familiar to Aleister was the moon and the stars.

Double-checking to make sure no one else in the quarters were awake, Aleister slipped on his woolen coat, patting the pocket to make sure his pad and sticks of charcoal were there. Although he grabbed one of the brass lanterns hanging by his bed, he didn't need light to navigate his

route. Aleister may have not been as skilled as the others when it came tying knots or rigging sails, but he did have a knack for committing things to memory. In fact, it had only taken him a few minutes to view the layout of the crew quarters- the location of the doors, the position of the bunks- and carve it into his mind like a sculptor to marble. As his feet searched for the familiar nicks and grooves in the floor that helped him “see”, Aleister couldn’t help but smile, as though he was greeting an old friend. But, despite knowing the room like the back of his hand, Aleister executed every move with caution. One step in the wrong direction, one stray flick of the hand, and the peace and quiet he was seeking would be shattered in an instant.

Thankfully, Aleister crossed the quarters without much trouble. Exhaling a quiet sigh of relief, he began to climb the stairs. From here on out, it was easy. Just a couple of steps, a push of a door, and then-

A gust of ocean wind greeted Aleister, who spread his arms out wide, letting the breeze billow through his hair and the folds of his clothes. Although a gentle rain fell from the sky, the nighttime air was still warm, wrapping around Aleister like a silken blanket. High above him, the moon winked from beneath a star-studded curtain of misty clouds. The faintest hint of a smile tugged at Aleister’s lips, the sheer force of his elation threatening to burst into a

full-on grin. This was the kind of night that filled Aleister's chest with a sense of self-belonging and made him wish for the power to control time, for it was at moments like this- when the noise of the universe seemed to blur into nothing, when it was just nature and him- that made him feel as though he'd found himself at last. That he mattered. That there was some purpose for his existence and that he was so much more than an addled daydreamer with his head in the clouds and his feet pointing in the wrong direction in life.

“And just what are you doing up here, kline kunstenaar?” muttered a gravelly voice.

Aleister turned around. He could barely make out the details in the stocky frame limping towards him, but he knew who the figure was by voice alone. Only one person onboard the Halstead spoke that way, smoothly blending Dutch and English the same way Aleister blended the charcoal of his sketches with his fingertip to create a smoky effect.

“Bram!” Aleister cried, in a voice bursting with excitement and volume. He sprinted towards the old night-shipman, paying no heed to the puddles on the rain-slick deck or the safety hazards they posed. As he barreled himself into his friend, Aleister closed his eyes, letting Bram embrace him and ruffle his hair- just like how his father would. In a

sense, Bram was much like his father. Although they couldn't have been more different in physique, the men's personalities were practically identical, to the point where Aleister still had a hard time believing that they never knew each other.

Aleister still remembered the first time he met Bram. It was on a night similar to this one, several years back. The Halstead was delivering shipments of supplies to a coastal town, and it had anchored but a mile away from the docks of its destination. They were close enough so that Aleister could see the hazy golden lights of the town; close enough so that Aleister was seriously considering jumping overboard and swimming towards there. Earlier that day, several of the older boys thought it would be a fun idea to tie Aleister up high on one of the masts and let him stay there for a while. Aleister recalled heading towards his bunk for a midday nap, only to wake up wrapped in seven feet above the deck, his limbs bound and unable to move. A particularly nasty brute by the name of Collins had somehow obtained his coat, and was searching through its pockets like a hungry scavenger dog for scraps. Aleister could only watch in horror as Collins tossed aside his beloved charcoal sticks and pencils as through they were useless trinkets and crushed them with his boot. Just when the thought the worst part was over, Collins produced a small, leather-bound book from Aleister's coat.



“What’s this?” he said, raising his nasal-sounding voice in mock curiosity. “It seems as though Addled Al has got himself a little notebook! But what for? He can’t read or write! Oh, look! This is full of pictures of his daddy! How sweet! You miss your daddy, Addled Al?”

As Collins violently tore through the water-and-coffee-stained pages, occasionally stopping to show the growing crowd a sketch that he apparently found hilarious, anger began to bubble in Aleister’s chest like a hot teakettle.

“Give it back, Collins! Please! It’s not funny!”

Collins paused, cocking his head as though he had trouble hearing.

“What was that? You want your book back?” he called out. “I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to do more than ask nicely.”

And with that, Collins pitched Aleister’s sketchbook into the sea.

Eventually, the Captain intervened, but by then, the damage had already been done. Aleister’s sketchbook was lost, as was his hopes of ever fitting in with the crew. He’d run back to his bunk, teary-eyed and runny-nosed, and

buried his face in his bed- wishing his blanket was a river that would take him to a faraway land, where he'd never have to see Collins or anybody on the Halstead ever again.

That night, Aleister had awoken with a fiery determination. He was going to get off this forsakened ship, even if it killed him to do so. The town where they were delivering supplies to wasn't far away- a mile, tops. Alestier figured he could be at an inn there, drinking warm soup and black coffee before anyone had a chance to realize he was gone.

The plan had worked. Almost.

Aleister had one leg swung over the Halstead's railing and was just about to put over the other when a thick, accented voice interrupted him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The night-shipman. Aleister had completely forgot about the man who made rounds aboard the Halstead while everyone was asleep, checking to make sure nothing was stolen. Normally, Aleister would've been more polite, but right now he didn't care. Everyone on this ship would soon be a distant memory, anyways.

"I'm getting out of here," he snapped.

The night-shipman lunged forward, and swiftly placed an iron grip on Aleister, who was saddled uncomfortably on the railing, preventing hiim from moving.

“I don’t think so, kleine kunstenaar.”

“What did you call me?” asked Aleister, more out of curiosity than anything.

“ Kleine kunstenaar. It means “little artist” in my mother tongue, because you are one, no? I can see it in your eyes, in the way they try to take in everything. Life to you is but a blank canvas, and you are figuring out what is the best way to paint it.”

“Actually, I sketch.”

“Well, all the better. Sketching is an incredibly important skill, especially in areas of exploration and navigation.”

Aleister knew the remark was meant to be a compliment, but it only deepened the pit in his stomach.

“Unfortunately, no one else thinks that. The other boys are all convinced that I’m useless, simply because I’d rather draw and sketch than read and write and do ‘normal’ things.”

At that point, the night-shipman had offered his hand. Surprisingly, Aleister obliged. There was something about this man that made Aleister feel like he could open up and truly talk to—something he hadn't been able to do since joining the Halstead crew. And besides, the railing was getting uncomfortable.

“I'll let you in on a little secret,” said the man, “Normal is boring. Normal is stupid. After all, why sink down to the level of others when you were clearly made to be so much more?”

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Even after all these years, Bram's words still rang in Aleister's ears. Along with his father's, they were like a symphony of motivation that kept him going. Normal is boring. You were born to touch the sky.

“I was thinking about sketching,” said Aleister, pulling out of Bram's arms. By now, the rain had gotten heavier, the winds stronger. As fat droplets plummeted from the sky, Aleister sighed. “But I guess I won't be able to do that.”

Bram opened his mouth to say something, but Aleister never got to hear what it was, for just then, a

sound like cannon fire echoed through the air. As rain turned into storm, more and more of the crewmembers were aroused from their sleep, emerging from the quarters in masses. The deck was a jumble of people, all scrambling to make sense of the events. And that's when all chaos broke loose.

It was raining, the kind of rain that Aleister had only ever heard of in epic ballads and seen in nightmares. Thick clouds obscured the sky, blocking whatever moonlight was visible. Thunder boomed and wind howled, a cacophony of noise that served as both a backdrop to the battle taking place between the ship and the waves and as a reminder of the power of the storm. As waves, some nearly as high as the ship itself, licked the sides of the vessel, the Halstead began to rollick back and forth, as if swinging on a pendulum controlled by Death itself.

The storm had only been raging for a few minutes, but while it lacked in time, it made up for in power. Part of the railing had been knocked off and pieces of wood and cargo were bobbing in the water. Aleister didn't want to end up in the same position.

“Boys! Get over here!”

Aleister turned and saw the Captain. He, along with several other sailors were leaning against a mast, barely preventing it from falling over. The Halstead was not a large vessel, but it was very old and in disrepair, and it seemed as if the forces of nature were taking its toll on the ship.

“I’m coming!”

Aleister scrambled towards the mast, struggling to maintain his balance on the water- slick deck. He was only a few paces from the mast when a towering monstrosity of a wave attacked the ship.

The next few heartbeats passed by in a blur of screams and cold water. The wave plunged onto the Halstead with enough force to send Aleister and the others flying towards the railing. It also meant that there was no one by the mast, which, without anyone supporting it, toppled over like a hewn timber.

The ship capsized under the sudden shift in weight. Aleister barely had time to process the turn of events before he was thrown overboard.

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Aleister once heard that falling onto water was like falling onto stone. In reality, it was much worse.

Sharp, bone-rattling pain coursed through his body as the icy waves enveloped him in a deadly grip. Salt stung his eyes and raindrops pelted his already soaked skin. As he submerged under the waves, fear began to override Aleister's mind. He couldn't scream, couldn't swim. It was like the time with Collins, but worse, because this wasn't some boy's prank. This was real.

Emerging onto the surface of the water, he began to frantically search the area around him for something to use as a floatation device- a chest, a plank, anything. The only object within an arm's reach of him was a small, jagged piece of wood, most likely from the fallen railing.

Grasping the wood in an iron hold, he began to kick his legs in a desperate attempt to propel himself forward. But without any light to guide him to shore, he may as well be swimming in circles. He tried to keep afloat but the numbing cold and the heart-racing paranoia seemed to be overpowering his will.

Let go, whispered his mind, Let go and all your problems will be solved. You've fought for so long already, but have never won any battles. Why continue? You've heard of what the others have said of you. Let go and you will never have to deal with this anymore. Let go, let go, let go....

“No.” said Aleister, forcing his doubts down. There was no one around to hear, but he still felt better after saying the words from his own lips. “I won’t let go. I may not have ‘normal’ talents, but so what? Normal is boring. Normal is stupid. I have dreams that I want to achieve, and I will achieve them. I will move forward. I will touch the sky.”

Through the rain and haze, he could barely make out the lights of a port town. My destination, Aleister thought. Gritting his teeth, he began to swim forward.



HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS  
AND HONORABLE  
MENTIONS



# Dandelions for Grandmother

1<sup>st</sup> place

High School Category

by Claire Huchthausen



Danny had cheered when they had told him Grandmother was coming to live with them. “It won’t be like other times she’s been here,” his parents had said, worry in their eyes. He was too busy prancing to listen.

He had run outside calling “Grandmother, Grandmother,” knowing she would smile her little wrinkly smile and melt her eyes into happy pools of molasses and butter when she saw him. She would open her arms for a hug, and he would barrel into them and smell her scent of soap and cinnamon toast. She would say how much he’d grown, ruffle his tumbled hair, call him “such a handsome little man”, and come inside at his tugging hand to bake him sugar cookies shaped like dragons and cars, and play make-believe with him after lunch.

But his mother rushed after him, and held him inside. “Let Daddy go first.” So Danny watched with a pout as his father passed by, taking the privilege that had always been his.

His father opened the door on the right of the car. Two feet and a cane emerged, then his grandmother in a faded flowery dress, more stooped and wrinkled than last time.

He beamed. She didn't look.

His father helped her into a black chair on wheels, and she creaked to a seat with a sigh. His mother still held Danny back. He looked at her with anxious eyes. She whispered, "Be gentle," then let him go.

He went to her slowly. "Hello Grandmother."

She tried for a smile. "How's my handsome little man." Her eyes did not quite melt.

His father wheeled her inside and straight to her room. "Grandmother's tired," they said. "She's had a long trip. She just needs a nap."

They ate lunch without her.

After, he headed to her room, eager for dragon-cookies, planning to bounce on her bed and wake her like he always had. His father stopped him. "Let her sleep."

His mother said, "Danny, why don't you go outside and play."

He pouted. He wanted Grandmother as his playmate.

He went out and found a stick in the yard. He'd be a pirate today, he resolved. He leapt about waving the stick in the air for the rest of that afternoon, stabbing his foes and

steering his boat, growling “Arr!” and “Yoho!” and “Avast!” He captured two ships, and defeated two sharks, and won two chests of gold coins.

And when he was through, he went back inside, and found Grandmother awake in her chair. She smiled at him with her wrinkly smile and let him crawl onto her lap. She no longer smelled like cinnamon toast. She smelled like the syrup he took for a cough. “We need to bake cookies,” he said.

They got only as far as rolling the dough when Grandmother sat down again. His mother rushed over. “I’ll finish up.” She shooed him away. “Stay with her.”

Danny went over and perched on the couch. Grandmother, beside him, looked sad. She saw him watching and tried for a smile. “Who were you today, Little Dan?”

That bedtime, his parents sat on his bed, spread with a quilt that Grandmother had made. His father pulled him onto his knee. Springs squeaked. “This won’t be like other times,” they repeated. “Grandmother is sick.”

The weeks wore on and wore out. Grandmother napped a lot. His parents argued in whispers outside her

shut door. Whenever they caught him looking, they sent him out to play.

He had time to be many different people.

One day, his Grandmother called for him. “Come here, my little man.” She motioned from the bed. These days, she never got up. He came. Her eyes were watery-weary, her crinkles sagged around them. Her white hair fanned lankly across her forever-flat pillow. “Let me play with you today.” Her voice was fragile as dry grass.

“Okay Grandmother,” he said. “Can I plump your pillow?”

They played castle that day. She was his princess, trapped in a tower. He braved dragons and wizards to find her.

After he found her, she gave him a hug. “I love you.”

He said, “I love you too.”

The next day for breakfast, his mother fixed up a tray stacked with toast to bring to Grandmother. “Wait,” Danny said, dashed outside and in, bringing dandelions clenched in his fist. He ran to his mother and begged with his eyes. “Let me bring it today, Mommy, please.”



She relented. “Be careful. And don’t spill the juice.”

He cheered, bouncing up on his toes.

He balanced the tray with his tongue ‘tween his teeth, wobbling down the hall. Toast teetered. Juice sloshed. Dandelions trembled on the napkin. He pushed through the door and went to the bed. “Breakfast is ready!” he sang. He puffed out his chest and stuck out his chin, proud he had not spilled the juice.

She didn’t stir. He frowned.

His mother rushed in from her place at the door, eyes round, mouth forming an O. She shoved Danny aside and shook Grandmother hard. “Wake up, wake up, wake up!”

The juice spilled onto the quilt.

People in boots and matching green suits sped to their house in a wailing white car. They put Grandmother onto a thin rolling bed and ran her outside in a flurry of yells. They hustled her into the back of the car.

Danny cried and tried squirming away from his mother. “They’re taking Grandmother,” he wept.

She clutched him tighter. “She’ll be fine.” Her voice wobbled. The car wailed away. “Let’s follow them.”

They spent the rest of the morn in a sterile white room full of people either sneezing or sad. Then a man came to see them, and spoke with his mother. She cried with smiling tears. “Grandmother’s okay.” She gave Danny a squeeze. “Doctor Donald says we can see her.”

The man led them up to a smaller white room, where Grandmother lay on the bed. Her molasses-brown eyes were open, but tired, and Danny ran up to her side.

“Grandmother, Grandmother!” He presented the dandelions, crushed by his fist, their heads drooping. “I picked flowers for you,” he said.

Soon Grandmother returned, back to house, back to bed, and the weeks resumed their pace. Grandmother slept. Parents argued, and cried. Danny played in the yard outside.

He tiptoed to Grandmother’s bedside one day. She was awake. “Hello, my little Dan.” Her crinkles were paper and void of a smile. The butter in her eyes was old and flat.

“Grandmother, can you play with me today?” He tugged on the quilt. “Pleeease?”

Her frail hand found his. “Okay, Danny,” she whispered.

He was a knight of Arthur's round table, she was his lady, and sick. "I'll find you a cure," he vowed with a bow. "And then you'll be better, you'll see."

He donned a pillowcase cape, found a paper-plate shield, and marched off for a stick from the yard.

"What are you doing?" his mother inquired, casting her eye at his gear.

"I'm questing after a magical cure, to make Grandmother better again."

She covered her mouth and her eyes welled with tears. "Find that cure fast," she said.

He quested through perils, o'er rivers and plains, 'cross kingdoms and powerful realms. He went on without tiring, for his own lovely lady was dying of sickness back home. At last he confronted a wizard of might, and vanquished him, sword to wand. He took from the wizard a little orange vial—it could cure any illness, heal any wound, and make almost anyone smile.

He dashed back to Grandmother, the vial in the air, pillowcase streaming behind. "Grandmother, Grandmother!" He slid to a halt. "I'll save you. I've found it," he said.

She didn't move. Her hand trailed off the side of the bed.

Danny crawled on the bed and bounced on his knees. "Grandmother, wake up. I fought a wizard. I found you a cure." He picked up her hand and gave her the vial. Her fingers were limp, and cold. "It'll make you better, Grandmother, you'll see." He waited, and frowned. "Grandmother?"

Still she stared at the ceiling, the last bit of butter gone out of her eyes.

After that day when grandmother died, they went to a hill full of standing-up stones. People wore black and held flowers. They watched strangers lower a big box into a hole. His father made a choking sound behind him and squeezed him tighter around the shoulders.

He wanted to tell these people what she was like when she was well. How she would smile her little wrinkly smile. How her eyes would melt into happy pools of molasses and butter. How she smelled like soap and cinnamon toast. How she baked him cookies shaped like dragons and cars. How she'd play make-believe with him every day after lunch.

He didn't.

He whispered, "I loved grandmother" and started to cry.

His parents knelt and hugged him. They said, "She loved you too."

They stayed until the others had gone, and they were alone with the box in the hole. His mother's eyes were red. "Danny, it's time to go."

Danny shuffled closer and stared down at the box. He held dandelions clenched in his fists. "I picked flowers for you," he whispered down in the hole, and let his blossoms fall. He snuffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Goodbye."



**Deepest**

2<sup>nd</sup> place

High School Category

by Briana McMahon





There was a boy lying on Abir's doorstep.

For a brief moment, she simply stood and stared. People rarely strayed this far from the village, and there were no children nearby for miles. Kneeling down, she dutifully took in the dark skin, matted hair, wet clothes... wet clothes? Had it rained last night? Tenderly, she rolled him over to get a better look at his face.

His eyes were wide open.

Abir stumbled back. He was young, likely no older than eight. But as he stared up at her, unease clawed its way up her spine. His eyes were dark and vast, filled with an emptiness that was exceedingly unnerving.

Abir awkwardly cleared her throat, pushing her hair from her face and straightening up. "Well, hello there."

The boy blinked. "Well... hello, there," he repeated, his voice rough and waterlogged. Coughing slightly, he sat up and brushed himself off. "Who are you?"

Abir chuckled. "I think I'm the one who should be asking that." she extended a hand to help him up, and he stared for a second before taking it, flexing his fingers as if he didn't quite remember how to use them. The woman

pulled them both upright. “My name’s Abir. How on earth did you end up here?”

The child shrugged. “I came from that way,” he motioned towards the path that led into the forest, “and wound up here.”

A burning curiosity nagged at Abir, but she forced herself to swallow it. “Well, how about you come inside? You can... tell me where you came from, and maybe I can help get you back home.”

Turning quickly, Abir pushed open the door. Soft footsteps informed her that the boy had followed, so she directed him into the small main room, gesturing for him to sit at the low table in its center. He obliged, thudding down heavily and eyeing the room around him.

A few minutes later, Abir placed a bowl of soup in front of her guest and sat across from him, cocking her head to place her chin in her palm. The child was stroking the surface of the rough wooden table, a look of thorough concentration on his face. Abir knocked gently on the surface, and a pair of dark eyes raised to meet her own.

“Down to business,” she said. Nodding, the boy raised his head slightly higher. “What is your name? Where did you come from? Why are you here?”

“I do not have a name,” the boy answered, “nor do I come from anywhere in particular. I began, and now I am here.”

Abir wrinkled her nose, opening her mouth to voice her confusion when the boy held up a hand.

“I began for one purpose,” he continued, and Abir studied his face.

He wasn't really as young as he seemed, was he? There was the typical teenage acne, the barest definition of a jawline, a deepening voice that she hadn't picked up on before.

“I exist to experience the world as it currently is, a checklist visit of sorts.”

No, hold on. Not a teenager; a young man, the barest shadow of stubble on his cheeks, curly hair that hung low over his eyes.

“There is truly much to see in a world as vast as this,” the man across from her rose to his feet, and Abir recoiled from the table, scrambling backwards, “and I have a duty to see it in its entirety.”

“Wait,” she stammered at the full-grown adult facing her.

“I have been to the Hottest,” the man rounded the table, his words drawing sand from the floorboards and causing the air to shimmer around him. “I have been to the Coldest, the Flattest, the Sharpest.” Underneath her fingers, the wood panels felt like daggers.

He knelt in front of her, and where his hands touched the floor, the blade-sharp floorboards morphed into rough, pocked wood.

“Most recently, I found the Deepest,” he whispered, and the room began to darken, the walls wobbling and distorting as if cloaked in water. “What have you seen?” “Nothing,” Abir gasped, the air turning thicker with each inhale, “I have seen nothing.”

“Then let me show you,” he said, and suddenly he was leaning forward and touching his forehead to Abir’s and the world fragmented. Pitch black slammed into place around her, all noise cutting out in lieu of a solemn hum. Abir opened her mouth to speak, but water rushed in and filled her throat, silencing her words.

Deepest, came the voice. A ripple spread from the point of origin, washing the ocean floor in a fuzzy gray and

illuminating spindly creatures spawned from nightmares. Tiny plankton, no bigger than Abir's fingernail, blinked into existence around her, flashing brightly against an inky backdrop. Sluggishly, she reached a hand towards them, and they scattered.

Do not fear the dark, the voice whispered, roaring through Abir's head like the sound of the waves. There is true beauty in what lies unseen.

A sudden, blinding light caused Abir to flinch away. When she pried her eyes back open the boy was standing mere feet away from her, clutching a fistful of light, as youthful as if he had never aged in front of her very eyes.

"What do you want?" Abir attempted, voice quaking.

Highest, the boy said, his voice layered with a thousand others, warping and echoing oddly off of the jagged trench walls. Take me to the place where you can touch the stars. Abir clenched her hands into fists to stop their trembling. She would take this, this being wherever he desired. But she had to know what she was dealing with.

"Who are you?"

I am your beginning; I am your end. The boy said, his face shifting oddly, becoming bonier and angular. I am life,

death, the suspension in between. Teeth protruded sharply from a stretching jaw, fins budding from his limbs.

I am the truth, rumbled the monster, and I am your protector.

Abir's world melted into darkness.

-

The mountains were roughly two days' worth of walking, and Abir, frankly, was a bit nervous.

When she came to, it had been to a sandy-haired boy with his face jammed in hers, impatiently bouncing on his toes. "Well?" he inquired, eyes still glittering with the thousands of creatures from Deepest. "How soon will we be able to reach Highest?"

Abir hadn't been able to find the words then, nor had she found them yet, so she had simply thrown rations into a bag and plodded out the door, the child following her. She didn't attempt to make any conversation, fearful that he would drag her to the middle of the desert, but as the sun went down on their first night of walking and they sat, hunched around a crackling fire, she had had enough.

"So," Abir cleared her throat, and the boy looked up from where he had been lighting a stick on fire and

watching it blaze. Yeah, best to put a stop to that right now. “You’re not exactly, well, human, are you? How does that work?”

“That is a stunning observation,” the boy abandoned the stick and nodded at her, “but a correct one. I am human sometimes, like now, but sometimes I am not. Sometimes I prefer something with a bit more teeth.” He grinned, and Abir tried not to shy from the mouthful of fangs that greeted her.

“So how do you... decide what to be?” she asked, leaning forward to tug the stick away from his hand. “I know that what you were in... Deepest, wasn’t exactly a fish.”

“I take form depending on thoughts.” The boy seemed to consider his words for a minute, then nodded once. “Go on. Try it out. I know you want to.”

Abir slowly closed her eyes, rolling over a few choices in her mind before she settled on one. A whine sounded from next to her, and suddenly a wet nose was nudging Abir’s hand. She slapped said hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle at the golden dog panting up at her.

The dog barked once, then the fur shifted and receded and the boy was back in front of her, running a hand through hair still as golden as the sun. “After that,” he ruffled his hair once more, “I have choices. A set of options that I can draw on from my experiences. In this way, I can reach places like Deepest with lungs that do not collapse and visit Coldest without my hands freezing to each other.”

“Simply incredible!” Abir exclaimed, flopping backwards and running her hands through her hair. A thought occurred to her, and she rolled to face the boy, all previous fears diminished. “Wait, then why do you need me to get to Highest? Why not just sprout wings and go?”

The boy was quiet. “When I visit these places,” he murmured, “I have to be shown the way by something of this planet. If I have no guide, then I must wait until one appears.” He glanced down at her, endless eyes vacant. “It can sometimes take much longer than you could possibly imagine.”

Abir chewed her lip. “So, I guess you’re lucky you collapsed in front of my house, huh?”

The boy nodded solemnly.



“If we walk all tomorrow, we could probably reach the summit by sundown,” Abir yawned, crossing her arms behind her head to get comfortable. “Let’s rest for now.” The boy nodded, copying her. For a moment, there was silence.

“I’ve been thinking of something,” she said, and the boy glanced at her, the dying fire casting cryptic patterns on his face as he quirked an eyebrow. “A name for you.”

The boy wrinkled his nose. “A name? I have no need.”

“I know, but I can’t keep calling you ‘kid’ in my head. Besides, you aren’t even an actual child.” Abir retorted. “I think I have one for you.”

“Oh? And what would that be?”

“Eirik. In a way, it means ‘forever’.”

The boy was silent.

“Well? What do you think?”

“It’s perfect. Thank you.”

Abir hummed contently and closed her eyes, drifting off to the sound of the boy whispering the name to himself.

Eirik. Eirik. Eirik.

They did not stop walking for the entirety of the next day. Equipped with a new name and a new form, Eirik certainly made the trip more interesting, shifting species every few hours. When Abir would complain of aching feet, he would slow to trot beside her, and the ground would soften and shift underneath her feet. The boy seemed to get more and more anxious as they approached the mountain, and tapped his thigh as if he were itching to run ahead.

When Abir finally insisted they take a break at a small town by the foot of the mountain, she thought Eirik was going to jump out of his own skin. The whole trip, he kept his eyes glued to the now-visible peak, shrouded by clouds and snow. Abir shivered and gifted herself a soft coat before they began their ascent.

It wasn't even an hour into their climb when Eirik couldn't stand it anymore. "Too slow," he insisted. "We need to go faster!"

His form shivered and twisted, back arching and his limbs stretching into powerful legs. Sharp hooves

bridged the gap between fingers, and a pair of elegant horns stretched from his skull. In seconds, Abir was staring at a very odd looking deer.

Hurry, the voice bounced around Abir's mind.

Let's go.

With a grudging acceptance, Abir hopped onto Eirik's back, and he took off without a second thought. His speed was incredible; Abir yelped and wrapped her hands like vices around the horns, grateful for their ornate curves. The mountain blurred by, and Eirik continued accelerating until snow was slicing Abir's face as they hit the upper slopes. As the air became nearly too thin to breathe, Eirik stopped suddenly, sending Abir flying forward into the snow.

"Uncalled for," she spat, brushing herself off. But Eirik was not paying attention; instead, he was gazing a spot just ahead.

Abir came up beside him and gave him a nudge.

"Is this it?"

Eirik shifted until he was a child once more, nodding and starting forward. Abir picked her way across the rocks, and then she saw it.

In the middle of the small, flat clearing, a needle-like stone stood pointed straight upright. She turned her gaze upwards and gasped. Directly above the stone, there was a jagged hole, spreading across the noon sky and slicing the sun in two.

“I’ve reached it,” Eirik whispered, falling to his knees before the stone. “The last place on my journey. The top of the world,” he leaned forwards and brushed his lips against the point of the rock. The skin split, and golden blood dripped down its needle-like structure. “The place where you can touch the stars.”

Eirik reached up, and Abir watched in disbelief as he reached between the crack in the sky, tugging and clawing until he had ripped a hole in the universe. The night sky poured through, enveloping the pair in a frigid atmosphere. Eirik reached out and scooped a star from the cascade, cupping it carefully in his palms and turning to face the woman standing behind him in awe.

Abir, he whispered, his form wavering and his voice carrying the sound of every soul in the universe, you have returned me home.

Abir nodded silently, feeling tears she hadn't known were falling freeze to her face in the emptiness of space. Eirik approached her, his increasingly familiar soft face filled with starlight.

“What now?” she whispered, her words barely making it past her lips.

I must return to the start, Eirik responded, his once empty eyes glittering with millions of galaxies. My time on this planet has ended.

Abir nodded, a pit growing in her stomach. “Then this is it?”

Eirik shook his head. I have completed the six trials of this planet, and therefore it is mine to keep watch over. He smiled, a cocky and crooked thing that somehow didn't match the situation. As if I could leave this planet on its own.

Abir nodded, and the starlight began to shimmer and fade around her. Eirik grabbed her wrist, his touch mercilessly hot and brutally cold simultaneously.

You have only seen a glimpse of the world, he murmured. You must go and see it for yourself.

Abir nodded and pulled Eirik into a hug, and suddenly she was back at the village, kneeling on the grass and hugging only air. Pushing herself to her feet, Abir asked the first villager she saw if they knew the way to the nearest ocean.

She certainly had a lot of ground to cover.

# The Daguerrotypes

3<sup>rd</sup> place

High School Category

by Jessica Neer





*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

“Sir?”

James looked up from the tattered Bible in his hands and squinted at the man who had addressed him. His glasses started to slip, so he shook them into his hands and looked at the man who had come.

“Yes? A picture I assume?” James hadn’t meant to sound so rough, but it was hot in his dusty little photo shop. It was the type of heat that clung to your skin. James brushed the moisture from his forehead and rose to prepare his camera. His hands glided along the bulging, accordion-like tool as he waited for the man to respond.

“I-I do.” the man stuttered. “Yes, I want a picture.”

“Well then take a seat. You’ll pay at the end.”

James said. From the little he could see without his glasses, the customer was an old man, who didn’t seem like the type of person who had the money to spend on something as frivolous as a picture. But then again, who had money to spend when their country was impoverished and at war with itself?

The old man sat in front of the black curtain, on a sturdy cushioned seat. He didn’t seem to fit the scene. James couldn’t see the dirt smeared on his face and hands, the magnitude of wrinkles weighing down his genial, elderly eyes. No, James couldn’t see much, but his

customers did not know that. They didn't know that he really never saw the detail of his subjects until long after they left.

James prepared the camera. The old man shifted.

"Now, you won't be able to move when I'm taking it. Don't try to smile either, unless you can smile for 15 minutes without muscle spasms." James snorted.

"Sir, I don't think I'll smile," the old man's voice wavered. "Not for a long time."

James noticed that the old man kept still when he was talking. If this picture was going to amount to anything, he'd have to keep up conversation.

"I'm sorry for your loss. Who was it? You never know these days." James didn't need to see the man to know that he was surprised. James had a peculiar way of reading people that shocked most. Besides, it was hard to get through a month without news of someone you love dying.

"My son." the old man whispered. "My only son. I gave him away and now..."

James raised an inquisitive eyebrow while fixing a lighting piece. The old man continued.

"They don't know what's happened to him. Whether he deserted, was taken prisoner, or was just too dismembered to be recognized. Either way," he inhaled and exhaled deeply, "they told me to consider him dead

regardless.” James noticed the way his voice hitched when he said “deserted”.

*A deserter? Huh.*

“I’m sure he’s all right,” James said while making some final touches. But they both knew, too many scared boys enlisted and then ran. They were trying to cover it up, but everybody knew.

“I thought he wanted to go...I really did. I hate to think I did that to him.” The old man dropped his head.

James gazed at him pityingly. “Hey, now. Don’t be a pessimist. Let’s get a good picture for you.”

The old man raised himself and fell silent, knowing that the time had come for him to gaze at the machine and wait for it to capture his features, his face. Many minutes later, when James guessed that he had gotten what the old man was coming for, he told him it would take a while for it to develop, so drop in a sometime tomorrow.

“I’m doing this for him.” The old man suddenly whispered. “Maybe if he had had a photo of his father to tuck into his uniform, he wouldn’t have done what he did.” As the depressed old man left the sweltering shop, James whispered to himself: *Poor old fool.*

A few moments later, a haggard woman walked into the shop with a dismissive air.

“So, I hear you’re the best in this town?” She blurted out.

James caught the outline of her elegant carriage when he replied.

“I guess that’s for you to decide.”

The woman sniffed. “If you were, it wouldn’t be saying much. This town’s nothing but a heap of garbage and poor, smelly people. They dress like it’s summer and I’m frozen solid. It would not be tolerated in Richmond.” The woman gracelessly plopped herself on the cushion in front of the couch. “Would it, Ralph?”

James watched as she retrieved a fat, gray lump from under her coat. His profusely watering eyes told him what it was before he could get close enough to see it. *A cat, goodness no.*

“We don’t normally accept animals here.” he sneezed whilst stumbling over to the camera. “Peculiar,” sneeze “business.”

“Well, Jimmy, that’s your name, right?—”

“James will do.”

“Jimmy, Ralph is my only companion, and I so I’ll keep him around.”

James took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose. *I need to get this over with.* “Please sit still, ma’am.” As the woman sat there staring into the void of the camera, her haughty smile slowly faded. Instead of proudly stroking her cat, she began to clutch it desperately, savagely. But James couldn’t see this as he allowed the camera to capture each of the woman’s peculiarities. He

couldn't see the haunted look in her eyes when, after the picture had been taken, she slowly, mournfully asked "How old are you, son?"

James shifted uncomfortably and rubbed his slightly swollen eyes. "I'm well into my 30s, ma'am."

"You're not fighting?"

"Well, I have...medical issues." James left out the fact that he was nearly blind and could hardly see that the woman was not much younger than his previous client.

"There was a boy, I thought he was about your age...But he was much younger. Barely 18. He came to my house in Richmond, looking for shelter." The woman seemed as if she had gone into a trance. James slouched onto the stool behind him. "What's it matter if you pull the trigger on a deserter?" she asked.

James eyes continued to water. He didn't like this sudden change in the woman, and her oversharing. He looked at her and said "The picture will be ready in a day or two." James didn't wait for her to respond, but he ran to the sink in the back of his building and splashed his face in water to bring down the swelling.

James did not have another customer for hours after that. He rested his irritated eyes and, in his deep sleep, missed the sun slowly descending in the blue sky. Clouds had begun to gather in the darkening sky and rain had begun to sprinkle ever so slightly. For this reason, it

took quite a few minutes for James to wake from his sleep and realize that someone was knocking at his shop door.

“Come in!” He impolitely howled to the person rapping at the door. As he gathered himself behind his desk a frail woman stepped in. James stopped and looked at her. He reached for his glasses, but couldn’t remember where he had left them.

“I would like to have my picture taken.” The woman shyly whispered to James. She was alone, which was unusual. James noticed that she did not lift the black veil that covered most of her face when she spoke, but he could make out her amber colored eyes and jet black cascading hair. She was young, he could tell by her voice.

James pointed her to the backdrop and said “Sit over there.” As he searched for his glasses. The young woman carefully sat down on the seat. She didn’t look comfortable, she looked lost, despaired.

James began to fiddle with the elaborate tools of the camera. The entire time she sat there with her face covered, staring. She was mourning, but James couldn’t see that. He was afraid that she had fallen asleep so he cleared his throat and inquired, “Do you have anyone special in the war?”

The girl slowly blinked her wide, golden eyes at him as he fixed the lighting fixture opposite her.

“I did.” She whispered back.

James debated whether asking the next question would be appropriate, but then decided that they all knew what loss was at this point.

“How?”

“He was shot. I told him to leave so we could run off somewhere war couldn’t find him, but he was shot.” She whispered, barely audible.

James couldn’t see the young lady softly murmur to under her breath “*He was shot as a deserter.*” As if the words killed her.

“Would you prefer the veil on or off? I won’t tell anyone you broke mourning just for a picture.” James gave the girl a reassuring smile.

The young lady seemed to think for a moment before she slowly unwrapped her black veil. James drew in a breath when she was finished. He didn’t need his glasses to know that she was beautiful. Her waist length ebony hair complimented her olive skin. Stray curls fell around her face, making a frame for her entrancing amber eyes. James knew she was beautiful, but he couldn’t see she was in so much pain. As he knelt to take the picture, he didn’t see that her eyes were so full of tears that they looked like glass about to burst. He didn’t see the stray, rebellious tear fall down her face.

“We’re done.” James said, straightening out. “You can pay when you come to pick it up in a few days.”

The woman issued a timid, tearful thank you. As she walked to the door, she hesitated and turned around to face James.

“We were supposed to meet here. Once he had escaped we were going to meet here and get our picture taken, so that no matter what came we would always be together...even if only in a picture.” The lady let out a sob as she said. “I only came to keep my promise. I don’t want the picture, sir. It has no use to me now.” The girl hurriedly set a few coins in James’ hand and ran through the door. Excreting her heart’s miseries with each wave of tears.

James worked for hours on his pictures. After many hours of water, chemicals, and even fire, the daguerreotypes were finished. This was the part that James loved the most; the revelation. The moment when his pictures were laid out and dried and he could see all that his flawed eyes had missed hours before.

In the dull light of his dim workroom, James peered at the photo of the elderly man. He smiled when he put the voice he had heard to the face; he gazed at the crinkled hands. His eyes shifted to the complacent old lady. She did indeed look old. He frowned at the malicious face of the cat in her lap. He cleaned his glasses before he looked at the final picture, the one he had wanted to see the most, and the one he had waited the longest to see. She was in a long, obsidian dress that matched her hair; she



was young, she was stunning. But when James looked closer, she was heartbroken. He gazed at the tears that decorated her cheeks, looking misplaced on her pretty, youthful face. She looked like a dove being suffocated by shadows.

In the distinct look in the young girl's face, James came to a realization. It seemed so absurd, but it still had to be true. He ran his fingers through his hair as he relayed the events of the day over and over in his head. He remembered the depressed old man wincing as he said "deserted". The haughty old woman claiming to be a simple tourist, when, in reality, she had seen an old man walk out of his shop with the same blue eyes as the boy who had come running to her in the night, begging for protection. Since he was fighting for the other side, she instead greeted him with a bullet.

But the girl. Her voice swam in James' head. *He was shot, he was shot.* She was the only one that knew he hadn't abandoned his duty out of fear. No, James thought to himself. He could see it now, the idea of running off suggested in letters, starting as a spark, but, with the more blood the boy saw and the more he missed the girl he loved, it became a flame. So he ran. He was going to meet her in this shop, and they would leave it all behind with just a picture to represent all they had abandoned and all that they would discover.

James felt sick with his discovery and stumbled up the steps and into his small bedroom. His head was pounding, he breathe was short. He fell onto his bed and opened his Bible shakily to a place that he had bookmarked years before. His vision swam in and out as he read:

“there will be no more death”

*He was shot.*

“or sorrow”

*He was his father’s only son.*

“or crying”

*She killed him without hesitation.*

“or pain”

*That girl loved him.*

His heart beat until his sight swam read and he couldn’t think anymore. As his vision blurred he had one last, lucid thought:

*He loved her enough to die.*

# **The Devil's Town**

Runner Up

High School Category

by Emily Wolfe



God walked out when I was ten—just up and left town in the middle of the night. The note he taped to the church door was frustratingly vague about his reasons for going: He'd been doing this too long; he just needed a break from it all; it wasn't about us, really. We all knew it was a load of crap.

A lot of people turn their back on God, but it's another thing entirely when he does it to you. You, and six thousand of your neighbors.

It wasn't that we hadn't seen the whole debacle coming. Even when Long Grove was just a group of a few dozen bean farmers having a go at rural Pennsylvania's hard, surly ground in the seventeenth century, we'd never treated God the best, and, three hundred years of separation between church and state had put a real strain on the relationship. But actual divorce papers arriving at Mayor Henry Asher's door and citing grounds of irreconcilable differences threw everything into brutal perspective. The deal outlined in those papers gave us almost *nothing*, by the way. Of course, the mayor signed them anyway. No one wants to mess with God's lawyers.

You've probably heard about us somewhere or other since it happened. National news networks took the story and ran with it—I think Fox News was the one who came up with the phrase “the devil's town.” Twitter caught wind of it and made it a hashtag, and a few days later my older sister Jen drove out on a school night to the *Welcome*

to sign on Route 80 and painted it beneath the town's name in red letters. So that was how people classified us afterwards: Long Grove, PA: The Devil's Town.

When chance hands a small town a gimmick like that, it has to be a fool not to take it. (Never mind that, even without God, Long Grove was no den of sin. If anything, we were a kind of Purgatory: more a vacuum for spirituality than a genuine red-light district of the Sodom/Gomorrah variety.) Tourist traffic had been falling for a while, and we couldn't count on prayers to save the economy when Heaven had started sending them back unopened. So with a few minor changes, we transformed ourselves into a place the devil could put his name to.

The council voted to leave Jen's vandalism undisturbed, and hired a man to add a few streaks of blood to it for good measure. Within a few months, our biggest high school's football team, the Long Grove Labradors, had been renamed the Fallen Angels. Henry Asher, whose campaign slogan had been "Clean Up Public Parks" the first time he'd run for mayor, changed parties and started telling people he was the Antichrist. Sightseers loved it. Us kids loved it too. Growing up, I was always glad I lived in the devil's town--it felt like all the people there had something that brought us together, something that made us special.

Still, it was a little weird to pass by the church building on my walk home from school and see it boarded

up and empty. There were some people, I know, who had gone there every week for decades—not just for Sunday morning services, either. Every time you went by it in the evenings, the windows had been lit up and you could see people inside doing *something*—choir practice, Girl Scout meetings, and piano lessons. It had never gone empty for a day before, and then it went empty for years. It seemed wrong that God should get to take all that light with him when he left.

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The closest I came to a genuine demonic force was during the summers I interned at the town hospital. I was just a gofer, and it was unpaid, but it looked impressive on college applications. Long Grove Hospital had the best witch doctors in the country, or told people it did, so I saw all sorts: possessed kids, virgin births, things like that. I met Mica and her soul there when I was sixteen. I came in with only a few minutes left in my shift to deliver a bouquet of flowers that had been sent by some uncle.

It's hard to judge when the other person is lying in a hospital bed recovering from a high-risk operation, but the girl looked taller than me, around my age, and pretty. I arranged the bouquet next to a few similar ones and introduced myself as Peter, an intern.

"What are you in for?" I asked, attempting to sound casual.

"My soul was all voodoo-y," she told me. "I had to get it replaced." She pointed to a jar hiding behind a leafy

plant on the bedside table. Something smoky and alive was wriggling around inside it.

"Oh, that's nasty!" I said, and went to get a closer look. The thing wasn't really *alive*. It was more like those tornadoes you make in grade school by swirling some water around in two 2 liter bottles, if instead of water you used a gaseous form of oil with unexpected teeth.

"How did you do this to yourself?" I was impressed. I didn't get this up close and personal with many souls in my job, but I'd seen X-rays, and it was my impression that it was hard to screw your soul up *that* badly before you were sixteen or so.

"I ate some cursed venison in Maine last year. Spent two days next to the toilet." She was looking at it with disgust. "Wicked painful, and then I started having dreams about murdering our mailman, so the doctors sent me here to get a transplant. I've got the soul of some poor bastard who died in a car accident."

I touched the jar. It hissed at me. "So you're from Massachusetts?"

"Yeah! Boston." The girl craned her neck to look at the jar. "Is there some way to tell where it's from?"

I grinned. "No, my sister just says 'wicked' like that. Picked it up at MIT. Boston, really? I would have guessed Salem."

She sighed. "Everyone guesses Salem." Pause. "Hey, Peter, I think maybe this new soul they gave me is



defective, cause I'd literally kill a man for some ginger ale right now."

I got one for her, and one for myself, too.

"Thank God," she said. "I need caffeine."

(Ginger ale is caffeine free, although I elected not to let her know that. Or that thanking God was considered rude in Long Grove, in light of everything. She only had me and Canada Dry to thank for that can of ginger ale; God wasn't involved anywhere in the equation, but I don't think girls like it when you tell them that.)

"Did your nurse tell you when you're getting out of here?" I asked as she downed it.

"I don't know, Peter, pretty soon? I was asleep the last time she came, and my concept of time is like, super warped. That's why I keep saying your name, by the way. I don't want to forget. I think I still have some serious drugs in my system." She said all of this very quickly.

"Did they make you forget to tell me yours?" I said, which I thought was pretty smooth.

"Mica," she said. "Spelled like the rock, not the prophet."

"Thank goodness for that," I said, because we certainly got enough of *those* around there. My mom says they're like my aunt Linda; they love a hopeless case. I popped the top on my can of ginger ale and took a long sip. Mica watched me.

“You’re so normal,” she told me. “Everything here is so normal.”

“No, we’re not,” I said, annoyed.

“You are,” she said. She looked like she was maybe falling asleep.

“Well, anyway, my shift is almost over,” I said. I started to leave.

“Hang on, come over here for a minute,” she commanded. I obeyed. “Will you do me a favor?”

I said, “Yes.”

She wrinkled her nose and pointed at the jar of swirling stuff. “Take it with you.”

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I did my best to take a different path home from the hospital every day, and that night, for whatever reason, with the jar buckled into the passenger seat, I drove by the old church building. It stands right next to the town hall, with a clean line dividing the properties where the grass changes from high, withered and brown to neat, close-cropped green. The church’s windows were dark as usual, but you could see faint yellow light behind the door of the town hall. What made me bring the car to a stop, though, was the sight of a person leaning against the side wall of the church, looking at the upper floor of the town hall, or maybe the stars. I saw her face for an instant in my headlights before she turned away—it was a girl, dark-haired and tall. “Mica?” I said out loud, and glanced at the jar next to me. It oiled ominously.

I racked my brain for every case I'd shadowed at the hospital. Could broken souls separated from their physical form manifest new bodies? This was something I had not considered when I had agreed to take the thing with me. I had received Mica's "I just don't want it around, it creeps me out," with a kind of faint amusement at her superstition. She had told me to dispose of it however I wanted to—she figured I would know ways, she said. I had been planning on keeping it anyway, but I wouldn't be doing that if it came with a ghost.

Even when you grow up around all that stuff, you have your limitations.

So—well—what would you have done? I parked the car in the little parking lot, took the jar from the passenger's seat, and walked over, clutching it to my chest. As I got closer and my eyes were able to slip into the shadows, I realized that my brain had played a trick on me: The girl wasn't Mica at all. It was my sister Jen, holding a canister of red spray paint, who was leaning against the church and staring at the town hall.

"Hi, Pete," she said, without looking at me.

"Hi," I said. "What are you vandalizing?"

"What *did* I vandalize," she corrected me. "Look."

I looked at the upper half of the wall of the Long Grove Town Hall. "Oh," I said. It was a steaming red pile of crap. Really.

"What do you think?" she asked.

“It’s very easy to tell what it is?” This seemed to satisfy her, because she pointed to my jar and asked what was in it. “A soul,” I said. “This girl I met today gave it to me. It’s cursed.”

“Sounds like a cool girl,” said Jen. “What happens if you break it?”

“Nothing, as long as we don’t breathe it all in.” This was more of an educated guess than real knowledge, but the doctors probably wouldn’t have let Mica keep the thing if it were really dangerous.

“Do it,” she said. She set the can of spray paint down, took her hair down from its ponytail, and put it back up. “I want to see what it does.”

“I don’t know,” I hedged, because I had really wanted to show it to our parents.

On the other hand, I really wanted to see what it did.

“Let me do it, then,” she said, holding out her hand.

“No way,” I said, and threw the jar against the lower half of the wall of the Long Grove Town Hall.

Nothing happened—just the small, clear crash of the jar hitting the wall and breaking. You couldn’t even see the stuff disappearing into the air. When we walked over and knelt to get a closer look, there was nothing black at all—just a glittery dust in the grass amid the pieces of

broken glass. It was like powdered mica, or powdered snow. I touched it--nothing--and put a little in my pocket.

I realized suddenly that we were hearing music, and that it was coming from inside the town hall. The sort of music you used to hear in church. I looked at the windows, faintly yellow behind their blinds, and then at Jen.

She shrugged. "You know the choir still meets there, right? They've changed the words, and the place they practice, but everything else is exactly the same."

No, I didn't know that, I thought. I thought everything like that had disappeared from Long Grove. I remembered Mica calling us--me--*normal*.

"It's just all crap, you know?" said Jen as we were walking back to the car. She gestured over her shoulder at her artwork. "They get the same feeling from it. They just call it something different now."

"*Is* that crap?" I asked. I genuinely wanted to know what she thought, but she didn't answer, getting into the passenger seat of my car. I slipped my hand into my pocket and pinched some of the sparkling stuff between my finger and thumb. Then I brought it up to my mouth so I could blow on it like I was wishing on a dandelion and send it out, sparkling, into the air.

I said, "Wicked," and got into the driver's seat.



**Sandra and Victoria with the  
Curious Body Cavities:  
Conceptual Guts/Filled with  
Water**

Runner Up

High School Category

by Shiki Anderson





Sandra, her guts, they're not connected to anything. They're not connected to each other; they don't form any kind of working mechanism. They're just kind of thrown in there (stuffed in there). Too long intestines snake around lungs (of which she has three), pancreas, womb, and liver (which was hastily crammed in on the left side of her chest, where her heart would normally have been). When she breathes, her lungs expand; when she eats, her stomach fills with food; and as she lives, her heart beats. But her guts, they're not connected to anything. They're just for show: you can take them right out.

You may think that, despite the jumbled mass and mess of her insides, her organs would be the same, at least in quantity and appearance, as those of any other human (just disorganized). But, upon closer inspection, you'll find that they are ever so slightly *off*. As I mentioned before, she has three lungs and too long intestines; however, apart from that, her insides are elegantly beautiful, in the way I notice that certain people's hands and ears can be beautiful, but I thought nobody's guts were until I saw Sandra's. They look like a Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock print ( if you've ever seen a Hokusai print, they look like they have been printed by Hokusai, if Hokusai had ever printed guts). As for the color, they are colored with a harmonious palette of cream, coral, maroon, and brown. As for her blood, it seems darker, thinner, and clearer than normal

blood. The odor, however, is the same as that of any healthy body cavity: a raw, fleshy metallic smell.

At parties, she'd open up her chest and belly and show them to us. It may seem too forward or open of her to you, but we were all charmed, bemused, and a little touched at the periodic, unsolicited appearance of her insides. We grew fond of the curve of her liver. I don't know. It may have been too forward for some people (we hung around her and she hung around us for a reason).

Victoria, they say, is filled only with cold, transparently plum-colored water, which came out in small measures when she sneezed, coughed, or laughed too hard. Whenever this would happen, she would cover her mouth and murmur, "Excuse me." She would seem sheepish, but no one really thought anything of it. Sometime in April, she coughed and that time under her hand, as she murmured,

"Excuse me,"

I could see a tiny sliver of cream colored intestine peeking out of her mouth, only to disappear with a muffled slurp.

That particular intestine incident had to have occurred a little bit after we first noticed Victoria and Sandra getting closer, which was sometime in January or February, or even December of the last year. Victoria and Sandra were both part of our circle of friends, so of course they knew each other and interacted in group settings, but they had never struck me as being particularly close to each

other (not to the extent that they would single each other out over anyone else in the group). I hadn't even thought that they hung out with each other one-on-one: they entered the group through two different people, so I always thought that they only saw each other at all because they each fulfilled the disparate niches in our group, only connected by a chain of 3-dimensional personality. Of course, maybe we were right the whole time and they didn't really have any special relationship until we started to see them hang out. All I know is, for a long time, all we ever saw of them together was them laughing along to each others' jokes in groups (but when I think back maybe Sandra laughed a little harder at Victoria's jokes than everyone else) or sitting on opposite sides of the couch when we had movie night at somebody's house (but maybe Victoria's eyes lingered on Sandra when Sandra got up to go to the bathroom), and then suddenly we saw them tucked away in a corner of the kitchen at parties, sitting next to each other on the couch, and calling each other Vicky and Sandy. Once, I passed by them while I was driving in the car: they were walking down the sidewalk in matching sunglasses, carrying matching milkshake cups. When we saw things like this (that is, the rest of our friend group), we raised our eyebrows at each other behind their backs or when their heads were turned, but we didn't say anything.

In March, Sandra opened up her chest and belly for Vicky and Vicky began to eat from her veritable buffet of organs; she slurped up her intestines like noodles and ate her heart, liver, and two of her lungs whole (it tickled). When Vicky had had her fill, Sandra drank the plum water from Vicky's body cavity and found it had a complex, spicy and sweet taste (she just wanted to keep tasting).

In April, I saw Victoria's belly expand and contract, like something inside was filling and emptying.

In April, Sandra coughed, and wiped away a speck of water from the corner of her mouth.

In May, inside both of their body cavities, uncanny woodblock organs floated free in cold, plum-colored water.

Uncanny Ukiyo-e woodblock organs floating in cold, plum-colored water:

My beating heart floats in the plum-colored water  
in your chest;  
floating in the water, 1/3 of your lungs breathe in  
my belly.

# Counting Train Cars

Honorable Mention

High School Category

by Lydia Smith



“When my brother and I were little, my grandmother would take us to the train tracks so we could count the cars. It was partly a math exercise, but moreso because I loved the trains, and my brother loved everything I loved, back then. I knew all their names and what they were carrying, too, and my grandmother had to hold me back by the shoulder to stop me from running up to them and touching them reverently with my little hands. My brother thought it was terribly exciting, and would jump up and down and scream train, which was, I ensured, one of his first words.

“It’s ironic, now, looking at all the misery that came to her because of the trains, that my grandmother fostered my love of them, but that was the way she was—she saw love, and she grew it. She was the one that bought me my first train-set, the one that I took everywhere until it got lost in the river on my tenth birthday. She helped me learn how to draw round wheels and tracks that looked three-dimensional, and even gave me a whistle that said Conductor Pat.” I paused, looking down at the paper clutched in my hand, at the words printed evenly across the page. My full name was too long to be painted onto that whistle, for which I had been secretly thrilled, though my mother was displeased and claimed that it was instilling unladylike ideas into my head. I still had it. My mother said I was like my grandmother, too materialistic.

I heard a lot of that from my mother-- that my grandmother was a bad influence, that she was teaching me and Michael to be selfish children-- but my mother grew up dirt-poor, and she's never really understood the concept of buying nonessential items. My grandmother was a relic from another age, and besides being frivolous she had a chocolate stash hidden somewhere in the house that my mother could never discover.

"More than anything, she was full of kindness," I continued. "She had a small family, but she poured enough kindness into it for a thousand lifetimes. She will not be soon forgotten."

I stepped down from the lectern and looked around at the mourners gathered there-- the preacher, my brother, my mother, my uncle, and a few close friends. The grave was to be next to my grandfather's. All I knew about him was that he had died long before I had been born, and that it was his decision to start a farm on the five worst acres of land in North America, just inside what eventually became Lasara, Texas. When he died-- in a train accident, as it happened-- it had been passed on to his son, but my uncle was an alcoholic who never married and left his sister to do most of the work, so it was my mother who had run the farm for as long as I could remember.

My father was a soldier from Ohio-- someone whom my mother always painted as handsome and tragic, but there isn't much to be liked about a father who leaves



in search of greener pastures when your brother is hardly more than a baby.

Patricia means noble, and we were anything but.

We only had two horses, officially named Lincoln and Johnson, but we called them Connie and Johnny, and they were generally terrible at their jobs. Connie was a mare, so I don't know why we named her Lincoln, but she was a good riding horse, not bred for labor. I think my uncle won her gambling, though I'm not sure-- he just turned up one day with her, having traded in our old horse, Franklin. Johnny was a labor-horse, born and bred, but his problem was that he was just plain lazy. We'd set him off to plow the field, and a quarter of the way through it he'd give up. We used to be worried that he'd give Connie foals, but as my grandmother liked to joke, he really wasn't up for it. I'd be surprised if he'd ever moved more than three feet more than was absolutely necessary in his whole life.

It was with my grandmother and Michael that I had the best memories. She used to tell us about her father, who had been a daring cavalryman that had fought against the British in 1812, and her vivid descriptions ensured that he became my childhood hero.

Besides telling war stories, my grandmother knew the best way to make mud pies, and how to whittle willow whistles, and all sorts of things that are important for little children to learn. She was the one that taught Michael

how to tie a tie for his confirmation Sunday, because our uncle was too hungover.

Walking back from her funeral, I thought to myself that she wouldn't have wanted it like that-- it was formal, and preachy, and I had to wear a stiff black dress that belonged to my mother. She would have wanted it to be alive, with laughter and love and other such things. I arrived at the house and pulled off the dress.

I often wore Michael's clothes when I cleaned the barn, simply because they were easier to move around in; it's hard work lifting skirts up and climbing a ladder to get into the loft. I cleaned slowly, paying meticulous attention to every speck of dust or rotted piece of hay. It was cathartic, as if by cleaning it perfectly I could somehow bring my grandmother back.

"Patricia, holler at me when you're done up there," called Michael, and I broke from my reverie to see him standing at the barn door with a sack of manure. "I need your help with this."

I wrinkled my nose, but grudgingly climbed down the ladder and helped my brother spread the manure all across the field. It would make the wheat grow fatter next year, we hoped.

"You go on, I'll clean up," I said when we were done. "I'll catch up."

He walked on to do the rest of his chores, and I stood looking at Connie. She was trapped in this farm,

born to be ridden on the plains, not strapped to a yoke and forced to plough wheat fields. I touched her nose with my hand.

#

Later that night, after my mother and Michael were in bed but before my uncle had drunk his fill down at the bar, I crept into his room and felt for his bedside table. It was not locked. Inside, I felt what I wanted: the cold barrel of a pistol. The extra shot was kept in the barn.

Michael heard me leave. He came out the door with his shirt flapping in the wind and his feet bare. I looked back, my legs tensed and ready to urge Connie into action, my hair newly short enough that the night was making my neck cold.

“Patricia!” he called.

“I’m sorry,” I said, too quietly for him to hear. I nudged Connie with my heels, and she set off at a walk. Michael began to run after me, and I urged her to go faster.

“Patricia!” he called again, and I extorted Connie to speed up, but she was not used to going at fast paces anymore, and Michael caught up with us, breathing hard.

“Patricia,” he said again, the third time, and he held up a red bundle, and pressed it into my hand before I could look to see what it was. Then, he stopped running, and Connie finally got the message, and I left him behind as we sped away.

I slept that night outside the outskirts of Lasara, and rode on the next morning. The first town I came to that I didn't know the name of, I tied Connie to a post and walked into the clothing shop. I thought of how Michael walked, trying to adopt his slight swagger and forward gaze. I had brought all the money I had ever saved plus half of my uncle's, and with it I bought a hat, real goat-skin Angoras, and an extra shirt. The shirt I tucked inside my saddlebag along with the remainder of the money. It was only then when I unwrapped the red bandana my brother had given me to find the wooden train whistle, its letters faded slightly but still readable.

#

It was easy being alone. Connie was a good horse, and I was a hard worker. We drove cattle from Texas to California and back again, and the people who paid didn't ask many questions. Sometimes, I would come across others, and together we would exchange stories and liquor by the glow of a campfire.

That was how I met Stefano. He was a vaquero, and he had a pretty face and an easy laugh. His hands were rough, like all of us punchers, but their tanned skin was not yet leathered with age. Stefano told stories, his hands moving and giving life to the ghosts that invariably haunted them.

He had fought for the Indians down at Red River, and he told war stories like my grandmother did. I

listened, raptured, as he spun out tale after tale under the Southwest stars, and though it was hot that summer, I got chills down the back of my neck.

I asked him once where he came from, and he just shrugged. “South Texas,” he said, and I, imagining it to be San Antonio or Three Rivers, had nothing more to say.

Our path was cut by new train tracks that had emerged seamlessly from the ground in the year since I’d traveled there. We had to divert our route by nearly two hundred miles, because it isn’t safe to drive the huge herds of steer over the tracks, in case a train comes and they spook. It was wildly different from the predictable pattern of growing that I was used to, and sometimes I missed home, and Michael, and the unshakable belief in eventuality that came with the harvest.

Stefano had kind eyes. We traveled together for five weeks, from the Texas panhandle to a town called La Reforma in the middle of Nevada.

That night, before we parted, I almost thought I was in love with him, as I watched him poke our campfire through slitted eyes. I nearly gathered up the courage to tell him everything, but was instead satisfied with pretending to be asleep and listening as he sang a song in Spanish that I could not understand.

We rode up to the drop point slowly.

“So long, Pat ,” he said. He had a train to catch if he wanted to make it to Genoa in two days’ time; our detour had cost him dearly.

As I watched him go, I had to turn my head, because a cowboy isn’t supposed to cry .

#

It had been three years like this when I decided to go home, or at least to visit Michael. By then, the era of cattle-cars had started to squeeze the pockets of the men that made their living driving cattle, and I was nearly out of money.

I rode home, pushing Connie a little harder than I usually would, and wondered what my family would think of me. Michael, I hoped, would understand. My grandmother would have.

When I arrived, my brother was digging in the garden. The house had not aged well, and over the past three years our field had shrunk from five acres to four. A guilty stone sat in my chest as I wondered why they had been forced to sell that acre.

“Patricia!” he said, more out of amazement than anger, and my stomach turned over.

I dismounted Connie and walked towards him. He looked at me as if I were not a real thing, but some kind of a dream, and then he shook his head and blinked as if to see if my image would go away. “Michael,” I said, standing a few paces away.

“What the hell have you been doing?” he demanded, his anger finally coming through, and with sadness I recognized the tone of my uncle.

“I’ve been driving cattle out to California,” I said, simply enough. I opened my saddlebag and pulled out the train whistle. “Thank you. I never got to thank you.” Michael struggled to find the words, then leaned on his shovel. “I just figured you’d– want a piece of her, wherever you were going.”

I privately thought that the whistle was more of a piece of me than of my grandmother, but I nodded all the same. “Where are Ma and Uncle?” I asked.

He looked to the freshly turned over ground. “Uncle died a year back,” he said. “Liver failure. Ma’s been overworked since you left.”

“I can’t stay.” I hadn’t known it with certainty until just then, but looking at Michael turning over his vegetables, I couldn’t bear to be anywhere permanent. “I’m sorry.”

Michael bit his lip, then nodded like he understood, or at least was trying to. “Patricia--”

“Pat.”

“Pat, I missed you,” he said. “Can you promise you’ll come back to visit sometimes? At least promise me that. You owe me that.”

I promised that I would.

#

Texas has changed since my grandmother died. It's moved on, progressed, and left behind what used to be a way of life. But some things have stayed the same. Michael's son served in a war just like our father and great-grandfather had, and Michael takes his grandchildren to see the automobile races every other Saturday.

And, of course, the trains are still running, running, like a never-ending race that we are all a part of. And it doesn't matter in the end whether you're buried in a suit or a dress, because we're all buried, and at our funerals someone will read a eulogy and maybe run away from home. I look out my window sometimes and see the ghosts of the train-cars, and sometimes I try to count them, and I think: One day, I could run one of those. And maybe, one day, I will



# **The Grim Protector**

Honorable Mention

High School Category

by Alyssa Lane



There wasn't any tunnel with a light at the end. No pearly gates of white. No fires or sulfur. Just black. Honestly, I was feeling a little disappointed. I thought death would be way more exciting. It was just sort of....dark, floaty, like I was in space.

*What a way to spend eternity, I snarked.*

That was before something sank its teeth into my arm.

The pain was excruciating. I thought that you weren't supposed to feel pain after death! I hate being proven wrong. I wrenched myself away from the attacking creature and clutched my bleeding limb to my chest, spinning around to try and protect myself from whatever had attacked me. I couldn't see it clearly, but I saw enough. A tail fin, swinging side to side, whipped past me, white teeth snapping at where I had been just a second before.

A shark. I was deathly afraid of sharks. Suddenly the darkness and floatiness made sense. I was underwater.

I knew staying still wouldn't have any effect, I was bleeding to much. I would have to find somewhere to hide or find something to fight it with. I looked at the bottom that I could suddenly see. Absolutely nothing, just sand.

My chance of surviving hit rock bottom.

I was trying to think of a way to survive (or whatever the heck happened after death) when another black shape appeared, holding a long, silver pole with a sharp blade on the end, charging at the shark. With one

slice, the shark's head slowly sank to the bottom of the "sea". Once it hit, the watery feeling disappeared, and I hit the ground below. The floor had turned from sand to black and white marble checkerboard, with blood red walls. The now-hallway ran long, with black windows semi-covered by gray curtains, and dotted with old fashioned gas lamps hanging sporadically. I tried to see out one of the windows, but it was useless as staring at a slab of obsidian.

The shark head had turned into a- somewhat- human head. The features were burnt and misshapen, almost melted in appearance. I walked over to it warily, examining it.

"What the heck is this thing?" I murmured, nudging it with my foot.

"Daeva," someone said. I whirled around to find a dark haired boy, a few years older than me, in black, loose clothing. His eyes were gunmetal grey.

"Huh?"

He sighed.

"That *thing* was a daeva. Feeds off fear. You'll have to kill all of the ones who attack you," he explained.

"And who are you?" I asked, cautious. "How do I know you're not one of those....diva things?" He shot me a long-suffering look.

"*Daeva*, not *diva*. And I'm not either of those. I'm a reaper," he said impatiently. I squeaked and clutched my arms to my chest.

“No! Go away! *My* soul, not yours!” I shouted, glaring at him. He scowled at me.

“Be quiet! All your screeching will bring them running. I'm not the danger here, they are. Why do you think I killed that thing? I'm not going to take your soul, I'm here to guide you to the next plane of existence. You're between planes at the moment, between life and whatever comes next. Daevas are souls who escaped hell. They can't go back to hell, or get back to life, or go to Heaven, so they're warped and stuck,” he whispered fiercely. “I'm a reaper, someone who wasn't accepted into either heaven or hell. It's my job to guide you and protect you on your way to the gates. So follow me and keep silent!”

I followed him and kept silent.

For a while we were just walking in the semi-darkness, our footsteps echoing loudly through the corridor. The hallway seemed to stretch on forever, cold and uncaring.

Eventually he spoke.

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I get that this is hard for you. It's just.... I'm portrayed as a horrible, soul-stealing monster, when I'm actually the person who helps everyone get to where they belong. I'm sort of sick of it,” he added quietly. I smiled a bit. He wasn't as rough and tumble as he first appeared. I was just about to respond when ran into a wall in front of me.

It made me feel a tiny bit better when he ran into it too.

“What the-” he muttered, turning around. There was a wall behind us too. And on either side. No door, no windows, just a grey steel cube. I looked at him and he shrugged.

“Your fear, not mine,” he said, just as lost as I was.

Just then, a horrible, metallic groan scraped through the room, startling us. I jumped about a foot in the air and almost knocked reaper guy over. He steadied me, and took my wrist.

“What's happening?” He asked me. I shook my head, dumbfounded. I looked around the room. Did it seem....smaller, than before? An awful certainty gripped my chest, and I looked back at reaper guy.

“You remember that one scene from Star Wars? The one where they're stuck in the trash compactor?” I asked semi-calmly. “Let's just say there's no golden robot to help us this time.”

His eyes widened.

We turned and started to try and brace ourselves against the walls, pressing with all our might, trying to halt their progress. Reaper-guy had his scythe strapped to his back, and I suddenly had an idea.

“Can I see that?” I asked, pointing to the weapon. He gave me a weird look, but handed it over nonetheless. I examined it, shuffling a little bit closer to Reaper Guy to

avoid the wall. “Will this thing break if I try and cut the metal?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Lets test that.”

I swung it at the wall, gouging the metal. A terrible, high pitched scream erupted, and the metal started to bleed. The box shrank faster, attempting to defend itself.

So I was right. The box itself was another daeva.

I sliced the metal again, cutting deep. That horrible scream erupted again, as did more blood. One more slice, and the box- by then we had to crouch and huddle together to fit- disappeared, replaced by a dead daeva.

I handed Reaper Guy back his scythe. I nudged the daeva with my foot.

“How'd you know that would work?” He asked after a pregnant silence. I shot him a sideways glance.

“I didn't.”

The hallways from before reappeared, and we continued down it. There was silence for a long time, but not bad. He broke it after a while.

“My name is Thomas, not Reaper Guy, by the way,” he commented. I jumped slightly, surprised by the sound and the information.

“You, ah, can read my mind?” I said uncomfortably.

“When I want to, yeah. Helps me protect you,” he explained.

“Oh yeah? What number am I thinking of, huh?” I challenged. He grinned.

“You're not thinking of a number. You're thinking of blueberry banana flapjacks,” he replied smugly.

Holy mother of-

*He was right.*

“Stay out of my head you pervert!” I squeaked, covering my head with my hands. He laughed, long and loud. It was nice. I liked it a lot.

“It takes effort to pry into people's brains. I can't just do it anytime. That'd be crazy hard,” he said, flicking my forehead. I giggled and swatted his hand away. We proceeded down the hallway, keeping an eye out for any new fears.

The next one came soon enough.

The gaslights on the wall started to go out, dimming and flickering before becoming dark. The hallway we were in grew blacker and blacker, until I couldn't see my hand in front of my face.

“Thomas? You there?” I asked warily.

“Um, yeah. I'm standing right next to you. What's up?” He asked. I reached for where his voice came from but was only met with more darkness.

“I can't see you,” I said, my voice shaking slightly.

“What do you mean you can't see me? I'm literally right here,” he replied exasperatedly.



“It’s really dark in here, with the lights out. I can’t even see my own hand, let alone you,” I snapped.

There was a long, long pause.

“It’s not dark in here. The lights are all on. I can see you perfectly fine,” he said slowly.

He thought it wasn’t dark and seemed pretty calm. I couldn’t see anything and was definitely afraid. It was only affecting me, which meant....

The daeva was in my eyes.

Great. Just frickin perfect.

“Okay, so how do we kill the daeva this time?” I asked, annoyed.

“I don’t know. I’ve never faced this before. Let me think,” his voice said. I could imagine his eyebrows scrunching together and his jaw clenching, his thinking face. I smiled fondly. He always had a little crease between his eyebrows when he was thinking hard.

Wait.

How did I know that? I didn’t think I’d ever seen him deep in thought. So how did I know his face in such detail and remember it with such affection?

“I’ve got an idea,” he said, shaking me from my reverie.

“What is it?” I asked. He gave me an apologetic look before grabbing my wrist, and twisting hard.

A horrible crack rang out, and a pain filled cry tore from my throat. A few tears leaked from my eyes, and the

hall was suddenly bright again. He showed me the tears. They were black and oily. He slid his scythe blade gently across them, splitting them, and a horrible screech filled the air. He dropped them, and when they hit the floor, the tears turned into another daeva, cut into pieces.

I turned away from the gruesome sight, the combined pain and gore making my stomach turn. Thomas laid his hand gently on my wrist, and I yelped as the bones settled back into place and knitted back together.

“Why did you do that?” I asked, cradling my now-healed wrist.

“I had to make you cry, and you don’t have any memories to work off of. It’s a security mechanism, keeps you from wanting to return to the living plane. I had to cause enough pain to make you cry, to get the daeva out. But it’s better now, see?” He said, gesturing at my arm. I was suddenly struck by a question.

“If you can just heal me, why do we need to kill the daevas?” I asked.

“It’s a sort of test, to get into heaven. The amount of fears you have, combined with your deeds in life and your response to your fears determines where you go. Don’t worry. You’re almost definitely going to heaven,” he said soothingly. He held out a hand, and I let him pull me up.

We continued down the hall in relative silence.

“Do you remember anything about your life?” I asked. Maybe it would give me insight on why he seemed so familiar.

“No. Only people accepted into heaven or hell get to keep their memories, for better or worse. I can’t remember anything but my name. I’ve been dead two years and I don’t even know if anyone misses me,” he said. I detected a hint of melancholy in his tone. I wondered who he’d left behind.

I bet he did, too.

We came to a doorway. The hall had finally ended. I warily pushed it open and walked down the steps. A tarmac road that stretched in front of us, leading into more darkness. I hesitated, and Thomas took my hand. I looked up at him, and he smiled gently. I took a deep breath, and started down the road.

Not long after we started walking, we came across two buildings. Motels. One said “Heaven’s Inn”, the other, “Hell’s Motel”.

Heaven’s Inn was a cheerful looking, cream colored building with blue doors to every room. The room numbers were nailed beside each door in pretty, swirly gold plaques. There were little planter boxes with flowers under each window, all in full bloom and filled with color.

Hell’s Motel was a very, very different. The red painted building had flaking paint, boarded up windows, and broken....well, everything. The room numbers were all

dented or missing. The landscaping was dry and covered in sand.

I gave Thomas a look.

“Really? You were actually serious when you said they had no vacancy?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. He laughed.

“This is just the entrance. But yeah,” he said. We walked between the motels, and stopped in the middle. Heaven’s vacancy sign lit up, and I knew where I was supposed to go. Which was great and all, but....

I looked at Thomas. A longing, wistful look was on his features. I didn’t want to leave him here, all alone, to forever lead souls to their destination but never get to go himself. I didn’t know why I felt such a strong connection to him, but I did.

“Thomas-“ I started. I was interrupted when the world started to shake and crumble. I looked down at my hands and realized I was fading out like a mirage, or a ghost. “What’s happening?” I asked, panicked. Thomas gave me a shocked look.

“You’re waking up!” He shouted above the din. He reached out to me, but his hands went right through me. The world grew painfully bright. I closed my eyes and looked away.

When I opened them, I was somewhere else.

“Honey! You’re finally awake!” A tearful woman exclaimed. She embraced me, and I hugged her back, finally having regained my memories.

“Mom...where’s Tommy?” I asked, looking around. I also remembered why Thomas was so familiar. He was my brother. We had been in a car accident. I’d been in a coma for two years. I guess he had been, too.

Her happy grin disappeared, and the tears streaming down her cheeks were of sadness.

“Sweetheart....your brother died in the crash. The force....it broke his neck....nothing they could do....”

Her sad words faded out as I remembered his face. He was so sad....

“Mom, I have to go get him!” I said frantically.  
“Send me back!”

“Back?”

“Back to Thomas! I saw him mom, he’s all alone! I need to go back!” I thrashed and upped the IV from my arm. Mom and the doctor tried to hold me down, but I kept fighting them. I didn’t know where I would go, exactly. Just that I had to get to Tommy.

I felt a prick in my arm, and all went black.

*Many years later*

“Hello.”

I turned to find a dark haired boy, much younger than me, in black, loose clothing. His eyes were gunmetal grey.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Thomas. A reaper. I’m here to guide you to where you belong.”

“Oh, alright. It’s nice to meet you, Thomas,” I said, holding out my wrinkled hand.

“It’s nice to meet you too.”

**Scales & Tears**  
Honorable Mention  
High School Category  
by Zenia DeHaven





I was beginning to think that challenging a centuries old dragon was not the brightest idea. Except I wasn't exactly in a good position to correct my horrendous decision. Especially since dragon in question was fast asleep nearly a few feet in front of me. Its gentle, slumbering exhales felt like gusts of wind.

I closed my eyes, tracing back all the mistakes that led me to this nightmare.

First off, I was a lowly prince, not some destined warrior.

My father was a king over a small estate of Falron. "Estate" was honestly a huge glorification of our territory. Most of his subjects were cows, with some baying sheep, and, on rare occasions, a stable horse. King wasn't a fitting title. If it was somehow up to me, he'd be labeled a Bedazzled Stable Gentleman. I mentioned the idea to my mother once and, on a completely unrelated note, I did not eat dinner that night.

All of the kingdoms of our land, Bendhaven, were called to a Grand Council just a few years ago. Grand Councils were basically huge meetings that invited select kingdoms to discuss political matters. The kings usually sent the representatives because the subject matter usually wasn't vital enough for them to attend. Except this one. The kings and princes of nearly all of the kingdoms, even adorable Falron, were invited to this Council.

I soon decided that there is no lower life form on this planet than a teenage prince.

I hated all of them for fairly decent reasons. They were unkind, arrogant, and generally terrible human beings. They treated anyone with a lower rank than them like specks of dust and those that ranked above them like saviors of the universe. And they hated me because I was from Falron. Other regions looked down on Falron for being rural, uncivilized, sparse, and uncultured. While they weren't wrong, I refused to give them the satisfaction of being proved right.

The worse of the princelings was Ulric, the prince of Wazir, a wealthy mining kingdom. I still remember meeting him the day of the Grand Council.

I stood alone as the nobles, both the elderly kings and their childish heirs, mingled amongst themselves in the Hearing Room as we waited for the meeting to begin. Most of them were already acquainted from deals and treaties and other diplomatic affairs. Some were even friends. Since Falron was so isolated and didn't offer many natural resources, we were scarcely invited to meetings with the other kingdoms.

Hence, why I remained just outside of the bustle of people, praying no one bothered speaking to me.

Ulric, being a self-proclaimed god, answered my prayers, but not I the way I hoped.

He sauntered towards me with such confidence that it was an effort not to squirm. Despite the rot under his tanned skin, he was unfairly handsome. He stood a few inches taller than me, his shoulders broad and his head perfectly centered. His face looked as if was carved from a smooth slate of limestone. His blue eyes matched the shining diamond pin embellished on his black suit.

I took a breath and stepped forward to introduce myself. "Hello, I'm Aksel of—"

He interrupted me with a lazy wave of his hand. "I know who you are," his voice was dripping with boredom. "I want to know why you're here."

I frowned, surprised by his blunt attitude. "I'm afraid I don't understand your questions."

"Of course you don't," Ulric sighed, shaking his head as if he were trying to communicate with a small child. "Why is Falron here?"

I tamed my patriotic fury that was beginning to fume in my heart. "We were invited here. Same as you, same as everyone else."

"But *why?*" he ran a hand through his luxurious dark hair. "Do you even know what this Council is for?"

He finally bothered to meet my eyes, and his face lit up with amusement when he saw the confusion in my expression.

"You don't know," he breathed, more to himself than to me. I felt my face redden with embarrassment and

dropped my gaze to the floor. Father never told me what this Council was for, and I was too blinded by my excitement to be involved that I never asked.

Ulric was smiling, and, despite his beautiful face, he looked hideous. Like a monster preparing to pounce on unsuspecting prey.

“This is for fighters, Aksel.” I cringed at the way he said my name. Like I was a child. Like I was pathetic. “Not for farmers. If I were you, I’d go back to whatever haystack you crawled out of. You’re gonna get yourself killed by staying here. You Falronians are at least good at that, right? Self-preservation? I mean, there isn’t a whole lot to “preserve,” really-”

“Gentlemen, please take your seats,” the booming voice of King Seamus drowned out Ulric’s next words. The prince smiled at me once more before melting back into the crowd like a shadow fading in the sunlight. I released a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding and unclenched my fists. I’d carved small marks in my palms with my fingernails. I moved towards my seat, trying to shake the haunting image of Ulric’s feline grin out of my head.

King Seamus stood on the ground floor of the Pit, a nickname for the Hearing Room. All the seats faced the center of the room, giving the speaker everyone’s attention.

Seamus was older than most of the kings, but the only sign of him tiring were the speckles of grey and silver streaking his brown hair. He reigned over one of the most

prosperous kingdoms, Solace, a region along the seaside. His dark skin was evidence of his years spent under the sun.

Even with the cane at his side, he held himself with the confidence of ten men. “Good evening, kings and princes.”

“Good evening,” was the monotonous reply.

Seamus inhaled deeply before he spoke. “As you know, I was the one who summoned you here today. All of you.” He seemed to face my direction after he finished his last sentence. “I thank you all for making time to journey here. I know you would all rather be in board meetings with your courts.”

Light laughter from the kings filled the room, lightening the serene atmosphere if only for a moment. Seamus paused, waiting for the silence to refill the room once more. When he spoke again, only cold emotion bled in his words.

“My daughter has been imprisoned.”

A breath was stolen from the room by an unseen force.

“My daughter,” Seamus continued, his voice tight. “Princess Selene of Solace, fled for unknown circumstances nearly a month ago. Our armies tracked her to an abandoned castle bordering the Wastes. We sent our men in. None returned.”

Murmuring began to replace the tensed silence. I had my own questions, but I kept them to myself. It didn't seem logical for a wealthy princess to wander off into some dangerous castle for an "unknown circumstance." There was more he was keeping to himself. But why?

Seamus motioned for silence. He bit his lip before he continued. "The castle is guarded by a dragon."

The gravity of the situation slammed into my like a stampeding bull. Groans and some shouts of protest and disbelief emerged from the crowd, more from the kings than from the princes. Like me, most of the boys were probably too shocked to speak. They seemed to realize that we were not invited here for the free concessions.

"I understand your concerns, my friends," Seamus continued, unsurprised by the reaction. "I don't have any intention of sending the princes into a slaughterhouse. But I simply can't afford to send my men in without some sort of incentive. So, I came up with one for yourself and your heirs, take it or leave it."

Oh gods...

"The prince who rescues my daughter will have her hand in marriage."

I suppose that one sentence sealed my fate in stone. To marry into one of the wealthiest families was a daydream for lower kings. But for a place like Falron, we didn't even dare ponder such an outrageous idea.

But Seamus gave my father an offer he simply couldn't refuse. Infinite wealth. And, worst case scenario, his firstborn is mauled to death by a scaled monster.

Money makes desperate men do terrible things.

And so I was trained for the next two years. It shouldn't really count as training. A withered, retired soldier basically ordered me to stab a tree with various techniques. He napped on most days. Over the months, we received news of hopeful boys who ventured into the castle and didn't return. Father only seemed encouraged by this information, saying it "eliminated the competition."

And so, two years passed, and now I stood before the beast.

Its body was so massive that it almost took up the entire lobby. Its forked tail draped over its eyes to block the sun that flickered in through the cracked ceiling. One of its talons was easily the length of my arm. Its body radiated heat from the fire churning in its stomach. It looked more like a poorly shaped building than a living creature.

I had to remind myself to breathe. And I continued to wait.

I learned from the bones of fallen soldiers and doomed princes that they tried to fight their way to the princess. To my sick amusement, one of the skeletons bore a shield with a blue diamond, the symbol for Ulric's kingdom. I made sure to step on his decaying bones as I walked past.

But Ulric was right about one thing: I wasn't a fighter. But I did know how to kill a creature without swinging a sword.

I learned from following the beast for about a week that the dragon's main source of food was the fish in a ravine close to the castle. So I emptied my pockets to a medicinal merchant and bought all the questionable goods he had to offer.

I poisoned the fish nearly two days ago. Any other animal would've been dead.

But it was weakening. Its breaths grew shallower by the minute, its purple scales looked gray in the dim light.

I didn't know how long it would last. I had no idea if its disease would worsen beyond this point or the beast would somehow recover and change food sources. I'd been wandering in and out of the castle for two days to monitor its sickness. I thought about trying to reach the princess without confronting the dragon, but its whole body blocked the staircase to the upper floors.

I couldn't risk letting the monster recover and sealing my small window of opportunity. I couldn't return home empty handed, not with my father in such a crazed state. I wouldn't be surprised if he tore the head from my shoulders.

And, just maybe, I could save Princess Selene from being entrapped by this gargantuan creature.



I stormed out of the shadows and sunk my sword into the dragon's chest.

The roar that escaped its mouth rattled my skull and shattered my eardrums. It moved to stand, but its movements were sluggish from the poison coursing through its veins. I withdrew the blade and scaled up its back, using its rough skin to push myself forward. As it began to crane its long neck to face me, the scales along its back began to flex, opening and closing. I found a gap in between the scales and thrust the sword deep into its skin. It bellowed again, its jaws snapping just above my head. But it left the soft underlining of its neck and head completely exposed.

I shove the sword into its unprotected throat.

One moment I was underneath the dragon's neck, the next I was flat against the wall, my sword some feet away and my head throbbing. The beast must've flung me off at the last possible second. I blinked away the stars that flickered in my vision, wincing at the sudden pain in my knee. My leg was bent at an awkward angle and I couldn't move my right hand.

I squinted to try to decipher the blurs of color before me.

The dragon was dead. Its enormous body was utterly still, its head slumped against the floor. The air felt cooler without the fire that burned inside its chest. Its mouth was still agape, and a chill ran down my spine when

I looked closer. It seemed as if it were calling for help in its final moments. Despite the skeletons proving its brutality, seeing such a legendary creature dead... I resisted the urge to look away.

A soft whisper echoed in the hall.

A figure, so small compared to the massive beast, was leaning against its snout, gently rubbing its cold scales. Her gentle cries were heart-wrenching, so full of pure emotion and agony and suffering. She kept repeating its name, shaking its talon, hoping that somehow the dragon would awake.

“Kamaya,” she whispered in between breaths, pressing her temple against the beast’s head.

Kamaya. The Precious One.

King Seamus never explained why Selene fled to the castle. He also never mentioned why she never tried to break herself free.

She suddenly stopped, her body completely rigid. She stood slowly, her long, braided hair falling evenly onto her back.

She turned to me, and she was truly the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Everything about her, even when her face was blotched with tears and her dress was filthy and tattered, was absolutely perfect.

But when she locked onto me, there was nothing human behind her eyes.

“You killed my dragon,” she said, her voice devoid of emotion. “I loved that dragon.”

A sword from underneath her long sleeve fell into her hands.



# **A Mission of Conquest**

Honorable Mention

High School Category

by Holden Shea



Jorpus Eno, Class Scout, Rank 10 Expert  
Previous Operations: Overtake, Conquer, Triumph  
Specialties: Infiltration & Stealth

**Operation Dominate, Log Entry #7:**

I do not know if the Supreme Leader will receive this, or any members of the Council of Invasions. The transmission reception here is dreadful. If you do, heed my warning: abort the mission. The inhabitants of “Earth” are far too dangerous; we would surely be defeated. I will explain.

I had arrived at our target, and did some preliminary scans of the atmosphere and planetary structure. I decided to land somewhere on the large continent shaped like a ray gun. I maneuvered to a forested area, my ship slowly sinking down until its three feet touched the ground. Stepping out, I adjusted my appearance scrambler. It would allow me to take the form of one of these Class B humanoids. I locked up my craft as I moved in the direction of the life forms I had picked up in the scan. I crested a hill, with strange, veiny, paper-like objects crunching under my feet, and I walked into the town. It was very ... quaint, to put it nicely. There were no Giant Riding Beetles or Anti-Gravitational Abodes like we have on Xenocs 8. The houses were tiny, almost the same size as our warriors’ quarters. And they had put walls on the top,

which must have been designed for protection from the small, wet (and sometimes cold) projectiles which every so often fell out of their sky. On many of the porches were cauldrons, similar to the ones in Apothecary Yego's lab, although much more primitive. In each were many small brightly colored packages. My translator did not recognize the text on them. The air was cool, even a bit chilly, so different from the balmy, humid air I am accustomed to. Many Class Bs were strolling about, and I immediately saw they were not at all what I had expected.

Some looked very humanoid, but others had monstrous exteriors. I gazed at their claws which could rip us to shreds, their tails which could smack us a hundred feet, their horns which could pick us up and throw us. In their yards, corpses stripped of flesh, leaving only bone, hung on poles. Such barbarians! But our superior intellect could easily beat them in a hypothetical smackdown! (I apologize if that statement appeared to be a joke. It was an accident; I, of course, intend to speak only in the language of logic, facts, and figures. Hail the Leader!) I peered through the window of a residence. What I observed on their viewing screen was too frightening to comprehend.

An Earthling seemed to be watching footage of a battle between their kind and invaders similar to ourselves, albeit much more militant. And the humans were ... winning! They fought in crude, arrow-shaped vessels, but were somehow able to destroy a mothership twelve times their



size! If they discovered us during Phase 1, our chances of survival would be zero. I hurried back toward my ship. I needed to escape.

Suddenly, a tall class B with a spike through his head and green skin caught my eyes. “Hey dude, nice, like, caveman costume!” he said. My translator automatically activated its cross-reference feature to analyze the statement. A caveman was one of their ancestors, popularly depicted with a large forehead. I realized that this must be an error in the appearance scrambler, the bony, jutting brow giving the impression of a hominid. *Costume* was their word for disguise. They were aware of my true identity. The mission was compromised. “Yes, congratulations shall be going to you as well!” I quickly responded as I ran to the forest. When I reached my craft, I leaped into the pilot seat and ascended as fast as possible. I’m on my way back. We need to find other targets for Operation Dominate. Earth is a death trap.

**Transmission from the Supreme Leader of Xenocs 8, He Who Knows All and Tells No One His Wisdom:**

We have received your log, and your unintentional “joke” is pardoned. This is an unfortunate setback, but there are other planets in that solar system; we shall select one of them. I have heard that the Martians are very simple-minded. Because you are an expert in the rank of Scout, I am ordering the Corps of Last Resort to intercept you, in

case the green-skinned human informed their military to send out a fleet. The Corps are capable fighters, as you know. They can handle a number of Class Bs, no matter how strong you say they are.

**Operation Dominate, Log Entry #8:**

Please inform the Corps that they should not, under any circumstances, travel to Earth. A spacecraft with large rectangular ... wings? is heading towards me. It says “SYFY” on the side of the cylindrical body. It must be a defense measure. I cannot steer out of the way; I have not broken orbit yet. Tell my wife I love her very much,

**Transmission from the Supreme Leader of Xenocs 8, He Who Knows All and Tells No One His Wisdom:**

Jorpus? What is your status?

**Operation Dominate, Log Entry #9:**

I have slight bruising, but otherwise, I am healthy. I shall greet you in the Palace of Learning.

**Earth, 1 Minute After These Events:**

The damaged SYFY channel satellite drifted away in the cold vacuum of space. Down on Earth, in the small town of Bennington, Vermont, Ryan O’Donnell knocked on the

door of his friend's house. "Hey, Frankenstein," Dave greeted Ryan. They both sat down on the couch. Ryan set the pumpkin-shaped bucket he'd been carrying down on the coffee table. He noticed the static on the TV.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," Dave replied. "I was watching *Independence Day* when it lost the signal. I tried to fix the antenna, but no luck."

"Well, we could just sit here and mope, or we could eat some candy." Ryan held up the bucket filled with delicious treats, and they each grabbed one. "Trick-or-treating at Walmart," he said, chuckling. He looked wistfully into the distance, stroking his green chin. "*Independence Day*, huh? I wonder what we would do if aliens really tried to attack us?"



**This is War**  
Honorable Mention  
High School Category  
by Morgan Mabery



On the morning of the day I first killed, I didn't have any breakfast.

I was woken by our lieutenant marching up and down the rows of our bunks, yelling, "Come on ladies! Time to save lives! Up and at 'em! There'll be time for shut-eye when you're dead!"

My bunkmates and I all sprung up from our beds and promptly pulled on our scrubs as we filed out of the barracks. The hot Afghani sun burned in our eyes as we were greeted by the shouts and grunts of soldiers running around, bodies of people stretched out on planks between them. Dust flew where their boots shuffled towards the medical tents.

"No time for grub, ladies," our lieutenant barked at us, "injured are rolling in by the dozens. There's no time to waste for your mama's oatmeal!" Every shout was a jolt to my over-exhausted brain, the previous day's stress and work still felt in my bones and in my head. As we shuffled toward the tent, my stomach rumbled, but I had to push away the urge to eat. It didn't matter that I only had four hours of sleep and hadn't eaten for twelve hours - there is no room for weakness in war.

Entering the medical tent, I was bombarded by the shouts and scurrying of the doctors and nurses on duty. Calls rang out across the tables "I need blood, stat!" and "Get this guy an IV, now!"

Gazing around at the chaos, I heard my name called, “Grant!” It was Sylvester, a young nurse in his late twenties. We had gone through basic combat training together. “Get your ass over here!” Sylvester, normally cool and collected, was overwhelmed. His eyes were wild, his hair a rat’s nest. “I’ve been going non-stop for twelve hours and we just had a herd of civilians brought in - attack by another terrorist group. Those people are bat-shit crazy... using civilians against us!” He talked as he worked on a patient, his fingers quick and sure while my mind was whirling at the news. We barely had enough supplies to help our own soldiers, and the next supply drop wasn’t for another seventy-two hours. “I know,” Sylvester said, glancing up at my expression, reading me like he did with everyone. “We don’t even have a damn second to worry though,” he said, his attention already drawn back to the patient whose blood currently encrusted his scrubs. “Take the north side of the tent... more injured are coming in.”

I just nodded, not saying a word, my mind reeling at the choices before me. I jogged to where Sylvester told me to go and already many Afghan civilians were on tables, waiting for someone to save them. Hugh, one of the lead doctors, told me I was needed at the end of the row. An Afghani girl was lying there, maybe twelve years old. Her clothes were soaked with blood, her hair covered with ash and singed beyond repair. She moaned in pain and my thoughts drifted away from war to the time when my



daughter Clarissa, just eight at the time, had broken her leg. The anguish that twisted her face so resembled this girl that I couldn't help but feel the same sense of panic, my heart beating fast.

I placed my hand on her arm, where there seemed to be little injury. "Alright, honey," I whispered in her ear, "we're gonna get you fixed up, ok?" I had no idea if she understood English, but her expression softened a bit at my voice, her fingers reaching out. I grasped her hand tightly, hoping she understood my desire to help her.

From the table next to her, I heard a hoarse voice cry, "Fatemah!" I turned to find a woman lying naked, her skin also burnt, but this woman's legs had been blown off, the ends bloody, veins and skin hanging like spaghetti. As I watched, her hand reached out to grab the end of my scrubs, fingers leaving blood on the fabric. "Please," she groaned in heavily accented English. Her lips parted, about to say something else, but suddenly her grip slackened and she fell back on the table, her eyes empty glass.

My breath caught in my throat for a second as the girl, Fatemah, cried out. *Pull yourself together*, I told myself, *It's not as if you haven't seen death, mate. This is war.* Turning back to Fatemah, I was filled with a new vigor to save her. From the clipboard attached to the table, I learned that the girl had been in the market about 30 feet from where a bomb had been ignited. The woman must have been her mother. They might have just gone out to

trade something for supper. Again, I was reminded of Clarissa. She and her mother coming back from the grocery store, her face flushed with excitement, her little arms hauling heavy bags of food. My heart ached.

I worked methodically, removing Fatemah's garments carefully - nakedness no longer fazed me after so many months of gore - to have a better look at her wounds. They were extensive, ranging from burns to shrapnel injury, and it looked as if she had a concussion - blood was leaking from a wound on her head. I knew I had to work quickly. Gathering the materials I needed from the cabinet, I couldn't help but notice the lack of supplies we had. If I wanted to fix Fatemah, I needed to finish before more patients came in.

Returning to my patient, I noticed fresh blood had trickled out of her lips and her breathing had become shallow. "Hold on, honey," I said as I readied the IV, "You'll be comfortable soon." Connecting the IV to the inside of her left elbow, I injected morphine and got a fluid drip going before taking care of her injuries.

I started by cleaning her up, wiping away the blood, even more of it transferring to my scrubs and hands. It soon became clear that she needed a lot more help than I had the time and materials to give her. The burns on her legs and arms were at least second-degree, and shrapnel had embedded itself deep into her legs and cut up her chest. I was not prepared to handle this much on my own.

“Help!” I screamed for anyone who could hear me. “I have a patient in critical condition!” Only one out of all the nurses looked up at me, and her expression told me everything: *All our patients are in critical condition*. No help was coming.

Just then, the lieutenant barged in, followed by a doctor I hadn’t seen before and about ten soldiers carrying their comrades.

“Move, move, move, ladies!” the lieutenant barked. “This is life or death!”

As I watched, hands still hovering over my patient, the soldiers carried their comrades and laid them down on the remaining empty tables. I realized only too soon that there were too many of them and not enough tables, not enough nurses, not enough supplies for everyone.

The doctor leading the lieutenant came over to me. “You, nurse,” he said, “what is the situation here?” He was obviously overworked, running only on adrenaline. The lines on his face, though he looked young, told me he had seen too much for a lifetime.

“These are civilians from the bombing, sir,” I said. “Many in critical condition. There aren’t enough here to take care of them as is.” I watched his eyes as I was talking slide over my shoulder and look behind me. A soldier had come to the table the dead Afghani woman laid on. Picking her up, he threw her body outside the tent, where it

flopped atop a pile of the dead, replacing it with an injured soldier.

The doctor turned away from the soldier and down to my patient. “And what of her? How likely is it that she will survive?” My eyes averted from the doctor’s. I wanted to tell him 100% she would live. I needed that to be the truth. I wanted to be that nurse that could do those things. But war has no time for lies.

“Not likely,” I told him finally.

“Okay,” he said. His voice was not the hopeful lead I hoped for, but rather sounded defeated. “You have to make the decision, now, whether you want to continue your work on her, or on our American soldiers, here,” he said, like it was my choice, but I sensed only one decision would please him.

I knew that if I didn’t try to help her, the Afghani girl would certainly die. I knew that even if I did help her, there was still a chance she could die. I knew that if I chose her, our soldiers would suffer more, possibly even perish. And I knew that if they died, it would be my fault.

Was it just my hope clouding the reality of the situation, or did Fatemah actually have a chance of survival? And if I chose her over the soldiers, would I be going against my oath? If the soldiers died because of my choice, could I live with myself?

My heart sank under the weight of reality.

Bending down, I kissed Fatemah's forehead, her blood staining my mask. Then I took out the IV and lifted her up, carrying her to where her dead mother lay. She moaned a little as I placed her gently in the arms of her mother. I took one last glance at her when her eyes fluttered open for a second, locking with mine. They spoke of pain words could not express. Then her eyelids fell heavily and with finality, and I knew this image would burn into my mind. A child in the arms of her mother. Both of them victims of a war neither of them wanted.

Later, I would remember her blood coated my hands, all the way up to my elbow. Like gloves, only these I could never seem to take off.