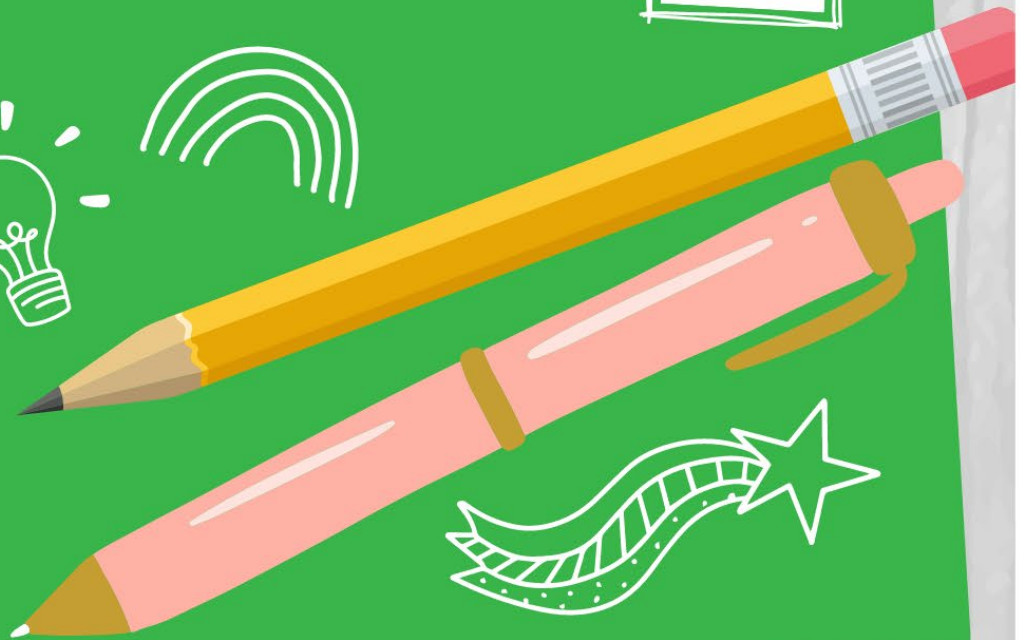


IT'S ALL
WRITE

☆ Short Story Writing
Contest for Teens



Teens

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Thank you to all who participated
or supported participants.

Thanks to those who attended the event
Saturday, May 18 at Eagle Ridge Middle School
and to those who made the event possible.

These stories are included in their original format, with editing
made only to font and spacing.

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A special thank you to our guest judge, Taryn Kloeden, who ranked our winning stories.

Taryn Kloeden is a lover of nature and all things furry and feathered. As a graduate student in anthrozoology, with an undergraduate degree in psychology and biology, she is dedicating her life to understanding and protecting animals, both human and nonhuman. This zeal for the outdoors combined with a lifelong love affair with fantasy and horror stories led her to create the YA dark fantasy series, *The Fenearen Chronicles*.

Taryn lives in Richmond, Virginia with her Prima donna cat, Stella, and personal piano player/spouse, Lorenzo.



A special thank you to our keynote speaker, Amina Luqman-Dawson.

Amina Luqman-Dawson has always had a love of writing. However, writing wasn't the first path she pursued, she first received a political science education and BA from Vassar College. Reflections of this educational path can be found in the topics of her writing, through glimpses of the public policies learned. Luqman-Dawson creates stories that facilitate an understanding of race, along with the culture and the community. Current published writings include a novel, a non-fiction book, newspaper op-eds, magazine articles, book reviews, and travel writing. Luqman-Dawson wants to help show how the world works through her writing and what people can do about the things they see that need fixing. While she has written many things, it's specifically writing and reading for youth that brings the most happiness to Luqman-Dawson.

Authorship includes: *African Americans of Petersburg*, an edition of the pictorial history book series "Images of America," and the New York Times Bestseller *Freewater*. Incidentally, New York City was where Luqman-Dawson was born, though she was raised in California. Thanks to determination and libraries she was able to depict the African American history of the area she moved to: Petersburg, VA. This was the first big authoring that fueled her drive to create further works. *Freewater* received the John Newbery Medal as well as the Coretta Scott King award. It was thanks to her son and husband, who reminded her of the joy of words felt in childhood, which lead her to adding *Freewater* to the beloved literature. The family currently resides in Arlington, VA and all will have to wait to see what Amina Luqman-Dawson writes next.

Photo courtesy of:

<https://www.aminaluqman-dawson.com/about-amina>

Thank you to our 2024 Middle School Participants

Jasper Adkins	"Revenge of Obi Wan"
Poppy Adler	"The Enchanted Locket"
Penelope Adler	"Her Heart is Too Kind"
Tanisha Aggarwal	"Emotions"
Nonso Agogbua	"Europe's Scoundrel"
Jiovanna Amadi	"The House on 67th Street"
Anuja Anand	"The Death"
Raihana Aoualhab	"The Dreadful Night"
Adeline Arnwine	"The Emerald Turtle"
Krishna Ashok	"NSK - A Story of Three Young Superheroes"
Reagan Baehr	"The House Sitters"
Meg Bales	"The Shadowclaws Tell A Story"
Jack Barbie	"Eruzione"
Ishnoor Bhatia	"Whispers of Fate"
Ayush Bhattacharya	"A Wasteland"
Mati Blackford	"Caroline"
David Bour	"Zerneas"
Zahkaylah Bradford	"Beginning of Dance"
Amira Bradshaw	"Song: A Girl and Her Friend"
Alexander Brandt	"Chances to Dances"
Ekam Brar	"The Wishing Well"
Max Canavan	"Best Two Out of Three"
Charlotte Caraway	"Secrets"
Lillian Cassano	"Clowning Around"
Clare Ceigersmidt	"To See Beyond"
Desta Chachu	"Hopeless"
Hannah Chapin	"The Strange Dream"

Devina Chauhan	"The Silent Goodbye"
Saanvi Chevuri	"Lilly's Unraveling of Family Mysteries"
Kate Cleavinger	"A Hero's Journey"
Lilah Collins	"Thinking with Your Feet"
Pearl Coogan	"Searching for Home"
Sophia Cost	"Frozen Ice"
Darcy Cowan	"Jellyfish Jungle"
Aden Curtis	"Murder on the Oracle"
Anya Dahal	"A Horrific Hallucination"
Nathaniel Danh	"Overdrive"
Elianna Davis	"The Club"
Luciana de Lima-Campos	"Red Carpet"
Purvi Deglurker	"Looking in the Dark"
Emma DiPrete	"The Jellyfish"
Ava Dolven-Miller	"Other Humans"
Kaitlin Donahue	"Clarity"
Maria Doubova	"Burning Memories"
Hannah Edwards	"Picture Day"
Chloe Ermellini	"The Crazy Encounter"
Riley Etheridge	"The Flower Field"
Falisha Faacy	"What If It Was Crystal Clear?"
Katherine Feng	"The First Year"
Quinn Fitzpatrick	"The Field of Screams"
Addie Flick	"Goodbye Terria"
Addie Freund	"The Girl Outside the Glass"
Elizabeth Frierson	"The Dragon's Remains"
Aarya Fulambarkar	"A Froyo Kind of Day"
Akshara Gaddam	"Secret's Don't Stay Hidden"
Vihaan Gangshettiwar	"The Cursed Shell"
Krystal Garn	"Mountain of the Weavers"
Andrea Gaston	"Amnesia"
Sofia Gelston	"Bluebird"

Anderson Goka	“Child's Play”
Kishan Gorur	“Battle of the Elements”
Lucas Granja	“The Intense Game”
Teresa Gryś	“A Farm in the Woods”
Emma Guerreiro	“The Great Grandma”
Leia Hatem	“Castle of Deception”
Hillary Heise	“Rich Rehab”
Megan Holmes	“The Woman Who Knew her Death”
Sara Holmes	“Dreams”
Afra Hoque	“Dwindled”
Jolee Hubbard	“The Room”
Charlotte Iacono	“The Girl on The Hill”
Sophia Ingegneri	“The History of the Commanders”
Vedanti Jain	“What People Don't See”
Purvi Jasti	“The Dreadful Dogs”
Yusra Jawad	“Hope”
Amit Josyula	“A Revival of Harmony”
Tanishka Kamble	“The Gem of Magvil”
Tanvi Karnati	“My Golden George”
Hrishi Kashyap	“Environmental Attack”
Nathan Kim	“The Horrors of Death Realm”
Sohyon Kim	“The Audience is the Victim”
Neil Kiran	“Lifeless”
Abigail Kontny	“Picture Day”
Saketh Koripalli	“The Horror of Swamp Oreka”
Maahi Kotian	“Like a Flower”
Sam Kravitz	“Ramp It Up”
Samuel Laurenzano	“The Tiara of Magic”
Janice Lee	“The Forge”
Aiden Lee	“The Living Chronicles”
Taegan Linmore	“Screams of My Sister!”
Anjasi Maddikunta	“The Warn of a Whistle”

Quinn Marangoni	"The Quidditch Match"
Christian Marchant	"Last Minute"
Everly Marino	"A Journey Beyond the Shelves"
Melissa Marr	"The Adventures of Aquastorm"
Scarlett Martinez	"The Timber Magic Legacy"
Olivia Mauricio	"The Girl in the Woods"
Ian McPherson	"Switching Players"
Mila Mirilas	"By Blood or Marriage"
Lianna Molina	"The Contact"
Lisa (Lou) Moom	"Scaredy Cat"
Claire Moore	"The Children of Uex"
Emilia Mulford	"The Woman in the White Dress"
Niharika Narige	"In the Middle of the Hills"
Grace Ngo	Lost Then Found"
Kayla Nguyen	"Beyond the East Gate"
Annalie Nichols	"Trust Issues"
Kaylee Nored	"When Drawings Come to Life"
Enzo Nsouli	"A World at War"
Grace Ortube	"Best Friend"
Melanie Ouyang	"The 'Gifts'"
Aarmaan Pahuja	"The Scaredy Cat"
Akshaya Pajjuri	"The Red Book"
Srinidhi Pampati	"Unlocking the Portal"
Ella Papageorge	"Just Like Your Aunt"
Clara Park	"What Am I?"
Rayaan Pettitt	"Today is the Day"
Arica Pipkings	"The Horrid Prank"
Hannah Pogany	"The Great Rubber Ducky Uprising"
Ryan Posid	"The Ill-Fated Magician"
Anuj Raja	"Dragon City"

Nika Ramsey and Elise Hannah	"Museum's Maze"
Owen Rath	"Audition Day"
Tvisha Rathinam	"Dropped into Another World"
Genevieve Recco	"The Escape Room"
Saharsh Reddy	"Magic Mania"
Khloe Reeder	"The Two Musketeers"
Noelia Reyes	"The Greatest Fraud in Modern History"
Kaleb Ricce	"The Starfish"
A.J. Ridolfi	"The Time I Broke My Leg"
Ariana Rinaldi	"Following Raven"
Marlo Rocha	"The Orphan Escape"
William Rodgers	"The Crushing Waves"
Naomi Rolf	"The Missing Pendant"
Daniela Romero	"Sneaking Out"
Aaron Rondina	"Hotel Wonders"
Emily Ross	"The Red Bag"
Avni Sachdev	"Thoughts He Couldn't Think"
Rawan Salem	"The Red Marbled Glass"
Peyton Schuman	"The Wand"
Tvisha Seelam	"Identity"
Esha Selvam	"The Restaurant"
Samyuktha Senthilkumar	"The Scent of Fear"
Annika Shah	"A Phone Call Home"
Vivaan Sharma	"Broken"
Anika Sharma	"Slipped Back in Time"
Tanisha Singh	"The Rivers Embrace"
Abdu Sock	"Asher Creek"
Emenet Joy Springfield	"The Accident"
Kuhoo Srivastava	"The Shape of Love"
Hasini Sundar	"Out of this World"
Meeraa Suresh	"The Never Ending Dream"

Mariam Syed	"The Porch Surprise"
Faye Sylvester	"Cycles"
Nishka Talaulicar	"Escape"
Anika Tammineni	"Dreamers"
Wyatt Taylor	"Voice"
Janelle Towsey	"Seeing the Invisible"
Iniya Udhayasanker	"My Perfect Pet"
Alexis Ukaegbu	"My Decision"
Laila Ukaegbu	"5 Generations"
Rithi Vanam	"Ella the Violinist"
Samheetha Vasan	"Level 1: Seek"
Ahilan Vasanth	"Almost a Month Estimated"
Faith Vien-Nguyen	"The Story of Scarlet"
Maithreya Viswanathan	"Death's Dilemma"
Emma Vu	"The Life of a Fish"
Lexie Westervelt	"My Last Episode"
Emily Weyant	"Family"
Landon White	"The Navy Trick"
Amelia Wilson	"The Raven's Eye"
Emma Wojtkielo	"The Mind of a Furry Potato"
Yelena Yeh	"Climbing to the Summit"
Liam Yung	"Paranormal"

Middle School

Honorable Mentions

Caroline

By Mati Blackford

“Why are you doing this?”

The question glittered darkly like a sharp icicle and hung in the air between where Caroline and I stood at opposite sides of the room. I didn't look up from the dusty old books beneath my hands, didn't even bat an eye.

She had asked me this before, so she must've known I would refuse to answer. My silence was its own kind of response, the kind that I knew would result in her mouth forming that thin, disapproving line. After another moment, she crossed the room to stand directly beside me.

“What will you gain from this, Bia?” Caroline asked me, her voice clearer now that she was closer.

My hands stilled above the prototype of my project, and my eyes flitted over to where Caroline stood. Her palm rested on my shoulder, hesitant, and I noticed the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes before it settled calmly.

“What are you hoping to obtain?”

I couldn't hold my sister's gaze. Her wide, blue eyes were piercing, and she was acting like she *knew* me through and through. In reality, she hadn't known me for years. My voice came out gravelly and dismissive as I turned back to my work, replying, “You wouldn't understand.”

Weeks passed by, or maybe months. I got so enveloped in my project that I hardly listened to Caroline's incessant questions anymore, and I hardly thought about the one that had gotten to me.

What was I trying to gain? What could I *possibly* obtain from this wild, outlandish plan that my older sister had shot down so many times before?

I couldn't answer her, not truthfully. Caroline wouldn't understand. She had always been so hopeful, so *joyful*.

That just made it more painful to see her so worried now. I couldn't stand to look at her and discern the unfamiliar pity and anxiety in her eyes, so I stopped looking at her altogether. I blocked her out, putting up an intangible wall between us.

Our cabin began to feel more like a house than a home as I got busier with every passing day. I had finally perfected the elixir I had been working on, after long nights of mulling over dusty old recipe books, and now I just needed to gather the materials to make it.

That's how I ended up walking around the dismal town of Lillith late into the night, carrying nothing but a small basket. Caroline had refused to come, leaving me completely alone. Again.

Stars twinkled above me as I ambled along the gravel path I had been on many times before. Since it was night, the streets were empty and completely silent. No sound echoed in the air, which should've unnerved me, but I had lived in Lillith for years. I knew how peaceful it could get, and even though I hadn't left my cabin recently, I also knew by heart where all the herbs and ingredients I needed were located.

Quiet as a mouse, I slipped into the shadows next to my parents' house. With how many desperate letters they had been writing to me recently, I knew that if either of them caught me, they would've kept me here.

Logically, I stayed silent.

Immediately, I was bombarded by the overwhelming scent. The garden smelled like a familiar mixture of rose and ginger, which was an odd pairing, but also so nostalgic that heat rose behind my eyes. I ached for the sense of family that I hadn't had since blocking Caroline off weeks ago.

Deathly silent, I plucked a few Saint John's wort flowers and catnip leaves, dropping them without a word in my picnic basket before moving along through the garden of my childhood home.

Sure, I was only eighteen, but with everything I had gone through recently, my childhood felt lifetimes away.

I pulled a few more plants as I glanced around town, chestnut brown hair falling over my face every time I bent over.

Finally, I reached the part of the garden where the flower I needed most was growing: marigold. The plant was a large portion of my recipe, so I pulled nearly every marigold flower from the ground.

Once I was finished, I glanced around the garden a final time, whispering a soft “goodbye” to the place I had known all my life. I wasn’t prepared to leave this version of Lillith behind, but wasn’t that the only way to get the closure I deserved? Everything would change in just a few weeks if it all went as planned, but that was what I wanted, right?

Squaring my shoulders, I turned and retraced my steps, heading back into the heart of the forest. When I reached the cabin again, Caroline stood in front of me for the first time in what felt like forever. She perched in the doorway, her hand on the knob, her eyes dropping to the herbs in my basket before meeting my stare.

I broke at the sight of her gaze. The pity had disappeared from her expression, leaving only disappointment aimed straight at me.

“You’re destroying yourself, Bia,” she whispered into the dead of the night. That hurt much worse than her pity ever had.

After ten more days, everything was in order. At least, plan-wise. I was ready to present my project, All Hallow’s Eve was that night, and Caroline wasn’t talking to me.

Ever since the day I had finished my elixir, it was like she’d given up on me. She’d barely even looked my way in the past week and a half, and it stung more than I’d like to admit.

I was truly alone for the first time in my life, but that wouldn’t matter after tonight.

It was evening now, and I was standing in front of a mirror, staring at my reflection on the other side. I wondered, vaguely, how the same little girl who used to have staring contests with her older sister had come to... this. The skin that hung off my bones was white as a sheet, my silver eyes practically bulging and bloodshot from little to no sleep. My frame was unhealthily thin, and my hair fell in long, dry, knotted strands.

I was Bianca Richards, and I was falling apart.

Unable to look at my face any longer, I sucked in a deep breath. It shook my body as I inhaled, and when I exhaled, I released all of my worries as well as the air in my lungs. I was ready. No one was going to stop me.

With one more glance at myself, I grabbed the blanket from off my bed and threw it over the full-length mirror.

“Caroline!” I exclaimed, stepping out of my bedroom and pulling my rough leather boots on. I took a hard seat on the floor, beginning to lace them up as I waited for a response.

Only, none came. Was Caroline really that mad, that she wouldn’t even answer me?

“Caroline?” I repeated, more hesitantly this time. I finished lacing up my shoes as quickly as possible, shaking out my trembling fingers before I stood up once more and began looking around the house. “Where are you?”

Was she not answering me, or had she left? Was she leaving me, her only sister, to be forever alone?

“Caroline, I know you don’t agree with my idea, but it’s the only way,” I went on, walking throughout the house. “I know that you know that, okay? So don’t leave me now!”

When there was still no response, I began to grow frustrated. Who was she to ignore me, after all I had done for her?

“Caroline!” I bellowed into the empty house, but the only reply was my voice echoing back to me. Frustrated, I declared, "Fine. If you don't want to wish me luck, then don't. So much for sisterhood."

Huffing, I turned to the door. Just when I reached the threshold to the outside world, I paused, glancing back only once before I took another deep breath and reached into my pocket, feeling the cool glass vial buried deep in it.

With or without Caroline, I was ready. And without any more words, I was gone.

It was All Hallow's Eve, so everyone in our little town of Lillith was at the market.

When Caroline and I were little, Mom used to take us around here every year on this day. She would let us each pick out one item: anything we wanted. I had always looked forward to it.

She stopped doing that once the witch accusations arose. Anywhere and everywhere, including the marketplace, became dangerous for women walking around without any men. After all, average women weren't capable of functioning on their own, right?

And if they were, they must've been a witch.

That All Hallow's Eve, I walked into the marketplace with a scoff. It was just as busy as I remembered, except there were much fewer women walking around nowadays.

The exact moment people began to notice me, there were whispers. I only caught snippets of conversations, but what I heard was along the lines of, "Is that the Richards girl?" and "I haven't seen her since...". I didn't need to hear the end of that sentence to know what they were going to say.

With everyone I walked by, I made sure to smile politely and send them a little wave. A few women wrinkled their noses at me, and a few men's faces turned an angry shade of red, but I had been away from society for too long to care.

“Attention, fellow citizens of Lillith!” I announced, stepping up onto a small platform that our mayor had always used as a campaign stage. Many people turned in my direction, and a million more small, condescending conversations started up.

I smiled diplomatically, closing my fist around the smooth glass in my pocket. My thumb hovered over the cork top, but I didn’t pull it off yet.

“I’m sure you all recognize me,” I went on, pacing around on the small stage. “Bianca Richards, the girl who disappeared a few years ago, after her family tragedy.” My gaze narrowed, and I continued more bitterly, “Well, thanks for checking on me, all of you. You were such a help.”

With the following silence, I continued, “Have you ever wondered what it would feel like to have everything you loved falsely taken from you? Have you ever wondered what it would feel like to have everyone you’ve ever known turn on you and your family, and *betray* you in such a way?”

I paused at the center of the stage again, laughing humorlessly. “Although I’ve never loved Lillith, I didn’t think that any of you people would go to the lengths that you did,” I admitted sourly, wrinkling my nose like I’d eaten a lemon. “I never imagined that you would all *hate me so much* to-”

“She was a *witch!*” The cry came from somewhere at the far end of the now-forming crowd, and my head snapped over in that direction. The words resonated through me, and my expression settled dangerously.

She was a witch. They had thought sweet, innocent Caroline was a *witch*, and they had ruthlessly destroyed her for it.

The crowd was loud now, multiple voices overlapping over one another as people began shouting angry exclamations. They accused me of being insane. They said they had saved me from my own *blood*.

I barked out a mirthless laugh, doubling over. Surprised, everyone fell silent as they watched me. I just kept cackling.

“She was a *witch*?” I forced out between laughs, gritting my teeth. “You *fools*,” I seethed, “you wouldn’t know a witch if she was right in front of you.”

With that, I lifted the glass vial out of my pocket, unplugged the cork top, and downed the elixir in one gulp.

Immediately, energy surged through my body, and I doubled over once more, gasping for air. My vision swirled in front of me, and for a moment, every person in the crowd multiplied. I thought it was just my eyes playing tricks on me, but no. This second version of everyone... was different. The figures were hazy, and I could feel the energy coursing through them, as well as me.

They were spirits.

My mouth curled into a grin. And

then, all hell broke loose.

First, with a singular wave of my newly empowered arms, fires exploded in the town, causing people to begin screaming. Of course, the flames didn’t kill anyone, but they were good for dramatic effect. Enough to strike fear in peoples’ hearts.

Next, I pulled on the energy in the spirit of the mayor. His real body was dragged to center stage, right beside me, and I grinned as I watched him kneel.

“You see,” I began, “Caroline was never someone you had to fear. But me? Well, I’m a bit different.”

Mayor Reed’s eyes widened, and he cast his gaze downward, at the floor beneath my feet.

“Please,” he said, “spare me, Bianca. You can have whatever you want.”

I paused, as if pondering the words, before I asked, “Anything?”

His eyes nearly popped out of his head, but he nodded nonetheless.

I glanced back over the crowd, smiling so widely it hurt. “You hear that?” I announced. “Why don’t you show some respect and clap for your new mayor?”

My vision swam again as another wave of energy coursed through me, and the crowd began hysterically clapping. With the flames consuming land around them, it was quite the odd scene.

Still, everything was going according to plan.

That is, before there was a ghost of a touch against my shoulder.

I spun on my heel, looking around until my gaze landed on the exact girl I hadn’t been expecting.

Caroline.

She stood just before me, and with my newfound power, I could see the way that she was full of manipulative energy. She was but a spirit, not tangible, not *alive*.

“Caroline,” I whispered.

“Bianca,” she answered with a harsh voice. Fire swam in my vision, so much fire, and the screams of the people around me finally sharpened. The flames were spreading, more than I had intended them to.

Caroline’s voice was barely audible as she asked, her tone dripping with disappointment and fear, “Why are you doing this?”

I paused. I had told myself I was searching for revenge, but that wasn’t true, was it? What I had been hoping to obtain was my sister’s life back, but her spirit was already fading away, and I could only watch as she vanished altogether, her outstretched hand passing right through my skin.

With that, I let out a guttural cry and sank to my knees next to the mayor. I was too late.

Caroline was gone forever.

To See Beyond

By Clare Ceigersmidt

“... And then Peter soared through the air, all the way to Neverland, bringing the children with him!”

Rodney looked in amazement from his mother to the fairy tale she was reading. “To Neverland? What’s that?”

“You’ll have to find out tomorrow – it’s bedtime.”

Rodney’s mother closed the book, placed it on the table beside his bed and switched off the lamp. Then with a “Goodnight, Rodney,” she left the room, gently closing the door behind herself.

Rodney listened to her footsteps descend down the stairwell then waited a few seconds. He wanted more than anything to know what Neverland was.

Quietly, he turned the lamp back on and pulled the book close. He couldn’t read yet, so he had to be content with looking at the pictures.

The wonders he saw printed on those pages were well worth the occasional scares as he thought his mother was coming back up the stairs to make him go to sleep.

Fantastical lands and people and things far, far away...

Rodney looked from his copy of Peter Pan to the other fairy tales stacked on his bedside table.

Do worlds like that exist? Rodney wildly but truly decided that they did. He drifted off to sleep looking up at the stars beaming through his window, sitting up once or twice because he thought he saw a fairy fly by, only to realize they were the headlights of a passing car...

SEVEN YEARS LATER

“Officer Cory Brownstein would like to alert all citizens of a supposed ‘pale light’ coming from Willard Woods. The police station keeps getting complaints and concerns and although they have found nothing there upon each investigation, thought it best to alert the public. If you see any suspicious activity coming from Willard Woods, please report to the authorities.”

Rodney’s mother, who had been reading the newspaper article over her son’s shoulder, grimaced.

“That’s strange. I don’t want you going near the woods until I stop hearing about all these rumors, alright? You never know what ridiculous...”

She shook her head and returned to washing dishes, muttering about the world being a dangerous place.

Rodney put the newspaper down, disappointed. He liked going to the Willard Woods. Being there under the canopy of leaves, with streaks of sunshine streaming through, made him feel like the main character in a fantasy story.

“What do you want to do for your thirteenth birthday?” his mother asked from the kitchen. Rodney’s stomach dropped.

Thirteen. He would be thirteen the day after tomorrow.

“I guess we could go for dinner or something,” he said vaguely, “It’s getting late, I think I’ll go to bed now. ‘Night.”

Thirteen. Rodney remembered Neverland in Peter Pan and bittersweet nostalgia plucked at his heart, but also a longing as he remembered what Neverland was.....a place where you never get older.

Boy, what he'd give for that. Because, as Rodney knew the world to be, when you aren't on the Neverland side of things, you get old enough to not believe.

Rodney lay in bed, idly running his finger along the spine of the fairy tale fantasy volumes that sat upon his bedside table. The stack was taller than when he had been five, since he was now able to read more advanced books.

The Hobbit, The Chronicles of Narnia, and the first few Percy Jackson books were all piled high at the top, Peter Pan and his other childhood classics holding base at the bottom.

Rodney looked out his window, hoping to fool himself into seeing the shape of a dragon, but he didn't. He saw something else.

A pale, white light coming from Willard Woods.

Rodney's eyes widened. He slid out of bed to go tell his mother then froze. Everything froze – his limbs, his eyes, his heart – everything suddenly fixed itself on what he was witnessing.

Now he did see a dragon, as big as five buses smashed together, rearing itself up from where the pale light was.

Rodney knew it was a real dragon because when you see one – you always know. It was strikingly purple with a translucent pattern down its side like the glittering reflection of the moon across the ocean.

Then it swooped down into the forest, out of sight.

Rodney was sure that it was on the forest floor. His mind swirled incessantly with all the endless options of what he could do. He could keep walking downstairs and tell his mom. He could try to avoid consequences and just go back to sleep, letting the dragon be. He could go to Willard Woods.

The last option was the scariest but ultimately the most desirable so, mustering his strength, Rodney crept downstairs. He put a coat on over his pajamas and shoes on his feet, and, after making sure his mother hadn't heard him, quietly left the house.

It was dark outside, but the moon's glow was stronger, and the streetlamps guided the way. The pale light still glowed from the forest, and as Rodney got closer he could hear noises coming from the trees, like the fuzzy ambience of talking you hear at a party, where everyone is so chaotic it all blends.

In stories, the protagonist facing the danger has some strength, whether wit, or bravery, or even curiosity.

Rodney reached the edge of the woods. It was much darker and foreboding at night without sunlight streaming through the vibrant, living leaves. He decided in that moment, standing at the edge of the wood, that his power was the knowledge he had gained from his books about perilous situations such as this, and also his many hours spent in Willard Woods, so he was familiar with every nook and cranny.

Now the trees seemed dead, aside from the wind whispering through them.

Still, it is moments like these that define heroes and Rodney decided that if this was his moment, then he would have to use it right.

So he stepped in.

There was a lot of stumbling and listening and questioning whether or not he should go back before Rodney noticed that the pale light had reached him and was beaming across the forest floor and trees, giving them a blurred, grey appearance. He was getting closer, and the distant sound of activity was getting clearer. He kept going, kept pushing, then heard it.

An almighty roar of a dragon made Rodney's hair stand on end. His heart soared like he was in a convertible that had just sped up to a hundred miles per hour.

Now he heard the *definite* sounds of a party, like it had been muted but at the dragon's cue had ramped up to full volume. Talking and gibberish and grunting and music and stomping

could be heard and sure enough, Rodney only took a few more steps before stopping entirely in dead shock.

Winged creatures big and small either playing music or dancing to it, stubby Gnomes with pink beards holding cupcakes, tiny fairies zooming around throwing glitter, stooped Ogres with long limbs, Elves in shining robes, and of course, two or three dragons.

“How?” Rodney whispered, and elated, moved toward the delightful gathering.

The light came from an orb, floating high above, that was like a disco ball. Then an Elf noticed Rodney and there was a tense moment where they just looked at each other. The Elf strode forward.

His eyes were chestnut colored, and he seemed about twenty in human years if Rodney had to guess.

“You – you’re human?” The Elf inquired.

Rodney was reminded of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* when the Pevensie children were brought into the fantastical world of Narnia.

Rodney nodded.

“May I join you?” he asked, eagerly. Then, on second thought, added, “Uh, what are you doing?”

“Oh, this is just a gathering of creatures. Actually, this wood is a new meeting place, you see our last one got burned down. Not our fault, but one of those people who are in charge found us.”

“The president?” Rodney gasped. “What?”

“Oh wait,” Rodney said, remembering the newspaper, “no, sorry, you mean the policemen.”

“Well, whatever they are, they suspected witchcraft and burned down the whole forest. So we moved here.”

“Yeah, the policemen here suspect you now too,” Rodney told him seriously. “Do they already? Sounds like you came just in time, then... oh!” the Elf then nearly hit himself, “Oh, goodness, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Jaze.” “I’m Rodney.”

“Well, Rodney, the thing is not many people have the ability to see us. Plenty of younger humans start out believing, but they can’t see us like you can because they won’t always believe.”

“Yeah I get it. I’m turning thirteen the day after tomorrow. In human years that’s –”

“– usually when belief starts to decline,” Jaze finished knowingly, “not in every case, everyone is different, but their minds turn to different things.”

“But I’m here,” Rodney said, “So... I can I avoid that, right?”

“Why do you worry that you won’t?” Jaze replied gently, “It will always be your choice.”

“Right,” Rodney said slowly, “thanks, Jaze.”

“Of course, my young friend. Now, would you like to meet some of my companions?”

“Yes!” Rodney exclaimed, suddenly remembering with a jolt of joy all the other creatures that were there.

He first met a gnome who had a surprisingly high-pitched voice and frosting mangled in his pink beard.

“Ah, hello! So we have found another; excellent!”

“Are there other humans here?” Rodney asked, interested.

“No, not now! We don’t get many at all, let alone two at a time.”

“Oh, right. Makes sense I guess. Jaze was telling me about how it isn’t very common nowadays.”

The gnome nodded as he meticulously selected another cupcake.

Next was a Fairy – about a foot long and suspended in the air by gracefully beating wings.

“You look like Tinker Bell!” Rodney commented without thinking. “Who?”

the Fairy asked, blinking her big purple doe eyes.

“She’s a Fairy from this great tale called Peter Pan. It has a lot of magical creatures in it.”

“Oh, I see!” the Fairy said, “Yes, I remember the writer of that book. Spoke to him when he was just about your age.”

“What?” Rodney was aghast.

“Yes, lovely boy,” the Fairy said fondly. She had a soft, slow voice like a pleasant brook.

Jaze appeared and clapped Rodney on the back.

“Yep, you’re going to come up with quite the stories too, won’t you?”

“Um, what do you mean?” Rodney asked, making sure he wasn’t missing something.

“Oh I forgot!” Jaze smacked himself on the forehead for real this time, “I’m so used to not having humans actually show up! Yes, well, Rodney... maybe someone else should tell you, I’m not very good at explaining things.”

“No,” the Fairy said soothingly, “you tell him, Jaze. You found him, after all.”

“Okay then. Rodney, choice people who are wise and curious and ambitious and who will forever believe get to see us. That’s why we have these gatherings. It is to celebrate our legacy and to give chosen humans a chance to find us and carry on the hope of magical worlds in theirs.”

“But why not just reveal yourself to everyone else?” Rodney couldn’t help asking. “It’s easy to believe things you can see,” a deep voice said from behind Rodney, “but to see beyond words on a page or special effects in a film is something special.”

Rodney turned and saw the dragon he had seen rising up out of the woods from his room. It was now looking into him with deep, black eyes that reflected the moon.

“You,” the dragon continued, “Must be a beacon for those who can do that. You must tell these stories.”

Rodney found his hand reaching out and finding the dragon’s snout. It was smooth and moving slightly as it breathed.

“I understand,” Rodney said.

The dragon closed its eyes and bowed.

Jaze reached out and took Rodney calmly by the arm. They went together, back down the hill, all the creatures watching proudly after them.

Jaze walked with him until they were just behind the edge of the forest, then stopped. Rodney turned to him. It was dark. The pale light was gone and the party, dispersed.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Jaze smiled.

“Hope I’ll be a character in one of your stories. It’s been amazing meeting you. Remember, like I said earlier, the world just needs to believe there’s more out there, beyond. Remember what the dragon said.”

Rodney hugged Jaze. Then, he was hugging nothing as Jaze disappeared in a wisp of smoke that was the color of the pale light.

...

“Do you believe me, Mom?”

It was the next day, in Rodney’s kitchen, where he faced his mother. “Do you think it was real?” she asked.

“Mom, stop just playing along with me, I’m serious!”

“Rodney, so am I. You’re reaching that age where you have to decide for yourself whether or not you believe in the impossible.”

The day Rodney turned thirteen, he asked for paper and a real quill with ink. Then he began a story about a compassionate but forgetful Elf named Jaze who visited a waiting twelve-year-old in the night, glowing by a pale light, and asked him,

“Do you believe?”

Then the adventure began as Jaze led him through the land of frosted cupcakes inhabited by Gnomes, the twinkling land of fairies, and ultimately to the lair of the dragon where the boy had to give his final answer.

Like any well-done fairy tale, after the twists and turns, the ending was a happy one. The story was eventually published, translated into many different languages, made into special edition copies with leather bound covers and illustrations, then produced as a cartoon. Through all this and forever more the story was an inspiration to children everywhere.

And Rodney was sure that Jaze and the others who had changed – or rather sealed – his life had heard it too.

The Ill-Fated Magician

By Ryan Posid

I walked down the steps nervously, carrying a deck of cards in my hands. It was a dreadful day, the day that my parents would test if I had improved on performing my magic tricks. This was the tenth and final month of performing tricks for them, and if I failed, who knew the horrendous chores and other tasks that would be inflicted upon me.

My foot landed on the last step, the hard floor beneath me, I could see my parents waiting at the end of the hallway, and I looked around in despair. The walls around me felt like they were going to close in and consume me, the paintings looked like haunted portraits about to reach out and grab me, the candles looked like they had haunted spirits trapped within, and the floor I was standing on felt like it would drop out from under me any second and I would fall for eternity in an endless void of nothingness.

I walked down the hallway, scared that I would mess up my magic trick. It was one of the hardest magic tricks I knew, and a single mess up in my hand placement would lead to my failure.

I reached the end of the hallway, gulping as I looked at my parents in fright. They were very strict, and always tried to make sure I did everything just the way they wanted it to be. It was as if a single mistake would lead to my demise down the road.

“Hey sweetie,” my mother said in her high pitched voice she liked to use. “Are you ready to show us that magic trick of yours?”

“Y-yes,” I stammered. “I am ready to show you.”

“Good,” my dad replied in his deep voice that sounded like rocks grinding against each other. “Make sure you manage to get it right, lest there be consequences. You should know very well from last time Jeffery Smith, don’t fail us again”

“Of c-course dad,” I stammered again, knowing there was something that was inevitably going to go wrong.

We walked over to the table of dread, the same table I had performed a magic trick on a month ago, which failed miserably. The punishment for failing that one was an hour more of studying every night adding on to the three hours I had already and having to do five extra chores every day for a month.

I sat down at the head of the table, with my parents on either side of me and examining my every move. It was like two vultures were eyeing me down, ready for their next bite of prey, their next snack to feast on.

“Go on,” my mother said, staring at me intently. “Show us your magic.”

“Ok,” I said calmly, but almost dropped the cards in the process. “You may shuffle up the deck.”

I handed the cards over to my parents for them to shuffle up. They started mixing them up very well, not keeping a single card in the same place it was before.

“Now what?” my dad said, but it sounded closer to an avalanche.

“Pick any card you want,” I replied, trying to keep my voice from stammering and somehow succeeding.

They picked a card from the center of the deck, making sure I couldn’t see what card it was. It was all part of my trick, as I already knew what the card was, but I couldn’t let it show.

“Now what do we do sweetie?” my mother asked, almost cackling like a witch with how high her voice was. “Should we put it back in the deck?”

“Y-yes,” I stammered before I could stop myself. My mother was deathly terrifying at the best of times, and an eldritch monstrosity at the worst. “Put it a-anywhere you want.”

They put the card back in the deck making sure it wasn't in the same spot they took it out from. They were very meticulous in what they did, and tried to make it as impossible as it could be.

"What now son?" my father asked. He was the better of the two, but that wasn't a huge compliment because my mother is usually a bit psychotic.

"Shuffle up the deck as much as you want," I replied calmly. It was easier not to stammer in front of him when he asked me a question. My mother, on the other hand, was like a witch right out of her little hut, and it always seemed like she had some crazy scheme that only she knew about. On second thought, she probably did have some diabolical thing she was thinking about at all times.

They shuffled up the cards as good as physically possible, using every type of shuffle they knew. They always randomized it, so I couldn't use that to my advantage either.

"What should we do now," my mother asked, sporting a wide grin. "I want you to try and find that card."

"Just give the deck to me," I replied, somehow sounding confident. "I will find your card."

"Ok son." my father said, sounding sure I couldn't find it. They always loved when I failed, because it meant they could torment me further with more sadistic plans for an endless amount of time in the future. "I'd like to see you try."

I took the deck from them and decided to throw them off. I spread out the deck, pretending to look for their card. They both had a smirk on their faces that said it would be impossible to find the card, no matter how hard I tried.

I started to examine the cards looking for the card that they chose. I found it, but I wanted to make a better ending than just pointing out the card, because the last time I did that, they eventually proved how it worked. Another one of the rules was that if they figured out how the trick was done, they would punish me for not being good enough to hide how I did the trick. This time though, I was going to fool them.

"I don't see it," I proclaimed while squaring up the deck, but it was just a distraction to pull their attention away from the deck.

The second their eyes traveled away from the deck, I made my move. I slipped their card out from the deck in less than a second, and folded it in a secret little maneuver. This was one of the hardest parts of the trick, as it required deception and quick hand movement. Then, I held the card in a grip that seemed normal, but it deceived the eye perfectly.

"I'm going to try something different," I said, reaching into my pocket. While my hand was inside, I dropped the card in my hand while simultaneously pulling out a wand. I tapped the wand to the deck and said the magic word for vanish from my favorite book, *Harry Potter*.

"*Evanesco*," I said, bringing the wand away from the deck. "Your card has now disappeared."

"Are you so sure sweetie," my mother said boldly. "I highly doubt you actually made the card disappear."

"I a-am positive mother," I stammered, it was almost impossible not to in front of her. "You can check."

"Ok," my father said threateningly. "But if it is still in there, you will be punished."

"O-o-of c-course father," I replied, frightened. When my parents threatened me, it felt like I was staring at the devil, unable to so much as take a breath, unable to speak a word.

Then I saw something horrific. The reason I had failed at all of my magic tricks. My undoing for every trick I had ever performed in front of my parents. As I saw it, I just barely refrained from gasping.

My parents slipped a card into the deck right before they looked through the deck. They had lied to me for every magic trick I had failed, which, to be honest, wasn't many, but it still hurt. I still had to do every single chore that they assigned me, which took hours upon hours of my time. They were the ones that made my tricks fail every single time, month after month.

They spread out the deck before my eyes, and I could see their card right in the center, staring at me like a devil from an abyss of endless torture and pain. A devil who was rooting for my downfall and eventual failure.

My parents saw the card as well, and I could see them both grinning under a mask of disappointment.

I looked up at them and saw the deadly glint in their eyes, the same one I had seen each time I failed, and although I now knew the reason for my failure, it wouldn't matter. They would still punish me just the same, still torture me with all the vile things they made me do, so they didn't have to do it themselves.

"I-I-I can explain," I stammered again hurriedly. "This isn't how it seems."

"Oh, it is sweetie," my mother said in the highest pitch voice I had ever heard her use. "It is exactly how it seems."

"You failed us again son," my father said roughly. "We are so very disappointed in you."

I knew they weren't actually disappointed, as this had turned out exactly how they wanted it to. They wanted me to fail again and again, so they had reason to punish me without me knowing. It was awful.

"I'm sorry," I replied dejectedly. "I know I failed again. I promise that I will do better next time."

"Good sweetie," my mother responded. "That is all we ask of you, but you will have to do one hour extra of studying now, and ten more chores per day. This is your final punishment, so at the end of the year, we will start all over again with a new task."

I was mad that I had to do more chores, but I knew they would just refute whatever I had to say in response to their lies. It was annoying having no power to back myself up, and being helpless to the whims of my parents, but eventually, the torture would finally end and I would be free. I just had to wait till I was old enough.

I looked down, with a glare in my eyes, and hatred in my soul, but I followed my parents upstairs. As we walked up the stairs, my parents pretended to comfort me, hiding their smirk under masks of disappointment. It was like a group of evil sorcerers pretending to be kind hearted souls, until at the end, when they finally revealed their true colors.

My parents escorted me to my room, and my father patted my back comfortingly. All I felt though, was the mental feeling of spines poking into my back, or thorns slowly ripping me apart piece by piece, until all that was left was a wrought out skeleton with small bits of flesh remaining as reminders of the life that was once there.

I sat on my bed, and looked down, feeling despair at the coming chores I would be subjugated to. Some of the chores I had to do were easy, which made some days great, at least, compared to the torturous days where I had to do things like vacuuming every single surface that was physically possible in the house.

I looked up, staring at my parents in dread, ready to hear the list of chores for today, the momentous tasks I would have to handle all by myself. My parents both opened their mouths at the same time, as they always did, to speak in perfect unison like a well oiled machine. But I didn't expect what came out of their mouths, I could barely comprehend it at all. It was a scream.

An instant later, my parents bodies started to morph, shaping into an eldritch monstrosity out of the deepest parts of my nightmares.

A red demon formed, with six horns, an assortment of armor, and multiple weapons. The horns were black and red, and looked sharp enough to take a finger off from even the lightest of pokes. The armor was a complete gray and gold suit, made with perfect quality, and a beautiful, intricate design. The weapons, on the other hand, were the scariest part of it all. There was a sword as long as my body was tall that was lit on fire, and multiple knives that looked perfect for throwing at some unsuspecting person.

The demons' visage was terrifying, an awful amalgamation of things that was coming to haunt my reality, instead of the nightmares it was supposed to come from.

"What the..." I yelled, staring at the demon standing before me, terrified that my parents had just been turned into this beast. I didn't love my parents, or even like them. All they gave me was shelter and food, and more chores than anyone had any right to do. Sometimes, I even had to do a chore twice in a row, because my parents couldn't come up with a different chore for me to do.

As soon as that train of thought ended, the demon decided that it had enough standing where it was. It leaped towards me, bearing down, and I screamed out my favorite magic word.

"*Evanesco*," I yelled, hoping that somehow it actually worked, and the demon would vanish into thin air. Of course, even as I said it, I knew nothing would happen. Magic wasn't actually real, just a tale spun by good authors, a fantasy. And, even though I believed with all my heart that the demon would disappear, it didn't. It stayed on course, coming straight for me, blades in hand.

I screamed, knowing my fate was now decided for me. It was just my luck that my horrible parents turned into an even worse beast. I saw the beast right in front of me, inches away. Its face was locked into my mind, its wild eyes wide with joy, and a grin on its sadistic face.

Then, it all disappeared, and all I could see was black. Was this what death was like? Was this how I would spend the rest of my eternal life? I didn't have the answers to those questions, and I wondered for the split second I was in the darkness.

Then, I awoke, gasping for breath, with sweat covering every pore of my body, and I almost screamed in shock, my face a mask of horror. I could clearly remember what had happened, just like it was yesterday, but at the same time, the intricacies started to disappear from my mind, and I started to calm down as I realized what had happened. I was in my bed and I had just awoken from a terrible nightmare. I was safe.

A Phone Call Home

by Annika Shah

You open your eyes in an unfamiliar world. Fields spread as far as the eye can see, empty plains filled with millions of people milling around.

Oh, no, you think, jumping to your feet.

You slip your hand into the pocket of your jeans, groping for your cell phone so you can call for help. You can't find it, so you check your other pocket. "Where is it?" you yell, frantically searching the ground underneath you. "Help!"

A girl materializes in front of you. She has long shadowy hair and a smirk painted on her angular face. There is something otherworldly about her that you just can't place.

"Mira Umbra at your service," she says, flicking her hair over her shoulder. "You called for help."

"Where am I? And how did I get here?" you demand as a woman wanders past you, her expression glazed.

She scoffs. "You're dead. This is the Afterlife."

"What?" you exclaim. "How?"

She shrugs.

You search your brain, searching for a memory, *anything*, to explain why you're here instead of there.

Your girlfriend Aria's face swims in front of you. "Hold on!" she cries, tears streaming down from her perfect, almond shaped eyes. She is every bit as beautiful as she was the day you first met her, the fiery autumn trees framing her chestnut hair.

You dropped this, you remember her saying, her touch light as she hands you your sketchbook. I draw too, you know. I couldn't help but see yours. They're good. Maybe we could draw together sometime?

Pain twists in your chest, snapping you out of your thoughts.

Your twin sister, Cassidy, comes into view behind Aria. She frantically punches numbers into her phone. It drops from her shaking hands, and it takes her a few seconds to gather herself and pick it back up.

The world blurs as you try and fail to breathe.

Aria pushes on your chest. "Cassie! Faster!" she screams. You feel something crack and a sharp stab of pain.

And then everything goes dark, and you're back in the field, on your knees next to this strange shadow girl.

Breathe, you tell yourself, blinking the tears away from your eyes. You gather yourself, looking up at Mira. "I need your help."

"Sure."

"You need to get me out of here."

Mira's smile drops. "I can't do that, sorry."

"Why not?"

"It's against the rules," she explains. "Shades like me are supposed to help you get adjusted to death. I'm not supposed to send you back to the world of the living. It doesn't work like that."

You're not done interrogating her, though. "Is there a way for me to... well... talk to someone from the world of the living?"

Mira doesn't answer.

"Well? Is there?" you ask, more forceful this time.

"We can't lie about this," Mira says quietly. "It's in the contract."

"There *is* a way!" you realize. "Please, I need to," you add softly after seeing the look on her face.

"I'm not allowed to deny you this." Mira sighs, swirling her shadowy hair around her to create a portal. "Right through."

"Thanks," you say gratefully.

You step into the portal, and suddenly you're in a building surrounded by people, each standing next to a shadowy person of their own. You look around for Mira, and you spot her behind you.

"So... you're a Shade, right?"

Instead of answering your question, Mira reaches her hands out and presses them to your temples. A dark energy swirls around you. She draws away a moment later, the shadows dissolving.

"What was that?" you ask, rubbing the spot where she touched you. "You'll see," she tells you cryptically.

You have reached the front of the line, and the Shade standing there taps his foot on the ground, an expression of impatience on his face.

"Choose wisely," Mira finally says. Before you have a chance to blink, she is gone.

You're left standing in front of the line alone. "Name?" the Shade asks you, his voice bored.

You tell him, and he barely blinks an eye.

“Sign here,” he says, thrusting a piece of paper and a pen into your hands. It’s a contract.

By making the phone call, I will owe Death one favor, it says in fancy lettering.

People begin to stare at you as you hold the pen over the line where your name should go.

Before you can overthink it, you sign, handing it back quickly.

One favor shouldn’t be too bad.

“Through that door,” he tells you. “You have one call.”

You step through the door and find yourself standing in a large room. A telephone box stands in the corner, caution tape surrounding it. A large sign reads *Out of Order*.

And then you notice the cell phone resting on a table in the corner.

It’s *your* phone. The case is the same, the color of the night sky. The Popsocket is the same, the one Aria got you for your birthday. Even the small crack in the corner of the screen from when your baby cousin got hold of it is the same.

Just seeing your phone again brings back memories.

A flash of curly hair. Aria runs down the driveway as you follow her closely, recording her every move.

Your mom presents you with a phone of your very own, her smile wide. Money is tight, so you know how much it means that she is giving you this.

Saturday nights spent on the couch scrolling through TikTok, Cassidy's laugh when you show her your screen.

You pick it up, feeling the small, familiar weight in your hand.

You turn it on, punching in your password (your birthday). The phone opens and the lock screen with the picture of your dog disappears. Instead, now your home screen glares at you. It's a picture of you, Aria, and Cassidy standing together from your birthday party last month.

The photo blurs as tears swim in front of your eyes.

Wiping them away quickly, you notice that there's only one app left: Phone.

There's no way to text anyone, no way to post on social media. You click on the app, and a list of your contacts pops up. You scroll through it, pausing on people you might want to call. *Cassidy. Aria. Your mother. Your father.*

The farther you scroll, the more the list grows, until you can't handle it anymore. "Aaah!" you cry, throwing the phone across the room. It hits the floor with a clatter. Immediately regretting it, you hurry to pick it up from the ground.

But before you reach it, the world twists and suddenly you're in a car, speeding along a highway. You look out the window and watch the world zip by. Holding your fingers up to the window, you trace the outline of the telephone poles, just like you used to when you were little.

You hear someone giggle and turn around. A teenage girl and boy are sitting in the backseat next to you, holding a worn yearbook and laughing.

"Is that your *mom*?" the boy asks, beaming. The girl nods, giggling.

The girl turns around to look out the window, and with a jolt, you realize it's *Mira*.

She has the same jet-black hair, same angular face, except this girl's hair is a lot shorter, and her eyes sparkle a deep shade of blue instead of the stormy gray you remember.

"Mira?" you say, waving your hand in front of her face.

She doesn't move, just turns back to the boy and the two of them keep laughing over the book.

Suddenly, you feel something slam into the car. It sends everything flying. Your body jolts forward, and the scream is torn out of your throat by the impact.

You hear Mira, the boy, and the woman in the front seat cry out at the same time.

The car turns upside down, and there's a thump and another scream. "Mira!" the boy yells.

"Liam? Mira?" the driver calls.

"Mira!" Liam sobs.

Looking over at Mira, you realize she's not moving. Bright crimson blood trickles from her dark hair. She's *dead*.

And suddenly you're in a field just like the one you had been standing in just hours ago. Liam's cries echo through your head.

You look down and see young Mira sitting on the ground, blinking confusedly. "Where am I?" she wonders aloud.

"You're in the Afterlife, kid." A man materializes out of nowhere, a sad smile on his face. He reminds you eerily of the Mira you met earlier today.

"No," this Mira says.

"That's what they all say," the man laughs dryly. "I can't be!" she wails.

The man's smile disappears and he runs to help her as she starts shaking, her sobs echoing through the endless fields.

"You're younger than most," he remarks. "How'd it happen?"

When she starts crying harder, he stops talking. Instead, a tissue materializes out of thin air, and the man hands it to her.

She blows her nose and wipes at her eyes. "S-sorry," Past-Mira stammers. "It's just, I'll never see *them* again."

The man sighs. "I know."

"All the people... Mom, Dad, Liam..." Her voice trails off and she hiccups. "Trust me, I know," he repeats, his eyes faraway.

"I need to tell them," Mira says. "All the things I never said... is it too late? Is there a way for me to talk to them one more time? Or to make sure they get a message?"

The man is quiet, hesitating before he says, "And what would you do if there was, but it came with a terrible price?"

Mira stands up. She throws down her tissue and crosses her arms. "I'd do it." "Few choose this route," he says quietly. "If I could go back, I would not have." "Please. I need to," she begs.

"Are you positive?"

"Yes," Mira says, her voice full of certainty. "I will do whatever it takes." The man holds out his arms, swirling them around the girl.

They're transported to the same building you're in right now. You follow them as they join the line of people the same way you and Mira did.

"What are you?" says Mira.

“I’m a Shade,” he replies. “What’s that mean?”

The man opens his mouth and closes it again, like he wants to tell her, but physically can’t. “I cannot tell you,” he says. “You must figure it out for yourself. But it is not a fate I would wish upon anyone.”

By now, they’re at the front of the line.

A Shade waits there, her shadow hair spiraling around her head. “Name?” she asks.

Mira states her name, smiling widely.

“Well, this is where I leave you,” the man tells her.

“Thank you,” she says.

He nods. “Goodbye, Mira Umbra,” he replies.

She waves as he dissolves into the air. What was once there is now gone.

You follow Mira into the room where the telephone box stands. Instead of being “out of order,” it appears to be functioning properly.

She steps eagerly into the box. Her fingers shake as she punches a number in. She knows this number by heart; she hits the keys like she’s done this a million times.

The person on the other end picks up after five rings. “Hello?” You can hear his voice clearly even though Mira has the phone pressed firmly to her ear. *It’s the boy from the car*, you realize.

“Is this Liam?” Mira asks.

“Who’s asking?” he interrogates. His breathing is shaky, like he already knows who is on the other end.

“Liam, it’s me, Mira.”

Liam is silent for a long time before he says, “Is this some sort of cruel joke? Mira is *dead*.”

“I-it’s not a joke!” Mira stammers. “It’s really me!” “How am I supposed to believe you?” says Liam.

“I don’t know! But it’s me, I swear!” Mira insists.

“If it really is you, how is this happening?”

“I don’t know!” she repeats. “I don’t know. But I had one call, so I called you!”

“Really? Is this really you?”

“Yes!” Mira’s eyes fill with tears. She slides to the floor of the telephone, the receiver pressed closely to her ear.

“Why would you call *me*?” Liam whispers. “You could’ve called your mom, your dad, your brother, *anyone*. Why *me*, Mira?”

Mira says nothing, sniffing and wiping her tears on her sleeve. “*Why me, Mira?*” he repeats, a bit more forceful this time.

“If you really want to know, I like you!” Mira spits into the phone. “Or rather, I *did*. Now I’m dead, so it doesn’t matter anyway.”

Liam says nothing.

“I just needed you to know,” she says softly. “And I’m sorry-”

“Mira,” he interrupts. “If this really is... you, then I feel awful telling you this. I don’t like you that way. But I do think you are a great friend. And I love you in that way.” His voice trembles. “I’m sorry you wasted your time with this call.”

“Can you...?” Mira asks.

Liam finishes for her. “They know you love them,” he says. “And Mira?”

Mira nods and then realizes he can’t see her. “Yeah?”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Liam.”

“I love you,” he says, and then the line goes dead.

“Love you, too,” she whispers. Then, she collapses to the ground, her tears pooling at her feet. And then suddenly, you’re back in your own body standing in the room, your phone in your hand.

A voice echoes in your head, Mira’s voice.

I need you to know. This isn’t what you think it is.

Just because you regretted it doesn’t mean I will, you shoot back.

Yes, but you don’t know the cost, her voice retorted.

Only because you won’t tell me.

You really mean you haven’t figured it out already? she says dryly. Think.

Mira is a Shade. The man who helped her is a Shade. But what is a Shade?

My biggest dream, Mira whispers, was to live past the half-life I lived. Maybe fall in love, out of love. See the stars, dip my toes in sand.

And then it dawns on you.

The contract, the call, the regret.

Mira can't pass on. She is forever in debt to Death for the phone call. She can't leave until her debt is paid.

Cycles

By Faye Sylvester

“Oliva, WAKE UP!!”

I stir awake at the abrupt sound of someone shouting my name. Yawning, I slowly open my eyes and groan. The sunlight through the tinted windows of the cars sting my eyes, so I squint for my eyes to adjust to the brightness. I see Cove, my companion, staring down at me. His red bangs fall in front of his face with a smirk spread across his lips.

“Hey, sleeping beauty.”

I punch the button on my seatbelt, and it snaps back onto the place of the top of my seat.

“We’re already here?”

“Yeah, already.” Cove chuckles and grabs my hand, pulling me out of the car and onto the sidewalk.

“I could’ve gotten out of the car myself, you know,” I mumble, letting my hand go slack and fall from his grasp. “I’m not a child.”

“I know,” he grins, ruffling my hair. “But I can’t help being so chivalrous.”

I roll my eyes and slap his hand off my head. I walk over to the trunk of our truck and open it. In the mess of items we have, I grab my bag and Cove’s. I grab a few more bags with our stuff in it and then slam the trunk shut. I walk over to Cove and promptly shove his bag into his hands, glaring at him. “Before we leave, you’re taking your *own* bag. I’m not going to keep carrying your garbage for you.”

He shrugs and takes his bag, slinging it over his shoulder as if it was a bag of potatoes. “Alright.”

We grab whatever else we need from the truck, making sure to carry as little as possible to

ensure that it will not slow us down on our journey. I glance over at Cove to see him throwing the keys to the truck into the car. He lights a match and grabs a can of gasoline we had in the backseat of the truck.

I walk closer to him and stand next to him. "What are you doing?"

"Burning the truck. We can't be leaving traces for M.E.G to track us down," he said, his gaze shifting to me. "Unless you have a better idea."

I put my hands in my pockets and shrug. "I don't. Go ahead."

He flashes me a grin and throws the gasoline lid off the can and throws the can into the car. The smell of gasoline flows through the atmosphere, making my lungs itch and my nose tickle. My hand slaps over my house and I squint again. The smell is like salt to my eyes. Cove throws the match into the gasoline, and the car bursts into flames. Embers fly out from the car and black smoke begins to rise into the air.

Cove grabs his bag and begins to walk down. "Alright, let's get going. I don't wanna be here before M.E.G sends their troops here when they see the fire. Could draw suspicion to us."

I nod and begin to follow him. We walk down a stone, gray, dark path into the grayed-out forest. Silence fills the air, my thoughts take the chance and begin trickling into my mind.

I didn't think that it would come to this, with an outbreak after mutants from another world attacked Earth. Everything became ruined. Life around us began to decay at rapid rates, food became scarce and more than half the population in Vancouver died out. I'm not sure what happened to them, but I hope they're all in better places than here. The year is 2095, far from what society had been back then. I don't know how long I've been here. It feels like I've been here longer than I should have been.

My thoughts begin to calm and lay to rest. Coming back to reality, I look up and see that Cove has stopped a few feet ahead of me. We stand in front of a worn down, broken factory, spewing

smoke all around the sky.

“We’re here,” he says with a calm, yet sparky tone. “Welcome to our new home.” I stare at the factory. The smell of smoke fills my lungs again and I cough a bit, covering my face with my sleeve.

“Sure looks cozy.”

We both push the factory door open, the door creaking open. The sound of the creaking emits an eerie echo throughout the corridors of the factory. I step forward a bit and look around, observing our new “home”. The factory pipes were broken, each one dripping with oil which covered most of the floor. Cogwheels were covered in cobwebs and dust, like an old cupboard someone had forgotten to clean out for weeks. Windows were shattered, similar to a mirror that had been dropped by a clumsy person gazing at themselves in the reflection.

I hear the sound of the door shutting behind me. I turn around and see Cove securing the door once again with a deadbolt that I didn’t notice that was there.

“You know,” Cove starts, “Maybe we can fix this place up.”

I raise an eyebrow, both intrigued and confused by his idea. “How do you propose we do that?”

“No clue,” he says, shrugging with a stupid smile on his face. “But I think we’ll find a way.”

“Correction, *you’ll* find a way. I’m going to go find a good place to rest,” I declare.

I start to walk away from him, my eyes feel like they weigh a ton.

“Aw c’mon Oliva,” he says, walking up behind me. “Why don’t you try to be more optimistic about this entire thing?”

I look at him with both annoyance and utter disbelief. Does he not understand that the predicament we are currently in can mean both of us dying? I clench my fists as my eyebrows furrow

slightly. I want to wipe that stupid smirk off his face. I can't stand how he is taking this situation. A small pit of fire begins to boil inside my heart, beginning to become frustrated from his attitude.

"How do you expect us to react in a life or death situation like this? Are you *trying* to tick me off? Because it's working." I growl through gritted teeth, giving him a dark glare.

His face doesn't change, his smirk still plastered on his mouth. "Woah, calm down princess, I was just-"

I shake my head, my arms crossed over my chest in a tight squeeze. My eyes burn into his, locking his gaze with mine. "I don't care if you are '*just kidding*' or not. I am *this* close to ditching you and you'll be on your own. You aren't helping this situation in any way and I am starting to lose my patience for dealing with you for a good 9 months of us being in this hellhole. So either shut up, or I won't hesitate to drop you. Got it?"

Cove went silent, like a broken record player. His eyes fall away from mine and he turns away from me.

"That's what I thought." I murmur under my breath, my tone harsh and bitter. I turn around and begin to walk away again, not planning to listen and stop to hear his nonsense.

I walk around the factory, getting some kind of sense that I've been here before. I feel like I know these hallways like I've been here all my life. Why did my conversation with Cove feel similar, too? I brush the feeling off and continue to walk down the hall. I reach a small pair of stairs, leading up to what seems to be a secondary floor to the factory. Curiosity fills my body and I start up the stairs. Each step emits an ominous groan, the echoes bouncing off the walls.

My hand slides off the railing as I reach the top of the staircase. There are papers scattered everywhere, chalkboards filled with equations and strange drawings scribbled on the walls with a red marker. A desk lay on its side, a typewriter and many pens and pencils dissipated from one another on the floor. I approach the chalkboard and begin reading the mass amounts of information, which cover

the entire board. Not a single inch of the board was left unfilled.

Many of the sentences written on the board talk about humans being imprisoned in their own minds by the government, who have become power hungry and wanted to dominate over the citizens who had trusted them to provide safety and care for us. Only for them to take that trust and eat it up, like a beast does to its unsuspecting victims.

How we can only escape if we are able to recognize we are the ones in control. That is the only way out of this. Out of this prison, where we are confined and stripped of our freedom, which they had promised to us in a document made by our fathers.

I stare at the board in confusion and then glance at some of the papers on the floor. My hand reaches down and grabs one, inspecting it carefully. On the entire page, the words “*LET ME OUT*” are scribbled dozens, if not thousands of times. Each paper reads the same thing, each one coated with the same red pen which glazed the walls with the same phrase noted.

The more I stare at the words, the more they begin to ring in my ears. It begins to get louder.
Louder.

I clap my hands over my head, attempting but failing to silence the unwanted calling, which enters my head, the phrase sounding more crude and raw each time it is spoken. I want to scream, I want to run, but my body becomes chilled, making it almost impossible for me to move. The writing on the wall begins to melt into a red mess, puddles of red cladding the ground, which transforms into a terrifying sea of red.

The room around me begins to dissolve into the ocean, slowly merging and becoming one with the marine of red. My breath falters and I back myself up against the railing. My hands clutch the railing as I become desperate to escape. I turn to go down the stairs, only to be met with a dark red void, which begins to swallow the sea, and me.

My hands clasp onto the railing edge, unwilling to let me fall. Before I know it the red sea devours the railing-

and I slip from actuality.

I fall and fall for what seems forever. I can only see red, going on for miles and miles down the endless void which I am falling into. The words begin to trail into my head again, a drumming in my head that I can't silence. My head feels light, my breathing begins to become heavier. I'm going crazy. There is nothing I can do to stop my mind from reaching insanity. Soon, reality will be nothing but a memory, and will be replaced with the dreadful feeling of delusion.

The voice is starting to get louder.

Why?

Why is this happening to me? There must be a way out of here. The voices are almost unbearable now, the words floating and spinning around in my head. Dark spots begin to dance in my eyes as I hear the sound of whirling wind and bloody screams. I can't take it anymore. I shelter my eyes with my arms and scream. I scream louder than I have ever before, a desperate call for a haven. A way out of this. A way back home.

"LET ME OUT!!"

My vision begins to blur. Everything becomes a blinding color of green, the wind transforming into a hurricane. The screams become distorted, their cries of desperate pleas mold into terror and pain. I blink once,

and everything goes dark.

When I open my eyes again, I awake to see a woman staring down at me. Her hair is blonde, secured in a tight bun. Her blue eyes are like diamonds, sparkling brightly in the light of the room we are in. She is wearing a mask over her nose and mouth, and is wearing a black leather outfit.

A mask is suddenly pulled away from my face, and I gasp loudly, my throat as dry as a raisin. I didn't even notice I wasn't breathing. My lungs fill with air, the sound of my heavy breathing being drowned out by the conversation of the woman and a man with brown short hair, smoky blue eyes, a face full of hair and a lab coat draped over a tank top with jeans and tightly tied black shoes.

"Another one has woken, sir." the blonde woman says to the man, who seems to be greatly irritated, his face smeared with an unsatisfied grimace.

"Alright, put her back to sleep. We can't risk any more citizens waking up and disturbing our work."

The blonde woman nods and grabs the mask, pressing it onto my face. A strange smell fills my nostrils, smelling like an old factory. My eyes start to close, and as I slip back into slumber, I can hear my name being called in the distance, the echoes bouncing off the walls of my mind.

"Oliva."

"Wake up, Oliva!"

Middle School

Winners

1st Place: Death's Dilemma

"Creative concept with incredible execution. Loved every moment of this unique, mind-bending tale. Impressive vocabulary and word choice." - Taryn Kloeden, judge

Death's Dilemma

By Maithreya Viswanathan

The message came in through the communicator. Benny Benton was the unlucky soul doomed to die. *Maybe not so unlucky*, Death thought. *After all, most everyone has come willingly.*

He sat in his office, a crystalline, translucent, purplish, floating prism in the gap between space and time. It existed in a small, trans-dimensional rift, suspended and static. It was the perfect place to work long hours without bothering about the flow of time and the people below. Death, a skinny, run-of-the-mill man in his late sixties, with a head of balding hair, took the slip and stored it in one of his millions of bins with a sigh, laying on a shelf in rows of twenty and columns of... well, he couldn't count anymore. Each bin, listing every soul Death had ever taken.

After he had put away the slip, Death made his way to the exit through the halls. His wife of over fifty-million years, Deathella, was leaning over a seat to his right, cleaning it off. "Another soul?" she asked.

"You know it," he responded dryly. He reached for his razor-sharp scythe, its curved blade glistening, clean as the day he was given it by the Almighty. He then threw on his black, hooded cloak, obscuring his face and darkness. Suddenly, though, he stopped. "Honey?" he began.

"Yeah?"

"Have I ever gotten a man named Benny Benton before?"

After a moment, she said, "Quite frankly, I lost track a while ago." Death nodded and stepped out the door into space. The planets began moving again quite abruptly with a bright glow and space

spun around him. Just a moment later, he stood in the bright sun of planet Earth in a verdant, green clearing. Oak trees circled him, and he breathed in the fresh air; birds and squirrels chirped around him. In front of him sat , a small, one-story cottage with a reddish-brown, shingled roof , sunlight cascading over it. All felt perfectly peaceful. Again, Death sighed. "Let's get this over with." He paced forward to the door.

In all truth, Death was growing weary of his duty. Long ago, when he was enlisted by the Almighty for this endeavor, it had seemed entirely exciting, bounding with opportunities. Eventually, however, the full weight of his eternal duty had settled onto his shoulders with an unbelievable, exhausting pressure. Collecting souls was his past, present, and future, and there was nothing he could do to change that.

There was brief rustling in the underbrush to the left of the house. Nothing was there. He shook his head and silently swung open the door, making sure it didn't ring the bell. He strode ahead, his footsteps like a leopard, about to pounce on its prey. Typically he created a gray, shadowy smoke billowed behind him, for a dramatic arrival. This time, however, he simply walked to the front. The interior was cozy and welcome with barstools sitting next to the kitchen countertop and comfy couches lying to the right; light beamed. Sitting on one of the couches was Benny Benton, a wrinkled, old man wearing a red shirt and growing a large, silver beard.

"Benny Benton?" Death rasped in an artificially deep voice.

Benny downed the glass of bourbon in his hand and put in one the coffee table. "Yeah, that's me."

"Your time has come, Benny," Death announced, brandishing his weapon. "Don't worry. It's painless."

"Yeah, about that," Benny said, standing to his feet. "That's not something I want to do." He walked over to the kitchen, and Death took notice of the metallic CLUNK his leather boots made.

“It’s not something you have a choice in.”

“Isn’t it?” The man placed his hand under the bar counter.

“Enough of these games,” Death growled. He raised his scythe to deliver the killing blow, but the man leapt out of the way with surprising agility - far more than a man his age should have. In his hands was a spherical, gunmetal device, glowing neon green. Mechanical devices broke out of his boots, augmenting his speed. He bounded out the window, then suddenly disappeared in a flash of green light. “Time traveler...” Death grumbled. It wasn’t something that happened often, but something he’d come prepared before. He became enveloped in a crackling, thundering cloud, which compressed on itself.

The clearing was empty.

VROOOM! Death narrowly avoided an old, 1920s Ford, a matte black, as it drove on by, splashing water onto his robes. The brick street was occluded in fog and smoke and wreaked of exhaust, as well as horse dung. It rang along the riverside, the polluted waters to the left murky, a disgusting sort of green. The lights of buildings were like dim lamps in the night. The moon was faintly visible, rising high above the smog, and a massive factory stood far in the distance. Men wearing polished, black suits strode around with their canes and top hats perched soundly on their heads. Death indeed was in the middle of the Industrial Revolution.

Death pulled out a little device, its screen displaying Benny’s Soul Signal, to track him. Using the beacon, he strode down the road, turned right, and slipped through a series of alleyways. Old hags and homeless men cackled in the streets madly as he passed by, though it barely affected Death. Finally, he came to a dead end between three walls: on the left and right were two houses and their respective balconies, and front and center was a brick wall.

BANG! An old-timey pistol fired at Death. As he was an immortal being, it did nothing but cause him some minor pain. Disgruntled, he looked up and to his left to find Benny taking aim at him. Raising

his cloak into the air, Death floated up and jumped up onto the balcony, knocked the gun out of Benny's hands, and pushed him to the ground with his scythe. "You're coming with me," he growled.

"Not likely," Benny replied, grinning, and he bashed out the loose supports of the balcony, sending the two tumbling to the ground. Benny retrieved the time machine from behind his shirt and disappeared. Meanwhile, Death crashed to the ground as metal bars fell onto him with a CLANG. After a moment, he pushed the steel off his body and sat up.

A grizzled old man in rags and torn gloves stared at him. "You good, mate?" he asked.

"Shut up," Death muttered, and went into the time portal.

The moment he landed he was thrown back onto the ground. The turf was softer, dirt and grass. Boots stomped around him, people barreling into each other, blurs of red and blue. They held muskets, stabbing and shooting each other with screams of anger and agony. Death stood to his feet in the commotion and chaos. The field he stood on was wide and lime-green, slightly sloping down at the edges. The odor of gunpowder tainted the air, gunshots flying, leaving Death's robes tattered. The fighters, American Revolutionaries and British soldiers fiercely battled for the fate of the thirteen colonies, Death imagined, now the United States of America. It was all really pointless. His past self would probably be there any moment to collect those poor souls.

All of a sudden, he eyed his target slipping away, down the slope and into the surrounding forest. Death followed, shouldering through the combating armies.. He looked around in the dark shadows of the high boughs for Benny, when - WHACK! He collapsed to the ground as the man struck him in the back of the head with a branch. There was another flash of green light. Death followed relentlessly.

Smoke and ash filled the air, stifling Death's breaths. Around him, Greeks dressed in white and blue togas scattered like cattle, shrieking with horror. Rock and magma whizzed through the sky, which glowed a bright vermilion. Marble houses and structures crumbled. Looking behind him, Death saw the source of the destruction: a thundering, behemoth volcano in the horizon, orange and red and burning with lava.

Pompeii.

Something brushed Death's shoulder. He glanced behind him to see what had nudged him. It was Benny. Death quickly grabbed him and threw him in front of him. "It ends here!" he shouted, though his voice was muffled in the roar of the volcano.

"What?" Benny said. "I can't hear you!" From behind him, a massive ash cloud was growing increasingly larger and looming closer.

"I said -"

In this moment, Benny jumped to his feet and knocked Death down. "See ya' around!" Death was barely able to make out as Benny disappeared.

A darkness was overtaking him, a massive shadow. He glimpsed the gray cloud - almost black - make its way over his head as he stood up "Crap," he said, and was lost in the ash which consumed all.

Death burst back into his house and swore loudly, his cloak covered in dust, dirt, and grime.

"What's the matter, dear?" Deathella asked, concern in her voice.

"This - this has n - never happened to me before," Death, stammered, "never!" He collapsed into his office chair. "Sure, people have avoided me before, but never this long! Time travelers!" he shouted. He sat silently for a moment.

"Honey?" Deathella said.

"Yes, darling?"

“What did you say the name of your target was?”

Death sighed and shook his head. “B - B... Benny Benton.”

“Benny Benton... Yes, now that I think about it, I do remember that name. Yes, I recall that you asked me to keep that name in my mind, but I forgot all about that until now. You said you have a special bin for it.”

Death contemplated. “Yes... yes!” He leaped to his feet and flung open the drawers in his desk. “Not a bin, but a slot, and - and... here it is.” He held in his hands a similar slip like the one that had come out of his communicator. Detailed on it was a complex plan, one he had forgotten for a long time...

“Don’t wait up darling, this may take a while.”

“Where’re you going?”

“On a trip down memory lane,” said Death and he left.

His destination, curiously, was right back where he started, just over a thousand years in the past. He looked at his younger self, sitting at his desk. It was odd to see himself standing before him, but also intriguing. Had he really been so thin and in-shape ? He couldn’t remember.

“Who in the Almighty’s name are you?” Past Death asked, jumping to his feet. “Some sort of imposter?”

“I’m you from the future,” Death answered. “I can prove it to you. Here, see.” He walked over to Past Death and showed him the message. “I - you... we wrote this soon after now, when we completed our mission. It’s all clear to me now.”

Past Death looked at him, then back at the slip. “And may I ask what that mission is?”

“The capture of Benny Benton’s soul. “Let me explain it to you...”

Death came to an Egyptian street, dry, arid, and burning in the blazing sun. Stalls and tents sat on either side of the road, vendors hawking their wares, beggars sitting in the shade and pleading for food or money. The street led ahead to a main city, and many were taking the path.

Death walked over to a tent wedged between two walls and a few stalls, sitting inconspicuously in the shadow. An old, ragged man in torn schmattes sat hunched up in the back of the lean-to. "Benny Benton?"

"(انت من اعرف ال انا.) "I don't know who that is.")

"Is that so?"

"(ألن اذهب ، نعم.) "Yes, now go away.")

"Oh, I think you do know." Death reached in and grabbed the old man by the collar. With further examination, his features made it quite obvious that he was, in fact, Benny Benton. "Hello."

"So, you found me," he said in English. "Took you long enough." He kicked his legs into Death's ribs and propelled himself out of his grasp. He held onto the time machine he had been sitting in front of and disappeared. Death only smiled and checked the temporal location of the Soul Signature. It was as he thought. He had gone to the future - exactly as Death had planned.

Death reappeared at the woods in which the cottage sat. He sat behind a rich, green bush. Past Death (from when he first went to Benny - his "First Past Self") stood at the foot of the house, darting his eyes toward the bush. Death hid, knowing that he couldn't jeopardize the plan.

In a bit , his First Past Self and Benny got into the scuffle he had already been through and disappeared into the past. At that moment, Benny crept out from behind a tree to Death's right, cautiously stepping over to the cottage. "Benny!" Death shouted. Benny looked his way, then bolted around behind the house, Death in hot pursuit. The moment Benny turned the corner, Death's Second

Past Self (the one he recruited for the plan) slammed him in the face with his forearm, sending him to the ground.

“What?” Benny muttered. “How is this possible?”

“You don’t deserve to know,” Death said. “I’ll see you around.” With that, he raised the scythe and dug it into the old man’s chest. He disappeared in a bluish-gray puff of dust and thunder, soot sinking to the ground where he had been.

The plan had worked perfectly.

You see, back in Death’s Second Past Self’s office, Past Death had been told to stand guard behind the cottage, moments before Death’s First Past Self appeared and fought with Past Benny, to wait for Present Benny. Present Death had remembered being told to do this years prior and that he had knocked out Present Benny at this point, which was how he was able to give the order to his Second Past Self. Simply, he knew that Benny would go back to the cottage, so he posted his Second Past Self to wait for him. Genius, paradoxical, yet simple, depending on temporal certainties.

Present Death called out to Past Death, “Hey, I’m gonna’ need you to make a report on this so you can remember in the future.”

“The one you showed me? What if I lose it?”

“You won’t. Trust me.”

Past Death sighed resignedly, then disappeared into the time cloud, going back to his home.

Present Death did the same. At length, he strode through the door of his house, hung up his cloak, and rested his scythe against the door.

Deathella sidled up beside him. “How was your day, honey?”

Death turned and looked at her for a good moment. Then he shrugged. “Now that I think about it... it wasn’t too bad.”

2nd Place: The Shape of Love

“Beautiful fantasy tale with fascinating world building. Left me wanting to know more!”

- Taryn Kloeden, judge

The Shape of Love

By Kuhoo Srivastava

The cold winter breeze whipped through the streets of the village, which were silent save for the sound of lanterns swinging from where they hung above each doorway. Clumps of snow attached themselves to my midnight fur and my paws were numb from walking on the frozen roads for so long. A voracious sort of hunger had begun to consume me, clawing at my stomach and making it rumble. My yellow eyes darted around, searching for any prey lurking nearby, despite knowing that I was in no shape to be chasing after mice with a twisted, bloodied leg.

To distract myself from the emptiness in my tummy, I chose to ponder about why I'd chosen this form tonight. I could've picked a fox, or an owl, or even a big, mighty polar bear, I thought. But why I chose a cat, of all the creatures in this vast world, I did not know.

I was startled out of my thoughts as a loud CLANK! sounded from somewhere behind me. With a yowl, I spun around, worried that the Hunters had found me again. Instead, I found myself staring up at a human child.

It was a girl, I think. She had brown, curly hair and eyes the color of a cerulean sea. Her tiny nose and cheeks were rosy from the frost, despite the bright pink scarf wrapped tightly around her neck. Scolding myself internally for letting her creep up on me unnoticed, I turned and began to continue onwards, ignoring her.

“No, no, don't leave! Kitty!” she exclaimed, calling after me. “Come back!”

This time, I could hear her as she scrambled after me. When I felt a hand brush my back, shivers rippled through me, and I hissed. I glanced back at her, and found her bending down towards me, trying to grab me with her small, chubby hands.

“Come here, kitty-kitty,” she cooed, giving me a warm smile, “I won’t hurt you, kitty-kitty. I just want to help you, okay?”

I couldn’t help feeling amused as she beckoned for me to come closer. I watched her kneel and reach for me once more. A wild idea began to form in my head.

Hesitantly, I limped towards her, tilting my head as I examined her once again. This girl... maybe she could help me. Even though she was just a child, a family with a child this small would certainly be kind and caring.

Suddenly, I was lifted into her arms. Panic seized me, but I forced myself to stay calm as she stroked me with her soft but icy fingers.

I leaned forward, letting the warmth of her body seep into me and purred, trying to appear friendly. She began to carry me towards her house, a small cottage built of wood. A woman appeared in the doorway wearing a nightgown with eyes like the girl’s own, and I assumed she was her mother.

“Amabella Hargrave!” she yelled, wrapping her arms around herself in a feeble attempt to protect her from the cold. “Come back in here right now! And what are you— *oh dear*—”

The girl’s mother – *Amabella’s* mother – looked at me, and immediately shook her head.

“Amabel, darling,” she sighed, “you can’t pick up random stray cats off the road. What if gives you the lyssa?”

“But *Mama*,” Amabella whined, pouting, “he’s hurt! We can’t let him starve out here.”

The mother looked at me again and frowned. Then, she looked back at her daughter.

Finally, she said, “Alright. Bring it inside.”

Amabel happily skipped up the steps of her front porch and into her house, while whispering to me, “Don’t mind Mama, kitty. She can be a little cranky sometimes, but she makes great potato stew.”

Once again, I found myself captivated by her bubblyness as she set me down on the table and her mother disappeared into what was probably the kitchen.

I seized the opportunity to take in my surroundings. The inside of the cottage was made of wood too, and the house was small, but cozy. Around the dining table I was sitting on were three chairs. Past the makeshift dining area was a small sitting room with a toasty fire. Above it were frames with a few family photos and many more pictures of Amabel.

Mrs. Hargrave appeared from the kitchen, this time carrying what looked like some gauze and a yellowish balm. She took a seat in one of the chairs and instructed Amabel to keep me still while she worked on my leg.

Ahhhhh, I purred as she applied the ointment to the wound in my side and carefully bandaged my leg. A cool sensation spread through me, replacing the throbbing pain. This had turned out to be a good idea after all.

When she was done, she picked me up and sat me down on a worn red armchair by the fire. She began to sit down next to me, but Mrs. Hargrave gave her a stern look and insisted, “To bed, Amabel! Look at the time – you should’ve been asleep an hour ago.”

Before leaving, though, Amabel made sure to tuck me into a blanket.

“Goodnight, kitty-kitty,” she chimed before scampering off.

.....

The next morning, I was greeted by someone squealing, “GOOD MORNING KITTY!”

Irritated by the rude interruption, I flicked my ears. I had been pleasantly dreaming of slicing through my enemies before she'd awoken me, and I intended to finish the dream. I shifted, trying to block out Amabel's voice, but she persisted, sauntering closer and even *poking* me.

How dare such an insignificant human child poke me while I try to sleep, I wanted to scream. Because I lacked the vocal skills to do so in my current form, I settled for opening my eyes and hissing at her.

I am a POWERFUL and DANGEROUS shapeshifter! I tried to tell her, baring my teeth. *You should FEAR ME!*

Instead of being scared away, Amabel only giggled. "Awww," she drawled. "Don't be lazy, little kitty." I bristled as she tried to pet me, but she didn't seem to care.

"Do you want some warm milk?" she continued, "or, do you like potato stew?"

What I want, I thought, *is for my leg to heal so that I can go back to slaughtering your kind, just like they slaughtered mine.*

Mrs. Hargrave appeared again; this time followed by a tall, burly man that seemed uncannily familiar. At his arrival, Amabel ran over to him, and he easily scooped her up into his arms. Narrowing my eyes at him, I let out a loud *meow*.

What is *that*?" the man – presumably Mr. Hargrave – voiced, wrinkling his nose.

"Kitty!" Amabel announced.

"A cat that Amabel picked off the street last night," Mrs. Hargrave clarified. "He was hurt and, well, we couldn't just leave the poor thing out there to die."

Mr. Hargrave's eyes surveyed me skeptically. After a long pause he sighed, shrugging.

"So, we can keep him? We can keep him?" Amabel beamed wriggling away from him and bouncing up and down.

"Yes," he grunted "but *only* until this weather clears up."

Amabel clapped, enthusiastically tugging at her mother's gown. "Let's go get kitty some milk!"

Sighing, Mrs. Hargrave followed after her, leaving me alone with her father.

"I have a bad feeling about you," he muttered, scratching his beard.

The feeling is mutual. I stood up, leaning over the edge of the chair, trying to deliberate how I would get down with my bad leg when a strong pair of hands took a hold of me. Tilting my head up, I growled at him.

I didn't like being at the mercy of anyone, but I didn't have a choice as he set me down on the floor and gave me a pat before walking away.

"Come back soon!" Mrs. Hargrave called after him as he grabbed a bow and some arrows out of a bag by the door. He pulled it open, sending a gust of chilly wind into the house.

"I'll try," he responded, casting me one last, lingering look before leaving.

.....

Three weeks had passed since the Hargrave's had taken me in. As much as I hated myself for it, I had begun to enjoy spending time playing and cuddling with Amabel. Still, I knew I would have to leave them soon. A powerful and dangerous being like me did not belong in a human household.

The beast inside of me was growing restless, I realized with a jolt one day when I found myself sizing up Mrs. Hargrave as I would my prey. I hadn't changed my form in days, and I was angering it. It was tiring of the milk, and it was craving fresh meat.

I would sneak out this evening, I decided. I would sneak out when Mrs. Hargrave and Amabel would leave for a trip to the market.

Unfortunately, Amabel had other plans for me, because as she and her mother were leaving the house, she insisted rather loudly that she take me along with her.

“Mamaaaa,” Amabel whined for the thousandth time, “I want to take kitty with me!”

Finally, Mrs. Hargrave gave in to her protests, sighing, “Alright, come on. Put him in this basket.”

She then gave me a pointed look as if to say, *you better not cause any more trouble for me than you already have.*

If I could’ve, I probably would’ve snorted in response.

When we got to the marketplace, I tried to find a good time to try and slip away unnoticed. I knew that if Amabel caught me, it would be game over.

At one of the stalls that was selling toys, Amabel finally set me on the ground to examine a wooden horse.

I hopped out of the basket. I stretched my legs in preparation for running. But then, before I could, a loud roar sounded from behind us. A flash of brown fur leaped out of the woods on our side. Behind it, several men were running and pointing spears and arrows at it.

People began to scream, tripping over each other to try and scramble out of the big beast’s way. It took me a minute to identify it as a bear through the chaos.

I turned, trying to spot Amabel and Mrs. Hargrave through the crowd when I realized that the bear seemed eerily familiar. I glanced back at him and realized that he was one of my friends. Rowan, I think. He was a shapeshifter too.

As shapeshifters, we liked to wreak havoc on human villages as much as possible, maybe even choosing a couple for our next meal. But after staying with the Hargrave’s, I’d unfortunately realized one thing. Even though I hated humankind for what they’d done to us, I’d also seen how they could show kindness. How not all of them were evil like I’d once thought.

I had to stop Rowan before he tore apart this town, or worse, kill someone. I ran towards him, weaving through the mess he’d already made. I tried to make my form look slightly bigger, hoping that it wasn’t too obvious who I really was.

When Rowan's eyes met mine, I let out a yowl. At first, he didn't recognize me, but then he faltered. He slowly lowered himself down and looked at me and a silent question formed in his eyes.

"What are you doing?" he let out a low growl, speaking in our tongue.

"Stopping you from doing something terrible!" I hissed.

He looked around, snorting. "What are *you* saying? Look at these people. These are the people that murdered our families. That killed our *children!*"

I opened my mouth, but before I could, another familiar face stepped in front of me. It was Mr. Hargrave, and he was wearing the clothes of a Hunter with a crossbow in his hand.

"I knew it," he exclaimed, pointing the crossbow at me. "I had a feeling you were one of them!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Mrs. Hargrave, her hand covering her mouth, her eyes wide. Amabel was clinging to her tightly, staring at us with a baffled expression.

"I'm going to kill them now," Rowan said, licking his lips moving closer to them. A hungry expression crept over his face, his eyes glimmering as he sized up Mr. Hargrave. Mr. Hargrave, however, took no interest in him and drew back the arrow in his hand. He had no idea that Rowan was about to pounce on him. I felt panic course through my veins, and I lunged forward.

"No!" I cried, hating myself for feeling this way about a human family. But I couldn't let him kill Mr. Hargrave. I couldn't let Amabel go through what I went through when I was a child, even if it was because of her kind.

"He'll kill you!" Rowan snarled, baring his teeth at Mr. Hargrave. He inched even closer.

I pounced, and the arrow was released. It skimmed past me, grazing my fur but barely leaving a trace behind. At first, Mr. Hargrave began to draw another arrow. Realization and confusion dawned on his face as he registered that I had not been aiming for him at all, but for Rowan instead.

Startled and not wanting to hurt me, Rowan stumbled backward.

“They took me in,” I tried to explain when I noticed the anger on his face. “They took care of me when I was hurt. What better would it make us if we hurt them the same way they hurt our families?”

An odd sort of silence began to spread. Everyone else that had been here had scattered, leaving the area empty save for us. Even the Hunters had run away, scared off by Rowan’s strength.

“Fine,” Rowan whispered at last. “But you can’t stay with them. You must come back with me.”

I nodded, suddenly unable to speak. I looked back at Amabel. Her innocent gaze met mine and she seemed to realize. She ran to me, her curls bouncing in the air behind her. Her hands scooped me up and hugged me tight. I nuzzled against her, surprised at how good it felt to be in her arms. To make her smile and to see her happy.

Over the years, I’d taken many forms. I knew I’d probably take many more. But I knew that Amabel had taught me something I’d remember for the rest of my life – the shape of love.

I glanced up at her, not wanting to say goodbye. But maybe, one day, I’d return.

Slowly, I wriggled out of her arms. I looked at Rowan, nodding. He nodded back. It was time to go.

Together, Rowan and I walked into the setting sun, both new people than when we first come here. I didn’t look back as I ran into the forest, knowing if I did, I wouldn’t be able to turn away.

3rd Place: Mountain of the Weavers

"Horrifying yet intriguing story of mythological proportions. Loved the concept and the twist ending."-
Taryn Kloeden, judge

Mountain of the Weavers

By Krystal Garn

Jay was horribly lost. He had been wandering through the forest for hours, looking for the rumored ruins with his friends, but it had been hours, and he had accidentally managed to wander away from them. No matter how hard he searched, he couldn't find his friends or the ruins. The sun was beginning to set, and he grew worried that he would not be able to find his way back down the mountain. He wandered restlessly with a growing feeling that he was only going in circles. All around him, he could hear strange and ominous clicking noises and movements, and he felt a prickle on the back of his neck, like he was being watched.

"Guys? Hello? Where is everyone?" Jay shouted, his desperation heard in his voice. As the sun set, he picked up his pace, walking faster and eventually starting to jog. The sounds around him continued, getting louder. He ran and ran, until he reached a clearing in the forest. The clearing was eerily empty and silent. There was no movement but the breeze in the grass, and it was creeping Jay out. There was no sign of his friends, and he had no idea how to get back down the mountain. He checked his pockets to find his phone. His phone had no service and was nearly dead, and he began to panic. He had no one around him, he had no way of calling for help, he had no idea where he was, and it was nearly night. His despair began to set in and he sat down on the ground, beginning to cry quietly. Behind him, he heard a soft scuttling, and he whipped around, terrified. To his shock, what he found behind him was a woman, but where her legs should have been, there was the abdomen and

legs of a spider. She had long brown hair and bore markings like that of a wolf spider. Jay sat, frozen in fear, as the woman approached. He was shaking, tears in his eyes, but he could not bring himself to run. When she reached him, she reached out and gently held his face with her hands, wiping away his tears with her thumbs.

“Why do you cry, young one?” She murmured, and Jay couldn’t even stutter out a response, shaken by the events. “Are you lost?” She asks gently, and he managed to nod in response, still trembling. Behind him, he heard a clicking noise like he had heard before, and he jumped. The woman in front of him looked up and made a clicking noise in response, and before he could register what had happened, he was surrounded by spider people. There were too many to count, all of them unique in some way. Jay was startled by the sudden crowd, and scared of them, but there was still a part of him that was quite curious about them. There were some with multiple limbs, some with the lower body of spiders, some with multiple eyes, and many with various combinations of those and other spider features. They all bore the patterns of different spiders.

“Come, follow us, we will make you a part of our family,” the woman said softly, helping Jay up from the ground. He was too scared to protest. They began walking, with her leading Jay, and the rest of the spider people following behind. A large spider man walked near Jay. The man and the woman leading Jay seemed to be having a conversation, constantly clicking back and forth. Eventually, the group reached what seemed to be a village, constructed with wood, stone bricks, and silk. There were large houses hanging from the trees, constructed of tree limbs, wood scraps, and spider silk. Several had lovely woven tapestries and curtains hanging from them, woven from different colors of dyed silk. Wonderful gardens grew at the bases of trees around, the flowers a likely source of the dye for the tapestries. Jay looked around in awe, though still very nervous, unsure what the woman meant when she said they would make him a part of their family. Among the branches of the trees, he could see many spider people watching him and the group approach. Several watched through the windows

of homes, and Jay felt his skin crawl as he realized that he was completely surrounded by the spiders. As he followed the first woman, the group around him dispersed, wandering off to their homes, or to tend their gardens. A couple picked up the ends of unfinished tapestries and began working on them. Some went to join what appeared to be their families and friends. Eventually, the woman led Jay to a clearing farther up the mountain. It was full of man-made ruins of buildings, but seemed to be a common area of sorts for the spiders. There was a large pot in the center, hanging over a roaring fire. It smelled like it contained a delicious stew, and Jay's stomach growled, reminding him that he had not eaten since noon, which was hours ago. Out of the corner of his eye, Jay spotted several large bundles of webbing hanging in the trees around the common area.

"W-what are those?!" Jay yelled, fearing that they might be prey of the spider people. "Ah, those are children we found, similar to you. They are metamorphosing right now, they will be part of our family when they emerge!" The woman replied cheerily. "I shall have more family..." She began quietly humming to herself as she tended to the stew. Before long, the rest of the spider people had gathered around, the delectable smell luring them to the gathering area. The cocoons in the trees around made soft scratching noises before the silk split open to reveal Jay's friends, one by one emerging, all bearing spider-like features like the rest of the gathering. He noted that one of them was missing, but was too nervous to think anything of it.

"Come now, it is time for your metamorphosis," the woman said, and several of the spiders surrounded Jay rapidly, wrapping him in silk. He cried out for help, but none of the people he called friends made any moves. Within minutes, the world was dark and quiet.

Jay blacked out.

Hours later, he awoke, feeling strange and groggy, like his head was full of fog, and his limbs didn't belong to him. He managed to scratch his way out of his silken prison, discovering in the process

his two new pairs of arms and his six new eyes. His fingers had become claws, and his teeth sharp fangs. When he made it out of the cocoon, he was met with the sight of the woman, standing near the pot.

“It is very late, but I stayed awake to greet you. I saved you some stew,” she said, but her lips did not move. Jay realized he now also had the ability to understand their clicking way of communication. She handed him a bowl, and he took it, eating it wearily. He was already hungry and tired, but the transformation had taken a lot out of him. It was delicious, and he wondered what it was made from.

“Will I be able to go home?” Jay asked, nervous and homesick.

“Oh, no, this is your new home now, isn’t it lovely?” The woman replied in a sing-song voice.

“W-what?” Jay stuttered.

“You will be here forever, and ever, and ever,” the woman added.

“What will happen if I try to leave?” Jay asked, desperate. He was close to tears again. “Oh, we will reverse your transformation,” the woman said calmly, like she’d had this conversation before.

“Then what?”

“Then you will join your friend in the stew here!”

First Runner Up: The Great Rubber Ducky Uprising

“Amazing use of puns and love the final line! Very imaginative story.”- Taryn Kloeden, judge

The Great Rubber Ducky Uprising

By Hannah Pogany

In the country of Bathopolis, past the black hole drain of demise, and behind the soap bubble mountains, there lived the rubber duckies. With a small quackulation of only fifty, the rubber duckies lived a simple life. Although, it seemed like the town was shrinking nearly everyday. The townsduckies lived in relative peace, knowing that their leader, Great Chief Quackers, would always find a way to solve any problem. Today, everybody was happily swimming about. Martha’s bread crumb shop was open, with a long line as usual. Puddles was selling his famous soap bubble balloons to the ducklings. However, there seemed to be tension in the Forgotten Strainer Bowl, where the Quackling Council was meeting.

A group of eleven ducks was sitting around a round bar of soap, arguing.

“We need to do something about this problem!” said one of the ducks. He had on a headpiece in the shape of bread.

“We cannot do anything, Great Chief Quackers!” said General QuackMcGuffin frantically, “There is nothing we can do to stop the giants from coming every two days! A quarter of our men have already been lost!”

"I know, General QuackMcGuffin," Great Chief Quackers responded, "but if we let this keep going on, our quackulation will plummet to zero."

"What are you suggesting we do, then?" General QuackMcGuffin asked.

"I say we need to stand up and fight back," Great Chief Quackers said darkly.

"What-" General QuackMcGuffin gasped.

"I say that we strike back and fight against this unjustified attack!" Great Chief Quackers yelled this time.

Everybody in the room gasped. One councilduck even fainted.

"But-sir-," sputtered General QuackMcGuffin.

"General," Great Chief Quackers sighed, "this is the only way to save our people from danger."

"... a-alright sir," General QuackMcGuffin gave in.

"Okay then," Great Chief Quackers said, "round up the townsduckies and tell them to prepare for a fight."

...

“What’s going on mom?”

“Somebody said we're going to fight?”

“But my bread shop! What will happen to it?!”

There was a great commotion in the town square. Everyduck had been ordered to immediately drop what they were doing and swim to the Forgotten Strainer Bowl. Once everyduck had gathered around, General QuackMcGuffin got onto a soap bubble and addressed the crowd.

“Ladies and gentleducks,” General QuackMcGuffin announced, “the Great Chief Quackers has decided that we are going to fight back against the giants.”

Everyone started panicking at this statement.

“Fight? But I don’t want to.”

“What?!”

“But what about my bread shop!”

“Calm down, please!” General QuackMcGuffin cried, “Great Chief Quackers will now give you more information about our plan.”

“Thank you, General QuackMcGuffin,” Great Chief Quackers said as he swam up to the soap bubble, “Everyduck! As you all know, the giants have been terrorizing our community ever since we founded this town. We have lost many good ducks to them. I think we’ve all had enough of this reign of terror, haven’t we?!”

“Yeah!” the crowd cheered.

“Aren’t you tired of having to rebuild every time a giant comes and wrecks our beautiful town which we have worked so hard to maintain?”

“Yeah!” the crowd cried again.

“So, grab your family, make signs in protest against these horrid giants, and prepare to fight against them!”

“QUACK!” the crowd screamed.

“Go and get ready!” Great Chief Quackers yelled, “for tonight, we will defeat those giants!”

The crowd quacked its loudest as it began to disperse in a hurry to prepare for the coming battle. Great Chief Quackers slid down from his soap bubble podium and swam over to General QuackMcGuffin.

“Man your soldiers General,” Great Chief Quackers said, “prepare them for the biggest battle in Bathopolis history.”

...

It was time; night had fallen. Everyduck was ready, waiting for the protest to start.

Bob, the rubber duck with a built-in light, was the only source of light in Bathopolis. Everyduck was holding up protest signs; some had made weapons out of soap bubbles or leftover bars of soap. Martha had obtained a floating soap bubble to store all her bread crumbs. All were gathered outside the Forgotten Strainer Bowl, waiting for Great Chief Quackers to tell them what to do next.

“All of the soldiers are armed and ready for a fight,” General QuackMcGuffin said to Great Chief Quackers as they slowly swam out of the Forgotten Strainer Bowl.

“Perfect,” Great Chief Quackers replied, “I will report to the duckizens, and then it will be time for action.”

“I’m at your command sir,” General QuackMcGuffin said. He turned left while Great Chief Quackers stepped up onto a soap bubble.

“Fellow ducks!” he proclaimed to the gathered crowd, “when the giants come soon, we will fight back against them and claim victory once and for all!”

“Quack!” the crowd screamed.

“Swim to your positions!” Great Chief Quackers remarked as he swam down from the soap bubble and over to General QuackMcGuffin.

“Now,” Great Chief Quackers said, “all we can do is wait.”

...

Everyduck was huddled in the town square. They were all looking towards the dark sky for any sign of the giants. Suddenly, after a quiet hour of waiting, an ominous thumping could be heard, quickly getting louder and closer.

“Here we go,” Great Chief Quackers whispered.

Everyduck began to raise their weapons and signs. Martha hid in the back with her bread crumbs. Everyduck was holding their breath. Out of nowhere, the dark sky was flooded with a bright

light. A giant was standing in the frame of what looked like a large portal to another world, the giant's world. The giant began to walk closer. It stopped right in front of where the ducks were armed for battle.

"Bath time," the giant exclaimed, "yay! Hi duckies!"

"ATTACK!" Great Chief Quackers yelled to the others.

"QUACK!!" the ducks yelled as they swam toward the giant.

"Release the extra soapy bubbles!" General QuackMcGuffin shouted to his troops.

The soldiers let the extra soapy bubbles float toward the giant.

"Ooh," the giant cooed, "these soap bubbles are so soapy!"

The giant popped all the bubbles with the touch of a finger.

"It's immune to the extra soapy bubbles, Great Chief Quackers!" General QuackMcGuffin cried.

"Then we'll scare it away with our quacking," Great Chief Quackers shouted, "Everyduck, quack as loud as you can!"

“QUACK! QUACK! QUACK!” the townsduckies screamed, “QUACK! QUACK! QUACK! QUACK!”

“Aww,” the giant giggled, “it looks like they’re actually quacking! Ooh! Look at this one! It looks like it’s holding a pile of bread!”

The giant bent down toward the duckies and extended an arm. It grabbed Martha and began to retract up again.

“Agh!” Martha shrieked, “help! My bread crumbs!”

“Martha!” Great Chief Quackers gasped.

“Release more soap bubbles!” General QuackMcGuffin quacked loudly.

The ducky soldiers released as many soap bubbles as they possibly could. Just before the giant had captured Martha in its grasp forever, a soap bubble floated into its mouth and it dropped Martha as a result.

“Ahh!” Martha shrieked as she fell back to the town square.

Martha landed with a plop into the water. The townsduckies all cheered. Great Chief Quackers helped Martha up and swam with her over to her bread crumbs.

“Thank you, Great Chief Quackers,” Martha shivered.

“We’re glad you’re safe Martha,” sighed Great Chief Quackers.

The giant was still flopping about after eating the soap bubble.

“Eww,” the giant exclaimed, “soapy! Mom!”

“No!” General QuackMcGuffin cried, “it has called its superior! Everyduck get ready!”

Another thumping, even louder this time, could be heard. Within seconds, a taller giant had appeared.

“What, Kathleen?” the taller giant asked.

“I got a soap bubble in my mouth when I picked up one of the ducks!” the first giant whined.

“Oh, you're fine,” the tall giant said unsympathetically. “That reminds me - I was going to ask you today if you wanted to get rid of these ducks since you have so many and you rarely play with them?”

“I mean, I don’t care,” the shorter giant shrugged.

“Alright then,” the taller giant said as it picked the Forgotten Strainer Bowl and began to scoop up the ducks, “let’s put them in the pond in the back. It will look good for decoration. Now go and get ready for your bath.”

The tall giant finished scooping up the ducks in the bathtub and carried them away.

“What’s happening?,” one of the ducks cried out from the strainer bowl.

“I don’t know,” Great Chief Quackers responded with trepidation.

The tall giant continued to carry the ducks in the strainer bowl. The giant didn’t stop until it was outside by a small pond with little stones in it. The giant dumped all the ducks out of the bowl and into the pond. Then, it turned away to go back where it came from. All the ducks reconvened after the giant had left.

“What just happened?” General QuackMcGuffin asked as he watched the giant leave.

“Did we win?”

“Are you alright?”

“Oh, thank goodness! My bread crumbs made it!”

“I think we just laid claim to a victory, General QuackMcGuffin,” Great Chief Quackers said softly.

Everyone turned to Great Chief Quackers to wait for what he was going to say.

“Ladies and gentleducks,” Great Chief Quackers exclaimed happily, “we have won against the giants!”

“Huzzah!” everyduck screamed. Excited quacking could be heard from the duckizens for a long time, celebrating their great victory.

“This is our new home!” Great Chief Quackers said to the crowd, “We shall rebuild our town here!”

“QUACK!” the crowd cried.

And so, the ducks began to thrive in their new home in the pond. Martha reopened her bread shop and Puddles began to sell water droplet balloons instead of soap bubbles. The ducks no longer had to live in fear of the giants wrecking their town. The story of their great victory would be passed down through tens of generations, showing that the quackmunity is a strong force the ducks could always rely on.

Everything was perfect. Until summer, when they would learn that there was a hibernating snapping turtle in the pond.

Second Runner Up: Chances to Dances

“Adorable, relatable story of a first crush! Loved the use of months to guide the reader through the tale.”- Taryn Kloeden, judge

Chances to Dances

By Alexander Brandt

August

“Liam!” Liam’s eyes slowly opened. “Wha- what,” he said. “It’s 7:40, you’re going to be late for your first day of school!” his mom screamed. His droopy eyes shot open and he threw himself out of bed. He quickly put on some fancy clothes, you know, you gotta make a good first impression. He sprinted downstairs, new backpack in hand. “What’s for breakfast mom?” he said. “Yogurt!” she smiled. “Why me?” he mumbled. He shoveled the yogurt into his mouth and ran back upstairs to brush his teeth and comb his hair. He ran downstairs, grabbed his water bottle and started to the door. Turning the door handle he heard a voice from behind him, “Now aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Mom!”

“Don’t tell me that you don’t have a kiss for your mom,” she replied. He gave her a kiss and ran out the door. He was almost around the corner when his phone rang. He answered as his friend John said, “Liam! The bus is already here!” “I’ll be right there,” he said. He hung up and thought to himself, *“Is anyone going to say my name without yelling today?”* He sprinted towards the bus. He just made it and found John near the back. “Made it,” he said. “Barely,” his friend mumbled.

He got off the bus and went to his homeroom. After a few minutes, the door creaked open, and he looked over and saw something he never expected. In the doorway stood his crush, the love of his life since third grade, Emily.

He couldn't believe his luck! Homeroom with his crush! Then he realized that homeroom was every day, if he accidentally did something weird, Emily would never like him. He sunk back into his chair thinking "*How am I going to get Emily to like me?*" He couldn't get his mind off the question when the bell rang and everybody got up to go to their first class.

He entered his first classroom, and everybody was picking seats. He went for a seat near the window but realized if he sat there, he would sit next to... Emily! *Oh no! She's in my math class too!* He thought. *Don't let her see you,* said a voice in his head. *Go up to her and ask her on a date,* another voice said. *When's lunch?* a hungrier voice asked. He decided to sit far away, in the back corner. As the day went on, he concluded that Emily was in every one of his classes! *What am I going to do?!* he thought to himself.

Just before the bell rang, an announcement came on. "Good afternoon students," the vice principal's voice boomed, "What a great first day! That little acorn of the first day will bloom into a great big oak! We will have fun activities throughout the year, such as Veterans Day breakfast, winter breakfast, grandparents' breakfast, Groundhog Day breakfast, Arbor Day breakfast, and on the last day of school, the 8th-grade dance! It was at this moment that it dawned on Liam that it was not about all the food, but about the dance! If Liam could summon enough courage to ask Emily to the dance, she might realize she liked him back. *This should be easy, and I have ten months to do it,* he smiled. *Piece. Of. Cake.* Sadly, he had no idea how wrong he was.

September

After deciding to ask Emily to the dance, he realized he had to ask now before someone else did! He thought the best time to ask her would be at P.E. Later that day, he steeled himself to ask. They were playing handball, and she was on the side of the field. He slowly walked to her, but when he was about 5 feet away, Emily turned towards him, her eyes widening. Time slowed as she yelled, "Look out!" She jumped at him and, for a moment, he thought she was going in for a hug. Then he looked right and saw the large, heavy ball they were playing with hurtling at him, and just before it hit him, he hit the ground.

Later, he was in the clinic, nurses hovering over him. He groaned. One of the nurses rushed over and said, "I heard you got hit in the head by a handball. Your mama will be here soon." *Guess I'm not asking her this month*, he thought.

October

I will definitely ask her this month Liam thought. He was in FACS, supposedly making his school recipe for vegan, gluten-free, dairy-free, meat-free, nut-free, garlic-free, non- chicken cordon bleu. There was only one empty station between his and Emily's. He made sure that the oven was at the right temperature and left his masterpiece cooking. He walked over to Emily and started to say, "Hey, do," before somebody screamed and somebody else yelled, "Fire!" He whipped around and saw a column of fire shooting from his oven. He screamed, pulled the fire alarm, and leapt for the exit, others close behind.

Fire trucks were arriving at the scene when he exited the building, firefighters running in his direction. He had just parked himself near a ladder truck when Emily came over and asked, "Sorry, what were you saying?" *Ask her out!* the voice from the first day of school said. *Do it! Do it! Do it!* Then, another voice said, *When's lunch?* After a second, Liam said, "Never mind." She walked away and he thought, *guess I'm not asking her this month either.*

November

November was Liam's favorite month with Thanksgiving and lots of good food. *Karl*, he thought, *by the end of this month, you won't ever want to know when lunch is.* In case you are wondering, Karl was the hungry voice in his head. After some thought he decided that he couldn't tell his mom about his problem because she would embarrass him, he couldn't tell his dad because he would make a dad joke, and he couldn't tell his little brother Tom because well, Tom was a little brother. But he could consult the voices in his head! The hungry voice, as you now know is named Karl, the bold voice in his head is Alan, and the shy frightened one, he named Gaston.

Do you think he's ever going to ask Emily out, Gaston asked? *Well, he should!* Alan said. *I'm not so sure about that,* Gaston said. Alan and Gaston started arguing like crazy about whether Liam should ask Emily to the dance.

BE QUIET! Liam's mind shouted at them. *My bad,* Gaston said, and it sounded like he just left. *How do voices in your mind just leave?* Liam thought. *What do you mean? We can always leave to go to other parts of your mind,* Alan said. *Wait, you guys can hear anything I think?!* Liam asked. *Of course,*

they answered! *Okay, so the three of us agree we have to ask Emily out this month*, Liam thought. *Yes*, Alan replied. *Can we do it after lunch?* Karl asked.

After lunch, as Karl suggested, they planned to ask Emily. Gaston still hadn't come back, but he was too shy to do this. In class, Liam sat in a different seat than normal, closer to Emily. After she didn't come in, Liam asked the teacher where Emily was. "Oh sorry hon, she left to help her family with Thanksgiving. Are you her boyfriend?"

"Oh, no," he said. The teacher looked up at him suspiciously, and he was frozen. At the last moment, Gaston came to the rescue and said, *Go back to your seat!* At this very moment, Liam found himself walking quickly back to his seat. *Wait, what just happened, I didn't try to go back to my seat.* Gaston and Alan both said, *Yes! We can control Liam.* *Great*, Liam thought, *not only am I not going to get to ask Emily to the dance this month, but now my thoughts know how to control me.*

December

Liam loved December, but he was worried that now he had to make sure he didn't get frightened, bold, or hungry. Not unless he wanted his thoughts to control him. So he told himself he was 50% sure he was going to ask Emily to the dance this month, not too bold, but not shy either. He glanced over at Emily. She wore an elf hat that looked great on her and would make her easy to pick out in crowds. *Let's do this*, Alan said. *If we can get some food after, totally*, Karl said. *The votes are 2-1, and I'm stuck in here, so fine*, Gaston said sadly. *Ah come on, if I get frightened or shy, you can force me to walk away*, Liam said. *Splendid point*, Gaston said.

Standing up he heard a voice from the loudspeaker say, "All students, please report to the auditorium for a *fun* announcement!" Liam walked to the door, then quickened his pace. Emily was only a bit ahead of him, he could reach her before she reached the auditorium. People fell in behind her, but as he predicted, her hat made her pretty easy to pick out in the crowd. A tall person suddenly blocked her from his view, but he picked her out again, almost on the other side of the room.

Suddenly, more elf hats popped into view. *Oh no*, he thought. It turns out, his hypothesis was the *opposite* of what would happen. Half the people were wearing hats identical to Emily's. He quickened his pace again to find Emily. He turned his head every time he saw an elf hat, but he could just not find Emily. He finally saw her, but then he heard, "Everybody take the closest seat, and let's begin!"

NO! He thought.

January

"Okay, lunch 9, exit through the doors you came in, you can't go outside, because of the pending condition," the lunch monitor said. "Huh?" Liam asked as they walked out of the cafeteria. "I hear there is going to be a massive blizzard. They say we'll be out of school for the rest of the month," John said.

Liam looked outside. He thought it was just flurries, nothing big, but if they were out for the rest of the month... "Wait! Out for the rest of the month!" Liam yelled. He was planning to ask Emily later this month, but if they were out, he had to do it today. He got back to class and took his seat but soon, the announcer said, "Everybody, school is dismissed, this blizzard may snow us in, so you must leave." As he exited the school, he ran towards Emily but his feet suddenly leapt out from

under him, and he fell flat on his back. "Ice," he said painfully. *Get up!* Alan said. Liam slowly got to his feet, tried to fix his ruined hair, and looked around for Emily, but she had vanished.

February

Liam had a perfect plan to ask Emily out for this month, he had made a beautiful card in the shape of a heart. *This is going to be it,* Alan said. He sat two seats from Emily and waited, and waited, until the English teacher said, "Ok, everybody can now pass out their valentines. He stood up but was pushed back down by Ted Nelson, the biggest, buffest, richest, most handsome kid in school. Ted walked towards Emily and handed her a beautiful card and a humongous box of very fancy chocolates. *NO!* he thought, *I can't ask her out now! Not after the boy every girl loves gave her that!* *You have really bad luck,* Karl said.

I know, Liam said.

March

"Ow!"

"Sorry," John said. We were creating leprechaun traps in shop, but our teacher was the leprechaun and reversed lots of our traps and, well, things were not on our side. The good news was, Emily had rejected Ted Nelson, but the bad news: if she rejected Ted, she would never accept *him*.

At the end of the day, he was outside catching up to Emily. Suddenly, he saw a green blur in the corner of his eye. A leprechaun leaped towards him, pulling his wallet from his pocket. "Come

back here," Liam yelled. He sprinted after him into the woods. The leprechaun stopped short to taunt him, and Liam jumped at the leprechaun, it jumped, and he fell into what he could not see, a pond.

Ah, I'm soaked!

"No gold coins!" The leprechaun said in a squeaky voice, "Oh well, you can have this back."

"Thanks," Liam said in pain.

April

This month, he was going to ask her out at the chorus concert. He took his place behind Emily and waited. Suddenly his family burst in the doors, holding a big sign that said WE LOVE YOU LIAM!!!!

Oh no, he thought. *Liam, you have to get down!* Gaston said.

Yeah, Liam replied. He hid for the rest of the concert, too embarrassed to ask Emily out.

May

At this point, Liam was just too disappointed to *try* to ask Emily out.

I hate seeing him like this, Gaston said. Liam went to his classes, got an A on his French project, didn't really eat his lunch, despite what Karl asked, and really didn't talk to anybody. He was going to his 7-8 block when Emily fell into the hallway in front of him. Emily was on the phone and she was saying something like, "Yeah, I know Lias-, yes, is super cute, but he's just too shy to ask me to the dance."

All sounds suddenly drowned out and Liam didn't hear much of the rest of the conversation. He could do it. However, he didn't realize he was walking towards the stairs, and he tripped and fell down the stairs, breaking his leg and ruining any chance of asking Emily this month.

June: The Dance

After the whole thing of breaking his leg, he hadn't been able to ask Emily to the dance, but his mom still made him go, in case some girl's date didn't show and he could talk to them. He just hid in the corner, mad at himself for not asking Emily to the dance, and sad at himself for not being able to change the past. He looked around and almost fell over when he saw Emily in a pretty dress sitting down, alone at a table. *We have do this*, Liam thought. *We will be with you the whole way*, all three of the voices agreed.

Liam walked over to Emily, held out his hand, and said, "May I have this dance?"

They danced through the night, and on the last song Alan started chanting, *Kiss her! Kiss her!* Soon, Karl joined in, then even Gaston started chanting. This time, the voices got what they desired.

Thank you to our 2024 High School Participants

Kelvin Aban	"Moving In (Slowly)"
Diwa Ahmadie	"The Prequel"
Insia Ahmed	"Fashion Show"
Scarlet Artz	"Candlewick Sheep"
Yasmeen Ashour	"Teal Planner"
Labibah Baba	"Who Knows?"
Kyra Bawa	"Autumn Love"
Kharis Beach	"Anastasia"
Ariana Blake	"If It's a Triple Dog Dare"
Alexandra Blake	"Blackout"
Clara Bloom	"Conglomerate"
Ethan Broady	"Spirit Quellers"
Gwen Brodsky	"Azure Eyes"
Jillian Byerle	"Possessed with Love"
Grace Callahan	"The Destruction of Leviathan"
Sophia Campbell	"The Woebegone Woman"
Andy Cao	"A Forever Without You"
Xander Capell	"A Giant's Humble Abode"
Nicole Centeno	"To Be Free"
Amy Cherian	"The King on the Lowest Floor"
Abigail Chiaramonte	"The Grieving"
David Craig	"Or Forever Hold Their Peace (Figuratively, Kintsugi)"
Jia Degan	"How a Fearless Princess Changed Her Tribe"
Jason Del Cid Campos	"Nameless Rider"
Neishha Desai	"Mensonges Island"
Kasey Devitt	"Hunted"
Aspen DeWan	"Blank Slate"

Isabelle Dino	"A Life of Death"
Vaibhav Dwaraka	"A Great Lesson Learned"
Jenya Erinjeri	"Help from the River"
Febronia Farowez	"Annalee's Awakening"
Evelyn Fick	"Looking Too Closely"
Ashley Flores Chavez	"Diamonds Will Burn"
Miriam Gale	"Prince of the Dead"
Allie Garbini	"Behind the Tapestry"
Leila Gebrehiwet	"The Thief is a Ghost"
Layla Ginty	"Fiona: Embrace Your Uniqueness"
Alex Glover	"Left This World Because of My Thoughts"
Bethany Grinnell	"The Mask Keeper"
Siyona Gupta	"The Farmhouse"
Eli Heeren	"Altered Perception Psychosis"
Rachel Hernandez	"The Danger of Intelligence"
Kaylee Kadans	"Rosaline Nick"
Jana Kandagiri	"The Dawnscream"
Raihana Karim	"Thankful for My Friends"
Aditya Kaul	"Man of the Cottage"
John Kelly	"Requiem of the Rear-Garde"
Sahana Khokha	"Beyond the Finish Line"
Lindsay Klinge	"Three Second Delay"
Vincent Le	"Alternate Worlds: Allebahst"
Insha M	"The Rainforest Experiment"
Genesis Marquez Portillo	"The Windows That Divide Us"
Insha Memon	"The Rainforest Experiment"
Aneesh Merupula	"The Duel"
Lauren Montgomery	"Linger"
Charlotte Murray	"The Retainer Regicide"
Losritha Nallamala	"A Classic Unrequited Love Story (TRUE STORY EDITION)"
Robin Newhouse	"Barbenheimer"
Angela Nguyen	"War"

Mihir Nimkar	"The Rooftop"
Sofia Ocasio	"Ink"
Sharanya Pokharel	"Dysfunctional at Best"
Ariana Porto	"The TimeKeepers"
Sanica Rao	"Cake from the Bakery on 7 th "
Sahasra Revada	"If I Had to Choose Between Me and You"
Gayathri Revada	"At 11:00 PM"
Safana Sahib	"The Drained Dystopia"
Suhana Salman	"A Search For Life"
Danie Shen	"Failed Protector"
Kaityn Shoup	"The Kingdom of Love"
Lila Slate	"Hunted"
K. Smith	"New Town"
Davina Thongprasert	"Friday The 13 th "
Katie Varachi	"Human/Nature"
Felicity Vogl	"The Perfect Pair"
Anna Yao	"Forget-Me-Not"
Rachel Zamsky	"Something That Was and Never Will Be"
Daniel Zamsky	"The True Taste of Triumph"
Sasha Zuckerman	"An Ode to Red and All Its Shades"

High School

Honorable Mentions

The Destruction of Leviathan

By Grace Callahan

Inspired and named for the artwork by Gustave Doré

My eyes shift open as my body gracefully floats through a fluffy cumulus cloud. The cool air flows around me as I swiftly move up through the sky. For the first time in my life, I am at peace. My life has been completed. I have run the race.

As my body moves higher and higher still, the Sun's light becomes unbearable. Shining directly into my eyes, blinding me. I force my eyes to open, just a little. Slowly, the light starts bending into the shape of a man's face, one full of power and compassion. I gasp, knowing that it is time.

Suddenly, I feel the grip of gravity in my gut, and the light vanishes. The world around me blurs as my body falls through the air. *I'm going back.*

My vision almost goes black before one image creeps into my mind. A devious man, with startling different eyes, one black, and the other blue. *I know him...*

When I awake, the sun is up. It doesn't seem nearly as bright now. I look around to find myself alive in the middle of a large, sandy crater. One I must have created. I hear the crash of waves and the sounds of a crowded city somewhere in the distance.

I force myself to move, waiting for the agonizing pain to consume me. It never comes. I stand up feeling as though I have just awoken from a blissful sleep. What is happening?

The sounds of a city beckons me, and so I walk. As I draw closer, I see the massive city taking up the entire horizon. Steel upon iron upon asphalt, and a hazy black smoke blocks the sun's rays. People all around me look as if they are in a trance, their eyes clouded over and as dark as the smog above. Suddenly,

one of the many screens strung on the wall blares to life, and on it I see him. I know you! My mind screams:
Are you why I am here?

The man looks directly into the camera, into my eyes, and smiles a malicious, false smile, causing the skin around his multicolored eyes to crinkle.

“Hello, my sons and daughters,” he says, his voice smooth like velvet. The people around me snap to attention, like his every word is life. It sounds a lot more like death.

“Let’s begin. Today is my day.” The people repeat his words, echoing around me everywhere.

“Today is what I make it.” I take a step backward, as the words are repeated in dead-like tones.

“I can do whatever I want to.” My heart pounds wildly in my chest as I back away from the screen, the crowd, the words.

“There is no such thing as wrong.” I bolt away from them, but the screens, the words, they’re everywhere.

“If someone tries to stop me, I no longer need them.” I trip on someone’s foot and hit the ground, blood rolling down my leg. I look up for help, and my eyes find a screen right in front of me.

“No one can stop me.” the man snarls, his eyes like a snake’s. The words echo around me, filling the lifeless city.

The screens turn black and go silent, and the people start to shuffle and disperse. My mind is racing as I try to figure out what just happened. And then it dawns on me. I know who he is. He's always been there, lurking in the shadows, waiting for me to slip. Well, now I’ve fallen, and he’s waiting.

I tear a piece of cloth off of my shirt and wrap it around my bleeding leg. I haul myself up and walk with purpose. I know what I have to do. As I walk, the buildings slowly get dirtier, and are covered in ash. It's as if someone tried to burn the city down over and over again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice movement, a child. It is then that I realize the child is the first person I have seen since the eerie chant. I watch as the child turns and runs, her long, ratty hair flying behind her. I race after her, following her through winding dark alleys. Finally, I draw close enough to step in front of her. The child looks up at me with bright green eyes, startling me. *Why aren't her eyes black like everyone else?*

The child begins to run again, and I shout, "Wait! Please, stop running! I won't hurt you." The child looks at me like I am insane.

"You aren't convinced?" she asks, her eyes growing wide, "he doesn't convince you?"

"Convince me about what? Who is he? I question, the desperation for answers creeping into my voice.

"He's The Dragon. And he's convinced everyone that he's here to fix things," the child responds, "Come with me."

I follow the child as she weaves through the labyrinth of eerie passageways. Eventually, she comes to a stop at what appears to be a large shelter, the size of a small room, on the end of a narrow backstreet, pieced together with garbage bags and boxes.

The child leads me to one side and goes into a small opening. The ground starts shifting downward as we crawl through, and we eventually emerge into a large tunnel with hundreds of people inside, all with bright green eyes. Unlike the people above, these people look as if they are full of life and love.

"Why are you all down here? Who are you?" I ask the child.

“We are the Unconvinced. And this is the only place we can hide from The Dragon,” the child responds, “but he will find us again soon.”

Some of the Unconvinced come closer to me, looking into my eyes with suspicion.

“Why did you bring her here, Eve?” a woman asks, her hard gaze never leaving mine.

“She’s not convinced, Mama.” the child, Eve, explains.

“Look at her eyes. They are like The Dragon’s!” the woman says, her face growing furious, “You have put us all at risk!” I look towards a nearby mirror and gasp. She’s right! My eye’s edges have turned an icy blue, while the center remains the brown I was born with. As I watch, a shard of ice creeps toward the brown, freezing it. A shiver runs down my spine. He's taking over.

I turn away from the mirror and from the gapping, frightened crowd, and run. Eve chases after me, begging me to come back, but I keep running.

“Wait! I can help! PLEASE!” she calls, but I am already too far gone. She can’t help me. If there was any doubt before, I know for a fact what I have to do now.

As I run, I pass a room in the underground covered in weapons. I stop and look around, but I don’t see anyone. An eerie silence overcomes the room as I step in. I make my choice, and strap a blade to my hip.

I hear the sounds of a child running, and then the voice of a mother.

“Eve, let her go. She has a story of her own to finish.” her mother says in a soothing tone, the voices and footsteps getting quieter. I slip out into the hallway and find it empty. Quickly, I escape through the tunnel, crawling at a rapid pace.

When I emerge from the shelter, I run until I find a main road. All around me, people are gathering and walking towards something in the distance, a massive, black palace, with winding, eerie turrets, snaking together to look like squirming black tentacles.

As we walk, I watch my eyes from the windows we pass. Every few windows, there's a new shard of ice invading the brown. At this point, more than two thirds of my irises are converted to blue.

The walk continues until we reach the gates of the palace, where everyone comes to a sudden stop. I look around for an entrance, but the only one is through the massive, onyx gate. Pushing through the crowd, I come up to the bars, a coolness radiating off of it. I check for guards, but see none. There appears to be no authorities in this city whatsoever.

I push the gate, and the massive black structure moves open. My hands, stinging from the cold, continue to open the gate until it is enough to slip through. I take a deep breath, and begin to step through.

Out of nowhere, I feel someone tightly gripping my wrist, and turn to see a set of dead, black eyes. I try to wrench my arm free, but the man's grip holds fast. Without thinking, I pull the weapon resting at my hip and swipe. The man doesn't even cry out. He just stares straight ahead, looking at the castle, as if he is accustomed to this pain.

I back away from the horrifying sight into the monstrosity that houses the evil who caused this. As I walk into the castle, I find myself staring into a mirror, reflecting back to me what is coming. My eyes have nearly become entirely ice.

I think back to the man, and my blade ending him. For a moment, the guilt and pain of what I've done doubles me over, and a cry retches from my soul into the dark echoing halls. I sit on the hard, cold tile of the palace panting, my mind scattering on how to cope with this.

Abruptly, a soothing chill fills my mind, and a quiet voice whispers: "You did what you had to do."
I clutch my head, my nails digging into my skull.

"There is no such thing as wrong." My nails carve bloody moon shapes into my head as I try to scream the voice away.

"He tried to stop me. He had to go." I slump, panting, and let the coolness seep down my spine.

My mind goes silent, and my strength returns. I stand up, and rush down the halls with renewed purpose. The Dragon needs to come to an end. That will be the ending of my story.

I turn a corner to see several pairs of black eyes staring at me. I kill them without stopping. My blade is as merciless and cold as the ice blue that has now entirely taken over the remainder of the brown warmth.

My footsteps click quickly as I race through the lonesome halls, having no particular direction at all. And yet, deep in my gut, I know I am getting closer. I can feel The Dragon's menacing presence all around, intoxicating the air.

Finally, I come across a set of massive black doors, radiating the same frozen temperatures as the gate outside. I reach to open the door, and five men come running toward me, like armed marionettes. My body moves and my arms swing the blade, knocking down the puppets with ease, and knocking down my consciousness with them. Finally, the only one moving is me. I simultaneously feel a weight on my shoulders and a weightlessness where my heart should have been. I swallow any and all emotions and push the door open with the ferocity of an angry wolf.

The Dragon sits in front of a fireplace, looking as if he has been caught in the peaceful eye of the storm. I stand silently, stunned at his casual acceptance, my blade waiting impatiently at my hip. Eventually, he turns his head to me.

“Well?” he questions, “Was it worth it?” he asks, his gaze never leaving mine. I look deep into his eyes, the soulless, murderous, black eye, and the pale, cold, frighteningly blue one. My gaze falls, and for one second, I allow myself to feel the emptiness of my soul. Then the second comes to an end.

Suddenly, fiercely, I force my eyes upward, and in an instant charge at him, ready to swing the blade.

“No, it wasn’t,” I scream, as the blade comes crashing down, and the old man’s body goes down with it. His blood pools at my feet, but I don’t grimace. Nothing will make me grimace ever again.

I straighten my back and hold my head high. Slowly, powerfully, I walk over to the broadcasting screen and turn it on, my eyes of ice reflecting back at me. “Good morning, my sons and daughters.” I call, with a smirk etching, carving its way up to my eyes. “Let’s begin.”

Three Second Delay

By Lindsay Klinge

The video call rings

And rings

And rings

No answer. Again

—

I call Astrid again, weeks after she first missed my call. I wonder where she is while looking at the seemingly infinite black sky dotted with stars outside my window. In the middle of it all, I see another planet similar to mine. Her planet. It's easy to see how similar they are through the telescope. I imagine the green parts are full of luscious forests with trees and animals, and the blue areas are filled with underwater ecosystems and fish no one has ever even heard of. Just like my planet, Shiiden. The only difference is her planet, Hemera, is encircled by foreign ships from out of our solar system. They call themselves the Medeans. From here, you can almost see the explosions from the rockets that are shot frequently. And the bombs look so small from here; it's hard to see them leveling cities on the news. I try not to look too often. Everyday, I am grateful to be here, not there.

I pray that Astrid picks up.

She actually does.

"Astrid? Are you there?"

"Amina?"

My initial smile fades away at the smoke in the crowd of people she's around. "Where are you Astrid?" The bright daylight on her side causes me to turn my brightness down in my dimly lit room. This is one of the only times of day that we're both awake. "Why are you outside?"

"I'm walking home now. I wanted to surprise my parents and get the groceries from the market before they got home."

She jostles around the crowd.

"What did you get?" I curse myself. Why am I acting so awkward like she's a stranger?

"Only half of what's on the list. I'm surprised I even got this much. Everyone is rushing to buy items before they disappear."

"You're going home now, right?"

"Yep, it's not too far."

Hemerians, Astrid's people, have been blunt in their opposition to Medean colonization. It was said that Hemera was home to crucial ore used for their space travel technology. I think it's pram-i-bilium? pragnibilum? I don't remember. Also oil. It seems so dumb, but they kill for it.

"I'm sorry I missed your twelfth birthday." Astrid says after noticing the balloons in my room. She's around less people now.

"It wasn't much. I missed yours, too, so we're even," I say.

She thinks for a second. "Wow, I can't believe I've been gone since then." Her birthday was two seasons ago. It feels like she left yesterday.

I write a few notes on the mostly empty page of my notebook. Multitasking by calling Astrid while doing schoolwork usually involves me neglecting one or the other. Recently homework has gotten the

short end of the stick. Especially since I've been staying up praying Astrid's name doesn't come on the news.

Yelling comes out from her side. So much that the audio cuts out for a millisecond at a time. I stop writing notes. She glances over at something then runs the rest of the way home. There's been a protest happening for the past ten days with hundreds of participants. The Medeans must have gotten sick of them. I've watched the news religiously since she left. Since she lives in one of the biggest cities of her world, it's easy to keep track of what's going on around her even if Astrid isn't here to tell me.

"You can hang up if you need to," I say.

"No way, this is the first time I've had internet or electricity since last season."

She walks up all eight flights of stairs to her building. "Hello, little baby," she coos at either her sister or her dog. She lays on her bed.

"Someone got arrested." Astrid whispers, "It was a protester. I could barely see, but I think the officer was Medean. I don't know what's up with them lately. They've been extra strict."

"If it was too much trouble, they shouldn't have colonized you in the first place."

"That's what I'm saying!"

I wish it was that simple. The Medeans have occupied both of our planets for a while. My parents say we could never defeat them even if both planets worked together.

Astrid peers out the window and adjusts her round glasses. "Oh my god that's Ivory's dad! He's a big Hemerian nationalist." She glances up. "And that's *another* Medean ship leaving the planet." She sighs, "Dad doesn't want me looking outside," she says as she plops back on the bed.

"Who's at your house right now?"

“Just me and Luna. Oh, and Sparky. Mom and dad are out.”

I want to tell her to take her and her sister away from the windows, but she seems so carefree about it all. I don't get it. Her dog jumps on her bed and stares its five, big brown eyes into the screen. He acts as the perfect distraction. I give in.

“Oh, how is it going with that girl you like?” I ask, trying to copy her demeanor.

“Oh my god! You need to stop that,” she laughs. “She doesn't like me like that!”

I smile. “I dunno... I think you're just not giving her a chance.”

“Yeah right. No, I'm good right here: a comfortable distance away from any relationship.”

“‘Miss Loudmouth’ can't handle socializing, wow.” I roll my eyes. She's crazy.

“At least I'm not married to my studies!”

“That's my parents' doing, not me! I can get by with an 89% as a final grade.” She raises an eyebrow. “Alright! 95% is my minimum.”

“You are suffering.” She jokes in the way that sheds a hint of truth in it. I laugh anyway. I want to tell her “No, you are!” but that seems inappropriate in this situation.

She gazes outside again. “Be careful, they might be off to exploit your planet.”

I laugh without thinking.

Through the window that takes up my entire wall, a barrage of Medean ships leave Hemera. They are so small and far away, but on Astrid's side, they cover up the otherwise sunny day, and cast a shadow over everything outside her window. I turn my brightness back up. The dim floor lamp in her room is the only source of light. It shuts off.

“Astrid?”

“Amina, it’s okay. I’m sure the Medeans just shut our power off. They’ve done it before.”

I don’t believe it’s that simple. It’s like in the movies. The enemy doesn’t just leave. Not when they still have the upper hand.

“No! They’re all leaving! All the Medeans are leaving!” I breathe. “Why...?”

“It doesn’t matter, that’s a good thing!”

“No,” I yell, “they wouldn’t just leave, idiot! Why would they just up and leave? Over what, a small uprising? They deal with hundreds everyday. It doesn’t make sense.” All the news stories from the past few months run through my head. Medeans never let themselves lose a fight.

“Okay, Amina, what should I do?”

“Hide under the kitchen table just like the bomb drills we had in school.”

The Medeans ships are further away from Hemera now. They’re easier to see through my telescope. One has an interesting shape: a small cabin, but a big storage area. It looks pregnant with an oversized load. It begins to open.

“Astrid.”

A big rocket shaped object emerges from the cabin.

“ASTRID?”

“What?”

“There’s a...um...” I stammer. I don’t know what that is.

“God, where’d Sparky go?” SPARKY!” She looks around her house. “Luna, have you seen him?”

The rocket is released.

“There you are! What’s wrong, boy?”

“ASTRID GET OUT OF THERE.” I grab my tablet. “Get under the table.”

I can’t see the rocket through the telescope anymore.

A siren shrieks on Astrid’s side.

She screams.

Her tablet is left on the ground facing the ceiling

“Please, God.” She says quietly.

The ceiling collapses. Her scream is cut off. The siren stops.

“Astrid?”

The call disconnects.

It takes three seconds for light to travel from Hemera to Shiiden.

3

My jaw drops.

2

I turn to the window.

1

My eyes hurt.

I don’t need my telescope to see this.

The rocket hits Hemera. From there, the planet cracks to its core and splits like little jigsaw pieces.

A different alarm blares through the ringing in my ears.

My mom throws my bedroom door open.

“Mama, Astrid...”

“Honey, your dad is opening the bunker. We have to go right now.”

“Will they target us too?”

“I don’t know, but we have to go.”

—

You can’t walk around the street corner without seeing a Medean soldier or two. You can’t hang Shiidenese flags anymore. They’re replaced by Medean ones. My own home cuisine has been watered down for Medean taste.

“We had built a new weapon,” a Medean commander said on not my usual news station, but a Medean mandated one. “The insurgents of Hemera were wreaking havoc, killing our own people. My own sister, a general, was killed in their rebellion. Those criminals would never let us help them, bring them a better life with our technology and intelligence. And we needed to test our new weapon.” He smiles, proud.

We were never killed in a big boom like the Hemerans, like Astrid. But the fractured planet—once a beautiful green and blue turned black and charred—gave us a reminder of what would happen if we stepped out of line.

Ink

By Sofia Ocasio

When the car of the bullet train jolted slightly as it began to move onward again, I let myself sink into my seat, turning my head to look out the small plate glass window beside me. My eyes trailing along the hill tops, tall grass, and arched roofs of temples.

It wasn't long until my hands itched to put a pen down on paper, and create something. My mind flashed with various shots of muffled, inspired ideas from the sights of the day in Kyoto, but the ink never reached the page as my hand stubbornly didn't move, my mind racing for ideas even though it seemed so empty. The leathery, empty off-white paper lay in front of me, watching me as if waiting, anticipating for the pen to glide along the page.

I had almost given up, the cap inches away from clicking shut over the inky black brush, when the train stopped at the next destination, Shinagawa. A few figures entered the car, slumping down into seats, but one caught my eye. A young woman, with short, light auburn hair that framed a sharp, pretty face and round eyes. Freckles dotted her skin and her nose was slightly upturned. I caught myself staring when she gave me a small smile, and I put my head down. As an artist, I had a tendency to let my gaze linger on a person's facial features. I had already committed hers to memory, and I looked down at my paper as the woman settled down in the seat right in front of mine.

I lifted the cap off my pen again with a sudden surge of inspiration, and let my wrist rest on the paper's surface, before lifting it slightly and letting my hand glide easily along the paper. The brush, filled with ink, flew effortlessly, the black trail tracing the soft, shiny streaks of her hair, her high cheekbones, her round, curious eyes, the soft bend in her cupid's bow. My hand paused as I heard the soft sound of a camera shutter. I chanced to look at the woman in the seat in front of me. I hadn't noticed she was carrying a camera. An expensive-looking black one that hung on a lanyard around her neck.

The lens was uncapped, aimed at the unforgettable view outside of the window. The sky was blue-gray, the sun not peeking through as it fell to sleep past the horizon, but the warm lights of the lanterns glowing along the streets began to light up as afternoon turned into evening.

I looked back down, my pen beginning to move again. I easily zoned out, the continuous, soft rumbling of the speeding bullet train gliding along the tracks carrying me into focus. The soft bump in her nose, the freckles along the bridge, and the slight protrusion of light, shapely brows over pale lashes. Her skin wasn't tainted with makeup, but it glowed nevertheless. Then, I moved my pen down to trace the outlines of the camera she carried. An object that added much to her unknown character. I tried my best to give the black pen's marks as much expression as I could, revealing the colorfulness of raven ink.

Maybe she's a ghost. A spirit of some kind, a beautiful one that carries a camera around and lingers on the Japanese bullet train. I thought. It was possible. I had learned about plenty of different spirits while roaming gardens and visiting temples, reading the small Hiragana text engraved on wooden signs.

Within minutes, I stopped drawing, lifting my pen and capping it, my eyes flickering about the ink-filled page. *Maybe I should give it to her. She might speak English.* I thought, my leg starting to bounce with anxiety at just the thought.

Minutes went by, the sun set, and I my eyes stayed on the view outside, the atmosphere of the low hum of the train and the occasional camera shutter easing my mind and tired muscles from the long day.

“東京都千代田区。Tōkyōtochiyodaku.” I heard the automated female voice say over the speakers, making me snap back from my daze. We had already arrived back in Chiyoda, where the bullet train's Tokyo station was. Where I would be getting off. I gently ripped the paper from the notebook, and stood with my grandmother out of our seats. But as she walked past and towards the exit, I turned to the woman with the camera, offering the drawing with wide, nervous eyes, my heart pounding like a drum.

To my relief, the woman smiled, her pretty eyes lighting up at the sight, after a slight moment of confusion. She reached out, her pale, delicate hand taking the paper, holding it carefully as she admired the strokes of black ink. My heart still pounded and I felt like I was going to faint. I wasn't very good at talking to people, especially in Japan, where I stood out as a foreigner. The woman looked back up at me, speaking with an accent that I didn't recognize, and a lilt in her tone.

"This is gorgeous, thank you," the woman said, her smile big and bright, her head lifting. Her accent laced her words. She might've said something else. I could barely hear above the rushing of blood in my ears. But I relaxed as I saw her smile, her kind eyes. I nodded, stammering a string of thank-yous. She was patient, but my gaze looked back to my grandmother as she urged us to leave. I nodded, then turned to the woman, who thanked me again.

"I'll try to find you," she said, waving as I left. I waved back, turning towards the door. I walked out of the train and onto the tiled floor of the train station, as the large rumbling vehicle slowly began to start forward again. The woman was gone, but had still left me with a racing mind and fluttering heart rate as I took my grandmother's hand and walked into the crowd.

I left from Japan back to America the next day, and I didn't see her again. I don't think I ever will. Maybe to her, I seemed like a spirit as well, someone that she would never encounter again, someone that she wouldn't remember the face of.

The Perfect Pair

By Felicity Vogl

“I don’t know, Sayali.” The pointe shoe fitter frowned as she meticulously judged the shape of the pointe shoes on Sayali’s feet, all the while Sayali practiced her passé balances and tendus in front of the fitting area mirror. “They look too blocky on you. Why don’t we look for something that better complements your feet?”

Sayali observed the way her feet looked at different angles in the shoe, admiring how they displayed her polished technique from years upon years of intensive training at her ballet company. She lifted her leg up into a low arabesque behind her and let go of the barre, letting herself suspend en pointe for a couple seconds before gracefully returning to solid ground.

“No, no. These are wonderful. I don’t think I’ve ever found a shoe I can balance in and roll through so easily. And I haven’t even adjusted the drawstrings and broken them in yet!”

“But they’re cheap. They probably won’t last you long.”

“I’ve bought pairs that are over \$120 that have barely lasted a week. When you’re one of the thirty willis in the corps de ballet of *Giselle*, you don’t have the money to buy a new pair of a hundred dollar pointe shoes every week once your last pair dies.”

“And what makes you think these shoes will last longer?”

“I can just feel it. And if I switch to this brand, I can get high quality shoes at half the price!”

“Sayali, I’m a professional at this, and in my professional opinion, those shoes look horrible on your lovely feet.”

“But they feel amazing!”

The pointe shoe fitter looked at her suspiciously and sighed. “Fine... But if you come back in a couple days needing a different pair of shoes, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The pointe shoe fitter ran the box of shoes over the scanner and handed Sayali the elastics and satin ribbons for sewing. Sayali cheerfully waved her goodbye and skipped out of the store, cradling the box of shoes in her arms. At her apartment, she wasted no time sewing the pristine ribbons and elastics onto the shoes, looking upon them as warmly as Clara did her Nutcracker. The fabric was much thinner than her previous pairs, allowing Sayali to fall into a soothing pattern with every easy stitch she made as she hummed a tune from the second act of *Giselle*.

If the second act of *Giselle* were not a somber scene, she would’ve smiled proudly in rehearsal the next day. She was, in fact, unconsciously smiling in rehearsal, until the artistic director snapped at her and told her to stay in character. Regardless, Sayali kept her chin lifted with dignity and her posture impeccable.

The company was only two weeks away from the performance, and one week away from dress rehearsals. *Giselle* was easily one of the most recognizable of the famous “white ballets,” renowned for its gloomy yet mystical atmosphere and its gorgeous choreography that left audiences as breathless as the ghosts they watched on stage. But for the dancers, it was a nightmare. Especially for the corps de ballet of willis,

who spent most of their time on stage standing completely still until they suddenly began to perform some of the most difficult steps in ballet's classical catalog, such as traveling arabesque hops across the stage, all while staying perfectly synchronized to create an illusion of effortless uniformity.

Sayali could normally easily execute the steps, but due to how quickly most of her pointe shoes wore down and softened, after hardly two days of rehearsals, she would begin to struggle to hold her balance on the failing shoes. But with her new pair, she breezed through rehearsals for five days straight, the shoes sustaining her weight and complementing her technique. For those five days, she felt almost euphoric at the ease with which the shoes allowed her to dance. She felt satisfied with her dancing in a way that she hadn't since she graduated from a local, non-professional studio to a serious, professional company.

The shoes hadn't lost their tough structure during those five days, which meant that they hadn't lost their commanding sound when they hit the floor landing a jump. The shoes sounded clunky and hard against the floor, though Sayali wasn't being sloppy with her footwork. She honestly didn't think much of this though, seemingly unaware of the loud sounds they were making against the marley floor. She didn't seem to notice the glares her sister Willis shot in her direction whenever she danced beside them, the clunky sound of her shoes overpowering the muted sounds of theirs, nor did she notice the frown on the artistic director's face as he aloofly inspected the performance of the young women.

At the end of rehearsal on Saturday, as Sayali was tenderly untying the ribbons of her pointe shoes, the artistic director approached her, his arms crossed and his eyebrows furrowed.

"You need to get new shoes."

Sayali stared up at him, dumbfounded. “What? Why?”

“The ones you have right now are too loud. You’re supposed to be playing a ghost for heaven sakes! Do you think ghosts move like they’re dragging a sack of bricks behind them?”

Sayali’s response was no. According to classical ballet, “no” was the only correct answer. But *A Christmas Carol* would beg to differ. *If Christopher Marelly drags chains, maybe others drag a sack of bricks.* Sayali thought to herself.

She chuckled at the thought.

The director gave her a side eye. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

“Not to mention those shoes look too blocky on your feet, and the fabric on the box is starting to fray.”

The director continued. “Have you noticed that?”

He gestured to the box of the shoe: the small platform upon which a ballerina trusted her full body weight.

Sayali glanced down at the shoe in her hand, noticing the fraying fabric that revealed the wood it concealed underneath.

“It’s not affecting my ability to balance.” Sayali said. “But if you want, I can cut the fabric so it’s less obvious.”

“I don’t care about how well you can balance, I care about the fact that those shoes are way too loud. The corps de ballet is supposed to sound in harmony with one another. When your shoes are louder than the rest, it makes your presence obvious even if you’re on time with the other girls.”

“But I can’t help that the shoes are loud. That’s just how they were designed.”

He leaned in closer. “Are you trying to argue with me?” “N-no sir...”

“Then get new shoes.”

“I- I can’t right now. I can’t afford new shoes until the end of the show. I’ve spent so much on old pairs and other dance attire already...”

“Have you tried shoving them in a door or bending them in half? That should do the trick if you insist on being frugal with your money.”

Sayali hadn’t before. She hadn’t *needed* to in the past. But at the artistic director’s request, Sayali aggressively shoved the shoes between her bedroom door and used all her strength to bend them in half. She headed to her apartment kitchen and quickly tied the shoes onto her feet to test her balance. She held onto the edge of a counter and tried her best to stay afloat on the wooden flooring in her apartment that definitely wasn’t intended for dancing. When she went on pointe, the shoes pulled over into an enviable arch that any ballet teacher would applaud as perfect for a ballerina, but she struggled to

maintain balance when she let go of her support railing. She practiced a couple *dégagés*—no sound. When she took them off, the shoes felt limp and frail in her arms, like a balloon that had lost its air.

The artistic director didn't say anything to Sayali during the dress rehearsals leading up to the performance. Sayali was sure she had wobbled on even just a simple *balancé* every time they ran Act 2, but the artistic director, who was watching from the front line of seats, didn't comment on it. Her shoes sounded as muffled against the marley floor as the other willis' shoes. She wondered if the director would notice if she applied jet glue to her shoes to try and strengthen them; this was always the go-to backup for a ballerina's shoe problems. She tried this every night leading up to the premiere, but it didn't seem to make a difference.

"Come on... I just need you to last until the end of the show."

Thousands of audience members were enchanted by the movements of the ghost Giselle on the large, misty stage the opening evening. Sayali's mind began to wander. The blaring stage lights warmed her body like a campfire hovering over Sayali's head. Beads of sweat dripped down her face, breaking through her heavy stage makeup. From the corner of her eye she noticed the artistic director standing in the wings, meticulously judging the willis performance. Sayali felt herself tense up.

And then, it was time to dance. Thirty idle willis suddenly moved in unison and traveled slowly across the stage, appearing to effortlessly maneuver through each other. If you were to be in the audience, you would wonder if they were even breathing. Sayali knew they were, and doing so heavily too. As the figures of her sister spirits passed by, Sayali heard their rough, agonizing breaths as they struggled to pass the center mark of the stage.

When Sayali and her fellow willis rose up on pointe, Sayali felt her arch go over the point where it could reasonably allow her to balance. Her body leaned forward, down down, to the ground. Though in reality only a split second, Sayali felt that she was falling in slow motion for a moment. It was slow enough to allow her to realize her terror before it happened, but too fast to prevent it.

Sayali planted face first onto the ground.

A collective gasp escaped from the audience. Giselle and the willis didn't react to the fall, as they have been trained and ordered over and over to never acknowledge a mistake until they were out of the public eye and hidden behind the curtains of the stage wings. This same training told Sayali to instinctively jump up from the ground, pick up on the next phrase in the music, and force a smile in spite of the soreness slowly spreading through her ankle and what felt like a bruise on her knee. From the other side of the stage, the director was glaring at her.

When she finally left the stage through the wings opposite of the director, knowing she was done dancing until curtain call, she collapsed onto the ground. Her knee was stinging and the pain in her ankle was sharp when she tried to pointe and flex it. She briefly pulled up her ankle-length, tulle skirt to check if her knee was bleeding. It wasn't, but she could see a purple bruise forming under her peachy tights.

A couple of her fellow willis approached Sayali and frantically whispered "Are you okay?" "What happened?"

“Your bun and headpiece are a mess...” One of the older willis, Elizabeth, gestured to Sayali’s head at the flyaways in her bun and the off-kilter flower crown. “Here, I’ll take you backstage and we can try to fix it before curtain call.”

Elizabeth extended a hand and helped Sayali from off of the ground. As the two walked to the other side of the stage, Elizabeth straightened out the tulle on Sayali’s pure white skirt, which was now coated with a layer of dust from sitting on the ground. The dust layer was quite thin, mind you. Stage lights always messed with the audience’s perception of a costume’s details, so most casual, pleasure-seeking theatergoers would hardly notice a difference. But up close, it was obvious to both Sayali and Elizabeth.

“You know that if the costume mistress sees this you’ll have to pay a fine for getting the dress dirty,” Elizabeth said in a disapproving tone.

As the two girls passed the artistic director on the way to the door, he scowled at Sayali. “You see? This is why you should’ve gotten new shoes!”

The red curtains closed, the sound of cheering and clapping deafened. At this point Sayali could hardly walk from her injuries, much less dance. How was she going to complete another week of shows? She limped over to the artistic director once he was alone and asked him if an understudy could fill in for her at the performance tomorrow until she could see a doctor to check for injuries.

“They can fill in for you until the shows are over.”

“That might not be necessary. These injuries could heal after a day or two. I’m sure it’s nothing too severe, I just want to check with a doctor to be sure.”

“But can you replace your shoes in a day or two?”

“I can’t afford new shoes until after the show. I’m relying on this paycheck.”

“So you are released from *Giselle*. Those shoes are messing up the illusion of beauty, you should’ve replaced them when I told you to.”

Sayali stared at him, dumbfounded. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Even if she could speak, she wouldn’t have known what to say. The director didn’t wait for a response. He was already walking away.

Sayali kept her pointe shoe bag saddled over her shoulder as she burst into her apartment bedroom, bitter tears streaming down and ruining the blush and foundation coating her cheeks. She furiously tore the bag open and ripped out the pointe shoes, staring at them angrily as she panted heavily.

She hurled the shoes into the ever expanding pile in the corner; a graveyard of dozens of pairs of nearly identical, pale pink shoes. The traitorous shoes were as frail and battered as Giselle had been when her heart had beaten madly as her lover had turned his back on her, the girl’s joy and strength stripped away as she descended into her cold form, indistinguishable from her sister Willis’.

Forget Me Not

By Anna Yao

“Don't you remember, Kath?” He grinned. “This was where we first met; the boulder right over...there.” He led me to the front of the boulder, facing the scenery of the forest. Truthfully, the boulder was more comparable to a rock. It was barely the size of my height, but in a way, it seemed as though a mountain with its placement, veneering the lake and the reflections of the sun. It was grand in its composition of the trees, hallowing towards the rock in an eerily but rather elegant manner.

I smiled. “I do. And I'm sure you remember how you were barefoot, drenched by the rain, and absolutely lost in thought when I first saw you.” That day, he seemed as if in a trance, motionless and without a word. The sky grayed with the fall of rain, so violently pouring down that the ground began to sink beneath me. I didn't quite notice. After all, my eyes were glued to the peculiar stranger sitting in front of me, completely unbothered by the rainfall while he remained fixated upon the scene behold.

I don't remember when I first began to forget. It wasn't abrupt, but it hurt to not remember. Memories and small reminders of my life had fallen out of my mind, even as I tried so desperately to grab ahold of them. In truth, they were small, but each time I sensed a forgotten memory or thought, it was as if I had truly lost an aspect of my life. I guess that hurt the people around me too. I saw wherever my mom's lip would quiver or when my younger sister would cry, pulling up her hood whenever I forgot a moment we had spent together. I suppose that was why they sent me to this facility—they simply couldn't bear my resemblance to Katherine Hart, and neither could I. Pictures of her lined my mirror, a reminder of who I truly was, of who I was supposed to be, anyway. Either way, in this facility, I was *patient A058-3395*.

Other than him, no one visits me too often. There's the monthly visit from my mom, and if I'm lucky enough, my sister. But there's also the weekly visit from him: every Monday afternoon, one o'clock sharp. He's strange, and I often catch him staring intently at me, looking as though I have more to my exterior. In reality, I'm almost a corpse—there's simply nothing to me other than what I've lost, and I suppose that might be just about everything. Despite so, I certainly enjoy our time together, every Monday afternoon, one o'clock sharp. He must think I'm strange too; I don't remember who he was to Katherine or what's been forgotten, who she had once loved and spent a period of her life with, but his presence is still familiar. I'm sure he had once been a person Katherine treasured. I hope he used to treasure her too.

Facing my bed was a flimsy T.V. screen with knotted cables. The walls were a sort of blinding white, scarcely decorated with old brochures and miscellaneous infographics. A small cabinet stood beside my bed and above was a terrible sight of crumpled forms, a half-empty plastic water bottle, and a stray bouquet, haloed with dried flower petals. The bouquet was close to withering, absolutely sucked of color. I don't know how long they had been there, lying without life just waiting to be thrown into the trash. I think they were given to me by him, last Monday or so. They had been forget-me-nots, presumably Katherine's favorite flower. Now, they could hardly be considered anything other than carcasses of love. I couldn't bear to throw them away.

It was the first Monday of the month and at exactly one o'clock, I heard him enter. I was lying in my bed, unmoving even in his presence. Today had been lazy, and therefore, unbearable. I hoped he would have changed his mind, decided he didn't want to see me, and shut the door behind him, but I suppose we weren't similar in mindset. These visits had always been quite abnormal. Certainly, it was simply because he wasn't here to see me. Rather, he visited me to see her, or at least a semblance of her.

“Hi.” he greeted me, almost awkwardly. This was normal for any of our numerous encounters as no matter how many times he had visited me, he had never mentioned his name, nor did his discomfort ever cease.

“Hello,” I replied, synonymous with his discomfort. I remained in my bed, still motionless at his greeting. “I hope you’re doing well. It seems like it’s been a month since you last visited.”

“Well, it’s only been a week, like it—well—always has been. But I have been doing okay, and I guess I hope you’ve been too.” He remained silent for a minute or so, and I sat up to examine him. He still had the same blueish-colored eyes, dark-brown hair, and the freckle below his right eye. He was certainly handsome, and his features co-existed quite nicely. I liked looking at him, especially his eyes, which squinted and widened expressively.

“I guess it has been. Anyways, what are you here for this time? Would you like to join me for some lunch? I’m pretty hungry.”

He nodded. “Same as, always has been. I brought some snacks since I know you don’t exactly like the cafeteria’s food. And why don’t we open up the blinds for some sunshine? It’s pretty dark in here after all.”

“Yeah. That sounds good.” I smiled. He stood at the doorway, looking strangely at me, almost as if I had said or done something wrong. After a few seconds, he shook his head, mumbled to himself, and walked over to the window, opening its blinds. He reached for the plastic chair beside the window and sat himself down. And then, he began.

“Hi, Kath. I’m your boyfriend, or at least was. Wow...that sounds pretty sad, now that I’ve repeated it dozens of times. But, anyway, it’s August 1st, and we’re both eighteen. It’s been about three years since we met and about one since you began to forget. Since your accident.”

“It’s already past our senior year. We were supposed to graduate together, visit colleges together, and just plainly, live life together. I don’t know what went wrong. Well, I worded that wrong. It isn’t like we were a formula or some recipe for happiness. I just miss it when we were together. I just miss when you remembered things, when we were together when life was normal. “

“Now, we’re strangers. Except it’s not just now because this is how life will always be. You won’t ever begin to remember me, and I won’t ever forget you. And that sucks because each time I see you I think of who we were, not just together, but who you were as an individual too. Sometimes, I think I just think about that time when we met, and what would’ve happened if you had just continued walking, ignored me in the pouring rain. We probably wouldn’t have ever met. And it sounds awful, but I think that would have been better for both of us. I’m sure you think of me as some stranger, random enough, prancing his way into your hospital room, telling you all about this crazy life you have, telling you all about the people you’ve met and loved.” He paused, and he released not even a single breath as he thought.

Finally, he released his halt. “Sometimes, I wish you just remembered.”

I smiled. “I wished I remembered too,” I whispered, but I’m sure he heard it because his tensed eyebrows suddenly relaxed and he managed a small, melancholic smile. “You know, it’s weird. It’s weird because it feels as if I know exactly who you are, literally a pinpoint of your identity, down to whatever minuscule detail about you. I feel as if I know everything about you. But whenever I come close to digging up that familiarity, everything becomes muddled, and I lose all of that understanding of you, everything. But even so, I’m glad that I’ve gotten to know you, well, at least somewhat temporarily. You’re leaving soon aren’t you?”

He looked away quickly, but I still managed to catch a glimpse of his eyes, glassy and reflective. “I am, for college. It won’t be close either.”

I nodded. "I understand. Well, I hope it goes well for you..." I paused. "I'm sorry, I'm not very good at sentimental goodbyes." He laughed, though only for a second or two. "Well, I do have a gift for you. It's a journal. I think Katherine—I—wrote in it a few years ago. It had only been filled up a few pages or so when I found it, so I wrote a few entries in it. It was only on Mondays though, so I doubt any of it will mean much. I liked the first entry...about how we met. I liked to reread it a couple of times." I opened the drawer of my bedside table, carefully pulled out the journal, and handed it to him.

"Wouldn't you want to keep it?"

I shook my head. "It won't do much good for me. You're the one who really remembers all of this stuff. I only wrote in it to give to you anyway."

After I had given him the journal, he left an hour later. We ended our conversation briefly. Well, actually, I had asked him to leave. I believe I had used an excuse, that I was sick. Perhaps it was because I was truly feeling a bit ill, or rather because his presence made me feel strange. It was a blank. I didn't remember what we discussed after I gave him the journal, probably something concerning memories and whatnot. But once he left, most likely for good, I felt almost terrified. Of course, I enjoyed his visits, and I enjoyed his presence, but it was never to the point of attachment. I didn't know who he was, and he doesn't know who I am. It should have been as simple as a brief goodbye. Why did I feel so wretched?

It's been...I suppose around a month since that visit. I've come to remember little about his appearance and less about our conversations. I should be quite sad, but I've gotten used to this sensation of forgetfulness.

It's Monday, around one o'clock in the afternoon. I believe the month is January. Mom has been visiting me more, since around a few months ago. Today, I was sent a bouquet. Ironically, it was a bundle of forget-me-nots. Mom says the flowers have been sent to me since September. I guess she's right since

the drawer of my bedside table has a collection of little cards with a hole punched in the upper-right corners. Each card reads the same motif. "Forget-Me-Not. From, Nate."

"Don't you remember, Kath?" He grinned. "This was where we first met; the boulder right over...there." He led me to the front of the boulder, facing the scenery of the forest.

I smiled. "I do. And I'm sure you remember how you were barefoot, drenched by the rain, and absolutely lost in thought when I first saw you." That day, he seemed as if in a trance, motionless and without a word. My eyes were glued to him, and I thought of him as peculiar.

"Well, I was lost in thought. I guess I do that a lot. Anyways, do you remember what you said to me?"

I laughed. "Of course I do." I looked at his eyes, a bluish hue, squinting with a smile. "Hi. My name's Katherine. You can call me Kath. Why are you outside in the pouring rain?"

"No specific reason."

"And your name?"

"Nate."

"So...Nate. What exactly are you looking at? It's a little too glum to be dazzled by the lake."

"Forget-Me-Nots."

"What?" I laughed. It was as if we were in a play, except we weren't just actors in any ordinary theater.

"The flowers. Forget-Me-Nots. Aren't they pretty? They're almost drowning though."

“Yeah, I mean it is raining after all. But you’re right. They are quite pretty. The Forget-Me-Nots.”

High School

Winners

1st Place: Requiem of the Rear-Garde

“Reminiscent of the classics—this reads like something out of Victor Hugo or Oscar Wilde’s imagination. This just had to be number one.” - Taryn Kloeden, judge

Requiem of the Rear-Garde

By John Kelly

“Arrête! C’est ici l’empire de la mort.”

“Stop! This is the empire of the dead.”

-Inscription above the entrance to the Paris Catacombs

“Faustmann, my dear friend, I hope this letter finds you well. You are in good health, I expect. No doubt you have already received telegraphs and rumors telling of the end of the war; those are true. As of the Twenty-Sixth of January, Eighteen Seventy-One, the conflict between France and Prussia has ceased, and with it, our Siege of Paris. But, it is now I must tell you that this correspondence was not written in an entirely selfless manner. You make clear your distaste for the stories of war I collect, yet I feel there is one I must urgently share with you. This grave story was told to me by a Frenchman taken prisoner by us; as soon as I was given charge of those captives I bargained with him--a piece of bread and a handful of cheese for the story in his keeping. He told me, but before I could ask more of him a few days later, he had been repatriated in the postwar confusion. Upon retelling it to my fellow countrymen of the Crown Prince’s regiment, they were altogether too amused to take it seriously; so I seek a second opinion. I fear I may have been the prey of a swindler, and I implore you for your judgment on the matter.”

“When speaking with the Frenchman, I found that he knew some German, and I some French, yet he spoke the most fluently out of either of us. He said his name was Cadeau. He wore an army greatcoat, but was not accompanied by the usual soldierly disposition--perhaps a volunteer. He

confirmed this: and was a student, in fact. He and his classmates had signed up and were first given duty over those seeking refuge. It was here he began:"

"In the face of the incessant onslaught, we were commanded to assist the frail and elderly, far from the front-lines, at the *Rue d'Enfer*. Watching those infirm bodies hurry down the way to safety, I was reminded greatly of the Phoenician elders surrendering themselves to slavery at the sack of Carthage. Absent-mindedly, I turned to a light whistling sound down the road when a roof about 80 meters away violently exploded. Shards of dark wood scattered into the air, and were out of sight within the second."

"This shook my compatriots and I, as it was now plainly clear we were within the range of the Prussian artillery. By that time our charges had been reduced but to a trickle; in haste we threw ourselves at one of the nearby toll-houses, the *Barrière d'Enfer*. We were a mad throng, pushing, kicking, doing whatever we deemed as necessary to getting ourselves closer to safety. In a flash the door of the toll-house was down, with some of us breaking off the main body to dive into the safety of adjacent rooms or under furniture. But the majority, including myself, were looking to put as much between themselves and the sky as possible. So, when the cellar door was found, it was down, down, down the echoing stone steps, into the dark shroud waiting for us at the bottom of the winding stairwell."

"The steps were extremely narrow, with many of my compatriots losing their footing, and tumbling down in a mass. I was near the back of the group, and thus, able to avoid the landslide of equipment and human substance that broke down the wrought-iron gate guarding the bottom exit. As forceful as the plummet sounded to me, it seemed the only serious wounds obtained by us had been to pride and ego. Despite this, our numbers had been diminished to less than a dozen, though we had only been about twenty strong before. The rest had remained upstairs. The artillery could be heard and felt through the earth as it intensified within minutes, echoing through our subterranean surroundings like

the falling of rain. As such, we silently elected to stay down there until the danger subsided. The stairwell had deposited us within a vast corridor, emptying into a great many intersections and junctions. Placed intermittently were iron braziers, nursing healthy fires for such desolate surroundings. No doubt, we thought then, that others had been seeking refuge down here as well, lighting each fire. This theory was given credence, as the lit braziers formed paths through certain tunnels, with the rest remaining unlit. Pervading through each was a distinct smell, that of aged decay. It came from the bones. An incalculable amount of them, lining each wall. Whether each stack reached the ceiling or not, every collection of them reached far above our heads. They were all arranged--heads in rows, limb-bones in rows, on some occasions being interspersed with large stones in holy shapes, adorned with Ecclesiastical or Imperial tongues. It was an ossuary, sheer in size and rivaled only by the macabre rituals of Tenochtitlan. From each and every wall, hollow visages of bleached bone leered at us--and our faces, pale and marbled in the flickering firelight, could only stare back as we realized we were totally enveloped."

"The raining shells pounding Paris, that beating war-drum of Westphalia roused us from our horrified stupor. It was a sight to behold, yes! But for an indeterminable reason, perhaps cowardice, we felt it prudent to find another way out, even if that meant abandoning what vestiges of natural light remained atop the stairwell. The bulk of our remnants, including I, traveled down the path that lay open immediately in front of us-- seemingly being the natural choice. A small handful of our group chose other tunnels, those that extended themselves leftward or rightward of the staircase where we had come from. Those paths seemed to snake through the earth, as opposed to ours, which stretched into the distance, eventually being cloaked in the pall of darkness. I have little doubt now that those who proceeded down those other paths, succumbed and joined those who lined every wall."

"As we traveled down the cold corridor, the artillery would subside for a time, before resuming again. This happened repeatedly, and every time the silence would deafen us. For long periods the only

sound that could be heard was the heavy breathing of a few in the group as the artillery-fire waned. At times we could swear we saw eyes in the blackness around us, reflecting the orange firelight. Rats most likely--but they never stayed around long enough for us to ascertain. It was this way for awhile, until we heard distinct sounds of clinking; some that could only be produced by metal clashing with another material. Thinking it to be Parisians, possibly with food or any other desires we could conjure up, we hurried ahead. The sound was stationary, and I estimated it to be only a few halls ahead.”

“Eager to exchange our surroundings and share company, we were on the verge of yelling out, when rounding a corner we saw a company of Prussians. There were several of them, some kneeling, some standing, all focused on their rifles, which were the source of the metallic sound. A shot went off, alerting them to our presence. It hit no one, driving itself into one of the skeletal limbs jutting out from the wall. As our groups rushed to meet one another in a frenzy, someone let out a terrible cry--not of pain, but a strange sort of catharsis. It was later recounted as similar to the ululation of an Indian warrior. Very quickly the small corridor filled with the sound of crackling and was crowded with gunpowder smoke, having no means by which to dissipate. Although we had been even in number by the onset of the skirmish, by the end there were three of us--with all others laid prostrate on the compacted dirt floor. Upon inspection of the battle-ground we found a nearby brazier fallen sideways, with ash and hot coals spilling out onto the body of a Prussian. Likely the source of that sound which galvanized us so. We soon found the business the Germans had with their arms. Each Prussian rifle, in place of a bayonet, had large shards of bone attached. These came from a desecrated wall nearby, and were sculpted to be roughly the size of bayonets we found on their persons. One of us, a man named Montresor, had fallen victim to such a tactic. Halfway in his thick paunch was what we could only assume to be an arm-bone. Montresor was famously gluttonous, yes, but his cheeks were always rosy, and he seemed to be filled with a perpetual exuberance. There was nothing that could be done for him.”

“All of our faces, dirtied and pockmarked and deathly pale, were nearly identical to those of the Prussians. Their stained and torn uniforms, similar to ours, suggested they had become victims of the labyrinth down here as well, before our encounter. A small breeze behind my back from the direction they had come from, so light as to almost be imagined, seemed to confirm this. I noted it in the back of my mind as a possible exit. Despite our similarities to the Prussians, we had emerged victorious and they had not, because of their heinous transgressions in defiling these halls of bone. A kind of divine retribution, perhaps. That small semblance of righteousness was the closest we had to any hope of escape.”

“We quickened our pace now, with fewer people and more resolve to leave. We didn’t pay attention to sounds or light or dark or any of the walls anymore. If we found another Prussian company again, we all would surely be forfeit as a consequence of our lesser numbers. We had lost the path we had been traveling down prior to the battle, and our hurry meant that we could afford no effort in finding it again. Our wailing and gnashing of teeth only seemed to lead us in circles. We stopped to look around, the only landmark was a tipped-over brazier, devoid of any fire. It was then I came to the paralyzing realization that we had gone back to where we had started. The wall, scored and scraped, remained, only all bodies, all signs of battle were gone. I informed the others of my revelation, and we all leaned down. Faintly, hidden partly within the shadows of the lower bones were dark stains. I could scarcely imagine what else might cause such an appearance. It was down there my breath stopped. Hidden behind the askew brazier, perhaps having been unknowingly kicked back there, was one of the bone-fragments used by the Prussians. It still had holes from where it had been attached.”

“When we reached a crossroads adjacent to the site of our skirmish, I turned around to ask one of our trio if he had any hint as to where we should go next. Only, I was met with an empty, bone-lined tunnel lying open in front of me, with no living souls in sight. But there had been someone with us who

had identified himself as Pierre, yes? He was right behind me, I was sure of that, as I could hear his breathing. The other man didn't seem to know who I was talking about."

"Now it was me and that other man, who I believe was named Jean-Paul. We didn't know each other well, but I was under the impression he was of a weaselly type. He was thin and greasy, but kept his army cap firm. We continued on a-ways, squeezing into such narrow spaces as to only allow us through single-file. It was now we remembered to check for water in our canteens at an intersection that was brightly-lit for the surroundings. Suddenly, Jean-Paul, somehow emboldened, started running into an adjacent tunnel, one that remained unlit. He cried out to me that he had seen a French soldier in clean, unblemished uniform with glinting eyes and shiny equipment just out of the range of light from a nearby fire there. I had seen no such thing, the darkness was all-consuming in that direction. When he had his back turned to me, I noticed Jean-Paul had a sizable gash on the back of his ankle. I thought he would not get very far, but he managed to get just out of sight into the veil of darkness, before his cries stopped."

"With no one else now, it was indeterminable how much time passed. At times I would run as if an exit were around the next corner, as if it were some feverish dream. Sometimes I would shuffle along in small paces, stricken with solemn sobriety. But eventually I was met with a rotting wooden door, complete with an antique rusted lock. I felt a wave of shame pass through me, as I had no means by which to break it open. It was then I remembered the rifle I still held in my hands, that I had been clutching with white knuckles ever since the skirmish."

"The lock came apart easily when hit, and in the moment the clang of the rifle connecting with the lock rang out, I could have sworn I heard a scuttling sound from somewhere behind me. Rats, no doubt. The noises seemed to intensify the closer I had gotten to the exit. As the door opened, it added shadow to the worn stone steps that were hidden behind. I climbed those, almost on my hands and knees as the pure white sunlight broke into my eyes, disorienting me. When I reached the top, I stood

up, wavering before steadying myself on a nearby stone wall. I was in a large wooden lean-to, against a substantial stone building. I had come out of what looked like a great angled metal grate, into the protection of the lean-to. Sunlight flooded in from an open threshold, where it fell upon flocks and flocks of pigeons and doves hiding inside, an amount that seemed almost comparable to the locusts that had plagued Egypt. There even appeared to be a trio of American cardinals. I had seen some in the zoo years prior. They looked to be sheltering from the Prussian batteries, which apparently had only recently ceased. Despite feeling the greatest kind of fatigue, I carefully made my way through the flocks to the doorway. In the plaza outside I was met with a company of Prussians, puzzled at my sudden and disheveled appearance.”

2nd Place: Conglomerate

“An eerie slice of a dystopian, corporate future. Great twist that really delivers on the tension building throughout.” - Taryn Kloeden, judge

Conglomerate

By Clara Bloom

“Are you disgusted by your life?”

What life? I thought to myself, bemused.

“You can become a new, better you in just ten short hours!”

I slowed my pace, adjusting the bag on my shoulder. It was nonsense, pure corporate nonsense, nothing more.

“Head over to the System Industries kiosk and fill out an application form, and you can do just what our motto says: ‘Rewrite the past, prepare the future!’!”

I glanced to the right. There was the kiosk, tucked behind the community announcement speakers. I felt myself pulled by fragile strings toward the kiosk, strings that may have broken had I simply stopped to think. It blinked to life when it sensed me standing there, chirping a happy little tune. An image of a vibrant landscape filled the small screen, with the company’s motto rolling across in graceful script.

“An interview session has been scheduled based on applicant availability,” the computer announced cheerfully. “Have a good day, Applicant.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I said back to it, well aware that it couldn’t hear me. I was dazed by my actions. I knew absolutely nothing about this company, and I had just applied for a—a what? A job? A service?

No, no, neither of those, or maybe both. I’d been presented with a nameless opportunity, a possibility, most likely a scam.

I suddenly panicked. What had I done? I’d given a computer access to my calendar. What if I got hacked? Cybersecurity had certainly improved since it was identified as a problem, but a locked door was useless if you gave the predator the key.

“Ah, you must be the newest applicant!” A little man with deep bags under his eyes had come up to me. “It’s so nice to meet you. My name is Moritz Osman, and I’m a recruiter for System Industries. Your calendar informed me that you’re free right now, so if you’d like, I could give you some information about the company?”

He was right. Any plans I might’ve had were canceled the moment I left work with my bag full of office supplies. I hadn’t had enough on my desk to warrant a sad cardboard “you’re fired” box.

“Sure” I said.

“Great!” Moritz beamed. “Can I buy you coffee?”

We chatted a bit as we walked, talking about the weather and the economy and anything but the elephant that trampled in circles around our minds: System Industries.

Once at the coffee shop, we sat at a small table near the window.

“Are you familiar with System Industries?” Moritz asked as he pulled a folder from his briefcase.

Stupid name for a company. I didn’t say that. I just said that I was not familiar.

“Well, I’ll give you a quick rundown, then!” For the first time, I realized that his voice was the one from the announcement. It was a pleasant one, if not a bit strained, like he was on the verge of breakdown. You could hear the smile in his tone, though. Not happiness, not joy, not contentment with his overworked state, but a smile.

“For years, humanity has been surveying foreign worlds, trying to determine which are habitable in hopes that one day, a non-Earth colony will be founded. Well, System Industries has found the perfect world, and all we need now are people to settle it. That’s where you come in!”

“I’d assume you’d have millions of applications,” I said.

Moritz winced. “Oh, we do. I have a whole office just bursting with letters and resumes. And you should see my inbox!” He grimaced at the table, trying and failing to keep his expression from turning to one of despair. “A-Anyway, right now we’re looking for people to join our team. The majority of people are only interested in colonizing the planet, maybe starting a family, or a business, but not working for us. But System Industries is a wonderful place to work! It’s a great environment, and you’ll know you’re helping humanity. It’s just like our motto says: ‘Rewriting the present, preparing the future!’”

“What exactly would I be doing?” I asked him.

He drummed his fingertips on the table, and I noticed that the skin around his nails was frayed from constant anxious picking. “Well, that’s... heh. Before you leave for the planet, you’ll be given a

series of tests to determine where you would fit best. From there, you'll be given an assignment."

Moritz paused, tilting his head slightly to the side in consideration. "Do you have any higher education or unique job experience?"

I wasn't about to tell him I'd just been laid off, not when he was offering me such an opportunity. "I went into the military straight out of high school," I said slowly.

He smiled reassuringly. "Wonderful! Thank you for your service." He looked like he wanted to say more, but a quick glance at his watch cut him off. "Oh, out of curiosity, do you have any experience in an administrative position?"

"I'm—I *was* an executive assistant at CenTek."

"Excellent, excellent!" He scribbled a note on a Post-It. "Now, I understand that you'll need some time to think it over, but please reach out when you make a decision. Here's my card."

I read it. *Moritz Osman, Chief Recruiter, Human Resources, System Industries.*

"Okay," I said. Moritz looked up. "I'll take the job."

"Wow!" he exclaimed, surprised. "Alright! Now, it won't be official until you sign the paperwork, which is a bit extensive. You can understand why, I bet. I have everything right here." He pushed the folder toward me. "Take your time."

Paperwork. It was strange: most things these days were computer-based. It was 2124, after all. Moritz was more traditional, then.

I opened it and flipped through, seeing that much was written in typical office jargon. I noticed that the paper looked a bit dirty, like tiny grains of black sand had been embedded in it, but the contract itself was agreeable. It was probably recycled to justify Moritz's use of paper in the first place.

I finished reading and looked up at Moritz. "What now?"

He handed me a pen and leaned over the table, searching the papers. "Sign here... and here... initials here... one last signature right—oh, no, sorry, not there, over *there*... beautiful! Thank you so much, and welcome to the company." He stuffed the folder back in his briefcase. "The next ship leaves in two months, and unfortunately, we can't get you on payroll until you start working."

"Oh, that makes sense," I replied, but I was disappointed. That would mean I'd have to find another job in the meantime, which was... not ideal.

Moritz bit his lip, noticing my change in mood. "I'm really sorry," he apologized sincerely, then his eyes brightened. "*Or* you could hop on tonight's ship. I have to go back to the colony; you could come with me!"

I felt a spark of hope. "Really? I mean, thank you."

"Sure, sure! Just... pack light, okay? I'm friends with the pilot, but we can't fly if there's too much weight."

"Don't worry," I responded, looking at my backpack. "I'll manage."

I rolled my bag up to the relatively small ship that sat in port. Moritz was already there waving me over.

“I’m so glad this is working out!” he exclaimed happily. “Here, I’ll bring your bag to the cargo bay. You go right on inside.”

I climbed the stairs up to the entrance to the blocky plane. There were a few other new employees, but it was mostly seasoned staff. They were all eerily silent, staring at the seat in front of them, enraptured.

I looked around for an empty seat, then heard Moritz call my name. “Here, you can sit with me,” he invited.

I dropped down beside him, stretching out a bit.

“You alright with aisle seat?” he asked.

I buckled my seat. “Yeah, thanks.”

He grinned cheerfully and gave a thumbs up. I chuckled to myself. What a silly little man.

“I know I said you wouldn’t get your assignment until we arrived, but I’ve been brainstorming a bit, and...” He seemed to barely be able to contain his excitement. “...I’d like you to be my assistant.”

He paused for reaction. “Sounds fun,” I replied, giving him a little smile. “Thank you, Mr. Osman.”

“Call me Moritz,” he said, beaming.

The ship took off and flew us deep into space. I inconspicuously looked over Moritz out the window, but all I could see was darkness and stars.

We cruised for awhile, then the pilot gave an announcement that we would be entering a state of extreme speed to send us to the other planet. It would take about nine hours, and we were told to get comfortable. I rested my head back and let my mind wander, dreaming of colorful planets where breathing was easy and gravity's grip was loose.

After a few hours, the speakers clicked, pulling me from my uneasy sleep. "We've arrived at our destination, folks. Now, be aware that this planet has higher gravity than Earth does. Be careful when going down the stairs." The pilot sounded amused. "I hope you all enjoy your work with System Industries."

We disembarked, and Moritz put his hands on his hips, looking triumphant. "Well, here we are! What do you think?"

I looked around. The landscape was dusty and dull, the sky hazier than Earth's. "It's... huh. It's not what I imagined."

An executive who was walking past barked a laugh. "Did you think it was supposed to look like the ad?" She shook her head and stomped away, her steps heavier than they should've been.

"Just wait till you meet your coworkers," Moritz gushed, then followed my gaze to the executive. "Your *other* coworkers, I mean."

I grabbed my bag and dragged it along through the soft sand, following my new boss into the colony. Everyone inside was working, sweating, slaving away at their task. The majority were gasping for breath, their lungs—like mine—searching for oxygen that wasn't there. A few had fainted. A medic rushed from one exhausted worker to another, a desperate, hopeless expression on her face.

I was shocked. This couldn't be right; this wasn't at all what Moritz had promised.

"Your quarters are that way," he said anxiously, pointing left. "You'll be working ten hours each day, but you only get eight hours on Sunday. You'll be billed for food and—"

"You lied to me!"

He flinched.

A foreman gave me an unimpressed look. "Oh, honestly, did you not read the fine print? This was all disclosed in the paperwork."

"What fine print?" My heart dropped so far it might've been six feet underground.

Moritz handed me my folder, along with a magnifying glass. I held the two together, and suddenly those little black spots were words and I was a fool.

"I quit!" I yelled, having a hard time distinguishing my anger from my terror from my embarrassment at being tricked so easily.

"You can't quit," the foreman said. "You signed the contract. You're company property until you die."

I turned my panicked gaze to Moritz.

He gave me that wavering smile. "It's not that bad. You won't be working out here; you'll be working *inside*, with me! We're office buddies!"

"I am not your office buddy," I hissed spitefully.

Nonetheless, I was led to my quarters by a coworker. Across the back wall, behind rows and rows of bunks, was the title “System Industries” with their motto in quotes underneath. The saying had been crossed out, and someone had written “We put the ‘con’ in ‘conglomerate!’” in its place.

I found an empty bunk and put my bag under it, unpacking my few things. Then, I went outside and got directions to Moritz’s office. I took the elevator up and knocked on his door, but there was no answer. I opened it and found no sign of my office buddy.

There were documents littering the floors, some pinned to the walls, annotated with highlighters galore. A little potted plant was sitting in the center of the desk with a yellow Post-It stuck to the side.

sorry to leave you like this. Ive been here for twentythree years and I cant take it anymore. hope the plant makes you feel a bit better. Im sorry. -Moritz

Too overwhelmed to be shocked, I tossed the note in the recycling bin, then sat in Moritz’s chair and began to go through applications. I had been right: there were hundreds of millions of them. I was painfully jealous of Moritz, wherever he was, probably being hunted down by the conglomerate—anywhere but here.

I grabbed the first application and went to work.

Two months later, I was back on Earth, preparing to recruit more hapless victims. I had gone through lots of applications, but none of them had been for jobs. I now had to fill Moritz’s shoes.

The grief had come, as well as the fury. But what was I to do? Moritz had run, and he'd either starved or been murdered. Either way, I couldn't risk it, not yet. Maybe in twenty-three years.

I spotted a young woman sitting in the same place I'd sat just two months ago. She was in tears, looking at her sad cardboard "you're fired" box. She was just the one Moritz would've chosen.

"Hello," I said with a smile. "My name is Moritz Osman, and I'm the chief recruiter at System Industries. Would you like to rewrite your future?"

She trained a gaze of such hope upon me, and I was overjoyed. This was how Moritz had felt. He'd just wanted to help people.

"Do you want coffee? I'm buying," I added.

She nodded, sniffing, mumbling an apology. I took her box and we walked to the coffee shop.

And, well, you know how this story goes.

3rd Place: Human/Nature

“Heartwarming, magical and beautifully written modern fairytale.” - Taryn Kloeden, judge

Human/Nature

By Katie Varachi

Sofia had no one in the whole world.

Well.

Almost.

She had her grove of oak trees, and that was plenty for her. Many a townspeople had claimed that the grove was a haven for witches, or evil spirits, or demons. They were wary of the grove, and there had been many a petition to get rid of it, but they all seemed to fall through. Dark magic, people guessed.

Sofia knew better.

A bright girl of ten, and orphaned at a young age, Sofia didn't think that the grove held evil spirits, or witches, or portals. She only knew it as a place to hide away when things got hard. The world is a cold place for children touched by tragedy, and Sofia was well aware of this fact. As the girl from the group home, other children from school immediately marked her as the target. They would chase her down after school calling her cruel names, or throwing things. In truth, their reasoning for targeting Sofia was not her parentless state, rather the fact that she was skinny and shy and seen as weak. Whenever the bullies started running after her, she would run straight for the forest. There was a perfectly Sofia-sized hollow under the biggest oak tree that she would curl up inside of. Somehow, despite the fact that the hollow had just the right size when she had found it at seven, it had never seemed to get too small for her to hide

in. The hollow was cool and dark and quiet, and specks of sunlight dappled on the walls. Sometimes, when Sofia was certain that she was alone, she would talk to the tree, whispering her secrets to the only thing in her world that listened to her, knowing her heart would be safe in its branches.

Every afternoon, as Sofia clambered out of her little hollow, peeking out of the forest, making sure the boys were gone before heading back to the group home, the old oak watched her go. It knew it could only protect her so much, and it felt a stab of pain at the fact that it could not guard her from the world. It could only listen.

“Students, I’d like to introduce you to Waylen Alvarez. He just moved here from Vermont, and I’d like you to all make him feel very welcome.” Sofia’s teacher said, putting her hand on the new boy’s shoulder. Sofia took in Waylen. He had long fingers and large, dark green eyes. He was clutching a tattered paperback in one hand, and a guitar pick in the other. He looked quiet and nervous, and that made Sofia want to like him. Time would tell her if this new boy would join the entourage that chased her every day. To her surprise, Waylen walked to the free seat next to Sofia, sat down, and gave her a shy smile. Despite her shock, Sofia looked at Waylen and smiled.

“Hi.” Waylen said shyly.

“Hello.” Sofia replied.

“I’m Waylen,” he said, extending his hand.

“Sofia,” she said, shaking it.

“Nice to meet you,” Waylen said, releasing her hand and smiling again.

“What are you reading?” Sofia asked bravely, gazing down at the spine of Waylen’s worn paperback. Waylen grinned.

“Wait until I tell you about it.”

Over the next few weeks, Sofia and Waylen became inseparable. Sofia trusted Waylen more than anyone else in her life. He understood her. He didn't have parents either, they had left a few years ago. He lived with his grandparents now, and they had just moved here to get out of the city.

"Too many reminders." Waylen had said, and Sofia had seen how much he was still hurting. He played the guitar like a master and was an avid reader, consuming as many books as he could, just like Sofia, though they liked different genres. Waylen was more interested in mysteries and science fiction, than the fantasy and fairytale retellings that Sofia still loved. She liked stories where the villains didn't get away with it, stories where the heroes won. Waylen listened to her when she talked about how hard it was to be the youngest kid in the group home, and how the others, both at school and "home" bullied her. He let her come home with him, a different route than her usual, and wait until the bullies had given up and gone home. After a few weeks, Sofia decided to take him into her wood. Unlike the other townspeople, Waylen wasn't afraid of the wood. He trusted Sofia. They had run through the light-dappled trees together, Sofia showing Waylen her favorite bits of the forest, and finally, the old oak. Sofia laid a hand on the wizened trunk of the tree, praying silently that Waylen wouldn't laugh at her.

"I've hid in here for years, when the boys would chase me." She said softly, showing Waylen the little hollow. The two of them climbed in, sitting side by side, shoulder pressed together, but not uncomfortably. The thought that the hollow had only fit her yesterday never crossed Sofia's mind. The two children sat in the hollow for a long time, enjoying the comfortable silence and safety of togetherness.

"Sofia?" Mrs. Rosa, one of the nicer women who worked at the group home, said as she peeked into the girls room. Sofia looked up from the novel she'd been reading.

"Yes?"

Mrs. Rosa smiled.

“We have some prospective parents visiting. They’re looking for a girl about your age. Would you like to come meet them?” Sofia kept her excitement tamped down. She didn’t want to get excited, only to be disappointed. She agreed to come meet the parents, and followed Mrs. Rosa downstairs.

Leo and Elizabeth were both in their mid thirties. They had recently found out that they would not be able to have children, their lifelong dream. They had decided to foster, then think about adopting, and were looking for a child of about ten. They had talked to all of the children in the group home. Now, they wanted to talk to Sofia. Leo, it turned out, was a high school English teacher. Elizabeth was the chef of the town’s local diner. They both loved books and art and each other. Sofia could barely breathe for how much she wanted them to like her.

And by some miracle, (at least in Sofia’s mind), they did.

They filled out the papers to foster Sofia only a week after they’d met her, and before she knew it, Sofia was sitting in the back seat of Leo and Elizabeth’s beat up Subaru. They had a room set up for her in the attic. A whole room. Just for her, with yellow walls and gauzy white curtains.

The best part though, was the view.

Sofia could clearly see into her forest, including her old oak tree. Its branches waved in the soft breeze, as if it was saying hello. Sofia waved back. She knew it would be awkward adjusting to life with Leo and Elizabeth, but that was ok. It was worth it for the chance at a real family.

“Do you think they want to adopt you?” Waylen asked, as Sofia told him about Leo and Elizabeth, the two of them nestled in the hollow of the old oak. Unbeknownst to the two of them, the old oak listened too, silent and alert.

“I don’t know.” Sofia said with a sigh. “It’s all happening so quickly. And they’re good to me, they’re wonderful, but it still feels a bit odd. It’s all right though. Better than the group home.” Waylen nodded in agreement, and laid his head on Sofia’s shoulder.

“They’re idiots if they don’t love you.” He said softly. Sofia smiled a little, and the two of them sat like that for a long time, pressed into each other, with the old oak standing guard, doing the little it could to protect the two of them from the world around them.

“She’s so weird, man. Why do you hang out with her?” Sofia heard as she walked into her classroom a few weeks later. She recognized the voice as Liam, one of her most frequent tormentors.

“Yeah man, I think she’s like crazy or something. I swear I’ve seen her talking to trees.” That was Aiden, another tormentor. Sofia felt a hole open in her heart as she realized who they were talking about.

“Yeah, I’ve seen her do it. She has this super old tree that she tells everything to. It’s so weird, dude. I sat down next to her for one day and now she thinks we’re best friends. She’s such a weirdo.” The hole in Sofia’s stomach grew bigger as she realized who the third voice was. She turned and ran as fast as she could out of the school, Liam and Aiden’s cackles mixing with Waylen’s as she sprinted out the door.

“Sofia! What are you doing home?” Elizabeth asked, looking guiltily up from a pile of papers on the kitchen counter as Sofia burst in. “Oh honey, what happened?” Sofia was about to spill out everything when she saw the name of the group home emblazoned on the stationary.

“You’re sending me away?” Sofia whispered. “It hasn’t even been a month.” Elizabeth shook her head hard.

“No, no honey, wait!” But Sofia was already running again, running towards the old forest as fast as she could.

The little hollow was ready and waiting for her, but Sofia went straight for the trunk of the old oak, flinging her arms around the sturdy wood.

“They all hate me.” She sobbed into the trunk. “Waylen made fun of me and told the boys my secrets and Leo and Elizabeth are sending me away.” Sofia felt something on her arms, and looked up to see that two of the oak’s lower branches had wrapped around her in something like a hug. Sofia was fully aware that this was not, in fact, normal tree behavior. However, she knew this oak, loved it. She knew it would protect her.

“Do not weep little one.” A soft, low voice said gently. Sofia didn’t exactly hear the voice, at least not with her ears. It was more in her mind. She knew, somehow, in her heart, that it was the old oak’s spirit.

“What do I do?” She asked, stepping back and staring into the oak’s branches.

“You may join our forest. The Forest of Lost Souls. This forest is filled with those who wished to leave human life for something else.” Sofia wiped her eyes.

“You’re not bad, are you? You won’t force me? The stories aren’t true?” The tree shook its branches in a way that Sofia clearly interpreted as a shake of the head.

“This is your choice, little one. You are the only one who can make it.” Sofia thought for a moment, then looked up at the old oak.

“Does it hurt?” Again, the tree seemed to shake its head.

“You simply must climb into your little hollow, and you will fall asleep. When you awaken, you will be one of us. However, I must warn you. The transformation is permanent. You will need to be

completely certain of your decision.” Sofia looked down at the ground, thinking of all the things that had hurt her in her life. It was all too much. She nodded.

“I’m sure.” The oak seemed to nod. Sofia climbed into the little hollow in the oak’s roots and closed her eyes. She felt magic moving over her skin, lulling her into sleep when....

“SOFIA!” She jolted up, the magic shaken away. Waylen was sprinting through the forest towards her, Leo and Elizabeth close behind. Sofia curled into her oak’s hollow.

“I think that there are some people you should talk to, little one,” the tree said softly in her mind. Sofia shook her head. “Suffering is part of life,” the tree said gently. “It is human nature to suffer. But it is also human nature to be kind and loving and good. If you give your family another chance, I think you’ll find kindness in their natures too.” Slowly, Sofia uncurled and walked to Waylen, Leo, and Elizabeth.

“Oh honey, I’m so sorry.” Elizabeth said. “Those papers weren’t to send you back. They were to extend how long we want to foster you for. Originally we were only going to foster you for six months, but we wanted to extend it because we’ve loved our time with you, and we’d like to see what happens over this next year.” Sofia teared up again.

“Thank you.” She whispered through her tears.

“Waylen came to get us, and said that something had happened and that this was where you’d go.” Leo said, kneeling and hugging Sofia. “I think he’s got something he’d like to say to you.” Sofia turned to Waylen.

“Sofia, I’m so sorry.” He said tearfully. “I just wanted them to like me. They were talking about comics, and I went to join the conversation. They started talking about you, because they knew I’m friends with you, and I just started talking. I barely even knew what I was saying. I was weak, Sofia. I’m sorry. I hope you can forgive me. I just...I don’t want to lose my best friend.” Sofia looked into his eyes, the eyes of her first and only friend. The old oak’s words echoed in her head.

It is in human nature to suffer. But it is also human nature to be kind.

She looked back at her oak, saw it give its little nod, then turned back to Waylen.

“I forgive you.”

There were a lot of hugs given that afternoon, and Sofia didn’t have time to talk to the old oak before Leo and Elizabeth walked her home. However, that night, she slipped out of the house, padding down the path into the forest, the stars twinkling above.

“I’m proud of you, little one.” The tree said in her mind, as she rested her forehead against the rough bark.

“Thank you.” She thought back.

“You must know, little one, that I will not be able to communicate with you after tonight. I can only speak to those who need it more than anything” Sofia nodded.

“I thought so.” The tree wrapped its branches around her.

“I’ll still be here. Your little hollow will always be there if you need a place to get away. And whenever you feel lost, I’ll be with you. In your mind, and in your heart. I promise.” The tree thought to her. Sofia pressed her palms into the bark.

“Thank you.” She thought again, one tear slipping down her cheek. “For everything. I’ll never forget what you said. I promise” She felt the magic fade out of the old tree, as she cried, but she swore to herself, she would never forget her vow.

And even after all these years, I never did.

First Runner Up: The Woebegone Woman

“Sweet, beautiful story of friendship between two lost souls and how small acts of kindness can change the course of life.” - Taryn Kloeden, judge

The Woebegone Woman

By Sophia Campbell

The children called her the Witch of Westover Park, and few dared to argue with their resolution. After all, it didn't seem far from the truth. They traded stories in hushed, juvenile tones as they traversed the playground's vibrantly painted plastic tunnels and rusted swing sets. *If you look her in the eyes, she will cast a spell on you. If you ever speak to her, she will curse your home.*

Admittedly, she was no witch at all, but rather a woebegone woman of forty or fifty years, though her outward appearance would suggest several decades older. For longer than the children had been alive, the woebegone woman had sat on the old playground bench from sunrise to sunset, watching the children frolic and play on the equipment. She rarely moved except to slump further into the rotting wooden planks. Nobody knew how she got there, and nobody dared to ask.

Her appearance through the years remained more or less the same. Her eyes were rather disconcerting, halos of jarring electric blue sunken deep into their tired sockets, the surrounding skin ringed with sleep circles—twin perpetual swaths of purple, black, and green, as if she had been punched. And perhaps clothing was too dignified a title for the melancholy palette of black wrinkled fabric that enshrouded her slouching form. Within the rigid clench of her fingers she always held a bunch of lilies, sometimes the same bunch for weeks at a time to the point where the flowers were unrecognizable—brown crumbling reeds whose white petals had long since found their final resting place beneath the moldy planks of the bench.

Vigilant parents hovered awkwardly around the perimeter of the playground, their eyes darting nervously back and forth between their beloved children and the weebegone woman. Though they had long outgrown the childish fables of magic and 2 sorcery, they remained too afraid to sit down at the bench with the weebegone woman. It was something about her that deterred them, her ceaseless presence, her watchful eyes. For what could possibly make a person so haggard, so silent, so miserable?

One day a new child came along to the park, a redheaded little girl of about eight years old. She was unaware of the fables and legends surrounding the weebegone woman. As she eyed the woman on the bench curiously, the other children warned her, "She's a witch! Don't go near her!" But the little girl was intrigued by the woman's mournful solitude. The other children screamed and scattered across the playground like frightened mice as the little girl clambered onto the bench next to the weebegone woman.

"Hello," the little girl said.

"Hello," the weebegone woman replied.

"What are you making?"

The woman looked down at the withering lilies that were interlaced between her fingers. She thought for a moment, but couldn't come up with an explanation. "I can't remember."

The little girl looked at the crumbling brownish flowers in the woman's hands, and impulsively reached behind the bench where she plucked a fresh white lily from the earth. She handed it to the weebegone woman without a word, and the woman accepted it, seemingly astonished at the tiny act of charity.

"Aren't you afraid of me?" the woman asked. "All the others are."

"I'm not." The girl gazed out at the playground, listening to the other children shriek and holler. The sun was just beginning to set, drenching the scene in shades of amber and gold. "Which one is yours?"

The woebegone woman gazed out at the playground full of children. “None of them are.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I had a child once, but she passed away long ago.”

“What was her name?”

The woman seemed to struggle to remember it. Or perhaps it was simply too difficult for her to unearth the word from her heart and speak it aloud, a name she had not uttered in a very, very long time. “Her name was Lily.”

“Why did she die?”

The woman’s eyes were fixed on the children scampering across the playground, refusing to blink as if self-denial would curb any flickers of emotion. “She got sick. I knew that it would happen eventually. Her immune system was too weak. Even the slightest stomach bug could have killed her.”

“Couldn’t you have given her medicine?” the little girl prompted. “My mommy takes medicine often. It makes her very tired, and sometimes she sleeps all day long.”

The woebegone woman shook her head. “I tried to protect her. That was all I ever wanted. I kept her inside, never allowed her to leave the house. You see, there are so many germs and bacteria everywhere in public. I was terrified that if she ever stepped off our front porch, she would get sick, and that was simply a risk we could not afford to take.” The woman pointed to a brownstone across the street. “I live there. Up 4 there, in that window—that was her bedroom. She had toys, lots of them. But she didn’t play with them often. All day long, she would gaze out of her bedroom window to the playground across the street. She begged me to take her there every single day. But I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. All I saw when I looked at that shiny plastic jungle gym and the dozens of children that delighted in it was bacteria and illness and disaster. But Lily saw happiness. Joy. All she ever wanted was to play there, to have a friend. And I denied her that. It is my biggest regret.

“And the worst part of it was that despite all the measures I took to protect her, I failed. One day, a plumber came to our house to fix a burst pipe. He never told us, but he had a virus. And later that week, Lily developed symptoms. It only took a few days and she was gone. Just like that. Now I know that to lose Lily was inevitable; she was simply too fragile, too delicate, too weak. I should’ve let her experience joy and companionship and childhood while she still had time.”

The little girl remained solemn and silent for a long while, letting the weight of the story sink in. The two of them sat on the bench in silence for a long time as the last fragments of daylight pierced the sunset sky. Parents ferried in and collected their children. The sun slipped beneath the horizon, the playground grew empty, and soon all was quiet except for the chirp of the grassland crickets.

The woman turned to the girl, her face a mixture of surprise and confusion. “Where are your parents? Shouldn’t they have come and collected you by now?”

The girl shrugged. “When my mommy dropped me off, she said she would be back in twenty minutes. But I think she forgot.”

“And your father?”

“Well, he isn’t my father, but Aaron was at home sleeping all day. He’s my mommy’s boyfriend. I don’t like him very much.”

An ominous thought wandered into the woman’s mind. “What did you say earlier, about the medicine? You said your mommy takes medicine.”

The girl nodded. “She and Aaron both do. They say it’s because of the pain.”

“And what kind of medicine is it? Does it come in a bottle?”

“Well, sometimes it’s pills in a bottle, and sometimes it’s like the shots that you get at the doctor to stop you from getting sick. It takes the pain away and makes them go to sleep.”

The woman suddenly felt a stab of anguish and a piercing urge to hug the girl. “Do you want me to walk you home? It’s quite dark out.”

The little girl shook her head violently. “No, no. Because earlier today I accidentally broke one of Aaron’s CDs, and he got mad at me. And when Aaron gets mad, he screams a lot and throws things and it takes him hours to calm down again. Besides, my house is too far away and I’m hungry.”

“Haven’t you had any dinner?”

The girl shook her head.

The woman thought very hard about what to do. “Well,” she said slowly, “I can take you back to my house and make you a sandwich, if you like. But if your mother does not come to pick you up by then, I’ll have to call 911.”

The girl was quite perturbed at the suggestion of the woman calling the police, and some faint warning echoed in the back of her mind about talking to strangers. But the piercing hunger in her gut outweighed it all, and she nodded enthusiastically.

The woman guided her out of the playground and across the street to the brownstone. When the girl stepped inside, her jaw fell open, taken aback by what she saw: spotless white marble floors, untouched by the muddy footprints and strewn clothing that were commonplace in her home; picture frames on the walls instead of fist-sized dents and gashes; tables that weren’t covered in old bottles and used cigarettes. But most disconcerting of all for the little girl was the absence of sound. There was no noise of yelling, or of shattering dishes, or of loud metal music. The house was completely silent. The girl hardly dared to breathe.

In the kitchen, the woebegone woman placidly began to slice bread and cheese while the little girl sat patiently on the counter, her legs swinging freely in the air.

“Do you have a husband?” the little girl blurted out, anxious to break the unfamiliar quietude.

“My husband died a few weeks before Lily was born,” the woman explained as she buttered the bread. “It was just Lily and me for seven years.”

“Did you make Lily sandwiches too?”

A small smile crossed the woman's lips. She remembered how Lily had so enjoyed ham-and-cheese sandwiches, and how she would make her one almost every day for her lunch.

"My mommy doesn't have time to make me sandwiches, or cook at all, really. I tried to make myself toast once, but I didn't hear the beeper go off because there was too much noise."

"Is your household very loud?" The woebegone woman plated the sandwich and set it before the girl. She had grown so used to the perpetual silence of her brownstone that she could not imagine anything else.

"Yes," the girl said while taking a bite. "Especially when mommy and Aaron fight. There's loud music on a lot, too." She paused for a moment to swallow. "And the man who owns the apartment is always banging on the door and asking for money. Whenever he does that, Aaron just turns the music up louder."

The woman felt her heart swell with sadness and sympathy for the little girl. She had spent so many years ensuring that the brownstone was a perfect, safe, and healthy haven for Lily; anything else was unthinkable.

When the little girl had finished her sandwich, she was overcome with a sense of panic, as she knew what was coming next. Desperate to bide for a few extra minutes, she asked, "Can you show me Lily's bedroom?"

The woman hesitated. She had not stepped foot into Lily's room since the day she died. But something within her could not bear to deny the little girl's request, and reluctantly she led her upstairs to the bedroom.

The door was closed. With trembling fingers, the woman reached out and twisted the handle sharply to the left. The door squeaked as it opened.

The girl wandered inside, and instantly felt as if she had stepped into a frozen pocket of time. The air was still. It was the most amazing thing she had ever seen—boxes of beautiful dolls, hand-

painted toy cars, a jar of shiny translucent marbles, a shelf of colorful hardback books—for the little girl did not have any toys of her own.

All the while, the woebegone woman hovered in the doorway. She couldn't bear to step forth onto the plush pink carpet, but she watched the little girl explore the room. A moment came when the girl stood at the window and looked solemnly through the glass, and the woman's knees nearly buckled, because it reminded her of the sight of her daughter.

The little girl glanced back at the woman. "Which one was her favorite toy?"

The woman squeezed her eyes shut and remembered. She had to force the words out. "The doll with the red hair."

"Can you show me it?"

The woman faltered before taking a trembling step into the room. The first few footsteps felt painful, but they progressively became easier, and she was able to cross the room to the box of dolls under the bed. The most frequented one lay atop all the others, as if it had only just been played with not long ago. The woman picked it up with quivering fingers and handed it to the girl.

The girl twirled the doll's ginger tresses around her index finger and smiled in delight. "She looks like me!"

"You can have it," the woman burst out suddenly before she had a chance to hesitate. Something had stirred within her to see another little girl play with the toys that had once been Lily's. "You can take the doll home. Actually, you are welcome to come over to play whenever you like."

The delight in the little girl's face ever-so-slightly alleviated the years of pressure built up in the woman's chest. She imagined her daughter and the redheaded girl sitting on the pink carpet, giggling and playing together, and her heart ached. But it had been 9 almost an hour since the little girl had entered her home, and the woman knew that enough time had passed. "I'm sorry. It hurts me to have to do this, but I must."

The police arrived swiftly after the call was made and took the little girl. After evaluating her living situation, they placed her with a foster family a few blocks away from the woebegone woman. But the little girl was allowed to visit her often, and she did so frequently over the years.

The woman still went to the park every once in a while, but she was very different to the person she had been before. On the same bench once occupied by her old self was a rosy-cheeked woman in bright colors, the faintest traces of a smile crinkling the corners of her eyes.

As the girl grew up, the woman's brownstone became a haven of trust and companionship. In sixth grade, she visited the woman after school and sought advice for her friendship troubles. During her high school years, she often brought her homework over to the woman's house to complete in comfortable silence. Soon the little redheaded girl became a beautiful auburn-haired woman, but she still visited the brownstone every Sunday for many, many decades thereafter.

And eventually, when the woman died, she brought lilies to her grave.

Second Runner Up: Cake from the Bakery on 7th

“Haunting and evocative prose! I was drawn in by the mystery from the first few lines.”

- Taryn Kloeden, judge

Cake from the Bakery on 7th

By Sanica Rao

David Whitlock walks into the church with hands in the pockets of his dark overcoat, puffing out smoke around the cigarette pressed between his lips. The overcoat, the faded jeans and old boots he’s wearing are lightly patterned with raindrops, but his pale hair is mostly dry. He carries a small coquettish bag around the wrist of his left hand. The church he enters is catholic, wide-ceilinged, grand, and empty.

Not entirely empty, he realizes. After putting his glasses back on and letting the world come back into focus he sees a man tending to the rows of lit candles on the front altar. He is a tall, gangly man no older than twenty-five, with dark hair and a rather square-looking face, softened by deep-set eyes and a curved nose. He’s dressed in black vestments that hang loose over his thin frame. The hot wax from the candle he’s holding is dripping onto the shining wooden floors. He doesn’t seem to notice.

The man doesn’t react to David’s intruding presence at first, but once his footsteps grow closer, he straightens and turns. He looks surprised.

“David,” he says, in a voice hoarse. David doesn’t respond. He takes a seat on one of the front pews, setting the delicate bag to his right and folding his hands in his lap. He sits stiffly, his shoulders tense. He takes the spent cigarette out of his mouth and crushes it under the heel of his boot.

He stares silently at the long wooden cross mounted on the back wall of the church before fishing in the inside pocket of his overcoat for a half-empty pack of cigarettes. He places one in his mouth. The man dressed in vestments is still staring at him, holding the dripping candle, unmoving.

David takes a chance. “You think you can light this for me?”

The man looks down at the candle as if he hadn’t realized he was holding it, and then glances back up at him. “David, what are you doing here?”

“I’ll take that as a no.” David fishes in the pockets of his overcoat, and then raises his hips slightly to check in his jeans. He finally finds the lighter in his left back pocket. The taste of the cigarette is horrible, but the smoke soothes his lungs on the way out. The man in dark vestments looks at him unreadably.

David is looking around at the grand architecture of the church. He’s surprised he would find it this empty, but it’s almost midnight on a seemingly random Tuesday in April. Congregation has come and gone, and soon the next morning families will pile into the pews, settle down for sermon, sing along with the choir, clasp their hands together and pray, eyes closed, muttering under their breaths. He finds it pathetic, the way people fighting tooth and nail in a nasty, disgusting world would get on their knees and lick the boots of their everloving Creator, thank him for their own successes, pray for what they could never have, fear his anger over their sins.

He himself had been raised mildly Christian. His father wasn’t a devout man by any means— he drank, smoked, and gambled like anything— but they went to church every Sunday and said a prayer before every meal. They lived in a small, quiet town in the country. It’d been years since he’d even thought of that town— filled with men and women with egos too large for their empty pockets.

As a child, he’d never liked church— but then it was because he didn’t like getting up early, or the stiff shirts his mother made him wear, or sitting still on the pews. He- a reckless kid with perpetually skinned knees- cared nothing for God nor his overstuffed book. He did, however, fear the wrath of his father, who’d beat him for sneaking out of the church at sermon or opening his eyes during prayer over dinner.

His first exposure to real religion was through his father, interestingly enough. There was a year when he was around ten when money was tight. He had woken up from a dream and had stumbled into

the kitchen for a glass of water to see his father sitting at the kitchen island, hunched over. His hands were clenched in fists and he was pressing his temple to his knuckles. When David had looked closer, he had seen his father's mouth moving; he was muttering the Lord's prayer. Then his father had looked up at David and fear had swelled inside him, more sharp and terrifying than anything he had known. His father's eyes were red-rimmed with tears. This man who stood eight feet tall and could move mountains with a touch of his hands, hunched over the kitchen island, crying, praying.

The Lord's prayer. He was taught it by his mother when he was— he'd have been seven, maybe six? Memories so old they felt like dreams. A town which felt like one from a story, his parents now twenty years dead, characters in a play, one whose curtains had fallen, theater long abandoned.

He was taught the Lord's prayer by his mother when he was young, after a spell of terrible nightmares that left him screaming, sobbing. His mother would find her way into his room every night, but nothing she did seemed to work.

After a week of terror, his mother taught him the Lord's prayer. They said it over and over until he fell asleep. Somehow, it worked: he didn't have another nightmare that night, and he wouldn't have many again until his mother's death six years later.

As he grew older, the night terrors came back with a vengeance. It was that same prayer he muttered to himself even as a teenager every time he woke up in the middle of the night, hands clasped together white-knuckled, head bent. As he grew older, he grew more cynical, more despondent, but in the dark of night, when night terrors shook him out of sleep...

Well, he thinks to himself. Look where he was now. The man in the dark vestments is still standing. Several minutes have passed in complete silence. David pats the seat on the pew next to him. The man doesn't move.

"Julian, sit down."

Julian obeys, if not reluctantly. David hands him the pack of cigarettes.

Julian hesitates before reaching for one. David hands him the lighter wordlessly and looks at him for a moment. It had been several months since he'd seen the man last. There are faint lines under his eyes and above his brow he hadn't remembered. The sharpness of his features are heightened- it could be the candle-light, but the boy looks like he's lost weight. And there is that specific quality of those blue eyes, that hair, the crook of that nose; so terribly, hauntingly familiar. So alike; him and Maria.

Words rise to the back of his throat but he fights them down. This strange stasis they're in, with the rain pounding down around them and the cross above illuminated by the flicker of flame- is too fragile, and if he lets the clawed words spill out of him he knows it will shatter.

He wants to take another cigarette but instead reaches over to that coquettish bag he's been carrying around. It's from a specific bakery over on seventh, an old mom and pop thing, not one of those new chains. A quiet place, one he used to visit almost every day, but now he only visits once a year. From the bag he takes out two slices of rich chocolate cake. He can smell it through the plastic container and it's equal parts nauseous and salivating. He places one container on his lap and hands the other to his quiet companion. This is all he can do.

Julian is staring at the slice as if it had transformed into some Lovecraftian creature, holding his cigarette motionlessly. David chuckles.

"Come on, Jules."

Julian takes the slice and the fork David hands him. David watches him crunch his cigarette under his shoe, taking the first bite. David follows.

The first taste is so painful he has to press his eyes closed and fight the thrashing creature inside his chest. The knife-like sharpness melts into heady sweetness and he swallows as if it's medicine. Julian sets his cake by his side, not even half-eaten. He looks similarly queasy.

The air around them is sedate. It feels as if Julian is waiting for him to say something but David refuses to say it. He can't.

“She’s the reason I’m here,” Jules says softly, and David’s stomach churns.

“She used to read the Bible to me when I was a kid. After Mom had died, but before you had come along- I was young, maybe eight, nine. I had trouble sleeping.” he says. “I would make her reread it to me over and over- that worn-down, bent Bible we had.” He smiles. “Even before, I knew this was where I wanted to end up. But after she died—” the words seem to choke him. He starts over. “After she died, I knew for sure.”

His own mother read the Bible to him at a similar age. There was one story that caught his interest: David and Goliath; the fact that the main character was his namesake helped. As a kid, he had fashioned himself a biblical David— defeating the Goliaths of the schoolyard, throwing a killing stone with ease.

As he grew older, the Goliaths before him became less solid and more unyielding in stature and power. Here he was now, before Goliath, except the giant no longer falls to his stones. This Goliath swings his sword and David is too weak to stop the blade before it touches his neck.

Julian’s words are making his hair stand on end. David feels Julian looking at him but keeps his eyes fixed onto the wooden cross.

There’s a beat of silence. “That’s where you met her, right?”

Julian is glancing at the name on the bag. Jules hasn’t heard the whole story, David realizes. Why is he asking? He takes a tentative glance; there’s a strange expression on Jules’s face. Is he worried about him?

“Yeah, it was.” David says sharply. Julian’s blue-eyed gaze is so familiar it twists like a hunter’s blade, slitting into his vital organs.

“Why haven’t you visited me all these months?”

David looks away from him. “I don’t know, Jules. Why haven’t you visited me?”

Julian looks down at his hands.

Jules wants him to say words; that's why he keeps asking questions. There are probably words he could say, but he has searched for weeks; he cannot find them.

Or, the truth; the words he needs are so serrated and bitter he cannot bear to speak them.

It's strange, how it feels after two years. The first year he felt as if he was being flayed open, but now? He has scooped up his clawed organs and his scarred flesh, locked them behind walls of liquor and smoking and silence. It has more or less worked, but for the past few weeks, he's found himself in a daze. Wondering idly when time would start moving again but fearing the concept of emerging out of the iron-walled box.

Goliath waits for him behind his iron-walled box. With trembling hands he grabs his pack of cigarettes and places one in his mouth. He's misplaced his lighter— there it is, behind the bag.

Julian suddenly sighs. David's hand pauses, the flame inches away from the cigarette. "Look, I'm trying."

David doesn't respond. The light flickers out. He wonders how stupid he looks, unlit cigarette in his mouth, hands shaking.

"Why did you even come here?"

"You mean, why am I visiting you?"

"No, I know the answer to that one. Why are you here? This church."

David looks around for a moment. Although the tall arches and the windows and the cathedral-like atmosphere is entirely familiar to him, the church itself is not. He's saved the address in a slip of paper ever since he got Jules's letter a couple months ago. Jules doesn't know him as religious, and he isn't, not in any real sense. Why did he come here?

"What do you mean, you know the answer to that one?"

Jules looks at him with a mixture of pity and regret. "David, it's not hard to figure out that you want to talk to me about Maria."

Finally they've landed on the point after minutes, hours, months of stalling. The weight of the words feels palpable in the air. His skin is churning with discomfort, he can taste it, bitter on his tongue. Jules was wrong; but what had he come here to do? David looks at Julian's simpering gaze and feels the mild urge to punch him in the face.

"You know I'm the only one who could understand. I know you've been avoiding me--"

"You don't understand a thing."

Jules pauses, sighs. "David, just--"

"This was a mistake," David mutters. "This whole thing." He gets up to leave, but there's a hand on his shoulder.

"David, sit down."

Bile rises at the back of his throat and so do thousands of sharp, needling words but when he whips around to look at Jules's even gaze he pauses. That blue-eyed, intensely familiar gaze. For a second he forgets who exactly he's talking to and it feels like the wind has been knocked out of him.

He can now hear and see himself from Julian's eyes. How childish he sounds, the oily tone of defensiveness behind his words. He sounds angry, bitter. Something in him had been reduced to that angry, reckless boy, bouncing his leg at the pews in a church far away from here, long ago. David sits down.

"I'm sorry," he begins, but Jules shakes his head.

They sit in companionable quiet for some time, hearing the rain patter down against the roof of the church. The lights inside only seem brighter as the night falls- he can see it through the windows, the darkening sky. He knows Julian is waiting for him.

David is wringing his sleeves. Those words are fighting their way to the back of his throat again, but he isn't pushing them down. But they don't seem to be forming correctly, appearing in jagged fragments, in flashes of memory, of touch and sound and color.

Julian saves him.

“I can’t believe you’ve never told me the whole story,” he says, gesturing to the bag, and David grabs this and suddenly the story flows like wine on his tongue, sweet and tart. The rain pounds down and the night is long ahead of them. The candlelight flickers and shadows dance on the wooden cross.

“I met her at the bakery on seventh,” he begins.