

**It's All Write!**

**2012 Short Story Contest**

Middle School

Call Me 'Om...Katie Bushman...First Place

Stupid Annabelle...Emma Gillies...Second Place

Time Before Freedom...Zoe Hana Mikuta...Third Place

Advisors and Assassins...Emily Wolfe...Honorable Mention

The Big C...Michaela Fleming...Honorable Mention

Blood and Butterfingers...Leah Steiner...Honorable Mention

Little Savior...Adithi Ramakrishnan...Honorable Mention

Seacat...Lydia Davenport Smith...Honorable Mention

Still Healing...Sian Syring...Honorable Mention

A Tale From the Deadlands...Garrison Haugen...Honorable Mention

Call Me 'Om

Katie Bushman

Grade 6

Ashburn, VA

Tom Trenton could not pronounce the letter “T”.

He didn't know why. Nobody did, to be honest. It was just a fact of life.

Reasonably, his parents regretted the name they had chosen for him. Their neighbors would occasionally hear an anguished cry of “Why? Why couldn't it have been Edwardo?” emanating from the Trenton's modest townhouse. No one was quite sure if they were lamenting the name and speech predicament of their son or watching a cheesy soap opera.

Tom wasn't looking forward to his first day of sixth grade. Honestly, who would want to be friends with someone who couldn't say their own name, flunked kindergarten due to the unfortunate fact that they couldn't see triangles or the color purple, and had an inexplicable fear of pencils?

Nobody, that's who.

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“Tom Trenton.” The teacher looked up from her attendance sheet.

“Here,” Tom said quietly. He was glad beyond words that “here” didn't have a “T” in it. It was the only word he was planning on saying all semester.

Mrs. Wellsworth continued to take roll. “Jessica Deep?”

A freckled, blond haired girl cheerfully waved her hand in the air. “That would be me.” She winked at Tom.

Tom blinked back in surprise. No one had ever smiled at him like that before. After a moment's hesitation, he smiled shyly back.

The morning went downhill from that. He got in trouble with his art teacher for spilling a bottle of purple paint that he swore he didn't see. His math teacher gave him

extra homework because he couldn't complete his triangles worksheet. By the time lunch rolled around, his head hung as low as his spirits.

He made his way to the lunch line. It moved painfully slow, and the things that the trays being carried out by chatting students were laden with didn't look particularly appetizing.

"You're welcome," the lunch lady growled beneath bristly eyebrows as she glopped a scoop of *something* onto his Styrofoam tray.

Tom eyed the food warily. It looked like it might crawl away if he didn't keep an eye on it.

He scanned the cafeteria for an empty table. No such luck. But there was one in the corner that looked reasonably empty.

Sitting down, he tried to ignore the giggles and whispers of the other kids. But some of their conversation still filtered through his mind as he halfheartedly poked at his lunch with a plastic fork.

"It's that weird kid from art. You know, the one who spilled Miss Itaria's paint. He's such a retard."

Tom was so preoccupied with trying to choke the inedible cafeteria food down past the lump in his throat that he barely noticed someone plunk their tray down next to him.

"Hi. You're Tom, right? From homeroom?"

He looked up. It was Jessica. "Yeah."

She smiled at him. "Mind if I sit with you?"

"No."

They ate (er, make that they made sure that their lunches weren't growing legs) in silence for a while. Eventually, Jessica turned to him.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

Tom shook his head.

"Why?"

"I... I's complica'ed." He mentally cursed himself. *Way to showcase your little problem*, he thought bitterly.

Jessica tilted her head, scrutinizing him. She opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a burst of noise as one of the other kids at the table spilled their milk.

Once the giggles and shrieks died down, she turned back to Tom. "What?"

Tom took a deep breath. "I can' say the le'er e."

She frowned. "E?"

"Uh... the le'er af'er 'Q, R, S.'"

"E' doesn't come after..." Realization dawned on her face. "Oh. You mean 'T'."

"Yeah." He looked at the floor.

"Cool."

Tom stared at her in shock. "Wha'?"

"It's cool. Got anything else up your sleeve?"

He blinked. "Well, I can' see the color purple. Or 'riangles."

She laughed, her nose crinkling. "No way. You're kidding."

"Nope."

"That is just awesome." She grinned at him.

"No' really."

Her face became serious. "Oh. Sorry."

Tom shrugged. "I's okay. I's a lo' nicer than wha' mos' people say abou' me. And I don' know why I'm like this. I's jus' like I'm ... I'm incomple'e, you know?"

Jessica nodded. "I see."

He smiled at her. He'd never had someone who understood him before. He'd never had a friend before.

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Days grew into weeks. Weeks wore into months. Tom was happier than he'd ever been.

Kids were kids, and it was second nature for them to be mean. They still made fun of "that weird kid" and tried to avoid the fabled wrath of Jessica Deep.

The principal's voice crackled through the aging PA system. "Ms. Edwards? Will you please send Jessica to the main office?"

Jessica looked up to the round, flat speaker on the ceiling. Groaning, she gathered her English supplies.

Tom caught her eye. He raised one eyebrow. She shrugged.

The heavy door to the office squealed as it pivoted on its hinges. Jessica walked in, not bothering to look up.

"Hi, Sweetie. How was your day?"

She froze, slowly fixing her eyes on the man rising from his chair. Whenever he showed up, things got complicated.

"Hi, Dad."

Her dad smiled, showing his toothpaste-white teeth. A sickening feeling started in Jessica's gut.

James Deep was one of the finest agents in the current espionage world, and part of one of the most prestigious agencies, ██████ (Unfortunately, I can't tell you because I'm not supposed to know either, and I'd prefer to stay alive for the time being). He spoke seventeen languages like a native. He moved like a shadow. There were fifteen different recording devices ready for use in his front right pocket alone.

Of course, with all this, he had little time for his daughter. Jessica's mother had died of cancer when she was two. She wasn't too sad about it. Sometimes she wished she had a mother, or at least a dad who wasn't always away on classified business trips, but she couldn't really miss something she couldn't remember.

"We're going on vacation," Mr. Deep announced.

"What? Now?" A spew of questions poured from Jessica's lips. "Why didn't you tell me? What about Eva?" Eva was her au pair.

"It's just a short trip. I'm sure she'll be thankful for the break."

"Mm-hmm." Often, her dad's idea of a "short trip" was a few months' difference from Jessica's.

"Come on, Sweetie. It'll be fun."

She sighed and looked at the ceiling. "Fine."

Jessica sat in the passenger seat with her arms crossed, staring straight ahead.

"Where are we going?"

Her father ignored the question. "I need to talk to you about something."

"What?" Jessica put on her best annoyed-teenage-girl face.

"It's about my work."

That got her attention.

"It's confusing, but try to keep up."

"I'll do my best."

Mr. Deep took a deep breath, his eyes fixed on the road. "About every... oh, 120 years or so, a group of people--kids, really--are born."

She looked at him like he was crazy. "Uh, Dad? People are born, like, every two seconds."

He shook his head. "Not the Incomplete."

"The Incomplete? What are they?"

"In a word, geniuses."

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Well, that clears it up."

Mr. Deep shrugged. "Like I said, it's complicated. There are certain things an Incomplete is not able to do when they're young. Like, say, hear a cow mooing. Or..."

"Seeing triangles? Pronouncing the letter 'T'?" An idea was beginning to form in Jessica's mind.

"Atta girl. I knew you'd catch on quick. Anyway, when they get older, the incompleteness goes away."

"And then they're ordinary, normal people?" She wondered how Tom would react if she told him he'd be average someday.

"Anything but ordinary. Extraordinary."



“And you’re telling me this, why?” She had the feeling that she already knew the answer.

“The [REDACTED] has reason to believe an Incomplete attends your school.”

“So you want me to find them.”

“That would be the general idea, yes.”

“Consider him found.” Mr. Deep turned to look at her, moving so abruptly that the car swerved and nearly hit a parked truck. “Dad!”

“Sorry, sorry.” He regained control of the vehicle. “But you know who he is? Do you know him personally? Are...”

“I wasn’t finished.” Jessica adjusted the sun visor, squinting from the glare until shade fell across her eyes. “Yes, I know him personally, and yes, we’re friends. But no, I am not going to drag him into this.”

The car stopped at a red light. “Please, Sweetie?” her dad pleaded. “Could you just ask him if he wants to go on a cruise to the Caribbean with us?”

Jessica looked out the window. “Do I really have a choice?”

“Probably not,” Mr. Deep admitted.

“Fine. I’ll ask him.”

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“Will all employees please report to the bow immediately? We are having... technical difficulties--” The captain’s voice suddenly broke off as the radio died.

Mr. Deep stood up, trying unsuccessfully to mask his concern. “Excuse me,” he said, making his way past Tom and Jessica.

“Dad-“

“Just stay here.”

Jessica sipped her soda, all the sweetness gone from it.

“Wha’s happening?” Tom asked nervously.

“I – I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“Sure. I’s abou’ me, isn’ i’.”

“No... why do you ask?” She feigned innocence.

Tom looked at her meaningfully.

“Okay, okay. I guess you know. But this might not-”

She never finished her sentence.

A blaring alarm shrieked over the commotion of two hundred innocent, screaming, cruise-going tourists. Jessica grabbed Tom’s arm and dragged him towards the front of the ship.

“Come on!” She pulled him through a maze of hallways.

After what seemed like hours, they found themselves standing in front of the door to the captain’s quarters. It was a hulking thing, basically just a huge slab of gleaming, watertight steel.

“I bet they’re in here.”

Tom nodded wordlessly. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

The agents were in there, sure enough. They were bound, gagged, and tied to folding chairs, but they were there. Someone else was, too.

“Ah, our guests of honor,” a middle-aged man announced. “I was wondering when you’d show up.”

Only two words could describe him. The first was *gray*. His hair was the color of storm clouds. His eyes were the color of thick fog. His suit was the color of dirty dishwater. Even his skin was a slightly ashen shade.

The other word was *evil*, and that was fairly self-explanatory.

Jessica took a step back. "Who-- Who are you?"

"That's not important. What *is* important is the boy," he said, looking at Tom. "*He* is what we're after."

"Wha' do you wan' from me?"

The gray man looked at him innocently. "Nothing. We just want to help you. We just want to keep you safe."

Tom looked from the man to Jessica to the bound agents. "I was pre'y safe un'il you showed up."

The man shook his head. "Wrong. These men were planning on er, *experimenting* on you, to put it nicely. They didn't even tell you, did they?"

"Ell me wha'?"

"I swear, we were going to --" Jessica started.

"Lies!" the man snapped. He turned back to Tom. "You are an Incomplete. You are one of the most powerful people in the world."

Tom looked at him, not sure whether to believe it.

"If you come with me, you can be whatever you want to be. You can be normal."

Tom's breath caught in his throat.

"All you have to say is yes."

Tom looked at the gray man, at the agents, at Jessica. Who was he supposed to believe? Who could he trust?

“Tom...” Jessica pleaded.

Was it possible for him to be normal?

*No*, a little voice inside of him said. *Not with this man.*

Tom took a deep breath. “I won’.”

“What?” The gray man said, eyes wide.

“I won’ go with you. Now, the Coas’ Guard is on i’s way. So if I were you, I’d le’ these men go and ge’ ou’ of here.”

The man glared at him. “Fine. Just mark my words; you have not seen the last of Sebastian Gauschimmel!”

And with that, he strode angrily out the door and was gone.

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Tom’s head was spinning. “So I’m an... Incomple’e? And Alber’ Eins’ein was also an Incomple’e?”

Jessica nodded. “Yep. And he wasn’t nearly the smartest.”

Tom grinned. “Maybe being differen’ isn’ so bad af’er all.”

“Who said it was bad in the first place?”

“Nobody.” He thought for a moment. “Wai’. Didn’ you say tha’ there were others? Others like me...”

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MIDDLE Call Me 'Om 11

Far away, back on the mainland, Jane Fonder stared glumly out her window,  
feeling just a little....

*incomplete.*

Stupid Annabelle

by Emma Gillies

Grade 8

Round Hill, VA

## MIDDLE Stupid Annabelle 1

The day when that squealing, crying, smelly little humanoid thing came into the house was probably one of the worst days of my life. First off, I got no attention WHATSOEVER. Aren't I supposed to be the baby of the family? That's what I thought, until the day this disgusting-looking creature called Annabelle arrived. Ugh ... horrible name. At least compared to mine. By the way, I'm Kit Kat. Before the Stevens family adopted me, I was named Muddy because I have dark brown fur. Now THAT was a bad name. Anyway, this wretched Annabelle creature has lived with us for a couple of months or so.

Anyhoo—

“WAAAHHHH!”

Oh, for crying out loud. There goes stupid baby Annabelle, crying her head off. Stupid thing. Wish I could just teach her a lesson somehow...

“Oh, Baby, what is it?” says Mama from the living room.

I walk in that direction, quite reluctantly because of the noise, but it would be really interesting just to see what's up...

I enter the cozy room where I particularly enjoy snoozing on rainy days and see that Annabelle is crying because of no apparent reason. Rats. (I hate rats.) I thought it would be something interesting. Maybe she'd fallen from the high chair! But no such luck.

“Hey Mama, I'm home!” a high-pitched voice resounds through the house.

“In the living room, Lilly! Just attending to Annabelle...”

Annabelle wails louder. Meanwhile, I rush out of the room to meet 10-year old Lilly at the door.

## MIDDLE Stupid Annabelle 2

“Hey Kit Kat!”

Lilly smiles and drops her backpack to the ground. She strokes me—it would have been nice, if it had lasted longer—and then rushes into the living room.

I sigh. Well, more of a throaty sort of sound. Anyway, that’s what’s been so annoying about the new arrival—every moment of the day has been dedicated to her! And not me! I mean, what’s up with that? My real mother always told me that we cats are the supreme rulers. Which we are. So why am I not getting treated that way? Stupid Annabelle...

I suddenly feel hungry. I stroll into the kitchen where my bowl is half-full—like to think optimistically—and gobble the Cat Munchies down. Aahhh, delicious. Not as good as the chicken-flavor ones, but nearly there. Just for some closure to the snack, I lap up some water. Hmmmm ... Not as fresh as could be, but good enough.

Eating makes me sleepy, for some reason. So I go upstairs, because that baby is STILL crying for no apparent reason, and curl up on Lilly’s bed by the fluffy duck toy—and as far away from the creepy gorilla toy as possible.

Maybe groom a bit? I was feeling a little dirty. But very soon my eyelids start to feel heavy, and the world turns dark.

I open my eyes. My surroundings are sharp and clear. Aaahh, the things that a quick nap can do for you ...

I hear the clatter of dinner plates downstairs and hurry down to the kitchen to collect scraps of fallen food. Daddy (weird name) calls me “the vacuum,” whatever that means.



### MIDDLE Stupid Annabelle 3

Mmmm, smells like Chinese tonight. The family is just leaving the table to do the dishes—Annabelle is in her high chair, eating some sort of strange mushy-type substance. And not crying!

I inspect the floor. Disappointment. Seems like Lilly is cleaning up her eating habits. Oh well. So what's the strange mushy-type substance that the Annabelle creature is eating? Maybe that'll taste good.

I weave my way through the legs of the table and chairs (don't know why they're called 'legs', because I thought that legs moved) and jump up on the counter. Big no-no, but luckily Mama, Daddy, and Lilly all have their backs to me. Baby Annabelle is sitting just a few feet away. What is that stuff? Green ... I sniff the air. Smells like ... peas and green beans. Hmmm. Might be interesting ...

The next thing I know, I'm leaning onto the high chair, trying to get a taste of this strange and interesting concoction. And then Annabelle starts wailing at the top of her lungs. I jump—frightened out of my mind, I tell you—and land, somehow, on my feet, onto the cold kitchen floor.

Mama screams something like: "Kit Kat! What's wrong with you?!" and goes to soothe stupid baby Annabelle while Daddy comes over and grabs me by the scruff of the neck—strangely comforting in most cases, but not in this instance, as he was performing this action quite roughly—and opens the sliding glass door to the back yard.

And then—get this! He throws me out! Literally, throws me onto the deck into the dark drizzly evening! Well, I can tell you, I'm pretty mad right now. And then I get sort of sorry for myself, and then I get mad again.

## MIDDLE Stupid Annabelle 4

“How’s this my fault?” I think.

It was that stupid baby. It’s not my fault I’m curious—curiosity killed the cat, my mother used to say (think I get that now)—and if Annabelle hadn’t howled, this would have never happened. I can hear that stupid baby still crying inside.

I’m pondering this on the deck in the dark of the night with cold rain drizzling down on me, when suddenly I hear this growling sound from behind me. I jump up, my fur standing on end, and twist around...to see a humongous monster of a raccoon baring its teeth at me!

I scream “Meeeeooooowww!!” at the top of my lungs and zoom off into the night, down the steps of the deck, and into the woods.

I look behind me. The big hairy raccoon is following me at a surprisingly fast pace. Now, let me tell you: I really HATE raccoons. And dogs. And squirrels. And one time I came across this—

But that’s a story for another time. When you’re running across the slippery grass and into the big dark woods with a gargantuan raccoon beast chasing you at top speed, you can’t think about much. And because I couldn’t think very well, I wasn’t thinking about where I was going.

Of course I knew about the rushing river in the woods. Just sort of ... forgot about it, is all. I look behind me to see if the raccoon is still there—he is—and then hear this enormous rushing sound, which suddenly fills my head. Before I can put the brakes on, I’m slipping and sliding on the muddy ground, narrowly missing trees, and down the steep bank into the roaring water.

## MIDDLE Stupid Annabelle 5

I wail loudly, the sound echoing in the night. And then cold, freezing, penetrating water engulfs me and I'm surrounded by a water tornado. I try to breathe in but all that comes into my lungs is water—which probably isn't very good.

So I'm kicking and kicking and choking and choking and trying to find the surface of the water—can't tell you how much I hate water—and then suddenly POOF! I'm above water for about a millisecond (again, I think that's something to do with time), and in that millisecond I gulp in as much beautiful air as I possibly can, and then the roaring fills my waterlogged ears and I'm underwater once again.

This river is annoying me. And scaring me. Suddenly I feel a surge of power through my body and I remember stupid baby Annabelle and I feel like crushing her, so I push up to the surface with all my might, coughing up water and trying to breathe in air at the same time. I open my eyes and see the bank not very far away. The river is whisking me off downstream. What to do?

And then I see a log caught in the riverbed and with amazing reflexes (not to boast or anything), I grab ahold of it with my paws and somehow manage to fling myself to the top of the wet and slimy log.

I sit there for a while coughing up water and breathing in oxygen and then I just lay on the log limply, thinking about things. Stupid Annabelle ... if it weren't for her, I wouldn't be out here in the first place. And have I mentioned what a bad name that is? And Daddy ... why did he have to throw me out here? And that stupid raccoon ... well, I was sure going to get my revenge on him one day.

## MIDDLE Stupid Annabelle 6

Then I realize that I'm freezing. I climb shakily—nearly falling into the river again—down the log until I'm back at the muddy land.

“Meeeeooooowwww!” I wail, calling for help.

Wait, that's dumb. What if the raccoon comes back? I shut up and begin walking slowly back in the direction I THINK I came from.

Suddenly I see a slight movement behind a tree. Was it the raccoon? Then I see a bushy tail. A squirrel! And as I've told you before, I hate squirrels. So annoying. My life goal has been to catch one.

Despite the fact that I'm soaked to the skin and am lost in the big, dark woods while the rain is still drizzling down—a little harder, now—I really want to catch that little thing. My muscles tense, ready to pounce. Just one more movement and I'll attack ...

And that unknowing squirrel moves once more, somewhere in a bush, and I spring forward. What? Where'd he go? Oh, I see him! He's moving across the ground like a cheetah (my mother told me my fourth cousin was one). He looks back, and meets my eyes. Is that a smirk I see on his smug little face? Now I'm angry. He dashes—hey! out of the woods!—and I follow him across someone's lawn. And then, at the last minute, he scrambles up a nearby oak tree and looks down at me with an evil little grin on his evil little face.

I know I'm beaten. Stupid thing. You know, I wouldn't be out here getting embarrassed by a squirrel if it weren't for stupid baby Annabelle. Suddenly I feel the freezing cold again. I start to shiver. All I want now is to curl up in Lilly's nice warm room

## MIDDLE Stupid Annabelle 7

next to her head. (Isn't it odd how humans only have hair on their heads? I mean, what's the point of that?)

I walk away, downtrodden, across someone's lawn, and for some reason I find myself walking up the steps to their deck and by the glass back door. Just someplace warm to rest would be nice. So I scratch against the door and mew pleadingly, in my nicest voice, asking to be let in.

Then this lady who looks quite old and wrinkly comes to the door. At first, I think she's going to let me in.

"What are you doing here?" she asks me, really quite rudely, from behind the door.

Then she squints down at me.

"Is that ... a ... a rat?"

The old lady becomes terrified.

"John!" she screams. "There's a rat! There's a rat at the door!"

A voice calls from upstairs, barely audible.

A rat? Where? I hate rats. But I didn't smell one, or see one.

The old lady kicks the door.

"Get away, you disgusting creature!" she says.

Was she talking to me? Of all the ... She thought I was a rat? Well ...

The old lady kicks the door again, screaming, and I decide to leave. Really. How rude ...

## MIDDLE Stupid Annabelle 8

I walk down the steps and onto the wet lawn. The night is dark and I'm still freezing. Need somewhere to sleep. Hey look! There's an overturned trashcan by the side of the mean old lady's house. I walk up to it, sniff around—smells like tuna, a mixture of other food, and—ugh—raccoon. I look inside. The aroma of it is powerful, but there's nothing inside.

The rain comes down harder. OK, think it's time to get some sleep. Tomorrow I'll try to get home, even if it means going back to stupid baby Annabelle.

I enter the trashcan, my eyelids drooping. Groom? Don't think so. I can already feel myself nodding off, even with the strong scent filling my nostrils. So cold...

I wake up shivering. The sun is shining down on me, and quite soon I'm warm. I almost forget that I'm in a trashcan, away from home. I sigh, and stretch. Aaaahhh...so refreshing. I feel sort of dirty, so I groom myself a bit. Ugh... I don't taste very good. I force myself to keep on licking, the warm sun shining down on me.

Pretty soon I'm clean and warm and dry... but I still want to go home. I'm starving. Some chicken-flavor Cat Munchies would be bliss just now...

I stretch—the best kind, where my front paws are extended in front of me and my back is up to the sky. Then I yawn, and am on my way.

The grass is wet with dew. I prance toward the street, rejuvenated and anxious to go home after such a night.

Hey look! Squirrel! Just across the street... I figure it's time to get my own back. My back end squirms, I crouch low to the ground... the squirrel is unsuspecting... and off I go! Sprinting across the road...

MIDDLE Stupid Annabelle 9

SCREEEECCCHH!!!

“Aaaagghhhh!!!!” I howl in terror and stop dead in my tracks.

What is it? I see a big green car right in front of me... looks familiar, somehow.

And then out jumps a little girl with blonde hair. (Again, why only on the head?)

“Kitty?” she says. “Hey! Daddy, look!”

Daddy? I know him!

“It’s Kit Kat!” the girl—Lilly!—exclaims.

“Kit Kat?” says Daddy.

I hear a human baby in the back. Groan. Annabelle. But you know what? I’m actually kind of glad to see her. Maybe someday she’ll turn out as nice as Lilly. Maybe.

Lilly picks me up and carries me into the car.

“Kit Kat!” she says. “Where were you?”

“Dying in the cruel wilderness,” I think to myself. But I just purr.

“Sorry, Kit Kat,” says Daddy. But you need to learn how to get along with Annabelle.”

I look next to me. There she is. Stupid Annabelle. She lifts up her hand. At first I think she’s going to hit me, but then she brings down the plump little thing onto my tummy and strokes me. Aaaahhhh, bliss. Maybe she will turn out like Lilly after all.

A Time Before Freedom

by Zoe Hana Mikuta

Grade 6

Ashburn, Va



## MIDDLE A Time Before Freedom 1

I am so weak the wind could knock me over. My broken arm hangs limply at my side, probably begging for some kind of protection. My head and my stomach ache from the lack of food. But the sound of barking dogs in the distance and the thought of having to go back to that horrible plantation makes me start running again. It is like the nightmare I've had many times before. Gathering up the courage to run away and then getting chased around the woods by shouting men and dogs, only to end up dying or losing hope forever. But this time it is real. This time if I were caught I would really pay with my life.

The dark woods race by as I run, not knowing where I am heading or even caring. The last safe house was supposed to be a mile back, but all it was was a pile of burnt wood. The tears inside my eyes make my vision blurry and I trip over the root of a tree and fall. A sharp pain appears in my ankle and I know I've twisted it. The sounds of barking dogs and men get closer and closer. I know that I cannot run anymore and by tomorrow I will be dead. Death is the punishment for running away on Mr. Dreff's plantation. But I will try to die here before they can find me. I refuse to give them the satisfaction of killing me. It would be better to die than to be a slave on that plantation.

It was a windy October day when I became a slave and scowling white men with guns at their sides had just come below deck. They had begun releasing people from their shackles and pushing them upstairs. One man was bold enough that when they released him, he managed to grab the white man's gun and shoot him. In a minute the rest of the white men had turned on the man and shot him down. He smiled as he died. He would rather die than be a slave. No one tried anything so bold after that.

## MIDDLE A Time Before Freedom 2

We were all brought up on deck and then onto land. The sun was dazzling. And since I had not seen the sun since Africa, it was also blinding. One by one, all of us were auctioned off, like sacks of potatoes or horses. Mr. Dreff loaded all his new slaves into a cart and drove off. His plantation was so large I could see it thirty minutes before we reached the perimeter. It was filled with hundreds of slaves with no hats or any kind of protection from the sun. They were all sweating and looked very tired, some with red marks on their cheeks and backs from their beatings. That's when I knew I was not going to spend the rest of my life here. That's when I knew I was going to run. It was also when I knew that I was going to have a very hard time until I did.

My room was a small shack with no fireplace and six other girls living there with me. It had no windows and a dirt floor. There was no furniture except a small stool in the corner and seven beds with thin blankets and empty pillowcases. I had a nice room compared to the other slaves' quarters.

My job was simpler than the other slaves. I still had to work outside, but not in the field with the others, not in the blazing sun. I had to work in Mrs. Dreff's garden, pulling weeds and watering plants. It was in the shade of the big house and right next to the kitchen. All day, smells of fresh food wafted outside to my waiting nose.

But after I was done caring for her garden, I had to go in and wait on Mrs. Dreff herself. She was an absolute monster. If you looked at her at all, she would rap your knuckles. Whenever me or another slave carried her food and she thought it had an odd taste, she would say, "You black maggots contaminated it on the way over!" She never blamed anything on the white servants or the white cook. Everything that went

### MIDDLE A Time Before Freedom 3

wrong would be blamed on us “black swine” or “filthy brutes”. The day when she dumped a bottle of wine over her server after she claimed it was “disgusting because of your black hands” had been the final straw. That night I had packed up my things and left, making sure I dumped a full chamber pot on her garden before I went inside the kitchen and stole some food.

That had been four days ago. The food had run out on day two.

Hurting and starving, I lay on the ground, listening to the noises of men and dogs getting closer and closer. I remember that this is exactly what happened to Mama and Papa, who’d tried to run away in April. Five days after they left, Mr. Dreff came in with Mama’s shoe and Papa’s hat and threw them on the ground in front of me.

“Your parents are dead. They were caught last night in the woods and killed. Don’t follow in their footsteps or you’ll be dead too.”

Then he spat at my feet and went off. I remember crying late into the night, while everyone else slept. I took a vow saying that one day very soon Mr. Dreff would pay and fell sleeping trying to think up of a way to hurt him almost as badly as he hurt me.

I came up with an idea to get Mr. Dreff back when I found two snapping turtles in the garden the next day. Wrapping them carefully in my apron, I left them in the corner of the kitchen until Mrs. Dreff dismissed me for the day. Then I took the apron and raced up to Mr. Dreff’s room. Taking the chamber pot from underneath the bed, I plunked the two turtles inside. I closed the lid, hoping they wouldn’t suffocate, when I heard someone coming up the stairs. It was the cook, getting ready for bed! If I was to

#### MIDDLE A Time Before Freedom 4

be seen by her she would surely tell the Dreffs and I would get a hard beating. There was no way I could get downstairs without her seeing me.

A breeze came through the open window, giving me an idea that was both dangerous and stupid. Better than any of my other options, though. A big tree stood by and I was hoping to jump out the window and onto it. But instead, when I jumped, my foot caught the clothesline and I went directly into the trunk. I slid down and sat there dazed for a minute. I tasted something foul and touched my lip and my finger came back red. My nose was bleeding. Then I heard a shout.

“You scoundrel! Wait until Mrs. Dreff hears about this!” the cook shouted.

She began to call for her. The cook was shouting from the window I’d jumped out of. She must’ve heard me hitting the tree! I thought I was doomed, until I realized she hadn’t seen my face yet. I took off running to the slave houses.

Bursting into my room, I hurriedly tugged off my shoes and slipped into bed. I made my mouth hang open and my eyes close so I’d look like I’d been asleep for a long time. The door burst open and I heard Mr. Dreff come in. He looked around and must’ve decided I wasn’t in there because he grunted and left. I stayed up to hear the satisfying scream which meant the turtle had bitten Mr. Dreff on the bum.

It came around midnight.

The thought, despite my pain, makes me smile. Of course, it still doesn’t make up for what he did, but it was still a victory well earned.

A pain starts in my right arm, the one that isn’t broken; I am laying on it. I roll over and my head goes into a ditch at the base of a tree.

## MIDDLE A Time Before Freedom 5

But suddenly, I am up and looking at it. The ditch goes into the tree, which has a hole in the bottom.

“Maybe...” I think and knock on the tree trunk with my good arm. It makes a quiet, empty sound. The tree might be hollow! I get an idea. It is a doubtful plan, but I have no choice. I drag myself to the trunk and duck into the hole. It is damp inside but indeed hollow. I vaguely remember mama telling me once that other runaways covered themselves in mud sometimes so that the dogs couldn't smell them. There has just been a rainstorm last night and mud covers the ground all around me. I pick up a handful of it and start to cover my arms and legs. Then I put some bark and mud at the base of the tree where the hole is. Soon I have closed the gap and am completely sealed inside. Then I wait.

It doesn't take long. In a couple of minutes, dogs and men surround my tree. I can hear them talking.

“Where is she?”

“The dogs were going wild; she has to be around here somewhere.”

“Well, they don't seem to be picking anything up now.”

“This is ridiculous,” says a voice belonging to Mr. Dreff, “How could she have disappeared? Her footprints are right here, and now she's gone away with her scent! We have to catch this one or the slaves will think that running away is easy! First her parents and now her! How do they all escape?”

“If we fail to catch her you can just tell all your slaves what you told her about her parents, that she's dead. Come on, let's just go another mile.”

## MIDDLE A Time Before Freedom 6

The sound of footsteps and dogs creeps away.

I am overjoyed. It actually worked! But what had they been talking about, about my parents? The sounds of their conversation replay inside my head. “First her parents and now her!” and “You can just tell all the other slaves what you told her about her parents, that she’s dead.” Did they mean...

My mind is racing. Did Mr. Dreff lie to me? Mama’s shoe and Papa’s hat, were they just things Mr. Dreff found on their search for them? Are my parents still alive? I fall asleep thinking about the possibilities. And then I have a strange dream-

I am in the tree. A scratching noise comes from the mud wall covering the hole. It starts to crack and a white man’s hand reaches inside for me...

When I wake up, I am in a comfortable bed and a steaming bowl of oatmeal is sitting next to me.

“Where am I?” I wonder as I gulp it down. “Have I been caught? Am I dead? Did I freeze in the tree last night?” A knock at my door silences my thoughts.

A white woman’s face appears at the door. “You finished your meal?” she asks. I nod and she takes it out. She comes back with a brush and begins to comb my hair. I open my mouth to ask where I am when she says, “You have hair just like your mama’s.”

“What?” I ask, confused, “You know her?”

“Ah, yes,” says the lady, “Came here in April, with your papa. They had come a long way. They told me all about you over dinner, said you might come yourself, but

## MIDDLE A Time Before Freedom 7

you were too young to travel then, and were sick with a cold. Didn't want to risk it, they said."

"But... does that mean..." I stutter, my head spinning.

"Yes, Honey, you're at a safe house," the lady says with a smile.

"But how-"

"My husband found you last night, while hunting. A rabbit was trying to get in that tree of yours and when he noticed it was blocked, he was scratching something furious at it. After my husband shot the thing, he was curious and so he broke the mud wall and found you. So he brought you here," says the lady, putting the brush down. It wasn't a dream. "I'll go start a bath for you." She stands up.

"Wait," I say, "So are my parents really alive?"

She smiles. "Yes. My husband gave them a ride up to Canada after they'd rested, which is where you're going tomorrow. I will give you a ride once you've had some decent hours of sleep. With some luck, we'll meet them once we cross the border." She leaves.

The world is spinning. They're alive. They're alive! It seems like a dream. I hope I never wake up. I'm going to see my parents. I'm going to be free.

This last thought pulls me up short. Free. I'll be free. They'd never go up to Canada looking for me. Free. I smile at the thought.

I'm almost free.

# Advisors and Assassins

Emily Wolfe

Grade 6

Ashburn, VA



## MIDDLE Advisors and Assassins 1

Melanie glanced over her shoulder as she ran up the palace's winding staircase, the stolen maid's uniform held over her thudding heart. Had the laundrywoman seen her? If she had, she would almost certainly tell the chief advisor, and this little outing would have no chance of getting off the ground. The chief advisor would just laugh and shake her head, and Melanie would be sent to her room, like the last fifteen times.

Melanie hadn't been outside the palace since she was two, since her parents had died. She had no idea what Kirima was like, although, as princess, she was supposed to be ruling it, her advisors offering helpful counsel.

Certain she'd made a clean escape, Melanie snorted at the thought. She tried to remember the last time her advisors had *advised* her. *They* were the ones in charge, particularly the chief advisor. Melanie couldn't do anything about it until she was fourteen and no longer needed "advisors" unless she wanted them.

Her fourteenth birthday was in a month, and Melanie couldn't wait. It wasn't that she *wanted* the pressures of ruling Kirima. She just didn't want the advisors controlling everything in her life. Soon, she could just go out and see the sights just because she wanted to.

*So why am I doing this now?* Melanie wondered as she ducked into an empty room and changed into the maid's uniform. She knew why. She wanted to get the best of the chief advisor just once before she was gone.

And she had. Melanie was out the door and standing in the sunshine five minutes later, blinking at the bright light. It was wonderful to breathe in the fresh air and smell the spring flowers. But if she lingered there, the advisors might end her adventure before

## MIDDLE Advisors and Assassins 2

she got ten yards away from the palace. Melanie went out into the streets of Kirima's capital, Doromo.

At first, Melanie enjoyed every second of it, saying hello to everyone she met and looking at everything that caught her eye: a rusty wagon wheel by the side of the road, a peddler who was selling fresh fish, a woman hanging up laundry to dry.

But then she noticed how nobody said hello back to her, and how nothing was controlling the traffic, so that Melanie saw a horse nearly run over a little boy before his mother pulled him to safety. And when she asked a friendly-looking man where the school was, and the library, he looked at her like she was crazy.

"We don't have any libraries here, Missy, and no schools neither," he told her as he puffed on a pipe. "You should know that, as--" he eyed her maid's uniform distastefully "--you work for the blasted princess who runs the country and made our city such a wreck. I don't know what she does with all the taxes she makes us pay, but she doesn't put 'em into education."

"Oh, but the princess doesn't run Kirima," Melanie exclaimed, shocked.

"And who does?" the man asked snidely. "Yer Uncle Lou?"

To that, Melanie had no answer. If she told them the chief advisor and her lackeys did, he would ask how she knew, and if she announced who she really was, then...well, they didn't seem to look on the princess as a friend here. Who knew what the people might do? So instead, she walked away...right into the path of a carriage drawn by two horses.

### MIDDLE Advisors and Assassins 3

“Look out!” cried a voice, whose owner pulled her back just in time to avoid being trampled. As Melanie looked around, dazed, she saw her savior: A girl a little older than herself with friendly blue eyes. But Melanie had already been fooled once by someone who appeared friendly. “Are you okay?” the girl continued.

“Yes...Thank you, *thank you*.” Melanie gasped, deciding that however unfriendly the man had turned out to be, she should at least talk to somebody who had just saved her life. “It’s my first time in the city, and I didn’t realize how busy it was.”

“Yeah,” agreed the girl, and frowned. “Why doesn’t Princess Melanie set up a police force or something? Doesn’t she care if her people die, or get robbed, or anything?”

Melanie didn’t want to start an argument like she had with the other man, so she just said, “I wish the city was better, and cleaner.”

“So do I,” the girl sighed. Then she said, “By the way, I’m Bella.”

“Me...Meryl,” Melanie said, saving herself just in time.

They talked for a while; then Bella looked at her searchingly. “Meryl, do you really want to make Doromo a better place?”

“Of course,” Melanie replied.

“Well...” Bella glanced around, as if to make sure nobody was listening. “The truth is: I’m part of an organization to make that happen.”

That sounded good to Melanie. “How are you going to do it?”

“By...” Bella whispered, “By assassinating Princess Melanie and making Kirima a democracy.”

#### MIDDLE Advisors and Assassins 4

That certainly hadn't been what Melanie was expecting to hear. She gasped and felt dizzy. "Ass...Assass..." She couldn't say it.

Bella went on, "We've been around for a while, but since the princess never leaves the palace, it's been really difficult getting at her. You're the first person we've met who wants to help who works at the palace. So...will you help?"

What if Melanie said she didn't want to kill the princess? They might kill her, so she didn't tell. She nodded. "I'll try."

"Great!" said Bella, with obvious relief. "I'll take you to the vice-head of Project Democracy--that's what we're called. The head, Lydia, is always out on official business."

Twenty minutes later, after having gone through two or three trapdoors and down four or five underground passageways, Melanie found herself standing in front of Mr. Stoke, the vice-head. She was shaking with terror. What if he had seen a portrait of her and recognized her? But he just said, "Welcome, Miss Meryl."

Melanie managed to say, "Hello," without sounding frightened out of her wits. How would she get out of this?

"I'll get right down to business, Miss Meryl," Mr. Stoke said. "Do you have access to the princess's food?"

Melanie thought fast. "I've never even seen the princess, Mr. Stoke. I work in the laundry."

"Indeed?" Mr. Stoke looked disappointed. After a few more questions, he said, "Well, if you don't know anything that might help us, I'll have Bella escort you out."

## MIDDLE Advisors and Assassins 5

Back in the dimly lit passageway, Bella sighed, disappointed, while Melanie was trying to keep from jumping for joy. Her identity had stayed a secret. She looked around with interest, taking note of the things she'd been too preoccupied to notice on her way in. She saw a door marked WATER, and another POISON.

Melanie snorted. Pointing at the latter door, she asked, "Shouldn't you be a little more subtle? In case you're discovered?"

"You're right," Bella said. "I never thought about it before."

"Why do you need a whole room full of poison, anyway?" Melanie said. She opened the door. Inside were seven barrels. "I mean, if you're going to have to use a whole barrel of poison to kill somebody..." She tried to lift one of the barrels. It was lighter than she expected, and she fell down with the barrel on top of her.

Bella was looking at the floor where it had been. Melanie joined her, and saw the end of a rope coming up from between the stones. Without thinking, she pulled it. A panel opened in the wall to reveal a neat workspace.

"This must be Lydia's secret office!" exclaimed Bella. "I heard she had one, but I thought it was just a story."

"Should we look?" asked Melanie. "You said she was away, right?" She started to rifle through the pages on the desk. After throwing a guilty look over her shoulder, Bella joined her. A minute later Melanie heard a sharp intake of breath.

"Look at this!" Bella said, passing her a document. It read:

### *THE PLAN*

- I. Start a group to assassinate Princess Melanie.*

## MIDDLE Advisors and Assassins 6

- II. *Once she is gone, host celebratory feast and poison all members.*
- III. *Declare self princess of Kirima...*

Melanie didn't read on. "That's awful!" she exclaimed. "Getting you guys to do the dirty work and then *killing* you all!" *Not to mention me*, she added silently.

Bella looked like Melanie had felt when she first heard about Project Democracy. She pointed to a picture on the wall. "That's her. The *betray*er."

Melanie turned around and gasped. There was no mistaking the face on the wall. It was... "The chief advisor!" she blurted out.

"Who?" Bella asked, confused.

Melanie told her the whole story. What else could she do? She described how the chief advisor was in charge of Kirima, and how she had escaped, and everything else. When she was done, she looked at Bella pleadingly. "Please believe me. *Please*."

"I believe you," Bella said slowly. "But it's...a lot to take in."

Melanie knew what she meant. It was starting to sink in that the chief advisor had arranged to have her killed. But they had to do something to stop this from happening. She took a deep breath. "It looks like Mr. Stoke wasn't in on this. We should tell him."

Half an hour later, Mr. Stoke was standing in the secret office and staring, mouth gaping, at *THE PLAN*. Melanie had told him her story and he, too, had believed her.

"But I just can't understand why Lydia didn't just kill you herself. She must've had lots of opportunities to."

## MIDDLE Advisors and Assassins 7

“I think that she needed somebody to blame it on. Someone might have figured it out at the palace, and this way she could have an airtight alibi,” said Melanie, who’d pondered that herself. “Or maybe she’s so deranged she wanted to murder as many people as she could.”

“When she gets back from her ‘business’, we’ll be waiting for her,” said Mr. Stoke. “And what will you do after she’s captured, Melanie?”

“Well, I turn fourteen in a month,” Melanie answered. “Then I’ll have control of the kingdom. And I think the first thing I’m going to do is…” she paused, and then grinned. “Make Kirima a democracy!”

### *ONE YEAR LATER*

Melanie walked through the streets of Doromo, much quieter than the first time she had been there. Of course it was. The children were all in school, and some of the adults were, too. She nodded to the deputy on the corner and smirked at the jailhouse behind him, where Lydia had been for almost a year. Melanie hurried to the new building a block ahead. The Doromo City Library was currently a very small collection, but growing every day.

As she opened the door, she passed Mr. Stoke at the librarian’s desk. After saying hello to him, Melanie headed toward the back of the building, where a small reading area had been set up.

Bella was engrossed in a book about science but looked up as Melanie approached.

## MIDDLE Advisors and Assassins 8

“Melanie! I haven’t seen you since the election. Did I tell you that as soon as I learn enough, I’m going to be a teacher?”

“You might’ve mentioned that in your letter,” Melanie smiled. “Three or four times.”

“Oh, and Mr. Stoke’s writing a book about Project Democracy and how we caught Lydia. He’s going to add it to the library when he’s done.”

“That’ll be a good story,” Melanie said. “It has a happy ending.”

“Yes, it will,” Bella agreed. “And everyone knows it was because of you. They must, otherwise they wouldn’t have voted for you.”

For after everything had been explained, after the election had been held, who had gotten the most votes? Not Mr. Stoke, who hadn’t wanted the responsibility of a whole country. Not any of the advisors, whom everyone knew now were hopelessly unskilled. No, it was the figurehead whom the country had hated for so many years who was now president—fourteen-year-old Melanie, who got to govern Kirima after all.



The Big C

Michaela Flemming

Grade 8

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## MIDDLE The Big C 1

“Alright kiddo, loosen up on the armrests. We’re on the ground now.” Dad says, glancing over from his seat in aisle D.

“I know,” I say.

But I still don’t let go. The plane is cramped, constricting and stuffy. Everyone sounds like they’re speaking from far away, too. Even as we get out of the plane into the late afternoon sun, the trapped feelings follow me, like a dark menacing shadow. The City of Brotherly Love reeks of death to me.

Dad hails a cab. “St. Mary’s on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street” he says.

Then I remember why we’re here.

Like a tidal wave, the memories come and wash over me, drowning me in their emotions. I’m choking on their potency. I’m suffocating on their sadness.

Only one word comes to me.

Cancer.

The big C.

When we first found out, we got sentimental cards and chocolates from aunts and uncles we only see at weddings. You know those Hallmark greeting cards with peppy slogans that ooze false sympathy. I burned them.

Toby’s been in Philly, with my Mom. She sent me back to Dad after we found out. She sends me texts occasionally, “Everything’s fine” “Doing great!” Still it’s been there seven months since she told us.

My brother has brain cancer.

## MIDDLE The Big C 2

Those five words, uttered from my mother's lips, shattered my world into a million pieces.

I'm aware of Dad paying the cabbie in front of a sad gray building with tiny blocky windows. He takes my cold hands and pulls me through the doors. I can sense nervousness around him. His hands are clammy and his stride is hesitant. He's shaking.

I hear the nurses scrambling up and down the sterile corridors. A robotic voice drones "Gerandi to surgery." We enter the Alpert P. Sloane Brain Ward. I wonder briefly who Alpert was. What did he do to be remembered on these walls? Probably donate a bucket of money. Then the room looms before us. 317. I take a deep breath as I enter.

The room is clean and sparse, the only inhabitant, a small sickly figure with ashen skin and limp colorless hair. At first, I think I've wandered into the wrong room. Quickly, I muster up an apology, but the figure turns. We see those distinctive bright blue eyes.

Toby.

A canyon of questions lies between us. Why is he this bad? What's going on? Why didn't anyone tell me? Toby sits up, wincing a bit. His skin seems shrunken and stretched over his bare bones. He's wasting away.

"Hey Tessie."

### MIDDLE The Big C 3

God, his voice even sounds defeated. I can feel tears rising and my throat constricting. Panic races in jagged bolts down my veins into my heart. I will not cry. I will not let my brother see me cry.

But I feel it welling up and make a split-second decision.

I run out the door.

Dad is yelling after me, but I block him out and keep running. They lied to me. They all lied to me. I let the salty tears run down my face in wet tracks. I have to get away, from that room, from this place. I have to go where death can't find me. Where I can't hurt.

I run blindly into a tall African-American nurse with a clipboard. I lift my eyes up, ready to apologize and continue my sprint to the door.

"Now why you's running like a chicken with your head cut off child?" she asks in a Southern accent. She takes my elbow firmly and sets me down in a nearby chair.

"My brother--" I manage to say through racking spasms of tears. She looks understandingly and tells me to put my head between my knees.

"Oh, you's Mister Toby's sister, Tessa. He was all in a tizzy about you comin' to see him."

Another sob wrenches itself out of my throat. I ruined it. He must have been so happy I was coming and I ruined it.

"Now, now, child, it's all right, I'm Mary Alice; I take care of your brother. And what a plucky one he is!"

## MIDDLE The Big C 4

I decide that Mary Alice isn't that old, maybe only 25 or 26. But she holds me firmly, like she handles sobbing girls all the time. She speaks softly and shushes me gently.

"He's dying--" I choke out, not caring whether I'm rude or not. They said he was fine. They said he'd be OK.

"Now I ain't gonna kid around with you. Your brother is in terminal condition."

I try to forcibly restrain my tears, breathing deeply, focusing on the steady beat of the monitors.

"There ain't much more we can do, but keep him comfortable and give the family time." Mary Alice says, with compassion.

I wonder how many families she's comforted.

"Now child," her voice gets stern now, "you make his last days the best days of his life. You promise me! You make them the best he's ever had!"

Quickly I nod, ideas forming in my head.

If I can't save my brother, I'll do anything in my power to give him the best days ever. Anything. I'll give him everything. I swear.

\*\*\*\*

"You're amazing Tessie!" Toby shouts happily.

He's come a long way from the shell of a boy he was when I got here. His skin is still pale, but there's a pink glow in his cheeks. He's stronger now, able to do more. True to my word, I took him anywhere he wanted. We'd been to a Flyers and a Phillies

## MIDDLE The Big C 4

game. It had always been a dream of his to meet a Phillies pitcher. I'd taken him all over the city, to museums and arcades and even just sat in a diner and let him order whatever he wanted.

Today we stood on the steps of the science museum just basking in the Indian summer sun. I'd walked him through larger than life model of a heart, a special show in the planetarium and a dissection of a cow's eyeball.

Toby was more alive than I'd ever seen him. He was animated, waving his hands and jumping around, just like the old days. I smile, a feeling of triumph and euphoria racing through me. Toby really is getting better.

"Tessie! Look!" Toby's broken away from me and is pointing at an exhibit. Quickly, before I can respond he's racing into the crowd, disappearing into the mash of bodies. I sprint after him through the gilded double doors.

Shock washes over me like a bucket of freezing water.

In horror, I look at the exhibit. It's a Brain Cancer Treatment exhibit. People in white coats are all around talking about different treatments for Brain Cancer. I see a banner that says "Radiation Therapy" and a picture of a large machine that has bluish light coming out of it. You can barely see the tips of someone's feet poking out of the bottom. On another, it says "Gamma Knife" and a portrait of the brain with laser going into it. Pictures of sickly smiling children with shaved heads are all over the walls. Is this what they're doing to him? Putting lasers in his head? Isn't radiation supposed to be toxic?

## MIDDLE The Big C 5

I see Toby standing in shock in front of an observation table. The lecturer has a model of the brain with dark patches, like ink blots all over it. He's miming cutting in with a small tool and demonstrating various procedures.

"Hey! Hey you!" a group of boys call out into the room.

People turn and stare, thinking they've been singled out. A collective murmur goes through the assembled people, rustling them. It reminds me of wind going through the trees and crackling the leaves.

The boys run up to Toby and violently jerk him around. His mouth forms a surprised O, but before he can speak the biggest boy yells in his face.

"Hey baldie!" His voice is low and husky and his buzz cut regulation length. Toby looks even smaller next to him, a mouse in the presence of an elephant. "Escaped the ward!" Then I realize they've identified him by his shaved head. Like sharks, they smell the blood in the water and pounce.

Toby is still in shock and the people around us go back to their perusing of the exhibit, writing it off as nothing more than some kids messing around. The cruel boy smiles, and then grotesquely contorts his face. His eyes are staring in two different directions and his tongue is lolling. He looks like one of the characters from the *Exorcist*.

"Can...you...understand...me..." he mocks, "or did they cut out *that* part of your brain?"

I can feel the hot anger rising inside, a flame beginning in my stomach. Everything now seems more irritating; things I would take as a minor inconvenience are

## MIDDLE The Big C 6

now heightened and intensified. How dare they hurt my sweet little brother. Do they even know what he's going through?

I stride over to them, not caring how many people I jostle out of the way. All that matters are those boys and their cruelty. I'm next to Toby now and quickly put myself between him and them in a protective gesture. Maybe, I can protect him from their words by just being there.

"Get out!" I hiss, low and steady, my dark eyes steely. "Get out of here!"

The boys are taken aback. They don't know what to make of the angry blond girl in their way. The bigger one, who seems to be the leader, glances back at the others strategizing with their gaze. Finally they slowly walk backward, out of the exhibit and into the hall.

I turn back to Toby, who's still in shock. His eyes are gigantic, endless lapis lazuli pools. "Toby...are you OK?" I say softly, not wanting to scare him. My heart pangs for the poor boy caught in the middle of all this.

"Mommy says they're not hurting me when the man with the sleepy gas comes," he says in that innocent way only a seven-year-old can say. "Tessie, are they really cutting into my head?" he asks quietly.

It's like we told him Santa isn't real or the Tooth fairy doesn't exist. Now he's left with the cold harsh reality.

"It's going to be OK," I say.

That's become my default phrase these past few weeks. But it's not going to be OK. I know that now. I take Toby's cold hand and lead him out of this hall of horror,



## MIDDLE The Big C 7

back into the cab, and into room 317. I lay him down on his bed and turn on cartoons. But he doesn't speak and moves through the motions mechanically. He's locked in his head, imagining things that I don't know what to do about. I don't know how to help him. That's what hurts the most. Having to watch someone you love waste away till they are just shells of themselves and knowing that you can't help. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. So I'm silent. But inside, I'm breaking into a million pieces.

\*\*\*\*

"Tess, Tess wake up," my mother's voices urgently whispers in my ear.

She's shaking me hard. Her hair is in disarray and her clothes are stained and rumpled. This is what I've feared the entire time. They don't wake you up at 2:25 for nothing. Good news can wait till morning. Bad news is delivered immediately.

"Is...?"

The question hangs between us. It's strange how anger is hot, but so is panic. It takes you with its scalding hands and crushes your heart.

Slowly, she shakes her head.

"He's not gone," she says and I sigh, relieved. "But he doesn't have much longer."

That does it. I grab my coat and slam my feet into the sneakers that I have lying beside the bed, just for this night. After a quick burst in the starless night from our hotel, we run into room 317.

## MIDDLE The Big C 8

Toby's hair is barely peach-fuzz and is slick with sweat. His breaths come unevenly and his heart's skipping in a frenzied dance. I wait for the sobs to come, but I'm stronger now. I won't run.

Dad is sitting by the bedside clutching his son's small hand. He's drinking in these last sights of his child. All throughout he's been shrinking, pulling in on himself and now he's so small and weak that you want to protect him. You want to wrap your arms around him and never let him go.

"Tessie, I'm still scared," he whispers.

I want to say something consoling, but what do you say to someone who's dying? It's going to be ok? You'll be fine? So I just sit on the bed and hug him with all my might. I want to feel the scratchy hospital blankets. I want to smell the scent of isopropyl alcohol and baby powder. I want to remember my brother as he was. Not as the cold corpse I know he'll be.

I keep murmuring over and over "I love you. I love you." So maybe I'll sear it in his brain and the last thing he'll remember is "I love you".

"Guys," Toby says after a while, his voice barely a whisper. "Can...can you donate my organs?"

My parents are taken aback, and they look at each other asking how he got this idea.

"Please," he begs, and who are they to refuse his last request? After a quick check with the nurse, Toby's organs are cleared for donation.

## MIDDLE The Big C 9

And then I hold him. I hold him while he struggles for breath. Then, the room gets quiet and finally he slips away. He doesn't struggle to breathe anymore. He won't hurt anymore. For the first time in months, he's at peace. I never considered what a burden it would be; to be seven and know you're dying. He was always so strong. Mary Alice comes in and tells me I have to let him go. That he isn't in any pain anymore. But if I let him go he won't come back to me.

Finally, I look out the window into the cold black night. It should rain. It should storm while my brother dies. But, like magic, the clouds pull back from the heavens. The stars come out in a fiery glory. They are beautiful, sparkling jewels on a black velvet canvas. Maybe they're more radiant than ever or maybe I never noticed them.

A little silver star shoots through the sky, illuminating the sky as it passes in a shining brilliance. It sears my eyes as it flies by. Finally the tears come and spill over my cheeks. People cry for beauty and for pain. And that night, I'm not quite sure what I'm crying for.

He's at peace now. I just know it.

Blood and Butterfingers

Leah Steiner

Grade 6

Lansdowne, VA

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 1

### Preface

Wind whipped my face as I peered out of the jellybean bush, bow and arrow in hand. I could hear marching in the distance. My tense fingers slowly curved around the bow. The marching grew steadily louder. Suddenly Michael was behind me whispering, "Shoot now."

Aiming my bow at a gigantic green gummy bear leading the army, I let the arrow fly straight toward his heart. Half a second later I was flying backwards in a cloud of smoke and ash. My head hit a rock candy boulder with a sickening crunch and everything went red.

I heard Michael scream in agony, "No, not her, anyone but her!"

Then I blacked out.

### Chapter 1

"Lilly Wilson, you get down here right now!" My mom screamed.

"All right Mom, I'm coming! You don't need to throw a fit," I muttered as I stomped down the stairs. What could I have done this time?

My mom was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, a hamper full of dirty towels in front of her.

"I thought I told you to put these towels in the washing machine!" she scolded.

"Oh... whoops."

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 2

She had reminded me to put the towels in the washing machine five times. How could I have forgotten?

My mother sighed. "It's all right; just go and put these in the washing machine now."

As I thudded toward the laundry room, I heard her call out, "Remember I love you!"

I had the strangest feeling that those words would be the last I heard from my mom for a long time.

"What in the world is that?"

In the back of the washing machine there was a big red button that I had never seen before. How was that possible? I had done the laundry a thousand times before, yet I had never noticed a humongous red button that was just begging to be pushed. So I did the natural thing. I leaned forward into the washing machine and hit the button with all my might. Pushing that button was probably the stupidest thing I had ever done.

All of a sudden I was being sucked into the washing machine like a cow on a field being sucked into a tornado. Then I was spinning for what seemed like hours, trying to keep my peanut butter and jelly sandwich from making a reappearance. A moment later I hit the ground with a dull thud, my face squished against the soft grass. I dreaded having to open my eyes and find out where I was. With my luck, I probably ended up in China. Then again, I had just been sucked into a washing machine, so I was prepared. But not for this.

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 3

### Chapter 2

“Who is she?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe she’s the chosen one.”

“Poor her.”

Who were the people speaking? Were they even humans? And what was all this talk about the chosen one? I had to know. Slowly I opened my eyes, and looked right into the face of a life-size Twix bar.

“AAAH!” I screamed in surprise. “Who ARE you?”

“A pleasant hello would be a lot nicer,” grumbled the Twix bar. “My name is Carmella King but when I’m in uniform, you’re to call me General King.” I hadn’t noticed that the Twix bar was wearing a brown and green suit that looked like something you would wear in the army except it was made out of frosting.

“I must be dreaming,” I muttered. How could all of this be real?

“It’s not a dream,” explained the dark haired boy standing beside General King. “You’ve somehow ended up in Candy Land, live and in person.”

I quickly glanced around to see if he was right. What I saw shocked me, even after being sucked into a washing machine and somehow ending up in a magical place that might not even be real. Buildings of all sizes made out of delicious smelling chocolate towered fifteen stories above me. To my left, I glimpsed tall trees made out of sweet and sticky kettle corn with pale pink taffy vines roped around them like lassos roped around fence posts. Puffy blue cotton candy clouds dotted the sunset orange

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 4

sky. In the distance, I could spot a mass of purple, pink and yellow sand glittering like one million sequins. It was so beautiful; I couldn't take my eyes off of it.

"That's the Pixie Stix desert," said the dark haired boy. "Isn't it amazing?"

"It's... wow," I whispered breathless at the sight of the desert. "This place is paradise."

"Not anymore," muttered the boy. "I'm Michael by the way, the only human in Candy Land. Well besides you, but the chosen one is supposed to fight then die or leave so you don't count."

"Whoa whoa whoa wait? I'm supposed to FIGHT?"

### Chapter 3

Michael lead me into a tall white chocolate building with the words "Candy Land Protection Agency, Fight Ricardo Gummivitz!" written on the front door.

"Ricardo Gummivitz is the current president of Candy Land," Michael explained. "He has changed Candy Land from a sweet paradise to a sour prison. You are supposed to kill him or die trying."

"Why me?" I stammered weakly.

"You're the chosen one," he said as if that explained everything.

He led me into a room made entirely out of plump marshmallows. Sinking into a plush fluffy green marshmallow chair, I looked at the various types of living candy before me. Tall red and black Twizzlers pored over color-coded charts and graphs. Goey chocolate chip cookies watched news clips of battles raging all across the Sno-Caps



## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 5

mountain range. Sour Patch Kids of every color hovered in the corner of the room while a Swedish Fish explained, “Now kids, this is why you work hard in school and listen to your parents-- so you don’t become mass killers who try to take over Candy Land when you grow up.”

In the center of the room sat Carmella King on one gigantic marshmallow. Michael sat to the right of her on a slightly smaller marshmallow. He smiled at me as if he was telling me that everything will be fine. It was comforting to know that I wasn’t the only human here.

“Attention everyone,” boomed General King in a regal voice. “If you haven’t heard yet, the chosen one has finally come. She will be trained to fight and then take on Ricardo Gummivitz in possibly the most brutal fight in history. She will either win and save Candy Land from destruction or die a gruesome death.”

General King looked at me as if she wanted me to say something.

Nervously clearing my throat, I stammered, “Well let’s hope I don’t die an, ummm, gruesome death. My mom probably wouldn’t like that.”

The Twizzlers laughed weakly.

General King continued, “Michael will help her train for the next couple of weeks. Is that okay with you Michael?”

“Yes General.”

“Good, now everyone get back to your jobs. We have a lot of work to do.”

There were a lot of “Yes General”s and “She scares the chocolate chips out of me” as I exited the building.

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 6

As Michael led me toward where we would be training, my nervousness slowly escaped me like water dripping out of a leaky faucet. I felt like this was what I meant to do, even if I died in the process. After all I was the chosen one, so how hard could it be?

Now that I look back on it, I can't believe I was so ignorant.

### Chapter 4

For the next two weeks I trained like I never trained before. Every night I would go to sleep with my muscles on fire and my body slightly stronger. Michael was there the whole time, going through the pushup drills and five mile sprints along with me. It's a good thing we were friends because the days would have been torture without him.

Finally came the day when General King told me to suit up and head out into the field. Well, her actual words were, "Suit up and get your lazy butt out there!" but I prefer not to think about that.

As I was getting dressed into my battle armor I heard the announcement "Everyone in the building must report to the Marshmallow Room for a briefing" over the crackling intercom.

Suddenly all I felt was fear. In less than an hour I would be fighting for my life against the most powerful forces in Candy Land.

"I can't believe I wasn't nervous before," I thought. "So many things could go wrong with the plan, so many people could die. I could die. I probably will die." I took a deep shaky breath but I couldn't stop trembling. "I have to go!" I screamed. "I can't do

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 7

it!” Grabbing my shoes I sprinted out into the jungle, clinging onto every hope that I would somehow escape this terrible place.

“Lilly, where are you?” a voice called.

I was huddled in a little ball under a kettle corn tree, my blotchy red face covered with tears.

“Lilly, come back!” the voice called again.

“I can’t; don’t make me! Please.” I cried out.

Michael burst into the clearing. “Where were you? We were worried sick.”

“I can’t do it Michael. I’m not good enough, I’ll get everyone killed, and I’ll never see my mom again!” The words I had been dying to say all came out in a rush.

“That won’t happen. Just because some stupid old gummy worm that makes up dumb prophecies says that you might die doesn’t mean you will. Trust me.”

“I just don’t want lives to be lost because of me.”

“You’re saving lives, not losing them. Without you we would all die.”

“Okay, I’ll fight. I’m so sorry I’ve been acting like this it’s just that--” My voice broke off into a sob.

“I know,” Michael said gently, “I know.”

## Chapter 5

The bright, lemon Starburst sun sparkled overhead. It would have been a beautiful day except for the fact that I was hiding under a jellybean bush ready to make the one shot that would save everyone’s life or destroy us all. Minutes later, the soft

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 8

wind that had been blowing earlier changed into something you would expect from a tornado. I breathed in slowly. Why couldn't the army come sooner? I had been waiting under the bush for two hours. Maybe Ricardo Gummivitz is hoping that I'll die of boredom from having to wait so long for him to show up. That would make his life a lot easier. All of a sudden marching could be heard in the distance.

"It's time," I thought.

My fingers slowly curved around the bow. The army was slowly approaching, Ricardo Gummivitz right in the lead. One arrow is all it would take. If I hit Ricardo Gummivitz right in the heart, he would die instantly. His army would most likely scatter and run away. "Only one shot," I told myself. "That's it."

Ricardo Gummivitz slowly approached into my line of fire. A fifteen foot tall lime-green gummy bear with a suit made out of dark chocolate, he was something to be feared. Killing him with one regular arrow would be impossible, but the explosive arrow I was using would destroy him instantly. But it might destroy me too.

Suddenly Michael appeared behind me. "You have to shoot now, before he gets too close."

Slowly I pulled the bow back, while aiming the arrow at an unsuspecting Ricardo Gummivitz. It seemed to fly in slow motion as I let go. Even before the arrow exploded I knew I was too late. I had waited too long; the arrow would kill Ricardo Gummivitz but it would kill me too.

"Michael, run!" I managed to choke out before I flew up into the air.

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 9

I flailed my burned arms helplessly as I started descending in the cloud of smoke and ash. My body felt as if it were on fire. It probably was. A second later, my head hit the baby-pink rock candy boulder that going to be our meeting point after I fired the arrow. At least I ended up in the right place. Everything around me was red, even Michael. As I faded into the world of unconsciousness I heard him scream in agony. I would have screamed too.

### Chapter 6

“Is she going to wake up? She’s been out for two days.”

“Just give it some time; it was a pretty bad fall.”

“I just hope she’s okay.”

“She will be.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t.”

Blinking slowly, I opened my eyes and looked right into the worried faces of Carmella King and Michael. Michael! He survived the explosion!

“My head feels like a bulldozer ran over it,” I grumbled.

“I would have been surprised if it didn’t,” Said Carmella King. “Just be glad the burns on your arms healed up quickly. We have very good medics.”

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 10

I glanced down at my arms. Sure enough they looked perfectly fine, just a little pink. They seemed much better than the bloody red mess I had seen right before I got knocked out.

“You will be able to go home as soon as you can walk,” said Michael.

He sounded very upset about that. I wondered why.

“Is Ricardo Gummivitz dead?”

“He died as soon as the arrow hit him. Everyone else is celebrating their freedom right now.”

“Let me try walking, I want to see my mom.” Slowly I stood up and took a few steps. It was hard but I could do it. “Can I leave right now?”

“Sure,” said Michael, “We just need to find a washing machine. You’ll go home the same way you came here, by pressing the big red button.”

“There’s a service building with a washing machine right down the street. Let’s go now.”

Michael grew quieter and quieter as we walked toward the service building. I finally realized what the problem was right as I was about to leave.

“I’ll be able to come visit, right?”

“Only if you want to. The red button will be there forever now but your mom won’t be able to see it.” His voice grew slightly more hopeful.

“Good, I won’t be able to stand not seeing everybody here, especially you.”

Michael grinned. “Me neither, now you better get going. Your mom probably has the police searching for you in all seven continents.”

## MIDDLE Blood and Butterfingers 11

Laughing, I stepped into the washing machine and placed my hand on the red button.

“Don’t forget to visit!” Michael called.

“I won’t,” I promised myself.

And as I spun around in the washing machine I couldn’t help but wonder if this was the end, or a new beginning.

The Little Savior

Adithi Ramakrishnan

Grade 6

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## MIDDLE The Little Savior 1

They ate at her skin as she fled from the forest. They danced mockingly as she ran as fast as she could go. Her home was ablaze, seething with the vengeful gusts of fire. The malicious flames leapt from tree to tree, devouring their prey like a lion on the hunt. Soon, they would engulf her as well. The determined fawn, however, refused to give up. She continued running, her nimble feet leaping over burning branches and skimming rings of fire. An enormous tree collapsed crashing next to her, groaning with age as it fell to the ground. The fallen giant incinerated the earth around it, sparking more fire. The fawn flinched as a few cinders leapt onto her pelt. There was no time to waste. The escape was almost complete. Ahead, she could faintly see the others. They were waiting for her, like always. They were a family--they lived together, loved together, survived together.

Almost there! Strands of light peeked out from the hazy shadows. A pale moon crept out from behind the blaze. Salvation approached as the fawn put everything she had into her attempts to make her final getaway. Her family was so close; she could almost touch the fuzzy spots on their pelts. But she could also feel the daunting heat of the flames behind her as they sought to bring her to the ground. Her mother was merely a breath away... leaping gracefully over a burning tree branch, the fawn found safety. Her mother gasped, anxious, but upon seeing her young one secure let the worry lines smooth. The little fawn rested her head and tender ears on her mother.

This reality was too harsh to bear--dreams were far more pleasant at a time like this. Instantly, the little fawn closed her eyes and reveled in a dream that took her back to the once beautiful forest --the lush green trees that stretched their branches over her as she lay in the shade delicately nibbling on the green grass, twigs and leaves that covered the mossy ground she pranced in, chirping birds resonating with the hustle of nature at work. Rabbits also shared the forest, racing across the grassy terrain, chattering and singing cheery songs to entertain the wildlife and nature that surrounded them.

## MIDDLE The Little Savior 2

But that wonderful dream was slowly fading into the hazy mist. The mother slowly edged her little fawn's head onto the dry grass and stood up. Immediately, a sense of fatigue overcame her and she fell back on the ground, dizzy. The sight of the barren forest, ravaged by the scent of musty smoke, made her shudder. The flames had all but completely engulfed the abode her family had called home for generations. They had hungrily licked at the plants and trees, leaving nothing but dry ground as the forest fire continued its ruthless demolition. The mother turned away, her heart heavy with grief.

But the animals weren't alone. The terrain was also inhabited by another species-- humans. In that moment, the mother calmed. The humans were braver than the animals. They were also smarter and had more resources. She knew that they would never let the forest perish in the harsh flames. The humans would come back, just as always, and save them. Although mere hiccups of the fire that covered the forest, damage was being inflicted to their town nevertheless and it would most likely not survive the incident. But the forest was vast, and still had some hope. Small areas within the scorched trees and lifeless grass were still untouched, and could be saved by the gentle gush of water. The humans stored water in their homes, and even installed pumps that could be used in times of dire need. There was certainly enough to be spared? Yes! The humans would come to the rescue.

And yet... something was amiss. The humans weren't turning back. Instead, they were running away from the town and forest they once knew, gathering together their families and fleeing. The mother shook her head in despair, trying to understand. This wasn't possible. Humankind and the animals had shared the land for generations. They were family, united by the bonds of life and love. Didn't family help each other in strife? Then why were they deserting her when she was in need? It couldn't be. They had always coexisted in harmony and peace. And now, when panic had rippled through the land, the humans were choosing to leave behind their legacy. They were abandoning their family, their forest, their home.

### MIDDLE The Little Savior 3

The mother turned away, crestfallen. Her young fawn was reluctantly opening its eyes and they wandered back and forth, from the burning forest to her mother's apprehensive face. Finally, the fawn's eyes rested on the fleeing humans. The mother fondly licked her child's face and turned her head away. As her fawn nestled in her protective embrace, the mother turned an expectant gaze once more to the people. They were running faster now, their feet a mere blur in the shadow of the ominous blaze that wreaked havoc and destruction on their beloved forest.

As she readied herself to turn away for the final time and face the inevitable that her home was going to be lost forever, her eyes met those of a small child. He was leaving the town in the arms of his father. A young woman trailed behind the two. The boy's eyes were pure and innocent, and they devoutly eyed the animal for some time. Then, the small child's eyes drifted and locked onto the burning forest. A small tear formed inside one of his large eyes, and slid down his nose. It made a small damp spot on the front of his shirt. The mother deer merely stared at the boy, her eyes pits of despondence and lost hope. Was this the end?

The child's eyes wavered back to the mother deer and her frightened fawn. More tears were appearing now, and falling softly. Suddenly, the boy slid down from his father's arms. He lightly stepped onto the dry grass, and tugged at his father's sleeves. The tall man looked at his son for a second, who was pointing at the smoldering forest. The father patted the child on the head.

"It's all right, son," he said gently, "We'll find a new home for ourselves." The boy shook his head stubbornly and pointed again. The father smiled ever so slightly. "Don't cry," he said again, "There are many more homes out there for us."

The child shook his head once more, and this time he spoke. "But Dad, will there be a home for *them*?" As he uttered the words, the boy pointed at the deer. The mother, resigned to her fate, had turned away and was nursing her fawn. Further out, the other deer had also given

#### MIDDLE The Little Savior 4

up hope and sat on the edge of the barren land sadly watching their once lush abode burn to the ground.

The father's smile faded. "They'll find a home too. It's time to get going, son. Come on." As he said this, the father prepared to hoist his son into the air. But the child wriggled out of his father's arms and stood there limply.

"What if we run out of homes on this earth?" he whispered, tears rolling down the side of his face, "Will we find another Earth?"

In that moment, a stark realization crept into the father's eyes. He clutched his son's hand as if steadying himself, and slowly kneeled until he was at eye level with his son. By this time, the boy's mother had caught up with them and was tugging at her husband's arm, urging him to come, to leave. But the father remained stone still, moving only to wipe the tears from his son's innocent face.

"Another Earth?" His son's passionate words rang in his ears. And in that moment, the father was overcome with a sense of shame. He rose, and picked up his son. "Mother Earth has supported us, nurtured us, protected us," he whispered, his voice a wisp of wind.

"She has always been there, but have we taken her for granted? I've always thought that we were compassionate to Mother Nature, but if we desert her when she is in need, it has all been a lie."

The mother was looking up at her husband now, revelation clear in her crystalline eyes. "Oh," she whispered, and touched her child's tiny palm. "What must we do?"

The reply was simple, abrupt, yet firm. "We go back."

And with that, he turned, picked up his son and began running back towards the burning inferno. The wife, watching in awe, turned to follow them. And there they were. A single family, their home destroyed, yet going back into the flames to save a habitat that could perhaps be salvaged. Countless other townsfolk halted as they watched the family turn back. Some gasped;

## MIDDLE The Little Savior 5

some shook their heads in disbelief-- but most were inspired, turned around and began running back with them. The young child who had started the passionate revolution merely watched from his father's arms, his eyes fixed on the forest in need.

The water pump was near the outskirts of the town. The father picked up a few pails and began filling them up. A few men and women brought more pails from their packs, and began passing them out. All this the young child watched, his face beaming like the moon. There was hope yet for his deer, for his forest, for his earth.

At the edge of the forest, the little fawn was startled at the commotion. Her mother patted its fuzzy head and kneeled down to lick its pelt, but the fawn was restless. She stood up suddenly, straight and tall, and began leaping. The mother tried in vain to calm her child. After all, it was only a matter of time. It would not be long before they would be forced to move, to find a new home and that would not be easy. The fawn shook itself joyfully, trying to show her mother the wondrous sight before her. Her eyes were pivoted towards the humans. The mother stood, ready to calm her child, and finally caught a glimpse. What she saw made her gasp in shock. The humans--*they weren't fleeing*. They were coming back--back to the town, back to the pumps. *What were they doing?*

Then, it struck her. The thought was so startling that the mother staggered for a second. And yet, she knew it had to be true. It wasn't over--it wasn't the end. The humans--they weren't leaving their kin behind. They were coming back to save them and their home.

The water sizzled as it hit the flames. The blaze cowered under the coolness of the water. Although powerful, the fire was no match for the power of the intense gush. The water pushed forth in strong waves, extinguishing the deadly flames. The fathers and sons of the town threw the water on to the trees, battling the flames, while the women filled the pails. Slowly, all of the deer gathered and watched in wonder. The humans had become their beacon of hope--hope for their homeland.

## MIDDLE The Little Savior 6

Although the effort of the humans was immense, there were some areas of the forest that could not be saved. A lot of the trees were piles of ash and barren land. All was not lost, however. Some trees had kept their semisweet emerald color and valor during the ardent battle with the natural forces. There were still parts of the forest in which the deer could live in and slowly, but surely, the forest would be green again. The humans had collapsed onto the ground, both exhausted and in awe of the impact of their actions.

At the center of the crowd was the little boy, now in the arms of his mother. Although the forest had been rescued from its fiery fate, the town was destroyed. The humans had no alternative but to depart for another home- but they did so with an opened mind, and a new insight to the world.

As the humans left, the deer watched from behind the trees. Because of the heroic effort by the humans, the deer had been given a second chance. The townspeople had put their own needs aside and rushed to help for a greater good. The little fawn stayed close to her mother, watching them go. The mother's eyes were fixed on the boy, the child who had saved their forest. As the boy turned, and caught her eye, he smiled a large smile. The mother deer nodded at him, and the child threw his arms up into the air in delight. The mother's heart filled with contentment and gratification. The boy's simple words "Another Earth?" had started a movement more powerful than she had ever seen. He was truly a savior in her eyes. *There's still hope for the Earth, she thought: We just need more- like him.*

Seacat

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## MIDDLE Seacat 1

Chéstérr le Chat smiled rather darkly at the ship he was planning to attack. *His* ship, the S.S. (*Swashbuckling Seacats*) *Seawing* was not particularly large, but was notorious all the same. To the dogs, that is. In Cat Country, the *Seawing* was cheered on at her every turn.

Púffë, Chéstérr's best friend and the ship's repair cat for anything electronic, suddenly sprinted up to Chéstérr.

"That ship, the one we are attacking," Púffë purred in a low voice. "That is the DD *Retriever*. I assume you have heard of it?"

"Who hasn't? It is the dogs' best ship. It would be great to get our paws on it." Chéstérr replied, "Don't worry; it will be no match for us."

"Hmmm. Still, you don't want to cross swords with the captain, Fidu."

"Okay. Will do, or, I guess, won't do."

A scruffy Manx tabby with part of an ear missing quietly padded up to Chéstérr. His given name was Henri le Fonte, but everyone called him Stumpy because of his characteristic tiny Manx tail.

"Meowsieur. We are approaching the *Retriever*. Most likely they have spotted us by now, so it is good that the wind is behind us. We will be able to board in 10 or so minutes."

"Excellent!" replied Chéstérr, "Captain Lidyvaë has already assembled a boarding party. Now all we have to do is wait until the time comes."



## MIDDLE Seacat 2

When the cats boarded the ship, Chéstérr noticed a strange thing. All the dogs were falling back to the hold. He tried to break through them, but was stopped by a fearsome jet-black dog with a blood-red patch over his left eye.

“Hello, Cat,” he said calmly, “I do not believe that we have met. It is a real pity you will not live long enough to become acquainted with me. My name is Fidu.”

The dog slashed and stabbed, but always he was stopped by Chéstérr’s blade. Feinting to one side, Fidu almost managed to decapitate Chéstérr, but Chéstérr ducked at the last second and only the tip of the beret he always wore was cut off.

With a clever riposte following Fidu’s lunge, Chéstérr caught Fidu off guard and almost hit him, but Fidu recovered quickly.

“Ahhh, so we know what we’re doing, do we, Cat? Good. I like a challenge once in a while.” It was creepy how calm he was even though he was ruthlessly fighting.

Fidu was pressing hard, and Chéstérr grimaced as he continued his attack, which had mostly turned to a defensive struggle by now. Parrying, Chéstérr retreated two steps, and attempted another riposte. But Fidu had learned his lesson the first time, and, ready this time, parried the attack easily.

All of a sudden, the alarm blared and a dog managed to call in reinforcements on the radio. Chéstérr gave one last swipe and ran for the door. Fidu made no attempt to follow him.

Chéstérr was glad for once to retreat. He was an excellent fencer, but Fidu was better. He had barely been able to hold up.

Going back to the ship, Chéstérr was stopped by Lidyvaë.

### MIDDLE Seacat 3

“We need you to stay here with Púffë, Chéstérr,” she hissed, “I heard that some important government secrets are being held on this ship. I need you and Púffë to stay here. I would do it myself, but I need to captain the ship.”

Chéstérr agreed, and he and Púffë stowed away. They decided to hide in a dusty old dining room that looked as if it hadn't been used in years. Púffë thought it would be the perfect hideout. The walls were mildewed and the paint was chipped. Dust covered the floor. The door had been boarded off, so the cats had to find a way to get in through the air vent, which they did. The first night went well. Púffë wanted to sleep in shifts, but Chéstérr, arguing that no one even knew that the room existed, vetoed that.

The first day, the cats scouted out the ship, locating everything they needed. They stole some cured meat and water from the kitchen and stockpiled it in the hideout, saving it for later.

That night, the cats got caught. They were sleeping on a shelf when Chéstérr rolled off the shelf onto a grand piano. It was less than melodious.

“Next time at least try to play *Furry Elise* on the way down,” muttered Púffë as the cats were led away, “You aren't very considerate.”

“Well, I fell!” protested Chéstérr, “How are you blaming me for falling?!”

“I'm not blaming you for falling; I'm blaming you for sleeping above a piano.”

The cats were locked inside a small orange room.

“If I ever see another orange colored thing in my life, I swear I'll kill it,” raved Púffë, “Orange walls, orange floor, orange ceiling, and an orange table! I officially hate orange!”

## MIDDLE Seacat 4

“That’s too bad. Now, come with me,” a little beagle had crept into the orange room without the cats noticing. She whispered, “I’m Emalia, and I am on your side.”

“How do we know that?” Púffë asked suspiciously.

“Trust me. I’ve sent a message in meowrse code to Lidyvaë, and she is coming to rescue you. We need to disable the *Retriever’s* radio so they can’t call for help, though. Quickly, now, come with me!”

The cats and dog navigated through the ship without being seen or heard. Soon, they got to the main mast. The radio was on top of it.

“I’ll climb up and disable it,” said Púffë in a hushed voice, “I know how better than any of you do.”

Chéstérr spoke, “We all will.”

The cats were almost halfway up the mast when Emalia, who was not good at that sort of thing and was barely 12 feet off the ground, was blown off by a particularly sharp gust of wind. A storm was clearly coming on, and a big one.

Crashing to the floor, Emalia awoke the captain. Hoping not to arouse suspicion, she pretended that she was chasing the cats instead of helping them. Fidu quickly went to the radio in his cabin.

Calling over the radio, all Fidu managed to get off was, “We are fin--.” He had meant to say, “We are finally calling for help. The dangerous ship *Seawing* may be attacking us again. Please, will any ships in our general vicinity come to our aid? Thank you.” Luckily, it seemed to those that heard the message that the *Retriever* was fine.

## MIDDLE Seacat 5

The storm picked up. Huge gusts of wind and mile-high waves tossed the *Retriever* around like it was a toy boat, and whoever was playing with it wanted to sink it. Púffë and Chéstërr hung on for dear life at the top of the mast.

Several tense minutes later, all onboard the *Retriever* heard a loud crash and were thrown forward as water started pouring into the boat. As the *Retriever* was reduced to splinters against the heartless, piercing rocks, Chéstërr and Púffë leaped overboard to the thrashing sea below. Fortunately, they were excellent swimmers, and reached the land quickly.

“Ugh. I’m all wet. How am I supposed to dry off in this storm?” Púffë moaned, “I’ve had *enough* of this.”

“Well,” Chéstërr said, “At least we are not with those awful dogs anymore. I’ve had enough of *them*.....What is that?!”

“Oh no...Looks like the remains of the *Seawing*.” Púffë winced and braced himself for Chéstërr’s response.

“But how..?” Chéstërr moaned, looking at the ruined ship and quickly turning away. Sadly, he shook his head. “There is no way we can salvage anything! I just hope the crew is okay. Come on, Púffë; let’s go see if we can help.”

The cats walked down the hill, the grass sodden from all the rain.

“Just a thought,” expressed Púffë worriedly, “But did you happen to know where we are? The Dreaded Iguana Isles were relatively close to our original path, so...”

“Great! Just *great*. First, I’m captured by my archenemies, the dogs. Then, we shipwreck on an unknown island. *Then*, things appear to go in my favor for once, and

## MIDDLE Seacat 6

we see the *Seawing*... but it turns out that she is hopelessly wrecked on the aforementioned unknown island...which might turn out to be the Iguana Isles! Just how lucky am I! I could try for the lottery! If my chances of winning were a million to one in my favor, I'd probably lose! Hooray!" Chéstérr was being sarcastic, which meant that he was angry, upset, and agitated all at the same time.

"Calm down, Chéstérr. We are still the best Swashbuckling Seacats around, right? So the Iguanas will be no match for our excellent sword skills." Púffë had known Chéstérr since they were both kittens, and knew that it always calmed Chéstérr when he was talking about swords and fencing. It had long been a hobby of his, and he was quite good.

"Yes...I need to work on my riposte...will you practice with me?" In fact, Chéstérr's riposte was fine, but practicing would distract him from the *Seawing*, so Púffë agreed.

---

Three hours later, the cats had reunited with the ex-crew of the *Seawing*. The storm had let up, but all were grim. Lidyaë was convinced that, from what Chéstérr told her, that the dogs were in no shape to be fighting, so it was the Iguanas that everycat was worried about.

"I saw one today when I was cutting firewood," Csinnamón, a powerful ginger Maine Coon, commented. "It disappeared before I got a good look, though. All I can tell you is that they were green."

As they were conversing on what Csinnamón saw, Stumpy and Púffë's brother, an Abyssinian named Flúffë, walked up, overjoyed.

## MIDDLE Seacat 7

“Guess what?! We found some wild catnip growing in the forest!” Flúffë was so enthusiastic that he did a dance.

“Do not perform that dance in the public, Flúffë. I would be embarrassed,” Púffë warned.

Lidyvaë interjected. “Dancing or not, *catnip* or not, we need to form a plan to attack the Iguanas. I may not have a ship anymore, but I am still your captain, now your general. It is, as you all know, best to attack first and remain on the offense then to be attacked and remain on the defense. Therefore, we are going to send out spies tomorrow and....”

Chéstérr and Púffë were among those sent out to act as spies. Though they searched long and hard, they had no luck in finding the Iguanas’ secret base. Not everycat had the same luck, though. Stumpy and Flúffë found the base, although accidentally. They were looking for more catnip, as Lidyvaë had banned going back to where they first found it. Stumpy had seen a trail, and thought that it was how the Iguanas got their catnip, although later he realized that the Iguanas didn’t use catnip or like it. He followed the trail and found a tower, which he realized was a watch tower. Luckily Stumpy was a tabby, so he blended well with the grass, plus the Iguana on watch was asleep.

He quickly reported back. Lidyvaë was pleased, and planned to surround the base the next morning. They would then rush in at all sides, and quickly wipe out any possible threat. She told them to get a good sleep, but no cats ever slept so fitfully.

## MIDDLE Seacat 8

Chéstérr woke up early that morning, and got ready in record time. He and some of the other cats were practicing their fencing in an open clearing.

Thrust, parry, riposte, lunge, parry 4, fleche. Chéstérr practiced for two hours, and then the order came to attack.

As the cats formed a loose ring around the base, some noticed the *Retriever* sailing away. The dogs had repaired their ship.

“Attack!” the cats tore into the fortress. Chéstérr fought too many Iguanas to count, but remembered one in particular with a deadly sort of déjà vu. He was fighting an Iguana general who was almost akin to Fidu in the way he fenced, but this time Chéstérr was slightly better.

As the Iguana performed an excellent fleche, Chéstérr reprised quickly. His opponent parried again to riposte at Chéstérr. With a parry 4, though, Chester easily lunged and defeated the Iguana.

Even though the cats were good fighters, the quantity of the Iguanas much surpassed the quality. More just kept coming, and they were not merciful. Chéstérr now sported a nasty cut on his left cheek, just below his eye. He would have gotten worse, but Púffë had saved him on that one.

An angry scream from Púffë sent Chéstérr and two others running. Púffë had broken his sword arm after a cruel press from one of the Iguanas. Snóbelle, a white Persian and a great fencer, covered for him while Míttenes took him back to the *Seawing*.

## MIDDLE Seacat 9

The cats fought the Iguanas for almost two whole days. They were both very good, and neither one could seem to get the upper hand. It was only after Emalia, falsely telling the Iguanas that the dogs would team up with them, learned the Iguanas' attack strategy that the cats started to win.

Púffë, although his left and dominant arm was broken, still managed to salvage the radio and call for all the Swashbuckling Seacats in their area to come pick them up. Lidyvaë took a part of the wheel of the *Seawing*, just to remember. The cats have never gotten along with the dogs since, pardoning a few exceptions like Emalia.

Au revior.



Still Healing

Sian Syring

Grade 8

Ashburn, VA

## MIDDLE Still Healing 1

Livvy (no one called her Olivia except for her parents) surrounded herself in a stark white coldness, her head tipped back against the wooden cabinets. She allowed the tiles to leach the heat from her body, feeling dazed and confused, like the words hadn't quite sunken in. Reaching into her pocket, she slid out her prized possession. She studied it, turning it over and over again gently in her hands. Slowly, carefully, it flipped open with a click. As she examined it in the harsh light, its edges damaged by years of abusing trees and wooden desks, she felt her stomach muscles contract. The feelings of shame, disgust, and desperation had always been there, but she had never had the courage to face them head-on. Now, years of suppressed emotion hit her like a train, and she suddenly found herself unable to breathe. The fact that she was about to commit an act so typical of a pretentious, angst-ridden teen only added to her building contempt. Still, she felt that it was all that she deserved.

Cold steel, pale skin, translucent, blue veins, hot tears, trembling, hold still! Needs more pressure, no fear. Takes the blame, it's all her fault, he just sees her for what she really is. Lazy, pathetic, stereotypical, wannabe, and of course, boring. Tedium over, vision blurring, blood welling up, shock setting in, white porcelain, clear water, screams turn to retching, but nothing's coming up. Shattering so easily, how did it come to this? Then again, wasn't it inevitable? Little does he know that he has set off a ticking time bomb. Now the horror, the self-destruction begins, her breath coming in gasps. Finally, she finds the right word: worthless.

## MIDDLE Still Healing 2

As quickly as it had begun, the hurricane dispersed, and it became eerily quiet. Livvy stalked back to her bedroom, her mind a smooth, undisturbed sea. She completely shut down, uncaring, wanting nothing more than to simply fade from existence. After all, she was just a burden, and the faster her decay, the better.

The next few days seemed to blur together. Livvy isolated herself from the world, grudgingly answering questions from concerned peers. She would simply smile, shrug, and walk away. When people tried to open the channels of communication she was trying so hard to shut off, she became irritable and terrified, like a cornered animal. In the back of her mind, she knew that she would eventually have to face the pain, but she didn't have the strength to confront it just yet. The best she could do was fake disinterest, and try to move forward. However, no matter how hard she tried, her thoughts kept drifting back to that night...

---

It was a Monday night, a typical, routine facebook check, when suddenly:

“Um, we need to talk...”

Livvy's heart dropped, and there was a sick feeling in her stomach. Oh god, she thought. It's happening. As she expected, a few seconds later:

“I think we should break up.”

She took a moment to assess the situation. She urged herself to stay calm. Trembling with emotion, she slowly typed:

“Okay...”

### MIDDLE Still Healing 3

She could almost hear his voice, spitting out apologies and sentiments, as if she could reach out and slap him right now. As he continued, she found herself responding out loud in her usual dry fashion.

“I’m sorry it had to end so quickly,” he typed.

“I’m sure your large group of ‘lady friends’ helps with the guilt,” she muttered.

“Let’s just be really good friends,” he suggested.

“Yeah, like I’ve never heard that before.”

“Don’t think of it as a breakup, think of it as a step back.”

Livvy laughed bitterly. “Okay, dude, you’re just listing clichés now.”

Seeing that Livvy wasn’t responding, he typed:

“You probably hate me now.”

“Well, maybe it’s because, by the looks of it, you just Google-searched how to breakup with someone,” she half-snarled.

Then it hit her. “It’s me,” she thought. “It’s me I’m angry at. I’m the one who’s undeserving. I’m the one who has problems.” She angrily wiped away the tears that were now pouring down her face. Shaking violently, she wrote:

“No, I don’t hate you. I just... I don’t know.”

“Yeah,” he replied, “I’m sorry.”

## MIDDLE Still Healing 4

After mulling over the truth of that comment, she finally said:

“So am I. Bye Andy.”

She gingerly closed her laptop and stood up shakily. Her legs felt weak, and her trembling knees seemed on the verge of buckling. She slowly opened the door and curled up on the bathroom floor, hoping to find some comfort in her florescent-lighted purgatory. Breathing hard, her jet black hair forming a curtain across her face, she finally couldn't take it anymore---

At this point, she would always have to close her eyes and shut out the memories of self-inflicted torture, which threatened to send her over the edge again. She rubbed the jagged scar that had formed on her wrist, which she had become accustomed to hiding under a bracelet. As she felt the lumpy, uneven skin, she contemplated quietly, and hoped for better days.

A few months passed, and the scar started to fade, as well as her memories of him. In the last month, she had laughed at least fifty times. We're talking those serious pee-your-pants laughs. She could now smile at how cheesy he had been. Still, she felt a pang of something, something she couldn't quite comprehend. But one night, just as she was getting over this, her phone started to ring. Not paying attention, she picked up and nonchalantly said: “Hello?”

“Hey, Livvy, what's up?”

## MIDDLE Still Healing 5

She froze at the sound of Andy's voice, expecting to feel anger, but only found confusion.

"Not much," she replied cautiously.

"Nothing at all?" He asked.

"Well..." She said. "Mr. Gerard is still creepy, and our good friend Sarah from gym is still a very special child."

"Cool," Andy laughed. He paused. "Um... have you ever really regretted something a lot, but you can't fix it?"

She raised her eyebrow inquisitively. "Well, Catholicism works. A quick trip to the confessional, a few 'Hail Mary's; you'll be fine."

"True," he replied laughingly before continuing. "Seriously though, that's kind of how I feel about breaking up with you."

She clenched and unclenched her fists, trying to decide what to feel. Swallowing her fear, she decided to tell him what she had been dying to say.

"Look, when you broke up with me, I blamed myself. I kept saying it was my fault, that I was too fat or too boring or whatever. That I'd driven you away."

"No..." He whispered. "Don't blame yourself for me. I have issues with girls. I just get bored, and I break up with them even though I still like them."

## MIDDLE Still Healing 6

“Mm-hmm,” she remarked. Sighing heavily, she replied, “Look Andy, I still like you. I think that you can be really funny and sweet sometimes, but others...well... you’re kind of a jerk. I just don’t want to get hurt again.”

“Yeah, I know,” Andy said. “That’s why I think that maybe... I don’t know... we could date, but not really be in a relationship. You’d still have the freedom to be with a guy, and I’d still have the freedom to be with a girl.”

“So, like... friends with benefits?”

“Yeah, exactly,” he replied.

Livvy bit her lip. The temptation was overwhelming. She felt her defenses going down, and a small, suspicious part of her screamed in protest. However, she couldn’t escape the feeling she had been holding back since that night: utter loneliness. The hope that she wouldn’t have to be alone anymore overcame her.

“Sure, why not?” She said.

They talked for hours, and Livvy felt safe, happy even. She accepted this turn of events almost without question; wanting, needing, to feel loved. Finally, a gleam of hope danced before her.

However, the next morning, her excitement melted away, cold logic replacing it. As she walked to the bus stop, reality washed over her, threatening to drown her in doubt. Hiding her ice blue, tear-filled eyes with her hair, she slipped her finger underneath her bracelet, probing the uneven skin she found there. She pressed the scar, picked at it,

## MIDDLE Still Healing 7

and scratched it until it began to bleed again. The bus screeched to a halt in front of the school, and Livvy wanted more than anything to talk to someone. After a quick trip to her locker, she half ran, half skidded into the bathroom, where she knew she'd find her friend. Sure enough, Nikki was there, straightening her hair. Despite her sense of urgency, she took a moment to stop and say:

"I think you're the only person I know who carries all their hair products wherever they go."

"Shut up," Nikki laughed good-naturedly.

"Hey, I'm not judging. If someone shows up with horrible hat-hair, heck, you'll be ready."

Nikki giggled, then stopped short when she noticed Livvy's wrist. "Oh my god, what happened!?" She asked, her voice filled with concern.

"Never mind that now," Livvy replied curtly.

She quickly explained everything that had happened, the conversation peppered with varying amounts of profanity from Nikki. As Livvy spoke, she realized that without his voice, without his hold over her, the words were just that: words. His contrived excuses and empty promises tasted bad in her mouth as she spit them out into the open air. Still, it felt good to finally speak out loud about it. However, she left out her night in the bathroom, because the thought of it might force her to emote something besides anger. Finally, as she finished, Nikki looked a bit overwhelmed.



## MIDDLE Still Healing 8

“Thanks for letting me vent,” Livvy laughed half-heartedly.

“No problem,” Nikki replied, the surprise in her eyes being replaced with something Livvy had dreaded: pity. She hesitated, and then asked, “Do you want, nice, sugarcoated Nikki, or blunt, honest Nikki?”

“That second one,” Livvy said wearily. “I’d rather be spared of anymore BS.”

She nodded, not surprised. Putting her hands on Livvy’s shoulders, she said, “I hate to say it, but you’re getting played.”

“I know!” Livvy half-sobbed. She sank down to the floor, hugging her knees to her chest. “But no one else is going to want me. I have to take what I can get, you know?”

“True,” Nikki shrugged. “I mean, you’re cynical, sarcastic, dark, unfriendly---“

Exasperated, Livvy gave her a “you’re-really-not-helping” glare.

Nikki leaned against one of the stalls, grinning. “---but that’s why I love you,” she finished. Sighing, she continued, “You don’t give yourself enough credit. He just doesn’t appreciate you, or anyone, for that matter. I mean, he did pretty much the same thing to Lexi, Kendal, Mia, Zoe...”

“Thanks,” Livvy smiled weakly. “Thing is, I’ve already agreed to this stupid deal of his. What do I do?”

Nikki thought for a moment, then simply replied, “Tell him the truth: that you’re not going to settle for him.”

## MIDDLE Still Healing 9

Strangely, this hadn't occurred to Livvy before, but she now felt a wicked smile spread across her face. "Thank you, Nikki. I'm going to do just that."

"Good," Nikki sighed with relief. After a moment's pause, she asked, "Do you realize how germy that floor is?"

Livvy scrambled up on her hands and knees, yelping with fake panic. This sent both them into laughing/crying hysterics, and they leaned on one another as they struggled to catch their breath. Finally, once they had calmed down, they hugged each other and went to their separate classes. Livvy headed to study hall, where she knew she would have to confront him.

As she sat at her desk, she was very aware of him inching closer, a folded slip of paper in his tanned fingers. She forced herself to look directly at him and smile as he silently handed her the note. It was hard for her to tear herself away from those eyes; dark green, twinkling mischievously, pulling her in...

She shook herself, gently unfolding the note, swallowing hard.

"Hey, Beautiful," it read.

Clenching her jaw, she began to write furiously. After a few minutes, she leaned back and examined her statement:

## MIDDLE Still Healing 10

“Hi, Andy. Yesterday, I was in one of my ... understanding moods. But let me make something very clear: if you think you can win me over with a few sappy apologies, you’re wrong. You still like me, but you don’t want to be with me? The more I think about it, the more convoluted it sounds. If you really care about me, if you really feel regret, then say it now, TO MY FACE, and earn back my trust. Otherwise, leave me alone; because I’m not your backup plan, I’m not your last resort. You either love me, or you leave me.”

She smirked as she placed the paper neatly on his desk. She took in every moment, every twitch of his mouth, the slow changing of his facial expressions from content to confused to angry. He hastily scribbled something before slamming the note down onto her desk and moving a few seats away. Livvy’s fingers slowly unfolded the paper as she watched Andy fume with agitation. Her eyes dropped down past what she had written, and read one word:

“Touché...”

She scoffed. “That’s what I thought,” she muttered.

As the day went on, she had to hide the exhilarated smile on her face. After months of self-torment, she had finally come to the realization while some people may hurt her, that pain was just a part of life. She knew that, while she might keep this scar forever, it would serve her well in the future. Ultimately, the experience would make Livvy a stronger, smarter person.

## MIDDLE Still Healing 11

She was at her locker, packing up at the end of the day, when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around and grinned.

“Well?” Nikki said anxiously.

“I told him off,” Livvy replied.

“What did he say?” Nikki asked.

Livvy handed her the note, which Nikki proceeded to snatch excitedly out of her hand. She had to laugh at Nikki’s overly shocked expression.

“I can’t believe he’d say that!” Nikki yelled furiously, “I swear, if I see him, I’ll---“

“Relax,” Livvy said soothingly, “I don’t care about him anymore. In fact, I’m glad that I know now what he’s really like.”

Nikki lifted her eyebrows in concern. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Livvy paused. Her finger traced the outline of the scar, feeling the scab that had begun to grow over it. Then, smiling, she replied:

“I’m still healing, but I think I’ll be okay.”

A Tale from the Deadlands

Garrison Haugen

Grade 8

Sterling, VA

## MIDDLE A Tale from the Deadlands 1

I was the quiet follower of a merciless peer, an especially rigorous individual, a trauma-hardened child. He watched his family die to cowardly injustice, as he ran to save his life. He aged quickly in the nightmarish world he was thrown into, we all did, but he had heaviness on his heart. On the night he left my company, I saw in him the monster that had spawned from a life dedicated to revenge, a revenge I knew only vague details about. I knew I lost him the night before Mason died, looking into the self-loathing eyes of a guilty murderer.

Weeks before, the smell of dead flesh hung in the air. A disease plagued the earth called *ambulomortus*, a disease that reanimated the freshly dead. The disease was transferred through fluids, in many cases a cannibalistic bite that plunged the disease-carrying teeth of the corpse into the healthy blood stream of the victim, in turn infecting the healthy entity, and creating another ghoulish abomination to start the vicious cycle all over again. In the beginning, people created massive fear-born chaos, stealing and killing to make their chances more favorable to survive against these “zombies”, as people were coming to call them. In just days, the human population had been halved and then halved again. Massive herds of zombies would deal the most damage with their unexpected and overwhelming force. Mason and his family tried to take refuge in a warehouse near their suburban neighborhood. Mason made it back.

Mason had been a decent student, he could get by without studying or trying too hard, and he was more fortunate-looking than most, so he was naturally a rather popular child. I had lived next to him for years; I, less fortunate than he, had not

## MIDDLE A Tale from the Deadlands 2

achieved that level of social status. He came to my house alone, with his father's .45 semi-automatic pistol. My parents had died while getting supplies from the local elementary school; I was left with my brother Alton. He was thoughtful and decisive; I was lucky to have him with me during this time. I was not particularly brave or physically dominant, and admittedly my world shrank after my parents' death. I became a sad and quiet disciple of the charismatic Mason, who charged the undead world fearlessly.

When he arrived he quickly proved his worth by saving us countless times with his pistol; a headshot was needed to cease the restless reanimated. Any other bodily damage would only deter the zombie slightly, causing virtually no response in the corpse except the immediate reaction to the force of the weapon. Mason was also wise about his resources; he knew his bullets would run out, so he carried a heavy fire axe to handle the single zombies he encountered in manageable situations. For the most part Mason protected us while we scavenged. I used an aluminum baseball bat for my own safety when Mason wasn't there. My brother Alton used our father's sledgehammer. It wasn't actually practical to carry it around, but he fastened the head of the sledge to his belt, taking away the top-heavy aspect.

Mason and I ran past the rotting, wooden fences that protected the old tenants' bikes and gardening tools. We were returning from a scavenging expedition that took us through some of our neighbors' houses; it had been a rewarding trip. I was unaccustomed to the perils of entering the houses of the dead. Many a turned neighbor provided complications, but again, these complications did all but phase Mason. With a

### MIDDLE A Tale from the Deadlands 3

stone-like composition he put a bullet directly into the head of his old, reanimated babysitter. To this day, I can't comprehend the tragedies that brought this compassionless efficiency upon such a young hopeful, who just weeks before was joking innocently amongst his large posse of acquaintances. We headed to an alleyway between two rows of deserted townhouses. Moss and mud covered this pebbled pathway, a path well traveled by my company and me. The end of the pass sprawled out into the side yard of our humble fortress, a rather gruesome-looking townhouse with large pits in the floors and other makeshift traps for the imbecilic zombies.

Alton was fairly adept at preparing the house for this apocalyptic horror. He had us prepare it methodically: making sure all the entrances had the required intelligent obstacles and secondary traps. Mason and I burst into the house, sweating slightly and breathing hard. It wasn't safe for one to maneuver slowly through such a danger-ridden environment, so caution and swiftness were essential. I made my way to the kitchen and sat back, exhausted; Mason put away his weapons promptly.

"What'd we find?" Alton asked as he came down from the upper floors.

"More than expected. Some food, mostly expired, a small stock of water, little bit of toilet paper, and some canned goods," Mason replied as he rifled through our scavenging packs.

"Most excitingly, we found some rifle ammo, and that means there's a rifle," Mason added, raising his eyebrows.

"But the rifle wasn't with the ammo?" inquired Alton as he worked about assiduously.



## MIDDLE A Tale from the Deadlands 4

I decided to chime in.

“No, but I should think it’s somewhere in their yard. It was all the way up in up in Zach’s old neighborhood, and you know the kind of zombie traffic that comes around there towards dark, so we had to book it.”

“Tomorrow we’ll head back up there early and see what we can find. Hopefully we can get our hands on another gun. You know, make things a little easier around here.” Mason explained. Everyone gave their own approving nods and we headed off to our beds. I had second watch, so with any luck I could get some desperately needed sleep before my watch.

I lay back and let my eyes close as I reflected on my day. After a tense wait, I finally fell into a troubled sleep that seemed to only last a blink, until my brother awoke me for my required duties. I stumbled into the hall, peering out the window. I saw the sky was a gloomy orange that lit the outdoors peculiarly. Immediately my worried mind told me it was a dark omen, but my rationality timidly convinced me otherwise. I took the pistol in my right hand and a handful of sunflower seeds. I stepped out onto the deck and began my ascent of the ladder to the roof. I felt the familiar roughness on my hands as I pulled myself groggily up to the top of the slanted roof. I perched myself on the side of the roof and let my feet dangle as I spent the next two hours watching wearily and spitting the old sunflower seeds.

The morning came as an unwanted reminder that I had to face this dreadful world another day. I despised my surroundings but I felt strangely attached to them. I admit to sometimes feeling like giving in to the easiest way out by joining the ranks of

## MIDDLE A Tale from the Deadlands 5

my undead adversaries. What has kept me in this world is my attachment and commitment to Alton and Mason, and an obscure feeling that I owe it to humanity to keep our kind around as long as we can. In my heart, I was assured that if the worse came to worst and we were faced with the possibility of fatality, I would die for them and they for me. That's what got me out of my comforting bed that morning.

Baseball bat in hand and backpack on my back, I stood next to Mason, readying mentally for our journey. After a brief pause and a grin from Mason, we began our travels to the alien neighborhood. I had completed feats like this before but the threat of returning home with nothing made my worrisome heart sink. As we headed up the paved hill, we spotted a small collection of ghoulish figures. Without pause, Mason drew his pistol and steadied his axe as he charged the cannibalistic creatures. I yelled words of caution desperately, while timidly following from a distance. Mercilessly, Mason began to make vicious work of the zombies. As I watched, I became severely nauseated at the incongruence of the situation, where a child was inhumanly brutalizing a cluster of grotesque walking corpses. The furious bloodlust was indescribable, but as this took place I found myself faced with several zombies, three in fact, who must have been drawn by the sounds of gunshots. I looked to Mason with panic, but my fretful look was lost in all his chaos. My heart began to race, my breath became short and my head started to pulsate to the pounding of my heart. Then, in a flurry of devastation fueled by adrenaline and instinct, I stood with a bloody and dented bat. As I tried to collect the breaths I was too busy to take, I saw the trio of smashed bodies around me. My hands stung with the impact from the bat, and I tried to brush the skull fragments and brain

## MIDDLE A Tale from the Deadlands 6

matter from my shirt and face. Mason looked to me proudly from his accomplishments but his face turned pale as he saw my terror. He rushed to me quickly.

“Are you ok? Are you bitten?” he said with an odd tone of compassion.

“Yeah, I’m all right,” I stammered after I left my trance. After a few more reassuring questions, we continued onward. I was still left in awe of his destructive acts earlier. It always shocked me to see him act that way, but those actions came from a truly pained human being. I remember the first part of story; he lived with his parents and elder brother, all of whom were close and open to each other. After the first attacks their family tried to take refuge in a dilapidated warehouse; little did they know it wasn’t as deserted as it seemed. A band of thieves and murderers claimed that warehouse, and when the family asked to stay for just one night they were refused and taunted.

The father, a kind businessman, proceeded to approach the criminals to renegotiate their response. In a cowardly display of violent power, the men open fire on the family; Mason grabbed his father’s pistol from the car. Before he could do anything, his brother, who was on his knees with a double-barreled shotgun to the back of his head, screamed for him to run. Mason heeded his warning and ran until his legs tired too much to carry him further, but as he ran he heard the shot that ended his brother’s life. It is hard for me to understand the burden he wears heavily on his heart but I know that survivor’s guilt is one of the most despicable kinds.

With my actions freshly burned in my mind, I found it hard to celebrate the victory of finding the sought after rifle. The return home was quiet, for I feared to hear my own voice. It was the voice of an ashamed killer. I understood the legitimate justifications of

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my actions but until one does it, it is hard to comprehend the feeling of taking life of any kind. What puzzled me was how mercilessly Mason could take that life; it piqued my interest amongst my immense confusion.

“Mason, how do you do it so easily, you know, kill the undead?” I asked bluntly. Mason looked forward thoughtfully; I thought it a bit dramatic.

“It’s not something you want to learn,” he said coarsely. At the time I thought he just didn’t have any answers but after what I’ve learned I know now how it happens. He was right; it hardens your soul to the point of numbness, and it’s the worst feeling I have experienced.

When we arrived home we shared our discoveries with Alton, who seemed encouragingly pleased, although the next thing Mason said stunned both Alton and me and something about it put dread in my heart.

“Can I leave alone tomorrow? I have some things I need to do.”

I was taken back by this random but solemn request. I looked to Alton, who was just as shocked as I.

“Well, sure. What is this about?” Alton replied, obviously confused.

“It’s personal,” Mason responded darkly. The graveness he put in his short sentence ended the festivities of the new gun and silenced everyone. I walked upstairs to get needed rest before my watch.

I arose worried about Mason. I ventured downstairs to say farewells and inquire the length of his trip. What I found was a decrease in supplies and a loss of one of our members; my last sense of hopefulness seemed to have left me then. To find him

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gone without a goodbye struck me much like the end of a diverting vacation, but it struck much deeper to not have the assurance that he was coming back. Alton and I stayed inside that day; not many deadly visitors came, and traps or swift bullets to the cranium disposed those that did. As night came, I heard a familiar sound of quick footsteps, not those lifeless steps of the undead but that of a human. My heart leapt, I ran from my bed to see a grinning Mason, carrying a new double-barreled shotgun. His fraudulent grin faded he saw the fear in my eyes. He had gotten his revenge.

The next morning Alton didn't talk to Mason, breakfast was strange and alien with the unthinkable horrors that occupied our minds. I couldn't bear the silent assumptions because it pained me too much. I stood up and walked outside with the rifle; Alton quickly ran after me, fearing for my safety. I stopped in my tracks; Alton soon saw what had stunned me and he quickly motioned me inside. I didn't hesitate.

"Mason, we have to go!" Alton yelled at the sad boy.

"No, I can't," Mason replied without emotion.

"I don't care what you did, Mason; we have to run--there are hundreds of zombies out there! We have to go!"

Now the zombies were ruthlessly clawing at the door and the walls, moaning to get in.

"You guys go, I'm staying here," Mason replied harshly.

He glanced at Alton. Alton looked back at him. Suddenly the door burst and a horde of undead rushed in. Alton grabbed my arm and we took off away from the horrific scene. I turned back and regretted it immediately. I saw the young man I once knew get

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shredded apart willingly. After we burst through crowds of zombies, we finally came to a clearing, the zombies a mile behind us.

Alton looked at me gravely and I looked over him carefully. A large heap of flesh had been gored from him in a massive tangle of teeth marks and blood. My thoughts stopped as I realized the weight of the situation. Silently, he took my pistol and walked away. The last I remember was a loud gunshot, and then I lost all sanity and rational thought as I sat in the clearing on a hill.