

It's All Write!

2008 short story contest

high school & middle school students

PRIZE WINNING



**short
STORIES**

It's All Write!
~2008~

2008
Ann Arbor District Library
It's All Write! Short Story Writing Contest
For Middle and High School Students

This contest was held in conjunction with The Ann Arbor Book Festival May 15-18, 2008. The awards and this publication were made possible through a grant from the Friends of Ann Arbor District Library. The Library recognizes the creativity and courageous efforts of all writers who participated. Congratulations to the winners of the 2008 contest whose stories appear here.



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~Acknowledgments~

Judges

Middle School 6th/7th/8th

Cassandra Carter ~ a 19-year-old honors graduate of Huron High School in Ann Arbor, MI. She wrote her debut novel *Fast Life* at age 15. Two years later, she signed a contract with Harlequin and was published in July 2007, just one month after receiving her diploma. As a part of the new YA imprint, Kimani Tru, her newest work, *16 Isn't Always Sweet* was released on March 1, 2008.

Elizabeth Ellen ~ is the author of *Before You She Was a Pit Bull* (Future Tense) and *Sixteen Miles Outside of Phoenix* (Rose Metal Press). She lives in Ann Arbor and is deputy editor of the literary journal *Hobart*.

Amy Sumerton ~ Serves as assistant editor of *Orchid Literary Review*. She is currently program director for 826michigan, a nonprofit writing center designed to help students ages 6-18 develop writing skills.

High School 9th/10th

Aaron Burch ~ is the editor of the literary journal, *Hobart*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Quick Fiction*, *elimae* and *Smokelong Quarterly*.

Alex Mindt ~ is the author of the short story collection *Male of the Species*. He has published stories in numerous magazines, including the *Missouri Review*, *Confrontation*, the *Literary Review*, and the *Sun*. His plays have been produced in Seattle and Los Angeles, and he co-wrote, directed, and produced the feature film *Nowheresville*.

Nami Mun ~ her stories have been published in journals such as the 2007 *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, *The Iowa Review*, *Evergreen Review*, *Witness*, and *Tin House*. She received her MFA in 2007 from the University of Michigan and currently lectures in their English Department. Her novel, *Miles from Nowhere*, is forthcoming in January 2009 from Penguin/Riverhead.

High School 11th/12th

Nan Willard Cappel ~ author of *Cheating Lessons*, a YA suspense novel set in Michigan. *Cheating Lessons* received a starred review in *Horn Book*, a Junior Library Guild selection, and was nominated for an Edgar award as Best Young Adult Mystery from the Mystery Writers of America. She's worked as a waitress, speechwriter, computer sales rep, and college English teacher, and often draws on those experiences for her fiction.

Kathe Koja ~ has written award-winning novels and short fiction for adults and young people. Some of her most recent books include *Buddha Boy*, *Talk*, and *Kissing the Bee*. *Headlong* is forthcoming in fall 2008. She lives in Berkley with her husband, and their cats.

Screeners

Brad Bachelor ~ Teen Librarian at Canton Public Library
Jennifer Foster ~ Teen Librarian at Manchester Public Library
Stefanie Halliday ~ Teen Librarian at Belleville High School
Steve Howard ~ Graduate Student in English Literature
Gahl Liberzon ~ former AADL Teen Advisory Board Member, Poet
Emily Marshall ~ Writer of Teen Fiction
Mark Patrick ~ English Teacher, edits a zine, writes screenplays
Sarah Townsend ~ Youth/Teen Services Librarian

Awards Ceremony Speaker

Deb Caletti ~ Award-Winning author of *The Queen of Everything*, *Honey, Baby, Sweetheart*, *Wild Roses*, *The Nature of Jade*, and *The Fortunes of Indigo Skye*.

Ann Arbor District Library

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1st Place ~ High School 11/12

Searching

By Eva Colás

It's when I fall asleep in the empty bathtub naked that I know I'm in trouble, and I'm not even the sick one, Jamie is.

"It's chronic," she told me. I don't even know what that means.

When my mom heard about Jamie getting sick and saw how sad I was, she said,

"It's like Daddy's diabetes. He's fine as long as he takes that shot, right? Well Jamie will be fine as long as she takes care of herself."

I thought, *if it's like diabetes, why is her dad crying so much?* But I didn't say that.

I am asking Jamie questions.

"Is it contagious?"

"Not unless I bleed all over you or we fuck."

I make a grossed out face and play like I'm scared of her germs, because I know it will make her laugh. She does and I say,

"Then how'd you get it?"

"A needle."

"You don't do that..."

"Not for heroin. God you are so stupid. I was at the *doctor* and it was a dirty needle."

"You're suing them, right?"

"Of course, stupid."

"Are you gonna lose all your hair?"

"What? No, stupid."

I get serious.

"Are you gonna die?"

She doesn't answer, just leans forward and wraps her arms around my neck. She doesn't make a sound when she cries, so I can't tell that she is until I feel my shirt get all soggy.

I do research for her, and for me. Google is no help. When I type in “aid” it gives me Financial Aids!!! and I know that’s not what she needs. When I type in “doctor dirty needles” I get a website about some kid getting stabbed with a heroin addict’s syringe. When I type in “Jamie’s sickness” I get MySpace pages.

Then I remember, and I type “HIV/AIDS” and get results.

I go to her the next day and spout off my brand new knowledge, using big words like “Immunodeficiency.” I know she’s impressed, and she smiles so only her first four teeth show, which I love. She says, “That must be the first time you ever did research,” and I go, “You’re no history project.”

I don’t think it makes much sense, but she grins with all her teeth and hugs me. She’s been doing that a lot lately. Hugging me, I mean. I don’t mind. I just feel bad.

Google has become my guide. I figured Jamie was getting real tired of my asking questions all the time, plus her dad always looked at me when I was over like he wished I were gone so he could spend his time with her. He’s always asking me if I have a ride home, and also how my parents are. I don’t think they’re related. I always walk home. Google says it’s good for you.

Google also says that I should be there for her and sometimes send her cards that just say “I care.” Instead I print out papers for her about how she might be feeling, and when I show them to her she goes,

“Will...” all choky, and then rips them up and says, “The only thing I need is you,” and it’s cheesy and that makes my face turn all red so instead I just say,

“You just wasted like, 12 trees,” and play like I’m mad and she laughs and laughs and I know that the day it’s really bad is the day I can’t make her laugh anymore.

When school starts, I go to pick her up so we can walk. We have to leave extra early so we have enough time, but it’s worth it because it’s hardly even light out while we’re moving and our breath shows up in the air and we can just talk before being stuck in wooden chairs for seven hours.

This morning I heard her say to her dad, “Why did I have to get the disease that doesn’t get me out of *school*?” She rolls her eyes and he laughs but you can tell he doesn’t think it’s funny—he has to think about the laugh first. Her backpack has Pokémon on it.

“You like?” she asks.

“Word,” I go, because it makes her laugh when I talk like that

During health fifth hour, a lady comes in to talk about AIDS. This kid who sits behind me and two seats to the left whispers loud to this other kid, “The faggot disease!” They crack up and I don’t even think before I’m standing up and walking without feeling it and hitting that kid in the face harder than anything I ever hit in my whole goddam life.

In the office I don’t tell them why I hit him.

“Did he say something to provoke you?”

Silence.

“Do you just not like him?”

Silence.

“If you don’t tell us what happened, we can’t judge your punishment accurately.”

“Whatever,” I go, and then I’m suspended so I don’t have to go to school, which is almost ironic because I’m not even the one with the disease, Jamie is, and she’s stuck in school.

When they tell my mom, she asks me, “Why did you fight that boy?”

I say, “He called you a whore” because I know it’ll shock her and make her shut up. It does, and she says, “Watch it!” and leaves me alone.

I don’t want to tell Jamie why I hit the kid because I know it’ll make her cry like most things have lately, but she gets me to tell her and she does start crying.

I say, “Don’t worry, the kid’s an idiot anyway.”

She says, “I don’t care what he said. I just wish you’d stop getting in trouble because of me.”

This time she doesn’t hug me, just curls her legs up to her chest and wraps her arms around them with her face all in her knees.

We are having a staring contest.

Jamie blinks first and doesn't open her eyes for a whole minute.

Jamie and I are coloring in her bedroom. We tried to go to the giant rock in her backyard, but her dad wouldn't let us. "It's not safe," he said. "Think about all the germs outside." Jamie argued.

"It's 60 degrees outside. I'm not going to eat dirt or something, and who gets sick in the *summer*?" But he said "Absolutely not." and I thought, *aren't you already sick*? But I didn't say that, instead I just followed her as she stomped up to her room. When she got up the stairs she was a little out of breath, and that worried me. But I stuck quiet.

It's only when we're drawing dinosaurs and monsters with 64-box crayons that I say casually, "Not feeling good?" and I keep coloring the sky so she thinks I'm just curious.

"I hate it," she says. A tear stains the flower she's coloring, and she takes the crayon and scribbles the whole page red, and then she rips it up and throws it at me.

"Now you have AIDS, too," she goes.

I am researching on Google, which is the only way I can get information anymore considering I'm practically banned from school. Here's what I know:

--Needles are disposable.

--Doctors keep rubber gloves on top of a little trashcan-looking thing on the wall.

--The trashcan thing is filled with needles that have been used.

What I don't get is, if the used ones and the new ones each have different homes, how do you just *accidentally* use the wrong one?

When her dad is at work we sneak out to Dairy Queen. We used to go every day after school, before she got sick. We'd go and we'd get a big Oreo and Butterfinger milkshake. We share curly straws. She would pick out the Oreos, and I would pick out the Butterfingers. Then the milkshake would be all melty when we were done with the candy pieces and we'd drink it up while we walked home.

Today is different. We get a milkshake and when she eats an Oreo and I go for a Butterfinger she stops me and says,

“What if I have a cut on my finger?”

The look on her face makes my stomach twist up like when you’re little and you’re scared of monsters.

“Don’t you get it? I *want* it. If you have it, I want it too,” I say, and I mean it. She leans across the table and kisses my mouth. Her lips are sticky. She smells like Oreo and strawberry lip-gloss.

She sits down, and says, “If you get it, I won’t be your friend anymore” and she throws up all over the bench and passes out.

I don’t even care that I’m sitting in her puke, I’m right next to her holding her hand and trying to sit her up while the dumb girl behind the DQ window waits for good reception on her cell phone. I’m holding her hand when the ambulance gets there and puts her on that cot with wheels and I only let go when they pry our sticky, milkshaked hands apart and start asking me questions.

“It wasn’t the ice cream.”

That’s the first thing the doctor says to me and her dad when we’re sitting in chairs that look like they got thrown up on 11 times and then left to rot. It doesn’t seem very clean. Then I remember the whole reason I’m in a stupid hospital is because doctors don’t know how to keep anything clean. Then I start to wonder.

“You know how HIV and AIDS operate, correct?” he’s asking Jamie’s dad. I wonder: how do you get to be a doctor?

“Yes, Doctor,” her dad answers. He doesn’t even notice or care that the doctor is talking to him the way he’d talk to me, like a crazy kid fool who doesn’t know the difference between stop and go.

I wonder: how can her dad trust these people when they’re the reason she’s here in the first place?

“Well, a small bacteria has invaded your daughter’s body.”

That sounds bad. I wonder: Could she have gotten it from kissing me those two seconds?

I wonder: Why does everything have to be so complicated?

“Due to the lack of immune strength that AIDS causes, her body has much more trouble fighting this bacteria. That’s what causes fatalities in AIDS patients—even a common cold can be deadly.”

I wonder: Why did I let her play outside with me?

“Luckily she’s in a clean, safe environment now. We are keeping her isolated and sedated to try and avoid any possible foreign bacteria. For now, it’s best that you don’t see her. What is clean air to you could be potentially deadly to her.”

I wonder: How do you deal with some man telling you that you could kill your daughter by breathing?

I hold my breath. Quiet, so no one notices.

I wonder: How do you let a germ take over your body?

I wonder: How could I let germs take over her body?

I wonder: What have I done?

I think: Fuck Google for not teaching me better.

My heart starts beating in my head and I take a deep breath and it doesn’t feel fair. We see her through this window and she’s hooked up to some machine and she looks so small, smaller than a baby or a kitten or even an amoeba, which we learned about last year before she got sick. I wish she could divide herself in half, only one half would be healthy. Then she could regrow as a whole healthy person and we would all be okay.

Instead her dad and me are just looking at her. She’s paler than a ghost that’s invisible, weak like even resting her head on a pillow is taking up lots of her energy. I want to lie on a pillow. I want to rest my head. It’s not fair that resting my head won’t make me tired. I hold my breath again. When Jamie’s dad touches my shoulder, I know it’s time to go, and I let the air out of my mouth slower than a snail. It’s not fair that I can do that and Jamie can’t, not without a dumb machine making her air cleaner.

Jamie’s dad is taking me home.

“It’s my fault,” I say.

“I made her go outside. I kept telling her it was okay and taking her places and stuff,” I say.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and I’ve never meant anything more. I can feel it.

It's my fault, I want to say again.

I should have paid more attention on Google, I want to say.

I shouldn't have thought about myself, I want to say.

I want to say I'm sorry, but it's like my mouth is glued shut and my words are stuck in my voice box. Then I start to imagine what a voice box looks like. How it's just a metallic box in your throat with red buttons on it and words trapped in it and wires. Then I imagine how Jamie is all attached to one of those through her nose and her mouth and I want to throw up, only my mouth is still glued shut.

The car stops by a curb and then he's moving the shifter and pulling up the stick break and turning to face me. He raises his arms and I think, *now he's going to hit me. Well, I deserve it.* But I still wince a little bit, and I'm wishing I hadn't, especially since I deserve it. Only he doesn't hit me. Instead he grabs his hair and he throws his head against the steering wheel and the car alarm starts screeching and he's crying real loud and sobbing harder than I ever heard even a new baby cry. Then he's turning to me and wrapping me in this giant hug and saying something I can't hear over the alarm, until the noises start to separate and he's going, "It's not your fault, it's not your fault" over and over and over and for the first time since before I even heard she was sick I'm crying real loud and hard and I can't make it stop. I am so scared.

"It's not your fault, Will. It's not your fault."

I'm just crying and crying.

On some movie once, I heard someone say, "No one is an atheist in a foxhole" and I looked up what *atheist* and *foxhole* mean and the sentence makes a lot of sense.

That's why I started praying for Jamie. Not to God. I don't believe in God. I pray to the air and to the stars and to the clouds and the buildings and cells and atoms and molecules and dividing amoebas and hair follicles that can she please, please, *please* be okay, *please*, I'm sorry, I'll do anything, I love her more than the whole world plus the moon, sun and eight other planets including Pluto and black holes and all the stars, please, please, please. I do it so much I can hardly stop. Pretty soon when I'm eating Lucky Charms and washing the dishes I'm whispering "*Pleasepleaseplease*" without realizing it. I do it when I'm reading, when I shovel snow off the ground. I make a snowman and draw

“please” all over its stomach until I can’t feel my finger and it’s red like a balloon. I write it in the air and on paper in her favorite colors and I draw her pictures for when they’ll finally let me in the room to see her.

I can’t wait to see her.

They let her dad go in first, which makes sense. I watch through the window and then just close my eyes and sink to the floor with my back against the wall and I’m not thinking *please*, I’m thinking, *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

Her heart monitor is jagged.

When it’s my turn her dad touches my shoulder real light and looks at her one last time before letting me talk to her. It doesn’t feel like really talking to her. She’s asleep or passed out or something. I imagine taking all the machines and ripping them out and her eyes opening and us running away to a plane, because I’ve never been on a plane and she says I would love it. But I don’t, instead I just walk over to her real quiet and sit on this pukey chair next to her bed and her eyes are fluttering like they do when she’s sleeping and I think, *You blinked*, and I say, real quiet, “You blinked.”

And I say it again, like an echo.

“You blinked.”

Quieter, so I won’t wake her.

I wish I could wake her.

I wish she were awake.

My eyes hurt from staring at her so long. She’s so pretty. I never notice it when she’s awake. How she’s so small. I remember how I used to see how many fingers I could wrap around her whole wrist. I remember how she laughed like everything was the funniest thing she’d ever heard. I don’t want to leave. I don’t even feel time passing. I can’t even pray. When I’m seeing her all knocked out in front of me, praying seems like a joke, or fake. Because she’s not waking up, and that’s real.

“Open your eyes,” I whisper. Then, louder.

“Open your eyes.”

Finally I go on repeat, louder and louder until I'm shouting
"OPEN YOUR EYES! OPEN YOUR EYES!" And I'm crying and I don't realize it and
her dad is wrapping his arms around me tight because all of a sudden I'm standing and
throwing the chair I was sitting in and her vase with flowers against the wall. I'm sobbing
and choking and praying and whispering *pleasepleaseplease* and wishing her eyes would
open. And then they do and I slip out of his grip so quick and I am in her arms and she is
so warm and everything is real when she's gripping her fingers as hard as she can into my
back in a hug that makes more sense than anything I was wondering before. Everything is
real when she's whispering, "Why are you making such a racket, stupid?" and smiling,
smiling, smiling, she is smiling at me and I am smiling at her and she is saying, "You smell
so good, Will, you smell so good," and I love her.



2nd Place ~ High School 11/12

Networking

By Lindsey Maxon

(unpublished)



3rd Place ~ High School 11/12

Premonitions of a Janitor

By Josh Ballard

Not many people know when or how they will die. In this instance, David is no different from you or me. He is different, however, in two aspects; first, he is scarred terribly from the waist up, his torso a mess of transplanted skin and black swirls. This damage was done by an exploding fuel tank, brought about by a disgruntled ex-employee at the factory in which he had worked. Two were killed, and David was disfigured for the rest of his life. A pity.

Secondly, David is different from you and I in that he is newly married. Unless you have been married, or are about to, you cannot know the joy it brings. I have not, so I can only imagine. But David, despite the fact that he would die in less than a year, was very happy indeed.

Massachusetts glistened with the first snow of winter, and the sun gleamed behind a mass of pale, white clouds. In the reception hall, David, dressed in a designer suit, was ending a thanks to the guests, and a toast to his marriage.

"...And I thank you for coming, and wish you all an early 'Merry Christmas'!" the guests clapped in a dignified way, smiling gently, some wiping tears, some closer friends giving a simple thumbs up.

David smiled, skin crinkling slightly, and after excusing himself, left down the hall to the restroom. As he walked, a man, wearing grey, leaned against the wall, and reading a magazine, spoke.

"It's a real shame," he said, offhandedly. "All that champagne going to waste."

David was struck odd by this. "What do you mean?"

"I'd go get some if I were you," he muttered, turning a corner. "Before it's too late."

David wanted to inquire this further, but the man was gone from sight. In any case, his bladder was drawing his attention away, and he rushed down the hall to the restroom, skin crinkling as he went.

As David made his way back towards the hall, the grey tiles brought his mind back to the thought of the strange man. What did he mean, he thought, and how was the champagne going to waste? On this thought, he abruptly knocked over a waitress, sending the tray of

champagne across the alabaster tiles, crystal goblets shattering in their wake. The music stopped suddenly, and David quickly helped the girl up, apologizing thoroughly, and promising to go for a janitor.

He found one, tapping him on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, but there's been an accident in the hall, could you-

“Such a shame, really,” the janitor turned, dressed in grey. It was the strange man. His name tag read 'Charlie', and his hair was frizzled and tawny, sticking out all over. David was surprised, to say the least.

“Now wait, how did you know that-

“The champagne was going to fall?”

“Yes, because I don't see any way-

Charlie stopped him. “David, I see things that others don't, let's leave it at that for now. But tell me, are you busy tomorrow?”

“Not really, no. But what-

“I'd like you to stop by my shop tomorrow, I've got a business proposition for you,” he handed him a card. It read 'CHARLIE' in simple, black letters, followed by an address, number, and a single, red asterisk at its center. The place was set in the business section of town, not far from David's office. Charlie was already turning the corner as David looked up from the bit of paper.

“See you soon,” Charlie said, just as he passed out of David's view.

“Now wait just a-

But Charlie had gone again, and was nowhere to be seen.

-

The next day, David took the bus to the address on the card.(His car was in the shop.) It was small, rundown, and looked ancient next to the massive, shining pillars of steel, glass, and concrete. Above the door, the name 'CHARLIE' in bright, red letters stood out from the oaken frame, and the doorknob squeaked as it turned.

David stepped into the dusty room, lit dimly by a single bulb on the ceiling, painting the tattered papers and drywall with an artificial glow. Charlie, dressed in a deep grey, sat at an old desk, leaning in a second-hand swivel chair, leather, with gold tassels on the arms. He

held out a bottle of root beer. “Thirsty?”

David gladly took the bottle, smiling politely. “Thank you. Root beer’s-

“Your favorite, I know,” Charlie interjected. “Don’t worry, I haven’t been stalking you. I simply see things that most others don’t.”

“Like that champagne fiasco,” noted David, sitting in the dusty chair. “Now, how did you know that was going to happen?”

Charlie smiled, and steepled his fingers, leaning back. “Tell me, David, what would you do different if you knew ten years ago what you know now?”

“I asked you a question first; how did you know?” he pressed calmly, crossing his arms, skin crinkling softly in his suit.

“Very well, I can wait. Do me a favor, look outside and see how many red cars pass before the stop light.”

David reluctantly stood, and peered outside the door. Behind him, he heard a rustling of paper and the quick scribble of a pen. He counted five before the red light.

“Alright, now what was the point of tha-”, he stopped a moment. Charlie was holding up a cue card, and written on it was the number ‘5’ in bright, green ink. David knew Charlie couldn’t see the street from where he was. How odd, he thought.

“Like I said, David, I see things that others don’t. This is what I am offering. My services and advice in exchange for a small fee.”

David was a keen businessman, so he was wary of terms such as ‘small fee’. Quite often those ‘small fees’ turned into very large ones after the first week. He raised an eyebrow.

“Excuse me for being skeptical, but having five friends with red cars drive by does not make a psychic. I think I’ll leave.”

“You think I’m trying to trick you?” asked Charlie.

“In all fairness, yes.”

Charlie closed his eyes. They seemed to roll about beneath his eyelids, searching, writhing, spinning like billiard balls. His eyes shot open suddenly, and settled.

“Tomorrow, you will wake up with a sore leg. When you go to the shower, you will see a grey spider perched above the faucet, and your shampoo will have left a green streak across the side, having fallen over in the night. Your wife will make pancakes, but burn the first batch. Finally, your morning paper will be missing some print on the front page, and

as such will read 'ICE ALL'." he recited this as if prepared from a script. David scoffed twice during the list of events. First, the only shampoo I own is blue, he thought. Second, my wife is a practiced chef, and has never burned a crumb of food since college. Charlie smiled, and crossed his arms.

"If I am wrong in the slightest, I will pay you double my weekly fee for your trouble. If I'm right, however, I'll be wearing a red cap and black shoes."

David smirked, and rolled his eyes. "Alright then, Cleo, I'll see you tomorrow." he turned to leave.

"I'm sure you will, David." smiled Charlie, leaning even further back.

-

The next morning, David awoke with a terrible stinging in his leg. Upon further inspection, it seemed that a bug of some kind had bitten him in his sleep. David was somewhat disturbed at this, but his pride made him dismiss it as a coincidence.

He pulled the curtain of his shower aside. He couldn't stop himself from gasping. There was a small, grey spider sitting in a web above the faucet, and his blue shampoo had fallen in the night, leaving a thick, green streak, caused by a hardening of the dye. After killing the spider, he quickly showered and dressed himself, edgy despite his best efforts.

Upon combing his hair, he smelled smoke from the kitchen; he blanched. He rushed down the stairs, and he felt his mouth drop as his wife scraped charred batter from a pan.

"Oh, honey, it's the first time I burned something since college!" she exclaimed. "I was talking to Diane, and must have forgotten to put the margarine in. Isn't that funny?"

He mumbled something to her, turning to the front door. He had to see.

With shaking hands, he unfolded the paper. The headline should have read 'PRICES FALL', but the ink on the P, R, S, and F was uneven and faded. It read, clearly, 'ICE ALL' Despite the fact that it was half past nine in the morning, David quickly went to his liquor cabinet.

-

He got onto the bus, and sat near the middle (his car would be finished this afternoon). His nerves were still shaky. Charlie had been authentic. He was psychic alright, for there was no practical way he could have rigged all those events. No one would have gone through that much trouble for a few hundred dollars. He sipped his coffee steadily.

“So, David, how were those pancakes?”, Charlie asked, putting his paper down. He wore a red cap, and a smile.

David snorted his coffee out of shock, right into his nose. For those who haven't had hot coffee in their nasal passages, it is not a pleasant experience. David coughed for several minutes before he caught his breath.

“So, then. What's this 'small fee'?” he asked, once his nose was free of Mocha crème.

“Three hundred a week, 24/7 hotline. First week in advance, if you please.”

David thought it would cost more, but wasn't complaining. In business, knowing what happened next was a priceless commodity. His life could be reasonably simplified with a heads-up every now and then. He quickly agreed, and the accord was struck.

Over the next three months, Charlie gave David privileged information. He predicted that the plane to Brazil, where they'd planned the honeymoon, would crash halfway if he went. Thankfully, he transferred to a Maui flight, and instead, endured a week-long monsoon on the small island. When he checked the news, the plane had crashed, apparently, near the shores of the Bahamas. The greatest injury suffered was a broken leg. The resorts supplied 5-star room service to the passengers, the news time providing some of the best publicity for most.

“You'd have likely died, though,” Charlie would say in his defense, whenever David would bring it up.

Upon returning to work, Charlie predicted that David's boss was looking to promote someone to president of development at his company, which made nutritional snack bars. David was advised to focus on the Eilse report, and finish it within three days. After putting off all other assignments, he finished, and the president, not aware of David's current lack of other finished work, offered him the job. With the choice of promotion or being fired, David took the job immediately. Afterwards, he discovered that this involved being transferred to Nebraska. With no other choice, he left Massachusetts, and all of his friends, behind.

Despite the often double-bladed nature of Charlie's predictions, they attained a strange level of friendship over the phone. Charlie discussed his life; realizing his powers, the minor facial surgery he had gotten done a few years back, and David talked of his life and

the accident which scarred him. Two months passed after the move to Massachusetts. The necklace Charlie told him to buy his sister-in-law for her birthday caused a horrible allergic reaction (While at the same, it let her meet a handsome allergenist, whom she married the following year.). David did not blame Charlie for the accident, which he apparently did not see coming. Even he had limits, it seemed.

Soon thereafter, he went to his mother-in-law's anniversary, against his better judgment. Charlie, however, saw that it would bring him and his wife closer together in more ways than one. He actually enjoyed himself there, until, of course, the shrimp he had bought gave the mother and several guests virulent food poisoning. She then died three days later. His wife's mourning did, in fact, bring him and his wife closer together, in Charlie's defense. David never liked the old woman anyway.

-

David drove down the road in his wife's new car. He had gotten it for her birthday, and was taking it home, wanting to surprise her. He was on the phone with Charlie at the moment, who had just gotten a job as a sports writer. He had also moved into a new apartment, thanks in part to the steady flow of David's money into his account.

"I think you should get off the highway about now. There's going to be an accident up ahead."

"I'm sorry, Charlie," David started. "But I want to get home as soon as I can. I think I'll take my chances."

Charlie attempted no protest, and instead turned the discussion toward the past. "Now, how did you get those scars again?"

David thought a moment. It had been a long time since the accident.

"It was back when I worked in the granola mill, I kept these big, vats of syrup just warm enough so that they mixed with the oats. I'd just proposed to Gina the other day, actually, at the company banquet. So, I'm near the vat, and this one man comes up, worked with the wrappers, I think, starts calling me a dirty thief or something like that. He says I'm not good enough for Gina, and that he was going to propose to her, but I'd beaten him to it.. I say 'tough luck', he just takes out a gun, shoots the tank, ducks, and my crew and I get blasted with the explosion."

"He ducked?"

“Yes, it's strange, but he went right under where the explosion was, took off, police never found him.”

David passed under a large overpass as Charlie spoke.

“What was his name?” he asked.

David remembered for the first time in a year. “Yes, he was friends with Gina. We called him Chuck, but she always called him Charlie.”

And it hit him like a ton of bricks. The semi above him swerved over the edge, and sent a wall of propane and metal crashing down on him. He and everyone within 200 meters were smithereens in an instant. A pity..

-

Gina moved back to Massachusetts soon after. A week since David's death, she sat in a bar, sipping a strawberry daiquiri. A man came up, and sat near her.

“Another drink for the lady, Ted.” he gestured to Gina, laying a ten on the bar. She smiled.

“Thanks. Don't I know you?” she asked. His face looked very familiar for some reason.

He shrugged. “I don't think so, no.”

“What's your name?”

The man wore grey slacks and a black blazer. He smiled.

“Call me Charles.”



1st Place ~ High School 9/10

Loways and Highways

By Regina Rose Kazanjian

Highways are always gray. South or north, highways are gray. It's the plants that change. As Belle and Jesse drove northward, the blooming peach trees and apple trees thinned out and gave way to spindly tree skeletons. Jesse couldn't even tell what kind of trees they were. He saw fewer and fewer live oaks, twisted in complex yoga poses. Instead, he saw businesslike bare trees, evenly and artificially spaced along the highway's edge.

Mostly, Jesse watched the highway. The highway stayed the same, no matter how much the trees changed. Yellow lines flashed by just under his window and the monotonous gray tones blended into one continuous blur. A few hours northward, the grass was brown and patched with dirty spots of snow.

Jesse closed his eyes and remembered. His dad used to come home from training and poke his mom's belly with one hand as he dropped a bag of wriggling crawfish on the counter with the other. After boiling the water outside and then dumping in the crawfish to cook, he'd take Jesse out on the Louisiana back roads for a joyride. At first, dad would drive and Jesse would squint his eyes against the hot wind that rushed in the windows. He'd watch the kudzu-draped bushes and trees zip by. Then, sometimes, his dad would let him drive. He'd clutched the wheel and driven a speedy 25 miles an hour at first. Eventually, after a month or so of driving, with his dad's urging, he cranked that up to 40. Then 50. Soon, was driving drove 70 miles an hour down the lonely, dusty gray roads.

"We're almost there," Grandma Belle interrupted Jesse's thoughts.

"Mm." Jesse didn't even look up from the road whizzing past his window.

His thoughts drifted back—he remembered going home to the cooked crawfish. His mom would boil potatoes and lemons along with the fish. She spiced them with something that turned the rusty red crustaceans a brilliant scarlet and rimmed the family's lips with red when they ate them.

"You know, hun, this will be a better life for you." Grandma interrupted his reverie again. "I can't take care of you like I wish I could. Man, I wish I could! You're m'one grandson and I love you like a son. But I don't have 'nuff money to give you a good

upbringin' and no time, neither." She squeezed and unsqueezed the steering wheel as she spoke, her hands animating the conversation even when they were occupied.

Jesse wanted to tell his grandma how much he wished he could live with her, but more than that he wanted to cry. Only, he wanted to be strong most of all. He managed to reply with another inarticulate grunt.

Belle veered off the highway. Jesse saw a dirty theater with neon lights next to an unremarkable shopping center.

"We'll be at da house in five minutes."

They drove through an intersection as Belle turned on her windshield wipers to swipe away drips of rain. Jesse wanted to cry again.

They pulled into a neighborhood full of oddly assorted houses. Some were old and run-down; some were old and kept-up; a few were new.

"We're lookin' for number 3702."

"Right there, Gramma."

They pulled in.

Jesse stepped out of the car and looked around. He looked up and saw gray tree branches against gray sky. He looked down and saw brown grass, dirty wet snow, and gray driveway.

Belle pulled his bag out from the back of the battered orange Nissan and they walked up to the door. She rapped the knocker. Jesse wondered who had knockers anymore.

A dyed brunette in a pastel sweat suit opened the door.

"Jesse! Praise the Lord you made it! I haven't seen you since you were a baby! You've grown so much in fifteen years!"

Jesse wondered why his other grandma ended every phrase in an exclamation point.

"Yeeeeeeas, he's a bit bigguh than when he was a just-borned baby," Belle said with a touch of sarcasm.

"It is so good to see you again, Belle! The last time I saw you must have been when Jesse was born! I'm so nervous, driving on those highways—I haven't been down south since then. Why don't you stop in for some juice before you're on your way? We can chat a bit!"

"Well, that sounds fine, but I think Jesse better get settled in his room first"

“Oh yes, I almost forgot! I’m in such a fluster, having a *child* again!”

The new grandma led Jesse and Belle through an open foyer with high walls of window and then down a hallway.

“Here’s your room. It’s got a bathroom, too! And see that quilt on the bed? I picked it out yesterday!”

Jesse followed the new grandma through into the room. There was an empty bookshelf to his left and a bathroom to his right. On the wall across from him, there was a large window. There was a bed in the corner to the far right.

Overwhelmed, Jesse tossed his bag on the bed. He just wanted to be alone for a while. “I think I’ll stay here while you talk.”

Belle smiled at him, a smile only the person who loved him and understood him best could give.

“What a nice idea!”

The new grandma and Belle went off to their juice. Jesse considered the strange thought that the juice was probably imported from the south too.

A half hour later, Belle came back to his room to say goodbye.

“I’ll miss you, Babe. Be brave, hun. You’ll feel like a nat’rull part of it soon enough.” She engulfed him in a hug that only a large southern granny could give. Jesse relaxed in her arms until tears pushed themselves against his tight-shut eyelids. He pulled away.

“Bye, Gramma.”

Belle took one more hug and left. Jesse didn’t move from his room until he heard her car start. Then, he ran to the front door and looked out one of the tall, skinny windows that framed the doorway. He saw the back of his red-headed granny’s head in orange car as it drove away.

The new grandma came up behind him. “Why, Jesse, you look so dejected! Come have a bite to eat.” She wanted to comfort him, but she wasn’t sure how to relate to a young boy.

Jesse obeyed. He didn’t feel like refusing.

A week and a half passed and the rain incessantly drizzled down. Jesse ate and slept. His new grandma, Diane, sure believed in feeding growing boys, but she didn’t serve

crawfish pie, jambalaya, or gumbo. Only bland northern foods like meatloaf, potatoes, and oatmeal. Jesse only left his room when he was hungry; the rest of the time he sat on his bed and thought

Often, he thought about the day his dad was deployed. He thought about worrying with his mom every day. At night, he'd run to her room and crawl in her bed when darkness pressed about him and he couldn't shake it. It seeped into his body and he couldn't keep it out. Darkness had always surrounded him at night, but when his dad left, it filled him.

Inevitably, this led to remembering the day the captain came and told them that his dad was dead. Gone. Died in combat. His mom wasn't the same after that.

Diane walked into his room. "Jesse, dear? You want to come out? You've been sitting in here for a few hours now."

"No, I'm fine." Jesse shrugged.

"I'm sort of worried about you! You've been in here so much; it can't be good for you."

Frustrated with the prying grandmother, Jesse slipped off the bed and said, "Well, I guess I could go out for a walk. Get some fresh air and stuff." If you could call the drippy gray weather "fresh."

All the same, Diane immediately perked up. "Yyyyes! What a nice idea. Go and take a walk. Downtown Ann Arbor is down that road a bit, and it's very fun! You can wander around all the nice shops and have...uh...some fun!"

Jesse didn't expect to have nice time. He just wanted to get away.

He pulled on the jacket his own Gramma bought him back in Louisiana, anticipating the cold Michigan weather. He stomped along the gray sidewalk, bracing himself against the 40-degree temperature and drizzling rain. He walked and walked. He didn't look up. He didn't look down. He didn't even look out. His eyes blurred and he walked. Walking gave him a distraction; he didn't think of his mom drinking, flirting with new boyfriends, and dumping him at Gramma's house for three months at a time. He didn't think of Gramma stressing over the bills piled on the peeling kitchen counter.

Then, something caught his ear. A mournful, deep voice that sounded just like the country stations he and his dad listened to on the car radio. One guitar accompanied the

voice. No drums, no additional voices, no more instruments. Just one warm voice and one slightly plunky-sounding guitar.

He walked towards the sound, through two sets of open doors leading into a diner. One door had a scrawled sign on it that read: *Don't park in the party store lot; you'll be towed. You can park behind the old gas station.* The permanent marker letters were a bit smudged.

Jesse let out a breath and relaxed inside the diner. It was warm and damp, more like the south than anything he'd felt for weeks. He looked around the single rectangular room with dripping windows on all sides. Against the back wall, just across from the door, were three peeling rectangular counters, arranged in a square. A waiter in an orange t-shirt ran out of a door behind the counters and dropped four plates on the counter. A red-headed waitress with a big mouth – a warm smile – stood behind a cash register in the middle of the front counter. Clipboards were scattered around her.

“Can I help ya?”

“Um, can I sit with him?” Jesse pointed at the guitarist, who sat in a corner booth. Then, he jumped, realizing that he had asked to sit with a man who he had never met before.

“Well. Hm. I'll ask him, I guess.” The waitress seemed confused. Lou never sat with anyone. He came into the diner almost every day and played mellow country tunes alone in his booth. Of course, all the staff were acquainted with him and all the locals knew who he was, but he didn't have any particular friends. “Lou? Can this kid sit with ya?”

“Sho. C'mon ovuh.”

Jesse tingled. This guy was southern! He had to be.

“What's yo name, kid?”

“Jesse, sir.”

“Good strong name. An' you say “Sir,” jus' like you was from the south wheah they'se respectful like dat. But don't you bother with dat here. We ken jus' be friends. We don' need no big, better adults an' teeny little scardey kids.”

Jesse looked up into his black eyes. The southern accent made him feel home again. But, surprisingly, it didn't bring back the pain he'd felt for the past year. It just brought to mind the days when he had a southern family, when he lived in hot, humid air and ate hot, spicy food.

“You wanna coffee, boy? I can cover it.”

“Sure. I guess.” Jesse hadn’t tasted coffee in a long time. Southern mamas added a tablespoon of coffee to their baby’s bottles, but in the north, people thought kids couldn’t handle coffee.

“Orangey – get a coffee foe dis’ young man heah.”

The redhead turned from waiting on another booth to face them, and yelled into the kitchen, “Tristan, I got more orders for you!” She tripped into the countered-off section of the diner and held out a clipboard with orders. A teen, his brown eyes snapping, zipped out of the kitchen, yanked the girl’s ponytail, and grabbed the clipboard before she could react. He zipped back into the kitchen, laughing.

“Rrr! That boy!” She rolled her eyes. “The coffee should be out in a few minutes, Lou.”

For the first time since he had arrived in Ann Arbor, Jesse connected with his surroundings. Before this moment, objects had crossed his line of vision, but now, he opened his eyes. He soaked it all in. He let the images enter his body

“You look like you’s los’.”

“Maybe I was. But I don’t know if I am now. I might be...but I don’t think so.”

“Not knowin’ is part of bein’ los’.” Lou fingered his guitar strings and plunked out a tune. “*You’s los’ but you’s gonna be foun’ soon; you came into a di-i-i-i-nah and you foun’ yo southun home. You found an old man a-named Lou and the waitres’ brought you coffee.*”

Jesse grinned. Something that felt like a tickle grew inside of him. He was convinced that this man was crazy, but it didn’t bother him. The redheaded waitress thunked a mug of coffee, a bowl of creamers, and four sugar packets in front of him. Jesse picked up the mug and drank it black.

“*Cuz the coffee’s fo’ a southern bo-o-o-yyy.*”

Jesse’s lips curled up, almost into a smile. He watched Lou’s coffee-colored hands as they pulled a tune out of the guitar.

Lou stopped singing, but he kept playing his guitar as he talked. “De gran’ highway of life moved a little too fas’ for you and you gots yo’self confused, son. You’s a little bit los’. But you gotta remember that the highway keeps a-movin’. You can’t change it.

There's some plezh'rabable stretches of road and some nasty stretches of road, but you gotta keep goin', no matter weah you are. Jus' keep goin'."

Jesse drained the last drop of coffee and smiled. Drinking a southern drink and listening to a southern man felt like letting out a stale sigh of air. He felt good and easy.

He left the coffee shop and took in all the sights around him. He saw puddles speckled with falling raindrops, a boarded-up gas station, and a three-lane road in front of him. He crossed the road, walked over a bridge and came to a new part of town.

It still rained. But, as he walked down the streets, he noticed lights behind the rain. He looked into shops and restaurants where open, friendly people chatted inside the stores, milling through displays of intriguing artsy knick-knacks. One store sold saris; another sold middle eastern instruments and electric guitars. Sharp smells seeped out of restaurants.

He looked ahead and around him as he walked, not down. His feet slapped against the wet pavement.

He looked up in the sky, letting raindrops fall on his nose. He loosened his gait, walking less stiffly, less hurriedly. He smiled at a girl across the street. He took a deep breath of the damp air, letting it touch his whole body. Since he was warm enough inside, Jesse wasn't afraid to let the rain touch him. The falling darkness surrounded him, but it couldn't seep in.



2nd Place ~ High School 9/10

Everything is Connected

By Lindsay Fischer

Listen.

The night is like a symphony. Quiet chords of croaking toads, throaty sopranos. Grasshoppers humming along to the notes. The buzzing is the labor of hundreds of tiny violinists poised underneath dewy blades of grass. Silent, the fireflies carry candles in a nightlong vigil. They flit through the air lethargically, almost as if they know the world sleeps around them. Little light glowing softly, one lands on the chipped paint of my windowsill.

“Hey,” I whisper to the candle-carrier. “Whatcha doin? This is my room, do you like it? It's not much to look at, is it?” The firefly doesn't even look up, or if it does, I can't tell. “This whole farm isn't much,” I add, breathing out, that endless frustration.

There's a winding road that leads away from my farm, and I trace that path in a circle around the firefly. I know it by heart, the slim and dusty thread that could carry me away. I've always wondered what would happen if I left. Not to run away, exactly, but to start walking and just never stop. To get on the road and let it steer my course. It doesn't twist and wind the whole way, you know. After a mile, it uncoils, a straight shot, like an arrow in the dark.

I watch the path for a moment longer before reaching up and curling my fingers around a nail protruding from the faded rosebuds on the wallpaper. Then I hoist myself up onto the sill. The firefly closes its wings and the candle is extinguished. Grimy shoelaces trailing, I ease into a sitting position, legs dangling over the edge and pointed into darkness. I scoop the firefly up in cupped palms and blow gently on the wings, coaxing the tiny flame back. The wings shift and the glow lights up my palms red, *there*. Nothing is lost forever.

My radio crackles to life, which it always does when the DJ plays “Strawberry Fields Forever.” I don't know why it does that, but it must like the Beatles. I grab the radio and turn the knob down to a dull hum, the buzzing of the grasshoppers, little violinists, humming in my ears along with the humming pulse of my heart. I shove a bent box of cards into my pocket along with the crackling radio. My heart is about to leap out

my ears. I slide out onto the roof, clutching the window frame like a drowning girl clinging to a lifeboat. The waves of impermeable darkness lap against my shoes as I leave my room behind, that tiny square of light. My flashlight sits in the center of the wooden floor, pointing towards the sky and giving me a pinprick of light to steer by. I don't think I'll be coming home again, but you never know. It's always good to have options.

I gingerly climb down over the edge, the waiting branches of our golden maple tree folding me up. When I reach the bottom, it isn't as dark as I imagined it would be. The moon is hazy behind the clouds, like a big frosted glass marble.

Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see. The strains of the music crackle and pop like a fire, the warm air hitting my face like a blast of desert heat. I almost expected sand to hit my eyes, squinting them shut as I stole over my front lawn. The minute I step out onto the road, it ceases to be—the road ceases to be, anyway. It has become a dip between two dusty sand dunes, and I am traveling a path beaten into being by thousands of travelers leading caramel camels. My neighbor Finn's house is an oasis for me to rest, or perhaps a shimmering mirage. I thrust my walking stick into the crumbling sand, the dunes graceful and rambling like whitecaps beating against a shore. The hot Egyptian sun scorches my neck, eating through my thin clothes. I know I have to make it to the oasis before I run out of water and crumple into the sand, the desert swallowing me up . . . but I am a seasoned traveler, and I can beat the desert.

“Libby? What are you doing?” The camel is sitting on an oddly-placed tree trunk in the sand. He holds out a dirty canteen of water to me, and I take it eagerly. But the spell has been shattered like glass, the hot sun fading until it is a pale glass marble moon once more. The sand melts, becoming brown dirt covered with sparse grass. I shake off the rest of the sand as the daydream flits away. Then I sit down next to Finn—he's my neighbor, but he'd also my best friend. He's nineteen, pale, and he's all sharp angles—his limbs stick out like bent straws. He's always wearing a deep frown on his brow, like he has to concentrate hard to keep his limbs from flying apart in every direction. I think we all feel that way, but Finn's expressive, and you can see the struggle of staying grounded plainly written on his face.

"I'm leaving," I answer solemnly. Then I inspect the amber glass bottle he's handed me. "Aren't you a little old to be nicking from your parent's cupboards?" I peel at the blue label absently.

"It's root beer," he retorts, rolling his eyes. "And what do you mean, leaving? You're running away?" Finn always knows what I'm talking about, so I think it's weird that he has to ask me. Like the root beer thing, how he knew when to be waiting for me in his backyard. Even though I didn't plan on leaving, he acts like it's something I've had written on my calendar in bold black sharpie for months.

"No, I'm not *running away*," I answer in disgust. "That makes it sound so primitive. I'm just . . . leaving. I'm going to start walking, and hopefully I never stop."

"You're the only 13-year-old I know who uses the word primitive," he answers in amazement, shaking his dark head. He takes a big swallow of the copper liquid in his bottle. "And you aren't going to get far. What've you got, a box of cards? Unless you've managed to stuff in a blanket, clothes, food, and a wad of cash, I don't see how that's going to help you."

"I don't recall asking for your help." I wipe dust off my knees and stand up, glaring. I prop my bottle up in the soft grass and curl my fingers around my card box protectively. "I'll see you around, Finn." *But hopefully I won't.*

"Hang on, you're leaving already? Does that mean I can drink your rootbeer, or do you want me to save it for next time you come over here?"

"I'm *not* coming over here again. Didn't you hear me? This is goodbye. I'm gonna go now..." I back away, taking a mental snapshot of my friend perched on the tree trunk, hunched over, eyes staring straight into me.

"Libby . . . okay. See you around." He shakes his head and looks away from me, and part of my clenches up, wants to revolt. Why doesn't he take a mental snapshot of me? Maybe he's mad. But it's a taste of his own medicine. Now he knows why I threw eggs at his garage door the night before he left for college last summer. Why I stayed in my room, buried under the covers, when he tried to say goodbye. The thought propels me forward, onto the dusty street again. I lapse into daydreaming, but not of Egyptian deserts or violin-playing grasshoppers.

Finn was the first person to call me Libby. The first time he saw me, he was six and I'd just been born. It was the Fourth of July, and fiery light shows bloomed in the dark velvet sky outside the window. The fireworks weren't celebrating my birth, something I have to remind myself every year. Finn leaned over my mother's arm, frowning perplexedly like I was a puzzle to be solved. I had hair the color of a mud pie, a round nose like a button. Finn says I was pretty, but I wasn't. I was there. I should know.

"Elizabeth sounds too formal. Can I call her Libby?" He did, even though my parents thought it sounded silly.

It stuck.

As I continue down the road, I slip my fingers into the bent card box, taking out a photo of a little girl. She has copper curls, shiny like a new penny, and she smiles angelically at the camera. The photo is faded with age and too much sunlight. But I can't bear to keep her anywhere but my windowsill—her big smile sparkles in the sun, and sometimes I imagine I can hear her laugh on the wind, a little tinkling bell. Looking down on the world, sparkling in the sun, I try to make myself believe that she's happy. I really hope she is.

I hear a honking horn and look up, seeing the car roar down the dark street towards me. I jump to the side, stumbling into prickly weeds, but I'm not fast enough—the photograph slips from my fingers. As the dust clears, I rub my eyes and fall to my knees on the dirt, tripping on a pothole. The car disappears around a bend, a rusted blue pickup truck that belongs to some of Finn's friends.

"Dammit!" The picture is lying partly buried, the girl's smile obscured by dust and a long tear. Here I was trying to make myself believe she was happy, and a second later she's falling apart. The truth is, the rip was there long before the car ground it into the dust. I was trying to cover it up, but the girl in the picture is broken and faded, nothing but a quickly vanishing memory.

Her name was Mary, and she would have been my older sister. She died before I was born, so I never knew her, but Finn tells me she was a fairy child. Always smiling, almost too beautiful for this world. She was Finn's age, and they were friends, so he's the only one who ever tells me about her. My parents don't talk about her—they have me now,

and I slid in to fill her place. Maybe I'm the only one who remembers. I know one thing, and that's that Mary would have done far better things for this world than I can ever do. I spend half my time daydreaming about impossibilities and the rest of the time trying to get away from what I've got.

I want to be an archaeologist. I want to travel the world—swim in the turquoise waters of the oceans, walk the deserts in Africa, climb mountains in Asia. And once I've reached the top of the highest summit I can find, I'll sit down in the snow and watch the whole world spin. I'll walk straight to the edge of the earth and look down over the edge, and I'll take Mary with me in a box of cards in my pocket.

My feet are walking of their own accord, and I feel like I'm on autopilot. I don't know exactly how long I walked, but I knew exactly where I was going. And you want to know the odd part? I've never been to the creek where Mary died before, but somehow I knew that's where I'd end up.

It took a long time, an hour or more, I don't really know. All I know is that my feet are numb by the time I turn off the main road. I push over tall grass, and I hear the creek before I see it. Soft and tinkling, the waters are deep but clear as glass. I can see stones, weeds. It's nothing special. It doesn't look like it can kill. The wind blows through the trees, rustling the leaves, and it's an unhappy sound. I step closer to the bank unwittingly, the more reasonable part of me asking what I'm doing. I wasn't supposed to come *here*, I was supposed to be finding my destiny! Escaping my dusty, silent farm . . . dusty, silent life.

My feet are unsteady on the bank, and before I can stop myself, the dirt comes loose and I lose my footing. I slip, the world tilting forward as I fall slowly towards the water. The surface is like a plate of glass, and I don't want to slam into it. But I'm frozen stiff—the weeds are like black, skeletal fingers reaching to me. The black waters could swallow me up . . . I could let them.

I don't. When my nose is just close enough to the glass surface to pass a feather in between, I put out my arms. The heels of my hands slam into the sharp stones, cutting my palms. But worst of all is the black weeds, like slimy fingers wrapping around my hands—I gulp in water before standing up again and stumbling back onto the muddy bank.

I don't know when I started crying, but they weren't sad tears. As I sit in the dirt, I take my sister's picture out with shaking fingers, and I realize something I never noticed before. The girl in the picture might be a fairy child, but she's strong. She's still smiling, even though there's a rip tearing her face in half—she isn't taking notice of it at all, nor does she care that she's fading from the world. Really, she's not fading. She's becoming a part of this world, making the sun and sky and stars more beautiful for the people she loves. Each day that passes, she grows stronger, and so do the people she left behind.

I prop the picture against a tree, along with the box of cards, and I can't help smiling through my tears when I hear the wind again—a little girl's tinkling laugh, she's happy.

I leave the picture behind and walk back towards the road, and I don't notice the headlights of Finn's car until they're almost blinding me. Then I open the door and slide in. Finn doesn't say anything about the scratches on my palms or my wet clothes or even the traces of tears left over. He just turns the car around, pointed towards home, a straight shot in the dark.

“Hey,” I say.

“I'm glad you're back,” Finn answers. “And I'm glad you left the cards behind. You didn't need them . . . you've know them by heart.”

I crawl into bed as the sun's rising, and I've decided I can save conquering the world for another day. I don't trace the path of the road anymore, because like Finn says, I'm not going to get very far. Someday I will, but I'm fine with conquering this little patch of the world I've got already, to start off.

Sometimes I hear a little girl's voice laughing on the wind, in the rain dancing on my windowpane, a sparkling smile in the sun. These things might not be important to everyone, but they are to me. Every little twig, every blade of grass, every tiny firefly is affected by things that seem completely random to humans. Even so, they change you more than you will ever know—we're all a part of this world, and we all have a stake in it.

Everything is connected.



3rd Place ~ High School 9/10

Breaking the Birthday Curse

(unpublished)

By Sussy Pan



1st Place ~ Middle School

Purple

By Mari Cohen

I like to paint my nails purple on rainy days, hoping for a rare stroke of sun to hit the curtains and illuminate the dark kitchen so I can see better. The rain provides a steady rhythm and somehow it's comforting to dip the tiny brush into the bottle, swirling it around until I get the perfect amount and letting the extra drops drip down to the sea of purple, like the fading rain outside. This is the one of the few areas in which I can claim expertise. Julia never paints her nails, and if she did she'd never use purple, and even then she wouldn't say purple, she might say violet, or mauve, or maybe even amethyst.

I just say purple. When I stare into the nail polish I see more than glittery liquid; I see the perfect balance between good and bad, the essence of a mystery that tastes so sweet to solve, the ideal, flawless world that anyone would want to live in. A mixture of red, the hot anger, and blue, the serene calm. If you try to mix them, you get purple.

I've yet to experience any kind of purple moment.

My hair is straight and hers is curly, and when you look at us you might make the mistake of thinking that I'm the perfect student who never breaks the rules, and she's the crazy actress who even my mom can't understand.

When we were little we liked to wear dresses and tights every day, and even then I always wore the purple ones if they were clean. We'd sit next to each other in kindergarten and giggle; our feet were the same size and we'd share our little Mary Jane shoes.

My feet are bigger than hers now, but I'm shorter. It just figures, doesn't it?

When Julia walks into the kitchen I give only a grunt; she's distracted me and I've gotten purple all over the skin on the edge of my pinky nail. I reach for the nail polish remover and look at her bitterly, as if it was somehow her fault the brush slipped in my hand.

As she walks to the refrigerator I notice that her hair might actually be pretty if she didn't keep it in that ponytail all time, squeezing the life out of it. Without even glancing my way she takes out a tomato and starts to chop it up, then pops the pieces into her mouth, plain. Maybe I'm the crazy actress, but she got the weird food tastes.

She goes to the radio in the other room and flips to the classical station without looking at the dial, and because I'm in a good mood, or maybe I'm just too tired to care, but I don't argue this time. Instead I keep the brush going to the time of the music. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

Just like the world.

We don't fight quite as much since dad left last year. We didn't really want to bother Mom, because it was already so hard for her to juggle everything by herself. I think there was an unspoken truce between us we didn't bother each other for awhile, making an effort to say more than "Pass the salad," and "Have you seen my jacket?" But most of the time it was just silence, and we stayed out of each other's way.

The only time we felt close at all were the first few nights when I woke up alone, just the three of us in the cold house. I'd get up and into her room and sit on the foot of the bed just like when we were younger. She would usually be asleep and I'd wait there in silence, only needing to know that someone was there, that someone else was alone in the dark. Sometimes I fell asleep, and I'd wake up early in the morning and tiptoe out so she never knew I was there. But the next night, suddenly, there she would be in my room, sitting quietly on the floor, no words or explanations.

Sometimes you don't need any words.

"Ariana, you don't understand how disappointed I am in you," Mom says, handing me back the test with the bright red D on it as she reaches for the bowl of salad. "Julia tells me it was an easy test and if you paid attention it should have been no problem to get an A like her."

I turn to glare at Julia before replying.

“I’m sorry Mom,” I say. “It’s not a big deal, this test. It’s the only math one I failed, and I still have a A- in the class.”

“Oh, it’s a big deal,” Mom peers at me over the dish of potatoes Julia is passing to me. “Children in the Spencer family do not get D’s on an easy test, young lady.”

“Correction, mom. JULIA doesn’t get D’s. Maybe I do sometimes. Maybe I’m not always perfect,”

Mom’s expression softens a bit, but she doesn’t let up. “Can’t you at least try sometimes, Ariana? For me? Can’t you be a little more like your sister?”

I stand up then, not even realizing I’m doing it. “I do try, mom. I try hard at acting, and I try hard at playing the flute, and I try hard at everything you don’t even notice. And as for being like my sister, well, who’d want to?” My fork falling to the plate with a clatter, I run upstairs, not caring about the hurt expression I’ve left on Julia’s face and the confused one I’ve left on Mom’s.

The tears leak out before I even get to my room.

It was a year ago that he left and now we basically are back to normal, except for the occasional postcard, birthday gift, or phone call which gives us an unpleasant jolt back to the past. Mom sends Julia’s report card of A’s to him sometimes and he always writes back how proud he is, even though Julia doesn’t like to read his letters. Mom leaves my B’s here.

Julia and I stopped going to each others’ rooms. For a while we’d be there every night, together for at least a few hours, nothing spoken but everything said. And then one day I crept out of her room at sunrise, and that night I waited. I listened for the creak of the door and watched for the shadow crossing the floor. It never came, and I knew then that she had forgotten, falling asleep alone in her room, pushing me out again.

And I knew she’d never really needed me.

After my dramatic exit from dinner, I cried in my room for no reason and every reason, crumpled on the bed like an old paper bag. It wasn’t for a long while that I sat up, tears still clinging to my cheeks, gleaming like a show of hurt. I rummaged around in the

drawer of my nightstand until I found the tiny bottle. And even though it wasn't raining and the kitchen table was far away, I knelt to the floor and opened the bottle. I unscrewed the tiny brush and began to paint on the purple, and with every stroke my heart calmed a bit.

When all ten fingers were done, the sadness and confusion were gone. I was just angry now. I knew then that the only thing I could do was show them. Show them all that I could be the best.

A plan began to flow through my brain then, infecting every bit of me until I was standing tall in my room, anticipating what would be the perfect moment.

We didn't really understand why he had to go exactly. How could someone be a perfect loving father once and a shady, absent figure the next? I guess it wasn't as surprising as it could've been. He had disappeared into work and business long before, coming home later at night, leaving earlier in the morning.

Julia took it the hardest. She thought it was our fault because we were always fighting; Dad could never understand why we drifted apart in elementary school. He thought twins should always be best friends. Since we came a little closer afterwards it never came out in a full screaming fight, but I think she still holds it against me. I can be smarter about some things though. I know it was no one's fault.

Sometimes there is no one to blame but life.

The posters have been up for a while, but I didn't even really think about it at first. I didn't want to take on one more thing; second semester band chair tryouts are coming up and I need to practice to keep my first chair spot. But now these posters are essential to my plan. On my way towards Language Arts I stop to read the big bold letters. "Annie," it says. Annie? That's not just a play...

Oh god. I didn't realize it was a MUSICAL.

I hadn't sung in a real choir since second grade. Julia and I were both in church choir. Sometimes we'd do duets together. I always sang louder, and that made me feel proud. I always liked to know I was better at something.

Even then she dominated almost everything else.

Ever so unsure of my music abilities, I still go to the drama room at lunch a few days later, as instructed by the flyer. The performing arts teacher, Ms. Maris, runs over and welcomes me in happily. She remembers me from the required sixth grade performing arts elective last year. She overenthusiastically offers me a chair, almost shoving me into it. I pull a bag of grapes from my lunch bag and pop them in my mouth one by one, looking around the room. I see mostly kids I'm not really friends with, kids who take performing arts elective by day and spend time in Young Actors Guild by night. My mouth goes dry. I don't take performing arts elective, because I take band for elective period one and for elective period two my mom prefers that I take Spanish. The most acting experience I have is from those week long summer day camps once a year and the afternoons full of acting out famous roles in front of my mirror. Definitely not enough expertise here. I notice Mrs. Stevens standing in the corner; she's the choir teacher. My stomach clenches. How can I sing in front of her? I don't even take choir. I sing along to the radio, I sing karaoke. Besides that, nothing. Sure, I've practiced for hours in my room this week, but that's nothing in terms of experience.

Soon enough Ms. Maris is explaining all the play rules and telling us that anyone in any grade has a chance for the lead. We're lining up and stage, and we're moving through the line, and we're singing and reading and-
Oh god. It's my turn. I step up uncertainly.

I sing the first note. My voice shakes ever so slightly at first, but I continue.

We began to really fight near the end of second grade. It started sometimes when we would go over to a friend's house together or play with the babysitter after school. Julia

wanted to play school; I wanted to play tea party with the dolls. We couldn't seem to work it out and the fights often ended in tears.

In third grade we were put into different classes and she began to take fourth grade Language Arts. I felt so different than her then, left behind. She made new, smarter friends. I stuck with the old friends. At night we didn't read together anymore on the couch downstairs. We read in our rooms.

Things heated up in the later years of elementary school. She tried to scrutinize and fix my homework, I shoved her away. I didn't need another teacher. She was defiant, and soon we didn't really connect anymore. We didn't share things and we didn't take the time to talk to each other. There weren't any screaming fights, just cold silences. Mom would purse her lips, looking worried, and Dad would try so hard to involve us in things together. It didn't work. The string was cut, the bond was lost. Maybe if one of us had even tried, even cared enough, it would have been different. But we didn't. And that was the way it was.

I hurry back to the performing arts room at lunch two days later and a crowd has already formed outside the door. I find myself squashed into several other people with no way to even move, let alone see the paper that Ms. Maris is bringing out of the door, the paper she's taping to the door. I hold my breath because my plan will work best if I get Annie but somehow I know I won't...

And then they're patting me on the back, congratulating me, and I say, "Thank you," and I walk down the halls as though nothing has happened though I'm secretly wearing a badge of honor over my heart, unknown to everyone else.

And it doesn't matter, as long as I know it's there.

My mom knows exactly how to distinguish a lie from the truth, and she never fails at it. If you were the one who stole the last cookie from the cupboard and you denied it, she would know. That's why I know there's no use hiding things. I bring out my D tests as soon as I get home and I confess my late night ice cream eating as soon as anyone brings it

up. Julia and I became the most honest children this way; when we lie the words feel strange on our tongues, like a foreign language.

But sometimes, I'd rather just hide.

I go in at lunch every day now and after school too (Julia thinks I'm at my friend Andrea's working on a science project every day and she tells Mom this. This way, I don't have to lie directly). It's been two weeks and still for every note I hit and every compliment I get from Ms. Maris, there are twice as many times I need to ask what my line is or I forget the steps to the dance. The play is in a week and my insides clench every time I think about it, and at night I stay up, thinking songs and dance steps and lines, lines, lines. But I'm more nervous for what I will tell Mom.

The day before the play it's almost too late, so I have to do it. I muster up my courage and at dinner I take a deep breath. Pulling out the flyer, I try to say as nonchalantly as I can,

"Hey, the school is doing Annie and I think we should go," Mom studies my face for a bit and I try to keep still and calm, but on the inside every inch of me is praying, praying, and I can feel myself sweating. Julia rolls her eyes. She doesn't want to go to some stupid play when she could be spending the whole night studying (whoop whoop), but mom disagrees. She looks at the flyer and then at me.

"It sounds fun," she says, "We haven't done anything together for a while. I'll mark it on my calendar," *Thank God. Just one more lie to go. You can do it, Ariana, yes you can.*

"The only thing is Kara and I are going to the mall after school that day, 'cause I need new flats, and her parents are giving us a ride." I stammer this, and then try to move on clearly: "But she's going to the play too, so we'll just meet you there. I don't know how long the mall trip will take, I might be a little bit late,"

Every muscle in me clenches, my foot is jiggling like crazy, and it's so obvious that I'm lying. But Miss Lie Detector isn't even paying attention. She's shoveling more broccoli onto her plate, and she says, "Sounds fine to me, honey,"

And just like that I have lied to the lie-catcher, and somehow, I have made it look easy.

Mom loves theater, and I'm sure that's part of the reason she agreed to go. She and dad used to see a play every Friday while Julia and I would stay home and watch "Princess Diaries" movies with the babysitter. I loved to see her get all dressed up. She'd wear her silver hoop earrings and put on her makeup, and I'd watch fascinated, hoping to pick up tips for when I would wear makeup.

Now Mom still goes, but by herself. She skips the silver hoops and wears studs. Julia and I stay home alone, usually with me sprawled on the floor with a dish of ice cream watching whatever's on TV and her on the far corner of the couch, a book in hand to read during commercials.

Separate but together.

Wednesday, opening night, comes way too soon and I am nervous for everything: my plan, my lines, my solos. I make sure Julia sees me get into Kara's car (I have let Kara in on the plan) to go to the "mall." Once Julia gets on the bus I dash back inside and we warm up and rehearse until 7:00. By then I am not just trembling but shaking with fear.

I wait backstage, frozen, trying to remember my first line. I'm sure I've forgotten everything, but then the curtain opens and my mouth is moving all by itself, saying my first line.

I wish we could catch it all on camera: Mom's face when she sees me come out; Julia's mouth in an O of surprise. The audience's delight in "Tomorrow," the laughter at the well done "Little Girls," and the standing ovation at the end.

Then I look way out to the back of the auditorium and I see Ms. Maris' husband peering at me through the camera lens and I know that we have captured it. It's freeze framed there forever, waiting for me to rewind again and again back to the best day of my life.

By the third night of the play Julia, Mom, and I are used to the drill. I get home late still in my costume and I'm too excited from the thrill of the last night performance to go to bed. Julia, who has surprisingly accompanied mom to all the performances, decides to stay with me, leaning against the kitchen counter looking as though she is about to fall asleep. I

grab a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream from the freezer. Because I am the star of the show, I give myself the right to dig in. Grabbing a spoon I reach in and take a long, drawn out bite. I look at Julia, half expecting her to say something. There isn't even a flinch. On my third bite, I remember something.

"Hey, I thought Ms. Marin said the DVDs from the first night of the play were done earlier today. She told me she saw you at school and gave it to you. Where is it? Let's watch it,"

"Oh," she says, and for a minute I think she may have lost it but I banish that thought immediately. This is *Julia* we're talking about. "I mailed it to Dad."

"You did WHAT?" I am shocked.

"It's okay, I told him to send it back when he's done watching it." Then she swallows and says, "I told him that if he didn't watch it and write me back with proof that he had, I'd stop writing to him forever."

I am knocked speechless and silly and so I do the stupidest possible thing, scooping a too-big spoonful of ice cream and grimacing as it freezes my mouth. I don't have the words to say what I want, and though we've never had the twin telepathy thing, I can feel that she understands. "Thanks," I whisper finally.

The surprise that follows is even bigger. She goes to the drawer and gets her own spoon. And in a second she's eating out of the carton too, standing there next to me as if it's something she does every day. Well, trust me, it isn't.

I think back to the never ending hug Mom had wrapped me in after the opening night, how her eyes had gotten wet by the finale. I think of the flowers she presented on the second night, when she told me she wanted me to take performing arts instead of Spanish.

Then I absorb the scene with me and Julia here tonight. There has been so much commotion these past three days, yet I can only think of one word.

Purple.



2nd Place ~ Middle School

Bittersweet

By Lydia L. Brown

BITTERSWEET

TRANSCRIPT, DAY ONE: ROSS HURON

and this is how the world ends

ROSS HURON: My name is Ross Huron. And I suppose this story is mine. Olivia -- she's the journalist who's writing this, for future generations, I guess, says I should tell the story in my own words. So. My name is Ross Huron, and um...Olivia, do I really have to do this? Liv?

transcript pauses, continues

ROSS HURON: Shut up. Okay. Apparently I do. So where does this start? I guess...erm...My name is Ross Huron. And this story is mine. And...ehm...yay?

transcript breaks -- unintelligible voices in the background

ROSS HURON: 'Liv says I have to tell about the world. So. The world was ruled by a couple of idiots who rose to power awhile ago and built up this really gigantic army so no one really dared to defy them. They called themselves 'the Gods'. Bit odd, because they were as mortal as anyone else, but, yeah sure whatever. Oi, and they were evil. And cruel. And heartless. And all that fun stuff. And they tended to eat cheese --

transcript breaks -- unintelligible voices in background

ROSS HURON: Fine. So they didn't tend to eat cheese. Had to make sure you were really listening, though. Anyhow. So, I have these sweetly awesome mental mind power stuff, y'know, I'm an empath, so I can tell other people's feelings, and I can read strong thoughts and if I really concentrate, move things. Handy, mind you, if I don't feel like getting up. And I have 'second sight', so if I ever, y'know, went blind or something, or if my sight's blocked or something, I can see stuff

through my second sight. I guess.

transcript pauses, continues

ROSS HURON: So. Ehm. When I was thirteen, the Gods learned of my awesome amazing mental mind powers, and so they called my parents and told them they'd have to give me up. And my parents hid me; it was this tiny broom closet/cupboard thing in this hidden place, which was apparently used to hide other people during one of the first two World Wars. Yeah, I know, old house, built way before the Crusades and the New Age. No, my parents aren't *that* old, they bought it a couple years before Chris -- he's my older brother -- was born.

ROSS HURON: And I think first they took my dad, but my mom still hid me, and my brother didn't give anything away, so I guess that's all good. I don't know. I was stuck in a broom closet, can you really blame me?

transcript pauses for a full three minutes, then continues

ROSS HURON: Then -- they took my brother. For the Game. They called it the Gods' Game, and we used to play it in the schoolyards before they outlawed it, or before we really knew what it was. It's all about strategy and stuff, and it was always really hard to win. But in the Gods' version, whoever lost died, and whoever won got enlisted in their army. Bad stuff, y'know. And they usually made it so you knew your opponent beforehand, so that when you won or lost the betrayal was all the more deep.

transcript pauses, continues

ROSS HURON: So it was just me and my mom for months and months, and then I ventured upstairs in the middle of the night one night, and -- there were Gods in our house, torturing my mother, trying to figure out where I was. And I tried to give myself up.

transcript pauses, unintelligible, calm, female voice in the background

ROSS HURON: "Ross, **go!**" my mom cried.

I knew they would advance on me. But she yelled at me, so I ran for it. With my backpack and all my

stuff in it. They chased after me, but after awhile they stopped, and I couldn't figure out why. And I didn't really want to know, I think.

I found out later that my mother had told them a few hiding spots where I definitely wouldn't be, and they killed her immediately thereafter.

So I'm a coward. I was the one who ran for it.

But they didn't find me for a good six months.

ROSS HURON: I'm sorry. Olivia? Can I stop?

unintelligible voice, transcript ends

TRANSCRIPT, DAY TWO: ROSS HURON

ROSS HURON: Hi. It's me again. Ross, y'know?

ROSS HURON: Yeah. So, I guess I'll start where I left off, then. So. I broke into a Gods' building. I was sent to steal something. Something important. I shouldn't have listened to them, but I did anyway. I was fourteen at the time, all right? It would have been okay, except then I cut myself accidentally on a piece of glass, and it kind of bled a lot, and ... I don't really like blood.

transcript pauses, continues

ROSS HURON: So I fainted. Yeah. 'Liv?

unintelligible voice, transcript continues

ROSS HURON: Lunch?

unintelligible sounds, transcript ends

TRANSCRIPT, DAY TWO (continued): ROSS HURON

ROSS HURON: I remember waking up in a lot of pain. I knew I was lying down, and there were things attached to my arm -- an IV that was feeding blood into my shoulder, bandages all along my

arm, and another IV on my wrist. I remember using my second sight to tell who else was in the room -- a girl. Twenty, maybe twenty-one years old, shy and quick. Using that, though, cost me a lot, and I think I blacked out for a couple more seconds. Then she said, "You awake?" I didn't answer. "The painkiller will kick in in a couple of minutes." It did, thank the Gods, so I knew she was telling the truth.

When I opened my eyes and saw her, as she said, rather stupidly "You're awake." She blinked.

And I asked her her name, but then regretting it.

"Aragonia Feli. People call me Ari. What's yours?" Gods, she sounds like a talking doll.

"You already know my name."

"You're Ross Huron." I remember thinking that she must have been a popular idiot in high school.

"No, it's actually Henry Greene, and this has all been a horrible mistake."

"Aren't you too young for sarcasm?" What a stupid question.

So I answer with a bitter smile. "You're never too young if you're on the run."

I know she's probably been told that I killed dozens of people, but that wasn't really my fault. For some reason she blushes and turns her back on me. I raise myself up onto my elbows to look at her.

I know my face is contorted with pain and I close my eyes briefly. I test my second sight and I catch her staring at me. "Staring is impolite," I say reflexively.

"Oh -- I --" Definitely a high school cheerleader. Idiot. Can't even string a sentence together.

"Yeah? You forget why the Gods hate me already? I dunno, maybe because of my amazing mental abilities that no one else can comprehend?" My eyes are open, but narrowed, challenging.

"Erm, well, I --" Insert high school cheerleader comment.

"Well, just quit staring, and remember my amazing mental abilities. On certain days I can read your mind, and I don't like sandwiches." Her expression is that of those suffering from total shock. Satisfied she'll fall for my lies, I let my elbows collapse under me, and fall slowly asleep.

transcript ends

TRANSCRIPT, DAY THREE: ROSS HURON

ROSS HURON: When I wake up for the second time, I examine the IV attached to my wrist, realizing that it's feeding nutrition into my bloodstream. And the IV in a vein in my shoulder is probably feeding blood into my bloodstream. Suddenly repulsed by the sight, I turn away from it to see Ari sitting on a three-legged stool by my bed.

Suddenly, I comment, "You know, I always pictured a lot more people around my death bed."

Ari's head snaps up. "Why did you ever think that?"

I shrug my right shoulder -- I doubt I can move my left one at all. "I dunno. I guess I always thought that a few people liked me in the world. Instead, all Fate ends up giving me is a girl who's been assigned to make sure I don't kill myself, by the Gods themselves. I suppose that should be a tribute to my memory, that I was prominent enough to be hunted by the Gods."

"The fact that you got caught in the end erases any redeeming quality that might give you with fellow rebels. Who'd be stupid enough to break into a Gods' building?"

"Maybe I wanted to be caught," I whisper, and I doubt she can hear me.

But she laughs. "Who'd believe that? That's a death sentence."

I raise a single eyebrow. "Yeah. Whatever you say."

"Yeah. Whatever I say. So don't kill yourself, Ross Huron."

When I look up again, her long black hair hides her face, and she's hunched over her book. So I turn over, favoring my left arm slightly, and go back to sleep.

transcript ends

TRANSCRIPT, DAY FOUR: ROSS HURON

ROSS HURON: I know I'm being weak. I know it shouldn't affect me like this. I'm choking on my own blood and my head is in my hands, trying to block out the pain. I know it shouldn't affect me like this. I know I shouldn't let my tears show. I know I'm weak. But it *hurts*, dammit.

unintelligible voice, transcript continues

ROSS HURON: Shut up, 'Liv.

Ari looks up, sees me. "Ross?" she asks, and I can hear the concern in her voice even if I can't sense it.

"That's my name, don't wear it out," I say through my tears, spitting blood.

"Ross?" she says again, rather stupidly. "Ross, is anything wrong?"

That's a really stupid question, you know. "Well, of course not." I say, still through tears. "It's not like I'm bleeding to death, mortally injured, prisoner of the Gods or anything like that. It's not like I've got amazing mental powers or anything. It's not like I'm an empath or anything. And it's not like I believe your pity is real." I know that the last sentence is laced with bitterness.

"Ross," she whispers, and she touches my shoulder. And I break.

"NO!" I yell it, and I see her shocked face in that instant I turn around. "NO! Don't touch me!" I turn

away again, and I know that I am still crying, but I hope she can't hear the tears that lace my voice when I speak next. "I can't block his thoughts -- they're too strong. I don't know his name. His thoughts -- they're all so horrible. I mean, they're not horrible thoughts, but memories -- memories -- Ari --" I shouldn't have used her name, shouldn't have told her anything. It *hurts*, dammit. "I can't feel memories." My shoulders shake and I can feel the tears dribble down my nose. I shouldn't be this weak. I shouldn't have broken.

"Ross? Ross?" I can't say anything, knowing I won't be able to. When she puts her arm around my shoulders, I let her. I let her wipe away my tears; listen to her murmur nonsensical sentences. I want to tell her that I shouldn't be this weak, but I cannot speak. I think I eventually fall asleep in her arms.

transcript ends

TRANSCRIPT, DAY FIVE: ROSS HURON

ROSS HURON: Okay, okay, so I had nightmares. Horrible, awful ones. I don't want to talk about them. Can I go now?

unintelligible voices, transcript ends

TRANSCRIPT, DAY SIX: ROSS HURON

ROSS HURON: I woke up screaming. "I'M NOT INSANE!"

"I never said you were," replies Ari mildly, looking up from her handheld computer.

My head aches, memories bounce in my consciousness, and my face is streaked with tears and sweat.

"Are you feeling better?" she asks, her voice dripping condescension.

"Why wouldn't I be feeling perfectly alright?" I ask her, hoping she gets the hint and drops the subject.

"Last night, you said something about memories --"

I cut her off. She didn't get the hint. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The memories?" she says again rather stupidly. "You said something about how the memories were too strong --" Do you ever take a hint?

"I never said anything like that. Shut up."

"But --"

And I break. Again. "SHUT UP!"

And I know I'm crying again, know my shoulders are shaking, but I turn away from her as though I can

hide my tears. Flashes of pain -- *fear -- dark blood running from a deep cut -- fear -- pain -- fear...* She touches my shoulder, and instinctively I jerk away and scream "Don't touch me!" A woman's high voice -- *laughter -- and then a woman's scream -- dark tears -- dark blood -- where's the light switch? -- fear...* She stumbles back a few paces, and her hands snap away from my shoulder as though she's burnt it. As though she's been scalded by the terrified expression crossing my features. "I --"

"I said -- don't touch me!"

"Ross --?"

"Damn you!" Shoulders shaking, sweat and tears running down my face. *shattered glass -- get away from me -- the sharp taste of my own blood, bitter and sweet at the same time -- something breaks -- blood dripping...*

"Ross!" Anger breaks.

"Shut up! You don't deserve my true name! You're just a bloody spawn of the Gods, and you're going do to a report after I'm dissected, maybe on the different wavelengths of my brain -- maybe that's what causes me to be so insane, whacked-out -- the word you're searching for is *abnormal*, isn't it?" I smile brutally, know that I'm hurting her, don't care. "Don't you remember? I can read your mind. I know your every thought. You used to have a cat name Oscar, his fur was green and black, but he was different from all the other cats so you went and put him to sleep. You never loved him! You never thought about maybe who he was. Maybe they did a genetic experiment on him after you were done with him. And you didn't care, did you? You never loved him!" I know that I'm making things up, know she doesn't believe them, don't care. I lash out at her, reaching her arm, dig my fingernails into her soft flesh until blood shows, staining my own already bloodstained palms. And then -- *dead silence.*

transcript ends

not with a bang

TRANSCRIPT, DAY SEVEN: ROSS HURON

ROSS HURON: "I'm sorry -- I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." My voice. Whispering. "I'm sorry..." Tears are still running down my face. "You're afraid of me, aren't you?" I whisper. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." But my words are empty, and my sobs are hollow and choked as I gasp them out. No...what have I become? What am I doing? -- *the sharp taste of my own blood, bitter and sweet at the same time* -- ... I try to get up, ripping the IV from my wrist, ignoring the pain, only knowing that I have to get out

of here, have to leave...And that's all I know. "No," I gasp, the word dragged out of me like a scream. "NO!" I slump against the door, sinking to my knees, looking away from the blood, trying to ignore it. I don't protest as Ari drags me back to bed, don't protest as she whispers those nonsensical words in my ear and I know that she lies when she tells me it's going to be alright, but I don't protest. I fall asleep again, in her arms.

transcript ends

TRANSCRIPT, DAY EIGHT: ROSS HURON

ROSS HURON: Sorry, 'Liv, I don't want to do this anymore.

transcript pauses for a good ten minutes

ROSS HURON: Don't care. Don't want to.

wishing for water, broken glass -- half-drowned screams -- love -- all I wanted -- fear -- pain -- dark blood pooling -- the sharp, tangy, metallic taste of my own blood, somehow sweet and bitter at the same time...

transcript ends

project ROSS HURON has been terminated
experiment ROSS HURON was not cooperative

*and this is how the world ends
not with a bang but a whimper*



3rd Place ~ Middle School

Notes of Amadeus

By Caroline Elliott

"Yo Fritter!"

I turned around.

"Yeah?"

"Mrs. Kiko wants you in the library. She said some book was back, and you were next on the list."

"Thanks, Jack."

"No prob. Hey, are you gonna do the green team again this year?"

"Nah. Too busy."

"Oh, man! I liked the green team!"

"Sorry. Thanks, man."

"See ya."

I should probably explain.

My name is Peter Franks, but everyone calls me Fritter because I love to cook. I used to run the green team, which was a gardening team, but I quit doing it because of my schedule. I'm a freshman, at Franz High School, in Farmington, Connecticut.

I hurried over to the library before 5th period, and Mrs. Kiko was waiting for me.

"*The Life of Mozart* is in, Peter. You got lucky. A couple of kids said they'd changed their mind about the project they were doing." she said.

"Thanks, Mrs. Kiko. Really."

She smiled.

"Anytime, Peter."

I scanned the biography section, but couldn't find anything.

"Um, Mrs. Kiko, it's not here."

"Oh, yes, somebody put it in the fiction section. Here it is."

I picked it up, checked it up, and hurried off to fifth period.

When I managed to make my way home, after a long day (figures, it was a Monday), I knew I had to start my biography of a famous person of the 18th century. But that could wait until I'd had some leftover ice cream from last night...

After I'd eaten my sort-of-kind-of fair share, I picked up the book, realizing I'd never looked at it before. I gazed at the slim, golden lettering opened it, preparing myself for the tongue of fire to whip out at me, making me slam it shut.

"Mozart's life was a life of pleasure, prodigy, and a small lie upon another upon another which wound up an 18th century scandal..."

For the first time, I continued to read.

"Being the youngest of the family, he craved attention. His young mind was surprisingly conscious, and he was prone to envy. Maria Anna, his talented cello-playing older sister was quite a star, and Mozart longed for the feeling of appreciation. His father, a composer, music teacher, and violinist, loved his daughter, loved seeing the awe on his friends' faces, loved the feeling of pride Maria gave him, loved her. He loved his son, but couldn't resist his daughter's enticing pride..."

I read and read until Mom came home, and I realized, at the sound of her "Peter? Is your homework done yet?" that I still had homework that was due tomorrow, not three and a half weeks from now.

"Uh, yeah, Mom, it's in the progress!" I called. Dang it, now I'd have to work harder than a worker did on the chain gang.

I quickly pulled out my binder and worked harder and harder at my calculus papers. To be honest, I didn't even care about it much, but I still wanted to pass, as it would be good for my upcoming career.

When dinner came, I was three-quarters done, and if I didn't finish by tonight (procrastinator that I am, I had waited until the last minute), I would be dead meat, floating in the water and waiting for the alligator to snap.

All during dinner I was so stressed about Calculus that I had no time to remember the book. When I had at last finished all but one problem, it was 11:30; I had listened to the Rocket-Bombs, my favorite band, at least five times, and had very nearly fallen asleep.

My eyes flickered open. The small, neon green numbers upon my clock read 3:27 am. The small, dark green book lay on my stomach, catching rays of lights from the street

lamps around the street. I figured there was no way I was going to fall asleep again, so I opened it.

When the morning came, I was still reading, and Mom's voice had already called up, "Peter! Breakfast! Now!" I closed the book and sighed. It was going to be another long day.

"Dude, what the crap!"

"Watch it, man..."

Time to get shoved around as a freshman. Oh, joy.

"Fritter!"

I turned around, having fought my way to the freshman end of the school.

Dave Harris, my not-the-biggest-trunk-in-the-attic best friend, was running up to me, while Mr. Thomas, the custodian yelled at him for running in the hallway.

"Did you get the book?"

"Yeah..." I didn't want to mention it was probably the only book that actually really appealed to me.

"So it's settled? 'Cause we need a seriously the-bomb presentation, because if we don't pull it off..."

He didn't have to go on.

"I know... it's really good... I'm almost done."

Dave's jaw dropped.

"Are you serious? You've never read a book in less than a month, you couldn't even pull off *Call of the Wild*, and that was only 95 pages!"

"Thanks for the encouragement."

"Sorry." He really did look apologetic, and because Dave has issues with sarcasm, I didn't hold on to it for that long.

"Look, you just draw the pictures for now, I haven't quite figured out what I'm going to do yet."

"But Fritter, we don't have that much time..."

"I'll figure it out this afternoon. See ya."

But I knew he was right. I couldn't do a half-baked job... We had to pull off the ultimate oral report.

I walked into Biology and plopped down, suddenly realizing how tired I was. I laid down my binders and books and flopped down. I was so tired, and my binder was so soft...

"Mr. Franks!"

I jerked up.

"Yes?"

Mutters broke out.

"Ohhhhhh, Fritter..."

"Smooth, Fritter."

Just when I thought a lightning bolt would come out and zap me from my desk, Mr. Tally said, "Please keep your job at the mattress company to yourself." The class laughed, and I laughed a little, too, though I was a bit embarrassed, but it was mostly out of relief that I wasn't going to be sent to the Intervention Center.

For the rest of class, my eyes slowly closed, then snapped back open. I sincerely wished I hadn't gotten as little sleep I had gotten the night before. I got some sleep during advisory, until, fortunately, the sharp, cutting bell snapped me back to my senses. I grabbed a bag of pretzels, as I didn't have much for lunch, and headed off for sixth period.

I got home, tired, but hungry for the book. I microwaved a bag of popcorn and flopped down on the sofa, curled up with the book, being careful not to get any grease on the pages. Of course, when Mom came home and discovered I had finished a book, but not started on any homework whatsoever, I figured it was probably time to begin actually working.

As it was a Friday, I pretended I was working on my homework, while instead, for the first time, I decided to read a book rather than doing homework.

"... Mozart, in his final moments upon his deathbed, dreamt of his requiem, longing to conduct in the final production of his opera, La Clementa de Tito. Tended to by his younger sister, Sophie, and the family doctor, Dr. Thomas Franz Closset, legend has it that he dictated passages to Mr. Sussmayr. Though the chances are slim, it was not impossible. When his requiem was at last finished, Mozart, settled by his completion, died in peacefulness.

Yet while Mozart's work is still intact, his life, envy, his prejudice, and his pride are lost. Though a brilliant master, only those who are fit for his knowledge can ever know the true life of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart."

My fingers enclosed over the latter side of the book as I closed it. I had finished the book. And actually enjoyed it. This was a first for me. I had never liked to read, and in English class... I couldn't remember the last time I raised my hand.

When at last Mom called for me to set the table, my head was crammed with a new look at this oral report... a totally new look....

Shoving my way through rush hour, what kids called between periods, I pushed my through a wall of kids, pushing my way into class. My evil English teacher's class, to be exact. The bell rang, and various loitering kids scattered, like a rock thrown into a pool of fish. Mr. Wallis, evil as he was, walked into class. After the bell. A few kids, breathless from rushing to class, dashed into class, spewing excuses.

"Mr. Wallis, Ms. Faulkner made me finish my work-"

"Mr. Wallis, Mr. Tally had to talk to me after class-"

Opal walked in. My heart jumped, and my head grew a little bit dizzy.

"Mr. Wallis, Mrs. Pews gave me a pass."

She handed it to him. A pass meant you had a reasonable excuse.

"She had to talk to me about my science project. Sorry."

"Enough." He pointed to three kids.

"Detention, detention, detention..."

He pointed to Opal.

"Detention."

Opal's face grew upset.

"But Mr. Wallis, I have a pass! Mrs. Pews gave me one!"

She held out the pass, signed by Mrs. Pews, the science teacher. I knew it was useless.

"Mrs. Pews clearly didn't know what she was doing. Detention."

Suddenly, my anger took over my guts.

"Mr. Wallis, that's not fair. The school rules say that if you have either a pass or a teacher with you." I didn't have the courage to say anymore.

Mr. Wallis turned very slowly.

"That's not your decision. Detention, Mr. Franks, for back talking. See you this afternoon."

"Everyone has found a topic for their oral report, I assume?" Mr. Wallis crooned.

A chorus of "hmmmyeeaahh"s rang around the classroom. I kept quiet.

"We start research in the library on Thursday. All of the fools who have not chosen a topic or started outlining should work extra hard these few days."

I had to literally bite my tongue in order to keep a snotty insult, probably one he wouldn't understand.

Mr. Wallis strode around the classroom, reminding me of the vischi circling around a cafe... I could almost hear him asking "Vair are your papairs?"

All of the sudden, Mr. Wallis stopped and thrust a crooked finger at me.

"Mr. Franks, what is your topic?"

"Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, sir."

"What books have you read about him?"

I swallowed.

"The Life of Amadeus, sir."

"Have you finished it, Mr. Franks?"

"Yes."

He glared at me.

"Are you sure?"

I knew he thought I was lying, cheating around reading a book. The question was more of a statement: You are LIAR. I glared back evenly.

"Yes. I am absolutely, positively sure."

He continued. Feeling slightly victorious, but I knew, from previous wars, he would be back.

There she was. One good compliment, and that was all I needed... I could score points... big ones...

"Opal!"

She turned around.

"What?" she said angrily. I backed off a little. She sighed.

"Sorry. It's just that I've just gotten my first detention ever, and unjustly, too. I've been ticked off at him all year and he isn't helping his case. In fact, he just worsened it."

I took a deep breath.

"I don't think it was fair that he did that, either."

She smiled, and my heart beat a little faster, making me dizzy.

"Thanks."

I walked off to sixth hour quickly, pumped with brand-new, unspoiled energy, on stoppable... at least, for today.

"Fritter!"

I turned around.

"Dave, what's the matter now?"

"You blew it! Mr. Wallis is so going to fail us! He holds grudges. He's unfair. He's a big, fat, lying jerk who will fail you even if you're a graduate of Harvard!"

"Dave, we're only in high school..."

"Well, you know what I mean! We are DEAD MEAT!"

"Dave, calm down. Look, I have a great idea. This book was really, really good. You, since you're such a great artist, can do the poster. Let me handle the writing."

"Fritter, the last time we did an oral report, we completely flunked. You better do a GOOD JOB, because I haven't seen anything and I don't want to fail!"

I had never seen Dave in anything like this. He was truly upset.

"I want to go to art school, Peter. I want good grades."

He had used my real name. He was serious. I sighed.

"Dave, you're just going to have to trust me. I've never truly enjoyed a book. Tomorrow, I promise I'll bring you evidence that yes, I have been working. Here, why don't you come over around 5 o'clock tonight, okay? I'll have the poster board and all, and we can work on it."

Dave took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Okay."

Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no.... it occurred to me I hadn't done anything except read the book. I hadn't started on the poster. In fact, I hadn't even gotten a poster board. No report, no poster, no preparation, nothing!

I began to spin out of control. I would fail, get sent back a year, and be shamed by everyone. Especially my mom. And Mr. Wallis would goad over me, saying, "I told you, Mr. Franks, that you need to take your education seriously."

Stop it, I told myself. Just stop it. You're fine. Everything's okay. Just relax and get started. One step at a time.

I speed walked downstairs, and wrote a note to my mom telling her that I was out getting poster board, and jumped on my bike and sped down to the grocery store.

Gazing at the art section, I picked out a box of colored pencils, a bag of construction paper, and a big, white, tripod poster board.

A bald, grayish head swept around the corner. Mr. Wallis? Not good. Walking/jogging to the cash register, I peeked around the corner. It was definitely Mr. Wallis.

I peeked around the second corner. Opal.

Time to switch to the express lane.

I burst in through the front door.

"Mom?"

Nobody answered. A note told me she was out having coffee with a friend. I laid out my materials on the table and got to work on the report. For some reason, this was really of interest.

Then it hit me.

I enjoyed this book. For once, I could feel Mozart's anger, his resistance to being second best to his sister. His talent, his secret, and his success, everything this book had taught me about Mozart's life. He loved music more than his sister ever did, yet got even less attention for it, at least until he could earn money for it. I decided to get started on the report.

The doorbell rang.

"Coming!"

I opened it up, expecting to see Dave. Instead, I saw somebody I had long wished to see.

"Hey," said Opal said. "How are you?"

"Uh, I'm good, thanks. Uh, come in."

Great- now I was stuttering.

"No, I have to go soon, I just stopped by to see how you were doing."

"Oh, uh, great. I mean, not great, that you can only stay for a little while, but, I mean-"

I stopped, realizing the more I spoke, the more I made things worse for myself.

"Oh."

There was a pause.

Just as she turned around to leave, I blurted out, "Do you want to go out to the movies with me this Friday?"

It was terribly random, and completely uncivilized, but to my complete shock, she said "Yeah, sure." and left. I went back inside and sunk down on the couch. Half a second later, the doorbell rang. I opened it, and there stood Dave.

"Fritter, you look like a basket case."

"Really? I thought it was just me maybe I should have slowed down do you think I should have I think I was too forward I mean she doesn't really know me I really shou-"

"Fritter, shut up."

"Okay."

"Now, what is the matter?"

"I just asked out a girl."

We went inside and flopped down on the couch to plan out the poster. My hands kept shaking and I kept putting things in the wrong place, until finally, Dave said, "Fritter, why don't I work on the poster while you do the report, okay?" I calmed down a little bit after that, but was just as hyped when I went to bed at the end of the day. Things were about to change- big time.

The next day I walked into English, ready to face Mr. Wallis. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Opal, gazing over at me for just a second, then hurriedly turning to chat with her friends. I could tell she didn't want to look at me, for fear of disgracing herself with a crush on a loser like me. Unlike her, I didn't exactly have a lot of connections.

Mr. Wallis, as usual, walked in late. His stare silenced all chatter.

"Your presentations on 18th century famous people are due this Friday. Those who have not begun by now will surely get 'F's'."

Dave and I glanced nervously at each other. Mr. Wallis continued.

"Mr. Harris, the doodles I discovered on your poster board must be cleared away immediately. This is not a 'blow away in the wind' assignment. This assignment will severely affect your grade- I suggest you improve the status of your project. Caveman-like scratches as the ones I found on your poster do not count as sketches."

Dave looked like he might cry. The illustrations he had drawn were his pride and joy- he thought they were great. He had spent hours on them. It made me want to jump up and scratch his eyes out with his own pencil. My blood had boiled to the max.

"Mr. Wallis, Dave worked hard on those!"

Mr. Wallis' stony face turned to a puce color.

"Mr. Franks, you will kindly keep your tongue to yourself."

"They're perfectly fine! They're not doodles! You have no right to diss them!"

"Mr. Franks, I am your teacher! Now you will kindly keep your mouth closed and your tongue soft! You forget that right now I am in control of this class."

"Peter's right!"

Opal had stood up now.

"You need to give kids a chance to freely express themselves. He worked for hours- those are NOT doodles! They're hand-crafted, original works of art that you couldn't draw better yourself!"

"ENOUGH!"

We both backed down.

"I have been perfectly kind to this class. I have been fair and just. Now you will both join me for a week in detention. Mr. Harris, I suggest you watch yourself as well. Now everybody will now turn to page 301 in their textbooks."

"Peter, what on earth were you thinking?!?"

The bell had rung, and we were on our way to fourth hour.

"Dave, somebody had to say something. You worked for hours on those drawings. You love them. It's not like I could just sit there and ignore him."

"Peter, he will fail us..."

"So what? So what if he fails us? So we failed the last one too. But we've done well on the rest. So we get a bad grade- so what? We're not going to die just because a terrible English teacher failed us. The best thing we can do is make a great presentation- if everybody knows we did a great job, that's better than anything else."

Dave sighed.

"I know, it's just... we're in high school now. I want to be an artist- I love drawing and painting. It's something that makes me happier than anything. I don't want my future to be ruined by my grades."

"Peter!"

Opal... I had meant to thank her, but had forgotten.

"Dave..."

He grinned.

"My little Petie's growing up... it's fine," he added. "I'll go on... see you at lunch."

"Peter!"

I found Opal in the crowd, and we managed to get through the halls.

"Opal... thanks so much-"

"Peter, listen." Opal was very serious. "Peter, we need to talk to the principal about him. He's way out of line- giving me an unfair detention was one thing, but insulting a kid this far? That's just cruel."

"Opal, nobody will listen."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Opal, we're kids. Nobody listens to us. They say they do, but they never do."

She sighed.

"Peter, you're a kind, caring, sweet guy."

She came really, really close to me. Her face came really close to mine... really really close...

I got home, after my detention of writing lines, still in shock. I knew I had to shake myself out of it, but I was just so.... happy. When I finally snapped out, I realized the report was due tomorrow. I got the computer and began to type. I typed and typed, faster

than I ever had. It felt like all of the sudden I had things to say, something to express, something to say.

“Mozart is the most amazing person I ever wish I’d met. His life is so much different than anyone else’s. He was a genius, everyone knows. So what? That’s what I thought until I saw this one book about him...”

The more I wrote, the more I realized that Mozart was this person who I had met somehow through this book, this one book I’d ever found that I’d liked. I was actually enjoying writing. This new door had opened, and I was liking what was inside.

“Are you sure you have the report?”

Dave was looking terrified, like he was going to throw up what little he had eaten. He had asked me the same question six times. I sighed.

“Yes, I have the report.”

Dave had the poster board, and I had the folder with the report. I hadn’t actually seen the finished product, but I figured it had to be good. He was freaked out about me, so I figured he had put in more time than anything else.

The bell rang for third hour. We both walked into the classroom, Dave like a condemned man, I like a savior.

The late bell rang as we were sitting down. Opal smiled at me, and I felt my cheeks go slightly pink, and my head go light.

For once, Mr. Wallis had not been late. I knew he wouldn’t be late for this one for the world.

“Mr. Franks,” he said with a diabolical grin. “Would you care to go first?”

Now I was beginning to get nervous.

“Of course,” I replied, trying my best not to let a note of anxiety leak into my speech.

I walked up, Dave behind me. He propped up the poster. It was the most beautiful masterpiece I’d ever seen. A border of musical notes around the edge gave a look of authenticity, and the portrait (painted) of Mozart sat directly underneath the title: Notes of Amadeus. The facts around it gave the look of creativity, and it was (at the very least) perfect. Dave gave me a glance of good luck, and hurried back to his seat. I gazed

out at the audience. I gazed out at Opal. She gave me a look, a look simply saying one, simple word: go.

You are Mozart, I thought to myself. You know him like a brother. *You are Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.*

“Well,” I began. “I have never liked a book in my life. I could only barely read one when forced, let alone at will. I’m not a great reader. I’m a terrible one. But there’s one book that I would read anytime, anywhere, any situation. It made me feel like I could really be in an adventure, in another life, like I was living in somebody else’s body. In my case, the person was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart...”

It felt as if I was explaining somebody’s life. Everybody seemed unable to move their eyes away, and everybody was hanging on to every word I said. I’d never given a report like this one before- it felt great to feel like everybody enjoyed it, just like I enjoyed the book.

“...Mozart had a life that had many elements, not all of them good. He loved music so much he couldn’t even die without finishing his last composition, *La Clementa de Tito*. He lived a life like no other, and I wish I could’ve known him. And I really mean that. I wish I could’ve lived the life of Amadeus.”

The class burst into applause, cheers, and whistles. Dave smiled from ear to ear, and Opal looked so happy that I wanted to rush over and kiss her like I did yesterday.

“I guess my presentation went well,” I said to Dave.

He grinned.

“Yeah. Me too.”

I pulled the chair out for Opal, and she sat down with a dainty, “Thank you.” I sat down.

“So how are you? You look beautiful.”

“Thanks.” She grinned. She did look beautiful.

She was wearing an amber- colored dress that went just below her knees, and her hair was tied back around her neck. A small, golden chain around her neck bore a small, silver heart, and sparkling earrings hung from her ears.

“You know, Peter, you’re the first guy I’ve officially ‘dated’,” she said cheerfully.

“Oh, really? I’m either offended or honored, I’m not exactly sure.”

She laughed, as we entered the movie theater. I enjoyed the movie, but I particularly enjoyed just being next to her for an entire three hours. We rode the bus home, and when we reached the doorstep, she stopped me.

“Peter?” she asked, holding my hand.

“Yeah?”

“I love you,” she said, and with a peck on the cheek, waved to me, and went inside. I hurried out to the curb, walked to the bus stop, and rode the bus home. Life was so perfect. It made me feel good to be me - I had a girl friend, and a friend who was the most perfect friend I could ever have. I didn’t want anything.

When you’re this age, there aren’t many times that you don’t want anything. There’s always people yelling at you, telling you what to do, you never really get the time to just be happy. That’s why when the time comes, you need to just not think about anything else in the world. Just be happy.

