

œ 2009 œ

It's All Write!

Short Story

Contest

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2009
Ann Arbor District Library
It's All Write!
Short Story Writing Contest
For Middle and High School Students
38

This contest was held in conjunction with the Ann Arbor Book Festival, May 15-17, 2009. The awards and this publication were made possible through a grant from the Friends of The Ann Arbor District Library. The Library recognizes the creativity and courageous efforts of all writers who participated. Congratulations to the winners of the 2009 contest whose stories appear here.



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~Acknowledgments~

Judges

Janet Lee Carey is the award-winning author of *Stealing Death*, *Dragon's Keep* and *The Beast of Noor*. www.janetleecarey.com 🌀 Grade 9/10

Steven Lee Climer, an English professor at Baker College in Michigan, has sold the motion picture rights of his novel *Demonsequ* to After Dark Productions, and is the recipient of the Darrell Award, Eppie for Best Horror Novel 2000, and 1997 finalist for Best First Novel from the International Horror Guild. 🌀 Grades 9/10

John Coy writes picture books, middle-grade novels, and YA novels. His latest is *Top of the Order*, the first book in a series about four fifth-grade friends. He lives in Minnesota. 🌀 Grades 6/7/8

Ronald Cree studied television production at the University of Colorado and currently resides in Colorado Springs with his adopted son, Gabriel. He works as a Communications Specialist for the McKesson Corporation. *Desert Blood 10pm/9c* is his first mystery novel. Visit Ronald on the Web at www.ronaldcree.com 🌀 Grades 6/7/8


S. A. Harazin lives in Georgia and worked as a nurse in a hospital for many years. *Blood Brother*, 2007 is her first novel. 🌀 Grades 6/7/8


Michael Harmon enjoys backpacking, fishing, woodworking, and building skateboard and snowboarding ramps with his kids. *Skate* is his first novel, followed by *Last Exit to Normal*, a Thumbs Up! Award nominee, and most recently *Brutal*, 2009. The author lives in Spokane, WA. 🌀 Grades 11/12

Kristin Wolden Nitz has moved 10 times since graduating from Michigan Tech with a degree in electrical engineering. Her novel, *Saving the Griffin*, was named as a finalist for the Kentucky Bluegrass Award and the Georgia Book Award. 🌀 Grades 11/12

Daniel A. Olivas is the author of *Devil Talk: Stories*, 2004, *Assumption and Other Stories*, 2003, and *The Courtship of Maria Rivera Pena*, 2000. Widely anthologized, he also has written for numerous publications. Olivas is the editor of *Latinos in Lotusland: An Anthology of Contemporary Southern California Literature*, 2008, which brings together sixty years of Los Angeles fiction by Latino/a writers. www.danielolivas.com 🌀 Grades 6/7/8

Cynthia Leitich Smith is the YA author of *Tantalize*, 2007, and its companions, *Eternal*, 2009, and *Blessed*, forthcoming, all Gothic fantasies from Candlewick Press. *Tantalize* was a Borders Original Voices selection, honored at the 2007 National Book Festival,

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Grades 9/10

Laura Wiess, is the author of *Such a Pretty Girl*, chosen as one of the ALA’s 2008 Best Books for Young Adults and 2008 YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers, and *Leftovers*, 2008. Visit her at www.laurawiess.com  **Grades 11/12**

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Gary D. Schmidt

A professor of English at Calvin College, Gary is the author of *The Wednesday Wars*, a Newbery Honor winner, and *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, which received a Newbery Honor, a Printz Honor, and a Thumbs Up! Award.

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Photos of Author Gary Schmidt and Teen Librarian Vicki Browne with winners and guests at the It's All Write Short Story Contest Awards Ceremony held in the Vandenberg Room of the Michigan League in Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 16, 2009



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**Third Place
Middle School**

☞Brothers, Calendars, and Lies☞

By Hannah Clague

Lots of things in life tell lies. Ellie's Keep-N-Clean Spray bottle, for example, claims loud and clear that it is the "Best Brand of Cleaning Supply in America". That's a lie; I have proof. It can't even *begin* to remove half the stains that Clean-a-riffic Cleaning Solution can. *That's* the truth. The ads for Nutri-Fast in my mother's magazines lie, too. I'm sure the people in the ads have never even *touched* a bottle of that stuff, let alone lost "50 pounds by drinking just eight ounces a day for only four weeks!" The problem is, though, that the one thing in life that I wish didn't tell the truth always does. It is constantly 100% dead-on, as long as someone remembers to flip the page every month, which is one chore that Ellie would never forget. Calendars, unfortunately, don't lie.

"Tuesday, August 15th," My cell phone told me in its little automated voice. I glanced at my computer, and the bright display confirmed it. Only 14 more days until Sam would get into his car, and head off into the big blue world, leaving me alone in this empty white house, with only Ellie for company. In 335 hours, 25 minutes, and somewhere around 50 seconds, the moving van would arrive, driven by strong men in "Michael's Moving" t-shirts. They'd carry all of my brother's stuff up that little loading platform, and then follow him across the country, covering miles and miles of highway. They'd go all the way to Dartmouth, never looking back, never even thinking about the girl at the window; the one who'd been watching, crying as they drove away.

"BARBARAAAAA!"

I jumped, Ellie's voice pulling me out of my reverie.

"IT'S TIME FOR BREAKFAST!"

"COMING!" I called back, and then rolled off of my bed. My feet hit the floor a little harder than I'd anticipated, and I stumbled, catching a glimpse of my face in the

mirror as I tried to catch myself. I ran to the bathroom, turned on the warm water, and then tried in vain to scrub the tear stains off of my cheeks.

“YOUR PANCAKES ARE GONNA GET COLD, BARB! HURRY UP!”

I sighed loudly, quickly pulling a brush through my hair. Ellie always got so uptight about her cooking. It had to be the exact right temperature, not to mention fresh on the table, in order for her to be happy. She was a *great* chef, though, so I guess she had permission to strive for perfection. But I didn’t care whether or not my syrup got down to room temperature before I poured it on my pancakes. It was still syrup, and they were still pancakes.

When I finally reached the bottom of the stairs, Ellie was just putting my plate back into the microwave. She looked at me and frowned as I slid into a chair. “That took long enough, Barbara,” she said. “Your breakfast dropped a full two degrees.”

“God, Ellie, that’s practically ice cold.” I smiled a small smile at her, trying to hide the lingering sadness in my features. I attempted a giggle. It sounded pretty real, considering.

Ellie didn’t fall for it. She knew me too well. “Oh, Barb. Don’t worry,” she said quietly. “Everything will be fine.” The microwave beeped, and she brought my plate over to the table, setting it down and sliding into the chair next to me. “You and me, we’ll have a lot of fun together. Even without Sam.” I nodded solemnly, looking away. Of course she would say that; she believed it. Ellie was like calendars; she didn’t lie. But how could it be true?

I fought back the tears that threatened to start falling again, and silently started to cut my pancakes into little squares. Ellie watched me for a while, then went back to the kitchen and started to clean the griddle, leaving me alone—just me, my thoughts, and my pancakes.

All of my life, Sam had been there for me. He’d always help me with my homework, and would play make-believe and dress-up when Mom and Dad weren’t around. He was the type of brother who would invite his little sister to come to the mall with his friends, and make sure that they hit the pink, frilly stores as well as the hard-core guy ones. He knew that a kid needs attention, and since our parents weren’t giving it to me, he took the job upon himself.

Ellie helped him, of course. She had come to live with us before I was born. My mother already had one son, and was having trouble fitting parenting into her schedule, packed as it was with all the parties and things she just *had* to go to. With a second baby on the way, she knew she was going to have even *less* time available for playing mother. So, she hired Ellie. It's the best decision she's ever made, in my book.

Officially, Ellie was our cook. She catered all of the fancy events my parents held, and made up for what they lacked in cooking expertise. But really she was more than that. She acted as our replacement parent; she taught us how to walk, signed school papers, and attended various dance recitals and sporting events. Sam and I, we loved Ellie. Maybe even more than our real mom and dad.

At school, Sam was always the popular one. He was the captain of the soccer team, and everyone believed in the #1 emblazed on his jersey. Sam got invited to every party on earth. He had millions of friends. Every girl in the school wanted to be his. And then there was me.

Anyone who observed the lunchroom scene at my school would assume that I was with the popular kids. I sat at the table that the kings and queens ruled. But I didn't deserve my place; I didn't belong. They put up with me because my father was a high-powered executive. One with a lot of money. He was like their fathers, so they thought I should be like them. They didn't seem to realize that I wasn't.

Really, I belonged with the literate, all A+s kids. I always had a book with me, no matter what the occasion. The problem was that the so-called "geeks" didn't see me as I really was; they didn't see the book under my arm. They only saw my dad's job, his annual salary, and where I sat in the lunch room. Whenever I approached them, they turned me away, usually with a very long, multi-letter word.

It wasn't fair that the kids at school judged me based on my family, as my parents were a pretty bad excuse for one. Sure, my dad had a lot of money, but he was never much of a father. He never took Sam fishing, or read me a bedtime story in the evenings. He was never home in time to eat the dinners that Ellie cooked. He was always at the office, or at a meeting, or visiting a client. He was never around to get to know us, so we never got to know him. He was a name, "Mr. Williams", nothing more.

Except to my mother. She worshiped my father, always giving him lavish gifts on their anniversary, even when he forgot the day altogether. But he always took her to fancy parties, and bought her anything her heart desired. My mother was the opposite of Ellie and calendars. She lied. She said she loved my father, but really she loved his money. She also said that she loved Sam and me. But when dealing with less-than-truthful people, you can never know for sure.

On the wall in our foyer, displayed in plain sight where no one could possibly miss it, hung our family portrait. My parents had it done professionally. The four of us are sitting there, perfectly matching in our little blue outfits, with fake smiles plastered on our faces. Anyone who saw it said that it was “lovely”, or “charming”. But it wasn’t. Not really. It wasn’t my family. It was only the people who pretended to be. That picture was a lie.

In my life, I had Sam and Ellie. That was it. No friends, no parents, no one but the two of them. That was why I couldn’t bear the thought of my brother going off to college. Without him, only Ellie would be there to pick me up when I fell down, to help me when I needed it. Ellie was great, but I wanted Sam. He was the only person who understood me head to toe, inside and out. He was my brother. And that was something Ellie couldn’t replace.

My pancakes were getting cold. I could hear Ellie in the kitchen, pretending to wash dishes while she fretted about me getting tongue-freeze. I stabbed a couple of syrupy pieces with my fork. No good ever came of making Ellie worry. Plus, she already had enough to sweat over, what with Sam leaving and all. Sam. God, I was going to miss him. I chewed and swallowed, but didn’t really taste anything.

From its spot on the wall, the calendar was mocking me. “Look at me,” it seemed to say. “I’ll show you just how long you have until Sam goes away.”

I frowned at it. Stupid, truthful piece of paper. The date of Sam’s departure was ingrained in my mind, always at the front of my consciousness. I sat there for a minute, staring at August 29th and beginning to wonder just how long it was going to be before my brother came *home*.

I stood up, went over to the calendar, and started counting days. He was scheduled to fly in the day before Christmas. I flipped past September, moving on to October. As the number grew higher, the sadness in my heart swelled.

In the end, the total came to be 132. One hundred thirty-two days from now, Sam would be back at home, having experienced all the freedoms of college without me. I sighed. More than a third of a year to go. And of course, I was stuck with this calendar right here to remind me. It felt like a double pinky promise, knowing that the date was set in stone. Thanks, Mr. Calendar. Thank you ever so much.

“Barbara? Are you done with your breakfast yet?” Ellie appeared in the doorway, hands on her hips. “I’m about done with the dishes. I just need yours to finish.”

I looked my plate. It was full of little pancake squares. Little *uneaten* pancake squares. Ellie saw me glance down and followed my eyes to my breakfast.

“What? Is it too cold?”

“No, it’s not that. I guess I’m just not hungry.”

Ellie sighed. “Okay, then. I guess I’ll just throw it away.” She picked up the plate.

“I’m sorry, Ellie.”

“No, no. It’s fine, Barb. I understand why you don’t have much of an appetite. A lot’s going on these days.” Her smile held a touch of remorse. She obviously realized that I wasn’t exactly up to talking about the Sam thing. “Anyway, your brother’s in the backyard. He might like some company. Is there anything you need?” She turned to leave.

“No. I’m fine, Ellie. Thanks, though.” She nodded and left the room. I was alone again, and suddenly all-by-myself was not something I wanted to be. I decided that I’d take Ellie’s advice and to go talk to Sam. Maybe if I started saying goodbye now, it wouldn’t be so hard when he actually had to leave.

I opened the screen door and stepped out into the steamy August heat. It’s funny how everyone looks forward to summer, only thinking of days off of school and swimming at the local pool. Then, when it actually comes, all they do is sit around and complain about the heat. Not that I blame them. It must have been in the hundreds.

Sam was lying on a beach towel in the middle of the yard, drinking Mountain Dew and aimlessly flipping through the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. He looked laidback,

the opposite of how I felt. I walked over to him, kicked at the grass until it looked like a decent enough resting place, then sat down, leaning back on my elbows.

Sam lowered his sun glasses to look at me, secret spy style. Apparently my entrance had been amusing, for a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“Can I laugh?” That was my brother for you: Mr. Polite, with Dr. Tease always right along beside.

I opened my mouth, some smart retort on my tongue, but he was already chuckling away, rolling around on the ground.

“Ugh. You ask me for permission to laugh at me; then don’t pay attention long enough for me to say no. Nice, Sam.”

“What? You’re the funny one. I have every right.” He smiled at me full out, his laughter flaring again. I rolled my eyes, then stared up at the sky, and began counting the sheep-shaped clouds while I waited for him to get over it.

A few seconds later his shadow blocked my view.

“Okay, Barb. Sorry about that. I’m ready now. What do you want?” His expression was totally sincere, but I ignored him. I come out here to tell him how much I’ll miss him, and he wastes almost a full minute of precious time *laughing* at me. I hate him. And I wasn’t even all that funny.

Sam looked at me, concern now touching his features. “Barbara, what is it? You aren’t usually so sassy. What’s your problem?” He spoke softly, gently. He really wanted to understand.

I sighed. “You know what my problem is, Sam.”

He looked at me some more, trying to read my face. I stared back, pain obviously the dominant emotion on my face.

“Barb...”

When he spoke my name, I broke. The tears I had been hiding from Ellie started to flow freely now, and strange sobbing noises escaped between my lips.

“Oh, Barbara. Don’t cry. Shh. It’s okay.”

Unlike most brothers, Sam knew me well enough to know exactly what I needed when I cried. He pulled me into his arms, and just held me there. That was all. That was enough.

A little while later, after I had shed enough tears to fill the Atlantic Ocean, Sam shifted me to the side, and stood up. He extended his hand, reaching back down to pull me to my feet.

“Come on. I want to show you something.” He grabbed his towel and magazine, handed me the pop bottle, and led the way into the house.

I’d been in Sam’s room bazillions of times. The navy blue walls, chunky carpet, and faded bedspread were like a home to me. I knew all of his stuff by heart, from the old Peyton Manning action figure to the ever-present pile of dirty laundry in front of the dresser. But as I walked through the door he held open for me, I got this odd feeling that told me something was off. I looked around, wondering what had changed. A poster was missing from the wall, and all of his soccer trophies had disappeared.

“Where’s all your stuff?” I asked him, perplexed. Had some evil crook come and stole all of his prized possessions?

He smiled a small, sad smile at my horrified expression. “I’ve started packing, Barb. It’s all in boxes.” He pointed to the far corner of the room, where a stack of cardboard cubes stood, brimming with things my brother was taking with him on his long journey to Dartmouth.

I found myself jealous of a bunch of Sam’s junk. “Can you fit me in one of those?” I questioned. “I think they sell big ones at U-Haul. You could bring me to college with you!”

Sam laughed, and the sorrowful atmosphere lightened just a bit. “Sorry, but I kind of think not.” He glanced at me. “Hey, don’t look like that. Sure, I’m leaving, but it’s not *that* bad. The world isn’t coming to an end.”

I shrugged and looked away, feeling melancholy again. “So. What did you want to show me?”

Sam bent over and picked up one of the boxes. He dug through it, looking for something. “Aha! Yup, this is it. Come here, Barb. Look.” He sat down on his bed and patted the bedspread beside him. I crossed the room and peered over his shoulder, curious about what he wanted to show me.

Gingerly, my brother pulled an old, tattered photograph out of the box. The edges were ragged, and the once-vibrant colors were fading. It looked like it had been handled

often. “Here, look. It’s you and me when we were little. And Ellie too, of course.” He handed me the photo, being extra careful not to hurt it.

It had been taken years ago, when I was around three and Sam was eight, but I remembered the day like it had been only yesterday. Ellie had decided we needed to get out of the house, and lugged us to the Toledo Zoo. Sam and I had loved the animals, but they had not loved me so much. Sam had wandered off to find a bathroom, and Ellie had taken me to see the lions. When the leader of the pride growled at me, making me cry, Sam had appeared out of nowhere. He just showed up, to make his little sister all better. Ellie had snapped a picture right at that moment. He was standing there, arms open, and I was running into them.

Ellie is not a photographer, and her angle had been off. She had managed to get her left foot in the picture, who knows how. Looking at it, I realized that *this*, not the framed knock-off on the wall, was my real family picture.

“See, Barb? You’re my little sister. I’ll always be there when you need me. Even when I’m all the way in New Hampshire.”

I looked up at him, tearing my eyes away from the photograph. “You promise?”

“I promise.”

In just 332 hours, my brother was going to leave me. I knew it for a fact. But I also knew that he’d be there whenever, however I needed him to be. He’d be right on the other side of my cell phone, just seven numbers plus an area code away. Besides, he was coming home for Christmas, which was only 132 days away. I was relying on that number. Sad, but true.

I had circled December 25th in bright red, so that I could watch it getting closer and closer. I wasn’t worried, though. I knew that the day would arrive right on time, because calendars, just like my brother, keep their promises.



Second Place
Middle School

❧ Four Rolls of Toilet Paper ❧

By Christina Bartson

When you feel trembling on your skin and quivering liquid swimming through your veins, you lift your palms upward to expose the supple flesh and the blood hot in your shaking fingertips. When you feel the soft area behind your knees turn weak where the act of walking toward your salvation is beyond physical, but more willed. And you feel the deep drum in your fragile chest violently thrusting; fighting against the cage it is locked in when you reach for your small battery powered lifeline. When you must sit down and drink the orange juice in your pretty glass that seems so heavy that you have to hold it with two hands. Here is when you can know that you're living.

I remember how we crept out of the house that night, as stealthy as black cats. Cole had rolls of toilet paper stuffed in his t-shirt. He called the bulky lumps they made “Uni-boobs”. I remember I was wearing my favorite red cotton skirt and had pulled a hoodie over my bathing suit top because the air had grown chilly. I remember how we went barefoot carrying our flip flops in our hands, with bits of seashells still clinging to our toes from earlier, to pad across the floor and out of the cottage. The ocean exhaled deeply as we ambled to the sand chuckling and tripping over each other’s feet clumsily. The moon was fat and stared at us, watching contently from his place in the night sky, ready for tonight’s entertainment.

“Do you think anyone will see us?” I asked, looking over at Cole. His hands were holding his “uni-boob” in place. I laughed at his appearance, a little too loud, and he clapped a hand over my mouth muffling the sound. His hand smelled like salt.

“Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.” He hushed. A roll fell from his shirt and onto the sand. He picked it up and shoved it back under. I smiled. “No,” He whispered, “No one is up this late. It’s 4 am. Plus the lifeguard stand is on the far side of the beach. I doubt anyone will be taking a stroll through the tide pools.”

“Yeah,” I replied digging my toes into the sand with every step; liking the way it slid through my toes and molded under the soles of my feet. I love the feeling of walking through sand. There is something so gratifying about the lure of the matter and how it rushes in around your ankles when you sink down into the sand and how it skims back over the edges of your feet when you pull your foot out. It’s almost like the sand needs you. I know I needed it. The only place I never feel the stress from everything that troubles me is the ocean. All I want is the sand, the salty breeze, and the reaching, reaching water. Nothing else.

Childhood living is easy, that is what most adults say. For me, this past year hadn’t been easy. A week before my fourteenth birthday my mom took me to the doctor because I had been behaving strange. For the past months I had been angry constantly and would become upset so often. Not repeatedly do I ever cry for hours holding my head tight between my knees and rock myself sobbing into furious fits, and because I was it worried my parents. My clothes seemed to grow larger. All my jeans hung loosely from my hips and legs, where they once fit properly on my healthy stature. My skin, instead of moist and rosy, became dry and dull. I was constantly thirsty; and drank more than five water bottles a day. I was also hungry and ate heaps of food, but I wasn’t gaining any weight, I had lost fifteen pounds. Together I wasn’t myself, I was a stranger.

I was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. My mother and I were told by my doctor to go home, pack a suitcase, and drive right to the emergency room. I had the feeling as if part of me had left and was running very quickly toward something unfamiliar, and the other half was just hovering, unwilling to follow, just wanting stubbornly to not get implicated.

At the hospital I was sat in a large bed covered in starchy white sheets; I had never been the person in the bed before and I started to cry. I watched entranced, fascinated at how I didn’t seem to care as nurses stuck IVs into my thin arms, and lured blood from my veins into large vials. People in long white coats buttoned up or brightly colored scrubs told me my glucose levels were over seven hundred, and they needed to get me back to a healthy number so I would have to stay at the hospital a while longer. It was confusing sitting there. They explained everything so simply to me, the science I

could grasp, but what I didn't understand was how I could have this disease. I felt perfectly fine, I couldn't be sick.

I understand now. I am a fourteen year old diabetic who pokes herself ten times a day to check glucose levels and give herself shots. I am more myself now, just my pancreas doesn't work. But remembering the days in the hospital bed still makes my eyes swell and throat turn cold. It is difficult to tell new people I meet about my diabetes, but to tell Cole it was easy, he is just that kind of person. He undertakes every aspect of a person and appreciates them.

I was thinking about all this as I vigilantly stepped on the thick filmy rocks that surrounded the tide pools, creating the barrier that separated the one beach from the next. But my thoughts frolicked around, not really focusing, because I was giving most of my attention to the sharp boulders underneath me, and the mysterious creepy-crawly creatures lurking in the dark seaweed packed water that splashed at my ankles. I chose my path randomly, skipping around from one place to the next (mostly because I could barely see anything), clutching my flip flops and waving my arms around to keep balance. Cole was almost to the other side, still pinning his "uni-boob" in its proper position.

"Wait up!" I stage whispered. He turned to stop for me as I hopped to where he was standing. We stood on the same rock for a brief moment. My long wild hair blew gently in the wind, curling up in odd places to tickle my freckled face. I stretched up tall trying to level our gaze, both of our eyes almost even, mine green and his brown with twinkles fluttering around, but he was still a bit taller than me. I opened my mouth and started to talk.

"I've never done anything like this. I mean sneaking out that is. I don't know what I was thinking. It's not like me to do something without thinking, really weighing out my choices and the consequences, what my parents would say, what could happen to me, could I get hurt, what would I be doing..." I searched my mind openly, trying to remember why I was standing here, right now. My eyes tore away from Cole's, noticing he could easily read what I was thinking; I always show what I'm thinking, it's a loose brick in the great wall I tend to build. I turned my head away, brushing my shoulder, to

focus my eyes on the black ocean and hide the gap in me which Cole was peering through.

“But I guess in this case thinking slipped my thoughts. I’d probably be in bed sleeping if I wasn’t here right now ...” I trailed off.

“Yeah, sleeping and having no fun,” Cole said. He continued jokingly, “You’re such... aaaaa.... a goody two shoes.” He finished looking over at me. I bit my lip.

“Yeah I guess I am.”

“But you’re here though and you’re going to have fun. I promise.” He replied.

He grinned at me then turned around and proceeded to continue jumping from rock to rock with me following close behind. We reached the sand and in a moment arrived at the white wooden throne.

“Ahhhh,” Cole cooed, “My pretty chair, why we were looking for you. Now that we’ve have found you, tell us, are you ready for some fun?” He removed the four rolls of toilet paper from under his t shirt and tossed two to me. “Let’s do this.” He said, grinning. I laughed, and then made myself look serious by pressing my lips together in a smug smile.

“Let’s.” I said in a low, slithering voice. We threw the rolls back and forth over the lifeguard stand watching them soar through the air with their tails rippling. Giggling all the while and whipping tears with the backs of our hands from our sparking, dancing eyes. And finally when every last quilted butt-wiping square white sheet was gone we stood back to admire our work. The lifeguard stand stood tall in all its newly undermined glory looking very much like a little kids party all decorated with streamers.

“Well done, my friend, its lovely. And I have to say your toilet paper tossing skills are quite impressive.” Said Cole.

“Thank you.” I replied curtsying. Although I thought I was pretty bad at throwing the flimsy rolls.

“Well, should we celebrate our adventure’s pleasing outcome?” He asked, raising one eyebrow. I asked how we would celebrate and he said he’d show me. Then he grabbed my wrist and took off charging towards the ocean. Dragging me all the way while crashing over the water, falling inelegantly to his knees, and scrambling to get

back up. He started kicking up the water and spinning in circles looking up at the stars with his arms outreached. But instead of doing his Indian dance slash salute to the stars, I let myself fall backwards into the water, my arms out to the sides, but not there to catch myself. I let the sea water seep into my clothes not caring that I was completely soaked. But just living, living beautifully.



First Place
Middle School
Stynkchro Boy
By Christy Choi

Chapter 1

I whoop with joy as I plunge into the wide blue pool. The familiar coldness rushes over me. I take a deep breath and smell the welcoming, yet sharp, smell of chlorine. I dive under the water to swim my warm up lengths.

I am an average kid with one exception... I love synchronized swimming. You might wonder what's so weird about that, so I'll tell you in three words: I'm a *boy*. I want to be a professional synchronized swimmer when I get older; maybe even compete in the Olympics. Synchronized swimming is traditionally a women's sport. So yes, that means that only women can compete in the Olympics currently. I hope that will change. My idol, Kenyon Smith, is a male synchronized swimmer. He could probably compete in the Olympics if he was allowed to.

I keep my passion a secret from everyone outside of my team and family. It's because at my school, synchronized swimming is for girls... and girls *only*. I used to think that too, until I went to my sister's synchro practices.

I started going when my mom started to work more. I was embarrassed to be there, but I immediately found out that the coach was awesome. She let me swim as long as I wasn't disturbing the team practice. At first, I was just making fun of synchro by copying the moves, but then I realized how complicated and unique the sport really was. That was when I found out synchro is cool. I soon memorized my sister's synchro routine, and when it was time for my sister's competition, I could do it just as well as she could. I never thought that I could be on a team or even compete.

At my sister's competition, last October, her teammate, Tiffany, couldn't make it. She sprained her ankle during volleyball practice. The coach didn't know what to do, so that's when I stepped in. I told the coach that I thought I could do it. She was nervous but basically, the coach had no choice. You need eight people to compete to get the maximum amount of team points, and we really needed them. The other team's coach said that I couldn't go in the place of the girl, but the rule book didn't say

anything about that. I went into the competition and our team won. That was when I fell in love with synchro. It's a hard sport and I loved performing.

Chapter 2

"Yo, Brandon!" Ryan, my best friend yells. "Wait up!" I turn around to face the old school building and see my friend weaving around kids on his blue and black skateboard. He skids to a stop and adjusts the strap of his backpack.

"Hey, Ryan! What up?" I ask, raising my hand for a high-five. He slaps my hand and adjusts his familiar blue and white cap.

"Did you hear about the new skate park that opened? I heard that it's so sweet! There are all kinds of ramps, lots of pipes, and like everything!"

"Yeah, I heard about it too. I want to go there so flippin' bad!"

"Well guess what?" He asks in a serious, low tone. I pause for a moment, staring at his face. He raises an eyebrow at me and I get the hint.

"No way! You're not going there, are you?" I question. A smile slowly forms on his pale pink lips.

"I *am* going, and I want *you* to come with me. My mom says that she will drive us there."

"Man, that's off the hook! When are you going?"

"I'm going on Saturday... at five. Can you make it?" I think hard for a moment. I know I have something that day, but I can't remember. I think harder and then it hits me: the statewide synchronized swimming competition. How could I have forgotten? If we win that one, then our team will go on to the nationals. The team needed me.

"Sorry, dude. I can't make it," I sigh, shoving my hands in my pockets.

"Why not?" he questions, folding his honey-bronze colored arms across his chest. His index finger tapped impatiently on his shark tooth necklace.

"I just can't..." I sigh, hoping that he won't ask any more questions.

"S'okay man... totally cool," he says, frowning. "S'cool. See you on Monday... and remember, I'll always be there for you bro."

“I know that Ryan,” I sigh. “I know man.” I wonder if that would still be the status if I told him about synchro...probably not. “Why are you going all deep with me?”

“I think that you’re hiding something from me...” I tense up and look at him like he was crazy. He looks up at me and says, “I’m just kidding!” I breathe a quiet sigh of relief.

We say goodbye and I put down my skateboard and coast away from my best buddy and ask myself why I can’t tell him about synchronized swimming... I really didn’t even want to keep it a secret. *Would he really think I was “cool” if he knew I blew off the skate park for a synchro meet?* I answer this question instantly: *Nope, probably not.* But synchro really means a lot to me; it is like an adrenaline rush, competing with my team. I feel like I can fly, leaping off to dive, and feeling the rush of air that follows before I enter the water after the deck work. How could Ryan ever understand? I bet he would just laugh and think I was joking. Then, he’d probably tell George, Theo, Colter, Forrest, and the gang. I wouldn’t be able to look at them for the rest of my middle school career! Ugh!

I mess up my hair as I roll down the sidewalk towards my house. I slam the door shut, lock it and place my skateboard next to the closet. I kick off my brown and blue Vans and ditch my backpack as I run upstairs to the safety and comfort of my bedroom. I hate thinking of what would happen if my secret slipped.

I toss my back pack on my bed and fish out my blue and black binder. I take out my math homework and work on a few problems. I send a text to my sister, Selena, reminding her to pick me up. I lay on my bed waiting for her reply; I’m too tired to finish my math homework.

Bzzz. I check my phone, expecting it to be my sister. Instead, it is a text from Courtney: my worst enemy. I know the “worst enemy” thing is lame, but it’s hard not to resist if you know someone hates you and plays nasty tricks on you and all of that. And anyways, she started it.

Why is she texting me? I pinch myself to see if I’m dreaming. My phone still reads Courtney’s number. I shake my head and sigh. *Ever since she joined the synchro*

team, she has been nice to me... and she is never nice to me... ever. She must be up to something.

When Courtney joined the synchro team, I told her that my mom made me do it, even though it isn't true. I also asked her to keep quiet about it. I glance at the familiar smiling face of Kenyon Smith posted on my wall. When my friends come over, I always cover the poster up with one of Ryan Sheckler, an awesome skateboarder. I wonder what Kenyon Smith would do about Courtney. I think he would read the text. I grudgingly do so.

COURTNEY: R u coming 2 synchro 2day? I text her back as fast as lightning.

BRANDON: Yah... but I may b L8. Bzzzz. I look at my phone again.

COURTNEY: R U gng 2 the GIRLS synchro practice? U want me 2 give u a ride???? I can pick u up at 4:30. I hesitate and then start texting again.

BRANDON: Um... sorry but no, my sis is driving me there. Thnx anyways.

COURTNEY: Oh, ok. C u @ synchro. G2G. 2dles.

BRANDON: Bye.

Chapter 3

Later, at practice, I step out of the locker room and an ice cold hand lands on my shoulder. My heart skips three beats. I turn around to see who it is. Courtney. What does she want?

"Hey Brandon," she coos, twirling a strand of her long blond hair. "Did I scare you?" I think she's trying to pout and flutter her lashes innocently, but she just looks silly.

I twirl my goggles on my index finger. "Maybe, maybe not," I reply. I shiver at the sound of her fake cute, innocent, nice voice... the voice you use to kiss up to parents. Disgusting.

"Anyways, I've been thinking about your synchro secret. If I'm going to keep your secret, then you have to do something for me." she shifts her weight onto her right leg. "That's reasonable, right?"

"Yeah. I guess so." I mumble, worrying about the things that she might ask for.

"So can you umm... make Theo like me and then like, I don't know... hook me up with him?" She says Theo's name like he's a god or something.

I open my mouth and then close it like a fish. I was about to yell at her that I can't make Theo like her (nobody in his right mind would "like" Courtney) but I thought better of it. "You know what? We really need to warm up. I'll tell you after practice? Okay?"

"Fine," she sighs. "After practice." Her act of innocence has disappeared. If I didn't know better, I'd think she would have killed me on the spot.

Chapter 4

Back at home, I lie on my bed, thinking about what I have just done. I agreed to make my buddy like some stuck up brat. *How was I ever going to do this? Could I pay him?* As I scheme, I twist the rough brown cord on my wrist. All the guys in the gang have one. Feeling guilty, I untie the reminder and throw it under my bed. I sigh. I could tell that this was going to be a very long week.

Chapter 5

For four whole days I work on Courtney's request: a hook up with Theo. I try everything that I can think of: mentioning Courtney, asking him if he thinks she's cute, and suggesting he ask her to the movies. He says "No way" to everything. Finally I get desperate. Courtney keeps glaring at me constantly. I decide to bet Theo can't go out with Courtney for a week. Everyone knows Theo can't turn down a dare...

As the bell rings for lunch, I part with Ryan and make a mad dash to the snack line. I am the first one there. I quickly slap down my lunch card and order my usual: pizza sticks, chips and a slushy. As I wait for the lady to get my lunch, I replay my plan in my head. I sigh. If this doesn't work, then my future will be like Humpty Dumpty... beyond repair.

At our lunch table, Ryan tells the rest of our buds about how our chubby gym teacher fell on her face during class. We all break into laughter. When the laughter quiets down, I casually ask them who they would go out with for a skateboard. Ryan snorts and replies,

"I'll give my skateboard to go out with your sister!"

I punch him in the arm and say, "No, seriously. Uh... Theo! Would you go out with Courtney for a skateboard?" Gaggling noises immediately follow after the word Courtney.

“I could use a new skateboard... but Courtney? That brat? No way.” Theo shrugs. “What’s up with you trying to get me to like Courtney anyways? Is it a joke or something?”

I freeze. Then Theo says, “I think you like her.” I ignore his comment and turn to Forrest to talk. He rolls his eyes at me and turns around to throw his apple core into the trash. I sigh. I know I have to make him change his mind, and fast... I needed a miracle.

Chapter 6

The next day at synchro practice, I see Courtney strutting over to me, so I quickly dive into the pool and start my warm up. I know there is no way to avoid her, but I can’t help but try. As I dive back under, I feel something grab my ankle. I quickly pop my head up and turn around. Low and behold, it’s Courtney.

“Brandon Evens!” She shrieks. “Why didn’t Theo ask me out? Tell me... now!” She glares at me and puts her hands on her hips. Her mouth twists into a frown.

“Hey, Courtney, I tried my hardest but he just doesn’t like you. That’s something I can’t change.” I stare her down.

“Yes you can change that. Did you even try? Wait... no. You don’t even move that lazy butt of yours, do you?” She snickers. “Guess not.”

I fume with anger. The stress of the past week pours out. “Actually, no one *wants* to go out with you. Okay?” If she wasn’t a girl, then she would be seeing stars... maybe even worse. I don’t know.

Courtney freezes with her mouth wide open. For a moment, she looks like she is going to cry. But then she steadies herself to deliver another mean blow. “At least *I* keep *my* promises. I *really* thought that I could trust *you* to keep your side of the deal. So don’t be surprised if the *whole school* finds out that you do synchronized swimming. Got it Mr. Evens?”

I am speechless. She can’t be serious.

Chapter 7

Friday morning as I ride to school, I wonder about Courtney’s threat. She couldn’t have done anything yet. As I approach school grounds, immediately, it seems like everyone is staring. I quickly enter the building, and then I freeze. There are fliers

all over the walls saying “Come see STYNKCHRO BOY at the Star Lake recreation center on Saturday at 5p.m.” On the poster there’s a picture of me in my trunks. I don’t know what’s worse; the nickname, the advertisement, or me, half naked, all over the school. I can’t believe this is happening.

“STYNKCHRO BOY!” I hear someone call out to me. Right on cue, muffled laughs and giggles follow.

Until lunch, I hang my head down, trying not to be noticed. I have to talk to Courtney before this gets worse. I find her at her locker, applying lip gloss. I guess she saw me in her mirror because she tosses her hair and snorts,

“Having a nice day *Stynkchro Boy*?” She tosses her hair again and spins to face me.

“Okay, look Courtney. I really think you’ve taken this *way* too far. Me not being able to get Theo to go out with you was just a little thing that nobody knew about, but you’re like, *dissing* me with all those fliers... that’s *not* cool.”

“That’s nice to know, but *I. Don’t. Care.* You went back on your word.

“My word?” I make air quotes around “my word.” What the heck is ‘My word’?”

“You didn’t talk to Theo, so now the whole school knows that you do synchronized swimming. Duh. So can you please, *please*, act like you don’t know me? You’re an *outcast* now. Remember? Being caught with *you* will hurt *my* image, so go away. *Now.*”

Speechless, I walk to the bathroom and slam the door shut. I decide to skip lunch. I avoid the gang all day, ignore phone calls, etc. I can’t handle having my friends know my secret. I need to think of what to say to them about synchro... especially Ryan.

Chapter 8

“Hey, Brandon, wait up. We need to talk!” I hear voices behind me. I know it’s the guys, but I just board even faster. Unfortunately, George and Forrest are faster than me. “Brandon. Stop.” They stop right in front of me, blocking my way. ‘*Shoot.*’

I think to myself. ‘*What am I going to say?*’ Before I know it, the whole gang is surrounding me. ‘*Crap!*’

“Brandon, my man! Where were you?” Forrest says it like I am his long lost friend.

“Anywhere but in the girls’ bathroom,” I joke, hoping to loosen up the tension. The guys laugh along with me like nothing has happened.

“Okay, so anyways, is it true?” Forrest asks me smoothly, like we’re talking about ramps.

I play dumb. “What? Oh, you mean how my fish exploded when I was three? It’s true.”

He stares me down. “No. I mean, “Stynkchro boy.” Is that true?” His eyes burn holes in me.

My heart drops and then it rips. I look down and get ready to speed away home. “Yes.” I choke it out softly and coast away faster than I ever have before, my vision growing blurry.

Chapter 9

When I come out of the locker room to stretch with the team right before the routine started, I freeze. The whole school is there, sitting on the bleachers. Even some of the *staff* is there. I can’t believe it. In the first row, I see Theo, George, Forrest and Colter were sitting. My eyes then wander to the last person sitting on the bleachers. Ryan. That made the whole gang. My eyes linger on Ryan. His gaze meets mine but then we both quickly turn away. I sigh. I was officially friendless.

I snap out of the thought as the coach tells us to hit the deck. As I walk over, I ignore the presence of the crowd and spread my arms out in an oval, parallel to the ground and seal my face into a smile. The music starts and I nail the five second deck work, and so does the rest of the team. As I dive into the water, the rush of blue greets me and the adrenaline rushes through my veins. Nothing and no one can stop me or bring me down now. I concentrate on the routine, running it over in my head. We rock the flamingos, ballet legs, and the other moves, but now we had to do the lifts. We had practiced them forever but we rarely get them perfect. I take a deep breath and brace

myself for the lift. I stand on the platform made by my teammate's legs and rise. I don't even wobble. The music stops and I smile even wider. We did it perfectly.

Chapter 11

I sigh. The locker room was quiet except for the sound of my heartbeat. As I shrug into my blue synchro team sweatshirt, I let out a long sigh. It had been a long day. I basically lost all my friends and got humiliated in front of like the whole school. The only thing that went right was the synchro routine. We got first, but that didn't really matter to me anymore. After all, I had no one to celebrate with... My phone vibrates against my thigh and pulls me back to Earth. I check the screen. My eyes go wide as I read who the text is coming from. Ryan. It read this...

RYAN: Hey, man, nice job. Y r u ignoring me? I thought we were best buds. BTW, I'm srty tht I was mad @ u. I just wasn't really cool about not knowing about synch, not tht u do it. Anyways, like I said b4, I will always b @ ur side... I reread the text a few times to make sure that I was seeing correctly. I take a deep breath and text him back.

BRANDON: Thnx. So r we cool? I hit send and wait for a reply. My phone vibrates after half a minute and I look down at it. My eyebrows rise in surprise; it isn't a text from Ryan. Instead it's one from Courtney.

COURTNEY: R u sorry yet? Y don't u just quit? Realization strikes me. She wanted me to quit all along so she could compete with the team. After all, she's the extra. I shake my head in disgust.

BRANDON: Look Courtney, u can't just make me stop synchro. I don't care wht any1 thinks anymore. It's a part of who I am & u can't change tht fact... think about it. I grin as I type, and that grin slowly grows to a full smile as I hit send. The name Stynkchro Boy finally felt right on me... like it really belonged and no one could take it away, just like synchro was to me. It might not be the most popular thing to do, but it was like my ligaments, if I didn't have it.... Correction, If I didn't do it, I would fall apart... it is a necessity in my life. Stynkchro Boy. I laugh for the first time in days.



Third Place
High School 9/10

☞Charlie's Sleep☞

By Kaitlin Daida

Things didn't seem quite right when Charlie woke up. Maybe the sun was too bright or perhaps the colors surrounding him were too clear and vivid. He rubbed his eyes and blindly patted the bureau for his glasses. He knocked over an empty bottle of pills instead. Charlie paused. When had he used up all of them? An irritating buzz hummed in his ears. He supposed that is was the side effect of the sleeping pills. A cup of coffee would cure it.

Charlie stirred his coffee slowly that morning, disturbing the granules at the bottom of his mug as if he were stirring his thoughts. He looked across the table at the place where his wife used to eat. To him, she had been the most beautiful eater in the world. She would take small, delicate bites to savor each layer of taste by rolling and chewing the food in her mouth. Even when her arms quivered arthritically from the cancer, she was still the most beautiful eater. She was a lovely woman, but a real lady, decided Charlie. He sipped his coffee. No woman is a lady until she learns to eat like one.

Suddenly, Charlie couldn't stand the kitchen. It wasn't until he hobbled towards his dining room that he realized how much he couldn't stand the house itself. Everything was so common; the fog of significance had dissipated and all he was left with was a plain house. His wife's belongings became the skeletons of his memories with her. He could feel time peeling away each memory until only the residue of emotion was left. Even these feelings began to pass and Charlie hated the emptiness.

The murmurings in his ears were rising in a slow crescendo. He wanted to go to the park; he needed something real. He needed the smell of sunscreen, the cacophonic screams of children's play, the musty socks, the suffocating humidity, and the sticky fingers of popsicle-carrying babies. Heck, he wanted to see living people.

A gust of wind pushed him back when he shoved the door open. Sunlight flooded into the foyer, causing him to squint. Charlie stared into the blinding light and noticed a shadow on his lawn. “Hey!” he called. He stepped out, holding his hands over his head. When he looked up, a girl had emerged from the shadow.

It was like having a black and white television screen appear out of nowhere. The girl looked misty as if she were being projected on a transparent screen. She stood before him, a still piece in the moving world. The wind rippled through the grass, but never touched her. Her garments never stirred. Through the chatter of the Earth, he could almost hear the softness of her breath, rising and falling.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Suddenly, the sounds died. The wind still blew and she was still breathing, but he couldn’t hear any of those noises. Instead, he heard a clear voice utter, “He doesn’t seem to be doing so well. I don’t think he’ll make it.”

“Who’s there?” he repeated.

The girl looked at him and blinked. A tear rolled down the corner of her dark eye and she bowed her head. “I’m not going to hurt you,” beckoned Charlie. The girl looked up with an opened mouth as if to say something. Then, she vanished.

He stared at the spot where she had been. The more he looked at it, the stiller he became and the faster the world around him gyrated. It spun faster and faster, sucking out the colors. The light began washing out distinct lines and figures. The brightness was becoming unbearable, but he still gazed at the spot where she stood.

The voice began to speak again. “Charlie,” it whispered. He cocked his head and wondered if it was the girl’s voice. “Charlie,” it repeated, “please don’t die.” Charlie looked up from the spot where she had been into the light and fainted.

When he came back to his senses, he realized he was lying in front of his house. The spinning had stopped and the air was still. No one was on the street. In fact, there was not a soul in the whole neighborhood. He walked down a few blocks. With each house he passed, the older the houses seemed to appear.

The houses were dead. The windows that glowed like eyes in the night revealed no telling story of the habitants inside. There were no curtains for privacy or hopscotch

games drawn into the cement. The houses were shells that echoed only the long lost footsteps of their former owners.

Then, Charlie came upon a rock. He remembered the rock because it was where he had purposed to Veronica. He touched it and imagined her slender frame still perched on it. Yes, they had loved each other for a long time and were old flames, yet her eyes still held excitement and surprise when the sparkles of the ring danced on her finger. Charlie pressed at the cavity in his chest and wondered why he felt an ache mingle from that point to the rest of the body.

Suddenly, Charlie remembered something. The rock had been removed years ago. Despite the fair weather, he rubbed at the cold sweat forming on his brow. The voice begged urgently, “We can’t let him go! I’m sure he can think!” Charlie shook his head and ran.

He didn’t stop running until he came to an old building. In its glory days it had been the most powerful newspaper center in the state. They said cash came in as quickly and as cold as the boss. Now, the building stood forlorn and abandoned in very much the same state its owner had been when one of his employees ratted him out to the cops for embezzlement.

Charlie pushed through the glass doors and came to an office. At the desk was a name plaque with no name in it. It had once held Charlie’s name. He drew circles in the dust with his feet. Even though the boss had committed suicide years ago, Charlie still felt like a failure. The boss never had taken kindly to him.

Charlie heard a gasp. Leaning against the doorframe of Charlie’s office was his old boss. The man looked old and haggard. The clothes he wore hung loosely off of his frail body and the arrogant smirk he used to wear was replaced with a permanent frown. The boss stumbled towards Charlie and muttered, “Well, I’ll be.” The tired man stretched out his arm to touch Charlie’s hand. His fingers inched closer and then passed through Charlie’s hand as if Charlie were a ghost.

The boss sat down on the dusty office chair and wept. “Oh Chuck,” he whispered, “I’m sorry that... that I didn’t give you that loan, you know, for your wife’s cancer. She had a miscarriage too, didn’t she?” He scratched his balding head. “I wouldn’t usually say things that deal with money in such a casual way, but looking back

now, I missed so much of my life. I hurt so many people.” He began to laugh hysterically. “Ah Chuck,” he muttered. “I hope you can forgive me.” Charlie could only stare at his disgraced boss. The man giggled again. “If you want to know a secret,” the boss said with a strange look on his face, “then I have to tell you that I’m the devil’s brother!”

Charlie felt himself being torn away. The room was slowly vanishing from him and he saw walls begin to fly past. He watched it like a movie. Tape after tape began to overlap the others. “Don’t leave, Chuck!” yelled the boss. He pulled a pistol from his jacket and pointed it at his own. “Good-bye!” he shouted and then pulled the trigger.

Charlie’s landed on his face outside of the building. The girl was there. He took one look at her and threw-up. The girl knelt down beside him and wiped his mouth with her skirt.

“Do you know who I am, yet?” she asked. He shook his head and then vomited again. She took his face into her hands and said, “I’m Corinne, Daddy.”

He lifted a trembling finger and muttered, “No, you’re dead too, Corinne. In fact, you never lived. You died at childbirth.” He pounded the ground. “Where am I?”

The girl took his hands. “You don’t know how long I’ve wanted you to come home, Daddy,” she said.

He gulped. “Am I dead?”

She shook her head and took something from her pocket. It was the empty prescription bottle that he’d knocked over that morning. “You took the whole thing last night, or rather, several nights ago,” she reported. “You’ve been in a coma for about a week, now.”

Charlie turned on his back and stared at the sky. He felt the dirt in his fingernails when he dug his fingers into the soil. He felt the acid building up in his mouth from fear. It was real to him.

“They don’t want to put you through bizarre circumstances in order to test you,” said Corinne, as if trying to answer his thoughts. “They put enough normal elements of your daily life into the test so that you don’t become bewildered.”

“Why are they testing me? And why do I hear voices?”

She laughed. It was the most beautiful sound he'd heard that whole day. "The test is actually *for you*," she said. "You're going to die before your time. When you get to heaven, they want you to know that you had something validating in your life that you died for. Also, didn't you know that when a person dies, the last thing sense that goes is hearing?"

"Did I ever discover that purpose?" asked Charlie, directing the conversation from the thought of his being semi-dead.

The scene around them was gradually changing as they were speaking. The sky went from a soft blue to a violent red to a luxurious plum color. At the horizon, where darkness threatened to overtake the rest of the sky, a spot of white grew. Corinne turned to the sparkle on the horizon and smiled pleasantly. When Charlie turned, his heart twisted. In the midst of the white, glowing flames was a woman. Veronica.



Second Place
High School 9/10

Trinity

by Honora Wood

Part I: Fox

Damn alarm. I hate Mondays. I hate school. I hate mornings in general. As I roll over to reach the evil invention blaring into my dreamless sleep, my head starts to spin. What time did I stumble into bed last night? Or was it this morning?

“Good morning.” That is the only acknowledgment my mother gives me as she looks me over, taking in the black, the piercings, and the red streak in my hair. Bless her little Betty Crocker-wannabe heart; she made me breakfast. I grab the toast from the plate brimming with food and head out the door. No need to be in that house any longer than is absolutely necessary. Home Sweet Home, yeah right- the place is a cage. My mother shouts something about not forgetting my therapy session after school. How could I forget? Doctor Horton, the instrument of my misery. She has come to the conclusion that because I don’t prance around like a carbon copy of my Stepford mother, there has to be some wires crossed in my brain. Something talking can cure. What my mother and Doctor Whore have never been able to grasp is that talking doesn’t do anything.

Walking into school is my favorite part of the day. Everyone stares at me as if they’ve never seen me before in their lives. And despite the fact that we live in the wealthiest part of town, the new principal set up a metal detector at the entrance. Don’t ask me why. Our new principal is a psycho. I walk through and, surprise surprise, set off the alarm. As the security guard is removing my jacket, a crowd gathers.

“Hey boys,” I shout, winking as I’m being wanded. When it goes off, I lift my shirt so the prison warden we call a security guard can see my belly button ring. No sense pointing out to the pervert that we’d gone through this exchange for an entire semester now.

“Hey Fox,” one brave boy shouts back. I walk over to him after I get my jacket back. Several girls glare as I go by. The kid who shouted, Matt, is a hot commodity, and all the girls know that I’m every boy’s favorite in the school- that is, when I even bother showing up for school.

“Hey Matt, how’s it going?” I ask as I playfully flaunt my ability to do what every other girl in the school secretly wishes to do, but no one else has the guts to. Keeping my hand on Matt

at all times, I see the envy burning in everyone’s eyes as they walk past, and I relish it. All these people, all these soulless faces conforming to each other’s meek standards, are weak. They’re all victims. Like caged birds looking out to see an eagle soaring past, they see my freedom and they react with disgust, hiding their envy so that I’m the freak. I’m the one who has ‘issues’. I’m the whore.

“Listen, what are you doing tonight?” Matt asks, gulping with the insecurity that only I can bring out in him. I inhale slowly, pretending to think about it. My eyes focus back on him as I say with a smirk, “What did you have in mind?”

“And how does that make you feel, dear?” Doctor Whore asks, scribbling on her clipboard as if she’s translating the Rosetta stone. I wriggle and lay back on the couch.

“Well, Doctor, I guess it makes me feel like this *place* is a joke!” I’m shouting by the end. “Can I leave now?” I plead. I need to get out.

“If you would like to,” she says in that dulcet tone that’s like nails on a chalkboard. She doesn’t need to tell me twice. My phone goes off as I’m walking out. Oh Mattie, like a faithful puppy dog he waits. I almost feel bad for all the other girls vying for his attention; especially considering the fact that I refuse to submit to Matt’s wishes to make our ‘relationship’ exclusive. But he knows perfectly well that I don’t do exclusive. It’s one of the few rules I have.

“Hey Sexy,” I answer, even though I know he’s waiting by the curb to pick me up. He smiles when he catches sight of me, shutting his phone and shouting for me to get into his car, an amazing blue convertible Shelby GT. Damn I love this car. I hop over the door and sit in the passenger seat as Matt takes off.

“So where are we going?” I ask as we’re at a red light, my restless nature causing me to squirm in the seat.

“Well, I thought we could go see a movie...” he suggests, but I quickly cut him off.

“No. Not just the two of us,” I state.

“Come on, Fox, please can we just talk for a minute?” he tries to grab my hand. That’s it.

I open the door and step out into the gridlocked street, walking down the yellow lines away from him. The light turns green and everyone honks, but I keep walking.

“Come on babe, you can’t be serious,” Matt says, as the cars pile up behind him, waiting for him to go. “As a matter of fact, I wasn’t serious either. We’re going to meet up with Tommy and the gang at Box. I know that’s your favorite club, come on,” he pleads pathetically, and I can’t help notice how adorable he is when he begs. I smile widely.

“Now that’s more like it.” I say as I hop over the door back into the car. “What are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

At 3 am I climb back into my room, thankful I convinced my mother to let me sleep on the first floor. Also thankful that I had a mother who wasn’t at all concerned by the fact that I wasn’t home when she drank herself to sleep. Tonight was great. My added phone contacts are proof of this night’s escapades. I love that club. Unfortunately for me, Matt decided that tonight was a prime opportunity for him to take over his self-assigned role of my ‘protector.’ He keeps me on such a short leash, refusing to let me drink even though I always have my fake I.D. with me. I managed to shake him off for a while in the middle of the night, though, and that’s when the fun really began. Some people might stay up, reflecting on everything that happened on a night like tonight. But that’s not for me. I go straight to bed, not thinking twice about anything I’ve done.

No regrets.

Part II: Leila

6:00am: the alarm goes off. This alarm is not set for the purpose of waking me; I’m already up and finishing homework by this point. This alarm is meant to keep me on schedule.

Six o'clock means its time to lace up my tennis shoes, pull my hair into a strategically messy ponytail, and go for my run. I step outside the door, breathing in the sunny, crisp morning air. I love mornings. Everything's quiet, still; I can work, with no one getting in my way.

The first five minutes of every run are torture; my body aches with fatigue as it tries to slough off the last remnants of sleep. Once I hit my stride, however, nothing is more invigorating. The rhythm of my feet, the calm strength I get makes me feel as if I could do this forever. But I only permit myself to run for a half hour each morning.

There are simply too many other things I could be doing with my time than merely running. Speaking of which, my watch alarm just went off: 6:30. Time to head back.

After showering, dressing and blow-drying my hair, I head down to the kitchen, noticing the perfectly coordinated window drapes, chair cushions, and barstools. I smile to myself; a year and a half ago my mom hired a professional decorator to come and redo our entire house. Within three hours of the consultation, the decorator was so sick of me hovering behind her and making comments that she left, giving my parents their money back. Afterwards my mom thought it best if I do the decorating. And the house looks amazing, so my mom made the right call.

My mom looks up from the eggs and bacon she is frying and, ever the critical type, glances me over, smiling at my perfectly pieced together ensemble. Living in the upscale part of town affords me nice luxuries, like the ability to get away with wearing my white Marc Jacobs sleeveless collared dress and wide yellow belt to school. Everyone's parents are rich, and everyone wears designer labels to school.

My mom hands me a plate full of delicious breakfast food. I take it to the table and eat it quickly, smiling and saying good morning to my dad, who's reading the paper. I don't have much time, however, because I like to get to school early. I grab my jacket and my mom reminds me that I have to go see my therapist today. I don't really understand why I have to go to therapy, but a lot of kids at school go to Dr. Horton, so it's no big deal.

“Hi there,” I say to a boy with his back to me, once I get to school. My adorable boyfriend turns to me and smiles. He greets me and starts a conversation but I stop him; I have to get to class.

“Well all right,” he pouts, “but it’s good to see you back, Leila.” He leans in to try and kiss my cheek, but I pull away. PDA is *so* not my thing. I smile apologetically as I hurry off to class, even though he really should know this about me by now.

Yawning, I step into my house at eight o’ clock to the aroma of warm chocolate chip cookies. Wow, they smell good.

“Hi Leila, how was your day?” My mom has a plateful waiting for me, just like always. We take our seats at the table as I discuss the one hundred percent I got on my human physiology presentation. I tell her how my private tennis coach says my serve technique is flawless, and my piano teacher thinks I’m more than ready for my solo concert in two months.

“And how did your therapy session go?” She asks apprehensively. I mutter that it went fine.

“What did you and the doctor talk about?” she pries. I elaborate that we discussed mostly the same things that I just mentioned; school, tennis, piano. After my mom is satisfied that she has received enough information from me for one night, I head up to my room to get a head start on next week’s homework. I check my phone and see that I have three missed calls, one from my best friend and two from my boyfriend. I meant to call him; I just never got around to it. Oh well, I’ll call him later.

As I’m doing homework at my desk, the weight of the cookies sits heavy in my stomach. I can’t believe I let myself eat them, especially with all the junk food I’ve been eating lately. There is a truly heinous bulge around my midsection that needs to go. I can’t take this anymore; it feels like there is some sort of deadly illness in my stomach. I have to get it out, one way or another. But I can’t let it get absorbed into my bloodstream, so I get rid of it the way it went in. There, now I feel better; more in control. I brush my teeth and get back to homework. How silly of me to ever let something as petty as food get the best of me. I hate feeling like I’m not in control. I manage things better than anyone else I know, so it makes sense that I should be able to handle everything. And as long as I stay in control, I can do it all; be the smartest,

the prettiest, the skinniest, the most charming, and the most talented. That's all I need to do:

Stay in control.

Part III: Sara

Ah, Saturdays. The alarm next to my bed reads 1:17pm; the perfect way to start my day. I throw my hair up into a ponytail, put on a white tee shirt and some sweatpants, and trudge down the stairs to the delicious smell of chocolate chip waffles- my favorite.

"Good morning, Dear," my mom says after she surveys me quickly. I know that look of relief she tries to hide so well. Though she'll never say it, inside she's thinking 'at least today will be a good day.' She glances over at me again and, noticing something odd, asks, "Whose pants are those?" Her eyebrow lifts in a teasing way. Prompted to look down, I hadn't even realized that the sweatpants I'm wearing didn't originally belong to me.

"They're Matt's." I shrug, eager to drop the conversation as a gently steaming plate of waffles is handed to me. My mom smirks to herself as she turns away to load the dishwasher.

She acts as if me having a boyfriend is something new. I mean, Matt and I have been going out for over a year for crying out loud. We started dating after...but I didn't want to think about that right now. Today *was* going to be a good day. I would make sure of it.

My dad walks in and notices my attire in the same apprehensive way my mom did, and the identical look of relief flashes across his face before he can hide it. He smiles at me, mutters a 'good morning, kiddo,' and pours himself a cup of coffee. This is why I love Saturdays; they are so calm. Nobody feels rushed on Saturdays.

"Don't forget, Sara, you have your appointment with Doctor Horton. She will be very eager to see you." And just like that, any thoughts I had of having fun, hanging with friends, are thrown to the wind by the wonderful therapist whom I have to go see. I mutter that of course, I hadn't forgotten.

“Good afternoon Sara.” The ever calm and cheerful Doctor Horton greets me as I step into her office, still wearing Matt’s sweatpants. I’d ditched my slippers for flip flops, but that was the extent of my attempts to make myself presentable. It *is* Saturday, after all. I smile at her and take my seat on the couch. It’s weird, but I always feel a sense of guilt when I walk in here for some reason. Like a sleepwalker who fears what they could have done while they were unconscious. But the doctor smiles at me reassuringly.

“Where would you like to begin today, Sara?” I understand what she really means. Whenever I walk through the door, she knows I always have the same opening question.

“How long was I out for? Who came instead?” Yup, the guilt is definitely settling in.

“You have been gone since last Sunday. Fox was here starting Monday, and then Leila came starting Thursday. And now here you are again.” I sigh. That made sense. My mother and I had gotten into a fight Sunday night, and exams at school were on Thursday and Friday.

“Anything out of the ordinary happen when Leila was here?” I ask quickly, eager to find out what had transpired in my absence.

“Nothing out of the ordinary for her, although she expressed disgust at waking to find herself with a belly button ring and black nail polish. She is still getting up at 5 am and is constantly anxious about school. She claims to know that your mom likes her best, out of everyone; even you. I could tell she was stressed, and she was manifesting it physically. I am guessing that she is still struggling with her bulimia, though we didn’t talk about it. You should continue to consult with your health specialist about what you should be doing to counter Leila’s destructive habits.” Doctor Horton read all of this off her clipboard, glancing up every so often to judge my reaction. What she was telling me was nothing new. I had expected as much from Leila. Now was the time for me to ask the question I always asked and always feared above all else.

“Anything happen when Fox was here?” I shift my feet around as I wait for her reply. She flips to another page of her notes.

“She wasn’t here for long, though while she was here we discussed how frustrated she was that Matt still wanted an exclusive relationship. She has been manipulating people more often, and I am noticing some behavior that implicates the possibility that Fox is a sociopath. She refuses to acknowledge your father’s existence, and she kept repeating how your mother got worse after ‘the divorce.’ She talks about your mother’s alcoholism. Neither you nor Leila ever mention your mother drinking, so I gather that your mom only drinks when Fox is around.” I feel queasy by the time she finishes. My poor mother. It must be so hard for her when she sees Fox come down the stairs in the morning.

I sigh as I walk out of the office some time later, feeling heavy with all the things that are my fault. I can’t stand coming to Doctor Horton’s when we talk about the alters. I hate knowing I’m hurting people and I can’t even remember doing it. I smile though, when I see the familiar car waiting to pick me up. Matt must have talked to my mom and found out today was a good day. The adorable smile he gives me as I walk into the sunlight washes away all the guilt I feel.

“Hi babe,” he says calmly as I climb in the car, then asks me “Where to?”

“Let’s just drive. Somewhere. Anywhere.” So he takes off, and I look at him apologetically. Then I remember what Doctor Horton had said.

“What happened when Fox was here?” I press, feeling annoyance build in me.

“Nothing. Honestly. We drove around, went to Box...” he says sheepishly.

“You did what?!” I know I’m really not the one that should be getting annoyed right now, what with all Matt puts up with, but I can’t help myself.

“You’re still letting that tramp pull you around by her pinky finger, aren’t you? Even though you know you’re no more special to her than some oaf she meets in a sleazy bar. Just because she wears short leather skirts. God, all men are exactly alike. You know she loves it, too, you know she loves the fact that she can snap her fingers and all the guys, including you, come to heel like pathetic puppy dogs. But you’re better than that, Matt, please don’t let her order you around anymore!” By the end of my tirade tears are leaking out and my jealousy and annoyance and guilt all turn me into an embarrassingly sloppy mess in the passenger seat. Matt pulls over into a nearby parking lot and turns off the car. He pulls me into his arms without another word and lets me

cry. He doesn't try to defend himself, angel that he is. Because truthfully, he knows that I'm not crying over the fact that my stupid alter is a whore, or the fact that I'm jealous of her. I'm not crying for any of the stupid petty things that happen between me and my parents. I'm crying because of Jamie.

Jamie, my sweet, loving big brother. My best friend. My partner in crime for the whole of my life, up until a year ago when Jamie decided that he didn't want to live anymore. I'm not the reason my mother drinks, Jamie is. But she hides it from me because she's afraid I'm going to end up like him. I was already teetering on the edge, in her eyes. Typical Sara, running away and hiding behind her alters whenever things got rough. Nobody understands, because nobody was as close to Jamie as I was. We were inseparable, so much so that when we were younger my mother got our names confused almost constantly. Jamie was always the first one to whom I told anything important. And now he was gone. He would never come back.

The thought of Jamie alone is enough to keep me sobbing for longer than I'm aware of, but all the while Matt is there, quietly rocking me back and forth. He doesn't say anything; doesn't try to placate me. I wipe my tears and sniff as I move to look at him.

"Can I ask you something?" I don't wait for a reply, "why are you still putting up with me? I mean, the idea of a psycho girl with a dead brother doesn't exactly appeal to most guys." I choke on the words 'dead brother,' hiccupping as I wait for him to answer. He pauses.

"Honestly?" he asks, and I nod. "Because I don't care about anything besides being with you. Because no matter what, you are the girl I fell in love with last year. Because I can put up with any amount of craziness as long as I know that at the end of the day I can still call you, Sara, mine. Because I love you. And," he takes his eyes away from mine for the first time to glance down then quickly back up again, with a grin on his face, "because you look adorable in my sweatpants."

I laugh through my tears. "I don't deserve you." I state.

"I can't agree with that," he says, "You don't realize how amazing you are. Now buckle up, let's go."

“Go? Go where?” I ask. He laughs and kisses my forehead. “Who cares? Anywhere, it doesn’t matter. Today is going to be a good day.”



First Place
High School 9/10

œ Day at the Museum œ

by Lexie Bartell

I hate alphabetical order. My name, Alice Alborn, always puts me in the front. I have to be the first person to present projects and I easily mess up every time. When we take class pictures I'm always all the way to the side. Sometimes a teacher who thinks that they're clever will do reverse alphabetical order, leaving me all the way in the back. Worse than all that is when I'm put into groups. Norma Avarice, Darren Bauman, and Jay Beaker are the three people that I have had to deal with on every single class trip since middle school. Don't get me wrong, though. They aren't bad people, just different.

Norma Avarice is a practicing Anabaptist. In layman's terms, she's Amish. Norma lives on the outskirts of our school district in an Amish community. She grows potatoes and has a chicken coop in her backyard. Her parents drop her off at school everyday in a horse-drawn buggy. New people always ask her if she dressed up for Pilgrim Day.

Darren Bauman is huge. Not fat really, but he looks like he could be some famous person's bodyguard. He could also be a convict, depending on whether he shaved that day. When he was younger, Darren was just plain chubby, like that kid from Willie Wonka. Nowadays, he is more of a boulder. Like a humungous bowling ball, he plows down the hall at school, knocking kids down like toothpick-sized pins. It makes for a good skill when you are the star defensive lineman of the football team.

Jay Beaker is emo. The first thing people notice about him is his hair. It's purple and sticks out like some kind of weird tropical plant. Growing everywhere, it is his main facial feature. Not that you can see any other ones. He never talks, just sighs or a lazily grunts now and again. In my English class he sits in the back of the room, drawing pictures of zebras and listening to scremo music. He wears jeans that are so tight that his legs look like twigs. His dad is probably Jack Skeleton.

I'm just sort of normal. I have blonde hair (natural) and I'm on the Lincoln High Varsity Cheer Team. Go Ravens! I'm pretty smart; I get A's and the occasional B+. I really love to paint, which is why I was so excited about the trip to the art museum. That is, until I found out we were actually going to a field museum. You know, the kind with plastic dinosaurs and lots of little kids. The relaxing atmosphere I had been hoping for

had suddenly changed into a day of horror with the Fantastic Freaks from the planet Losermetia.

“Everyone!” Mrs. Ridgefield yelled as soon as we got to the museum, waving her hands, “Get with your group! Make sure you have your scavenger hunt list and camera!” We had to do a scavenger hunt and take a picture of each thing to prove we had seen it. There were only three things on the list. The teachers only wanted to make sure we saw each floor and visited its “wonders”. All four of us shuffled awkwardly together then walked into the museum.

“Oh, what is that?” Norma whispered to me. Her eyes were wide as she looked at the plesiosaurus skeleton that hung over the main entrance. The thing was ugly; I had to admit anyone could be weirded out by it.

“It’s a velociraptor, duh,” huffed Darren, rolling his eyes. What a braniac.

“Hmm mumff.” Jay muttered. It sounded disapproving.

“It’s a dinosaur skeleton and it’s also on the list. Only two more.” I answered her, ignoring Darren. I checked it off and took a picture. Click, check mark, done. The list was made up of riddles. The first one had been, “I see you come in. I used to love to swim.” Not a very hard riddle to figure out. “Okay, so the next riddle is ‘I have little wings. I rub them to sing.’” Darren sat down, rubbing his chin and raising an eyebrow like some crazy professor. I was obviously the only person taking this somewhat seriously. “I think it’s a cricket.” Jay’s eyes got big and he turned to look at me. Then he came over and pulled the riddle out of my hand.

“HM?” he stammered.

“What? What did I say?” I asked him.

“Excuse me?” asked Norma, leaning in to hear.

“Scared of bugs?” Darren laughed, slapping Jay on the back. Jay raised a withered hand and pushed him away.

“Stop it! I’m not.” Jay mumbled. We all gasped. You could have heard a pin drop from miles around. Never in the four years that we had known him had he ever said a coherent word. We looked at him, speechless.

“Wow! You spoke!” I finally said excitedly. Jay put his head down, hiding under his hair. “Hey, bugs are on the next floor, right?”

“Yup.” Darren said. So, we walked past the fake looking reptiles to the escalator. You could tell that Norma was in awe of everything. Her expressions changed with every new exhibit. Darren would just shake his head now and again, obviously bored and annoyed with Norma. Jay just crept along, his breakthrough forgotten. I tried to focus on the back of Darren’s head, to just keep moving, and to ignore the stares. We all looked so peculiar together; it was embarrassing, even more so when I could hear people whispering.

“Is that girl famous? That huge guy could be her bodyguard.”

“Ya, the pilgrim is probably in her new movie. Doesn’t she kind of look like Ashley Tisdale? Except, you know, younger.”

“Who is the guy with purple hair? He looks half dead! Is he her stalker?”

We got up to the next floor and made our way to the bugs. You had to go through the butterfly room to get to the other bugs, including the cricket that we needed a picture of. Jay’s face turned white.

“Butterflies are gentle,” I said to Jay as we walked into the room.

“A butterfly is such a dumb thing to be afraid of. If anything,” Darren said, turning, “be afraid of me!” Then he sprayed out his wings. He had gotten a pair of dress up wings from the little kids area.

“I swear you’re dumb.” I said, walking past him.

“What?” he asked innocently, looking around, hands up.

“Come here! Come on!” Norma cooed as she chased a butterfly, her hand outstretched. I laughed as a blue one landed on my arm. Darren went and sat on a log, flicking them when they got too close.

“I guess this is okay, almost fun, actually,” I thought, watching the butterfly creep up my arm. We hadn’t broken anything in the whole museum, not a single fight had we started, nothing! Then I pulled my eyebrows together in confusion. Where was Jay?

“Hm!” I heard a pathetic sound come from behind me. Jay was standing as still as a statue and had tons of butterflies on top of his head. They must have been attracted to his purple hair. His face was pale, paler than usual. Little beads of sweat had formed on his upper lip and he was taking in big, labored breaths.

“Ohmygawd!” I said. I went over to try and brush them off, but more kept landing. Jay looked like he was about to throw up. If he threw up, I was going to throw up. I was pretty much hitting his head, trying to get the bugs out. Darren looked up from the log, sighed at my frantic effort, and then walked over.

“Wait, I got it, I got it,” Darren declared, pushing me aside. From out of his pocket he grabbed a mini can of Axe. He twirled it around like a gun, then sprayed it all over the top of Jay’s head. All of the bugs that were in his hair stopped moving. Darren ruffled the hair and they fell out, plop, plop, plop. Unfortunately, more kept landing and dieing.

“Here! Take this!” Norma said. She threw her bonnet to Jay, who put it on top of his head, then ran out of the room, spindly legs hurtling out behind him. I don’t think I ever saw him run before. It was kind of funny, like if a spider would get up and run. I turned to thank Norma for the use of her bonnet.

“Norma! Your hair is so pretty!” I said. Her hair hung in ringlets down her back. It was pretty color, too, a dark brown. I wistfully twisted my limp, straw hair. With her bonnet off she looked normal, sort of.

“Not really,” she answered, and then turned to find Jay. Darren was staring after her like he was in love.

“Darren and Normaa!” I sang at him.

“Shuddup,” he mumbled and drifted after her. I went into the next room by myself, took a picture of the cricket, and then went to meet them. Jay had clamed down and, thankfully, so had Darren.

“What’s the next riddle?” asked Norma.

“I wear a war bonnet. I live in a house with paintings on it,” I said.

“Native American exhibit,” Jay figured. Again, we were aghast at his voice.

“Well then. Next floor?” I offered. We scurried along to the escalator. A kid with a huge camera around his neck was staring at Norma. Who could blame him, really? She blushed and looked away, embarrassed. Darren looked at the kid and made a vein pop out from above his eye. The kid squeaked and turned around. Jay and I snickered.

We walked over by the Native American exhibit. They had a huge display of a fake powwow with human-sized people. Every couple of minutes the whole thing would

slowly spin and powwow noises would play. There were huge “Do Not Stand On” signs everywhere.

“Alice, can I take the picture this time?” asked Darren.

“Oh sure.” I said, “I don’t care.” I tossed him the camera.

“Yes, yes dahling. That’s fabulous!” he coaxed as he took pictures of the plastic people, telling them how fierce they were.

“You aren’t Tyra Banks!” I shouted at him.

“Who is she?” Norma wondered.

“Who says I’m not?” he asked. Then he paused for a second. “Oh man, I think I jammed the button,” he said. Then he pinched the button, like he was popping a pimple. A split second later it flew into the air down onto the powwow display, right in the middle.

“Wait, I’ll get it!” Norma said as she jumped up onto the display.

“Norma, Norma, wait!” whisper-shouted Jay. “Don’t move a muscle!” He whisper-yelled as she stooped over to get the button. I followed Jay’s gaze. A security guard was walking straight for us. Just then, the powwow music started. Jay turned to Darren and me. “Just act cool, okay?” he pleaded.

I looked down and pretended to be writing on the scavenger hunt list. Jay sat down to scribble zebras in a notebook and Darren was suddenly tying his shoe. The guard walked over to the display purposely and stared at it as it as it turned in a circle.

“Hey!” he said, “Did you guys ever notice that there was a pilgrim in the middle of the powwow? I don’t think I ever saw it before.”

“No, its always been there.” I assured him. “The boat they came on was the Mayflower, right?” I asked, turning him away from the exhibit.

“Yup! You kids sure are smart.” He smiled, and then walked away. As soon as he was gone the whole thing stopped moving and Norma fell over. Then we all started laughing with relief.

“Norma is a pilgrim!” I laughed. She laughed and bowed as we gave her applause.

At the end of the day, when we filed onto the bus, the same guard saw Norma and did a double take. She smiled and waved. Jay showed us the picture he was drawing

when the guard came. It was a picture of four zebras. One had purple hair and was listening to an ipod. One was wearing a cheerleading skirt and had pom poms. One was beefy and was wearing a letterman's jacket. One was wearing a bonnet and an apron.

I love alphabetical order.



Third Place
High School 11/12



By Michele Jobst

It had no name. Everyone just called it, "It". It didn't mind. It didn't mind anything, except the flowers. Well, mostly just dandelions. The field round back is nothing but dandelions in the Spring. Spring is It's favorite season. Nobody understands why It likes them ole weeds so much, but then again nobody understands It at all.

It would go out in the morning and pick the dandelions closest to the house. We'd call It in for lunch, and It'd come in the house with exactly thirty-two dandelions. It wasn't a picky eater but boy It was a slow eater. Takes It twice as long as everyone else to finish one helping of food. Ma started given It a bigger helping cause there was never anything left after everyone else was done. Ma used to say that Jim and Jake alone could eat a bull. Once I asked her how much I could eat and she said considering my age, she reckoned I could manage a small heifer. Then Susie asked how much It could eat and Ma said that with It's pace of eating, It could probably manage our whole herd.

It wasn't big as far as size goes, but neither was It small. It was right in the middle, a happy medium, as Ma's always sayin'. There wasn't anything too special about It. Not that It was handsome at all, but It wasn't half as ugly as the tanner in Bauer. Once we was in Bauer, trading some of our livestock and I saw him. That tanner was prob'ly the ugliest man I ever did see. He had a big honker in the middle of his face and one eye was higher than the other. His hair was a dry blonde and it was swept o'er the face to make the eyes look evener. Couldn't fool me, though. He was a short, dirty man whose smile looked more like a bear growl than a smile. Yup, compared to him, It might even be called good lookin'.

Nothing was special about It, except the dandelions. After lunch, everyday during the spring, he'd walk out to the far end o' the dandelion field. All alone out there, It would come back at dusk with exactly eighteen dandelions, nine in each hand.

It never cried. It never laughed. It never sighed. It never spoke. It hardly made a sound. The clump, clump of It's shoes on the floor was the only noise It made. Ma said that's a blessing cause all the rest of us make enough noise to drive her crazy. Whether it's the big boy's rough play in the house, Susie whining about something, Pa yellin' at the boys to take it outside, Ma's dinner sizzlin' on the stove, or the animals' clamor outside. It never made a sound. Just clump, clump over to the cupboard. Clump, clump

over to the water pump. Clump, clump over to the window. Clump, clump, caring for the dandelions. Clump, clump.

Once the dandelion season was over, It always got real sad. It would sit by the fire and do nothing. Then one winter, Susie was readin' out of the Bible picture book that Ma always helped us to learn our letters in. On one page there's a picture of this lion and lamb sitting together in a field of dandelions. Well once It saw that picture, that book never left It's hands. From then on every morning, It would turn each page of that ole picture book until he reached the page with the dandelions on it. Then It'd just stare at the page for the rest of the day. Studying each flower, over and over again. Every day all we'd hear was the rustling of page, after page, after page. Once Jake got so fed up with the sound, that he tried to help It by turnin' to the right page but It wouldn't let him touch that book. With hunched shoulders, It would protectively watch if anyone drew near enough to touch the book. We just couldn't make It see how much help we could be. So eventually we stopped tryin'. It had a way of doin' things, and we had our way of doin' things. It didn't seem to mind doin' everything different from everyone else. It was happy as long as there were dandelions.

Towards the end of the growin' season, Ma always dried the flowers from her garden in Jeremiah's old stall. Jeremiah was our old mule. Darn'd if he wasn't the world's most stubborn ole mule. After a while, we just stopped trying to make him do any hard work. He was the gentlest animal, just so darn stubborn. Once things came down to actually workin' he just wouldn't have anything to do with them. The only reason we had to keep him was cause Susie had to go and take a likin' to him. She had a soft spot for that useless animal. I don't know, maybe it was a good thing, cause then I didn't have to take care of ole Jeremiah anymore. Susie did it. She was the one to feed him and brush him everyday. Right to the end of that stubborn mule's life. Susie cried for almost three weeks after her pet died. And everyday for those three weeks she'd put flowers into his stall. That's when Ma got the idea to dry her flowers there instead of up in the attic.

I'll never forget the Spring day that we had the Wilsons over. That was the same day that It discovered Ma's dried flowers in the barn. We hardly ever had guests over to the house. So when the Wilsons moved into the Myers' old house, just short of five

miles down the road, Ma insisted on invite ‘em all over for dinner. As it turned out, there were only four people in the Wilson party. They had a girl about my age, named Lisa, and a boy, named Tom, about Jim and Jake’s. It had gone out in the mornin’ like always, which Ma said was just as well, so he wouldn’t be underfoot. Everyone was rushin’ hither and thither to get ready for the guests to arrive. Then when they finally arrived, the meetin’ and greetin’ of everyone to everyone else started. We never noticed that It wasn’t there til after supper was finished. Then Mrs. Wilson asked why we had set an extra plate. That’s when all at once, we all realized It had never come in for supper. It always stayed close to the house in the morning, so when we couldn’t see It out in the field, Ma started to panic. She starts a hollarin’ and makin’ a fuss. Pa finally got her calmed down by tellin’ her that him and the boys was gonna find It and that It couldn’t be that far away. So all us men headed out to the barn to gather our search party supplies, when low and behold we find It all tangled in the wires of Ma’s dried flowers. We never will know how It managed, but the only flowers still hangin’ on the wall was a clump of thirty-two dandelions. All the other flowers were torn apart, trampled on, and scattered all over the place. In the middle of all that mess, sat It tangled like no tomorrow in about three feet of wire. The wire had gotten so jumbled with It’s limbs that movement was practically impossible. It just smiled up at us and tried to point to the dandelions. Pa sent Jim to tell Ma, which of course means all the women folk comes a runnin’ to the barn to see for themselves. At that point Ma didn’t know whether to cry at the state of her flowers or of the state of It. Eventually Pa and Mr. Wilson was able to unscramble It. While Mrs. Wilson helped clean up the flowers, Ma took It into the house scoldin’ and a bossin’ all the while. Yep, that was one memorable day for us, prob’ly for the Wilsons too. Maybe things like this is why we never have people over. Never the less, Ma started drying out dandelions for It, so that no more disasters would happen again.

Every year that goes by brought changes on us. We all adapted to the changes. Like when Jim got hitched and moved up by Lomask, which was slightly bigger than Bauer. Or when Jake went off to the University. But It never changed. Same thing year after year. In the Spring, It picked dandelions. In the Summer, It picked dandelions ‘til there weren’t none left. In the Fall, It looked at that ole picture book. In the Winter, It

would arrange and rearrange Ma's dried dandelions til the poor flowers was just a pile of dust. Then Spring would come again and It would be out there every mornin', rain or shine, bring in thirty-two, then back out in the afternoon and bring back eighteen. Day after day, season after season, year after year. This bothered me for a while, 'til my second year of college, which was also the year of Pa's accident.

The year of his accident was a terrible experience for everyone except for It. We were just never able to get It to realize what Pa's death meant. When we tried to explain, It would just look at us and nod, then head out to the dandelion field. In his will, made up with Judge Hackett, Pa stated that he wised to be buried in the southwest corner of the dandelion field. When the day of Pa's funeral came, everyone was somber and gloomy, with no more tears to give up in his memory. But It just went out like normal, brought back thirty-two dandelions, and went back out. We had to wait 'til dusk to bury Pa cause It didn't come back 'til then and Ma insisted on everyone being present. Once It was back, we all filed out to the field where the grave diggers had been before us. The preacher said his prayers and then we lowered the casket into the hole. As we were grabbin' shovels to fill up the hole, It climbs on in. We all watched in silence, as It spreads the thirty-two dandelions limp from being picked that morning and the eighteen picked in the afternoon in two straight rows all down the casket. Then slowly, quietly, It climbs out of the hole and heads for the house. We just stare in disbelief at the dandelions covering the casket. I think it was Susie who was finally able to put everyone's thoughts into words, "Fifty, that's how old Pa was before...I don't understand... how did It know?" Watching It stoop down to pick a dandelion on the way into the house, we realized Pa's death would leave a hole not only in our lives but in It's. To tell the truth, I was never able to look at those little yellow flowers, that many simply call a weed, in the same way again.



**Second Place
High School 11/12**

œ The Pebble Factory œ

By Lindsay Fischer

Lydia walks on the train tracks while I walk along the river.

I remember, I remember, I remember. I remember because the memories are so hard to press back, because that life meant so much more to me than I ever let anyone

know. The sun on my face, the silver Spanish moss ghostly and skeletal on days when it was dark, the soft breezes and the harsher gusts. It all comes back, crashing into me in waves of smells and summer days. We were best friends, weren't we, Lyd?

The phone is ringing. Shrill and sharp, at first it's like something out of a hazy dream and I just want to knock it off the bedside table. My fingers scramble along the wood, searching, eyes pressed shut, until I am forced to concede and peer out from between my lashes. Hand guided by what I can see, now, I pick up the phone and press it to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Oh, God, you're awake!”

“No, not really.” But my sister sounds so worried, her voice strained and cracked like broken glass, that I sit up. I haven't talked to her for so long, I don't know why she would call now. She's supposed to be all bright splashes of color, all *inspiration* and *illumination* bursting forth from that dilapidated artist's studio she bought in New York. She said it would solve all her troubles and I laughed at her, because she always has dreams as high as the sky. I know better than anyone that the higher you dream, the farther you to come crashing down to earth.

“It's mom. It's mom—oh, Quinn.”

And you know, sometimes that's all you really have to hear before you drop the phone to shut out the words.

A month later, my sister and I are driving to the home where we grew up, which has been bequeathed to following of our mother's death, which is a word that seems so cold and final and empty. She twists a straw wrapper around her finger, eyes flickering between the trees as they pass by, and I drive, eyes narrowing. She fiddles with the radio dial until there's nothing but static, static in between stations, and the fake, happy, plastic voices I am so used to hearing on the morning news are gone. She leans her head back and closes her eyes.

“What's this?” My voice is rough, but I can't help it.

“I just . . . it seems right,” she says as the static buzzes softly, grating in my ears and seeming wrong, all wrong. I reach over and turn off the radio as darkness claims the highway.

She looks at me, her necklace with tiny copper bells jingling and her freckles standing out against her pale skin, her big red-rimmed eyes so empty. She seems so fragile, her neck long and her brown hair a short halo of frizz. She twists the wrapper around her finger again and I don't say sorry even though I know that I should.

The trees whip past, dark, sharply distorted in the night, and I can't help thinking about how dark it looked in that rectangular hole. There's no light under the surface.

“Quinn! You can hear the trees, can't you? The breeze carries their voices.”

Lydia is perched atop a moss-covered rock, a skinny girl of eight, and I am twelve, which seems like a decade of difference. Her pointed chin is angled towards the tree, a light smile of understanding gracing her thin features. I don't hear anything, I can hardly hear the breeze, it's so light in the leaves. I trace my named in the dirt with the toe of my beat-up tennis shoes.

“Maybe,” is all I say, and sometimes I wish that I could be like Lydia, could see the magic in everything. I see the ants scurry over the hard, worn ground and I see the sky, flecks of blue between emerald green leaves that cast shadows over the forest. The bronze hairclip in Lydia's hair is sliding out, wisps escaping and flying wildly around her face in a tempest of summer light. She builds fairy villages out of smooth gray stones she plucks out of the creek like a kingfisher, fingers darting in the clear flow. They sit in the shade of the trees, tiny houses with toothpick fences and dirt mounds for hills, old rusted cans, brown crumbling leaves, brittle dried grass, corks, and bright bottlecaps.

She calls the creek her pebble factory, and I don't understand how she can be so patient. She waits months and months until the stones are smooth and soft. I wanted to buy a rock-tumbler with our money from weeding the garden, but she just shook her head at me in that way she does, like she's the wiser one, and says “Don't you understand, Quinn?”

I don't, not really. She tells me about the fairies, too, and her face glows like she's tasted magic on her lips, like she brought it forth from the sun and the sky and the moon, lassoed it and pulled it down to earth.

“Oohh, they're tiny. They have little blue faces and limbs like bent paperclips, and they bite! They don't ever talk, but you can tell how clever they are, because their eyes glint like tiny raindrops, and it's just obvious they *know*.”

“Know what? What do they know?”

“Things,” she says mysteriously, and smiles, and perches on the rock with her face tilted towards the sky.

I turn onto the old rutted driveway in the dark, car wheels grating against the dirt and weeds sprouting up in the middle of the dirt path, highlighted like thin fingers twisting in the yellow headlights. It's been five years, five long years that trail in the shadows and try to tug me back as I move forward. The house appears, and it is covered with vines, moss, and chipped paint. It used to be the color of a peach. The wooden gate around the garden is hanging off by one end, and the sight makes me both guilty and even slightly ashamed. Lydia leans forward and sighs wistfully.

“It's been a long time,” she says softly, and I get out of the car, sneakers crunching over the gravel, my duffel bag slung over my shoulder. The darkness stifles me, the sister who slept with a green nightlight, while Lydia was climbing out the window to camp underneath the stars. She would dance on the lawn, catching hazy fireflies in glass jars. She gave me the jars to ward off the dark, but I was always afraid that they would escape out the tiny holes she punched in the lids. Always afraid.

In the morning, the sky outside looks like water in a giant fishbowl, the gray clouds murky bubbles. I can hear slushy rain slapping on the window pane and the roof shingles. I rub my eyes and swing my legs over the side of the bed, narrowly missing kicking the orange cardboard Lite Brite box on the floor. Lydia's bed is empty, the covers trailing over the wooden floor of the bedroom we used to share.

I pick my way over the labyrinth of ancient junk, kicking aside things with my bare feet. A worn softball signed by members of my parent's wedding; a rolled up,

peeling laminated animal alphabet poster; a plastic lizard slide puzzle; an empty Windex squirt bottle; fuzzy plastic McDonald's Furby toys; a candy-striped jumprope that snakes its way around my ankle; and pink Hollywood sunglasses.

The floors are covered with dust, the corners hung with cobwebs, and I stop in the doorway. All that has happened strikes me very suddenly—my mother isn't here any longer, and this house is draped with the ghosts of my memories. My sister doesn't understand, because we don't correlate, and our lives have never followed the same path. She was walking in the clouds and dreaming about rainbows while I was taking on a burden large enough for the two of us. Because I had to, because I cared and she didn't.

“I'll do anything to make you happy again,” that's what he said.

I pressed the receiver closer, closer to my ear. He sounded so earnest and so sincere and so tired and I almost believed again. But I knew the words he didn't say, and that is “Anything I can buy. Anything except come home.”

“That's okay,” I said. I pushed 'end call,' but my fingers did not want to give up the phone, and there was a red mark on my face where my father's voice used to be.

The night that my father left, I stood at the window pane and watched his car disappear, fingers pressed against the cold glass, staring. Lydia read the “Princess Bride” under the covers, flashlight in hand, silent as the worn and yellowed pages rustled. I stood in the dark and missed him and he never did come back. And then my mother painted the house pink and I helped.

Lydia built villages for creatures that didn't exist, alone in the forest with her magic that did nobody any good. She sat under the leaves while I was alone, and we were both alone, and I think that we were always alone.

I don't know where she is, but it's raining hard and I hope she didn't leave the house. I step into the kitchen and watch the raindrops slide down the window pane like glistening tears. Lydia is gone, and no matter how much I call for her, she doesn't appear in the doorway. I've always felt like I need to protect her—after all, I'm the one who can see life for what it is, and my sister needs someone to remind her that life isn't

all magic, that life isn't perfect, that things happen that none of us can explain away. She needs someone to protect her from herself. The dim bulb over the stove flickers, and for some reason I suddenly panic, poking a hole through the cranberry juice box I was about to drink. The red liquid, sticky and sweet, runs in rivers over my fingers. I throw it into the trash and dart outside, forgetting a coat.

I don't even have any shoes on, which dawns on me slowly as my toes touch the wet, slippery grass. I run to the garden, fall as I reach the broken gate, reach for it as my back collides with the ground. I sit up again quickly.

“Lydia! Lyd?!” My voice is loud and strained, and I'm sitting in the weeds of our garden, rotting tomatoes near my feet, wet hair clinging to my face.

“Quinn,” my sister's voice says behind me, her face surprised. “Are you okay? I was cleaning out the attic . . .” She sits on the ground next to me, her expression startled and confused. I stare at her. I think, *that's funny, because I was sure she'd be out here in the rain.*

I was sure I'd need to rescue her, you see, that she would be searching aimlessly in the woods for the fairy villages or tripping in the creek, but I am the one sitting on the wet grass in the cold rain.

It strikes me suddenly—my face is wet. I'm crying, and I didn't even know it, the tears mingling with the rain. I don't understand anything as my sister puts her arms around me and pulls me close, our toes twisting in the vines.

“Shh, it's okay, it's okay,” she says, her voice soothing and comforting. “Know something funny? I was just thinking about Dad.”

My heart clenches like a cold fist, but I don't pull away.

“Do you remember the way he'd sit in the kitchen and cut old Orangina cartons into sailor hats for me? And the way he watched the Weather Channel every night and made those silly, complicated crayon weather charts with you.”

I hadn't remembered until now, because I remembered other things. I remembered the dark and the confusion, and I remembered standing at the window. But the funny thing is, I did love it—all of it, because even if there were some difficult times mixed in, the majority of my childhood was self-discovery and sun.

“And mom would always try to knit,” I add with a shaky, uncertain laugh. My laugh is dusty, and I wonder when the last time I laughed or cried was. The months behind me stretch on, paperwork and gray cubicles, and blaring alarm clocks, but there is no magic. “She knitted those horrible orange scarves for us, remember, but they were so long we tripped over them.”

Soon we are laughing so hard that Lydia is crying too. The salty tears slide down my face, messy and uncontrollable. After a while, I'm not sure whether I'm laughing or crying anymore. I just know that I can feel the rain against my skin.

With Lydia there was always magic. Always.

We spend the next month at our old home, with me tackling the cobwebs while Lydia digs up old photos, warped by the sun, and pins them on the peeling wallpaper around the house. We found the old pebble villages still standing. The grass grew tall around them, weaving in and out of the cracks so that they look like they've been there forever.

I laugh a lot these days, and I cry a lot too. I listen to the wind in the trees at night, and sometimes I think I can hear it whispering. Sometimes in the forest I think I hear tiny peals of laughter like bells, and the creek glints in the sunlight like it's covered in a layer of diamonds. I saw a rainbow once. I realized something funny—Lydia and I were best friends, we always were. We knew each other better than we knew ourselves. She is a dreamer, and she taught me how to dream a very long time ago. I got lost, but I knew all along that she would be the one to bring me home. She always did, and I think that she probably always will.



First Place

High School 11/12

Great Beauty

By Rebecca Cao

I was supposed to be perfect. My eyes were supposed to be amethyst with gold flecks that reflected in the sunlight (the trend among parents in my birth year of 2068). My hair was supposed to be pin-straight and silver, already down to my waist at birth. My nose was supposed to be narrow, straight, and slightly upturned. My lips were supposed to be pale lavender, as if a light frost had settled on my body. I should have radiated in the moonlight, the reflective quality of my pale, milky skin shimmering in the light. My body was supposed to be slender and firm, never topping 110 pounds and 5 feet 6 inches. My parents were thorough; they considered every detail down to the shape of my fingernails. Regarding the Attributes, they gave me six bars in memory and vision, probably hoping that I would enter the Creation field. My parents divided my last 17 bars fairly evenly among the last six Attributes: intelligence, happiness, ambition, capacity for love, and compassion for others. In Fixers lingo, I am a 6-4-2-3-2-3-3. I guess the emphasis on memory worked – it's probably the only genetic alteration that took its proper course.

Silver Commons disengaged her mind from her letter as she heard the approaching footsteps of a Fixer. The steady taps echoed through the stark, vacant halls of the Laboratory. Silver perched on the edge of her bed, scanning the four glass walls around her that constituted her habitation. She didn't bother turning on the theater or pretending to be asleep because the camera had been monitoring her anyway. The last thing she wanted was to appear suspicious.

"Good morning," Fixer #4 unlocked the inviscreen door and stepped inside his patient's room. "It's time for your extraction."

"May you fix," Silver replied in the customary greeting, keeping her eyes trained on the theater window in the North wall. Of course she knew the Fixer's name after fifteen years of interaction, but she had not addressed the Fixer by name the first day and so she would not change the behavioral pattern.

Fixer #4 swiped his finger over the electronic switch, instantly reviving the glass wall into a complex digital system. Silver stood up unprompted and entered the extraction field, a square space two feet from the wall. The Fixer typed in codes directly into the glass and the wall lit up as radiation began to spread over Silver's body. She

shivered although she could feel nothing physically. It was getting more difficult to block out the extraction rays and prevent it from entering her thoughts, especially since she was simultaneously sending out signals of her own. However, every minute was crucial and she immediately resumed her letter.

I don't blame my parents. They were horrified to receive a brown-haired, hazel-eyed baby with ruby-red lips from the Incubator, but they nursed me for nine months before giving me up to the laboratory and the Fixers. My parents never saw me again, but I continue to watch them here in the lab. Like I said, I don't blame them. In an age where everyone is physically perfect and mentally adept, no one has ever encountered a creature like me. I am a freak of science, a terrible mistake that has to be corrected.

I suspect that the Fixers, my current caretakers, know that I am special. They try their best to keep me comfortable in my home for the past 15 years; I cannot be seen by the public. My life depends on the Fixer's inability to find the source of my mutations. When they understand why a creature was created in the Before likeness and how this error can be prevented in the future, I will most likely be terminated. And so, I tell them nothing. I have kept my secret because it is so dangerous to the society that they could choose to abandon their research and terminate me immediately.

You must be wondering what is wrong with me physically. You are probably imagining a monster with bulging eyes, a skeleton-like body, deformed limbs, shriveled skin. You will be surprised to learn that, by your standards or the standards of Before, I am quite beautiful. Or, perhaps you are not surprised. After all, I am your great-granddaughter. Are you thoroughly confused? I would assume not; most likely, you have a good idea how this catastrophe came about. Either way, I will begin by explaining to you the secret I have kept for the entire 16 years of my being. My secret may not seem harmful at the present, but you will quickly understand its destructive power. You might have already guessed it – how else would I know you? Yes, it is true. I can see the past. The visions come and go, but currently, I am focusing my sight on the year of 2008. You are 38 years old, a pioneer of human genetic engineering, a respected physician, and a mother of two. I see you in your white lab coat, critically studying the incubators, where hundreds of embryos lie at your disposal. In the next few

hours, you succeed in what no one else has done before: create a genetically altered baby.

Silver sensed a breach in her conscious thoughts and had to return to the present state in order to guard against the rays. This was always the hardest part for her. She was struggling to keep a smooth face; she couldn't tense a muscle or even narrow her eyes. The camera poised directly above her face had a perfect view and it was no doubt recording vigorously. The fixers upstairs were possibly analyzing every breath she took and every blink of her eyelashes. She longed desperately to cry out, to let the fixers take whatever they wanted, and pass on the responsibility of saving mankind to someone else. But she couldn't. She couldn't give up when she was so close. To refuel her energy, she cut off her signals and paused to glance around the habitation. By the inviscreen, the Fixer stood with erect posture, but his glazed eyes revealed his disdain for the arduous procedure.

He was the first one. She could recall the day (or perhaps, the memory had come from a vision) of her arrival at the Laboratory. Frightened, hungry, and cold, she was delivered into the welcoming hands of this very Fixer. In his arms, she had looked up into his fawning, sapphire eyes and felt safe for the first and only time since departing from her parent's house. Years later, he was still her primary caretaker and his perfectly sculpted features had not changed at all. Sometimes, she could still feel the security of her once-innocent self when she looked into his eyes. As if sensing her thoughts, the Fixer locked onto her face with his gaze and searched her face.

"Silver." Her name was a wisp of air on his amaranth-tinted lips. A chill ran down Silver's spine, the familiar sensation of thoughts fleeing her mind.

Still, he would not release her. "Why do you resist? You could be happy. You were happy."

Quivering, she permitted herself one truth. "I have to."

"No, you don't! You could give them what they want. You could end this now." The Fixer's eyes bore into Silver's soul. She had to look away, biting her lip to hold back the thoughts.

Her voice broke, "No, I can't. You don't understand. I can't."

“I know you. I know you don’t want to give up. But if not for me, do it for yourself,” he continued, his movements now animated. With a stride of his long legs, he was nearly at her side. “You are my—my…”

Child. Friend. Lover.

Silver knew the words he was struggling for, but his lack of interaction with the outside world had deprived him of the concepts and vocabulary of love.

“You are my experiment.” He concluded, slightly winded by the effort, yet triumphant to have found a word adequate—at least in his opinion—for his emotion.

Silver could not suppress a laugh. She had not laughed in so long, the chuckle sounded false even to her ears. The Fixer retreated as if she had inflicted physical pain on him, his hurt feelings evident in the contortion of his face. But how could she explain to him that she was not mocking him? How could she convey to him how lacking and inappropriate the word “experiment” was, especially in the context of love? No, she couldn’t. So even though it tore her apart inside, she let him go. Silver whispered an inaudible, undetectable “I’m sorry” in her thoughts before exiling him from her heart without a trace of regret. Taking a deep breath in preparation, she dutifully resumed her communications.

I cannot help hating you. How could I not? Singlehandedly, you produced the catalyst for every atrocity that has since occurred. You destroyed the Before and created the After. You thought you could be God without consequences. I am bitterly angry that you did not survive to see the ramifications of your actions. In 2014, shortly before the intended publication of your work, you were murdered by the man who stole your techniques and proceeded to market the first M&M (Mix-and-Match Baby Factory). I don’t know his name, just like I don’t know yours, but I burn with hatred for both of you. With his socialist notions, he formed a uniform society in which parents are encouraged to decide every aspect of their newborn child. It must have been during the mid-21st century that Before was completely extinguished and After firmly implemented in its place. In the After, all traces of Before have been destroyed. Newspapers, books, and records that contain references of normal conceptions, births, and individual rights no longer exist. Words such as “beautiful”, “ugly”, “smart”, and “stupid” are no

longer in our vocabulary. When every human is a work of art by masters of the trade, there can be no comparisons among them. Without “ugly”, there is no “beautiful”. Without “stupid”, there is no “smart”.

Infants are predestined to become Commoners, Creators, Makers, or Fixers, depending on the distribution of their 23 bars. The Commoners are the largest in population but occupy the lowest status in the society, having no particular job except to form a perfect baby. Creators use After records and current technology to introduce new options for M&Ms every year. Makers are the ones who apply the technology and maintain the factories which create M&Ms. Finally, the Fixers oversee all operations and imprison mutations like me in order to “fix” the problem. All Fixers eventually become Beauties, the innermost circle of the society. They are the truly evil ones. They know everything and carefully orchestrate the continuation of the totalitarian society that their forefathers constructed. Machines and robots perform all labor, providing food and shelter for the three billion people in the world. As I can only see the past and only segments of the past at best, the information I know is pieced together roughly and it may not be entirely accurate. For example, I do not know who is currently running the Beauties (a man we call the Great Beauty). Locked inside a laboratory, everything I know of the outside world comes from glimpses of the past. I have to be especially careful with the Fixers because they assume that I know nothing of the outside world. In any case, I am always several years behind the current situation because my visions come with a gap of two or three years.

I was never supposed to happen. I am in the likeness of Before: a normal girl without god-like enhancements. This society has never seen freckles, natural-colored features, a flat chest, hair in areas other than the head, or menstruation. It is not hard to imagine why they consider me a monster. From my observations, I am the only mutation of my kind in the history of After. The only other patients in the laboratory are a boy whose top speed of 30 miles per hour is not the 35 miles per hour his parents chose and a girl whose eyes are a shade of jade that the Creators are attempting to emulate.

The single reason I live is to change your mind.

Silver's breath quickened as she sensed the impending realization of her task. She needed to pause for moment in order to compose her emotions; her skyrocketing heart rate was, even in a best case scenario, likely to cause alarm in the analyzing quarters. All she needed were a few more sentences. In less than a minute, she would be able to invite the Fixers into her thoughts without fear of termination and relinquish the shield she had protected her mind with. Above all, she wanted to share a gift before everything ended. Just as she was preparing to deliver her last argument, she saw Fixer #4 shudder in her peripheral vision. Normally, she wouldn't have noticed it; however, in that moment, she did—perhaps prompted by her own intuition. Already slipping back to her subconscious, transmitting state, she looked towards him just in time to see his lips mouth *T-M. Termination.*

Silver gasped. She had not thought that the Fixers could break her barrier, interpret her intentions, and respond so quickly. Now, there was no use in guarding against the rays. She allowed the radiation to seep through her mind; there was not a minute to waste.

You must know my final secret: I can communicate with people in the past. Only recently have I discovered this talent, and as soon as I succeeded in using the skill, I felt the burden to stop you from your research. Please, I beg you. As your great-granddaughter, the future generation, and a victim of the After world, I beg you not to commit the act that began this world of terror. Please, put down the dish in your hand, destroy the incubators and the embryos, and never give genetic engineering another thought! I urge you; I have not much time left and I have done the best I can to save humankind. Now, the survival of humanity lies solely in your palm. There is a world of Commoners, Creators, Makers, and Fixers awaiting salvation. Make the right decision; deliver us.

A powerful force knocked Silver back into consciousness. When she regained her senses, she saw a swarm of fierce, black-suited Fixers (the mysterious and rarely sighted Department of Critical Management) surrounding the four glass walls of her habitation. She found that she was no longer on her feet and then realized that Fixer #4

had lifted her into his arms. Up to the very end, he was still trying to protect her, but they both knew that once they exited the habitation, the D.C.M. would envelop her like an army of wasps. Without hesitation, Silver wrapped her arms around the Fixer's neck and raised her voice just above the noise of the people outside.

"I love you, Pat."

He looked at her in bewilderment, but she smiled knowingly. "Remember when you asked me why I never smiled?"

"Silver, this is not the time—"

She put a finger over his lips and continued, "It's because there's nothing here worth smiling for. True happiness is great and...well, beautiful. Here, let me show you."

She spread her fingers over his eyes, transmitting a memory of love—her first and favorite. She felt his shoulders relax and an expression of utter peace and calm wash across his face. Silver, too, lost herself in the joy of her parents' adoration for their child. She was certain that the After world was coming to an end. It seemed quite fitting that the second and last time Silver felt safe would be in the arms of the man who loved her most.

The memory ended and Patrick Fixer opened his eyes. Smiling at Silver Commons, he finally understood. "You are my daughter."

