

**2010**  
**IT'S ALL WRITE**  
**SHORT STORY CONTEST**  
**PRIZE WINNING STORIES**



**2010**  
**ANN ARBOR DISTRICT LIBRARY**  
**IT'S ALL WRITE**  
**SHORT STORY WRITING CONTEST**  
**FOR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**



Congratulations to the winners of the 18<sup>th</sup> annual teen short story contest whose stories appear in this booklet. 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.



**Friends of the Ann Arbor District Library**



**Ann Arbor District Library**  
Ann Arbor, Michigan



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## ►ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS◄

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#### MIDDLE SCHOOL GRADES 6 TO 8

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#### HIGH SCHOOL GRADES 9 AND 10

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In addition to designing and programming video games, Mr. Lubar has written several award winning books. Among them, *Sleeping Freshman Never Lie*, Winner of Michigan's 'Thumbs Up' Award for best teen book of 2006, other titles include, *Flip*, *Hidden Talents*, and *Dunk*. You can find several of David's short stories in collections edited by Don Gallo. He's also said to be one of the funniest guys around. [www.davidlubar.com](http://www.davidlubar.com)

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**IT'S ALL WRITE 2010**  
**◀SHORT STORY AWARDS SPEAKER▶**

**▶Amy Huntley◀**

Amy Huntley is a young adult book author and a high school English teacher. Ms. Huntley was awarded the William C. Morris YA Debut Award which celebrates impressive new voices in teen literature. The award winning book, *Everafter*, is a supernatural mystery, as well as an engaging coming-of-age story.

**◀FROM ANN ARBOR DISTRICT LIBRARY▶**

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**THIRD PLACE  
MIDDLE SCHOOL  
6<sup>TH</sup>, 7<sup>TH</sup> & 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADES**

**MY BROTHER, ISAAC  
◀ By Hanel Baveja ▶**

Isaac isn't just my family. He's not just my sibling, and not just my brother. He's my twin.

You know what they say with twins- what one twin has, the other doesn't. I guess our case was particularly extreme. Isaac, the scrawny, underweight infant with a heavy case of down syndrome and mild autism, and I, Noah, the bouncy plump one with not so much as a pollen allergy.

I'm thinking about this difference, still, on the first day of 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

*We're now 5 years old, dressed in red overalls for the first day of Kindergarten. Mom tried to find us as close to matching overalls as she could find- people love to see twins in matching clothes. Isaac's red corduroy Elmo overalls boasted "Mama's boy", in yellow writing on the front, as he still fit into baby sizes. Mine proudly display some kind of mustard green pick up truck, the emblem for shopping in the "big boy" section. Mom walks us into school, stopping to chat with a smiling parent. The smiling lady bends down in front of us. To me, she coos "And are you going to take care of your little brother on the first day of school?"*

*"He's not my little brother," I say. "He was born 3 minutes and 11 seconds before me." The lady withdraws, and asks Isaac the same question. He ignores her for a split second, vaguely picks his nose, pauses to hum a few bars of the Sesame Street theme song, and then bursts into tears. His face is red and wet. The lady bends down to comfort him, and then he's fleeing, a flash of red, and gone. Mom runs after him, leaving me with the not-so-smiling lady.*

For the last ten years, Isaac has gone to a special school downtown for autistic and mentally challenged kids. Recently, it shut down. Tight economy, and too small of a population to keep it running. I don't think Isaac could have continued even if it hadn't shut down. Dad moved out several months ago. He was an education specialist, working in the public spotlight. He wanted a flawless family, but what he had was a musician wife, playing her violin at small gigs around town, and two dysfunctional 14 year old twins, one of them autistic with the ability to memorize virtually every Sesame street episode that crossed his path, and the other so consumed with responsibility and guilt that he struggles to not take his anger out on everyone who insults his brother.

I'm thinking of these memories, as I get ready for the first day of school. Isaac, for the first time in 10 years, is going to the same school as me. My school has a program for kids with disabilities- the school provides a teacher aid that travels to all the students' classes, and helps them. Ms.Campbell, Isaac's teacher aid came to our house yesterday to meet him. She's young, and pretty, with a fresh face. She looks as if she should be teaching a group of happy preschoolers instead of my scrawny 14-year-old brother.

Mom drives us to school, Isaac moodily staring out the window, for once not reciting lines from Sesame Street, his favorite show, which is what he does when he is nervous. It's silent in the car. Isaac likes silence in the morning, but I like to listen to the radio. Cheerios



and milk splatter the seats, remainders of Isaac's breakfast. We're late already. Isaac took a long time getting ready. I'm upset, although I try not to show it. The car pulls up to school, and I walk through the doors, not looking back once.

In the excitement of the first day of school, I forget about Isaac, until I walk into Biology- when I know I have come face to face with reality. The double desks built for two are filling up fast, just as they usually do, the early comers each taking up a pair of seats. I rush to the last available pair, and plunk my books by the second chair, next to me. The remainders of our class trickle in slowly. As the bell rings, I see Isaac and Ms.Campbell. She sees me and gives a small wave. My heart races. Luckily, Isaac stops, squats on the floor, and covers his ears with his eyes clenched tightly shut. His lips are moving fast, but I don't hear anything coming out of his mouth. Quickly, I move, over to the empty chair by my friend, Billy, in the corner. By the time Isaac straightens up, Ms.Campbell is relieved just to find an empty seat, and gladly sits down next to him.

Our teacher, who's barely out of college, comes in. She pulls out a yellow attendance sheet. I know I have five minutes, if that, before the inevitable happens. I was stupid to think I could hide it.

The A's. B's. I'm sitting there, sweaty, wishing our last name was Baker. There are three Bakers in our science class alone, none of them related. She passes through Cadbury and Cass uneventfully. She squints at the next name. "C-czarisoli?" she stutters, looking up. "Czarosoli, Isaac?" Ms.Campbell looks at Isaac expectantly, who picks his nose carefully.

"He's here," Ms.Campbell says. The teacher nods, relieved.

"Czarosoli, Noah?" She asks. "Here," I reply. "Oh," she brightens. "You're brothers!"

Darn. Darn that last name Czarsoli, inherited from a father that moved out and hasn't talked to his only sons in months. I'm sitting in that plastic seat, wishing for a last name like Baker.

— — —  
"Retard."

There's that word again. This time, as I'm walking to lunch, I stop and face the offender.

I see the back of Isaac's head, and hurry to catch up. Suddenly, the same voice shouts, "Retard!" A group of three boys comes out of the gym, sneering, as Isaac, a deer caught in the headlights, turns confused. "God, he's even more retarded than I thought. Look at that face." a particularly fat offender laughs. My blood begins to boil. The smile on Isaac's face is slowly slipping to the floor. Suddenly, a rubber band flies out of nowhere, and pings Isaac on the side of the face, who spins around, off balance, and lands on the floor, bewildered, amidst the sound of laughter. "Cookie Monster thief, not liar," he mumbles over and over, the words tumbling out of his mouth like a toddler. "Freak," snorts the fat one.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm running. I'm running towards the tallest of the three boys. Suddenly he's against the wall, and I'm breathing his peppermint breath. I hear myself shouting words, just bubbling out of my mouth nonsensically. My left hand curls into a fist and smashes the side of his face ruthlessly, again and again and again. The sweat on my forehead is in my eyes, stinging. Isaac's whimper has now curdled into a high pitched squeal as he begins to bawl, crying between breathes "Cookie monster thief, not liar!" He tries to pull me off peppermint-breath, his bony hands having no affect whatsoever. There's the sound of footsteps from somewhere in the distance, and then nails are digging into my back, lifting me off peppermint-breath, who's cowering against the wall.

The custodian is dragging me away from peppermint-breath, and Isaac is still shouting Sesame Street quotes.

Ten minutes later, I'm in the principal's office. Isaac is with Ms.Campbell and the nurse, getting a glass of water and a cherry lollipop.

---  
Principal Goodman leans forward to look at me. Hands crossed, narrow, beady eyes squinting, she's inspecting me under her microscope. I'm the fascinating amoeba on her slide. At that moment, my mother rushes in the door, talking on her cellphone.

"Yes, okay. Okay, Phil. I said I'd be there. Yup, yes, see you. Okay, bye."

She takes her seat, flustered. I try not to look at her.

"Mrs. Czarsoli," Goodman begins. "Your son has recently committed a school crime- physically harmed one of his fellow students, which I understand was caused when the student in question provoked your son."

How nice. How charming. "Provoked your son." How about knowingly insulted and potentially physically harmed the boy in question's twin brother. Who just so happened to not be have a very good day, and who only reacted because he was sick of his last name, tired of his absent father, and angry with his twin brother, Isaac, who just so happens to have autism.

"Look," Goodman continues. "I'll let Noah off this time, because I understand he was provoked, but if there is just one more infraction of school rules, suspension and proper school procedure will be followed."

The crease of worry on my mother's forehead is lifted. Goodman goes on to explain exactly how the school procedure works, but my mother has stopped listening. As long as I'm not getting suspended or punished, it's fine. After the meeting, we walk with Isaac and Ms.Campbell to the car, my mother on her cellphone again. Isaac is troubled. He can't stop fidgeting, and his eyes avoid me, even in the car. "Oh, I love pigeons more than anything else in this world....besides oatmeal", he repeats over and over. This is a line from one of the first episodes of Sesame Street. Bert says it. Isaac has only recently gotten over Bert's scary unibrow and yellow skin and no longer screams in fright when he appears, but now has taken to memorizing everything Bert says.

My mother has already moved on to the next thing in her life, and Isaacs's fascination with his cherry lollipop and pigeons and oatmeal is slowly fading, and he reaches out and tries to pet the top of my head. This is a game we play sometimes, when I'm in a better mood. Today I shrug his hand off and think of reasons why my father left us.

---

At home, I get a text.

SkrPlyr24: R U DONE W/ THE MATH HW???

I don't feel like answering, but I reply anyway.

NoahC: NO

SkrPlyr24: Mr.B IS SO RETARDED

That word again. I have a sudden urge to smash the phone against the wall. I calm myself down. Its just a word. Just a word. Words don't hurt. Fists do. I hurt. I hurt the tall boy in the hallway. No, I hurt the tall boy who was throwing rubber bands at my brother.

"It is I, your furry pal, Grover!" Isaac sings loudly from the next room.

---

Another day, another life. Life without Isaac. I know, I know, its bad to think these things. You can't control thoughts. They spiral off in any direction they like, filling up space and time, but weightless.

In science class, it's quiet. People are afraid to look at me, especially careful to avoid staring at my bruised eye and bloody nose. Billy doesn't talk to me, and our teacher fumbles through the lesson, confused. Its her first year, and 'what to do when a boy beats another child because the child was throwing rubber bands and insulting his autistic brother, who (*shh*) he sometimes wishes didn't exist' probably wasn't covered in her teachers handbook. The only person that even talks to me is Ms.Campbell, who quietly asks me if I'm okay. *Haha*, I think to myself. *She should see peppermint-breath*. I'm debating whether this is something Dad would be proud of, when the P.A speaker system comes on, calling me down to the main office.

I try to control myself. If you can't imagine it, think clumsy silence. Fumbling, stumbling pieces floating around in the classroom.

Stupid. It was stupid of me to think I could get away with this. Too many people saw, probably teachers, too. As I shut the door behind me, the last things I see are Isaac's wide, troubled eyes. For a second, I think I see a flash of concern, but then the door is closed and his face is gone.

---

I can't afford to get suspended from school. Mom says this kind of thing goes on a permanent record. I can't have a smudge like this on my permanent record.

---

I'm walking down the hallway. My fingers are still curled into tight fists, peppermint-breath's blood still caked onto my knuckles. I can feel the blood dripping from my nose into my mouth. It tastes bad, like boiled eggs. I've always hated boiled eggs, even though they were Dad's favorite thing in the world. I spit. Red beads pepper the speckled tile in front of me. I'll probably get charged with vandalism now, too. I do not like where this all is heading.

In my head I hear the lines from last nights episode of Sesame Street. Big Bird has just found out that Mr. Hooper is dead, and he still thinks that he's coming back to make him birdseed milkshakes and look at the picture that Big Bird made. Susan tells him that when people die, they don't come back, and Big Bird says with indignation

"Well, I don't understand! You know everything was just fine. Why does it have to be this way? Give me one good reason!"

I'm almost at the principal's office now. I see it, and have a sudden urge to run in the other direction. I'm going to get suspended, I know it. Maybe even expelled. What a joke that would be, me, expelled, and Isaac, star student at Truman Middle School.

I promise myself never again. If I'm let off this time, I will never risk myself to protect him. I shouldn't be this weak. I shouldn't have broken. Dad never would have done this.

It's astonishing how well I can lie, even to myself.

Out of nowhere, a sharp bleeping sound known only too well as a fire alarm suddenly shakes me from my stupor. Kids and teachers come pouring out of classrooms, and I numbly follow them outside, scarcely believing my luck.

Across the field, I see Ms.Campbell. Isaac is not with her.

---

Later we are all riding in the car. My mother, Isaac, and me. Principal Goodman announced that a student has pulled the fire alarm, and we were all released. Another hard criminal slips through the cracks.

I'm in my room that night, when Isaac walks in. He's in his flannel Elmo pajamas and carrying his keypad. The whole scene is rather pathetic.

He opens his mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. He finally sits down on my bed, and hands me his keypad.

"Where were you when the fire alarm was pulled?" I type.

He picks it up, and looks at the screen for a long, long time. His eyes fill with tears as he points to himself.

"What?" I ask, puzzled. He points to himself again, and mimes pulling on a lever, and I stare in wonder. All this time I thought I was the one looking out for him, but even Isaac, my twin brother, looks out for me once in a while.

"Don't forget to breath! In and out!" Isaac sings from down the hallway.



**SECOND PLACE  
MIDDLE SCHOOL  
6<sup>TH</sup>, 7<sup>TH</sup> & 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADES**

**HANA  
◀By Jessica Liu▶**

**Y**ou said you liked flowers with bright, dazzling colors.

And these days I look to the window, summer reborn, and all these flowers blooming madly. I wondered if you would have said what you did again.

\* \* \*

Living in the countryside is where everyday was a sunny day. Rays from the hot boiling sun hitting your skin – like most boys I am tan, sweat dripping down my face as I work in our family farm.

It was a surprise to the town that someone had moved to the empty house not too far away from the hill. It was a little house, not a farm. No one had any uses for it. For my mother’s conscience and politeness, I am made to come along to say hello to the new neighbors, hearing that there’s a boy about my age.

I am smiling politely as I hear the broken English from the Japanese family, my mother shaking their hands wildly with grin too wide for comfort. They sat down in the living room, I’m urged to go upstairs and meet their son. The wooden stair creaked as I walked.

I went and what I saw was an almost empty room: a bed, a closet, and a desk, surrounded by the plain white wall. And you, the boy that I met at this moment and never forgot. You were sitting on your bed; every movement you made was without a sound. Your smile was quiet and done in the gentlest way. Skin paler than the bed sheet and your pajamas, but dark hair that glittered under the sunshine down to your shoulder, the eyes that shone even with the dullness around you.

Hana. The name that meant flowers in Japanese, the name anyone would think did not fit you. I was the only one that understood – this is the name for you.

\* \* \*

Oliver-kun. That’s what you inform me as. You explained it was a normal address for a young boy in Japanese. I nodded, just a bit bored.

“There are a lot of pretty flowers out there, Oliver-kun. Their colors are so wonderful.” You looked outside the window. That was your view of the world. You were forbidden to be outside, because somehow something out there is harmful to your fragile body. To most of the folks around town, who ran their mouths feeling rather unashamed, call your body “will swift with the wind if it hits him”. Cancer is a disease that tries to take you

away. You survived, obdurately. You wake up, open your eyes every morning, though it's just another start of pain you must take in.

“Those flowers are nothing.” I spoke. “I see way more than these.” I said in despise of your blindness. But not criticize from anyone brings you down; I admire that, in secret. A young teenage boy can never lose their insolence.

“You're very lucky, Oliver-kun, to see all those things out there.” You said with the look longing in your eyes; a littler bitter, but then you were never defeated. “But I will get cured, you know, then I can walk outside, play soccer with the boys, and maybe even do a little farm work. And I can see more flowers.”

Your eyes then shone with hope, as if tomorrow you could jump off your bed and run outside, free.

I fell silent. Mom has been talking about it at dinner, how your disease was could not be cured, how you would not live pass 16, how your family is having trouble paying your medical bills, how they wanted a child that was healthy and strong, how I needed to be by your side, be your friend, until the wind takes you away.

Like those flowers I planted in spring. Some of them are dying, and you know you can't help it, but watch its ephemeral life to the end, heart broken.

Life is a story. Places and characters, twists and events – it seems it's all set in the script, immutable.

\* \* \*

It is your 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. I bought you some pot-grown flower seeds and things needed for it to grow. You were excited; you wanted them to grow well. You told me if I could just please bring some more fertilizer, some water, some this some that. I laughed, I joked and said So now I'm less important than some flowers?

Your face becomes flushed. You stuttered as you spoke: “No – no! Of course not! Oliver-kun is a lot more important than flowers!”

I cracked up and watched you kept on trying to make out your words correctly. I rub your head and made your smooth black hair messy. I'm glad at that moment that you are not losing your hair like all those cancer patients I have heard from. It is too beautiful to be lost. You told me it's in the medicine, chemo, as they're called. I don't really know much about cancer, I didn't want to. Perhaps it would pain me to know what kind of things you go through each day. You accept my cowardice, as you did with my arrogance.

“Alright, quit talking before you really embarrass yourself.” My laughter rang through the room.

You blushed again, holding the pot in your hand; silently you press the seeds into the

dirt. Your fingers are long and bony, slender, fitted for piano playing. I know few girls in my school that plays piano. The way they play upon those black and white keys, the music they make out of it – it is beautiful. I wish you could learn it too. Me being your only friend, I would be honor before all others to hear it.

I lean on the wall by the window; the sun was warm today. You hum as you worked.

“Ay, Hana.”

You looked over to my direction.

I didn’t know what to say, I just felt like calling out your name.

Before you’re gone.

Before you disappear.

“You like your presents?” I grinned.

“Yes. Thank you, Oliver-kun.”

I notice how you smile then, those smile contain of pure happiness, that image was somehow never gone from my memories, no matter how much time can wash away.

\* \* \*

The flowers grew to our friendship alike. I came to your room everyday, telling you about my life. You act like a child hungry for those fairytales each night.

I found my first crush. I told you about that too, how her red hair was so beautiful, how her eyes shock me when it meets mine, so on. You always listen to my words with interest, nodding along the way.

“There must be lots of pretty girls out there.” You held your knees with your arm; you always sat like that.

“Che, yeah.” I sat next to the window; looked to your direction, pinch your face lightly. “If you were a girl, I guess you could be called pretty.” I have no interest in boys, but if being honest, that is the truth plainly. You can’t really tell that Hana is a boy by looking, and by his feminine name it’s just more confusing. His features are rather delicate, with long lashes, big round eyes full of spirit despite his illness, pale skin because he never faced the sun. A pretty boy, end of judgment.

I see you blushed and smiled, shyly, quietly, in your own little way. That’s just you. A flower blooming though its stems and roots are weak, but still with pride and that brightness that was beautiful no less.

You touched the flower buds lightly. “They’re growing, Oliver-kun.” You smiled again. You adored these flowers. You forget to take your medicine on time but you don’t forget to water them. You have a little notebook, a diary, and every page you draw or write about the flowers, things outside the windows, and me.

A little circle of your life. Your parents, your room, your window, your flowers.

And there stands me, in the middle, in the center of your attention, always.

I was 16, you were 15.

\* \* \*

And comes the twist, the turn in this scenery – our family moved to the city. Away from the countryside, the flowers and grass and farms.

You couldn’t come to say goodbye. I understand. We said we did write to each. You still smiled, like always, but somehow your eyes’ shines seem to be faded.

\* \* \*

We wrote, but less and less. Whether it is my life moving forward and you’re becoming the smaller parts of it, or your strength is finally fading, so much so that to hold a pencil would be a struggle.

Everything moved on so fast with the wind and clouds, going forward. It took some time to get use to, but I learn to like the neon nightlights and the rushing people of the city; it was different type of beauty. Things were fine, my role and such, a boy that loved sports, hard worker, energetic, has some girls around him – too fine, that I have forgotten the country’s vibrant blue sky, the green grass, and a boy named Hana, waiting for me. I bought girls flowers: roses, tulip, daffodil, lilac, corsage, iris, pansy, lavender. It reminds of you and your flowers. I would remind myself to write a letter, see how you’re doing, but it never came to be so urgent. Time washed everything away. You faded from the picture. I didn’t realize, I was still your center, though I am gone.

Every time I look back, I regret. Why had I not remember you, recall your name, why had I not know you were still waiting, a little flower, waiting for someone to come to him, to see him, to care for him?

And I know there is the part of me that forever remained to long to be by your side. But then I was denying it for whatever reason.

\* \* \*

I was 18 then.

I went back to take care of some business. See the hills of flowers and blue sky, sniff the fresh air. I looked around. It seemed as if nothing has changed. And then there was that little house by the hill.

Hana.

My memories rushed, my head rushed, my body rushed.

I bang on the door so loudly your parents seem to be cursing in Japanese. As they open the door, the surprise spread their face to see me. I couldn’t catch my breath. Didn’t dare to.



I look to your father's eyes, earning to ask the question burning inside, but no sound came. He studied my face for a little while, and merely closed his eyes and shook his head.

Gone.

16 years was your penalty of death.

\* \* \*

A boy that's locked in a room with dullness of white walls and illness, a boy that longed for the hills, desired for the colors of life, those eyes never faded, no matter what comes in the way.

No matter how agonizing waking up everyday would be. No matter how lonely looking at the white walls would be. No matter how hard it is to accept, to know, the solemn fact of your death's date.

And for the knowledge of I was gone, why had your eyes faded away.

\* \* \*

The part about dying is not the pain go through beforehand, it is the memories and the pain you left behind.

Your parents said you waited for my letter, for me to visit. Your body was weaker each day, yet the plants grew well, you took care of them. You wrote more in your diary, took notes, hoping, praying.

The day you left, they said you sneaked outside and walked a long road over the hills. I know how excited you must have been, to be free, to see more things and colors as you desired so, though your body at that time was so fragile, moving so much could have brought you down instantly. They said you wanted to see me, to get on the bus and go to the city. But they found you the next day, lying in the flowers near the city road, eyes closed, holding an envelope, with flower seeds you took in there.

Your parents hand me the letter and the diary. Their eyes showed no sign of sadness, now that they have a new child. You were the past for them, something that was gone, and better to be forgotten.

I didn't read your letter or the diary. I didn't dare to. I'm afraid if I do, the tears would wash away the writing.

\* \* \*

Your grave was at the place you slept and rested; forever and no longer need to face the pain. You liked flowers, with bright, dazzling colors, and so I planted them for you. In heaven, you could hold them in your arms.

The seeds you gave me rest in the envelope. In the way of life, it has always been blooming, beautifully.

I pray for cleanse of sin.

\* \* \*

"I'm Hana, my name means flower in Japanese. Nice to meet you, Oliver-kun."

"I like flowers, Oliver-kun."

"Don't you think those colors are beautifully?"

"Thank you for being with me."

"One day I will run through the hills of flowers with you, and rest there."

\* \* \*

Your name is Hana, a boy named after the flowers, that desired freedom, that longed for the hills of flowers and colors, the boy that left a seed in Oliver's life, grew silently, till the day you disappear, is only when he then felt the pain, through and through.

\* \* \*

Your name is Oliver, a boy like any others, forgetful, a bit selfish but has one's conscience. Someone that liked to have a person to talk to, that would look up to you, to accompany with no one else was there. That was Hana. You didn't realize his place until he is gone, and your remorse remains forever.

\* \* \*

I see the flowers in the field, on the hills, through the window, and you're missing sitting next to me.

For a sec in the flowers appeared a slender boy in white pajamas and black hair and eyes that shone. My heart quickens a beat. Was it you? Could it possibly be?

I ran outside the door, I ran to you. You were still smiling, in your quiet, gentle way. You looked happy. I am with tears. I mouthed your name.

Ha. Na.

You raised your arm, your hand swift against my face gently. The wind bellowed, the flowers' buds are flying, your fingers brushed away my tears.

"Oliver- kun." You say my name like you always did, your voice so nostalgic, the somewhat low, comforting voice.

You smiled. You put down your arm.

"The flowers are very beautiful, Oliver-kun."

The wind started again, carried you away along with the flower buds, and your voice remained ringing.

I shut my eyes, I hug the flowers. Hana. Flower.

In the end, you were still there by my side, I just didn't know it.

\* \* \*

Then, there was a flower shop in the little countryside named Hana's Garden. The owner was benevolent and spends his lifetime earning money and donates to the cancer association. He passed away at the age 87, holding a diary and a letter in hand, lying in the flowers next to a grave.

\* \* \*

Many years later, Oliver Smith and Hana Hoshino's graves were still in the hill of bright, dazzling flowers.



**FIRST PLACE  
MIDDLE SCHOOL  
6<sup>TH</sup>, 7<sup>TH</sup>, & 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADES**

**THE GARDEN GNOME  
◀by Ifeoma Irobunda▶**

In the beginning, Charlie Habel had a seed. He had dreamed of this seed since before birth; in the womb. At two years of age, Charlie Habel had one aster seed, one watering can filled with water, one spade, one section of the backyard designated as his, and a gut full of determination, rice, and beans.

Charlie dug a hole with the spade in his section of the backyard. In went the aster seed. And a couple more, just to be sure that there would be germination. Charlie covered the seeds, watered them, and then, he sat.

For three weeks, through rain, sun, darkness, and cold, Charlie sat rigid in the same spot in his backyard, eyes fixed to the spot in which the aster seed had been planted. Occasionally his mother brought him food and water, but Charlie could have gone without. For three weeks, Charlie Habel sat, watched, and waited.

By the end of the third week, the aster was a green shoot, almost three inches tall. Charlie could see the almost microscopic buds. He didn't need to wait for the aster to fully bloom. The green shoot was all the reassurance he needed. Charlie Habel, two years of age, then proceeded to plant cone flowers, false indigo, asters of every kind, bee balm, butterfly weeds, cardinal flowers, fairy slippers, spiderwort, columbines, an assortment of fruits and vegetables including blueberry and raspberry bushes, and, of course, grass. And within a year, by the time Charlie Habel was three years, four months, and six days of age, The Garden had been established. Charlie stood just beyond the gate inspecting his handiwork, and gave one short, simple nod.

Charlie Habel saw The Garden, and The Garden was good.

\* \* \*

By the time Charlie Habel was five years old and ready to start at the local elementary school, he lived and breathed The Garden, and nobody was allowed to tend to it except him. It was solely Charlie's Garden. His father referred to it as An Unhealthy Obsession. His mother said to Let Him Have His Fun.

Fun? Charlie thought. Then, Yes, Fun. I enjoy watching living things grow and flourish, so I suppose I am having fun.

"Charlie? Would you like a carrot?" his mother asked. She was always picking carrots out of his Garden before they were fully grown—a feat so truly appalling that Charlie could not stand to even think of it—and, worse yet, eating them without washing them. That, to Charlie, was a way to guarantee premature death. Now she held out one to Charlie.

Charlie stared up at her from where he colored pictures of a smaller, less impressive garden on the floor and considered saying, No Mother, I would not like a carrot. I would not like a carrot because it is practically still an embryo and it is very dirty. You may be alright after eating one or two or three very dirty carrots, but I am smaller and weaker than you and my immune system is not fully developed. If I eat just half of one very dirty carrot, I may

have a fatal hernia and sprawl dead on the floor, and then I will go up to Heaven to meet my Maker. You will then think it is okay to care for my Garden, and I will be forced to come down from Heaven and do something bad to you, not by choice of course, but rather by default, because nobody, but nobody, is allowed to see to my Garden except me.

“Is it washed?” he said instead.

She snorted. “Do I look like a well? Or even a sink? A little nature never hurt anyone.”

I bet the people who have been attacked by bears, or sharks, or wolverines, or become homeless because of hurricanes, tornadoes, and other such natural disasters would disagree with you, Charlie said in his mind. He spoke in his mind a lot. It helped him cope with other people, mostly his guardians.

“I do not want a carrot, Mother. Thank you,” he said politely.

Mrs. Habel shrugged and bit into another one.

She then had a fatal hernia and sprawled dead on the floor.

Charlie stared down at her corpse and said, How so very anticlimactic. I guess she had one too many very dirty carrots.

Charlie Habel got up from the floor, kissed his mother tenderly on the cheek, told her he loved her, covered her face with a dish towel, and then called for Mr. Habel—“Father, Mother is dead”—from the garage.

Charlie did not attend the funeral. He stayed home by himself. In fact, he was told to stay as far away from the funeral as possible, because if not for him and his stupid garden obsession, then his mother would not be dead, because she would not have picked all those carrots and eaten them without washing them.

Charlie Habel did not bother pointing out that Mrs. Habel ate dirty carrots from the market, and not from his Garden, all the time.

Charlie Habel did not consider himself abused. He knew he was very fortunate to have a father, and previously a mother, that loved him and took care of him.

And besides, the only thing that mattered to him, The Garden, did not abuse him.

\* \* \*

On his first day of Kindergarten, Charlie Habel woke up by himself, washed himself, and dressed himself. His father was long gone, gone to work in his law firm fifteen miles away. He then gathered his things, ate breakfast, bid his beloved Garden farewell, and walked half a mile to the bus stop by himself. But he wasn't alone. In his pocket, he had a packet of daisy seeds, ready to be planted upon his arrival home from school.

I do not understand the point of school, Charlie said to himself when he boarded the smelly yellow school bus. If I desire only to be with my Garden, and already know how to read and write and solve quadratic equations, then why on Earth do I have to go to an institute for not necessarily higher learning and sit there? It seems to me like some sort of cruel and unusual punishment, by keeping me away from my Garden.

But my father would never torture me, Charlie continued to himself as he stared out the window. So I suppose I'll go and see what all the fuss is about, and who knows? Perhaps I'll like it, because, after all, Kindergarten means 'garden of the children.'

Charlie Habel spoke like an Englishman from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But in truth, he lived in Rhode Island in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So alas, he did not fit in very well.

Charlie was in Ms. Ramsey's class, room 1B. He did not know any of the other children, as he had been homeschooled for preschool and pre-Kindergarten. He sat quietly where he saw his nametag and waited for class to begin.

There were the usual introductions and explanations, and just when Charlie thought he was going to die of boredom, Ms. Ramsey assigned something of interest.

“I’m sure all of you know about superheroes,” she said. “So right now, I want you all to pick a superhero and when I call on you, tell me which superhero you want to be and why.”

All of the boys picked Superman, Spiderman, or The Hulk. All of the girls picked Superwoman or ElastiGirl, and the occasional ditz picked Lois Lane.

Charlie very nearly clapped his hands together with glee. For how many times had he pictured this in his head? Charlie Habel was—

The Garden Gnome! Appointed Guardian and Defender of The Garden, The Garden Gnome’s sole purpose was to defend and protect The Garden from all sources of evil, potential or direct.

When Charlie announced this, there was a minute or two of absolute and complete silence in room 1B. All of the children were staring at Charlie as if he had three heads. Charlie Habel wondered briefly if, maybe, he had said the wrong thing.

Of course not, he reasoned with himself. They all said what they wanted to say, so I said what I wanted to say, and if they discriminate against me because of that, well, that’s just silly.

“A *garden gnome*?” one girl said. Charlie translated in his mind. Translation: What planet did this guy drop off of?

“No, not *a* garden gnome,” Charlie corrected. “*The* Garden Gnome. It’s capitalized, as is The Garden.”

“That’s . . . that’s interesting,” Ms. Ramsey said weakly over a slew of disparagements. Translation: There’s something very, very wrong with that child called Charlie Habel.

Is there? Charlie mused. Then, No. I’m fine.

As long as my Garden is there, I’ll be completely and totally fine.

When Charlie got home, he planted the daisy seeds, watered them, and smiled.

For the rest of Charlie’s elementary school years, Charlie was avoided at all costs, similar to the way one would treat a quarantined individual. It did not bother him one bit. Every day he rushed back home and cared for his Garden. He did his homework and made dinner for his father, and then he went back outside to tell The Garden about his day.

The carrots hummed with sympathy, and the bushes trembled their condolences. But Charlie shook his head.

“Do not pity me, friends,” he said. “For I live for you, and only you, and if you do not shun me, I will always be happy.” His Garden seemed to cheer.

It was something to be admired about Charlie, really: he found happiness in everything.

That particular night, the forecast was for clear skies. Eleven-year-old Charlie brought a blanket and a pillow out and lulled himself and his Garden to sleep by saying, “I am the Garden Gnome, appointed Guardian and Defender of The Garden. Those who bring harm upon my beloved Garden bring harm upon themselves. Sleep in peace, my Garden.”

At daybreak, Charlie opened his eyes slowly—

And screamed. It was the loudest and most impressive noise he had made since birth, shooting through a good five octaves and cracking at the end.

There, right next to his head, was a garden gnome. Wearing a green suit with a black belt and a black hat, the thing grinned devilishly at him.

Charlie jumped up and sprinted across the yard. He was not in the practice of seeking out his father, but today that would change.

“Father! Fath—” Charlie stopped, upon seeing his father standing in the back doorway.

“Good morning, Charlie,” the man said, smiling tiredly. Had he always looked so old and tired? Charlie wondered. “Good morning, Father.”

“I assume you’ve seen Tappaja?” Mr. Habel said.

“Sir?”

Mr. Habel cleared his throat and shifted his weight to his left foot. “I got you a present. For your garden. His name is Tappaja, and he can watch over your Garden when you’re not here. The man at the antique shop said he watched over an entire nursery in Finland.”

Mr. Habel smiled hopefully, and Charlie’s heart swelled. Although he was his own garden gnome, the gnome was a peace offering from his father, and he would gladly take it.

“Thank you, Father,” Charlie said, and smiled. His father smiled back, and then turned and shuffled back into the house.

Charlie deliberated a moment, and then walked back across the lawn to his Garden.

Tappaja looked innocent enough. His smile gave Charlie the creeps, but Charlie told himself not to be judgmental. He gathered his blanket and pillow and went inside to get ready for school.

As Charlie ate his usual breakfast of a poached egg on rye bread, Tappaja turned and watched him.

His smile grew just a little more devilish.

\* \* \*

Charlie walked down the hill toward his house, glacier lily seeds rustling in his pocket. It had been a good day at school, but all he really wanted to do was see his Garden.

Charlie dropped his knapsack in his room and then headed out back. He called out a cheery hello to his Garden, and then stopped short.

Oh. He had forgotten all about Tappaja. The thing really was quite creepy. It gave Charlie an unsettled feeling, though he wasn’t quite sure why.

Charlie smiled tentatively at Tappaja, and then moved to a clear section of the soil to plant his glacier lilies. He had just dug the third hole when he happened to glance up.

Charlie dropped his spade. There, in his line of sight, were two dead spiderwort flowers. Their purple petals were half sunk into the ground.

Since he had established The Garden, nothing had ever died in it. Things had shriveled up to bloom again the next season; certainly, but nothing had ever *died*. Especially not spiderworts. They were some of his strongest plants.

Until now.

Charlie’s gaze remained on the two dead spiderworts, and then ever so slowly shifted to Tappaja, who, startingly, was facing toward him. His evil smile seemed a little wider, if that was possible.

Charlie finished planting his glacier lilies, watered them, and plucked the dead spiderworts out of the ground. Carefully he gathered every petal, fully intending to glue them back on and press the flowers.

Charlie felt as though any second, Tappaja might grab his arm and throw him to the ground. He tucked the flowers gently into his sweater pocket and all but ran away from The Garden.

Away from Tappaja.

The next day was Saturday. Charlie went out to his Garden first thing after breakfast, entered the gate, and cried out.

Four hollyhock flowers were dead.

“No,” Charlie whispered. He quickly surveyed the rest of his Garden, finding everything else orderly and intact. Scooping up the dead hollyhocks, Charlie muttered a good morning to the ever-creepy Tappaja.

Why are my plants dying? Charlie wondered as he sat in the soil next to the remainder of his hollyhocks. What am I doing wrong?

“You watch my Garden while I’m away,” Charlie said aloud, addressing Tappaja. “Do you know what’s killing my plants?”

Tappaja said nothing (not that Charlie really expected him to say anything); only smiled in the same ominous way.

Charlie spent four hours talking to and caring for The Garden, and then went inside.

Later that day, it rained. When Charlie went back out later, six of his fourteen tomato plants were dead, drowned in a puddle of water.

Funnily, it looked as though they had been intentionally bent off their stakes.

Two days, eight dead violets, and ten dead cardinal flowers later, Charlie was sure.

The Garden was being sabotaged.

And Charlie knew who was doing it, too. All the pieces fit. Up in his room that stormy Monday, Charlie made a list.

1. Father brings home Tappaja
2. Tappaja has a sinister, evil smile
3. I find dead plants, in multiples of 2. (2, 4, 6, 8, 10 . . .)
4. The plants die while I am away
5. **Tappaja is always there when I am away**

Charlie put down his pen, satisfied. Thunder crashed outside. Leaning back in his chair, Charlie thought about Tappaja. About how he was always smiling. About how he was always looking at Charlie. About how each time Charlie saw him, his smile seemed just a little wider.

He had come from Finland, his father had said. Finland . . . .

Charlie bolted upright, struck with an inspiration.

Going to his bookshelf, Charlie retrieved his Finnish dictionary. Tappaja, Tappaja . . .

Tappaja.

Killer.

Charlie dropped the dictionary and sprinted outside into the slanting rain. Tappaja would strike again, using the rain as his cover. But Charlie Habel was—

The Garden Gnome! Appointed Guardian and Defender of The Garden, the Garden Gnome’s sole purpose was to protect and defend the Garden from all sources of evil. ALL of them. Those who brought harm upon his beloved Garden brought harm upon themselves.

Charlie Habel was the real Garden Gnome.

Tappaja was going to pay.

Grabbing a rake, Charlie pushed through the gate. What he saw stupefied and terrified him. Tappaja’s short, dwarfed gnome figure was bent over the patch of dwarf irises, Charlie’s absolute favorite flower.

“Tappaja!” The rain roared, impossibly loud in Charlie’s ears, but Tappaja turned.

“Stop right there! You have killed for the last time!” Charlie spoke in ardent Finnish.

Tappaja glared. “*Tyhmä poika!*” Stupid boy. He continued ripping the petals. Nine were dead already. Three more, and his goal would be reached.

“*Ei!*” Charlie screamed. “*Kieltäydyn!*” Crossing the yard, he brought the rake down vigorously on Tappaja’s head. Once, twice—”

Tappaja shattered. Charlie slowly lowered the rake, breathing heavily as rain dripped down his face and poured down his back.

“It’s over,” Charlie said aloud. “Be at peace, my Garden.”

Charlie buried Tappaja on the other side of the yard. He pressed the nine dead dwarf irises and put the rake back in the shed.

The rain had stopped by the time Charlie went back inside. He found his father standing at the kitchen window. Once look at his face told Charlie that he had seen everything.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Habel said. His voice sounded utterly feeble. “I didn’t know.”

“I know, Father. It’s alright,” Charlie replied quietly.

“I just wanted . . . to do something for you . . .” he croaked, gesturing helplessly with his right hand.

“You did, Father.” Charlie grinned unexpectedly. “You gave me some excitement. And better excitement I’ve never had. Thank you, Father.”

“I love you, Charlie,” his father said, smiling.

“As I love you, Father.”

\* \* \*

Two months later, by the time Charlie Habel was 12 years and 23 days of age, The Garden’s missing entities had been restored. Charlie stood just beyond the gate, inspecting his most recent handiwork.

Charlie Habel saw The Garden, and The Garden was good.





**THIRD PLACE  
HIGH SCHOOL  
9<sup>TH</sup> & 10<sup>TH</sup> GRADES**

**SWITCHED  
◀by Erin Baughn▶**

I screamed.

I cried.

I thrashed around violently.

My lungs were begging for air, for relief of the pain.

Strong hands gripped my wrists. My shoulders. My waist.

Most of the nervous people walking down the hallway averted their disgusted looks. One girl had the courage to look into my pleading eyes. She looked familiar, but I couldn't tell, since the tears blurred my vision. I fell silent for a moment, willing her to help me.

The girl didn't move. They continued carrying me down the corridor.

They calmly walked, moving me into a room with a steel door, locks upon locks on the outside.

The three men opened the door and deposited me on a crinkly, uncomfortable bed. They sprinted out, and shut the door. I could hear the clicks of the locks imprisoning me in the room.

I let out one final scream and I rested my head back on the bed. I gasped for air, and tears streamed from my eyes.

I knew I'd lost the battle. There was no point left in struggling anymore.

I looked around the room, taking in my surroundings. I was in a square, white room. It was too bright because all the white was reflecting the shining lights. Completely blinding.

There was a young woman sitting in a chair in the corner opposite my bed. She was dressed in bright white scrubs; her hair bleached white, even though she couldn't be a day over thirty. Her skin was extremely pale.

The only color in the room came from some sort of sphere-like machine that spun, colors pulsing slowly. It reminded me of a giant rainbow lollipop, with a short fat handle.

I gasped, realizing at once what it was.

It was where I was going to die.

The woman gave me a smile, noticing that I had realized at once the machine. "Blank Fifty-two-thirty? Female, seventeen years of age?" asked the woman in a monotone that sent shivers down my spine. She seemed to refuse to make eye contact with me.

I nodded, not looking at her, nor anything in particular, not bothering to respond with the generic reply we were supposed to use when asked our full names by an elder. I glanced up at her, and she seemed to be waiting for it, her expression demanding respect.

I glared at her, willing my face to tell her that I will not succumb to our society's idea of respect.

I chuckled and rolled my eyes and her head darted up from the clipboard that she had begun to scribble on.

"Don't you have to go through procedure and tell me everything that's going to happen, including who's going to kill me?" I asked sarcastically.

She looked taken aback. "Where," her mouth hung open, "did you hear that?"

I knew it was true, and giggled. "Runaways have their own scary stories to tell at night. So, you have to tell me. Go ahead. I'm not scared."

"First, I have to tell you the name of the memories and conscious that will be taking over your own. His name was—is Dandy Eighty-nine-ten. Male, twenty years of age," she took a breath to continue speaking, and I immediately cut in.

"Male? You can't put a boy in me! I refuse! I'd rather you'd kill me."

"I'm sorry, it's not your choice to make," she sighed, reverting back to the original monotone voice. "It's what he had chosen in the event of an accident."

"Are you saying that he chose me to be his body?" I scowled, hugging my knees.

"Of course not. That's completely random. First available body. Male or female, any race," she waited for me to say something, and when I kept silent, she continued. "He was in an accident. Quite terrible, actually. We couldn't revive him, but we managed to keep him alive just long enough to extract what's needed for the switch."

"Why do I need to know this?" I asked.

"Because you'll be put in a dream-like state for the rest of your body's life while he lives out a normal life. At the beginning of the dreams, what usually happens is that you'll be living out Dandy's accident," she saw the terrified look plastered to my face, and tried to assure me with an evil grin. "Don't worry. It'll be painless."

I didn't say anything, but continued hugging my legs and rocking back and forth, trying to will the tear that was forming in my eye away.

"If you don't have anything else to say, we need to start the process."

I sighed, giving up all hope. I was moments away from dying.

"I'm going to inject this into your arm. It's specially made to put your body to sleep just long enough for the procedure to take place, and at the same time, it will sedate your mind for the rest of your natural life." I began shaking, and she stuck the thing in my arm.

"We have about a minute before the sedation begins to work, so, until then, can you please grab hold of my arm and walk with me over to the machine?" I felt the coldness of whatever she had injected into me running up my arm, and, even though I wanted to say no, I did as I was told.

We walked across the room, and I stumbled over my feet, feeling light headed. "Please sit in here," she told me, and gestured to the multi-colored machine that now had a human-sized opening in front of me. I clumsily got in.

I poked my head out shakily to speak, "Please don't hurt them," I told her, and everything went black.

~\*\*\*~

I didn't know how long I had been asleep. But one thing that I did know was that I wasn't supposed to wake up. Ever.

I opened my eyes, and I was still in the machine. It was pulsing so many colors; ones I didn't even know existed. It was hypnotic, and my trance was interrupted by a countdown voice. I nearly moved, but then realized there was a hazy window where the woman could faintly see me through the colors.

"Starting in ten seconds. All operators and observers please stand back at least four meters," an electronic voice rung through quietly, obviously meant to be heard from outside.

I saw her fuzzy form step back behind a desk that I hadn't noticed before.

Suddenly, it seemed, some sort of foam padding had created a thin layer between the hard plastic or glass or something, and me.

A pulsing, colored gas filled the chamber, exactly the same color as what the machine used to be. I held my breath. It twisted around, flopping me in all different directions, and though it was nearly impossible, I tried to stay as limp and still as possible. I let my breath go after I began to get dangerously light-headed, and immediately got a scorching headache.

After what felt like several painful years, it stopped, leaving my head feeling cloudy and compressed.

Almost instantly, a giant wave hit me, filled with memories, thoughts, faces, and stories. They all belonged to that boy, Dandy. My eyes darted around in a panic. The lady was looking in the window again and the door to the machine slowly rose after the padding went away, and I shut my eyes.

"Dandy?" she called hesitantly. I pretended to be asleep for just another moment, to get my thoughts together, and to decide what to do.

After a moment, I got up shakily, and scooted myself out of that terrifying thing.

"Dandy?" she asked again in a sweet voice that I hadn't guessed she could be capable of.

I nearly fell flat on my face as I tripped and heard something in my head. A boy's voice. 'That's my name,' it whispered.

After pulling myself up, I replied, "Yes?" I said in the closest tone of voice to Dandy's that I could muster. I knew that the body kept the same voice pitch, but whatever they put into bodies changes the tone to cocky or shy or whatever tone you had.

She sighed, grinning, "Good. Everything had gone according to plan," she led me, or rather, Dandy, to a comfy chair. "Do you remember what happened to you?"

I began to run through his memories, but his voice interrupted me in my head, and I repeated the words after him. "I... it's too embarrassing. I can't say. An accident at school."

"You were on file to switch into a body, if your original failed. We switched you into a seventeen-year-old female. Her name was Blank. She was a runaway, and lived in the wild for five years before authorities were able to catch her. Runaways are said to be some of the hardest to switch into, but we've found that most everyone has had a smooth transfer thus far."

I nodded.

"You'll be living in the facilities for the next three months as you get used to your body and heal mentally from your accident," she told me.

"What about my family and friends?" I questioned, knowing from looking briefly through his memories that he had many of those.

"Sadly, you won't be able to see any of them while you're here," she sighed, as if she knew what he'd be going through.

"Erm," I spoke without thinking. "Did you happen to be switched into a new body as well? If you don't mind me asking." I shrugged and my mind raced, wondering why I had asked in the first place.

The woman nodded, "A runaway shot me. With one of those terrible weapons from the year that they used to call 2000. The same one whose body I'm in."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, even though I wasn't. Not in the slightest.

She quickly brushed her tear away and continued to speak. "I will show you to your room, which you will share with a newly switched girl until the end of your visit here," she stood up. "Your roommate will be waiting for your arrival." She tapped on a keypad, filled with numbers and a few odd symbols I didn't recognize. A buzzer went off a moment later, and after several familiar clangs at the door, it swung open.

We walked down the hall, and into an apartment-like room.

There was a girl sitting on one of two large beds in a bedroom portion of the apartment. I recognized her instantly.

She was the girl I had spent my entire runaway life with, my best friend. Ruela. She had disappeared just a day before I was captured.

"I'm Dottie," she extended a hand, and Dandy gasped.

"That's my girlfriend, act natural," he warned me.

"Dot?" I asked.

She looked at me confusedly for a moment, and then smiled.

"Dandy? Is that you? Did they put you in a girl's body?" she groaned after pecking me on the cheek. "Why'd they do that?"

"I don't know. I was wondering that myself," I said just a word behind Dandy's thoughts.

The woman laughed left the room after peeking her head around the doorway, "Dinner is at seven. Someone will come by to escort the two of you."

She closed the door behind her.

Dottie went rigid after a moment of looking me up and down. "Blank?"

"Ruela?" I gasped quietly after choosing to ignore the fact that she could be faking it.

She hugged me, and I began crying, "It didn't work on you either?"

"How did they capture you?" I asked.

"I was collecting berries in the forest, like I told you I was, and... something knocked me out, and then I was in the white room," Ruela shuddered. "How did you?"

"I was in sort of a panic that you hadn't come back to camp. I was looking for you. Somehow, I accidentally stumbled into a police base on the outskirts of this city. Did you know that I was the most wanted runaway for the past three years?" I grinned proudly after silently recalling the terrifying moment that had only been hours ago.

"Idiot. You should have forgotten about me, and protected yourself."

I shook my head, and she rolled her eyes.

"Anyhow," she paused somewhat awkwardly. "Do you have Dandy in your head? Like, talking to you?"

I nodded and looked to her, "What about you?"

"Yeah, Dottie's so annoying. She never shuts up. It's not chilly in the slightest," she groaned, I giggled. Somehow, it felt like we were back in the forest, laughing at the fire.

"Dandy doesn't say much," I willed him to talk.

'I've been in your head for ten minutes. I don't think that gives me time to say much while you're catching up with an old friend,' said Dandy's voice, and I jumped just a little less than I had the first time.

"He's talking, isn't he?" laughed Ruela. "You'll get used to that."

"It's just weird, having someone other than myself in my head."

"I know how you feel."

"Can I lie down for a minute?" I asked her after a moment of silence. It wasn't not awkward because we were never really been talkative people, so we filled our presences with silence so often. "I'm just really tired. "

She nodded, and I lay down on the other bed.

'Dandy?' I thought, trying for the first time to actually speak with him.

'Yes?'

'I'm sorry. Do you hate me for not completely going away?' I didn't know why I was apologizing, and he didn't seem to know either, but it seemed legitimate.

'No.'

I groaned inwardly at him. What was with those monosyllabic answers? 'Are you sure? I'd understand if you did.'

'Are you trying to make me hate you? I'm trying to figure out how to get out of your head.'

'So I'm just someone you're stuck with? What a great way to try and make friends with the *only person* that can talk to you.'

'Right, so, of course I should make friends with someone if they think I'm an annoying voice in their head.'

'I never said that! We have yet to establish if either of the two of us are annoying yet.'

It seemed like he was about to talk, and I felt a hint of humor, but then it disappeared after just a moment.

'Can we be friends?' asked Dandy, and it felt sincere.

'If you help us get out of this,' I sighed. 'Now let me sleep.' I rolled over to emphasize the point, though it didn't really help, since he was technically the same person as me now. I then fell quickly asleep after a moment of running through the day's horrible happenings in my head.

~\*\*\*~

I woke up groggily, and for a few moments, I had forgotten my surroundings and circumstance.

I jumped up, scared, but when I saw Ruela, I realized that there was nothing to fear. She was sitting on the bed next to me, watching me, almost studiously.

"What are you doing?" I questioned, rubbing my eyes and stretching.

"You looked so peaceful," she looked away, laughing.

"Really?" I tsked at her. This was no time to be laughing. We had to find a way to get Dandy and Dottie out of our heads.

'What?!' Dandy's voice was harsh. 'You're going to just get rid of us? I thought we had a deal!'

'A deal that you would help us get out of this mess,' I told him, and Ruela looked at me confusedly. "I'm talking to Dandy. He's being quite talkative recently," I explained.

"Really? Hope he doesn't stay that way," then she went silent, probably to have another argument with Dottie.

'What's going to happen to me? I won't be able to survive outside of your body!' he continued as soon as Ruela was quiet.

'We'll figure something out. I'm not that horrible of a person. I wouldn't kill you.'

'How do I know? You could be one of those horrible killing monsters that people tell stories about.'

'Trust me. Go through my memories I'm anything but that. I won't hurt you.'

We were both silent as he shuffled through my memories. We both knew it wasn't needed.

"Ruela, I'm going to clean up for dinner. Where's the washroom?"

She pointed me down the hall, and I saw hundreds of buttons and knobs, so I tried for what seemed the simplest. I ended up being dripped on with mildly lukewarm water at a drizzle that I couldn't figure out how to turn off for a good fifteen minutes.

I sighed and rinsed myself off in that water, and found a set of grey pants and a shirt, waiting for me on the floor. They were exactly like what Ruela had been wearing.

I quickly dried off and slipped into the clothes. I noted that they were a perfect fit. I wondered how they got the size exactly right, but didn't dwell on the thought.

I towed off my damp hair and walked back out to where Ruela waited, her eyes full of fear. I had never seen Ruela look that way. Ever. She always seemed so confident and sure of herself.

"Ruela?" I asked, looking at her shaking figure.

"Ruela? Who's Ruela? I'm Dottie!" her eyes darted around the room, behind me, as if there were people there.

I spun around, and there was the woman who had switched me, along with the four men who had carried me in.

"Blank, darling, you've been a terribly bad girl," the woman smiled and revealed her too-white teeth.

"Blank? Wasn't that the girl who's body I have now?" I asked stupidly, hoping she'd pass it as a little mistake.

"Stop playing dumb. We have that whole conversation on record. Don't you know that security pings us when our new switchees are being bad?"

I sighed and collapsed on my bed. "What are you going to do now? Kill me and Dandy?"

The woman laughed, "Kill Dandy? That's a horrible thought, child, wherever did you come up with that?" she rolled her eyes. "No. We're going to re-do the switch. And make sure that it's done right this time. On both of you."

The men moved forward and two grabbed me, and the two others grabbed Ruela. "I'm sorry, Ruela," I sighed and let them take us away.

'I'm sorry,' echoed Dandy's voice in my head.

'Not your fault.'

'I'd help you, but it doesn't look like there will be much of anything I will be able to do.'

I didn't say anything back.

This time, I didn't bother to struggle.

They brought me into a different room than earlier. It was shiny and metallic. It was filled with surgical tools, tables, chairs, and in the corner, a switching machine. They never did tell me what it was called.

They roughly threw me into a chair that was connected to the floor and made of some sort of cold metal. They locked my wrists to the arms of the chair, and the same with my legs, so I couldn't move. I shivered, and looked next to me, and they were doing the same to Ruela, just a meter or two away.

In between us was a tray filled with assorted knives that I hoped they wouldn't use on us.

The woman walked in casually, whistling to herself. "What are you so happy about?" I snapped.

'Control yourself. They might hurt you,' Dandy warned.

"Oh, just having a fun day today at work," she giggled girlishly and I glared at her.

'Please hurt her when I'm gone,' I begged Dandy.

'You bet,' it sounded like he nearly laughed.

"You have to tell us what you're going to do to us, don't you?" I asked.

"Maybe we're not going by standard procedure today."

"Dandy will get on your ass about it. He'll call the authorities. You'll lose your job, and they'll probably do something to you," I smirked.

'What? Who said I was going to do that?' he asked in a panic.

'I'm bluffing, you idiot.'

"You wouldn't dare," the woman hissed, standing in front of me with her hands on her hips.

'I wish I could talk to her,' Dandy sighed, and continued, 'I've been looking through your memories. You would dare. You'd probably do just about anything to get out of here.'

'Shut up,' I told him, 'this is serious. We don't know what's going to happen.'

All of a sudden, I felt a sharp jab in my arm.

"Ow! What wassat?" I exclaimed before immediately feeling light-headed. "Wha- arr?" I managed to get out before I lost my concentration.

"We're operating," the woman had begun to pull on a pair of rubber gloves as two men in light blue scrubs marched in with masks on.

My head started to bob against the hard metal on the back of the chair as the shapes in the room began to blend together.

~\*\*\*~

It was like one of those dreams where everything is black, but you can hear people talking, people who sound so familiar, you can taste it, but you can't place it.

"We'll be doing it first on the smart mouthed, red-haired girl," I wondered if I liked this person or not, because it reminded me of a bad memory.

I decided it was best not to think too much and just listen. It was so much easier, and didn't hurt my head.

"You'll want to disable her connection to motors and thoughts, but not his. Surely they taught you this at your fancy medical school, no?" the same voice was getting whiny and impatient. "Make sure she's completely asleep. We don't want her to—" The voice was cut off, and then there was nothingness.



**SECOND PLACE  
HIGH SCHOOL  
9<sup>TH</sup> & 10<sup>TH</sup> GRADES**

**CANON IN D  
◀By Rose Condon▶**

**T**here's a song that Mommy plays every night, on the piano or on the harp. She calls it Canon in D.

It's the way things are, back in our little pretty house in the woods with no one nearby and a long, long driveway going up to the big road. But it wasn't till I was nearly nine years old that I knew why she played it.

Mommy and Daddy and I lived together in the little house, way back in the woods among the great white sycamores and the fluffy green pines and the bright gray maples and brown-gold oaks. Daddy worked a long way away, in the city, and he'd come home just before my bedtime each night, to play with me and kiss me goodnight. We had a great big dog named Thayn, with fur all soft and silky and black and white. He's a Malamute, Daddy's told me. And there used to be a little pet rat that Mommy'd trained to sit up and beg, and come when called, and her name was Misty. But she stopped living when I was five, and I don't really remember her.

So for as long as I could ever remember, right at sunset when the sky is pink and gold at the edges and dark blue-black at the top, or when it's purple dusk and the first stars are glinting, Mommy stops whatever she's doing and goes to the piano in the living room - or the harp in her bedroom - whichever's closer - and play the song. And I sit there next to her and watch and watch, as her hands dance all across the little shiny copper strings or the spotless white smooth piano keys. And always it's the same song, the same Canon in D, and Mommy's face gets all dreamy and her soft dark floaty hair sways around as she leans forward over the piano or the harp. She never needs a page of music and she nearly never makes a mistake. "It's so important," she says sometimes. "So important, Tallis...."

When I was not so little anymore, around six years old it must have been, Mommy would sit me down on the couch and give me my little harp. She taught me to play "Amazing Grace" and "Lightly Row" and "Ash Grove." And when I'd learned all of these well and pretty and could play them nice enough for her, she asked me one day, "Do you want to learn Canon in D like me, Tallis?"

Of course I said "Yes."

So she took me to where her big harp was, and showed how to put fingers on it for the notes, and I copied with my little harp. It took me nearly three months before I could play it well, and then I felt so proud and happy for doing it. I showed Daddy, and he was very proud of me too. "Soon you'll be playing it as well as your mother, Tallis," he said.

"But for a while I'll still play it myself," said Mommy, and put her hand on my head.

Time passed, and the years went, and I got older. When I was seven years old we got a new baby, a little girl that we named Christine, and oh, she was beautiful! "You're the cutest sister in the whole wide world," was the first thing I said to her. And she had such curly hair, as dark as Mommy's, not golden like Daddy's and mine. Her eyes were big and blue and she would blink up at me so wise and sweet, when I sat down next to her and played finger-games and showed her the mirror and the toys.



When I was eight years old Christine was walking, following me around all the time. Mommy taught me to play Canon in D on the big harp, because my hands were big enough then. But still, every night at sunset, she'd go and play it. And I'd stand and watch and hold Ris (for that was what we called her) up to see Mommy's playing.

Our big dog Thayn went off into the woods one Friday night and never came back. Daddy went out to look for him on Saturday and came back all sad-looking. He told Mommy something, and Mommy cried. "Where Thayn?" Ris asked and asked. But when I asked Daddy, he said, "Thayn's gone, Tallis. He stopped living."

And that made me sad because Thayn was such a big splendid wonderful dog, and so warm to curl up with on winter nights, and so soft, and he always loved to play with me. "I want him back," I said.

"We can get another dog sometime," said Daddy.

"But it wouldn't be Thayn." And I cried just like Mommy because I wanted Thayn back. "Things shouldn't stop living," I said. "Things should stay alive forever."

And Daddy picked me up then and held me on his lap and told me: "Well, darling, that's the way the world is."

"Will we all stop living sometime too?" I asked.

"Yes," said Daddy. "But we shouldn't be afraid of it, for when we stop living here we go on to live with Jesus, and that's much, much better than anything we can have here."

"Is that how it was with Thayn?" I asked next. And Daddy shook his head and said he didn't know, but later Mommy showed me some Bible verses about the Creation waiting in eager expectation to be liberated. And I guessed that meant yes. Because if God took all the trouble and work to make Thayn so wonderful and splendid and pretty, I was sure it meant He would take care of Thayn after he stopped living. But I still missed Thayn.

1

After Thayn was gone, Mommy seemed to get worried more. She'd do my schoolwork with me and play with us outside in the woods, Ris and I, but as it began to get to evening she'd be nervous and more nervous. Until she played Canon in D. When she played it she got all soft and happy again, and afterwards she would kiss us and tickle me and poke Ris on the nose till she laughed.

She'd taught me a lot more songs on the harps, both of them, and on the piano too. But my hands were very small, just like the rest of me, and I couldn't play Canon in D on the piano, not quite yet. It took so much reaching, that bottom part for the left hand. Mommy could play the bottom part or the top part, and sometimes she'd play the bottom part while I played the top. But I wasn't very good at it, not yet, and kept making mistakes and losing count with Mommy, so that it didn't sound like our lovely Canon in D anymore.

Then came one night, one night I remember so well. It was in winter, around February, and my birthday was coming up in April. Mommy had on a blue shirt that night, my favorite because it was all velvety and soft. I'd gotten to dress Ris, and I'd done it in a little red shirt with a round white collar, and her brown corduroy pants. I don't remember what I wore, except that the sleeves were a little bit too long and I had to fold them up.

Mommy was making dinner in the kitchen - chicken and potatoes, I think - and had just put it in the oven when she looked outside and it was getting to be dusk. Sunset came so fast that day, it seemed. She went to the harp (we'd moved it into the parlor downstairs by

now) and sat down. She looked all fragile and nervous as she began playing Canon in D, and just as she began to relax, there was an awful snap and the lower C string broke in two pieces.

"Oh, \_bother\_!" said Mommy, and she sounded as if she wanted to say a lot more. But she only picked up the string's pieces. "The spares are out in the car."

"You could play the piano," I suggested.

Mommy stroked my hair. "Tallis, I've done that all week. I want to do the harp. The extra strings are out in the car - I bought some a few weeks ago." She laughed and started to pull on her shoes. "It's light enough still."

A moment later, she went out into the blue dusk, out to the car. Ris woke up from her nest in the couch and yawned, looking around. "Mommy?" she asked in her little voice.

And that was when I heard the scream. Right next to the house, and very loud.

It sounded as if someone was really, really scared, and my heart went all cold. "Mommy!" I whispered under my breath. Something slammed up against the door, and I heard someone gasp for breath, then the doorknob turned and Mommy came in. She nearly fell down, but shoved the door shut again, leaning hard against it, and slammed the big metal bar down across it. For a second she stood there, as if holding herself up by it. Then I cried, "Oh, Mommy, what happened?"

She turned, and I saw that she held her right hand against her, and it was all bleeding and awful and torn-looking. Her eyes were dreadful, and her face was white and terrible as she looked at me and Ris. Then we all heard something scratch at the door, heavy rending claws, and panting breath like a huge dog.

Ris looked as if she might cry, but she was too frightened. I glanced out the back window, and saw a shadow darting there, something dark that waited and watched. Fear prickled up and down my back.

Mommy looked down at her hand as though she'd only just noticed, though bright red was dripping off it onto our floor. "Oh, Kyrie eleison!" she breathed, her voice desperate and small. "Stay right here. I'll be back - " She broke off and went up the stairs, her steps hurried.

I ran and pulled the curtains shut on the back windows, checked the lock on the back door, closed all the curtains. I switched on all the lights, as bright as I could make them. Then I sat on the floor in the center, clutching little Ris to me. Her blue eyes were huge and frightened, and she looked as if she might cry. "Oh, Baby," I whispered to her. "Oh, what's happening?"

Then I grabbed her up and ran upstairs after Mommy. I didn't want to be alone with Ris downstairs, not with the wild awful shadow-things outside. And maybe she'd need my help. But anyway I had to be with Mommy when these things were happening.

I met Mommy coming out of the upstairs bathroom, her right hand and wrist all wrapped up, and she was tying it into a sling hung around her neck when I came. "Mommy, are you all right?" I asked. "Are you all right?"

Her face was awfully pale now, but not afraid anymore - still and set as ice. Her eyes were dark and flashing as she looked down. "Tallis, get the phone and call Daddy. Tell him I said 'I made a mistake and the warding is broken. Be careful when you come home.' "

I didn't understand, but I set Ris down and scurried for the phone. It was in Mommy's bedroom this time - we were always losing it because it was so small. Daddy wasn't answering, so I left the message on his voice-mail and ran back. All this time I was thinking

hard about what Mommy could have meant. The binding was broken? I'd heard of things like that in stories. But what mistake could Mommy have made?

Then, I suddenly understood! What had Mommy done every night forever, that tonight she hadn't? Why, she'd played Canon in D!

Mommy was sitting on the hall floor, with Ris in her lap, holding her tightly. She looked up as I came back. "Did you talk to Daddy?" she asked.

"He wasn't answering," I said. "I left a message." Then I blurted out, "Mommy, this is because you didn't play Canon in D, isn't it?"

For a shocked second we were all silent. Then Mommy began to cry. Bright tears slipped down her cheeks as she looked at me. "Oh, Tallis, I know it's my fault! If I hadn't been so silly and wanted to play it on the harp, if I hadn't gone outside, if I hadn't gotten attacked...."

"No!" I cried. "That's not what I meant at all!" I was horrified that Mommy thought I was blaming her. "It's not like that. It wasn't your fault. But is that what made it safe and made the - the binding?"

Slowly, Mommy nodded. "Yes. Oh, Tallis, We haven't told you the whole thing before because we thought you weren't old enough, but now - Tallis, darling. Our house - our woods - are in the center of a place that has been - different - for many, many years." She reached out with her left hand and put it on my shoulder as I sat down next to her. "We have to keep the binding 'round our house, else the death-dogs and the un-wolves and the nighthawks and - and others - will attack us in the night, after the sun goes down. It's their hour, when darkness reigns. And tonight I've broken the binding, and it won't be long till they - till they can get in."

I shivered and curled up to Mommy. "But we've got to do something!" Claws of cold terror grabbed at me. "How long till they get in?"

"The crosses will keep them out maybe another ten, twenty minutes," said Mommy. She meant our iron-and-silver crosses, with holly tied to them, that hung above the doors and windows. I'd always wondered why we had them, but now it made sense. "Tallis." She gripped my chin in her left hand and made me look up at her. That terrible hardness was back in her eyes, no longer teary. "Take Ris and go into the attic. Stay up there and don't make a sound, whatever you do."

"What about you?" I asked. Mommy's hand was hurting my chin.

"I'm staying to fight them," said Mommy. And as I saw her face there above me I thought "She is the bravest person I will ever know."

But then I stood up, as tall as I could, and for the first time I could remember I really purposefully disobeyed Mommy. "I won't go," I said. "I need to help somehow."

Mommy's eyes flared and for a moment I thought she would hit me. But then she shook her head. "Tallis, darling, there's nothing you can do."

"I could play Canon in D!" I said triumphantly. "Then everything would be all right."

For a moment Mommy smiled, sad and loving. "Oh, sweetie, your little harp wouldn't make any difference. It has to be on my harp or the piano - that's how the binding works."

"Then I could play it on the big harp," I insisted. "I could, really I could..."

"Not with a broken C string. Every note has to be played, or it won't work." Mommy kissed Ris and handed her to me. "Now \_go\_, Tallis!"

"No!" I cried. "On the big piano, then! I have to play it!"

Mommy got up, slowly, and put her left hand on my shoulder. "Tallis, no. You couldn't do it."

For a second I was about to turn and leave, but then suddenly an idea popped into my head. God sometimes gives us ideas that way, Mommy had told me before. And I guess that had to be where this one came from.

"Mommy," I said firmly. "You can't play Canon in D because of your hand. But what if you played the bottom hand part, and I played the top? I know how to do it. We've done it before."

For a second Mommy's eyes widened. Then she bent down and kissed me, right in the center of my forehead. "Tallis," she said. "Bless you. Put Ris in the closet, dearest, and then we'll go try."

We tried to put Ris in the big closet in Mommy and Daddy's room, but she cried whenever we set her down. So in the end we had to take her downstairs.

Downstairs was awful and cold for some reason. We could hear scratching and thumping outside, and then things howling and barking. I clung close to Mommy, but she was not showing herself to be afraid. She stood tall and though her face was all white, her eyes shone. I knew she would protect us, even if the bad night-things did come into the house. And I was so proud then of my brave, brave Mommy.

She set Ris down in her playpen, right next to us. I drew back the lid of the piano for her because she couldn't do it with one hand. Then we sat down next to each other. I tried very hard not to bump against her hurt arm, but it was hard not to because we had to sit so close.

"Christe eleison," whispered Mommy under her breath. Then, "I'm going to start playing slowly, Tallis. You come in when it's time."

And Mommy started to play the song. She did not listen to the noises from outside. She did not look at the shadows beyond the curtains. She did not even seem to think about her hurt hand. But she played the bottom part, and when it was time I came in with the top.

I was frightened at the beginning. But it only took a few moments before I stopped thinking of fear, and of dark things, and only thought of the song - of Canon in D, and of getting it right. And so for the first time ever it was `_music_`, what we did that night, Mommy and I working together.

The music was a binding. I could feel it settling into place as we played. We were laying the foundation in the first parts. Mommy played the weft of the loom and I played the warp, and I wove a circle of bright gold all around our house, around Mommy and Ris and I, around the little gray house in the woods that we were in. Nothing could pass it. We would be safe.

Then we started the faster part, and I got a little nervous, but since Mommy played her part so slowly, I could manage. It was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful - and this time, `_I_` was part of it too. It was the finish of the binding, where we took what we'd made already and made it strong and tight and better. My fingers tripped over themselves once or twice, but Mommy slowed down to let me catch up again, and we went on. Then Mommy and I both slowed our playing to a crawl, readying - and the two of us dropped into the last, the final chord.

We both let our breath out in a sigh. The house seemed warmer then. And Mommy put her left arm around me and pulled me close in a tight, tight hug. She kissed the top of my head and I curled up against her.

"Tallis," I heard her whisper. "You did it. We're safe."

"No," I said, raising my head to look at her. "\_We\_ did it."

Daddy came home in a little while, and we all had dinner, the four of us. And Ris turned her bowl over onto the floor, but no one minded, because we were too happy. "My brave little girl," said Daddy, when he'd heard the tale of the night from Mommy. "My sweet little musician."

"I had to do \_something\_," I said.

"So you did, so you did," said Mommy, from where she was feeding Ris. She smiled. "And so you did it. I daresay we'll have to do it for a while, until this hand of mine heals."

And Daddy went and put his arms around Mommy then. "When I think how close you came to getting killed tonight, Mallory...." he said to her.

"I was a fool," Mommy answered shortly. "But I managed to keep my wits when it jumped out. The un-wolves are getting bolder earlier in the night, Jim."

"Good to know." Daddy stroked Mommy's dark hair and then bent down to kiss her. "But thanks to our little Tallis we're safe - now, and until you're ready to play the Canon by yourself again."

I sighed. "Daddy! Mommy! You don't understand! It wasn't \_me\_ that did it. God gave me the idea, and Mommy played the bottom part, and - well - I only helped!"

"Yes, Tallis darling," said Daddy after a minute. "I suppose that's all that any of us can do."

I didn't understand why he said that. But maybe I will when I'm older.

I'm only just turned nine years old, and Mommy's hand is still sore and has scars all over it. We have a new puppy now, a little fluffy one named Diamond, and we all play with her and she loves us. And I love her too, even though I still miss Thayn.

And every night, right at sunset when the sky is pink and gold at the edges and dark blue-black at the top, or when it's purple dusk and the first stars are glinting, Mommy and I stop whatever we're doing and go to the piano in the living room - and play the song. And I sit there next to her and play with her, my hands dancing with hers across the spotless white smooth piano keys. And always it's the same song, the same Canon in D.

It's the way things are, back in our little pretty house in the woods with no one nearby and a long, long driveway going up to the big road.



**FIRST PLACE  
HIGH SCHOOL  
9<sup>TH</sup> & 10<sup>TH</sup> GRADES**

**THE BIRD SYNDROME  
◀by A. Bishel▶**

**T**hey say teenage girls are "catty".

Clarissa thinks they are like birds, with sharp, delicate looking little beaks and beady eyes hard and black as obsidian. She calls it the Bird Syndrome in her head. Cats are dignified, feline, smooth, liquid. Cats were worshiped. They exude a vibe of soft confidence-- an aura of "I just don't care about what you think."

Birds chatter and tremble and chirp and gossip and whisper and flutter. They flock together, never straying away from others like them. They are stealthy and furtive and sneaky little beasts.

Clarissa never liked birds much.

**RISSA**

Clarie Fletcher was a tall, serious little girl with pleated skirts down to her knees and French-braided dark hair.

Rissa Fletcher appeared in sixth grade when Clarie's friends decided that they were in middle school and Clarie was a little girl's name. They wanted to be teenagers. They wanted to be new.

Clarissa pictured Rissa Fletcher: bright-eyed, outspoken and pretty. Rissa Fletcher would be tall, with a glossy curtain of auburn hair tumbling down to the small of her back. Rissa would not be afraid to wear booty shorts and tank tops, because she would have long, toned and tanned legs and arms.

The real Rissa's dark brown hair grew out but did not become glossy nor auburn. Finally she got fed up with the tangles and chopped almost ten inches off and donated it to children with cancer. She did not want to wear booty-shorts because she did not count on her leg and armpit hair darkening and waited five months before she got up the courage to use a razor. She got braces and mild acne.

Rissa in Clarie's mind was very different than the Rissa Clarie had become, so Clarie gave up on her Rissa. Instead, she is just Clarissa.

**GRACE ACADEMY**

Grace is Clarissa's school. It is very small, and in middle school the girls and boys are in different halls, go to different classes, and don't see each other except for breaks, field trips, and lunch.

Grace is *technically* a Christian school, and a pretty cheap one (the uniforms are a stiff polyester that feels like cardboard), but the education was good, and it was more welcoming than the intimidating public school system. Not everyone at Grace was Christian.

The thing about small schools is that they become a family.

Not the type of charming, all-American-yet-diverse-enough-to-be-politically-correct family with 2.5 children and a dog.

No, the type that has certain crazy cousins locked in the attic that no one talks about.

The type where back-stabbing and gossip is an acceptable form of communication.

Like various royal families that eventually kill themselves off.

That type.

## THEM

Clarissa thinks of Them in capital Ts. They are a cult. An exclusive flock of flamboyantly colored birds. The most elegant are peacocks with bright tails fanning out behind them. The least of them are turkeys, earth colored and clever enough to stay in Their group.

There are requirements... unisex names like Taylor...Glenn...Frankie... athletic abilities... long, styled hair... height... perfectly tanned stick legs...

They never really bother anyone else, always staying in their group, preening and chattering.

They just pretend that Clarissa and her friends never existed. This doesn't bother them. Clarissa's group just pretends that They don't exist either. But They are the majority, so Clarissa's flock became invisible.

## US

Them... and Us.

Clarissa thinks of her group as Us. With a capital U.

If they are birds, they are a motley flock. They are not all peacocks and turkeys. They are blackbirds and starlings and sparrows and cranes and finches and robins. All sorts.

It is not what they have in common that draws them together. It is what they lack in common that permits them to be friends.

## NEW GIRL PART I

There is always excitement surrounding a new girl, especially at small schools.

There is a cycle:

The anticipation, where everyone displays an unusual amount of curiosity.

The "you're new and shiny and exciting", where the girl comes and everyone hovers flutters around her like she is a sweet and exotic flower and they are hummingbirds.

The breathing space, where the girl is left alone enough to decide what group she belongs in.

The acceptance, where the girl joins the group and everything is as it was before.

## NEW GIRL PART II

Mrs. Findlay talks fast. Clarissa usually catches one out of every three words, and she knows she is not alone.

"I'd... welcome... newest...student... Melanie Raye... you'll ...feel... at home...arriving...later...." Mrs. Findlay looks at the room of blank-faced girls expectantly.

"We can't understand you," drawls Glenn, one of Them. "Talk slower."

None of Us would talk that disrespectfully to a teacher, thinks Clarissa.

But Mrs. Findlay is young and resilient. "We have a new student," she says slowly and deliberately. "Melanie. She is arriving later. Please make her feel at home."

And then she is off again, talking about something called Tequila Mockingbird. After about fifteen minutes, all Clarissa gathers is that it is probably a book and not a drink.

She gives up on listening about Tequila and studies the room from her back corner seat. It is divided neatly right down the center, like a battlefield.

To the right and front: Us. Therese, Bridget, Greta, Elspeth, Faith, Kara, Morgan, me.

To the far left and slouching to the back: Them. Too many to name.

Between Us and Them lies a row of empty desks. It is a no-man's land, she decides.

Melanie, she wonders. Melanie sounds like Mallory. Mallory is one of Them, a turkey on the fringes of the flock. Mallory is not a unisex name. At least, she thinks so. And Mallory only plays tennis. Is that why Mallory is a turkey? Could she have been one of Us?

Melanie, she thinks. Melanie sounds nice, rounded. Maybe Melanie will be one of Us. Melanie. Mel. Uh-oh. Mel is unisex name. Mel Gibson. Maybe not.

And that is how she spends half an hour of Mrs. Findlay babbling about Tequila-the-book-not-the-drink and people with strange names like Bur Adley and Jemfinch and Attcos .

The door opens, and a girl steps in timidly, and Clarissa sees how rounded Melanie is.

## MELANIE

The second thing Clarissa notices is her eyes. They are a lightning clear blue.

The first thing Clarissa notices is her weight. She is fat.

Not *morbidly obese*, Clarissa thinks. Not like that lady that took up two seats on the flight back from Miami last summer. Just fat...ter...than everyone else.



Her stomach pouches out, is curved. Her arms strain at her sleeves, because they are too tight and cling to her skin in hills and valleys. Her legs are meaty and they quiver as she walks to the seat in the no man's land that Mrs. Findlay points to, little waves of fat that crest and roll.

But she has pretty eyes.

#### REPLY

There is a titter, to Clarissa's shock. A cruel one.

She glances around. She heard which side of the no-man's land it came from.

She thinks she is wrong.

She wishes she was wrong.

It is the wrong side.

It is her side.

Bridget, Elspeth, Greta, Faith, Kara, Therese, Morgan.

#### HER SIDE

Bridget is Irish, with bobbed red hair and sparkling eyes. She is a robin, breasted and cheerful.

Elspeth is weird sometimes, wearing her uniform blouse with *four* buttons undone instead of the permitted three (how daring) and rolling her skirt's waistband until it just barely grazes her mid thigh. She dearly loves gossip.

Greta is short and fair. She has narrow gray eyes. She is quiet, but she is the best actress in the school, in Clarissa's opinion. Clarissa doesn't trust thespians, but Greta is truly talented.

Faith is black, but not really. She is actually Hershey's Milk Chocolate brown, and she is tall and has long legs and a sharp jaw line and high cheek bones. She is beautiful. Faith is mild. A middle-child. A peacemaker.

Kara came two years ago in sixth grade. She is bright and animated, but always compassionate, and always a vegetarian.

Therese is thin and Korean and smart. Of all of Clarissa's friends, she is most physically bird-like. She has eyes as black and glassy as drops of ink. She is small and lithe, and looks as light and wispy as if her bones were hallow. Clarissa loves her friend, she loves how Therese has a sarcastic sense of humor and how her lunch is packed in small boxes within small boxes, with rice and sushi and dumplings in their own little homes. She came in seventh grade with lightly accented English and ornamental butterflies in her hair. She is Clarissa's closest friend. Neither of them are sure how that happened.

Morgan is a unisex name, but like Faith, she'd been part of Clarissa's little flock since kindergarten. Morgan is very tall and blonde and quiet and almost never speaks. She is painfully shy, but plays volleyball like nobody's business.

## LUNCH PART I

The morning has been peculiar, with the extra girl no one wants to look at tagging along. And They just ignore her, saying silently, *Oh, take her, we don't want this one.*

But Clarissa's flock of mismatched birds ignore her too.

They sit eight to a lunch table at Grace. It works out perfectly.

"Melanie is really FAT," Greta comments as she takes out her hummus. Everyone looks at her nervously.

"She IS," Elspeth agrees, breaking the silence. The dike is unplugged.

"How can someone let themselves GO so FAR?" Kara asks. "Self-control, anyone?"

"I KNOW," Greta chimes back in. "People like her are why other countries think Americans are FAT and STUPID."

"Stereotypes," Bridget shakes her head. "I hate being judged as someone else."

"Wow. I can't believe she's ACTUALLY EATING LUNCH," Greta adds.

"Now, now, girls," Faith says mildly, laughing uncomfortably. "Just because WE'RE all fit doesn't mean we should criticize."

"I'm Asian," Therese says. "I CAN'T get fat. Not THAT fat, anyways. Not like MELON-Y over there." The other girls laugh.

Who ARE these people?

In second grade, they used to play a game, a strange one that involved collecting prodigious amounts of dandelions. Clarie's cache of dandelions was filched one spring day (and shredded and scattered about the field) by James O'Malley. She screamed and cried at him but he laughed. Bridget flounced over and punched James's nose. Then he was screaming and crying and Clarie was screaming and crying with laughter. Where is that Bridget now?

When Grace Academy holds chapel time, El is the first to come and last to leave. Sometimes she cries as she kneels and prays...quiet, free tears. Where is that Elspeth?

Where is the Greta that cried when they watched genocide videos in History?

Where is Faith, who carried Clarissa's books when she sprained her ankle last year?

Clarissa remembers that she and Kara went to sleep away camp two summers ago. Clarissa remembers this vividly because she got her period during camp. Her first one. She remembers stumbled into the dimly lit, flowery-smelling bathroom in the lodge and stuffed her panties with toilet paper, face flaming red with embarrassment. Kara followed her to make sure she was okay. Where is she now?

*Where is Therese?*

Only Morgan seems to be the same, still solidly silent.

Clarissa is horrified. It feels like her friends' words are stabbing her.

Melanie sits alone, head bowed, slowly eating a sandwich. It's painful. It literally makes her sick, listening to her friends. She gets up, mumbles "cramps," and flees to the bathroom.

## NAUSEOUS

Clarissa's sixth grade English teacher was a stickler for weird grammar rules. *I hope*, not hopefully. *More important*, not most importantly. *Between you and me*, not between you and I.

"Don't say 'I feel nauseous,'" she would say. "Nauseous means 'to cause nausea.' You don't feel like you're causing nausea. That would mean you are a hateful, nausea-inducing person. You *have* nausea. You are *nauseated*."

"Mrs. Samuels, if we feel like we're going to puke, we're not going to bother with the extra syllables," Bridget had said.

Clarissa feel does not feel nauseated. She feel nauseous.

## THAT NIGHT

She strips before her shower and stares at her body. She has a little belly protruding.

Does this make me fat? she wonders. How am I so different than Melanie? She pinches herself hard, hoping to pinch away the flab like wet clay. It only stings and turns scarlet.

She doesn't call Therese. She calls Morgan, the only one who didn't participate in the lunchtime verbal massacre.

"I'm fat," she tells her. She feels the tears building

"No, you're not," Morgan says.

"See, I knew you were going to say that. You have to say that. But I know I'm fat. I have fat on my stomach. I don't have a flat stomach." She is crying now.

Morgan is silent. "They're not bad people, Rissa. They're human. I am. You are. I didn't have the guts to speak up either. That's okay. We don't have to. It's not our fault."

"But I--" *stood by and let them peck her apart with their sharp little words and didn't do a thing but run away.*

Clarissa hangs up.

## LUNCH PART II

Last year, when Clarissa had ventured to do something mildly athletic (cross country) she had rolled her ankle. She didn't realize it was sprained and she thought she had to finish the race. She thought that was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

That was not. This is.

She had spent the morning wrestling with her conscience. What about her friends, her little flock? But what about Melanie? But...but...*but*...

She feels sick again. Nauseous. Her palms are perspiring and her armpits feel damp.

But it is lunchtime again, and Melanie sits at her table, painfully alone. And that kills Clarissa. You don't see birds alone, away from the flock. It is wrong.

Clarissa sits next to her.

She knows Melanie must have heard them yesterday. She wants to apologize for her friends, to tell Melanie they really aren't bad people. She wants to know where Melanie came from, why she had come to Grace. She wants her to be okay.

She says, "You have pretty eyes."

Melanie looks startled. "Thank you," she whispers softly, like she is afraid it is a joke.

It breaks Clarissa's heart.

Morgan sees Clarissa and Melanie.

Please come, Morgan, Clarissa thinks desperately.

Morgan hesitates, then slowly walks to their little table. "Hi...I'm Morgan," she says. "Welcome to Grace."

Faith walks in from the main hallway and notices the three of them. She looks undecided, then her brow clears and she slides into the seat next to Morgan and begins chattering amiably about the weather.

Clarissa sighs silently, heart still drumming, palms still sweaty. But she has done it.

Greta, Elspeth, Therese, Bridget and Kara stare at them, puzzled.

Therese cocks her head at Clarissa.

Maybe tomorrow she will understand.



“**Y**ou’re what? *What?!*”

“Yes, blind. Sorry.”

“Is this why you’ve been avoiding me?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“How? Why? Since when?”

“Retinitis pigmentosa. Started four months ago.” Ryan’s hands were clasped in his lap, graceful fingers knotted together, knuckles white.

I sighed. He flinched, ducking his head. His hair fell forward, hiding his face and startlingly gray, sightless eyes. I wanted to grab the golden strands, yank them back, and stare into his face.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I didn’t try to sound so accusing, but it slipped out anyway.

“And let you see me like this?” He raised his head, glared in my direction.

“Yes,” I snapped, glared back, then realized he couldn’t see me. He heard it in my voice though and looked away, one shoulder hunching up as if he expected me to hit him. I wanted to. I would have if he could see me. Even now we still knew each other through and through.

I pushed away from the porch railing, paced back and forth with the rough wood deck prickling my feet. His head tilted towards my pacing, but he refused to look at me. Before, he would’ve got up off the porch bench, put his arms around me and made me believe that everything would be all right. But now he just sat, hands twisted together, and wouldn’t look at me. His hair fell in a thick curtain, hiding his face, separating us.

I paused in my pacing, watching him as he sat, long fingers tangled together, summer sun catching highlights in his hair. Sitting there, motionless, he looked like a shadow of his energetic, soccer-playing self. But he was still beautiful.

“You should’ve told me.”

He jumped at the sound of my voice, head whipping towards me as if he hadn’t known where I was. My heart ached. I bit my lip, dug my nails into my palms, kept my voice steady.

“If you’d told me, I wouldn’t have spent the last four months wondering what I’d done to make you hate me.”

He made a small noise, as if I’d hit him, but all he said was, “I know. Sorry.” Then very softly, “I am sorry. I don’t hate you.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me? Why wouldn’t you talk to me? Why did you let me think for so long that I’d done something wrong?”

“Sorry.” So quiet I could barely hear him, so miserable I nearly cried.

*Where was he?* I wanted to scream. Where was my Ryan who was never afraid to shout his opinions in a crowded room, never let me push him around, never hesitated to give me a shake and tell me when I was being an idiot. I wanted him, but he wouldn’t talk to me, wouldn’t look at me.

“*Why*, Ryan?”

“Because I didn’t want to hear you say it.” Now he looked at me, turned his face towards me, glared as if he could see me. I saw a flicker of my Ryan in his scowl and my heart tightened.

“Say what?”

He lowered his head, drawing back into himself, away from me. “Whatever you’re thinking.” His voice came out low, flat. “That I’m disgusting or that blind people are creepy or that I’m pitiful, or that, that you can’t, don’t love me anymore.”

I stared at him, eyes wide, breath gone from my lungs, his voice ringing in my head. I was silent too long. His shoulders hunched smaller, fingers knotted so tight I could see blue veins on the backs of his hands.

“Go away,” he told me. “Go find somebody you can have fun with.”

Two strides brought me to the bench. It took no thought to drop down beside him. He stiffened, tried to move away, but I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him back.

“Who says I can’t have fun with you?”

“I’m blind, Ethan.” He was wound tighter than a spring, shoulders trembling under my arm.

“You are also an idiot. Do you think I care?”

Silence. He wouldn’t look at me, face turned towards the ground, hair hiding his expression. I shook him gently.

“You can be awfully thick, but you aren’t disgusting. Blind people aren’t creepy. You aren’t pitiful unless you sulk, and of course I still love you.”

I could’ve been holding a statue for the way he froze, stopped breathing. But he still wouldn’t look at me.

“I am mad at you though.” That made him flinch. “You should’ve told me. You should’ve trusted me. I would’ve helped. I would’ve been there.” My voice was too loud. Softer, “I wouldn’t have been alone. I missed you.”

I reached over, touched a strand of golden hair to brush it from his face. He jerked, flinching away from me. I gasped, remembered he couldn’t see me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

His control cracked, shattered like glass. Hand clenched in my shirt, face buried in my shoulder, body pressed against mine; he cried silently, but I could feel his tears.

I held him. Held him as tightly as he held me and didn’t say a word.

“I missed you too.” Soft words, spoken into my shoulder so quietly I almost missed them.

Now he didn’t flinch when I touched his hair, pulled it back into a ponytail and bound it with the rubber band I still kept on my wrist just for him.

“Don’t you dare hide from me again.” I gave his ponytail a tug, the way I used to.

“I won’t.” He rubbed his face on my shoulder then lifted his head, turning towards me. His hand reached out, found my face. Fingers slid along my jaw. “Promise.”

“Good.” Face wet with tears, gray eyes vacant, he was still beautiful. “I’m going to kiss you now. Just so you know.”

His eyes closed, lips curved into a smile. “Okay.”



**SECOND PLACE  
HIGH SCHOOL  
11<sup>TH</sup> & 12<sup>TH</sup> GRADES**

**IT'S LIKE A SANCTUARY  
◀by Kayla Stoler▶**

Winter

In the attic studio, when you are not painting, you sit in a cracked leather armchair. The cranberry red cushions are contoured to your large body and the arms are covered in cigarette burns. You sit in your armchair and I sit across the room from you in a pile of pink insulation that is falling out from the giant planks of wood in the ceiling. This attic is unfinished and there is a gap in the corner of the roof so large that I can sometimes see birds flying south in the frigid morning air. Some days father and I lay wrapped up in blankets, on the pink insulation, just waiting for them to go by. Sometimes mother brings up tea for us. *These are the best kinds of days*, I think.

Spring

Sometimes your hand has a life of its own. It's just the way that it floats across the canvas, creating a tree in two stokes, or perhaps a cloud. Colored energy pulses through the veins in your arm. I can see the streaks of pansy purple and creamsicle orange travel down your forearm, through the tips of your fingers, across your paintbrush, and onto the canvas. As the side of your palm grazes across your palette, it becomes flecked with oil paint. Your hands become speckled with lemonade yellow and cornflower blue. Your fingernails are always caked with paint and dirt, and you have even given up scrubbing at them by now. *It's just the curse of an artist* you tell me. The folds of skin on your knuckles collect oil paint too. Blue like my tricycle. Red like my wagon. Green like the reborn spring grass. They mix in the cracks of your hands and create birdseed brown. When you forcefully squeeze your tubes of oil paint, the folds separate and sometimes the dry paint falls into the wooden slats of the floor. Now the ground is covered in paint and dirt and dust. We have not cleaned this attic studio in a while. But she doesn't mind. She say *we're painters, we're born to make a mess* and then she tosses her head back and laughs.

Summer

Sometimes you let me paint the birds into your ocean skies. We usually do this on summer mornings. You sit me on your lap and my legs dangle on either side of your hard, wide leg. You point to the places where you want a seagull or maybe a crow and I dip a thin brush into your palette. You teach me how to put white onto one corner of the brush and gray onto the other. I lightly graze the canvas with my paint. One stroke, two arcs. This is what it must feel like to be a painter. I think this may even be what it must feel like to be you. Your head is right in front of the biggest crack of the roof and the sun is shining through and your face is nothing but a silhouette. But when I look back up at you I can tell that you are smiling, even though I have to squint into the sun. I can hear your faceless voice whisper that I am good at painting birds and that I must have talent because it is not an easy skill. You point to another corner of the canvas, right above a dark and stormy cumulus cloud and I paint another bird while you hum and bounce your knee up and down, which makes the next bird a little lumpy but you do not even care. We just sit like this all morning with the velvet June breeze

blowing my bangs across my freckled face and by the time we are done the whole canvas is covered in birds. First seagulls and kingfishers and then crows and then robins and even nightingales. You say *it's like a sanctuary* and she hangs it in the parlor.

#### Fall

She dies on a Thursday morning and it is raining outside. The rain washes her into the river with the brown leaves and the mud and then it washes her away. It washes the colors that run through your veins too. All the colors except for blue. You lose all the colors except for blue somehow. They drain slowly and I watch them. I try to catch them in old yogurt cups but somehow I always miss. From now on it's just a matter of watching the colors seep out of your skin.

#### Winter

I stand behind you for hours, watching over your shoulder as you paint the end of the world. You paint clouds of gas imploding in Seven Elevens, all in the color blue. You talk to me for hours about the color blue. About cornflower blue and boysenberry blue and turquoise. You say it is the color of daytime and nighttime. It is the color of the ocean and the sky. I ask what color goes in between the ocean and the sky and you do not answer.

#### Spring

There's a place on the floor where everything collects. It is in the center of the studio, where the wood planks sink low. They did not use to slope down like this, but when the rain leaks through the roof, it collects and sits in a puddle there. This makes the boards stretch and warp and now the rain leaks through this floor too. First, it gushes through the roof, running down your canvases in the attic. It picks up oil paint along the way, collects in the puddle, and drips down to the first floor. Now our parlor is spotted in colored water. The glass coffee table is coated in technicolor drops. The soggy Persian rug releases a shade of forest green water when stepped on. There is even a lavender stain on the white sofa the color of the lilacs she picked for me on the walk to school. Sometimes I sit next to the lavender stain and cry for her because the lilacs are blooming bigger than ever this spring.

#### Summer

In the far corner of the studio, past my pile of insulation and under the window, you let me paint on the wood wall. I'm eight now and you say I'm better than silly finger-paint. You walk over to the small, white basin sink to the left of the window. You hand me a dirty yogurt cup of brushes and fill the mug you just drank coffee out of with water. Pointing at the wall, you tell me to paint. I ask *what* and you walk back to your own easel, positioned straight across the room next to the other window. I sit cross-legged and stare at the wood planks for a while. Then I touch them with my small hands, stopping each time my index finger catches on a splinter. She used to pull them out when I went barefoot in summers like these. But she's not here anymore, and when father does it, it hurts. I decide to trace the knots in the wood with the thinnest paintbrush. It is a topographic map of curves and swirls and lines and holes. By the time you have stopped working for the day and are asleep in the leather chair, I am enthralled in my painting. I stay up all night brushing over the pattern of the wood in every color. In the morning I show you my masterpiece. You nod and smile as you inspect every inch of my map. You say *this must be the world*.



### Fall

You make me wear shoes in the studio because of nails and splinters and other unfinished attic dangers. Everyday I walk up the attic stairs, holding tightly onto the rope you have fashioned in the place of a banister. At stair two I can hear the low buzzing of the attic light. By stair four I can see its faint glow. By stair six I can smell the oil paints. By stair eight I can smell the whiskey. Then I slip on garden clogs you leave for me at stair twelve. I think they may have been pink at some point, but I can no longer remember. They are splattered with orange and speckled with white. I ask you why you do not wear shoes. You say that you do not need to because you know where every nail and splinter is. I say *that is not possible* and you say *why not?*

### Winter

I cannot remember the last time I saw you outside the studio. You just began to be there all of the time. You were not and then you were. There was no space in between. Like sea and sky. It was blue and then blue. You have always said you do not need any other color.

### Spring

You pin inspiration onto the studio ceiling. Sometimes I bring inspiration home from school for you to put up. A new green bud that I found on my walk to school. Or a pastel still life of seashells from art class. But most of the inspiration is souvenirs from your life. Postcards from Mali and a swatch of our old parlor curtain fabric. Dalí prints and turkey feathers. Black and white photographs and concert posters and untitled poetry written on napkins. Even a few pages ripped out of your favorite books. Inspiration hangs slanted because our roof comes to a point. You stick tacks and shoot staples in the soft, rotting wood. One whole side of the ceiling is covered in the inspiration. There are not even spaces in between. Some days I just lay below the ceiling and look at it all, waiting for one of those moments you sometimes used to get when your eyes lit up and the energy flowed right out of your hand onto the canvas. There was so much energy I could sometimes see it light up in your veins, through your skin. I hope to feel this too, even though you don't anymore. But one day I come home from school and there is no inspiration left on the ceiling. Just slightly discolored wood and thousands of rusted staples and tacks. I do not even ask you where the inspiration went.

### Summer

The studio enters different dimensions in different light. In the morning the sun shines through the gaps in the ceiling and the studio is fresh, like it has been reborn. The smell of earthworms and wet bark even masks the paint fumes for at least a little while. We turn the studio's single bulb off and its buzzing stops, leaving us in suburban neighborhood silence. By noon the sun is radiating through the cracks in the roof and you have rolled your linen pants up to your thighs and the backs of your legs stick on the seat of your cracked leather chair. My white-blonde bangs are wet against my forehead and your marigold yellow paint glistens in the midday heat. This is when the smell of primer and oil paint is the strongest. I breathe in deeply and it makes my sinuses push against my sweaty cheeks. *Noon is a time to be restless* I think. But by nighttime the studio is still and cold and inexplicably naked. Only one florescent bulb illuminates our life. It's still so hard to see, these days.

### Fall

They turn our florescent bulb off today and the low buzzing stops forever. You always complain about that goddamn eternal hum but now that it is gone, you are angrier than ever. *How can you be angry when it's so quiet?* I ask. But you do not want to listen to the crickets with me and you do not want to enjoy this newfound serenity with me. So the whiskey bottle goes smashing against the wall. It goes smashing across the wall and smashing into my topographic map. My map runs down the wall in lines of poppy red and berry pink and cobalt like the lake she washed away in. Puddles of autumn gray and brown form near the baseboards. They slowly web out across the wood floor, reaching out to touch my dirty garden clogs. I look back up at my dripping wall. *This is the end of the world*, I guess.

### Winter

I come home from school today and you are sitting in your cracked red armchair with your eyes closed. I stand in front of you for a while in my garden clogs and my blue jeans that hit me right above the ankle. I just watch you. You are sitting upright, your back barely touching the chair, so I know that you are not sleeping. You know that I am there but you do not talk to me. So, I go do homework in my pile of pink insulation. I fall asleep in my pile, shivering in the cold winter dusk, but mostly shivering in the silence. You do not open your eyes all night.

### Spring

I hope for a new beginning this spring but I am old enough now to realize how alone I am. But I can also see that you are far more alone than I, and that you spend your time boxing yourself off in compartments. I watch you do it every single day. First, when she died, it was just us, alone in the house. Then it was us, alone in the studio. Then it was you, alone in the studio. Then it was just you alone.

### Summer

It is the hottest time of the year and I can barely breathe. You drink whiskey all day and that night, I sit on the pink insulation and watch you run around the studio, struggling to stand. It is like you are dancing and I even start to hum under my breath as you swirl around the studio of unfinished canvases. You want me to dance with you and when I say *no* you pick me right up and drag me along with you. My garden clogs barely graze the floor. But I do not want to dance and you are angry and you are not my father anymore—swinging your palette knife around you in circles. It cuts the musky air and it cuts the uneasy darkness and then it cuts my cheek. Seconds later I am sitting in the center of the studio were the floor sinks low and the water collects. I am sitting in a puddle of whiskey and paint and blood. You sit next to me in the puddle, your breath heavy and your mammoth body heaving in uneven sobs. We cannot think of anything to do other than to sit together in a puddle of tears and whiskey and paint and blood. Then it starts raining and the water gushes through the cracks in the wooden roof and it's like the world is falling down around us with the pink insulation falling in chunks onto my wet hair and the paint running down your canvases. It's a puddle of rain and tears and whiskey and paint and blood and I ask *is the world ending?* and you say *I don't know*.



**FIRST PLACE  
HIGH SCHOOL  
11<sup>TH</sup> & 12<sup>TH</sup> GRADES**

**CAPPUCCINO GIRL  
◀by Allison Burg▶**

I don't usually drink coffee. I don't even *like* coffee, really. Actually, I'm rather against coffee now that I think about it. The way America worships Starbucks, Dunkin', and Tim Horton's absolutely disgusts me. We. Are. Pathetic.

But for some reason entirely unknown to me, I was compelled to stride into the cozy little coffee shop across the street from my apartment last Tuesday and purchase a double trouble super vanilla chilla almond mocha and everything-under-the-sun cappuccino. I honestly had no idea what to get, or even how to read the menu for that matter, so I just got what the guy in front of me ordered and paid for them both. It was a spur of the moment type thing, you know. Cost me six ninety-freaking-five apiece though. I still don't get what it is about this stuff that drives everyone to such fanatical addiction. It really is just brown muck with whipped cream on top to me. I forced half of mine down just because I felt like I should be drinking it if I was going to claim a chair, but I ended up throwing the other half away to keep myself from vomiting.

I guess, overall though, the shop itself wasn't so terrible. It was a little too crowded for my liking, but most places are nowadays. It smelled nice and played decent music, and the atmosphere was a chill enough for me to get a little work done on my laptop in one of those oversized armchairs beside the fake fireplace. It was pretty fun actually. I sat there, acting as if I was one of those fraught damsels in the movies who hangs around that fireplace pretending to nonchalantly do work on their computers but who are really just counting down the minutes until Mr. Right and true love and happily ever after come marching up to them with their favorite latte in hand ("Oh how did you know?!") and whisk them off in his Ferrari to a city of happiness and sunny days. Or something like that. Whatever, I don't think I pulled it off very well anyways. I'm just not a coffee shop kind of girl.

You know what else I don't usually do? Read the newspaper. It's just another one of those things I'm not into. Why I opened the newspaper that morning as I munched on my Cocoa Puffs (yes, Cocoa Puffs- get over it), I simply don't know. Actually, you know what I just realized? I bought a cappuccino AND read a newspaper in a matter of approximately two days... egh.

So anyways, there I was eating my breakfast, when I happened to stumble across the personal ads. Just another pitiable creation of our "mighty" country. And there it was- "LAST TUES, 8:45 pm – BOOK BIN CAFÉ, Want to thank you again for the cappuccino. You made my day. Haven't been able to get you off my mind, especially your hair. Went back three times to look for you. Kicking myself for not asking for your phone number. Chris. Box 8281 "

My stomach dropped. I... was cappuccino girl. Dammit.

Who did this guy think I was?! I don't normally buy things for strangers on a whim. I don't normally hang out in coffee shops. I don't normally read the newspaper, *especially* not the personal ads. AND I DON'T EVEN LIKE CAPPUCCINOS!

My dog, Max, let out a concerned yelp as I hyperventilated in the middle of my cramped kitchen. I smiled. He knew me too well.

“Relax pup, I’m fine... Just a little shaken that’s all...” I breathed a deep sigh, attempting to re-collect myself and figure out what to do next. “Everything’s gonna be fine, don’t worry,” I said as I stroked his head, the assurance in my voice directed more at myself than at him.

You see, I’ve never really been very good at the whole “interacting with males” thing. Probably because I still haven’t mastered the whole “being a girl” thing yet. Yes, I’m perfectly aware that I am twenty-two years old, thank you. I’m also perfectly aware that I should be over this gaucheness by now, thank you again. But I just never got the hang of it I guess.

It’s been this way for as long as I can remember. I think I scare them. You laugh, but I’m one hundred percent serious-o my friend. I don’t care what people think of me. At all. And I think maybe, guys are intimidated by that. Because I’m not one of those girls who wears mini skirts and pink sweaters just to broadcast that she’s female and yes, has an ass. One of those girls who laughs at things she doesn’t understand, or laughs simply because she’s uncomfortable with the silence. One of those girls who hangs out in coffee shops. I’m just not the kind of girl that fits into society’s mold I guess you could say. And *that* is what scares off most members of the male species. I’m too different for them.

But whatever, like I said, I’m perfectly content the way things are. The only problem is, I don’t exactly know how to go about interacting with men, or how to respond to situations like this one.

It’s not like I’m twenty-two and have never had a boyfriend before or anything. No, it’s not like that. Relationships just don’t work out for me I guess. My first boyfriend was in the fourth grade and his name was Timothy. Not Tim, *Timothy*- get it right. He had freckles and big chunky glasses and we both sat under the tire ladder making castles in the woodchips at recess every day without saying a word to each other. I tried to hold his hand one day. He never came to make castles with me again.

Then in high school, I was with this guy named Brad for like ten months (which in high school terms, is practically the equivalent of marriage, in case you forgot), but we never really talked all that much either. I’m pretty sure he was just in it for the sex. Which is kind of why I was in it too, now that I think about it. But I’m not a whore or anything, don’t get the wrong idea. Anyways, he hit me one day, but I don’t even remember why to be perfectly honest. All I remember is I hitting him back. He cursed an awful lot and that was the end of that relationship. He came to school with a black eye the next day, and I overheard him telling all his friends he fought off some big bad football player from our rival school. I smirked to myself and never talked to him again.

I dug a pen and a piece of junk mail from the mountain of assorted garbage (bills, stamps, expired pizza coupons, loose paper clips, you know) that had accumulated beside my toaster oven and purposefully sat back down at the table.

“Hmmm... Chris...” I said aloud to Max, who was still staring up at me uneasily. His tail began to wag back and forth fervently, like an automatic broom sweeping the dust off my outdated kitchen tiles. I chuckled. “Yeah I think Chris fits him well too.”

I stared at the back of the junk mail, working out the kinks in my plan. I had as far as writing something back to him figured out, but it was the whole *what I’m writing* part that

remained undecided. A little happy face whose persistent smile seemed disproportionate to its small head beamed up at me shouting “OPEN ME NOW, HUGE SAVINGS INSIDE!!”

“You know little guy, I think you’d be better off if you didn’t try so hard. Maybe if you weren’t so ridiculously obnoxious you could blend in with all my other cold, mean, serious looking mail and I just might open you by accident. Maybe if you tried to be like all my other mail, I’d give you a chance. I’m sure you could fool me.”

Max nudged my elbow as I got in the junk mail man’s face, as if to remind me that I was talking to inanimate objects again.

“Haha, thanks buddy,” I laughed to Max. He was way too smart for a dog.

I began writing...

“ CHRIS from the Book Bin Café- You’re welcome for the cappuccino. I hadn’t had that flavor before, but it was absolutely delicious, so thanks. Book Bin’s a great shop isn’t it? I just love it there. Not sure what else I should say here... looking forward to seeing you around again sometime. ☺ ”

*Charming, reaaaaal charming*, I thought sarcastically as I dropped the letter in my mailbox. *Sounds just like you!*

I could barely even remember what this Chris guy looked like, to be perfectly honest. I didn’t pay him much attention really. He was sort of tallish but not so tall that he would stand out in a crowd, and had dark hair that was kind of tossed over his eyes. I’m pretty sure he was on the skinny/scrawny side, but I’m not positive. He sure does buy freaking expensive coffee though, I remembered that much.

Even though I had gotten a good laugh out of it, I sort of forgot about the whole Chris ordeal after that day. I assumed my letter had gotten lost or Chris decided he didn’t feel like pursuing me after all or something of that sort. But it didn’t bother me much.

A few days later, I saw a girl come bustling out of the Book Bin, shielding herself and her giant Styrofoam coffee cup from the wind, and I realized I hadn’t checked my mailbox since I sent that letter. Maybe Book Bin Chris had finally replied to my outrageous piece of bullshit!

I grabbed my mail and flipped through the bills rather quickly. No Chris. To my surprise, I actually felt a little disappointed. Whatever. I collapsed on the couch and cuddled up with Max, and began mindlessly flipping through channels.

But just as I had gotten comfortable (isn’t that always how it works out?), there was a knock at my door. Max beat me there, trying to sniff out the stranger through the oak barrier. It was my neighbor, Andrea, who robotically handed a letter addressed to me and turned back towards her apartment without saying a word to me. She gets my mail by accident all the time, and apparently it annoys the living shit out of her. It cracks me up when she’s all grumpy like that though. I tossed the envelope on the kitchen counter without even looking at it and flopped back down on the couch.

Approximately forty-five seconds later, it occurred to me that I hadn’t looked to see who the misplaced mail was from. Which meant it could be from Chris.

I leaped up in excitement at my realization, feeling a little foolish for my excessive enthusiasm. But I shrugged it off, this new game was fun.

I snatched the letter off my counter as I flailed my arms around to keep myself from slipping on the linoleum. Box 8281. Yep, it was him.

“ Your letter made my day, again. Still can’t stop thinking about you... You never told me your name though? I’d really love to get to know you better. Chris. ”

Hmmm, this was a fun little game I had going here. I brainstormed what I should say to him next...

“Chris- My name is Ashley. I like going to the movies and shopping for clothes. I like to play tennis. I like apples and strawberries, but not bananas. I never eat breakfast, but I drink a lot of coffee. I like reality shows and going to the beach.... So when do I get to know you better?”

Was that good? I couldn't decide.

It sounded good I guessed, except for the fact that my name isn't Ashley, I hate movies and shopping and all sports, I really do like bananas and cold weather, and the first thing I do every morning is eat a bowl of sugary cereal. Oh and obviously I think coffee is repulsive, incase you missed that before. I felt a little guilty for playing him like this, he seemed perfectly harmless and innocent, but I shrugged it off.

Shame tugged at my heartstrings for the next few days as I debated whether or not I should have mailed that letter from “Ashley”, but I knew a coffee shop boy like Chris would never stick around if he knew what I was *really* like. He'd run just like everyone else, and where would the fun in that be? But boys like Ashley's. I could be Ashley if I wanted.

A week passed, still no sign from Chris. *Maybe I couldn't pull off Ashley so well after all*, I wondered. It was foolish, I know, but as the days passed, I grew more and more anxious about Chris seeing right through my letter. Maybe he knew I was trying to fool him and knew I was actually a crazy careless kook. I even went to the Book Bin to look for him twice. TWICE. I felt stupid.

I poured myself a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and wrapped myself up in a blanket. Max sat patiently by my side, hoping I'd let him drink the milk when he was done.

“Aren't *cats* supposed to beg for the milk?” I laughed as he lapped it up out of my emptied bowl happily. When he had finished, I tackled him. He tried to lick my face and beat his oversized paws against me as I tugged at his ears. He snarled playfully and I snarled back.

A sudden vigorous thump against my door signified that Andrea must've gotten another piece of my mail again. No one else would ever knock that exasperatedly. It was the same four consecutive whacks every time. I laughed as I shoved Max off of me and skipped to the door.

Andrea looked surprisingly even more cross than usual, which I found quite comical. I acted as cheery and smiley as possible, just to further tick her off, as she begrudgingly thrust the letter in my direction.

“Why thank youuuuu, Andrea,” I said with an excessive amount of enthusiasm. She grimaced and turned back to her apartment. “Twenty bucks says she leaves the next one in flames at my doorstep,” I chuckled to Max.

I looked down at the letter and all the air was suddenly sucked from my lungs, leaving them shriveled and helpless inside me. Chris. His name scrolled through my head as I ripped open the letter. I didn't kid myself anymore, I wanted to know what it said. Had I fooled him?

“Ashley- You have a beautiful name... More about me you say? Well, I happen to thoroughly enjoy winter, as I am a very talented skier, if I do say so myself. I also like Chinese takeout and hot chocolate. I like painting, but I'm not very good at it. I don't like movies, or shopping, or television

but I do like apples, bananas, and strawberries. I like sweatshirts, but not the kind with zippers. I like hats, and guitars, and erasers, and I like you... When can I see you again? Chris.”

*Aw, he really likes me*, I thought to myself. I blushed, even though there was no one around, as I re-read the letter again a good solid three times. I continued to smile as I thought about Chris and everything he had said, until it dawned on me- it wasn't me Chris was complimenting, it was Ashley. Chris liked *Ashley*. Chris thought *Ashley* was beautiful. Chris wanted to see *Ashley* again.

I sighed. Well, what would *Ashley* do now?

I took out a piece of paper.

“ Soon. ”

I forcefully put the whole ordeal out of my head for the next few days, too nervous to think of what would happen next.

But next came anyways...

“ How about Friday night, 7:30, Book Bin? ”

I held the letter lightly in my hand, hoping the wind would take it away suddenly and rid me of this confusion.

*Shit shit shit shit shit shit, I haven't been on a date in years!* I thought. I had no idea how to act, what to wear, what to say... My panic came to a sudden halt- this was a date, wasn't it?

But not only did I have to figure out what to say and do in this situation, I had to figure out what *Ashley* would say and do in this situation. *Ashley* would pull off the Yes-I-look-like-a-movie-star-without-even-trying look and make all heads turn as she walked into the Book Bin that night. *Ashley* would be charming and witty and flip her hair all cute and it would drive him wild. *Ashley* would spark some fascinating and intriguing conversation to show of her intelligence and genuineness. *Ashley* would make him laugh. *Ashley* would be irresistible from the very beginning. But I was just me, I was no Ashley. And Chris had fallen for Ashley.

I had to tell him. He'd be disappointed, and so would I, but I couldn't keep being Ashley. I couldn't be more different from an Ashley and I knew it was unfair of me to keep playing him like this. I may be different, but I'm no bitch, that's for sure.

Friday night went by in a blur. As tempting as it was to wear an Ashley-like pink sweater, I stuck to my “no more bullshit” plan and dressed in my usual garb. I got there around 7:40, still not sure exactly what I was going to tell him. I looked around, but couldn't locate his face. *I couldn't've forgotten what he looks like that bad could I?* I thought nervously. I sat down on the same oversized armchair I sat in the first time I went into that shop. The day this whole thing started...

I waited in that chair like one of those foolish idiot moron dumbass damsels from the movies who I had previously so despised. I was disgusted with myself- it wasn't like me at all. I didn't just wait around hoping for things to happen to me. So I walked home and shared a bowl of Trix with Max.

I couldn't believe I had gotten stood up. Actually, I believed perfectly well that I gotten stood up. What baffled me was that *Ashley* had gotten stood up. She was everything a guy wants, everything a girl should be.

The more I thought about it, the more I was disgusted with myself for letting something like this happen. I tried so hard to forget about the entire thing that night. I just didn't want to think about it anymore. I laid with Max and read an entire Harry Potter book that night, which was actually rather successful in clearing my head.

But of course, the things we try to forget about always have a way of coming back to us in the end. I tripped on the front steps on my way home from work the next afternoon and whacked my head on the newspaper box. Which made me think about newspapers. Which made me think about personal ads. Which made me think about Book Bin Chris. Damn you train of thought.

I hesitantly grabbed my mail from the office and brought it up to my room, too scared to even look at it.

I gently closed the door behind me and glanced down at the top letter. Chris. Of course. I thudded my back against the firm oak door and closed my eyes. I considered not even opening it really. I started to wonder what *Ashley* would do, but dismissed the thought immediately. I needed to decide what *I* was going to do, and stop being so caught up in *Ashley*.

I opened the letter.

“*Ashley*- Sorry about last night. I didn't mean to bail, really... Anyways, I'm writing to tell you that I think you're beautiful and it's been great writing to you and all, but I really don't think this is going to work out. You just... you seem like every other girl I've ever dated, and at this point in my life, I'm really looking for someone different. Someone out of the box. I hope you understand, it's nothing personal. I would say I'll see you around the Book Bin sometime, but I actually hate coffee shops. It's been nice getting to know you. Chris.”

I sighed in disappointment, a microscopic twinge digging into my chest. I felt an indescribable amount of stupidity flowing through me, keeping me alive like oxygen. My body was thriving on stupidity.

“*Ashley*” had been a joke from the beginning. She was only a silly game that I couldn't resist partaking in. But in the end, she broke me down, took my independent, carefree personality and smashed it to smithereens like an antique vase under an iron hammer. My character and vitality was disseminated across the kitchen floor in tiny, infinitesimal pieces as I crouched down and attempted to scotch tape them back together. I sighed again.

Who had I been kidding? I was no peppy, cute, giggly, attention-loving, cheerleader cappuccino girl like “*Ashley*” had been. No, I was an entirely different breed. I was loud and outspoken, spunky and creative, carefree and perfectly content with who I was. And apparently I had needed nothing more all along.

