

2nd Place
High School Grades 9-10

Importance of Being Intact
By Emily Xiao

The café across the street where I spend my sultry summer days waiting tables sits in the margins of our grimy, forgotten town streets. In the shadows lurk shadows that, more often than not, do not know the concept of trust. Outside the thin walls, people of the town live their lives, and they live their lives as men and women and children and every type of dog known to man, but in here, only the fry cook changes every month while the previous one throws down his greasy apron into a boiling pot to chase some pretty girl north to New York City. These boys never return unless they happen to remember who waits for them at home, and few do. These girls never stop walking into the café with their dreams of escape.

In this town, everybody sees but nobody quite knows one another, and people come here, to this café, to steal little loving glimpses at others they see only during the daytime, and they warm their stomachs with food and minds with stories.

In this town, people rarely know your middle name or favorite color. They know the curve of your body and how your eyelashes fold when you blink, and they recognize the way you hold your cup as you drink from it. Once in a while, however, somebody comes along who has stories on their own lips to tell rather than in others' faces to seek.

Last night, I met a strange boy in the café whom I had never seen before, and this is the story he told me when I asked for his order.

"People call me Johnny, though my name is Frederick. Go ahead and call me Johnny. I don't mind—I find that as time passes, I cease to care either way. I was born in a place so small its name is thoroughly inconsequential. My last name is Sullivan of Sullivan Hats Company; my father makes hats for a living and my mother spends that living on better-quality hats to wear on her own worn out head. I think that's a hoot.

"As a result, we—my family—don't have much; we don't have much extra money to waste thanks to my mother's constant spending, we don't have much stuff thanks to the bank's friendly house calls, we don't have much company thanks to my family's lack of social aptitude, and we don't have much love because Father and Mother, as they tell me, made 'a lot of stupid careless mistakes no normal person would have made.'

"I will tell you this, however: Sullivan Hats Company wasn't always in such a bad state. Far from that. To tell you the truth, it was pretty hot in the old days when my grandfather first started it up. All the young people had to be caught with a brand new hat from Sullivan's if they wanted to get in anywhere, and even a secondhand one might do you a little good in picking up a girl. It was the depression and Nixon's campaign that did Sullivan Hats in. Couldn't have us hat it to him instead, huh?"

“What a life. What would you like to eat tonight, Johnny?” I asked once more. He only tilted his curly head downward to look at my clean white socks, barely visible beneath the hemline of my khaki trousers. Glancing down beneath the table, I saw that his own skinny ankles were bare and smooth beneath his scuffed and outdated black-and-white saddle shoes.

“Scrambled eggs are fine. How about that? Breakfast for dinner? It would be funny, wouldn’t it?” Johnny’s dark brown eyes crinkled into themselves like a dying flame as he smiled. He sat balanced on only a quarter of his seat, legs folded in the way a princess might fold her hands, and his head bore a gray newsboy cap.

“You’ll aggravate the chef, but all right. Did your father make that hat?”

“This one?” He gave his forehead a light touch with his left index finger, “No.”

“All right. That’s fine, I was just asking. I’ll go get your eggs.” I turned for the kitchen. In the background somebody had turned on the small television at the bar to some glitzy awards ceremony in the midst of the Hollywood lights and fur-trimmed coats.

“Hold on there a second,” Johnny said, clasping at the fabric of my shirt. “I told you the story of my life. Did you like it? I’d like to tell you why I told it to you. In fact, I will. This is going to be funny, I promise you, and it’ll blow your brains out of your ears. I promise you. Just stay a little longer and listen.

“Do you know what roly-polies are? I’m sure you do. Those little bugs that curl up into tight little bullets of balls when you touch them? The thing is, I was walking to my friend’s house this morning. Now, I say ‘friend’ here as a mere formality—he isn’t really a friend of mine, partly because his name is Mort. What kind of a name is that? So I was walking to his house because his sister—well, if you saw her, you’d understand, if you know what I mean. She’s kind of like that actress there right now, on the television. Look. What a beauty. And I was walking to Mort’s house, and here’s where the roly-polies come in—I saw one right there on the sidewalk. And this was weird, know why?”

He bore his eyes at me. Impatient, I offered, “I suppose because—”

“That’s right, because roly-polies are supposed to be in the soil, in the dark and damp and moist places. You knew this, right? Well, this wasn’t a normal roly-poly. It was an almost dead one, and I say almost dead because it was in half and still twitching and jumping all over that white sidewalk block. And I thought to myself, can you imagine? I mean, can you imagine that kind of luck, not can you imagine me thinking. But that’s how we’re all going to end up, alive and half-dead and in half and twitching, if we keep going on like this, even those people laughing their mascara off in Hollywood, California. So I figured I’d do something different for a change, take my godforsaken belligerent parents out to dinner for once with the spare change that happened to be in my pocket. Don’t ask me how I came by that change, because I don’t even know myself. It’s impossible to

come by any money in this part of the country. Anyway, I still had to head over to Mort's place first to see his sister.

"The thing is, though, Mort had his toes all in a tangled wad with his horrible socks because he had overheard some other neighborhood guys like Bill and Eckel talking about my messed up family life and how horribly my parents act in public. I can't blame him, honestly. You should have seen my mother last week at the bank. But he, of all people, didn't want to be seen letting me into his house. Can you imagine? So he said to me at the door, me out in the bright sunshine among his bright sunshine flowers, 'Johnny, I'm sorry, but I just can't associate myself with people of your type anymore. I'm sorry, but your family is, well, strange. And those who don't know about your family find out eventually.' And the most humiliating part was that his sister was right there, leaning her hip against the wall in the background looking unusually tender and nodding along with him. So I said to Mort, chuckling a little to lighten things up, 'Hey, Mort, I guess I'll just have to tell everyone I meet from now on about my family just to make sure they know, huh? Heh, heh.' So I suppose this explains part of why I told you about my life. Good explanation, yeah? And I suppose also because I invited my parents here, to this café, if that's all right with you. Because if I didn't, I'd end up like that roly-poly, writhing in half, if I'm not already." Johnny gave me a broad grin exposing his pink gums.

"Johnny, I'll go now and tell the chef you want scrambled eggs."

"Sure, I suppose that's probably best. Would you mind bringing me a glass of cranberry juice while I'm waiting? I hate the stuff, but it'll make my parents seem more bearable in comparison. I've learned to do this sort of stuff over the years."

"We don't have cranberry juice. Would coffee be all right?"

"Coffee? No, I love coffee, especially pure black coffee. It smells like heaven in hell. How about apple juice, do you have any of that?"

"Apple cider?"

"That'll have to work. Thanks. Come back soon, because I have more to tell. Oh, and can you change the channel? I'm not interested in watching any stupid Hollywood awards ceremony for how well you can make a beautiful woman cry onscreen."

"I'll just turn off the television, O.K.?"

"Oh well, not everyday's good for starting a revolution." Johnny shrugged a lazy one-armed shrug as he extended his legs straight out beneath the table.

I returned ten minutes later to find Johnny sitting straight in his chair with his legs tucked in beneath his seat. His gaze shifted slightly from his still, folded hands to the plate of scrambled eggs as I set it down on the table in front of him along with a three-quarters

full glass of golden apple cider, but he said nothing for a few seconds.

“Could it be that I’m already a roly-poly?” The words trickled in a soft brook from his lips. “What a mad world. Thank you for the eggs.”

I hesitated. “You’re welcome, but you know you can’t think like that. You—”

“What time is it?”

“Almost ten to seven.”

“My parents should be arriving soon. I should be happy, right?” The corner of his mouth turned up only slightly. “I guess I’ll just give you a wave when they arrive.”

Between six-fifty and seven-ten, the bell at the door of the café rung three times, each languidly announcing the arrivals of the fat mechanic from next door, tall Mrs. Mofferty who taught at the primary school, and a girl sent to the café by her mother to escort her drunken father home. None of the ensuing footprints belonged to Johnny’s parents.

By seven-thirty, they still had not arrived. Johnny stared at me from across the room as if to say, “Here I am, alive and half-dead and in half and twitching.”

The streetlamps finally flickered on outside, their orange glow outlining tiny rims of dirt left on the café windows by evaporated raindrops. In the glass’s reflection I saw Johnny counting his change on the table in front of him, sliding the coins around in smooth ellipses with his tapered, grasshopper-like fingers. Johnny still sat alone like this, limbs tied downward to the tile floor, four hours later when I finally took off my apron to head home. He only acknowledged me with a slight wave of his left hand and a tip of his newsboy cap.

He was gone the next morning. Nobody had bothered to wipe down the tables from last night, and I headed to where Johnny had sat to find a smattering of coins still arranged atop a clean napkin on the tabletop. Twenty-nine quarters, three dimes, seventeen nickels, and two cents. Johnny had touched neither his scrambled eggs nor his apple cider; he’d simply vanished into the black streets outside. His parents had never come.

Here we are, alive and half-dead and in half and twitching.

The bell pealed. A pretty girl walked in for breakfast.

