

# 2019 *Short Story Contest*





*The Future.  
Starts Now.*

Produced by Innisfil ideaLAB & Library  
December 2019



Seepe Walters was a well-respected and dedicated member of the Innisfil community until her death in 1995.

She was involved in many different facets of Innisfil life: the Historical Society, 4-H, the Women's Institute, her Church, her family and various political arenas.

It was her love of writing and all things literary which led her to journalism at the University of Toronto. She then worked as a freelance correspondent with the *Daily Construction News*, taught English to immigrant children, and worked with the Barrie Literacy Council, before helping to found the Innisfil Friends of the Library.

Seepe Walters' commitment to her community and specifically her legacy to the Library, which is now supported by two incredibly dynamic Friends of the Library groups, is being remembered through the Seepe Walter's Award.

The Innisfil IdeaLAB & Library would like to congratulate all the students who entered the 18th edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest.

The contributions of many have made this contest and this publication a reality. The Innisfil ideaLAB & Library would like to thank the Friends of the Library for their ongoing sponsorship; the Ferraro family for their years of involvement; the Innisfil Arts Culture and Heritage Council (IACHC) and South Simcoe Theatre for their partnership and support; Judge and Canadian children's author Joel Sutherland for his time and thoughtfulness in reading the entries; and finally, the efforts of all the wonderful young writers. Although there is only one name on the Seepe Walters Award, you are all winners for having the courage to pursue your writing dreams.

Many thanks to all those involved. And to everyone else, we hope you enjoy the stories submitted to the 2019 edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest.

Kathy Hammer  
Manager, Programming & Outreach  
Innisfil IdeaLAB & Library

#### **DISCLAIMER**

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# 2019 Seepe Walters Short Story Winner

A Hilarious Excursion

By: Elizaveta Slezkina (Gr.12)

*more* inside

Being the only human in a society of aliens sometimes really, really sucked.

She stuck out like a sore thumb, with her pale skin and flaming red hair, clad in a black travel cloak and a fur ushanka of the same color. As she walked out of the spaceport, hundreds of eyes bored holes into her. Conversations stopped as she walked by, and the crowd seemed to part like the red sea as she walked through.

It didn't help that Aequor was considerably taller than most of these aliens, and she inevitably ended up stepping on a few, starting a chorus of "Hey, watch it!" and "I'm right below you, you big honkin' clown!"

Well, of course, that wasn't what they were saying, as the Alchems—the name of these aliens—had their own language, a messy affair filled with clicking, hissing, and throat noises that her human vocal cords couldn't hope to replicate. Thankfully, the chip implanted into her brain allowed her to understand their language and project a robotic imitation of it through a speaker in her earring. This chip was made by the Alchems—they had always been brilliant in their technology.

As she hurried through the busy streets of Retort, capital city of the planet of Crucible, she couldn't help but look up and marvel at other, equally-sophisticated pieces of Alchem technology. There were fully sentient robots and androids, walking among the Alchems as equals; hyper-realistic holographic displays, showing the latest news from around the universe; drones, zipping through the buildings carrying various parcels; floating buildings, suspended by magnetic technology. Crucible was the planet of the future, and Retort was the city of dreams.

Her awestruck admiration for the tech rendered her temporarily deaf to the voice that was calling out from behind her.

"Lady Aequor! Lady Aequor, for the love of our Queen, *please!*"

She turned around to see a familiar face—Galmeen, a hydrogen who had been assigned to oversee her activities here on Crucible. He was a short, chubby little creature, with pale blue skin and a single, violet eye in the centre of his broad forehead. Alchems of his type were perhaps the most common, usually relegated to simple jobs akin to that of medieval peasantry. Hydrogens that served the Crown, like Galmeen, were very rare.

"Galmeen!" she said, cheerfully walking over to him. "Long time no see, old boy!"

With a single fluid motion, he grabbed her bags and tossed them into his strider, grunting. “The Grand Sulphur had me running up and down the spaceport lookin’ for you, my Lady.” He turned back to her, clapping his three-fingered hands together. “Wasn’t until that god-forsaken nitrogen porter told me you left that I came out here. You move quick, Lady Aphros.”

Aequor nodded her head, like a scolded child. Though she was technically above him in terms of the Alchems’ rigid caste system, she couldn’t help but feel guilty for wandering off and making his already hard job even more difficult. “Look, I’m really sorry—“

Galmeen waved his hand, dismissing her apology. “Don’t worry about it, just get in the strider before the Grand Sulphur comes marchin’ down from the palace and throws us both into the mines.”

He gave her a lopsided smile, revealing his pointy teeth, before hopping into the front seat of the strider. Taking care not to hit her head on the invisible techniglass door, Aequor also got in, letting out a sigh of relief.

As the tread-like wheels of the strider began moving, Aequor started to feel considerably better than she had when she arrived, surrounded by thousands of eyes ogling at her for being a human. Maybe she was cut out for this gig, after all. As Galmeen reached for the control panel above himself to turn on the music, he asked, “So what are ya here for, anyway?”

Her momentary sense of ease faded as quickly as it began. “I’ve been summoned here,” she began. “By your Queen. Her Sagacity, Queen Philosophorium.”

Galmeen let out a surprised grunt. “Generally, that ain’t a good thing, you know that, right?”

*Thanks*, thought Aequor bitterly. *Just what I needed. More reassurance that I’m going to leave Crucible in a body bag.* If he was trying to intimidate her, whether of his own volition or as a part of his instructions, it was certainly working.

Galmeen continued, pretending not to notice her glaring at him through the mirror. “Now, my Lady, I understand that you represent the human race on the Imperial Council, and that your planet—Earth, is it?—got a whole boatload of problems at the moment. Now, that don’t mean you’re in *trouble*, necessarily, our Queen’s a reasonable dame. I’m sure she’s just trying to help y’all out, you know?”

Aequor sighed wistfully. “I hope.”

The rest of the ride to the palace passed with an uneasy silence, save for Aequor’s gasp when the actual palace came into view. It was a grand, imposing structure, carved into a mountain with three massive spires erected on top. The various



other building were draped in red banners, all bearing the insignia of the Queen—a circle, within a square, within a triangle, within another circle.

As the strider pulled into the courtyard of the palace, Galmeen spoke again, this time in a hushed voice.

“Alright, my Lady, please don’t go makin’ any sudden moves out here, alright? There are sentry drones patrolling all over the place, and the Queen’s Guard consists of chlorines and florines. I don’t know how much you know about our caste system, but the general consensus is that halogens are just a little screw-loose, y’know what I mean? Be careful.”

Nodding in thanks (and in relief that the strider ride was finally over), Aequor stepped out, clutching her bags tightly. The air at this altitude was strained, and she soon found herself out of breath, putting the bags down with a dull thunk. *What joy*, she thought, putting her hands on her knees in effort to recover some oxygen. *I’m already making myself look like a weakling.*

“You need not do that, Lady Aphros,” came a gruff voice from ahead. She looked up to see three individuals approaching her, hovering a few centimetres off the ground. From imperial broadcasts, council meetings, and the news, she easily recognized them. These were the Grand Ministers, the Queen’s right-hand men. All three had a faint glow around their bodies, giving away that they were using psionics.

That was another thing about these Alchems. Some of them could bend reality with their minds.

“Welcome, Lady Aphros. I am Hydrargyrum, also known as the Grand Mercury,” said the one in the middle, a petite silvery-white Alchem with a soft, high-pitched voice. “On behalf of her Sagacity, I welcome you to the White Palace.” With a wave of one delicate hand, she called over two android servants and motioned to Aequor’s bags, which they took without a word. The Grand Salt—identified by the alchemical symbol embroidered in pink on their chest—floated down to Aequor herself.

“I received reports that your departure from earth was met with some...opposition, shall we say?”

“Opposition is an understatement,” chuckled Aequor. “People were jumping on my ship, trying to rip holes in it. All of them were chanting ‘traitor’, over and over again.”

The Grand Salt closed all seven of their eyes, contemplating. “I’m very sorry to hear that. I know the human race has had trouble assimilating into the empire, which is typical for new races.” Opening their eyes, they put a cotton-candy-pink hand on her shoulder, smiling widely. “Don’t worry. They will come to accept it in time.”



Aequor politely but firmly shook their hand off.

The Grand Ministers lead—no, herded—her through the perfectly clean halls of the palace. Servants milled about, refusing to make eye contact with any of them. They spoke in hushed tones, as if afraid that the intricate painting of officials past that lined the walls would jump out and scold them for speaking.

At last, the throne room. It was surprisingly simple, just a circular room. However, the ceiling was made from stained glass, throwing intricate, multi-coloured lights throughout the room. The throne itself stood in the centre, a sturdy wooden giant that appeared to be carved from a pair of tree trunks ripping through the floor.

Aequor turned to the last of the Ministers, the Grand Sulphur. “Excuse me, your Brilliance?”

The red-colored Alchem gave a hiss in response. Somehow, it was the most genuine thing that any of the Ministers had done up to that point.

“This throne is really big,” continued Aequor. “Unusually big for your race.”

“So? The Queen isn’t a midget.”

“Okay, then how big *is* she?”

He just rolled his eyes at her. “Wait and see, you impatient wriggler.”

No one had ever actually seen the Queen. She never appeared in broadcasts, and she never made public appearances of any kind. She was an enigma to her own people, and that was partially why people were so scared to disobey her. How could you stand against an enemy that you knew next to nothing about?

Suddenly, a pen came flying out of seemingly nowhere, smacking the Grand Sulphur in the foot. He blinked, looking down, then up at the person who threw it.

“How many times must I tell you, Brimstone, not to be rude?”

Aequor looked up too, and let out a little scream.

Queen Philosophorium was a literal giant, her multitude of wriggling, hair-like antennae brushing against the high ceiling of the room. With three pairs of arms, eight flashing, terrible eyes, and skin so white that it was painful to look at, she seemed to fill up the space around her like some sort of eldritch monster, a god amongst mortals. The Queen let out a booming laugh that reverberated throughout the room, making the floor beneath Aequor vibrate.

“Come now, Lady Aphros, no need to look so shocked,” said the Queen, plopping

down onto her throne with a dull thunk. “I promise, I don’t bite.”

Before Aequor opened her mouth, the Grand Sulphur began waving the pen around with anger.

“Your Sagacity! How many times do I have to tell you not to use me as your target practice? I have *dents* in my skull at this point!”

“I only threw it because you were being rude to our guest. She came here all the way from Earth. *Earth!* Have you got any clue how far away that is? You have no right to be giving her lip like that. Come on, Brimstone, have some decency.”

The red-colored Alchem sputtered a little in protest, but shut up with a childlike pout. Aequor stepped out from behind the Grand Salt, and cautiously looked up at the giantess before her. In the piercing gaze of those eight eyes, she felt like a bug under a microscope, but it was like there was some foreign force propelling her to walk right before the alien queen, and look her right in the face.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, your Sagacity,” she said, bowing respectfully. Somehow her voice turned out sounding a lot stronger than she felt on the inside.

“Oh, it’s dandy to meet you too, Lady Aphros! I’ve actually been waiting quite a while for you to show up.” The Queen moved to sit crosslegged on her throne, leaning down slightly to stare at the tiny human before her.

Aequor, however terrified, refused to break eye contact with the Queen. She would win this. She would prove that she wasn’t going to fold. “May I ask why? I was given absolutely no information. None.”

The Queen pinched her brow with two fingers, and sighed. “Well, to make a long story short, some clowns tried to attack me, and since they’re all humans, I thought it would be best to bring you in to deal with them.”

*Hold on half a second, an attack?*

Aequor struggled to think who would be stupid enough to try something like throwing hands with an alien queen who was well-known for being able to singlehandedly destroy entire planets. They were either stupid or just had a death wish the size of a black hole.

“I...wow. That’s unexpected.”

“Mhm. And it was during a roque game, too! I was *winning*, and then these scrawny-looking hooligans burst through my hedges, nearly trample poor Hydrargyrum, and start shooting away at me! Like, come *on*, dude, do you really have to be that violent?”

The Queen threw up her hands in frustration. Aequor almost sympathized with her. Almost.

“Well, what should I do about it, your Sagacity?”

“Just...just talk to them. Please. I don’t wanna be a violent queen, and Lord help me I will slap these children if I try talking to them again.”

Aequor sighed. She hated playing the role of a mediator, but that kind of came as a part of the job of being an ambassador. As the Grand Mercury disappeared to get the prisoners, she took off her hat for the first time since landing, shaking her red hair free.

“Oooh. That’s pretty. Really pretty. I didn’t know humans could have hair like that,” said the Queen.

“Well, it’s rare, but it happens,” laughed Aequor. “I guess you can call me a special snowflake.”

The Grand Mercury came back, with three hooded figures in tow. Her hands had melted and formed into chains, linking the three together. She roughly shoved them into a kneeling position before Aequor, nodding silently at her.

Aequor took off the hoods, and swore loudly.

The three hoodlums were her own brothers.

“Tony, Eric, and Lunchbag, you have a *lot* of explaining to do,” she yelled. Her hands were practically shaking with rage as she threw down the hoods.

“My name’s Lucas, not Lunchbag,” protested her youngest brother.

“Yeah, well with the amount of crap *you’re* in, you’re about to smell like one. Mind telling me why in God’s name did you try to attack the Queen?”

“It was all Tony’s idea!” piped up Eric. “You’re always off working, so we decided that we’d get arrested for something serious so you’d come-”

He was abruptly cut off by Tony’s fist colliding with his jawbone. “Pipe down, you snitch!”

“Tony, that’s mean. You’re mean. You stink.”

“Oh, shut up, Lunchbag, this was all because you started whining!”

The Grand Ministers were shaking, struggling to hold back their laughter. The

Queen herself was giggling like a schoolgirl. None of them had ever seen human family dynamics in action, so it was as equally educational as it was stupidly hilarious.

Aequor was anything but mirthful "All of you could have gotten sent to the *mines*, you hear me? The mines! At this point, I'd be glad if the Queen does send you to the mines, because at least the world won't have to deal with you three clowning yourselves on a daily basis!"

"Oh, naw," giggled the queen. "These lads were just trying to see their sister. They get a pass from me, but only this once. Next time, I'll send them straight to clown college."

Aequor turned to the Queen, bowing on her hands and knees. "Your Sagacity, I am so sorry, I-"

"I'm telling you, it's fine! This is the funniest stuff I've seen in over three centuries. I'm not a violent queen, and I won't blame these lads for trying to see their sister."

The Grand Mercury reformed the chains back into her hands, and Aequor quickly snatched up her brothers, angry at their stupidity but happy for their safe return.

She wasn't leaving Crucible in a body bag, but she was most certainly leaving with wet pants.

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

Wings

By: Hannah Wang (Grade 6)

*more* inside

“GET UP ALREADY!!!”

Another day waking up to Madame Pages yelling. All the other orphans climb out of bed, I climb out very slowly, I'm so not looking forward to another day of cleaning, and working.

“Melody! Can you help me tie up my dress?” asked Ellie, my best friend.

I walk over and tie the rough, and scratchy laces of the dark grey dress.

“Thanks,” Ellie sighs, “I sure hope we don't have to clean the washroom today, that's my least favourite chore...”

“Me too,” I reply, “I'd rather cut the grass than clean the washroom.”

I take out my scratchy grey dress and put it on.

“WHAT'S TAKING YOU SO LONG?!” Madame Pages screams, “STOP CHATTING YOU HAVE CHORES TO DO!”

I quickly walked out of the room, and into the cafeteria.

“Eat quickly! You have chores, and lessons in 5 minutes!” said Miss Elliot, she winks at me, she's one of the only nice keepers of this orphanage.

I poke at the hard bread.

“Are you not hungry Melody?” Laura asks, I lie.

“No, I'm not, you can have mine if you want”

“Thanks!” Laura munches on the rock-hard bread.

I silently leave the cafeteria, I go to the girl's room to get my school bag. That's when I bump into Mackenzie, Madame Pages daughter.

“Watch where you're going, dummy!” Mackenzie snaps.

“Sorry...” I apologize quietly, I walk away as fast as I could.

I look at the silver wing-shaped locket on my neck, it's the only thing my parents left me. Inside, is a picture. A picture of a beautiful bluebird, sitting on a snowy branch. It's feathers, all so nice. Sometimes I wish I was a bird, so I can fly free, away from this horrible place. A tear runs down my cheek, *no one wants to adopt 12-year old's*, I think to myself. They all want babies. I wipe the tears away, *no time to feel sorry for yourself, Melody*. I rush down the long corridor and into the classroom.

"Today, we are going to be practicing fractions." Madame Pages says as she hands out booklet to each student, "do Pages 14-36."

I work on fractions, math has always been easy for me. I finish in about 10 minutes. After about an hour, all of us line up, and we are assigned chores.

"Melody, Natalie, and Laura, you sweep the cafeteria." Madame Pages said, Natalie, Laura, and I hurried to the cafeteria.

We all took a broom and swept the floor.

"At least it's not as bad as cleaning the washroom," Natalie whispered, brushing her long dark braids over her shoulder.

We finish the chores, do some more studying, and after an exhausting day, we finally go to bed. I grabbed a flashlight, and look at the picture in my locket under the covers. *I wonder what it means... why is it a bird???* Suddenly, I hear footsteps. I quickly shut the light off, and I reach for my drawer, but then I dropped the flashlight. *No this can't be happening! Hopefully, she didn't hear the sound!!!*

"Who was that?!" Madame Pages yelled. She storms into the girl's room. "Ah, little Melody, what are you doing in THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT?!?"

She snatches my picture and looks at it.

"What a pretty little bird..." She rips it.

"NOOO!" I sob, "that's the only thing my parents left me!"

"Well, that's what you deserve!" Madame Pages yells, "now go to sleep you filthy animal."

I cry in my bed, *why is she so cruel?* After a long time of thinking, I decide to run, run away from this horrible place. I grab my locket and my bag. I sneak into the kitchen and grab some bread. I run, run down a long corridor, that's when I bump into Madame Pages. She grabs me by the arm,

"Trying to escape aren't you?" she laughs, she pulls me down a long stairwell, and into a dark room, with a closet.

“Stop!”

I try to run, but she pulls me back and locks the door.

“No!” I scream I’m so scared, no windows, no nothing. *What do I do now?* I sob I’m so mad I throw my locket at the closet. *Why does my life have to be like this?!* I go over and grab my locket, the closet door opens. Inside was the picture from the locket. *What-how- but she ripped it!* I touch the picture, suddenly, the bird pops out of the picture, and flies onto my chest I fall, and all I see is a ray of blue light.

“Ahh!” I scream as I wake up, but I’m not on the floor, I’m in the air, with nothing holding me, I look behind me, to see a pair of beautiful blue wings, just like the one in the picture! I look in the closet again, but it’s not a closet anymore, it’s a door, leading to freedom!

I walk through the long corridor in the closet, until I reach the end, a ray of sunlight hits me, I fly out.

“Is this really happening?!” I gasp, I’m flying above the clouds, it’s the prettiest view. “I can’t believe this is really happening!”

I feel the cool breeze in my lungs, as I fly around the clouds, and zoom through the trees until I’m all tired out, I sit on a branch and relax.

*No more Madame Pages, No more work, Freedom, at last!*



## Junior Division Grades 3-6

Where's My Handkerchief  
By: Laura Forgrave (Grade 6)

*more* inside

Long, long, ago, during the rule of the Roman Empire, there lived a very beautiful princess. She was also very forgetful. In fact, the princess was now 16, and there had not been a day in her entire life that she had *not* forgotten something. The thing the princess, Maya, lost the most was her handkerchief. The handkerchief was made of the same colour thread as the castle walls, so it was very easy to lose. She lost it at least twice a day! Because her father was the Roman Emperor, and she had the power to do so, she decided to halt the entire empire every time she lost her handkerchief. Everyone, even the people who lived five days away, had to stop what they were doing and look for the handkerchief. Now, by the time the people who lived five days away got the news, someone had usually already found the handkerchief - but the people wouldn't know that for another few days! Because of all the halts, travelling in Rome was difficult, and the economy was not doing well. It was very hard to do business when you had to stop every few hours to look for the princess' handkerchief. Rome had a very big problem to deal with, and only one person - all the way over in Persia - had a solution.

The emperor was very worried. His daughter would soon be the empress, yet she was so forgetful! How would she remember to do all of her duties? The emperor sent a messenger to all four corners of his kingdom, asking for ways to make Maya less forgetful. If someone had a solution, they would get to marry her.

One day, Maya was relaxing outside when a gentleman came along hoping to make the princess less forgetful. "Hello," said Maya, "Are you here to make me less forgetful?"

"Yes. I am going to be with you constantly for the next week, giving you repeated reminders about your handkerchief. I hope that after a while, you will be able to remember to take your handkerchief with you wherever you go, and will be ready to become a proper and respected empress," the gentleman Marcus replied with a bow.

For the next week, he followed Maya around, pestering her. She had just scooped a spoonful of oatmeal into her mouth when a head popped up from under the table and Marcus said, "Good morning, Maya - do you have your handkerchief with you?" Moments later, when she rose for her morning walk, he was standing by the doorway.

"Do you have your handkerchief, Maya?" Marcus asked, holding up the grey piece of fabric.

At the end of the week, Marcus' constant reminders were driving Maya crazy, and her memory had not improved. As soon as Marcus left her alone for a moment to use

the bathroom, she would forget her handkerchief, and Rome would come to a halt. So, Marcus was thanked for his time, and then he left.

One week later, a young farmer named Drew came along, and was sent to the princess' sitting room. He had dirt under his fingernails and wore patched up clothing. He could use some more money, that was for sure. He and Maya had a short chat. He suggested that most of her belongings be given to him for a short while, so she would have fewer items to forget. Maya immediately agreed, and the maids got to work, under the supervision of Drew. A few hours later, Maya had nothing left in her room but her bed, two pairs of clothes, a nightgown and a book. Drew was very happy with all of his new items. Maya, however, was devastated, and convinced him to let her have her handkerchief instead of her book. Maya had a really bad cold, and needed the piece of embroidered cloth. Of course, she then continued forgetting her handkerchief, so getting rid of those items didn't really make a difference.

When a servant went and asked for the items back, Drew refused, and ran away. He was soon found spending a large amount of gold coins in a nearby marketplace, and he was put in the castle dungeon. When his house was searched, they realized he had sold all the items and was spending all the money he had earned. This put him in the dungeon for an even longer period of time.

Just as the Emperor was about to give up hope, a wise man from Persia came along. He barely said a word as he walked in, bowed to the princess, and explained his idea. The man, Farzan, brought some fine cloths out of his satchel. Smooth blue fabric with gold thread was gingerly wrapped around Maya's waist. A quick cut was made, and then Farzan started sewing faster than any of the castle's seamstresses. In just a few minutes, he was done. He held up a wide sash with a small bag attached to it. He explained that where he came from, it was called a pocket. Maya could tie it around her waist, and put her handkerchief inside. Maya quickly put it on. Not only did she look beautiful, but it worked! Whenever she went somewhere, she would put what she needed inside her new pocket, and if she took something out of the pocket, she would put it back in as soon as she was done.

Maya never forgot anything again and grew up to be a great empress. When people did not have to halt every few hours to look for the princess' handkerchief, it was amazing how quickly people could travel across the empire, and the economy thrived. She and Farzan married, and everyone lived happily ever after.

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

Postman Billy and the Four Cats  
By: Emily James (Grade 4)

*more inside*

There once was an old lady named Brenda. She lived by herself with four cats. Their names were Spotty who was spotted, Chubby who ate everything, Blackie who was black, and Harry who had no hair at all.

Each morning, the cats would help Brenda get ready. Spotty would make a spot of tea, Chubby would butter a muffin, Blackie would sweep the floor from all of Chubby's crumbs, and Harry would brush Brenda's hair.

One day Postman Billy came to deliver the mail. He knocked once, but nothing happened. He knocked twice, but still nothing happened. So he shrugged and peaked through the mail slot in the door.

He saw Spotty pouring milk into a teacup. He saw Chubby eating half of a muffin. He saw Blackie emptying the dustpan. He saw Harry putting a hat on Brenda's head. Postman Billy couldn't believe it. He thought he was dreaming. So he closed his eyes, hopped up and down, spun around three times and pinched himself to make sure he was awake. When he opened his eyes Spotty was licking himself, Chubby was coughing up a hair ball, Blackie was drinking milk out of a dish on the floor, and Harry was curled up on Brenda's lap.

The next day when Postman Billy came to the house he knocked once, but nothing happened. He knocked twice but still nothing happened. He knocked three times but again nothing happened. So he looked through the window.

He saw Spotty putting sugar cubes in a teacup. He saw Chubby getting butter out of the fridge. He saw Blackie dusting a picture frame. He saw Harry putting a scarf around Brenda's neck.

Postman Billy couldn't believe it. His eyes must be playing tricks on him. He ran to the doctor's office to get some glasses.

The next day when Postman Billy came to the house he knocked once, twice, three times, four times but no one answered. So he crouched down and looked under the door.

He saw Spotty carrying a teacup. He saw Chubby eating butter with a fork. He saw Blackie vacuuming. He saw Harry putting lipstick on Brenda.

Postman Billy couldn't believe it. He was going crazy. He ran to the pillow on the porch and screamed into it. Then he ran back to the doctor.

The next day when Postman Billy came to the door he knocked once and the door opened. Postman Billy walked inside.

Spotty walked over and took his hand. Chubby reached up and hung his hat on a hook. Blackie untied one of his shoes and Harry did the other. Postman Billy was so shocked that he started to run when Brenda called out, "Wait! Please stay!" Postman Billy turned around.

He asked, "Do you see what I see? The cats are making tea, and buttering muffins and sweeping crumbs and fixing your hair! Brenda your cats are crazy!"

"Yes," Brenda said. "I taught them everything they know."

Postman Billy sat down on a chair. Meanwhile, Spotty poured some tea into a teacup, Chubby put the sugar in, Blackie put the milk in and Harry pushed a footstool up to Postman Billy's feet.

"Won't you stay for dinner?" asked Brenda. "It would be nice to have some company. My cats can do everything but talk!"

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

The Man in the Ring

By: Sanoja Srikanthan (Grade 6)

*more inside*

I can't believe it. My own mother is gone. And she isn't coming back. And now we have to move to Dad's house. I'm not happy about that. Neither is Eddie. Dad, well, he's known as the guy who destroyed our family. He's the reason our parents divorced in the first place. And now we have to live with him. *GREAT. JUST GREAT.*

A while later our bus stops around three buildings. There's a sign in front of them that reads: **LAWR NCE APA TME TS**. I assume that it's supposed to be Lawrence Apartments. I read a bit about them before we left, just to know where we were living. Apparently they were built around the time after World War II. Most would say that living there would be creepy, but I think not. There are rumors that the souls of veterans still roam the halls, and sometimes they possess objects, and even murder people, too. But if I were you, I wouldn't believe in these rumors. Ghosts aren't real. *Right?*

I call Dad to ask him his building details. He doesn't even pick up. I continue calling, but he still doesn't pick up! Impatiently, I grab Eddie and drag him to the nearest apartment building and sprint over to a man who seems to work at this particular building.

"How can I help you miss?" the man asks.

"I am looking for a man by the name of Albert Fraser, my dad. Does he live in this building sir? Is there a way you can check who lives here?" I reply. I only asked this because I know nothing about apartments. The man nods and walks into the apartment building. We wait a bit and soon enough the man spurts out. But he looks as if he just witnessed a murder. *Odd.* He notices us, gives a warm smile, and walks over to us calmly. But the thing he says next as he comes towards us sends chills down my spine:

"How can I help you miss?"

I gulp.

After giving up, we explore every single building and consult with their residents, then eventually find Dad's apartment. He's in the 3rd Building, Floor 7, Apartment 705. Eddie knocks on the door. He's not answered.

"No one's answering, Harley."

I turn the door knob, and unsurprisingly, the door opens. We enter the room to find a black onyx ring on the floor. Dad is nowhere to be seen.

\* \* \*

Dad is still missing.

Everyone at my new school hates me.

And Eddie... well, I'm not sure what's with him.

As for me, well, I don't know what's going to happen next. You must be wondering how all these horrible things are happening. I confidently tell you that this has something to do with the ring. Yes, *the* ring.

It all started after I finished unpacking my belongings. I went to check on Eddie to make sure he was all right. I found him staring off into space on his bed, so I clapped my hands, bringing him back into reality. Since we definitely both needed to get out of the apartment, Eddie suggested we meet the neighbours, because we might as well find out who the ring belonged to. I agreed, and we left the apartment and went to the next one with the ring: Apartment 703.

I knocked on the door and an elderly lady opened it. She immediately introduced herself as Mrs. Henderson and invited us in for some milk and cookies. Eddie and I looked at each other, smiled, nodded, and joyfully stepped inside.

I asked Mrs. Henderson if the ring belonged to her, and even though it was hers, she insisted on us keeping it. We agreed, because the reek of her apartment was disgusting, and we wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

Ever since I wore it bad things have been happening, but I never thought it would get as bad as it is now.

\* \* \*

I wake up to a terrifying nightmare, screaming. I was walking through the apartment at night, and notice that the ring was no longer on my finger anymore. Then, all of a sudden, I see it, destroyed on the floor. That's when a shadowy figure slithered out of the broken onyx, then vertically hovering in front of me. I trembled, along with a frigid chill that ran down my spine. The shadow eventually formed into an almost life-like portrait of an old man, appearing to be about as old as Mrs. Henderson. The ghostly man then smiled a petrifying smile and said in a deep voice:

"Hello, Harley." And then he jumpscares me. The dream ended there. Just as it ended, thoughts raced through my head. *IS THIS REAL? FAKE? DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH WHAT I READ? WILL THIS HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE?*

As soon as I calm down, I almost instantaneously check my hand. The ring is missing. *OH NO.*

Just as I think that, there is a loud knocking coming from the door. Now? It's only 4:09. AM. Out of curiosity, I walk over to the door, but it doesn't feel very much like curiosity, but as if something, or *someone* is pulling me towards it. I look through the peephole to find Mrs. Henderson crying hysterically! I open the door, and there she is, but she isn't crying, she is devilishly smirking at me. She's holding a baseball bat I didn't see through the peepho-

\* \* \*

I wake up, I think about an hour or so later in what seems to be a basement. Mrs. Henderson is in front of me. Her eyes are pitch black. I try to pinch myself, ensuring whether or not this is another dream. But only I can't. I gasp, then look down. I'm tied up in a chair.

WAIT, WHAT?

Mrs. Henderson is smirking again, this time, even more disturbingly. The ring is in her hand.

WHAT IS SHE GOING TO DO?!

I squirm around, trying to break free. Then, she drops the ring, knowingly. It shatters onto the cement floor, crumbling into millions of pieces. Mrs. Henderson laughs.

If there was one thing I knew for sure at this point is that it's too late.

"Hello, Harley."



## Junior Division Grades 3-6

### Run Away Turkey

By: Lucas McKay & Gianluca Chisholm  
(Grade 5)

*more* inside

"Alright boys, it's Thanksgiving next week so it's turkey slaughtering time!" said Farmer Jenkins.

Farmer Jenkins' three boys ran downstairs with their boots laced up and their jackets zipped. They all ran out the door straight through the barn, passed the chicken pen and the horse stables and ended up right at the turkey pen. They stared at all the turkeys just knowing that they will soon be in someone's belly. Farmer Jenkins ran up behind the three boys.

"Which one should we eat for Thanksgiving?" asked Farmer Jenkins.

"The fat one on the left," said one of the boys.

"NO, the one in the middle," said another.

"What about the one on the right?" said the third.

"If you boys can't decide then I will," said Farmer Jenkins. "I choose the fat one right there."

Farmer Jenkins pointed at a fat turkey that he thought was just a regular turkey but this turkey was a very clever turkey. In fact this turkey was the smartest animal at Farmer Jenkins' whole farm. The turkey's name was Gobbles Cluckington. Farmer Jenkins reached down to try to pick up Gobbles but Gobbles ducked down out of Farmer Jenkins reach and ran behind the bucket of slop they used to fatten up the turkeys.

"I'll get him Daddy," said one of the boys.

The boy jumped over the turkey pen fence and started to look for Gobbles he saw Gobbles hiding in a tight spot between the crack in the barn and the slop bucket.

"I found him daddy, I found him!" said the little boy excited.

But Gobbles squeezed through the crack in the barn, and was right in between the cow pen and stacks of hay. He looked for a place to hide, he thought that in the hay barrels would be too obvious and behind the milk jugs were very noticeable. But Gobbles took too long. Before he can think of a plan Farmer Jenkins and his three boys surrounded him.

"We got you know you dumb turkey!" said Farmer Jenkins.

Farmer Jenkins ran at Gobbles, Gobbles panicked and before he knew it he was in Farmer Jenkins arms. Farmer Jenkins ran as fast as he could back to his house. But poor old Farmer Jenkins tripped on the rake he used to get rid of the leaves that were all over the barn. He face planted into the giant pile of leaves, Gobbles knew this was his chance to run away. Gobbles began to run away passed the barn where he was cut off by the three boys who were determined to eat Gobbles for Thanksgiving.

"Get him boys you got this," said Farmer Jenkins from the big pile of leaves.

The three boys stared at Gobbles, Gobbles stared at the three boys. It was as quiet as a mouse. You can hear the wind blow against the barn. One boy gulped, another boy cracked his knuckles and the third stretched his thighs. They waited to see who was going to make the first move, then Gobbles tried to run past one of the boys.

"GET HIM!" screamed Farmer Jenkins.

One boy stopped Gobbles in his tracks, but Gobbles changed directions and turned into the second boy. The second boy tried to pick up Gobbles but Gobbles went through the second boy's legs and ended up at the third boy. He tried to tackle Gobbles but he moved out of the way just in time and plucked him in the forehead. He began to run toward the forest but there stood the first boy again in front of Gobbles, who made Gobbles back up into Farmer Jenkins trap.

"Ha ha ha got you, who's the dumb one now!" said Farmer Jenkins.

Gobbles was trapped in a cardboard box on the kitchen table with little breathing holes so he wouldn't suffocate even though Farmer Jenkins is the cruel type of person to let it suffocate in the box. Anyway Gobbles was stuck in a tough position and there was no way to get out but if there's anyone to never give up its Gobbles. Gobbles looked around at his surroundings trying to think of a plan. Then a plan hit him, he opened his mouth and started plucking, and clucking the little breathing holes trying to make it big enough to fit through it. He knew his time was shorting every second and soon Farmer Jenkins was gonna get ready to slaughter Gobbles.

"Daddy, we're gonna do some apple picking and maybe play some soccer" said the three boys.

"Okay, just be back quarter to eight while I slaughter the turkey," replied Farmer Jenkins.

Gobbles was terrified, he only had a couple of hours left to pluck his way out of Thanksgiving dinner. The breathing hole Gobbles was plucking on got bigger, but with time shortening Gobbles realized that this plan was taking way too long so he tried thinking of a plan B that would be quicker. He thought that maybe he had a chance to knock the cardboard box of the kitchen table and attempt to land on the side of the box and have a clear path to escape the house. But Gobbles thought that when he hit the

ground it would make a loud thud and Farmer Jenkins would hear him and catch him in his tracks. But then all of a sudden out of the blue Miss Jenkins turn on the vacuum and started cleaning the house. Gobbles realized this is his opportunity to nudge the box off the table. Gobbles started to nudge the box off the table, over and over and over again until... THUD! Gobbles landed on the side of the box and made a bolt for the door. He ran out the door and started running toward the forest, Gobbles was finally free from Farmer Jenkins and his three little spoiled brats, but then.

An eagle swooped down and gobbled down Gobbles.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Perspective

By: Riley Ma (Grade 8)

*more inside*

How insignificant that perspective seems. And yet, it determines your every thought, every move, every word.

The leftover light from the sunset spilled through the window. A thin, young woman sat by a chipped, wooden table, eating a burger wrapped in cheap fast-food packaging. She was wearing a black, fast-food employee uniform. The name *Chelsea* was engraved on a metal name tag pinned onto her shirt. A young toddler girl sat in a chair next to the woman, picking up Cheerios from a small plastic container with her stubby fingers and clumsily placing them into her mouth. The apartment they sat in was in dreadful condition. The once bright wallpaper had faded to a disheartening vomit-green and was beginning to peel off. The rooms smelled musty and unclean. All of the furniture was dilapidated, either chipped, dented, or cracked. Chelsea, who had now finished her dinner, picked up her laptop, one of the only valuable things she possessed, and sat on the creaking sofa in their living room. She opened her laptop and began searching through her inbox. Nothing new. "How am I going to pay the bills?", she sighed to herself.

*Knock knock knock.*

Wondering who it could be, Chelsea set her laptop aside and walked to the door, trying to adjust her appearance. She swept her long red hair out of her eyes and smoothed her crumpled blouse. She opened the door. *Creak.*

"Hello? How can I help you?" Chelsea asked tentatively.

An elderly lady stood in front of her, around 70. She looked a little odd, with a strand of her white hair dyed a bright bubblegum pink, a necklace around her that looked far too heavy for her thin neck, clothing that had seemed to come from a large array of fashion periods, and bright red sneakers. She smiled at Chelsea, with the warmth and compassion of an old friend.

The elderly lady's bright blue eyes fell on the toddler, who had wandered over from the kitchen to the door and was curious to see who had come.

"Why, what an adorable child! What is her name?" gushed the lady, who had now let herself into the old rental room. She ran her wrinkled fingers gently through the girl's light ginger hair. The toddler giggled. Chelsea was rather taken aback at this strange visitor's behavior.

"Her name is Aurora. May I ask who you are?" Chelsea asked, confused. The lady didn't answer. She walked further into the room and picked up a stack of medical bills and papers off the chipped dinner table. "Ma'am? What are you doing?"

"Who are these papers about?" the lady asked curiously.

Chelsea had now concluded that this lady, whoever she was, was probably crazy or just didn't have a clue about basic manners. She stepped towards the stranger, who was now reading through the papers, and spoke louder.

"Uhm, ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. If you don't have an explanation, I'll be forced to call the cops, and I don't want to do that." The lady looked at Chelsea, with pity in her eyes.

Chelsea was very surprised that the lady still hadn't left. Keeping her voice steady, Chelsea asked for the lady to go again. Instead, the lady reached for an old wooden picture frame a small rickety table with her wrinkled hands, examining it curiously.

In the frame was a faded photograph of a man and woman next to each other, maybe in their 40s, with a young teen girl in between. The man and woman's faces hung sweet laughs and joy, and the girl was sticking her tongue out and had crossed her eyes. Bittersweet memories of her childhood played through Chelsea's mind. They were happy then. Healthy. Able to pay the bills, and afford little treats from time to time. On Chelsea's 14th birthday, they took a family trip to Niagara Falls all the way up in Canada, where they had taken that photo. Chelsea could recall the exact flavour of a huge ice cream sundae her father had bought for her. The laughter from her mother and father when Chelsea had gotten ice cream all over her face. Her mother helping her wash it off. They had all been together and well. These thoughts made tears build up in Chelsea's eyes. The lady noticed, as she walked over and laid a hand on Chelsea's shoulder.

"Talk to me. I can help you, dear", the lady offered gently.

Chelsea turned to the lady, annoyance building up inside her.

"What do you want?" Her voice broke. "To hear the tale of my now hospital-confined father who can't afford his heart transplant for his disease?" "Who's stuck in a hospital bed because his health is deteriorating so quickly?" Her father, who was once so bright, dimmed by the loss of his wife. His body couldn't handle the darkness he felt. The grief that he allowed to swallow him. Tears burst from Chelsea's hazel eyes, and she got shriller as she let more of her bottled-up story out. "Because there you go! What else do you want to know? How I can barely afford rent and struggle to feed my daughter?" Chelsea, although she didn't realize it, was shouting. "Maybe about my stupid, broken car and stupid, broken apartment? Oh, maybe how my job at the local McDonald's is going?"

Chelsea's voice was drowned in her frustrated sobs, and the lady went over to comfort her. Maybe it was because she'd been alone for so long, but Chelsea didn't object as the lady led her to the couch, comforting her softly and rubbing her back until the tears had gradually fallen away. It had been so long since Chelsea had been cared for by anyone, and she was silently grateful for the mysterious lady's presence. Hugging Aurora against herself, Chelsea looked back at the lady.

"Thank you" Chelsea choked out. The lady smiled, her kind eyes scrunching up.

A month passed by. The elderly lady visited Chelsea at random times, bringing treats for Aurora or assorted groceries to Chelsea. Chelsea gradually forgot how the lady was a stranger and welcomed her in, forming an odd sort of friendship. Sometimes her and the lady had lighthearted conversations, while at other times Chelsea vented to her about how she still couldn't find a stable, decent job, about her boyfriend who had left her out of the blue, or about her latest visit to her father in the hospital. One Saturday while Chelsea had no work, the lady brought new wallpaper along with her. Together they took off the foul green wallpaper and replaced it with a calming blue. A few days before, the lady brought pots filled with playful, bright flowers. Chelsea felt livelier than she'd ever felt in a long time.

There were a few things Chelsea wondered about constantly. Who was the lady? Where was she from? Why had she appeared at Chelsea's apartment? What was her name? Whenever she asked these questions, the lady would change the subject. Why?

It was a cheerful Friday evening. The shimmering rays of early August's golden sunshine illuminated the small room, reflecting off a chipped mug on the damaged coffee table. The lady had just left after an exciting hour of baking with Aurora. Earlier, Chelsea had visited her father and talked to him about the lady, along with Aurora's growth. Her father had been doing alright. His health was no longer deteriorating, and Chelsea felt relieved. A notification popped up on the opened laptop on the couch. *Ding*.

Chelsea, who had been feeding Aurora in the kitchen, walked over to the living room. She curiously looked at the laptop screen. Her heart fluttered excitedly. A job! After so many tries, she'd finally been hired! Her heart seemed like it could burst from her chest as she swelled with delight. The offer was for a nearby position as a secretary for a small nearby office. Smiling to herself, she looked out the window at the now setting sun. She would manage. She had hope.

Another month flew by. Chelsea had been excelling at work, pushing herself for this long-awaited opportunity. Hospital visits had been doing well, and she was glad to be able to talk with her father. The lady came over, positive as ever, and Chelsea felt it to be miraculous that she had her in her life. Sometimes Chelsea wondered where she'd be at if she had kept living in the past, with no one to talk to. At these times, she would think about her appreciation to the lady, even if she still wasn't fully sure who she was or how they had bonded. Aurora had started school, and came home each day with a huge smile on her small, round face, filling Chelsea with pride.

It had been an unusually busy day at work. Chelsea had just come back from picking up Aurora from school, through the chilly late-September wind. She took Aurora to the hospital after, where they visited Chelsea's father. Chelsea hated the hospital. It made her dizzy with its blinding white lights and the smell of antibacterial sanitizers.

Chelsea and her father had finally scraped up enough money to afford the transplant, with Chelsea's new job and her father's little bit of money from retirement. Walking into his room, she cried and hugged her father.

"It's been so long, saving and making rations, and meeting with insurance companies, Dad. It's finally going to happen. We have hope." Chelsea whispered, tears in her overjoyed eyes. Her dad had smiled. A real smile. Something Chelsea hadn't seen for a long time.

Three winter months crawled by. It was now January, and Chelsea's father was due for his transplant. After many visits to the hospital, paperwork, and heartfelt discussions with her father, it was finally time. The lady celebrated with her. She made Christmas cards with Aurora to give to Chelsea's father. She took care of Aurora at the apartment when Chelsea was away at the hospital. Chelsea had also recently received a promotion, leaving her overjoyed and excited.

It was the week after the transplant. Chelsea received a call during her lunch break. Grabbing her purse, she bolted out of her office to her car, driving hurriedly to the hospital.

*Dad.*

She couldn't hear the doctor explaining how her father's body rejected the heart. She couldn't feel anything. She only saw the monitor's final message. Her dad being wheeled away. Tears splashing onto the floor.

"He wrote you this before his transplant", the doctor said quietly.

The doctor handed her a slip of paper. Chelsea traced her finger along the familiar handwriting.

*Dear Chelsea,*

*If you're reading this, I guess it didn't work. I always knew it might not. I'm sorry I couldn't be the father who was always there. I should've fought harder. This might seem like the end, but my love for you will carry far beyond. Keep holding on. Keep fighting. You'll see me again. Never lose sight of the light at the end.*

*I love you - Dad*



Grief. Why was it so unfair? The next few days tormented her. She couldn't sleep. Aurora had been crying too, confused as to what happened to Grandpa. What happened to Mom. Holding Aurora close, she comforted her.

When the lady came in, she already seemed to know. She came in quietly and let Chelsea cry on her shoulder for an hour or so. The lady didn't leave her side, coming in the early morning to help send Aurora to school, and leaving late at night to clean the house while Chelsea went over funeral arrangements. No matter what, she kept supporting her.

Four years later. A young woman in a hospital room. An elderly woman lying on a hospital bed, pipes and tubes attached to her. She's dying. The young woman sobs silently.

"You gave me so much. Why?" the young woman gasps between tears.

"You needed me", the elder says quietly, her voice soft.

"How did you know?"

The elderly woman looks up at her, with her bright blue eyes. They haven't changed.

"You felt empty. Angry. You didn't have anything left. I saw who you really were, who you could become. I merely had nudged you in the right direction."

"You've supported me through it all. Look where I am now. Look where Aurora is now. We'd be nowhere without you." the young woman whimpers, emotion flooding her face. "I'll never forget you. What you gave me. A stable future. A new perspective."

"My dear, you had it in you all along" the elderly lady responds, her soft voice brimming with warmth. The young woman takes a shuddery deep breath.

"What is your name? I need something to remember you by", the woman asks softly.

The elderly lady smiles.

"The Latin would call me Spero."

"What a beautiful name. I must wonder why you never shared it. What does it mean?"

The elderly lady keeps smiling. "Do me a favour. Spread my actions around to others. Give more people the light that they need to carry on." The elderly lady takes a deep breath. The young lady could swear a soft glimmer sparkles in the elderly lady's bright eyes as she speaks again.

“Hope. My name is Hope.”

The monitor sends its final message, that fateful sign. Hope closes her eyes and disappears in a glimmer of light. Chelsea is filled with awe.

How insignificant that perspective seems. And yet, it determines your every thought, every move, every word.

Hope.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### The Perfection

By: Aisha Akinade (Grade 7)

*more inside*

I look at the new family and I quickly become jealous. They're perfect. Pearly white teeth, well kept hair, clear skin, and flawless personalities. Their last name matches what they are. Perfection. Elizabeth Perfection and her twin brother Elijah keeps looking at each other whenever a person greets them, but only do this when the person is visibly disabled, sounds cruel, or just in general, nowhere near to their perfection. Their parents do the same. I study them all with confusion. *No human is this perfect*, I think to myself.

"Well, they were nice," My mom says once we get home.

" They were perfect," I say grudgingly.

" Cassia is right. They are perfect!" my little brother Casper says. My mom scowls at me, but doesn't bother to disagree. She knew I was right, she just didn't bother to say so.

2 weeks with the Perfections in our neighbourhood, and I have been proven wrong. Humans **can** be this perfect, or at least this family is. They're always at the community centre helping whenever they can. They are the kindest people in the history of humanity, and never show any hate or disgust. They are so smart, that Elizabeth and Elijah have been put into honors classrooms, Elijah being in the same one as me. Though, for some reason, whenever someone mentions getting a mark lower than B+ they always look at each other. Like how they did when people were just greeting them.

Today, for example, my best friend Theodosia was talking to me about her most recent grade.

" 54%. 54% Cassia! My step-dad will kill me!" she screamed in frustration.

"At least you passed..." I said trying to comfort her.

"Barely. Can you tell the new girl to stop looking at us."  
I turn around and see Elizabeth looking at us, but in the blink of an eye, she's gone. We both think nothing about it and walk away.

Tomorrow at school is strange. Very strange. At least 50 people weren't at school. All the people that were missing were either bullies, mean in general, special needs, or not considerably smart. Theodosia wasn't at school either. Everyone was clearly concerned, but Elizabeth and Elijah didn't seem a tiny bit startled. Infact, they seem rather happy, but once again I think nothing about. *They'll all be back tomorrow*, I think to

myself, *probably thought it was Saturday*. When I get home, I'm welcomed with an unpleasant surprise, a news report. Usually seeing a news report when I get home wasn't out of the ordinary, but was being discussed is what threw me off.

"At least 100 people have disappeared in a small town in Alberta," The news reporter said with a face of stone, "Ever since this morning, the police have received over 80 missing persons reports from Mapleview, Alberta, though there are many more who have disappeared just not been reported. Whole families have gone missing, and families have been torn with their missing children. If you see any of the following faces, please report to the police immediately."

The people shown are people we know. Neighbours, peers, colleagues, and friends were all shown. I saw Theodosia's face and I feel like crying. I look to my mother, whose face was struck with fear for what comes next.

For a week, our town was silent. Everyone was either grieving over the people we've lost, raging about not enough being done about it, or fearing what would happen to the rest of us. But the Perfections were not startled at all. They were always happy, but today they were extremely happy. Everyone was.

"They're back!" Someone screamed on a quiet Sunday morning.

There they were, all the missing people standing on the street. There something different about them, though. They were now perfect. They had been ridded of any physical, mental, or verbal imperfections. They still had personality, but the perfect kind. Something must have happened in the time they were missing, but they claim "they don't remember". They same the same thing to police, and anyone else who asked about. The perfect lie. I didn't trust anyone, not even Theodosia. Something had happened that they were not telling us.

Everyone who had gone missing had now become geniuses. Bullying had become extinct, and those who didn't disappear were clearly startled. By now, I was fed up with all the lies, so I had to get away from it all. I fumed off school grounds, and into the woods. I didn't know where I was going, I just wanted to get away from everyone. As I'm walking through the woods, I see something I might never unsee. It's a pile of what looks like **brains**. Human brains. About a hundred. I started running home as fast as I could. Once I get home thoughts flood through my head. *You didn't see brains*, I assure myself, *they were probably badly discarded Halloween decorations*. I go upstairs to my brother's room to check on him, because I knew my parents would be late tonight.

"Casper? Are you hun-?" I stop dead in my sentences.

He was gone. The sight of the brains came back to mind.

"No, no... No! NO!!!" I screamed at the thought of what would happen to my brother.

I **had** to find him. I didn't care how long it took, or how worried my parents would be. I can't let what happened to the others happen to him. I get my backpack, and pack all the necessities. The next thing I did, I was hesitant about. I took my dad's gun. I didn't know what I would need it for, but it could be useful. I head back into the woods, once again not knowing where I was going.

After an hour and a half of walking, I see a group of people.

"Hello? Hello! Are you guys-?" I start, but I'm stopped.

"Are you one of them?" a girl with jet black hair asks me cautiously.

Before I can reply, someone speaks up.

"Look at her acne, Onyx. There is no way she's one of them," A man tells her.

"You never know, they can shape-shift."

"Who can shape shift?" I ask quietly, until someone screams.

I look behind me and see Elizabeth. She smiles, and then she turns into a creature.

"RUN! EVERYONE RUN!!!" Onyx screams.

I start running, and hide next to Onyx behind a tree. I pull out my dad's gun and try shoot, but nothing happens.

"IT'S NOT LOADED YOU IDIOT!!!" Onyx screams at me.

She pulls out her gun and shoots recklessly, clearly trying to scare of the creature. Once we're sure it's gone we come out of our hiding place. There were bodies everywhere. I throw up at the sight of all of it. Only 5 of us survived. **5**.

"What was that.." I ask, traumatized.

"We don't know," The man replied.

"All we know is that the take the brains of humans and replace them with perfect ones." a new girl says.

"Why?" I ask.

"We don't know," Onyx says.

"I have a brother..." I start.

"Don't we all?" Onyx say confused.

"No, he's been captured. I need you help me find him. Please."

I see them all exchanging looks of uncertainty. Finally the man walks up to me.

"We'll do it," He says with a half smile

"Thank you! Thank you!!! I'm Cassia by the way," I say with joy.

"Omar. This is Onyx, Clover, and Daniel."

I smile. Not only did I have a chance of finding my brother, but also made friends.

It's been 2 days. It feels like we've been walking in circles. There was a chance my brother was already gone...

"Guys! There's this freaky building. You wanna go inside?" Clover exclaims.

"Are you insane? We don't know what's in there. For all we know, there could be a bunch of creatures getting ready to kill us!" Onyx says frustrated.

"Nothing interesting has happened in 2 days. What could happen that we couldn't handle?"

There was no point in stopping her, so we all went in. I saw my parents, my brother, and many others.

"Let them go! You have to let them go!!!" I scream.

We quickly untie my brother, my parents, and ready to free the others, but we hear footsteps. We hide behind a large table, and see creatures walk in. They each picked a knife and took out brains of people. I see one of the creatures drop their knives, and come up with an extremely dangerous idea. I reached out to the knife, my mom gives me a look, but I ignore it. I jumped out of the hiding spot, and stab 3 of the creatures in the throat and one in the leg. I watched as 3 of them fell to the ground, but the other one is gone. My parents get up and hug me, but my brother looks severely traumatized.

"Casper, you okay?" I ask worried, but he doesn't reply. I look to my parents' worried.

"You have to go with the crew. Find help. Me and Onyx will stay back to kill the last one," I say.

My parents try to argue, but I won't take no for an answer. They finally leave, leaving me and Onyx with a creature who wants to kill us.

"Onyx!!! ONYX WHERE ARE YOU!!!" I scream.

She'd been gone for **hours**, supposedly trying to find a local gas station to steal supplies from.

"Cassia... I'm here," I hear her say quietly.

"Finally, did you find one? Any food?" I ask worried.

"No. Not like there would be one anyway, right?" she mumbled, and smiled.

I get a glance of her teeth. **White**. I start running, but there are more perfected. They grab a hold of me, and everything goes black.

I wake up tied onto a chair, with Elijah standing in front of me.

"Hey Cassia. Guessing you want to know why this is happening, right?" He says while smiling. I see him holding onto his bloody arm, but he doesn't seem to show any pain.

"Well, as you can see, I'm not human. I'm what you humans would call an '*alien*'. My species lives to perfect other species. Though if they can't be perfected... **we kill them all off**. We want to help you, Cassia. We won't hurt you, promise. I don't care if you don't want this to happen. We're doing it anyways."

He turns around to get something, and I notice a bloody dissecting knife on the floor. When no one is looking, I use my foot to bring it closer to me and pick it up. I cut the rope, and run up to Elijah. He turns around, and I stab him in the head. He laughs sputtering out blood.

"If I die, they'll die too. Your just killing humanity off for me." He says, still laughing. Soon, all the perfected start laughing out blood too. I realize that everyone will die if I don't do something.

"Get all your creatures to give their brains back." I tell Elijah sternly.

"Fine, I can save these people," He says still laughing, "The first people to be perfected brains are gone."

I'm mortified. Theodosia and so many others are going to die, and there's nothing I can do about it.

"Fine. Just do what you have to do." I say quietly, but loud enough for him to hear.



2 weeks later and Elijah, all the other creatures, and the first perfected humans are **dead**. Maplevue will be forever scared from this, but at least I got my family and some of my friends back. Though we lost so many, we still had each other. All the people had got their brains back were still in recovery, and parents with dead children are left in pieces. **The perfection** is over, no one needs to perfect but rather effective. We'll move on. We **have** to.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Soulmates

By: Topper McGinty (Grade 7)

*more inside*

Dark followed by light. Fear followed by calm. Emptiness followed by fulfillment. Such sudden changes can be rather alarming depending on the situation. However, they can also be a great thing. For me, Dylan, a sudden change would be the most tragic and yet beautifully enthralling experience I would ever encounter. It was the kind of experience that changes you forever.

Keyboards clicking away. The scent of despair. My workplace is truly a depressing space. The fact that my apartment had become very lonely didn't improve the situation either.. My roommate, Adam, had recently moved out to find the person he was meant to be with. Everyone has someone out there that they are destined to be with. In my world, this is a literal phrase, not just some belief. Once you turn twenty, you stay that way until you find your perfect match. It's just so annoying, how Adam got to go and pursue his destiny, and I'm still here. My third year being twenty, and I was still stuck. Paying off student loans and trying to maintain life are both quite expensive. But, I figured if I worked hard then someday, I could have enough funds to fill someone's void. Was it selfish of me to make them wait? How should I know? I checked my generic, decayed watch. Five o'clock. Time to head out.

It was a Friday evening. I was excited because I wouldn't have to go to work for the next two days. I could finally get a break from that mind-numbing, boring cubicle job. As I felt how tight the tie was around my neck, I loosened it and walked through the door to my simple, two-bedroom apartment. It felt quite lonesome since Adam had left. I grabbed for the TV remote as I slouched into the couch and let my briefcase fall to the floor. The remote felt heavy in my tired hands aching from the feel of the keys rushing beneath them all day. As I flipped through the channels to find the news, I heard a knock on my door.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" a shy, feminine voice called out from the hallway. I suddenly recalled that I was meeting someone to fill the empty position of my roommate tonight. As I looked down at the plain work clothes I had on, I felt embarrassed. White button-up shirt and grey pants. Not the best outfit for a first impression. But I didn't have any time to change.

"That's too bad. I guess they forgot I was coming" says the same voice as I hear footsteps going down the hallway away from my door. I quickly jump up from my seat and run towards the door, stumbling over my briefcase. She turned around to see me, barely grasping the door handle. She stepped tentatively towards me, extending her hand shyly for a handshake, her head pointed towards the hallway carpet, diverted from my face.

“Emelia,” she says. I take her hand in mine and shake it, as a light I had never seen before erupts through the room, as though she was emitting it.

“Dylan pleased to meet you,” I responded, feeling slightly more confident in myself. Happy to see this new face almost. And, as a plus, she was absolutely beautiful! Too bad she was only looking for a roommate.

She had long, flowing brown hair, an oversized, cream coloured woolen sweater, and a pair of glasses, which she frequently adjusted with her index finger. She seemed quite small and dainty, in a cute way. I welcomed her in and gave her a tour of the little living space that I had to offer. Judging by the displeased expressions she gave towards my apartment, I was fairly sure she wasn’t interested in living in it. She was fairly emotionless and seemed as though her focus was elsewhere for most of the tour.

“This is exactly what I was looking for. When can I move in?” she stuttered hastily. I was very confused. She didn’t seem very interested, and yet she wanted to move in as soon as she could?

“Um... W-whenever you’d like. I’ll have to take the advertisements down. This is great! Do you need any help moving?” I asked her.

“No thank you. I don’t have many other things. I just turned twenty a few months ago and my parents told me I had to move out. I don’t have any furniture of my own yet” she replied awkwardly.

I told her I was going to go to bed early because I was tired from work as she settled in, turned on the TV, and curled up in the corner of the couch nuzzled into her sweater in a very cute manner. She wished me goodnight and diverted her attention to the cheesy sitcom that was playing.

I walked into my room and loosely closed the door. I was about to collapse into bed, but I remembered that I had to take the roommate ad down from the internet. I sat at my laptop on my cheap office chair and clicked on the open tab and removed my post. Just as I was about to turn off my computer, I got an email notification. I figured it was quite early anyway and it wouldn’t hurt me to check my email, so I clicked on the notification.

*Congratulations on finding your soulmate! You and your partner shall start aging after your next sleep. Have a wonderful life!*

*Your Trusted Government.*

I was originally very confused. Could it have been sent accidentally? No way, that’s impossible. I wheeled my chair over to the door and saw Emilia, curled up into a ball, asleep on the couch. How could it be her? I wasn’t even searching, and I hardly even know her. I decided I needed to get some rest and sprawled out on my bed,

thinking. Could this have been a mix up? No, these emails are almost never wrong. It has to be a two-way response of the same emotion - true love. I was exhausted, uncertain, and quite shortly asleep.

I woke up in the morning to the sound of bacon sizzling and the smell of pancakes cooking in the kitchen. I climbed out of bed, threw some clothes on and walked outside. Emilia was standing in the kitchen, hand on her hip, cooking breakfast.

“Good morning,” she greeted me quietly, “I snuck out of the apartment earlier to buy some things from the store as a thank you. I hope that’s all right”. Why would it make a difference to me?

I walked over to her and sat down as she placed a plate of food on the table. The eggs seemed burnt, the pancakes a little runny, and the bacon fried to a crisp. I reluctantly ate some of the food, and decided it was a nice gesture. It tasted better than anything I could have cooked anyway. She sat across from me at the table with her head lazily resting on her arms. I looked into her eyes as I ate and immediately remembered the message from last night. Had she gotten it as well? I was confused why she hadn’t said anything about it. It occurred to me while I was questioning why she didn’t seem more alarmed or awkward, that she only had her purse with her. She didn’t have a computer, and likely couldn’t afford a phone, so maybe she had no idea. I was so occupied with my thoughts, I forgot to chew. a piece of egg lodged itself in my throat. Emilia clumsily rushed to get me a glass of water to stop my choking.

“Thank you” I muttered raspily after drinking the water.

“Are you alright?” she asked me, walking swiftly back to the table.

“I’m fine, thank you” I replied.

How was I going to tell her what happened? She sat there in the same clothes as yesterday. I decided it would be best if I got to know her before confessing anything. I mean, I was socially awkward as it was. I couldn’t just tell outright her that the guy she had just coincidentally ran into yesterday was the same guy she was supposed to spend the rest of her life with. I had an idea.

“Hey, you don’t have a change of clothes, do you? I have the day off if you’d like to go shopping for some things” I proposed.

“I mean, I guess so. I should probably get to know you if we’re going to be living together” she said shyly.

She got up slowly, grabbed her purse from her room and came to meet me at the door. Her hand trembled as she reached for mine. I noticed what she was doing and was taken aback. She wants to hold my hand? We literally just met yesterday, she was acting so forward. I reluctantly took her hand in mine. It was almost as if it really belonged

there. Together, we walked down the hallway in a tense silence. We called the elevator and a man and his wife were inside when the doors opened. They were quite old and had likely known each other for a long time. We stepped in and, for the first few floors downwards we kept our silence. But that silence was broken by the man.

"Ah, it's always so nice to see a new couple happy with their destiny," said the old man in a shaky voice.

She quickly released my hand in a confused anxiousness.

"Why can't you see the signs? You're perfect for each other!" he said when he saw her let go. She was visibly embarrassed by this thought.

"Now, now honey, this might not be the case," the wife said.

This seemed to frighten Emilia more than the man's comment. As blood rushed to her face and made it turn red, she stood in the corner of the elevator, expression changing rapidly.

"Oh, really?" said the man sarcastically as the elevator door opened. I quickly rushed Emilia out of the elevator. The man and his wife bickered as we left. I suppose that was *his* perfect. Our walk down the street was an awkward one. She avoided eye contact the whole time. We finally came across a nice clothing store and stepped in. Emilia looked through racks of clothes. a store owner walked up to me as we were shopping.

"If you are looking for matching couples clothing, we have a full division for that," she said to me.

"Oh, we're not together. I hardly even know her," I said, somewhat shading the truth as I turned towards the lady in a mild panic. I saw a statue above a storefront behind her. It was a large diamond ring.

"My apologies sir," The lady replied, embarrassed.

"Hey, Emilia," I said, not taking my eyes off the storefront, "I'm going next door to look at something"

"Sure," she replied with unwavering concentration between the shirt and sweater she was holding up. I walked out of the store and crossed the street. What was I even doing? Was I moving along too fast? No matter what the stupid government thinks, even if that's technically what I think, shouldn't I talk to her a little bit more first? No, I knew she was perfect from the start. I suppose everyone does, but that's not the point. I didn't need any message to tell me I belonged with her. I could already feel it in my heart. It didn't matter that I had only known her for such a short time. I loved her, and that's all

that mattered. I decided that I was right to make the rash decision I had made. Soon, I found the perfect ring and went to pay for it.

“Your total comes to...” the store cashier said, leaving me in suspense, “ten thousand dollars. It’s beautifully crafted and a perfect engagement ring for your partner,” said the woman tending the store. I had nowhere near enough to pay that off. I hardly make enough to live. I walked out of the store, ashamed. Then I realized, I didn’t need to make this flashy. I knew neither of us were flawless. I didn’t have to be perfect because with her I would be. She would have an appreciation for a heartfelt yet inexpensive engagement. So I went back across the street. I grabbed the door handle. I twisted the knob.

“Hey there” said a voice to my right. I looked to see an admittedly beautiful woman standing there. But that didn’t matter, I had to get to Emilia, but she started talking to me about how she could be that special one. I knew the one I needed was just through the doors, but this woman kept talking.

“I really have to go,” I told her and finally walked into the store. I started to scan the room for Emilia, but she was right in front of me. Her eyes, tearful. She must have seen me and the woman outside of the store talking to me.

“I need to talk to you Emilia,” I explained. Poor choice of words. Her crying got worse.

“Look, it’s okay. I want you to find your perfect person, and if I can’t let go of you, that can’t happen. I just need to be left alone Dylan” she said to me, tearfully as she ran from the store, clutching her bag of clothing.

I chased her back to the apartment. She had left the main door open and had locked herself in her room. I could hear her crying. I knocked on the door.

“Emilia. I’m sorry. It’s not how it seems. I need to-” I was saying when I was cut off by her delicate, choked voice.

“Don’t worry about me. I just want you to know that the reason I decided to stay here was because I thought I had found love. You were so kind, welcoming me here... and this morning, when the meal I cooked for you was so bad you choked, but still, you said nothing and graciously ate it. I just had to let you know how I thought I felt, but I don’t feel any older and there are no signs that I was right, so I’ll let you find where you should be. Don’t worry about me. I’ll find what I’m looking for” she yelled, barely holding back an ocean of tears.

I felt so bad. I thought I should try to talk to her in the morning when she had calmed down. I decided I should go to bed.

I woke up in the morning, and walked over to her room. The door was still closed. I knocked. No response. I decided to try the door handle and it opened. The bed was made, her purse was gone and there was a note on the bedside table:

*I've left to go home hunting. I figured I shouldn't trouble you any longer*

*-Emilia*

I quickly ran towards the elevator. I made it to the lobby just in time to see her brown hair flowing as she hastily left the building. I followed her.

"Emilia!" I called out. She began running. I chased her, but with the steady flow of pedestrians, I lost sight of her. I shoved through the herd out to a riverside cobblestone pathway, the autumn leaves and twigs crunching below my feet. I saw her and began sprinting, dodging joggers and children playing to get to her. I got very close. So close that I could hear her choppy breath from a mix of tears and running. I seized her hand as everyone around us went silent.

"Stop!" she cried, "I already told you, I don't need an apology. It's alright, I understand". Her small face was red from a mix of emotions. I felt awful.

"Emilia, what you saw outside the clothing shop wasn't important. All that time she was talking to me, I was only trying to get to you. Emilia, we haven't known each other very long, and I know it's not much, but I love you." I said, getting down on one knee, ringless. "Will you marry me?".

"I will" she replied, still with tears in her eyes, "I love you too, Dylan".

And so, just as my story began, it ends. Darkness followed by light, fear followed by calm, and emptiness followed by fulfillment. That sudden hope in my life changed me forever.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Kitsune No Hi

By: Carys McQueen (Grade 7)

*more inside*

I was stalking somebody. My snow white and purple tipped tail slowly flickered like a dim candle flame. I flattened my ears and slowed my breath. This was a skill many *Callisunes* like me had learned to master. Showing little to no signs of my existence was the perfect way to eavesdrop on conversations my little fox ears weren't supposed to hear. Leaves brushed my pearl white fur, I tensed from the touch. I was currently hidden in a bush with small blue berries inside, like magical hidden gems. The two foxes I was stalking were barking at each other about some "important *Illusune* matters." And from the several times I've stalked *Illusunes* before, I usually associate this term with disobedient *Callisunes* that refused to follow orders, or lack of resources.

However, today two ivory foxes discussed entirely different things.

One had forest green teardrop shapes on its cheeks, green chest fur, a sharp green muzzle and ears. Along with that, he wore a gold chain necklace with jade and pearls hung on it. Something that surprised me on this particular fox was that he had seven striking tails with delightful nature tips. For all *Kitsunes*... *Callisunes* *Illusunes* and even the mysterious and rare *Nosunes* alike, having several tails is a symbol of power and wisdom. The more tails you had, the more abilities you'll earn. I stared down at my one tail. I couldn't wait to get two tails. Because then, I'd grow wings. I stared back at the seven tailed kitsune in awe, my eyes brightening, but I quickly shook myself slightly and continued to glare at the two in suspicion.

The other *Illusune* was similar to the first, but instead of green markings she had pastel mint. Her eyes were a glimmering purple and what surprised me was that unlike other *Illusunes*... she had magical glimmering wings that emerged from her sides, curved in a sweet leaf shape. *What!? Why does she have wings!?* Along with her wings, the fox had two tails and a leaf on the top of her head, which the other *Illusune* had as well. I also noticed a huge size difference between the two.

"I'm certain your training is simply a waste. You are *far* too hard to teach simple tricks an *Illusune* should be able to know. Your *defect* puts our reputation at risk." The first one said, spitting out the words *far* and *defect* out like a bitter tasting leaf. The second *Illusune* winced and lowered her minty ears, to the point where I felt bad for the fox.

"You're right. But maybe you should know that you aren't exactly perfect either. I know how long it took for you to even get your second tail, you *norowareta inu*." The second fox used a curse phrase that most foxes knew to use carefully, however she spun and wielded the curse casually in her own defence.



I noticed the first fox scowl down at the second, disappointment and irritation flared through his eyes. His tails swayed in separate directions, and I could tell it was intentional, but the bend in his tails seemed natural, sending a wave of dominance at the second cowering kitsune.

“Your pathetic attempts to seem tough simply annoy me, Opāru. So I will be informing your disobedience to your guardian. You bring shame on the name of King Satoshi himself.” The first kitsune mentioned the fallen king and raised his head up towards the midnight sky. His tails fused together, along with the rest of him in a flash of white light. The large kitsune had just transformed into the shape of a scaly dragon. I barely got a good glimpse of the dragon form before he flew away into the night, towards the cherry mountains. Which left the second fox, or *Opāru* as the first fox called her, alone in the cleared fields.

I felt a sudden tugging inside of me to go and help her. *She’s an Illusune! Illusunes captured and enslaved my kind. I can’t and will not help her.*

But Opāru seemed so sad and desperate for help, just like I was. I tensed my muscles and realised that if I went to help her, I’d have to explain that I’d just overheard the entire conversation, which I knew for a fact would lead to an execution.

I finally decided that I was going to approach her. I was about to move when I was suddenly tackled by a blur of mint and snow colored fur. My attacker pinned me to grassy earth floor, swiftly grabbing my paws in her’s. The shock stopped my brain for a moment. I was unable to think, and I met shimmering violet galaxy eyes. It took me a moment to realise that Opāru was my attacker.

I saw her mint wings raised in defence, but I noticed her eyes softened when she realised I was just a single tailed Callisune. But, I still saw suspicion flare in her eyes. I felt myself heat up and I felt myself start to sweat a little.

“Why were you stalking me!?” Opāru demanded, and quickly showed her sharp pearly teeth to show she wasn’t messing around.

I hesitated. What should I say?

“I uh- was curious on the situation. I wanted to make sure nobody got hurt.” I said, and it surprised me when I realised I was telling the truth.

Opāru released me and I took a sharp breath in, and started panting. I got up to my paws and stared at her. She sighed and smiled.

“Sorry. Maybe I have a little too much Illusune in me. But seriously. That was *super* creepy!” Opāru laughed, closing her eyes and grinning. I awkwardly laughed along.

"Maybe I should apologize. Sorry about that. I was worried something might happen." I sighed, lowering my ears and pulling in my tail to my paws. Opãru quickly shook her head. "No, it's fine. Anyways, what's your name?" She asked.

"Yume." I answered, keeping a low stance. *Maybe I shouldn't have told her that. Now if she really got mad at me she could report my name to the sukatos.* The sukatos were a group of highly advanced Illusunes that had perfectly mastered the art of shapeshifting and illusions. In fact, you couldn't even tell if they were after you because they were so well hidden.

Suddenly I heard distant voices of other kitsunes calling out my name. Then I felt Opãru quickly grip onto my shoulders with her paws. I yipped in confusion, but I didn't have time to protest, since I was being lifted into the air.

Opãru spread her majestic mint colored wings into the midnight sky, and flew out into the distance with me in her grip. *Why is she taking me!?* I have so much back there... Looking for Gin, earning my second tail along with wings, finding a new family and so much more! *Wait! All those foxes calling my name- they didn't sound familiar. They had some raspy edge to their voices. Much like an Illusune would.*

Why would Illusunes be calling for me? To them, I'm just a nameless one-tailed Callisune. Maybe because of Gin? I already know Gin's gone missing.

Gin is a rare snow Illusune... and much like the name, he was a pure snow white. No markings whatsoever on his fur. And his beautiful fur wasn't the only gift he was born with, winter Illusunes were born with very strong shapeshifting abilities from one tail to nine. Their shapeshifting is so outmatched, that their abilities make a nine-tailed's shapeshifting seem like a two-tail's.

Opãru's claws sank into my shoulders, her mint wings beating heavily. I felt myself lift into the air, midnight mist damped my fur. "What are you doing!?" I shouted, clawing at nothing below my paws. *Is this what flying feels like? Your heart pumping uncontrollably? Feeling like you'll never reach the ground again?*

"Those were Illusunes! They were after you. They must've known you were disobeying orders." Opãru shouted. Her voice was like a soft bird tweeting through the sky, full of innocence yet mysterious guilt.

*Disobeying orders. Me. Disobeying orders.*

"Why are you calling Illusunes bad? Aren't you an Illusune?" I asked, suddenly finding comfort being in Opãru's paws.

"I'm a *Hāfusune*. Part Callisune, part Illusune. That's why I have wings. And why my very existence outrages Oishgetta and all others." She explained, a sad wishful tone in her voice.

"Was that other Illusune Oishgetta?"

"Yes." Opāru answered.

A sudden silence overtook us, and I realised Opāru was thinking about something. "Where are we going? And why? You don't really have a reason to leave-" I started. "I was thinking maybe Kasai mountain. It's probably far enough. And yes I do. I'm going to be executed for calling Oishgetta a *norowareta inu*. He's Queen Utau's grandson. And her favorite grand-son at that. Bringing upon that curse in his name will be more than enough for my death." Opāru sighed. I heard distant chatter of kitsunes below.

I looked down and saw most of them were one-tailed Callisunes. We were flying above Callisto valley, where Callisunes lived and raised their offspring. They were still slaves to Illusunes, who lived not too far away on Cherry mountain.

Why King Satoshi of the Illusunes decided to kill King Genjitsu of the Callisunes that century ago was a mystery to all foxes... except for King Satoshi himself. However, the most popular theory was that he'd always wanted to enslave the Callisunes from the beginning and saw us as a threat somehow... which was stupid because everybody knows that Nosunes are the most powerful kitsune in the world- or the Sakasama ni world, since many believe that is where the Nosunes are currently. Nosunes are told to have amazing control over fire. Creating fire that isn't even fire anymore. Instead it is called Kitsune no hi. However, some call it Nosune no hi since the skill can only be performed by a Nosune.

Eventually we landed, and I felt things below my paws again. Soft grass and magenta flowers around me and Opāru's paws.

The sky was like an endless black blanket scattered with small stars.

We walked up the flower woven mountain, and came across a lone fox.

On closer inspection, he had charcoal black fur and red markings.

*Callisunes never have orange markings. Illusunes never have black fur.*

*That fox is a Nosune!*

I turned to Opāru, who was staring in amazement.

She quickly grabbed my shoulders and beat her wings into the sky, carrying me with her.

She soared over to the lone Nosune and dropped me beside him before she came down herself.

His ears were tipped with flames, something I never knew Nosunes had.

“Hello *watashi no densetsu no kitsune*.” Opāru bowed her head.

The Nosune watched in confusion.

“Uh- hi? I’m Shinku. What the heck are you guys doing here?” He asked, but he seemed a little scared.

“Traveling. What are you doing here?” Opāru answered.

“Same.” Shinku replied before sprinting away into the mountains.

Opāru shouted something and grabbed me again before flying after him. Wind rushed past us as Opāru’s mint wings flapped and sent us forward after the fleeing fox.

We soared after him, and Opāru rushed in and collided into Shinku’s body, and I was flung into the sky from the impact.

“I *said*, what are you doing here! It’s awfully rude to run away like that.” Opāru stated.

Shinku started to shake.

“Y-you’re an illusune... right?” He stuttered.

Opāru made a highly insulted and disappointed face.

“No. Have you ever even seen an illusune before?”

“N-no... but-”

Opāru growled, grabbed me, and flew off.

“We’re going further. I want to get as far away from other foxes as we can.” Opāru hissed.

And we did. She flew us farther than the maps went farther than what was known. And we stayed there...

So we’d never have to communicate with other foxes again.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### The Echo in the Park

By: Julia Gillespie (Grade 7)

*more inside*

Thoughts and feelings come and go, but sisters don't. When they're gone, they're gone forever. I would know because my sister won't be coming back from where she went and I will never be the same as I was before she died in a devastating car accident.

My name is Amber Callaghan and this is my story. 2 months ago, my life was perfect, I had a 21 year old brother named Nicolas, a mom named Crystal, a dad named Richard, and a 13 year old identical twin sister named Esmée Callaghan. The only difference between Esmée and I was that I had a faded crescent mole above my left upper lip. We lived on 36 Camelmoore street in a beautiful house hidden behind 2 huge weeping willow trees my sister named Willy and Jennifer. The house we lived in was a large 4 story house with a white rim and flowery vines growing up the side of the windows. Since the house was so big I could have had 2 rooms to myself but Esmée and I decided to share a room.

Esmée was not just my sister, she was my best friend. When we were little we would finish each other's sentences and we could feel each other's emotions. The way I felt when I found out about the car accident was one of the worst feelings in the world. When I arrived at the hospital, I saw my mom clutching Esmée's hand as she was rolled down to the emergency room. Esmée's eyes were open, but weren't staring at anything around her. A nurse named Tia said that she was "in shock" but I didn't understand what that meant.

There was tons of blood, scrapes, and already formed bruises everywhere on my dear sister, and it made me cry the instant I saw her. She didn't even look like my identical twin sister with all the cuts and bruises. I sat beside Esmée in the emergency room while my mom and dad were having a conversation with the doctor outside the door. I didn't get up from my spot beside my sister for a couple of days. All I did was cry as I sat by my sister. Looking at her almost lifeless body was the hardest thing I ever did in my life.

A few hours before she died, she opened her eyes for the first time in 2 days. "Amber?" she asked weakly "Remember, at the hardest of times I will be there". Then finally, with her heavy eyes, she fell back into the deep sleep she had been in before. The words she said made me bawl even harder. About an hour later I heard the door open and a kind nurse, named Shelby, walked in. She asked for my dad and they walked out the door together. I tried hard to listen in, but my mind was asking to many questions to focus on anything.

Then they walked in again and my dad came and sat beside me. "She's not going to make it" he said softly. I couldn't hold back the tears so I cried onto his shoulder for

the rest of the night. My mom had cried all night and so the nurses said she needed a little break so she went for a walk outside.

Today was the day my sister would die and the day my life would change forever. I knew this because the nurse Tia gave Esmée some medication to keep her going for 1 more day, but she said she would die quickly on the next. The thought of never seeing her deep blue eyes and wavy brown hair or listening to her again made me regret a lot of things. Fighting, disagreeing and every moment I didn't spend with her.

At 5:47 am on October 13th, 2001 my sister took her last breath. I often wander alone at Lionstone Central Park where I used to play with Esmée and I wonder what I would be doing if she were still here. Seven weeks after my sister's death I still am not myself and I know for sure that I'll never be exactly the same. "It takes time" my family said, but time was a painful thing now.

Everywhere I looked gave me a memory of Esmée until it got to the point where we had to move to a motel down the road from our house. Our new home was 47 Kandsmithe street. Our new home was nothing compared to my old home but if it took away the deep pain building in my heart every day Esmée was not here I could deal with it. Although we lived in a new home, memories still snuck into my mind somehow.

One memory I had every night before going to bed was when my sister Esmée used to come in my bed in the middle of the night asking if she could sleep with me because there was thunder and lightning. "Please?!" she would say in her desperate voice "only for tonight I promise" but she never actually kept that promise.

On November 30th, 2001 after dinner time with my mom and dad, I said goodbye to my brother Nicolas because he was going to his second year of college.

That night it started to drizzle outside so I thought it would be a good time to go outside for my weekly walk to the park. The rain always made me feel better for some reason, maybe because I love England. But even though I loved the rain and thunder Esmée hated it.

"Even though we look identical on the outside, doesn't mean we're identical on the inside" Esmée would tell other people, and I couldn't agree more with what she said.

I was more mature and intelligent than she was but she was outgoing, a daredevil, a great athlete and stronger in other things than school work. That's how the accident happened, she was on her way to a hockey game with her friends Jason and Claudia when a grey jeep went in the wrong lane causing them both to crash.

These were the memories I was having when I was putting on my rain jacket. The aching and deep pain caused me to feel angry and this wasn't the first time. The rain made me feel like I was one of the droplets falling from the sky getting closer and closer to the ground. The rain was more comforting than any words that anyone said to me. But

just as I was about to leave a big crash of thunder and lightning erupted from the sky, but this wasn't going to stop me from going out, I felt like I was a magnet being pulled to the park for some reason and I needed to find out why.

I went upstairs to put some pants on instead so I wouldn't get cold with only my jean shorts on. When I came down I had some black leggings on that really matched well with my wavy brown hair and orange headband that I wore everyday.

On my way out I slammed the door loudly to let my mom know I was leaving. This is because I have barely said a word since my sister died.

The park was now a 10 minute walk because we moved around the corner from my old house which meant it was a longer walk. On the way to the park I saw a bunch of families enjoying a fun Friday night which made me feel angry that I didn't get that anymore.

Was losing my sister a consequence? Did I really deserve this?

The questions confused and angered me so I didn't look inside the houses, I looked down at my feet instead. I was about halfway there when another crash of lightning and thunder echoed through the neighborhood. I saw the park a couple minutes ahead so I decided to run there because I saw my aunt's car in the driveway of another person's house and I knew if I stopped to say hi, I would never get the chance to leave to go to the park.

When I finally got there I felt like climbing up the "spider web" as Esmée used to call it when she was little. When I got to the top of the spider web I gazed over my neighborhood and let a few tears slip out from my eyelids. I thought about who I had become since my sister died and who I could have been if she were still alive. I got down from the spider web and went onto the roundabout for a bit.

I spun myself around letting sadness and anger fuel my body. It was boring, miserable, and lonely without Esmée there. I had another memory of her on the roundabout while I was spinning. It was a few months ago right after we had a fight about who had more friends.

Most of our fights were solved by going to the park so we went there for a bit. We went on the roundabout first and let out all of our feelings and secrets and shared a couple of laughs and then went home holding hands and smiling the whole way.

After I was done spinning on the roundabout I went to one of my favourite places to be with Esmée at the park. That was the teeter-totter. I stroked the side of the teeter-totter that my sister always sat on and memories flooded in again. Another stroke of lightning crashed through the park when I was about to sit on the other side of the teeter-totter where I always went. I sat on it and I felt so much pain I just screamed wishing I had the life I wanted.

Another crash of lightning hit “WHY AREN’T YOU HERE?!” I yelled “YOU SAID YOU WOULD ALWAYS BE THERE FOR ME!! BUT YOU LIED!” one more stroke of lightning hit louder than ever and echoed through the park.

“You’re not alone” said a soft voice in my head. The teeter-totter began to move up and down.

I wasn’t alone...



## Senior Division Grades 9-12

Blackbird

By: Lauren Griffin (Grade 10)

*more inside*

In the hours of the early morning, rays of light beamed across the wheat fields that surrounded a house on a hill; and in that house was a girl who sat in a worn wicker chair, simply waiting for something to do. Days like these weren't uncommon for Merelle, days where she would sit in her chair, watching the sun on the horizon, and wait, never knowing what exactly she was waiting for.

In her hands were a pencil and a pad of paper as she contemplated what to draw. Whenever her pencil moved, it would create something unsatisfying. Not necessarily bad, just not good. No matter how hard she tried, how much she looked out that window in her kitchen, she wasn't inspired. By anything, it seemed.

Out of that window was a bit of plain grass covered in tiny white flowers, to the left, she could see the field, and on the stone birdbath that was barely filled with water perched a crow. They often came, just resting on the bowl, not doing anything. Waiting. Without thinking much about it, Merelle arose from her spot and searched through the wooden cabinets for birdseed. She knew that her father had just bought some, as he liked to feed the finches, but she couldn't seem to find it anywhere. There were oats, crackers, cereal, and everything of the sort, but no birdseed. As she was about to give up, she spotted a tiny ceramic dish on the counter, and peering inside, saw that it was birdseed.

When she creaked the back door open, the crow didn't stir, it just turned its head towards her, staring, as she walked to the table beside the bath. Her bare feet stepped along the dewy grass, avoiding the flowers which she could easily crush. Placing the bowl onto the surface of the table, Merelle wondered if she should walk away, into the house, but instead, she waited.

Soon enough, the crow found its way to the small dish and began pecking. Merelle watched it with curiosity; why wasn't it scared of her? Any normal child would chase it and make it fly away, and she was a normal child. At least, she looked like one. She was small, in a way, but not petite, per se. Her dark brown hair hung in two braids, and she wore a frilly blue dress; it wasn't her fault that her father wanted to dress her up like a doll, he just knew that her mother would've liked it.

But to this bird, she was simply another kid, not differentiating from any other, yet it carelessly ate the birdseed that she had given it without hesitation. It cocked its head to the side as it looked at her briefly before flying away into the field, likely going to alert its friends, "free food!"

Merelle sighed and returned to her place in the chair, pencil resuming its useless doodling on the paper she held. She had some time before her father woke up; he usually slept in pretty late, whereas she arose early. Something about the way the trees in the distance moved in the morning wind, the way the sky was just a periwinkle blue, and the way the silence was broken by the melodic tweeting of chickadees made her unusually calm.

The flapping of wings jolted her out of her daydream as yet another crow landed on the birdbath. Or was it the same crow? In its mouth was a piece of something which gleamed in the sunlight a green hue, and Merelle pondered it until it was dropped in the stone bowl with a light splash. The crow took flight and went back to the field.

Remaining barefoot, she made her way to the bath cautiously, not thinking about the flowers beneath her feet, but out of habit, stepping around them. Her small hand reached into the water that was cold from the night, with a stray leaf floating on the surface. In this water was what looked to be a piece of glass, and picking it up, Merelle confirmed that it was. She couldn't make out what the bit of faded, broken text read along the left edge, but she surmised that it could've been a piece from a bottle.

Why had a crow brought this to her? Birds liked shiny things, she knew, but usually they just collected trinkets for themselves, and she'd never heard of any kind of bird bringing gifts to humans. Perhaps it had just decided that the birdbath would be its new personal collection spot. If that were the case, she didn't want to take its prize, so she left it on the surface of the table beside the birdseed and gazed into the wheat field. Where was it now?

The next day, having been offered more birdseed, the crow came back and left a tiny purple bead, the next, an old key rusted from weather, the next, a child's butterfly hair clip, and so forth. Each day, around the same time in the morning, the crow would return and drop something into the water of the birdbath. Merelle kept putting out seed in the same dish in the same spot, and she now had a shoebox which she left open on the table to hold the little objects.

By the end of the month of August, the bird had collected over thirty things, each dropped in the water of the bath, each stored safely in the shoebox. Merelle expected that it would sometime come to take things out of the box and somewhere else, but it never did. Along with the glass, the bead, the key, and the clip, the box held half of a locket, a shard of mirror, a ball bearing, beads, and more beads. There was no indication that it would stop bringing things as long as Merelle left birdseed.

On a bland September day, in the morning that grew warmer with time, the crow returned with something long and thin in its beak. Merelle, in her chair, still holding the pencil and paper, couldn't discern what exactly it was. She placed the pad onto the kitchen table next to her plate of toast and stepped into the sun that hardly shone through the mist.

In the birdbath was a silver chain so thin that it was still taking its time to float to the bottom, nearly slipping out of her hand when she picked it up. It was the tiniest bit worn, but she really didn't mind, because it looked like it could've been brand new. The sun hit the chain, reflecting bits of light onto her face and back into the water. Silently, the crow which had remained there, slowly lifted into the grey sky and returned to the field.

Merelle counted the beads that the bird had collected in the shoebox. There were eight of them, each varying in colour, size, and shape. The first that had been brought was the small, round purple one which gave off a metallic colour, the next was a sunset orange, as big as a marble with textured rings cut into it, another was green, in the most generic style of bead one could find, and the rest were black. Those ones weren't all the same, but in a way, they were.

In the following days, the crow stopped coming, even though Merelle left the birdseed as she always had. The shoebox which was wearing down from weather remained undisturbed, the trinkets just sitting purposelessly, waiting to be of use. After a time, Merelle got tired of waiting. She threaded the eight beads onto the chain, leaving the three coloured ones in the middle. It snugly fit onto her neck, and looking into the mirror, she felt something change. She didn't know what.

In times where Merelle was alone and doubting, she would turn the orange bead in her fingers and hum, merely stringing together random notes into a melody that felt comforting, unbeknownst that it was really a song from her childhood until her father pointed it out to her. He said that her mother sang it to her as a lullaby and that he couldn't recall the words because they were in French.

Her mother was a beautiful woman that had fallen in love with and married an Algonquin man, Merelle's father. He had told her some stories about her, but her favourite was the one about when her mother and father were naming her. Having the last name *Oupitauouabamoukou*, they both wanted her first name to be special too. Algonquin culture was in that, so they had decided that French should be in her first name. On the list was Lucille, Bernadette, Marie, and Adelaide, but her mother's favourite was Merle, though she wanted to change it to make it feminine. That's where Merelle came from. Supposedly, it meant 'blackbird'.

Her mother passed away when she was eight in a skiing accident. No, it wasn't the most common thing, and Merelle had been too young to fully understand. She still was. Only her and her father in a big house in the country, with that one room that neither of them went in anymore.

The picture of her father, her mother, and Merelle that stood on the mantle was of the three of them at the county fair when she was about six. Her hair remained in two braids, she wore a purple dress that made her look like a cupcake, and one of her front teeth were missing as she smiled, holding a chocolate ice cream in her hand. In the background, there were more children and parents walking, and she could see the very

corner of the tiny ferris wheel that they put up every year. Her mother's blonde hair fell over her shoulders and favourite orange shirt that had the embroidered image of a little white dog on it. Her father, on the other hand, wore the ugliest green vest Merelle had ever seen as he rested one hand on her mother's waist and the other on Merelle's shoulder. They had gone to the fair every year together; that was where she had first gotten obsessed with cotton candy, that was where she met her first kindergarten crush, and that was where she had her best memories.

Fiddling with her makeshift necklace, she took her place back in her chair. It was a calm Sunday morning, and the wind was still blowing as she took the pencil in her hand. The faint sound of footsteps made Merelle's head turn to see her father in his pajamas shuffling into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes.

"Hi, dad." Merelle smiled at him, and he returned it.

"Good morning, sweetheart." Responded her father, turning to get some birdseed from the cupboard so that he could feed the finches in the front yard. He had always told her that birds, in their culture, symbolized so many things, and that it was important to show them their earned respect. "*Everyone is a bird, Merelle, in their own way*" he had once said to her. She hadn't really understood it until now.

For the first time in a while, the crow returned, this time, going into the birdbath and soaking before looking at Merelle and flying away. She picked up a pencil, and stroke by stroke, feather by feather, began to draw a bird.

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

The Ashes of the Cranberry Bush  
By: Emma Duval (Grade 9)

*more* inside

Adelina crouched in a tree above a barn, waiting for her victim to emerge. The moon shone brightly, casting a shadow into the tree she waited in. Rhythmic footsteps echoed through the forest as Adelina readied herself to jump. A middle-aged man exited the barn, clad in a baggy shirt and brown, leather pants. He had robbed a wealthy woman in Gullivar, attacking her handmaiden and stealing her jewelry. A pricy crime indeed.

He walked next to the tree she sat in as she began to tense her muscles. Three more steps. Two more steps. Her knife became heavy in her hand. One more step. She jumped from her tree, landing perfectly on the man's back. A hand went to the man's mouth, silencing him. She brought her knife down in front of his throat, cutting just deep enough for it to bleed.

"Sweet dreams," She said, driving her knife into his throat.

She jumped away before blood splashed onto her clothes. The man laid, unmoving, on the grass. Adelina flipped the man over to leave less evidence. She ripped off a piece of his shirt, tying it around his neck to absorb the blood.

Suddenly, step, step, step, Adelina turned around quickly, bringing her knife to the throat of the person approaching her.

"Whoa, angel, I have not come to attack you." The warm voice of her husband soothed her nerves.

She removed her knife from where it sat, placing it in her scabbard.

"Do be careful, Cranley. I have told you times over not to interrupt my work," Adelina moved back to where the man lay, dragging a wooden board out of some bushes.

She heaved the body onto the board, securing it there with rope.

"Give me a hand, will you?" She asked, gesturing to the board.

The two picked up the board and began walking farther away from the town, into a clearing where a large fire pit had already been set up. They untied the body, letting it roll into the fire pit. Adelina grabbed the flint and steel that sat beside the pit, lighting it aflame. Their horses were tied to nearby trees, their ears tipped forwards and their nostrils flaring.

The two rode the frightened horses to their small cabin outside of Shaggdin, which Adelina had scraped up enough silver coins for from last harvest. Cranley cast a quick spell, summoning rain over Shaggdin and the area around the small town, sure that the body would have burned by then. He brought Adelina a bowl of warm soup, along with a piece of freshly baked bread.

"Thank you, Cranberry," Adelina smiled, taking the dish and pressing a small kiss on his temple.

"Of course," He walked away before returning with a dish for himself, sitting at the table beside Adelina.

After eating, Adelina changed into her sleep robes, taking off the cranberry wood locket that sat around her neck, which contained a flower from the day she had first met Cranley. She settled into bed as Cranley blew out the candles scattered around the house. He lit the furnace before placing a protection ward around it, and changing into his sleepwear. He settled into bed beside Adelina, placing a soft kiss on her forehead.

"Goodnight, sweeting,"

"Goodnight, Cranberry,"

"Lady Seraphina sent a letter today. She requests our presence at the ball she's holding during the new moon, in a fortnight. She plans to provide my payment then," Adelina entered the kitchen, her dress swaying as she stole a biscuit.

"Ah! Those are for your mother!" Cranley swatted her hand when she reached over again.

"Surely she won't mind, Cranberry," She purred, reaching over again.

"No!" Cranley laughed as he covered the biscuits, putting them on a shelf high enough that Adelina could not reach them.

Adelina huffed, nibbling on the one biscuit she'd managed to snatch.

"Well, I am headed to the market. Is there anything you need?" Adelina grabbed a small basket sitting on the table, dropping a few silver coins in.

"Some potatoes, maybe? Or blueberries?" Cranley brushed some flour off his clothes.

"Cranberry, we have a blueberry bush we can pick from." Adelina pointed out, moving towards the door.

"You know the ones from the market taste better,"

"We haven't the money for such frivolous desires," Adelina chewed on her lips as Cranley made his way over to her.

He slipped his hands around her waist, pulling her closer, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Please, angel?" He pouted.

Adelina rolled her eyes, but smiled.

"Oh, alright. But only this week, and you'd better help me make a pie with them!"

"Of course, sweeting."

With that, Adelina kissed him goodbye and left, riding her horse into the town. When she arrived, she left it tied to a tree just outside, taking her basket to the marketplace. She quite liked Shaggdin- it was a quiet farming town, much like the one she'd been raised in.

It was a pity that the people of the town were so poor; it had caused massive inflation, and had driven many of the townsfolk to theft- one of the main things she was hired to deal with.

She was quite glad Cranley had discovered wizardry when he had, otherwise she might have been hired to deal with him before they truly met.

As she wandered around to different stands, buying potatoes and flour and blueberries, a man wearing expensive robes approached her.

"Ah, Miss Adelina Coterel?" She turned around to find the man handing her a letter.

She noticed a purple badge on his chest, which had a white eagle and a golden, upwards facing arrow on it.

"For your husband." The man said, before quickly disappearing back into the crowd.

The badge could only have belonged to one of the king's servants. What would Uyanro's royalty want with her husband? He was not a particularly strong wizard, nor was he very well-known. He cooked, and he read, and he worked at the bakery.

Surely a small peak couldn't harm anyone.

She left the town with her basket of foods and what was left of the coins she'd brought. As she rode home, she opened the letter, and read the following:

Dear Mr. Cranley Coterel,

We hope you and your wife are well and prosperous.

It has come to our attention that several people of our kingdom Uyanro have gone missing in recent months. Many of which have been traced back to crimes committed to wealthy and well-respected families. Including:

Oliver Whyte, who thieved a necklace from the Knighton family,

William Payne, who tricked a handmaiden into giving him the Verney family heirloom,

Simon Hyll, who attacked the Mayne family's youngest daughter,

Raulin Denys, who killed the Clarke family's devoted chef,

Reginald Hamond, who thieved many pieces of jewelry from the Savage family.

Talking to the victim families, we have traced all of these disappearances back to you. We present you with two options, you may either stop your business immediately and avoid consequences, or devote yourself to the castle as a guard and assassin. The king himself has seen it through that your situation is dealt with. He highly recommends you devote yourself to the castle, as we cannot stop any consequences that have come from your former actions.

If the castle does not hear from you or your wife within a fortnight, we will know you have chosen the first option, and will watch to ensure no more disappearances are traced back to you. If it is found that the disappearances continue, you will have forced our hand, and a trial will be held, most likely resulting in your death. While making your decision, do keep in mind that the king has recognized your skill, and is being very merciful by presenting you with these two options.

We wish thriving conditions upon yourself and your wife.

With mercy,

King Constance's Trusted Advisor,  
Godfrey Williams

They truly thought that Cranley, her poor, sweet, lovely Cranley was the mercenary? She had to commend them for trying; it was clear a lot of effort had been put into tracking down who had been killing the townsfolk. She'd never have thought her little business could have caused such a ruckus as to be handled by the king.



Cranley would not be able to take the blame of this for her, they would immediately realize he was not the skilled mercenary they were looking for. But then, what would they do? Kill him for "faking inadequacy?" She was sure that whatever punishment they chose, it would not be kind, nor merciful. The letter was clearly a threat. Devote yourself to the king, or else.

Adelina could not devote herself to the throne either. There was no chance the king would accept a woman guard. She was sure of it. She returned to their cabin, distraught in every sense of the word. She quickly returned her horse to their makeshift stables, and ran in.

"Cranley! Dear, where are you?" Footsteps answered her call as Cranley appeared around the corner.

"Cranberry, read this. Please," She handed him the letter, moving to sit at the table.

Cranley took a few moments, reading it carefully, before looking up at her again.

"What about it? I can just keep quiet. We can find you another job, one that pays just as well. Do not worry, sweeting, we will figure it out," Cranley took her hand in his.

"No. Do you not understand, Cranley? The castle would never allow us to live normally, not after this. They will ruin our lives, I'm sure of it," Adelina wiped away the tears that had formed during her cries.

Cranley pulled her hands away from her face, holding them tight.

"We will be careful for the time being, then. They can't watch us forever, angel. We will go on as normal, and eventually the castle will forget about us," Adelina softly nodded.

Cranley kissed her hands softly before pulling her into the kitchen.

"Now, I believe I promised you I'd help you with a pie?"

Adelina applied the makeup provided by Lady Seraphina. The couple had arrived in Gullivar two days prior for the ball they'd been invited to. They had nearly forgotten about the letter- but just nearly. Adelina was sure she would not forget for a long while. Cranley strode into their shared room, putting his arms around her and kissing her head.

"Cranberry, should you not be helping Sir Gauwyn with the decorations?" She asked, putting away the makeup.

"We finished a while ago, sweeting. The Lady is requesting your presence," He took her hand, kissing it softly.

"Tell her I'll be down in a moment," Adelina got up from where she sat in front of a mirror, brushing off her red dress

"Of course," He smiled, leaving the room, supposedly to find Lady Seraphina.

Adelina checked herself in the mirror once more before exiting the room. The ball would begin in mere minutes, she was sure. People were already piling at the entrance, which she could see from the window of their room. She made her way through the halls, finally finding the ballroom, where she found Cranley speaking to a woman with shiny brown hair that cascaded down her shoulders, wearing a gorgeous blue dress that matched her eyes, which glimmered like oceans. Lady Seraphina. She brushed off her dress once more before straightening herself up and entering the room. Lady Seraphina noticed immediately, swinging her arms up in greeting.

"Adelina! Gorgeous dress, love. The makeup suits you." Lady Seraphina grinned.

"And you, Madame. Your hair is lovely." Adelina hated the customary compliments, but participated anyway.

"The ball shall start soon, but I first wanted to speak of your... payment. It has come to my understanding that the castle recently wrote to Cranley. I am very sorry, but you must understand that, as a businesswoman, when an offer comes along, it is best to take it," She smiled apologetically.

Adelina felt as if she might be sick to her stomach.

"Of course I understand. Money is money, no matter who it comes from," She returned the smile, if not a bit more tight-lipped.

"On the subject of money, I will see to it that your payment is sent to your room after the ball. Do let me know if it doesn't arrive, I've had more than one servant steal from our inductees," Lady Seraphina laughed.

Adelina mustered her best fake-laugh, looking to Cranley with a silent plea in her eyes.

"Of course, and thank you very much for the opportunity," Adelina spoke with stiff formality.

"Well, I'll see you during the ball, then." Lady Seraphina turned to one of her servants, who she spoke to before she quickly ran off.

Adelina turned to Cranley, who swung an arm through hers and guided her to the edge of the room.

"Don't worry, angel, we have attended plenty of balls prior to this one." He spoke softly, as if she might shatter if not handled delicately.

"Not since the letter, we haven't." Adelina bit her lip.

"Don't, you'll ruin your lip paint, and I know you hate having to leave the ballroom half way through. Though I suppose you're right, it's been a little over a fortnight, hasn't it?" The two watched as guests started filing in.

"It has, which is exactly what I'm worried about."

"Well, no time to worry now. I'll be right beside you the entire night, sweetie. You needn't worry. Now, let's go greet some old friends, yes?" Cranley said as he fixed a strand of her hair that had come undone.

Adelina took a deep breath. Just a few more hours, and then the two could return home, where they would be safer.

"Let's go."

The two fluttered from group to group, never staying in a discussion long enough to hear the end of it. The wine and food was delightful, though there were already guests losing their balance from having a little too much to drink. As the two spoke to others, they kept glued to the other's hip, as even though he faked confident, Cranley too was uncertain about their safety at such a large event.

Eventually, the two were forced to split up, as Lady Seraphina required Adelina's presence, and Sir Gauwyn required Cranley's. It was for such a silly thing, too. No more than introductions to old friends and trade partners. It was while Adelina spoke to Lady Seraphina's oldest trade partner that she felt a sinking feeling in her gut. Suddenly, there was screaming, and people telling each other to hide or duck. Adelina scanned the crowd, searching the sea of people for a mop of brown hair, and a green suit.

Where was he, where was he, where was he- BOOM.

The sound of a hand cannon being fired, and more screaming, and a group of people gathered around a body, and-

No.

No.

She fell to her knees, a sob escaping her lungs as she tried to stop the bleeding. But she of all people knew this was not a wound someone could be saved from.

"Cranley, you- you bastard, you said you'd stay beside me. You... I can't believe you're such a fool," Cranley smiled up at her weakly.

"Sweeting, kiss me once more, please?"

"No! I will not say goodbye, this is not goodbye, I will save you, I can-" He brought a hand to her face, stroking her lips gently to silence her.

"We both know I cannot be saved, angel," Blood trailed from Cranley's lips. He coughed roughly, causing more blood to spill from his mouth.

"All I want now is to feel your lips against mine, one final time. Please?" She cried silently at his words.

She didn't want one final kiss. She never wanted a final kiss. Her Cranley, her poor, sweet, lovely Cranley was never supposed to be here, laying on the floor of a ballroom on the other side of Uyanro, bleeding out from a hand cannon wound.

"You're a wizard! Do something!" She sobbed, gripping the hand he held to her face.

"I never was very strong," He said, as if trying to make humor in a situation like this.

"Cranley..."

She finally leaned down, pressing her lips firmly to his. It was all wrong. Their kisses were meant to taste of biscuits and blueberry pies, never of this. Never once of this. Never of tears and blood and pain and sorrow.

"I love you very much. Goodnight, sweeting."

Another sob escaped her.

"Goodnight, Cranberry."

She watched as his breath hitched, and his chest fell still. She watched as the light of life, the light of her life, drained from his eyes.

The ballroom had fallen silent, just as his voice had.

The ballroom had become dark, just as his eyes had.

Hours later, the ballroom grew cold, just as his body had.

Adelina found herself carrying his body into the woods that night. She created a fire pit, and gently hoisted his body into it. She undid the cranberry wood locket around her neck, removing the small, shriveled flower, and placing it on the chest of her beloved Cranley.

With that, she set the pit ablaze, and watched as what was left of her Cranley, her poor, sweet, lovely Cranley, burned away, into ashes.

Hours later, she would douse the fire.

Hours later, she would collect as many of the ashes as possible.

Hours later, she would put them in her cranberry wood locket.

With one final deep breath, Adelina disappeared into the night, where she would remain unfound, alone, and in despair, to this very day.

Some will still say she left the island of Uyanro, but of course I know that to be untrue. What she really did was move to a smaller island off the coast of Uyanro, where she gave birth to her first and only child, Cranley's child. I would know.

I am her daughter, after all.

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

We Are Like the Rain  
By: Christina Miskiv  
(Grade 12)

*more* inside

### *Last Week*

Solitary. This is what it felt like. I guess everyone had to experience the feeling at some point. It's true, it was like being trapped in quicksand. Like being dragged out one door but being pulled on the opposite side, stuck in the middle. Where do you go when you're stuck in the middle? Nowhere, I think.

Your mind tends to wander in this state. This state of middleness is now where you reside and you're left to your wandering thoughts. Why, in this place?

I'm clutching the bars, my knuckles a familiar white.

Waiting.

The white walls practically spin in my vision now. Who thought forty-eight hours was this long?

I hear the jingle. The turn of the key.

I jump up.

### *Next Week*

My brother stands in the doorway. I run to hug him.

It had been maybe three weeks since I last saw him, when he picked me up from the station.

My vision was blurry then. Rain glazing the windows.

Now, the sun pours in.

And this time the bed I'm sitting on isn't just a mattress on the floor.

He wraps his arms around me.

For once, in a long time, I feel okay.

I feel like I might actually be okay.

*LW*

They told me he bailed me out.

My father, a man I never trusted.

The only reason I've ever had to like him, or even see him, was because of my brother.

And I never talked about my mother.

But the one good thing my father brought into my life before my mother left was Adam.

That's my brother's name.

He's waiting for me outside the station.

The first thing I always spot; his bright, blond hair matching mine. He's wearing a sweater and khakis. A cloudy, windy night was settling in Southern California.

We climb in his blue Suburban.

My black sweater is still in his backseat, so I put it on. My skin is cold.

A familiar feeling creeps into me. I want to go home.

I don't know my home.

The car pulls up to the house I spent maybe two months in, until two days ago. Now I'm back. I know I have to go but I don't want to. I want to sit, right here, and never move. I don't want my brother to leave.

He doesn't ask me to go, he doesn't say anything.

We wait there in silence.

*Current Week*

Instability shouldn't be something you get used to.

Some people are unlucky enough.

But I learned the world works like flipping a coin. Whether or not you call it, gravity is in control. So you learn to flow, like water, because that seems the easiest way.

This time I called the right side. Finally, for once in my life, I am being placed in a secure home with two foster parents and no other kids. I don't have to be scared for the next chance I have to grab the few things I own and run, because I won't have to.

All my life I have been used to hopping around. House to house, couch to couch. When the kids I lived with got aggressive I would leave. Sometimes I'd manage to keep a friendship for a while and stay the night at their house. Other times I'd find abandoned houses, or new ones being built.

I never stayed in one home too long. Never longer than a year. Either got in fights with the kids there or stole and never came back.

This time, miraculously, a couple saw my photos and wanted to help me.

*LW*

I walk up the steps, wind whispering in my ears. I want to turn back to the car I know is still waiting at the curb.

The door opens, and another sleepless night lays ahead of me.

I don't like to admit it but I constantly think of what my life would be like if my father hadn't left my mother.

If Adam wasn't born. What would my life be like without him? With two real parents in his place. Would I be okay right now?

My pillow is cold and I close my eyes, trying to picture it; a regular day. Waking up to the smell of breakfast maybe and seeing your family at the table, going to school, hanging out with friends. Having a safe place to sleep at night without thinking twice about it.

I can hear the peaceful snoring of the other girls in the room.

They put me in a girls only group home after the last incident.

The next few days consist of the same thing I had gotten used to in the time I've been here. Seven cranky teenage girls fighting to use the bathroom in the morning, attempting to eat. There was school, although I didn't go much.

Sometimes I'd wake up late, or on my way to the school I'd venture off. Take day trips of the city. It was my way of getting away, even if just for a little.



It took a week for the call to come.

*CW*

My father was a selfish man. That's all I've known him as.

Paying my bail was a surprise to me, I would think he'd rather like me being out of his life entirely.

I can never put it past me, or past my view of him, but I blame him. I blame him for everything, with every fiber of my being.

My life has been horrid because of him. Why can't I be Adam, why can't he treat me like he treats him?

The phone rings.

I answer it.

*NW*

It's crazy sometimes how a day can feel like a minute, or how a month can feel like a year.

It's also crazy that a person can go their whole lives believing one thing, only to find out what they thought they knew the entire time wasn't true.

I thought I was gonna be okay but then I wasn't. Turns out it's a kind of cycle, things are okay until they're not again.

Basically I found out my mother wasn't better than I thought she was. Both my parents were cheating on each other. I wish I could say I expected better, but I didn't know my mother. My father went and got some chick pregnant, and then hid it from my mother for a couple of months until my own mother got pregnant herself with me. I would've been both their first child if it weren't for Adam. He was only my dad's and born almost a year before me.

The thing is, they're not sure. They never did a test. My father was never sure either.

I spent my life thinking undoubtedly that my father was a terrible excuse for a man, but I never spent time thinking that I may not even know him at all. Sometimes I think that would be the better option.

If I found out who my real father is - or never lost him in the first place - my life would be completely different. My life would be different if my mother was in it. Sometimes when I'm bored I go through all the outcomes, all the different paths. Where could I be right now?

Currently, I'm sitting on a bed. Not my bed - I mean, it is my bed - but I wonder who slept here before. Whose bed was this before I came? I could ask the same question in all of the homes I've been in, but they were group homes, so the answer was one I didn't wonder about.

Right now, I'm just sitting, thinking.

Absorbing the room; a pale shade of yellow.

There's one window in the room but the blinds are closed. I go over and open them, peering out. A regular suburban road, with kids playing ball hockey in the street. It's not too different, but I feel slightly out of place.

I walk into the bathroom.

The first thing I notice is my appearance in contrast with the room.

My wardrobe over the years has consisted of hand-me-downs and anything that would fit me in the donation bins. Sometimes I'd go 'shopping' around.

The most common colour I wore was black. In the mirror I stood out, everything else was white in here.

I breathe in.

It had been only a day since I arrived.

CW

The water was cold.

It always was when you live with seven other girls and an adult.

I let it pour over me. My knuckles are white, I watch the faint red water make its way down the drain.

I took a shortcut through an alleyway to get home last night. I'm not the smartest, but I've been living among these streets almost all my life. Social services tried to keep me close to my brother whenever they would move me. Sometimes I didn't get so lucky.

Last year, I spent six months in a home in the next state over. My dad wouldn't let my brother drive that far to see me. But he did anyway.

I got stopped in the alleyway. Someone was walking towards me, another was walking alongside the wall. It was too dark to make out faces. So I waited until the person in front of me was a few inches away, then I brought my fist up and popped him right under the chin. The guy along the wall was now behind me, grabbing me by my bag and yanking me back.

I managed to slip off my bag just fast enough, and sprinted out of the narrow alley. I ran the rest of the way back.

At night, I climb through a window in the living room. The girls all share two bedrooms in the tiny townhouse, bunk beds crammed in, I'd wake them up if I tried any other window.

Now I'm staring at my hand, another cut. Another day.

The cold water went from making me shiver to practically shaking. That's how I know I've been in here too long.

I spend a lot of time thinking in the shower, as most people probably do.

It's the freedom of having a curtain to shield you from a world of judgement. Anything you say, or do, is protected here. I like having my own thoughts without people trying to shove their opinions in places they don't need to be.

I step out, goosebumps covering my body. Warm towel.

That's when I hear the phone ring.

After waiting several seconds before I figured the house was empty, I open the door. It's around eleven in the morning, I don't expect anyone to be here anyway. Girls were at school or doing whatever it is they do. The phone is on a table outside the bathroom.

The call is short, maybe even less than a minute.

But I haven't felt the relief that hit me that very moment in a long time.

I was wanted.

*LW*

All I ever wanted was to be wanted.

A simple thing to ask, right?

Wrong. I haven't met simplicity, we don't know each other.

I have met several other attributes though.

Anger, as I'm being yelled at. A sad hopeless feeling - that was everyday though. I mean sure, I might be depressed, or overly anxious, or any other psychological feeling of emptiness and the vast lonely pit that keeps pulling me in like a black hole. But I'll ignore that for now, like everyone else does.

I still get blamed for every terrible thing that my life brings along. I'm sorry world, am I in your way? Should I change planets? I'm trying.

It's hard to see through blurred vision. Mascara burning my eyes.

I can't stand living here and I can't stand living anywhere else. I don't have anywhere to go and the world feels lonely. Like it doesn't want me here, my home doesn't exist here.

I slam the bedroom door. Burying my face into my pillow.

I'm tired. And not the tired kind.

I know it's nearing the next time I can't take it anymore and have some kind of freak out. Most homes let me go after I smash in at least one window. That's all it takes for a family - people in general - to not want me. A single window.

The second something breakable breaks, we don't want it anymore. We don't try to fix it, we throw it away, and maybe we'll get a better one next time.

The thing that most people don't understand is that human beings are not indestructible. We break. And sometimes we can't be fixed. Or replaced.

But one life is one life. And how many people are on this planet?

Plenty of spares.

CW

It took a bit to process what was happening. To understand what this meant for me.

I sat on my bed, towel wrapped around me still, phone in hand.

After a couple of minutes had passed, the first thought my brain could properly grasp was to call my brother.

He answered after the first ring.

Even though most of the time my brother isn't able to be a part of my life, he still worries and checks in on me regularly. He's the only family I got that would take me in, if he could. He's the only person really that has stayed consistently in my life. Everyone else comes and goes.

My father likes to think he has total control of him. Funny thing is, despite me never having lived with my brother, Adam talks to me more than he ever talks to his father.

Ever since he was old enough to start figuring out the reason he didn't live with his sister, he began to drift away from his father. When he turned sixteen, the first thing he did was get his driver's license. It was difficult to navigate transit in the city, especially when I kept moving around all the time.

Until now. I wasn't gonna worry anymore. I was told I didn't have to.

I told my brother.

*NW*

Julie and Wayne Hemwal.

Those were their names. The people who wanted to take me in.

Who took me in.

She had a gentle manner, offering me all her old clothes that didn't fit her. Blond hair like mine, and a smile that honestly could probably solve any world issue.

He had a British accent, which I liked. Brown hair, and an obvious love for baseball, the Los Angeles Dodgers were gonna win he told me.

It felt surreal. The realness of it.

It was a normal couple with a normal house in a normal neighbourhood.

And it would be my home.

I was used to changes, but I wasn't used to staying in one place for too long.

She handed me a glass of orange juice almost as soon as I first came in. They introduced themselves, told me to make myself feel comfortable. And showed me my room.

The room I'm now standing in, looking at my reflection in the mirror.

I decide to try on some of the things I was given.

A navy blue t-shirt, black jeans. And my regular old Converse, the same ones Adam got me for my birthday two years ago.

My hair is in tangles, I attempt to brush it out as much as I can before putting it into a bun. My hair was always doing its own thing anyway.

I came here on Saturday, now it was Sunday, and they said I'd have to start school on Tuesday. Monday, Julie wanted to take me on a small tour of the town they lived in.

I never got tours of the old places I lived in. But that's only because there were always new kids coming in and out, they never had time to show every person around.

I went downstairs. And my dream of sitting at the kitchen table with two people who wanted to be my parents, eating breakfast together, was waiting in front of me. Pancakes, placed on a plate. I grab a fork and I'm told where the cups are.

I'm actually almost overwhelmed. The normality, this was going to be everyday.

The forecast for this week; sunny with a chance of brighter days.

It felt like hope.

*LW*

Solitary felt like the opposite. Of hope.

Powerlessness versus power.

I've been arrested twice, I mean, technically once - they held me in solitary last time cause they didn't know what to do with me.

They apparently thought I took a baseball bat to this guy's car, down the street from where I was staying at the home of eight girls.

I remember the man well, at the corner of the street. He was always out in his garage around the time I was walking back from the high school three blocks away.

Told me I looked pretty.

Said if I ever needed anything to just knock on his door.

He was in his twenties no doubt, late or early I didn't know, probably early. I couldn't tell if he lived by himself.

I told him I was eighteen when he asked my age.

Maybe he'd leave me alone.

I'd quicken my pace when I walked by that corner so he wouldn't notice me, even on one night, when two of the three streetlights on our street weren't working.

He somehow managed to spot me from across the road. Lucky him, he caught me at a time where I may have drank slightly more than I thought I did that night, occasionally stumbling on my way back to the house.

He came down his driveway and noticed right away, putting his arm around me. I tried to shake him off, but I don't think he got the message because next thing I knew he was leading me up the stairs of his front porch.

I tried turning around, but he had a firm grip on me. That's when I started using my legs.

I couldn't breathe. His hand over my mouth, with the smell of gasoline.

I wonder how many girls have been dragged into this same house by this man, or any house he's lived in.

Eventually, I give up fighting. I don't know if he has any weapons, either around his house or on him. Better to go along.

Now I'm in the kitchen, and hoisted onto the counter. While he pours himself a drink.

Says he needs to catch up with me. Then he turns to put ice cubes in his cup.

There's a ceramic plate in the dish rack on the kitchen island in front of me. I grab it, throwing it at his turned head.

Then I run. Down the hall, out the door, and missing the bottom step as I run down the stairs of the porch. I fall onto the lawn, my heart pounding against my chest so

hard I almost can't catch my breath. I hear him open the front door and almost fall again as I get up. But I somehow make it all the way down the street without being followed.

I open the same living room window I had been using the past two months.

And I lay in bed cradling the phone from the hallway table.

But I have no one to call. Who listens to teenage outcries - with a juvenile history? My choice of drink made it slightly easier to not look back at the events of that night.

Until three days later.

CW

I began packing right away. If I knew I was out of here, I was ready.

I guess I was used to that.

Having to leave somewhere quickly, sometimes in a certain situation. One time I climbed out a window, hopped down from the roof and sprained my ankle for two weeks.

I don't know, life was a bumpy ride. I had learned that when I was a kid.

Going through your whole childhood growing up in different homes, constantly having different people going in and out of my life. No one to really know, or get the chance to know well. And not being able to see my brother a lot.

I remember days, sitting on a couch in a living room. Waiting, calling with endless ringing.

A day or two before, he'd call me and tell me he was coming to see me again. But my father didn't see me as his daughter as much as he did his son. Even if he didn't know for sure, what makes a person that selfish?

Adam always tried to come.

It was Thursday, two days after the call, and two days until I was moved.

I hadn't seen Adam in a week and a half.

LW

He was upset when I first got in the car.



Forty-eight hours in solitary confinement sounded inhumane when he talked about it. They didn't know what to believe so they just put me in there and thought about it later.

I told him that's just how it worked. The world was black and white. People saw the good, and the bad. There's no gray, it just looks gray because it's sugarcoated.

Three days before the police showed up at my house, I was the victim. Three days after, they stated I had been seen by the man who lived on the corner. Apparently one late night I decided to smash his car in and ran when he saw me.

I wish I had after what he put me through.

But local authorities believe local resident who has caused no trouble as opposed to a troubled teenager in the foster care system, changing multiple homes over the years. Who due to her record of theft in grocery stores, previous damage to a window in one of her more violent group homes - and being arrested once before, gave the police enough reason to throw me in a white cell for two days.

Maybe I don't look the part. Maybe my baggy clothes and disheveled hair gave way to violent means.

What does that even mean? Does society just accuse the first bug that bites them because they've been bitten before?

I was mad. I had a restraining order placed against me now, meaning I had to switch homes again.

And another charge to add to my record at almost seventeen years-old. I didn't have anyone to listen to my side.

But I guess I was used to that by now.

*NW*

The town was small, where my new foster parents lived.

But it was a nice, quiet place, by a little lake. The view was kind of peaceful, different from what I was used to.

Julie took me shopping with her. Groceries and any other things I might need.

Then we walked around the mall boardwalk, right by the water's edge.

After spending a weekend and a Monday getting accustomed, I started at the public high school down the street from the mall the following day. It was halfway through the semester and I was going to struggle catching up.

But here, at least, it seemed like a safer neighbourhood.

The street posts had hanging flower baskets, and you could hear music coming from outdoor restaurants.

Soon winter would be here, but for now you could enjoy the warm spirits.

I didn't know it yet, but I would spend many summer nights by the water. With friends I'll say I can't live without even though I had just a year ago.

And the next morning, I had a surprise waiting for me.

I was putting on a sweater and looking at my reflection, until it wasn't my reflection I was looking at.

Standing in the doorway of my new room.

I practically leapt into his arms.

After three weeks, my brother stood there. With the air of familiar cologne.

My home came to me.

CW

Sometimes you accept that moments are moments, come in a second, and go just as fast. And sometimes, you can't change or fix things you've done or have been done to you, and the world can't expect you to.

But you can choose what to hold onto.

The past is just moments before. The future is happening. The skies are clear and you can breathe in now.

The ground will not collapse under you, and instead you will move with it.

Maybe you are not meant to stand in the same place, and maybe you'll get carried away by the waves if you stand too close to the edge.

But maybe you'll end up at another shore.

And this time, the waves are calm.

*LW*

You know the feeling, like being an extra in the movie of your own life?

I'm told that's kind of the point.

I was a needle in a haystack, nothing in this world can change that. But you can change where you stand.

You don't have to be in the rain when it pours.

*NW*

I stared at the raindrops, slowly collecting and making their way down the windshield.

In that way, we are like the rain. We come into this world as individual journeys rocketing off into infinity. And on our way, we cross the paths of other rockets, and our journeys become infinite.

Sometimes we feel like we're spiralling out of control, and sometimes we break down.

But we've gotten this far.

The sun still rises and sets. And so will we.

# Senior Division Grades 9-12

Shatter Eyes  
By: Nathaniel Norton  
(Grade 9)

*more inside*

Belle Thomas was a quiet girl, always lost in thought and never bothering to make friends. As much as being lonely could hurt someone, she didn't seem to care. To her, people were distracting, and they got in the way. She was in her own little bubble, one that she didn't ever want to pop.

It was a Monday, and like every day that started the week, she would get herself ready for school. She grabbed the piece of toast her father had left for her in the toaster, quickly buttered it, and ran out the door. She paused after getting hit with a freezing cold wind, and ran back inside to get her jacket.

"Bye mo--" she shouted to the house before stopping herself.  
*You have to let go, Belle.*

She remembered her mother's final words to her, exactly last year, October ninth, in the hospital. She remembered the beeping sound as the line went flat. She could remember being dragged out of the room by doctors, struggling to get free.

She also remembered that her dad had grown distant from her, and she did understand why, but as much as she wanted to talk to him, something was holding her back.

She grabbed her reflective jacket that her dad had given to her, and slowly walked herself to school.

Despite it being her favourite place to get away from her home, everything about school sucked. The people were loud, the teachers pestered her to speak, and the food was terrible. Most people she chose to ignore. They were all just there, in the way and annoying, except one of them.

Luke Sanders was probably the most popular kid in school. Extremely smart with the top scores on all subjects, super athletic, team captain for the boy's football team, he was trained in proper first aid, and an all-around great guy. Despite her fear of everyone, he had this glow to him and a warm feeling that calmed her, though she didn't know why.

He was the only person her eyes would clear to.

Belle had what the doctors described as, "a once in a lifetime disease." But the problem was, it wasn't understandable. Some of the top ophthalmologists had looked at her eyes, and couldn't describe it. Belle could only see in black and white, and her vision was a little blurry, but that wasn't the odd bit. The odd thing to doctors was that

everything was like a shattered mirror. To Belle, one thing would become numerous, and some things would appear to be cracked or shattered. A crowd of three people would become ten, fifteen, or even thirty. The sky looked like someone had laid a mirror on it and then struck it with a hammer. The clouds were disproportionate and looked like a Picasso painting. Even sometimes with enough light reflecting in her eyes, she could see behind her.

She arrived at school earlier than usual. The amount of people was scarce, and she could actually manage her way through the crowd. She arrived at what she thought was the door being opened for her, and only hit her head off the wall. She fell back onto her butt, and sat quietly, listening to the snickers of people around her. Belle rubbed her forehead, and before she could stand, she heard that soothing voice call out to her.

“Hey! Are you okay?” Rang out Luke’s voice through the crowd.

She turned and his face appeared normally. He knelt down in front of her and pulled out a cloth to wipe the blood off her forehead.

“I swear this happens almost every day,” he said, a little aggressive, but still calm.

“I-- I’m sorry,” she said, suddenly.

At that, the entire lot went almost silent, besides the odd few kids still talking. Even Luke was taken aback.

“Did she just talk?” One student asked.

“Belle, the mute, just said something,” said another, pulling out her phone, and recording it.

Luke was the next to speak. “I haven’t actually heard your voice,” he said, smiling.

Belle’s face turned red, and she stood up and ran. She managed to reach the right door and pushed herself inside.

The principal froze and looked at her, his dark hazel eyes shooting an aggressive look at the fifteen-year-old running past. “Belle! You’re not supposed to be in here!” He shouted as she ran past, but she didn’t stop.

She stumbled as she ran up the stairs to her third-floor classroom, before running inside and closing the door behind her. Her teacher looked at her oddly, and Belle had to look away.

“Belle? You’re awfully early,” she said in a confused tone.

The anxious teen just shook her head and sat in her desk at the back of the room. She stretched out her arms till they hung over the opposite end of her desk, and then rested her head in between them.

*You have to let go, Belle.*

Her mind flooded with memories of that day.

The voice of a woman in her late thirties filled her ears.

A woman stood in front of her.

She gave Belle a warm smile.

The woman's seafoam green eyes stared at the girl, holding a look that showed happiness.

A gentle hand rubbed against her cheek.

Belle could feel tears streaming down her face, but she didn't dare wipe them.

The black room she stood in became a blurry vision of a hospital.

She could see the woman she loved so dearly lying in the hospital bed.

For once her vision was clear, her eyes seeing everything in one clear frame.

The woman's beautiful green eyes had become grey and cold, staring at nothing.

Her arms were limp, not able to give her daughter that warm touch she always needed.

The vital signs monitor started coming to life, beeping frantically.

Doctors rushed to the bed, quickly trying to slow the decaying number of lines on the monitor, but it was no use.

Though her mom was already gone, she knew she was telling her something.

Even as she was being dragged out of the room, crying for her mom, Belle knew these exact words.

*I'm sorry that I have to leave you so soon.*

*When the time is right, you will know.*

*You have to let go, Belle.*

“BELLE!”

Her head shot up, confused and dazed. The shattered vision returned and everything that was supposed to single became so much more.

She could see the students looking at her, their judging eyes piercing through her and skyrocketing her anxiety.

“Belle, your father is here,” said her teacher.

In an instant she stood and ran out of the room. She could hear kids laughing, and that’s when the waterworks started. She walked through the hallway, her vision becoming a blur. She tried wiping her tears away but they just kept coming. She could hear students in the hallway looking at her and judging her.

“Look at this loser,” an older kid spat out in between laughs.

She reached the first floor, and then tripped over her shoelace, falling to the ground and sending her books, phone, and glasses flying. She heard something crack and she couldn’t tell if they were her glasses or her phone. More snickering and laughter occurred from some of the kids hiding behind the stairs.

She crawled around trying to grab her things, when a familiar pair of broad arms scooped her up and placed her on her feet. She then heard grunting as someone was bending over to pick something up. A familiar hand grabbed her and led her through the hall and out the building.

No words were spoken as they walked to the truck together.

Her vision was still a blur the entire drive home, and her memory was foggy. Belle grabbed her bag and ran out of the car, up the stairs, and into her room, closing the door behind her. She flopped onto her bed and in an instant, she passed out.

Hours passed, though to her it felt like minutes.

She awoke to the sound of knocking on her bedroom door. She sat up, about to crawl out of bed to open her door when she stopped.

“Hey kiddo. It’s just me. Can I come in?” Came her father’s voice.

When she didn’t say anything, he sighed.

“You know, you’re right, I’ll just stay out here.”

Belle didn't say anything as she slowly pushed herself against the wall, getting ready to listen.

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry, about the past year and how I haven't really been there for you. I know it's been a year since mom's passing, and that you've been really hard on yourself since then." He sounded like he was holding back tears.

Belle pulled her knees to her chest and dropped her head into them. Her head filled with images of her mom, and she began tearing up.

"I know that I haven't been the greatest of dad for you," he continued. "I'm sorry that I wasn't there to hold you when you needed it. I'm sorry I haven't been able to help you with your vision, and the fact that you're bullied," he said through sniffles. She could tell he was crying, and she was too.

"From now on, I'm going to be the father that you need. One that's always there for you, just like your mother was."

She let out a hiccup through her tears, and he knew that he had gotten through to her.

"Oh, and I think it's time you got this," he said, slipping an envelope under the door. "It's from your mother."

She wiped her tears and looked at the base of the door. Sitting there was a pink envelope with a heart seal on it. She stepped off of the bed and picked it up, spinning it around and glancing it over.

The back read, *To my dear Belle*. She smiled and sighed. Just reading that was proof that her mom had written it.

She tore the seal and opened the envelope, revealing a fancy piece of lined paper. It was light blue with snowflakes lining the sides. Even in the big city of Minneapolis, her mom would always be able to find the quirkiest of things.

Belle carefully unfolded the letter, and tried reading it. She could tell it was her mother's hand writing, but the longer she stared at it, the more her vision cracked. She tried putting her finger under one word at a time. She tried putting the letter really close to her face. She even tried to take a picture of it and reading it off her phone, but nothing was working.

She laid in bed and cried, until she eventually fell asleep.

That night as she lay in bed, her mind filled with images of Luke. The images played in a distinct motion, giving her an idea what she needed to do.



Then her own words told her something, “go and get him or you’re going to lose the feeling mom gave you.”

Her dream grew more and more until she had a direct plan playing on repeat. It was time that she broke her bubble a little bit for happiness.

“Morning kiddo.”

She awoke to see her dad standing in the doorway. He looked like he hadn’t slept at all.

“Morning dad,” she responded while throwing on a new shirt and pants.

She turned to see her dad looking at the ceiling. “Would you want to stay home today?” He asked.

“No. There’s something I have to do,” she responded, picking up the letter and putting it in its envelope.

“Oh, and what’s that?”

She let out a sigh and stood in front of her dad.

“I need to talk to someone,” she said quietly, hugging him and then stepping past him.

Her dad chuckled before realizing she was serious.

“Did you hit your head? You never talk to people,” he said, sounding shocked.

“Well, most people. But this one’s different.”

“Different how?”

Belle finished packing her bag and eating her toast. She opened the door and stopped, turning to him. Her dad looked like he was still awaiting an answer.

She sighed and gave him a warm smile.

“He’s like mom.”

She closed the door and began walking to school.

Class was different today. She could tell people were sending her weird looks and giggling and snickering at her, but she didn’t care. She was too focused on her plan to be bothered.

Her vision began to web. Her eyes were playing tricks on her and getting worse and worse as the day got closer to lunch.

When she was on the first floor, she began walking toward the big crowd near the stairs. She got close to the crowd, and laid eyes on who she was looking for.

Belle walked up to Luke and cleared her throat, making his attention turn to her.

"I need your help," she said, and she grabbed his arm and led him carefully outside, almost bumping into the wall a few times. She pushed open the door, and dragged him out to the bleachers. She walked up the third row and pointed at the seat, gesturing for him to sit down. He did, and she sat down next to him.

"Belle, are you okay? I've never seen you talk this much."

"I- I'm fine. I just need you to read this for me since my glasses are cracked," she said, pulling out the letter and handing it to him.

He took it with a confused look on his face, but didn't say anything.

"It's from my mom. I'd read it, but my vision's been bad lately so I thought you could for me." She said, half lying.

He sighed and opened it slowly. She readied herself to listen.

Luke cleared his throat and began reading.

*To my dear Belle,*

*I don't know when you'll be reading this, but I take it that day will come when your father is ready. It was hard to write this, because I know that this will be hard for you. Actually, I don't even know if you'll be able to read this, because I suspect that your shattered eye sight will get worse and worse as the years go on. I'm sorry that you weren't able to live the rest of your life with me. As much as I wish that this disease that has overtaken me would go away, I know that life has a goal for everyone and mine has begun. But I know that with my goal being complete, your life can keep going. I will always love you, dear daughter of mine, and just remember.*

*You have to let go.*

As Luke finished reading, his voice was raspy and he was reading up.

"Belle, I'm so sorry," he started, looking at her. He walked over to her and saw that she was crying.

Before he could do anything, she stood up and hugged him.

"Thank you," she cried. "Thank you so, so much."

And as she held him and cried, Belle had finally let go.