



2023 *Short Story Contest*





*The Future.
Starts Now.*

**Produced by Innisfil ideaLAB & Library
December 2023**

Seepe Walters



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 supported by the Friends of the Library, is being remembered through the Seepe Walter's Award.

The Innisfil IdeaLAB & Library would like to congratulate all the students who entered the 22nd edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest. Since 2002, we have received hundreds of unique stories, celebrated dozens of aspiring local authors, and been overwhelmed by the talent in our community. Looking back at over 20 years of short stories, we celebrate the power of writing and the value of these young voices.

The contributions of many have made this contest and this publication a reality. The Innisfil ideaLAB & Library would like to thank Judge and Canadian children's author Melanie Florence for her time and thoughtfulness in reading the entries; the teachers and families of the aspiring writers for their support and encouragement; 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 2023 edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest.

Laura Jeffery
Children's Librarian
Innisfil ideaLAB & Library

DISCLAIMER

The viewpoints and opinions expressed in these stories are those of the individuals themselves and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints and opinions of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library or its staff. Some content may not be appropriate for all audiences. Parental discretion is advised.

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2023 Seepe Walters Short Story Winner

Clockwork Princess
By: Riley Ma (Gr. 12)

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The stage is dark, but I can still see faces. Expectant, watching me closely. I stay still, curtsied, hands outstretched. Waiting.

The overhead spotlights turn on with a boom, followed by a faint electric buzz. The light pinpoints my figure on the stage, reflecting off my metallic joints. I scan my surroundings, eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness. The four thousand seats of the D'Ailleur Hall look to be filled.

If I turn my head to the right a little bit more, I will see Olivier. But he has instructed me against doing this. I am simply to perform what we have rehearsed.

I register the slow strum of a cello, followed by the strained notes of a violin. This is my cue.

I slowly rise from my bow, my limbs clicking faintly. My clockwork dress shifts to adjust to my movement. I start to dance.

Olivier told me this dance is sombre. It is to reflect the Great Sorrow of Fading Hope, which he later explained should be imitated through slow, exaggerated movement. We practiced and practiced as he fed me more information and more moods he wanted me to mimic. He told me how happy he was when he watched me dance. That I was proving something to the world. It made me satisfied to hear him say these things to me.

As I dance, I can still see the faces of the audience. Their eyes are captivated by my every move, trailing each step I take. This is good.

The gears on my dress click rhythmically as the music's tempo picks up, and I spin in pirouettes across the stage, leaping and landing in poised arabesques. Olivier installed a shock absorption system quickly after our first rehearsal. He told me the whole street could probably hear me landing on the ground, and that wouldn't do.

It is now the final movement of the piece. I sense mechanical parts shifting inside me as my movement slows down, and I finally end in an outstretched position on the floor, my head facing downwards as the cello plays its last note.

The crowd erupts in deafening applause. I look up and see smiles, mouths gaping, even tears in a few eyes. I rise up from my position and look to the right as Olivier comes out onto the stage, walking stick in hand. He has trimmed his beard, which he says is too silvery for his age but "demonstrates his inner maturity", and his normally unkempt gray-auburn hair has been tamed and tied back neatly. His eyes are shining as if he had just wept, but I see no tears on his face now. He takes my hand like what we rehearsed, and we both bow as the crowd shouts praises and showers the stage with roses. He allows the noise to dim before clearing his throat, his voice magnified throughout the hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it was my honour to show you the future tonight. A future built by the minds of today, reaching horizons that some dare not dream of. But I do. I dare to dream it, to create it, to discover it!" Olivier raises his arm, and the crowd claps thunderously in response. "And so, on behalf of me and Koletta, I thank you for allowing us to perform for you tonight. To be brave enough to glimpse into the impossible made possible. Thank you! Have a wonderful night!" We bow again, exiting to the left. Olivier is still grasping my hand tightly as we walk backstage, where he has a toolbox and several other devices sprawled out on the vanity.

“Koletta, you were perfection! *Magnifique!* Your dancing... I must have seen it thousands of times by now... but seeing it on stage... you truly brought tears to my eyes. I wept like a baby! And— and did you see the audience, Koletta? A full house! I told you, you’re going to fix this world. You’re going to change them all! Now tell me, are you working fine? Anything not in order?” Olivier is grasping both my hands as he praises me, his eyes looking as if they might well up with tears again. I shake my head.

“Everything feels fine, Olivier. I am glad the first show went well.” I reply. Olivier shakes his head.

“More than well, Koletta! You did wonderfully. You danced with such emotion... it captivated everyone...” he trails off, looking back towards the stage. The energetic bustling of the audience is muffled through the heavy curtains.

“That is all thanks to your expertise, explaining to me how the Great Sorrow of Fading Hope should be danced. Otherwise, I’m afraid I wouldn’t have been able to reproduce the emotion of the performance.”

“Yes, yes, you truly captured sorrow faultlessly— pardon me—” Olivier’s sentence is interrupted by a fit of coughing.

“Perhaps we should head back now, Olivier. You have been out for a long time, and it has been an active day.” I start to clean up the tools on the vanity. Smooth metal is difficult to pick up with my fingers, so I take the box and sweep the tools in. “You can give me a checkup once we are home and you have gotten some rest, if you like?”

“Yes, very well, then off we go.”

The next week is busy. The public interest in my next performance has increased, and Olivier prepares me tirelessly. I watch material he has provided to me to study, ranging from

dance recitals to movies that Olivier has secured. It is hard to find movies nowadays, Olivier told me. They are not made much anymore, aside from the informational ones. Olivier shows me many newspaper clippings, pictures of my dance printed in black and white on the covers. I flip through them in my spare time when we are not rehearsing or adjusting my body. Phrases like “mechanical marvel”, “the perfect robotic dancer”, and “face of the future” come up often.

A paper Olivier has proudly pinned up above his workbench reads: *“Olivier has managed to create something beyond anyone’s wildest imaginings: the clockwork princess that dances with emotions perfectly imitating a human’s. It raises an important question: is there truly a specialness that sets humanity apart, and could this be what the future holds?”*

Olivier sleeps less now. He deviates between being in his study with books and papers sprawled out around him to spending time with me, oiling my joints or polishing my metal plates, if we are not rehearsing. He tells me about all kinds of things until I remind him that he needs rest. The night after my second performance he sits in bed and speaks to me, too tired to eat at the table. I prepare his food and medication for him today. His pills are small and white, and I crush them over his food before handing it to him on a tray.

“Thank you, Koletta. You have been working just as hard as me. Now, if only my limbs were made of metal instead of flesh.” Olivier jokes, setting the tray on his lap. I smile back, clicking faintly as I sit on the wooden chair by his bed.

“I have a question about one of the movies I watched.”

“Of course. Go ahead.”

“It is the one with the man who has scissors as hands. I don’t understand the emotions of the townspeople. How come they were afraid and jealous of him at the same time?”

“Ah, that one,” Olivier sips from the bowl of broth on the tray, “Yes, well, I often find that humans spend much of their time in insecurity. And there are a lot of fears that surround that insecurity. After all, we don’t want to deal with anything that risks our comfort, do we?” Olivier sighs and takes a bite of bread before continuing. “That man reminded the people of their insecurities. That maybe they weren’t unique enough, or that he could do what they could. It made them scared, and it made them jealous. Does that make sense?” I try to make sense of it. Insecurity makes people feel unstable, and that makes them feel afraid of it. Then they long for stability, making them jealous.

“Yes. Thank you. I understand now.” Conflicting emotions can exist at the same time. Like how people felt happy watching the Great Sorrow of Fading Hope.

“People are tricky, Koletta. You will find that.”

Olivier finishes his food, and I take the tray to the kitchen as he falls asleep. I sit in the moonlight that comes in through the window. It is not enough to nourish me, but I shift my metal plating to reveal the solar panels beneath anyway.

I process the events from today. The audience reacted like last time with smiles and tears, and there were more than last time. Some faces were the same because people came to see me for a second time. Olivier says my studying has been effective and that the emotion in my dance has improved.

Satisfied with today’s proceedings, I shut down for the night.

Things carried on regularly. I was taught a new dance Olivier said was called “A Flurry of the Most Desperate Emotions,” more intricate than the last. My faceplates were upgraded so that I could make expressions that I couldn’t before. I would spend many hours a day

sitting by the window to look at the faces that walked below, trying to copy what I saw. It took a month for Olivier to finally deem the dance ready to be performed.

The first few performances have gone well, but things have started changing. Something odd happened the night of my third performance of A Flurry of the Most Desperate Emotions. Olivier showed me a paper that did not have the usual words in it, with big bold letters,

“BEWARE OF THE CLOCKWORK DEVIL”

There was once again a picture of me, taken from my performance, but it wasn't of my dancing. It was my face, enlarged to see the metal plates and wires that made up the side of my head. I had an angry expression. I made that expression during a part of my dance, as Olivier directed me to.

“Keep reading, Koletta. I believe you'll find it interesting,” he had urged me. The rest of the article read:

“At a glance, the captivating performances of an imaginative robot should be celebrated and revered, but beware, there is more that lies beneath this technological “marvel” than it seems.

Koletta, or Model KOL 1.4, is the brainchild of inventor Olivier Gatineau, who many would describe as explorative or ambitious at best and downright dangerous at worst. He is the most extreme of the corrupted figures devaluing the heart, claiming there is nothing making us ‘human’ that cannot be replicated and improved. He wishes to perfect what is achievable only through a person using the mindless programming of mimicking robots.

'Koletta is how I see the future,' Olivier stated at his recent performance. 'She is the embodiment of my visions for this world: emotion manufactured perfectly, indistinguishable from our own. Is this not the progression we seek?'

When will we draw the line against these extremists, who hide behind a facade of 'progression' to further their dystopian agendas? How long will it be before our families are composed of robots? We are people of creativity, love, and individuality, and government agents like Olivier Gatineau threaten to replace it entirely. The stage has been set. We must fight back."

"It's a wonder that this newspaper is still running. It is the largest remaining one that pushes against the Devaluation. To catch their attention is a substantial feat that I have been waiting for, especially in this manner." Olivier proudly smooths out the paper on the kitchen table, ripping off the irrelevant pages.

"I am afraid I don't understand. Will this not affect if the audience likes the performances?" I ask.

"It certainly will. The Devaluation is not what people thought it would be. The belief that the human heart serves no functional purpose nor specialness was easier to accept before its ideals took form, and resistance is growing. I am positive this article will begin to turn them against what we have done. But you need not worry about that. Simply keep doing what you're doing."

"But-"

"Laissez-faire, Koletta."

Yet the popularity of our shows increased. At the end of today's performance, Olivier receives an award of merit from the government: a medal presented in a velvet case for "exceptional contributions to progression".

I received an award too: a magnetic badge that the presenting officer stuck to my chest plate. As I looked into the crowd, I saw some applause. But I also saw emotions I recognized. Jealousy and fear.

I walk offstage with Olivier and assist him into his new wheelchair. There are more security guards than usual when I wheel him out of the building. They lead us into our vehicle, designed by Olivier to accommodate my bulky figure.

As we drive, I see a crowd being broken up outside the D'Ailleur Hall. Someone has spray painted over the promotional poster of my performance. The word "MENACE" drips from the glass in red. My badge reflects in the window, and I take it off. The magnet is interfering with my battery.

I look at Olivier. He does not seem to mind the events outside. I decide it is not a concern.

After we have arrived home and Olivier has fallen asleep, I head back to the kitchen. There are leaflets on the table that Olivier found outside. I see more close-up pictures of my face, accompanied by calls to action. I read them.

"Progression will end us. Justice for the human heart! Humanity cannot be programmed!"

Flipping through the leaflets, I process for a long time. By the time I shut down, the streets outside are still.

For the next two weeks, I do not perform. Olivier's condition has worsened and a nurse has been hired to care for him. He mostly stays in bed now, although his enthusiasm has not changed. He talks to me about movies and inventions he has drawn up when he has the energy.

When he is asleep and I have nothing to do, I look out the window. One day, a group of people marches by, shouting and holding signs with the same phrases I read on the leaflets. They pass out of my sight. It is quiet outside for a few days afterwards until a bigger crowd comes by. I watch them for a while before I hear Olivier call out from his room.

"Koletta!"

I turn away from the window and go to his room, pushing open the bedroom door.

"Yes, Olivier?" He looks tired, but otherwise okay.

"Come sit, I want to talk to you. I'm afraid the hours become quite tedious when all the company I have are the shouts of protesters that seek my own downfall." He smiles. I nod, sitting on the chair by his bed. My metal scratches against the wood, and I try to sit as gingerly as possible.

"Now, I hope you didn't think all I've been doing these past weeks is sitting here idly. In fact, I've been hard at work devising your greatest performance of all. One to end the others." Olivier opens his hand, revealing a small chip.

"Tomorrow, I want you to perform this. It is my proudest work, apart from you, of course. I believe it will be no challenge to you." Olivier sits up as he motions me to come closer. I bend down as he opens a compartment in my chest, sliding the chip into place before closing the compartment again. I scan through the new data. "I have titled this dance as

Requiem of the Human Heart. While it breaks my heart to say I don't believe I can make it in person, I will be watching you from here. I'm sure it will be just as perfect."

"Will this be my last performance?" I ask. Oliver nods.

"I believe so. I have composed this to be the finale of our work. It will be bittersweet. When you return home afterwards, we will celebrate accordingly." He smiles as he grasps my hand. His fingers are just as cold as my metal.

I sit in his room with him for the rest of the night, even after he drifts to sleep.

I arrive at the D'Ailleur Hall alone, earlier than usual. Olivier wanted to give me extra time to calibrate since he gave me the performance data on short notice. The lights are dim as I step onto the stage, and the auditorium is empty. I dance in the dark, the sound of clicking gears in the Hall.

I wait backstage after I rehearse. I can hear the audience filling in on the other side of the curtain. Internally, I run through *Requiem of the Human Heart* while I count down the time.

A pair of scissors is sitting on the vanity belonging to Olivier. He must have left them here after trimming his beard.

When the time is right, I walk onto the stage and get into position. The audience quiets down as the lights dim, the curtains opening. I register the quick bow of a violin. This is my cue.

Requiem of the Human Heart begins with fluid movement, accompanied by the cascading notes of the orchestra. Olivier's data has input details of emotions of wonder and newness, which I emulate through careful pirouettes and jetés across the stage. Olivier has filled this routine with intervals of high and low, and I am constantly leaping and sinking to the music.

As I dance, I notice that the audience isn't quiet as usual. Some are not sitting, and there is even shouting coming from the upper stands. I disregard it, because I am here to dance.

As the next movement begins, the music turns faster and more dissonant. I make expressions of despair, of anger, and of hurt. The routine becomes increasingly aggressive. I can hear the shouting of the audience clearly over the orchestra now.

The notes slow down eventually. My movements are still rigid but have mellowed from the unrelenting energy of earlier as I slowly drop to the floor. But I can no longer hear the orchestra over the shouting. Someone climbs onto the stage, their face contorted as they run towards me. More follow, and before I can rise, someone plunges a wrench into the metal of my arm, leaving a gaping dent.

Olivier must have known this would happen, because I know exactly what to do. Although I cannot use my left arm, my right pushes me up so I can run away. Another person grabs onto my dress, letting go in pain as my metal leg collides with their shoulder.

But I am not fast enough. People clamber to get a hold of me, and the function of my right arm quickly disconnects as well. Something hard collides with my head and my vision malfunctions. I hear crackly jeering.

I have one final resort. Olivier had originally designed my mechanical dress to come outwards as an alternate appearance for dances. The gears on my body shift as the sharp metal rim of the skirt pushes upwards, forcing people away. I run backstage, my dress folding back downwards as I push the back exit door open with my body.

It is raining, but I must make it back to Olivier. I run through the alleyways of buildings so as to not be caught. I am not designed for the rain, and my vision is crackling with increasing frequency.

I am almost there. The dents in my arms are letting in water, and I see yellow sparks from my exposed wires. I make it to the back of the apartment before I collapse. I cannot see.

I lie on the pavement, face down. Raindrops pitter on my metal body. My power is depleting quickly.

I hear a door swing open as uneven footsteps slap against wet concrete.

“Koletta!” Olivier’s voice, frantic.

He groans as he rolls my body over. My vision flickers, and I see his face in brief increments.

“I-I saw it all happen. You danced beautifully... you danced beautifully.” Olivier weeps.

“I-I co-o-uld n’t fini-ish the d-danc-ce.” I try to say, but my voice box must be damaged. The words come out staticky and broken. “I-I f-a-ailed you-u.”

“No, no, dear Koletta. You have done perfectly.” Olivier murmurs softly. “From the beginning, you have done everything perfectly. You learned emotions. You cared for me. You captured the human heart. You reminded the people of Île-d’Égaré of their specialness. That is all I’ve ever wanted.” He lays a hand on my chest, over the dents wrecked by the audience. “People have chosen other things over human sentimentality for a while now. We do not see its value, its importance to us as a species. But you have seen the worth. You have analyzed so much, and learned that reason has so little of a place in the heart. And you have shown the people that they care about this individual, irreplaceable part of themselves that they brushed aside. My mission is complete, thanks to you.”

I turn my head a little, so I can better see Olivier's flickering face. There is too much damage. My battery will die soon.

"So-o you a-are hap-ppy?"

Olivier nods. "Sweet Koletta. I am beyond happy." His thin hair is soaking wet with rain, but he does not seem to mind as he kneels beside me.

"Then m-m-y-y m-iss-sion is co-omp-plete too. I a-am ha-appy that yo-ou are happy, Olivier." My vision goes black. All I can do is listen as I shut down.

In the blackness, I hear his voice.

"My clockwork princess. Rest now, Koletta. You have done wonderfully."

Junior Division Grades 3-6

Why Not Me?

By: Isabella Laing (Gr. 6)

more inside

Livy was sitting in her room, trying to get lost in her new book, but her mind was racing, and tears started welling up in her eyes. Her heart was aching, and she just wanted time to stop.

“Why was this happening?” she kept saying to herself. “Why her?”

The sinking feeling began last night, and she spent the whole day in dread. She had overheard her parents when they thought she was fast asleep. They were weighing the pros and cons of another move. Her parents’ work would finish, and they would have to find work in another place. They were consultants and went where the work was. She could hear her parents’ words ringing in her head,

“Groceries cost money and we need to make money so we can all eat!”

Livy didn’t want to be selfish, and she knew they had to eat, but she liked it in Ontario. Being 10 years old was hard. You are old enough to know many things but not old enough to make certain decisions. She loved the friends she had made and her school. The berry picking in summer and then making jams to last all winter. Apple picking in the fall and the tasty apple crumble that made her mouth water just thinking about it. She loved the rolling hills as the leaves changed color. She often thought she was living in a beautiful painting.

Livy looked around her room that she had spent countless hours decorating. She had the perfect pale pink and aqua walls or as Benjamin Moore says, “Pink Powderpuff” and “Icy Moon Drops”. She loved her twinkle lights sparkling all around her as she drifted off to sleep

at night. She made a cozy reading corner so could flop down in her bean bag chair and be surrounded while she read her books and dreamed of the future. It was her own space and soon it would be gone.

Livy could feel resentment and anxiety flood her body. Why was she being forced to move again? To give up everything she knew? Forced to leave her friends and make new ones? Forced to find the perfect shade of Benjamin Moore paint one more time because a new start always meant new paint? She felt mad and kept asking herself again and again, “Why me?” Her whole life she had been taught to embrace new adventures and what was in front of her. To remember to be thankful that it had happened and not that it was over. Yes, Livy loved new adventures, travelling the world, seeing new places and meeting new people. It brought her more joy than anything. She believed with everything inside of her that if you didn’t seize the opportunity to do these things you wouldn’t be living life to the fullest. She had done it since she was a baby, so it was a part of her soul. But at this moment she was simply mad and felt sorry for herself.

Livy desperately wanted to convince her parents to stay. She started making notes in her trusty journal which documented all of Livy’s adventures.

How to Convince Mom and Dad we should stay in Ontario

- *I can get a job and contribute to the expenses (babysitting at \$15 per hour x 20 hours per week = \$300).*
- *Take pictures with my friends and show them how happy I look;*
- *Research new potential home and find all the negatives so they won't want to go;*
- *Convince her sister it was a terrible idea and get on her side;*

- *Explain that she was at an age where friends shape your future and I have the best friends here.*

Her thoughts slowed down as she got distracted and started turning the pages in her journal and reading about her incredible adventures. Remembering the time she sheared a sheep in New Zealand, went tobogganing down a five-mile run in the Swiss Alps, walked on The Great Wall of China, skied in the Canadian Rockies.

“Wow!” Livy thought to herself, “I am pretty lucky. Why me?” And then she thought, “Why not me? Why not anyone?”

Livy felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. “Why not me?” she kept saying out loud. We are not entitled to anything in life. It is a privilege to live our life with a family that loves us, and we should always be grateful for every experience. As long as you are surrounded by people that love you, you can get through anything.

“Clomp, clomp.” Livy heard her parents coming upstairs to her room. As they knocked on her door, Livy took a deep breath. She was ready. As her mom walked in, Livy blurted,

“I am ok to move. It's going to be hard to leave this amazing place but I am ready for our next adventure!” Her mom smiled and said in her soft voice,

“Oh Livy, I love your sense of adventure. Your dad and I have decided that our next adventure will be to stay here for a little while longer. What do you think?” Livy replied,

“As long as we are together it will be perfect. I do love it here, but can we still go on day excursions? I have a journal to fill!”

As Livy drifted off to sleep that night, she realized that the scariest things we overcome often provide the greatest sense of accomplishment. She feared what the next adventure may be, but the thought of no new adventure wasn't something she could accept. It was far scarier

than facing her fear of moving. Life may not be perfect, but she told herself to always remember: “Why not me?” and she could accomplish anything. Livy’s eyes closed and she started dreaming of herself taking her first step on the moon.

“Why not me?”

Junior Division Grades 3-6

Colour

By: Jasmine Rajora (Gr. 3)

more inside

Far away in a green, flowery land known as the Butterfly Kingdom, there was a beautiful and colourful butterfly named Colour. Colour was smart, funny, kind, and friendly. She had loving parents, Happy and Lovely, and five good friends named April, Bright, Light, Tulip, and Rose. They all lived in the Butterfly Kingdom within the forest.

One day after school, Colour was excited because she had won the writing competition! When she returned home, she saw that her mom and dad were sick. Her friends flew by, and they were sick too. She then learned that all the butterflies in the kingdom were sick. Colour panicked. She never thought sickness could transmit so quickly! Soon she began feeling sick to her stomach so she went to bed hoping she would feel better the next morning.

In the morning, Colour got up to get ready, but she was still feeling unwell. So, she went to the pond to wash her face hoping to feel better. There she saw her reflection in the water and to her shock her colour was fading away! She flew home screaming. But when she arrived home, Colour looked at her mom horrified and said, “Mommy you are losing your colour too!”

“Sweetie, the whole community is losing their colour and getting sick.”

“Mommy, I want to save the butterfly kingdom with my friends.”

“Okay, dear, but stay safe!”

Colour gave her mom and dad a big hug and kiss. Then she visited each of her friends at their homes and said,

“Let’s meet at the park. It’s an emergency! Make sure to give your moms and dads big hugs and kisses.” So, her friends all gave their moms and dads big hugs and kisses and joined Colour on their way to the park.

At the park, Colour said,

“All the butterflies in our kingdom are getting sick quickly and we need to save our kingdom!” Tulip interrupted and said,

“Where are all the plants and flowers?” Everyone looked around and gasped with fear. Colour exclaimed,

“This is going to be a big mission. We can’t wait. Let’s go explore right now!”

The friends flew throughout the butterfly kingdom exploring. As they were flying, Bright saw an old grumpy man cutting down trees. Light spotted another human snipping flowers. Shortly thereafter, Tulip saw another human with a huge truck destroying bushes. The more the friends looked, the more damage they saw to their beautiful kingdom. They saw hundreds of men and women destroying their habitat! Horrified, they flew down and gathered.

Colour exclaimed,

“We are going to split up and find out why humans are destroying our habitat. We can go under big trees to source out information and then come back to this tree.” All the butterfly friends nodded, and Colour yelled,

“One, two, three - let’s go!”

The friends spread out. April spotted a poster board and flew towards it. She read the display depicting a plan for highways, buildings, and a large steel factory by the year 2026! Unfortunately, this would mean destroying the beautiful land that the butterflies called home. April flew as fast as she could towards the tree where they gathered and shared her findings.

Colour, alarmed, said,

“This is not happening on my watch. Let’s make a plan!” All the butterflies huddled together. Colour continued, “We will make a sign in the sky that says, ‘SAVE OUR HABITAT’.”

Tulip remarked,

“But our group has only 6 butterflies!” Colour declared,

“Bingo! We will call the whole kingdom into action!”

The friends spread out. They visited each butterfly home in the kingdom to gather all the butterflies saying it was an emergency. All the butterflies in the kingdom, sixty thousand in total, gathered within 15 minutes! Colour told everyone about the poster and explained the plan. All the butterflies were shocked and unanimously said,

“Let’s do this!”

The butterflies flew up to the clouds above the site where humans were destroying their land. The butterflies formed a message in the sky, ‘PLEASE SAVE OUR HABITAT’. At first not one human noticed the message until a small girl, ironically named Flower, glanced upwards and said,

“Daddy, look at the sky!” Her father, the old grumpy man cutting trees, looked up. He was astonished and saddened at the same time. His friends were also in awe of what they had seen. All the humans dropped their tools and sadly said to each other,

“Let’s go. I can’t ruin their home.” They collected their tools, turned around and walked away.

The little girl stayed behind with her dad cleaning up. She could not stop thinking about the plight of the poor butterflies. Later, she returned home and fell asleep crying. The next morning, she collected some seeds in a bag and snuck outside of her house. She went to the

same place her father was cutting trees the day before and opened the bag of seeds. Then she went to the lake and collected a jug of water which she poured over the seeds. She patted the ground with her hand and kissed goodbye to the soil. She snuck into her home before her father woke up.

In the Butterfly Kingdom, the butterflies slowly were awakening and getting ready for a new day. Colour's mom tickled Colour's tummy so she could wake up. Colour opened her eyes, looked at her mom and said,

"Mommy! Mommy! Your colour is returning!" Her mom replied,

"Sweetie, your colour is starting to return too!" Colour flew outside and looked. There she saw the beautiful, colourful green land like always. The mission was a success!

All the butterflies in the kingdom gathered at the central tree. There, the queen of the kingdom declared,

"Everyone, our beautiful home is restored. No more sickness and colour loss. Thank you for your cooperation in saving our land!" The queen especially acknowledged Colour, April, Bright, Light, Rose, and Tulip. All the butterflies rejoiced and lived happily in the Butterfly Kingdom forever after!

Junior Division Grades 3-6

The Logger and the Magic Tree By: Daniel Kotchetkov (Gr. 5)

more inside

One sunny afternoon, a very successful and skilled logger named George was walking to his client's house. He had gotten an unexpected call just an hour ago to remove a strange tree in a backyard from a man named Ralph Crooks. The people in his town always called George when they needed a logging job done, and he was perfect because he loved what he did.

When George got to the house, he went into the backyard and saw the tree. Ralph was right, it was strange. The tree was mahogany brown with pulsing purple veins and leaves of all the colours you could only imagine. As George approached the tree, he had this magical, peculiar feeling inside of him, but he decided to ignore it. He revved up his chainsaw to cut down the tree, but before he could put the chainsaw to the trunk, the sap spewed everywhere and got on George.

Some sap got into George's mouth and he accidentally swallowed it and fell to the ground. The world around George got darker and darker. It seemed as if the sap was swallowing George bit by bit, and he thought he saw a glimpse of Ralph chuckling and carrying him away.

The next thing George knew, he was in bed. It was morning and he felt strange, like he was an eerie magical being. "Phew!" George thought, ignoring his feelings. "It was just a nightmare. Boy, am I exhausted."

But he wasn't just feeling tired. It was a sort of tired he had never felt before. He thought it was simply because of his nightmare, but he was wrong. Very wrong.

The next job George got was to cut maple and spruce wood for a house. George couldn't finish the job, because sadly, there was a giant forest fire. Although nobody was nearby, he heard thousands of terrible screams, like the people were screeching because they were on fire. They were screaming about the pain of the fire, and about how global warming was causing so many disasters. George thought he was just hearing things because no one would care for silly old trees. But he was upset that he had to delay the house for the customer because he loves making houses for other people.

After one month, the forest fires settled down and it was safe for George to enter. Again, George heard coughing and wheezing, like people in pain. He also heard someone say,

"We do so much for you but you just cut us down! You litter all over our homes! The forest animals are dying from your selfish acts! There is global warming because of you!" But no one was around and George ignored the voices.

After three weeks George cut all the trees for the house, but it was exceedingly difficult because every single time he started his chainsaw and put it to a tree, he heard a deafening scream. This went on for months until he started going crazy.

One night he said to himself,

"I'm going crazy because of my job, and I don't know what to do." After another week, he couldn't take it anymore and he went to his manager and said,

"I quit! Every time my chainsaw is even close to a tree, I hear an ear-splitting scream and it's driving me insane with every tree I cut down."

His manager was shocked. Thinking George really was crazy, he brought him to a doctor. However, the doctor said that there was nothing wrong with George. The manager almost fainted and got really upset that his best worker was leaving his whole career behind.

Now wherever George walked, he heard,

“Stay away! I have children! Please don’t cut me down!” George was shocked and wondered if it was his imagination. He finally spoke to the tree,

“Don’t worry. I won’t cut you down.” The voice then said,

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

George was now convinced that the tree was speaking to him, and that he wasn’t losing his mind. George was speechless. He felt overwhelmed with all sorts of emotions like wonder, disbelief, and fear. He was about to yell to the world that he had discovered a talking tree and he could become famous. But after he had a conversation with the tree, George actually found out all the terrible things that we humans have done to them.

The tree said that we have been cutting down trees for houses, for furniture, and exploiting their precious home. George asked the tree how we would have houses if we didn’t cut down trees. The tree thought for a moment and said,

“As long as you don’t abuse our resources and don’t take them for granted, we are happy to share.”

George was amazed by his wisdom and thanked the tree. On the way home, he ran into Ralph and told him all about his adventures. He asked Ralph,

“The day before I could talk to the trees, I had a nightmare. I was going to cut down your tree, and I swallowed some sap. You chuckled and dragged me away. Did that actually happen?”

Ralph confirmed, “Yes, it did.”

George asked why and Ralph responded in a way that he didn’t expect.

“Well, when I was a young man in my mid-twenties, I was also a famous logger. But one day I got a call from someone to cut a tree down, just like you, and I swallowed the sap. I can speak to trees too and I quit my job. I now speak for all the trees and hope that it’s not too late to save them AND save our environment. Do you want to join me?”

George answered, “Yes, I would love to join you!”

From then on, George was committed to sharing his message to the world to protect the forests: by protecting our trees, we protect our environment, our future, and our precious planet.

Junior Division Grades 3-6

Waabigwah

By: Ophelia Berridge Kassam (Gr. 4)

more inside

One early morning, Waabigwah went to the stream where her family would go to talk to their families who have passed on.

She had lost her mother Akie at birth, and she would often go to the stream to talk to her mother. Her mother was a beautiful person who looked just like Waabigwah with her chestnut eyes that sparkled like the stars and her long raven hair that would blow free in the wind. She was kind and she loved children as much as anyone could.

As she sat by the stream, Waabigwah said to her mother,

“I am sad, I don’t want to live without you.” A voice replied,

“I am always here for you even when you don’t feel my love, I will always love you, my child.” And there was silence again. Waabigwah had gone to the stream for some answers since she had known she would soon lose her father as well from a sickness he had been fighting for many months.

Waabigwah shed a tear, she was so sad and felt she could not bare to live without her family.

The sun was going down, so she went home, and she spoke to her father Noodin about the day she had and shared her worries with him. Noodin was a wise person in the village and wore a long braid and had skin that glowed as the autumn leaves do on the forest floor when the sun shines. Noodin had been ill for many months, and the village doctor had been concerned about his illness. Waabigwah worried about losing him as well. They sat around the fire, and he told her stories as they did every night, stories of brave people and

hard times and how there was always a solution to every problem in these stories and it gave her comfort, and she went to bed with feeling love in her heart.

The next morning, there was quietness and silence in the air. She went with her friend Wanona to pick some corn from the husks. They were talking as they picked the corn, and they had a lovely time until Winona shared the news with Waabigwah that she had heard from the village doctor that morning that her father has become very ill, and he could pass away tonight.

Waabigwah felt frozen as if she had been stuck in an iceberg when she heard this news. She rushed home to her father, and she ran as fast as the wolves with her heart pounding in her chest like a beating drum.

When she got home, her father said,

“I want to tell you something before I go, I love you and when I am not here you will still have family.”

“But who is that father?” Waabigwah said in between her sobs.

“The Ojibwe people. Our people, they will keep you safe, they are our family.”

Waabigwah felt a sense of calm come over her, and all her fears disappeared. She sat by her father all night and told him stories of bravery and hard times and tried to give him comfort as the fire crackled through the night.

The next morning, she found her father had passed on. The time she had with her father was only 14 years, and she felt alone, the news saddened her, yet she knew she could always go to the stream to talk to her parents.

She was kept busy doing chores, playing and spending time with friends and other family as a fifteen-year-old would of her tribe. Winter was just around the corner and the cold

had created a magical frozen frost all around. She went back to the now frozen stream to reflect on her parents passing, and as she did, she bent over and looked into the frozen water, and saw herself, her reflection looking back at her. She had to come back in spring when the stream flowed to talk to her parents. She knew she had a long life left to live and to carry on with her parents' legacy and she went back to her village with a new life, and happiness in her heart.

Junior Division Grades 3-6

The First Flight By: Viktoria Poirier (Gr. 6)

more inside

Once upon a time, there was a Mother and Father robin that built a nest. They laid five eggs and cared for them for days until one morning, they cracked.

"Oh my," said Mother, hovering above the nest.

"The eggs hatched!" cried Father.

Four eggs had splintered apart revealing four beautiful squawking chicks.

"But what about the last egg?" asked Father.

They waited all day, tending to their new chicks, until the sun went down. Finally, the fifth egg started rocking from side to side. Crrrrraack! The egg splintered apart. The chick inside was smaller than all the others and it did not start squawking immediately. It just sat there in the corner of the nest, quiet as a mouse. Mother named her Rose.

The chicks grew up in the nest. Days went by while Mother and Father fed the chicks various delicious worms and seeds, though Rose preferred red berries and they made sure that she got them first when they found some.

Rose was an unusual chick. She was petite and quiet, waiting until all the other chicks were done eating so that she didn't have to wrestle for food with her pesky siblings. The biggest thing that set her apart was that she didn't want to leave the nest. All the other chicks couldn't wait to go out into the unknown, but Rose wanted anything but that.

"I like it here," was all she said.

One night, just as Mother was coming back from gathering food for the chicks, one of Rose's sisters asked,

"When do we get to see the world, Mother?"

"In three days I suppose."

Rose's siblings were very excited, but not Rose. When the day came, she firmly said,

"No!"

"But Rose, you have to learn how to fly," said Father.

"What if I don't want to fly?" asked Rose.

"All birds have to learn how to fly," said Mother.

So when all her siblings jumped out of the nest onto the branch to begin their flying lessons, she followed them reluctantly. Her first thought was, *It's so big!* The trees were tall and seemed to stretch on forever. Below, there was a clearing with a stream snaking through it, that appeared quite wide and deep. They were very far from the ground.

"What if we fall off the branch?" she asked her parents.

"We will catch you," said Mother.

"This is really cool! Can I go yet?!" hollered one of her eager brothers.

"Flap your wings up and down, up and down, just like this," Father demonstrated by flapping his wings. "Now you try."

All the chicks started flapping their wings except for Rose.

"What's wrong Rose?" Mother asked.

"I don't want to learn how to fly."

"Why don't you want to?" asked Mother.

"I like our nest."

"Just watch your siblings fly and then you can decide whether you want to try or wait a couple more days."

"Fine," said Rose begrudgingly.

One of her brothers jumped on Father. "So can I go now?"

"Let me show you what to do," said Father. "Stretch your wings wide like this and jump."

He demonstrated as he jumped off the branch. "Then after a couple of seconds you keep flapping your wings up and down. If you start rising up, great! If you start falling, flap them as hard as you can so that you don't crash. Alright, go!"

Rose's largest brother jumped off the branch, glided for a couple of seconds, and then remembered that he was supposed to be flapping his wings. He rose up, hollering

"This is so much fun!" And flew back to the branch telling his siblings, "You really have to try this!"

One by one, they all tried. One of Rose's sisters initially wasn't able to flap hard enough and was falling, but she caught herself before she hit the ground. After a couple of minutes of watching her siblings fly around, Mother asked,

"Rose, would you like to try now?"

"Can I watch for a few more minutes?"

"Of course you can."

"I'm just scared that I will fall and hurt myself," whispered Rose.

"I understand. Try flapping your wings on the branch instead."

Rose decided that flapping her wings without going anywhere wouldn't be that bad. So she slowly started to flap them and found it kind of fun.

"Can I try now?" asked Rose.

"Absolutely."

"But stay beside me Mother."

Rose jumped off the branch and stretched her wings as far as they would go, gliding downwards slowly with the wind blowing through her feathers.

"Good," Mother said. "Now start flapping your wings."

Rose flapped her wings hard and found that she was rising quickly. "This is fun!" she said.

Rose and her siblings practiced flying all day. Right before they went back to their nest for bedtime, they all landed on the ground. Mother told the chicks that the next day, she would teach them how to find food for themselves.

"Can we go back to the nest now?" Rose asked. "I'm tired."

"Sure, Rose," Mother happily said. "All right chicks! Back to the nest."

They flew back to the nest, and Father told them the story of how he learned to fly as a chick. As they were falling asleep, Rose thought learning to fly isn't that bad and trying scary things can be good.

"Thank you for helping me learn how to fly, Mother," she whispered before drifting off to sleep.

"Of course, little chick," whispered Mother. "I'll always be here for you."

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Broken Firewood

By: Catherine Yuen (Gr. 7)

more inside

I was playing my favourite game, Roblox, when I saw my mother's face pop into my room. "Sweetheart, why don't you practice the violin instead of gaming? You have a lesson in two days and you haven't even touched it this week," she asked. The problem was, I really did not feel very motivated to play the violin. I picked up the instrument when I was very young. It was fun THEN. But these days, I prefer listening to music more than making it. Every time I tried to practice the violin, I felt like there were so many other things I could do or needed to do instead of making some sounds with a wooden stick gliding on wires on a little wooden box. But my mother insisted that I should take lessons and practice. She even said that I have a talent for it as I could pick up new techniques rather easily. But couldn't she see that it was going nowhere? I simply did not care to practice. So, I did not answer. I was too focused on trying to beat the enemy and lead my team to victory. We were about to win!

She repeated the question, but much louder. "Amelia Brown, answer me!" she exclaimed, "Why are you always wasting your time on those games?" I started to get annoyed. We had talked about how I did not really want to play the violin anymore, but instead of acknowledging that fact, she still kept pestering me.

"Mom, don't you see I'm busy?!" I muttered with annoyance. Her face and mood immediately changed. Out of the corner of my monitor, I saw her disapproving stare like a sword stabbing into my soul. Without another word, she marched off out of my room and slammed the door to make her point. Practicing the violin was always the sticking point for us these days. The rest of that night, we mostly did not speak. We just gave each other the "side eye." Our home felt colder than Antarctica. That night, going to bed, I was wondering, "Really,

why does my mom want to make me play the violin so much?" Needless to say, it was not a good night's sleep.

The next day I dragged myself up for school. The only thing keeping me motivated to go was my best friend, Alex. I entered the school and walked into a classroom full of the sounds of the usual morning chatter before lessons. There, I saw my best friend Alex as she ran up to me.

"Amelia! How are you today? Ready for art?" she uttered with excitement because she knew that art was my favourite subject. She always had a way to make me feel good whenever we met. I was not very fond of school in general and I sometimes had anxiety. Being the only person who knew, she seemed to care as she walked with me to my seat and the lesson soon started. During art class that day, I took the liberty to express myself and my feelings by drawing droplets, rain, and grey clouds over a dark forest.

At the end of the day, my mother pulled up to the side of the school to pick me up. It was time to say bye to Alex. There was no rush, but no escape either. We were together again, stuck in the car, with no Wi-Fi for games. My mom seemed to drive extra slowly with much detouring and started, "Sweetie, I'm just wondering- why don't you pick up the violin?" It was this conversation again. "Did you know that music holds a very special place in our family for generations? Your grandparents were exceptional musicians, and you are one of the most gifted in our family for the violin." I started to wonder. *What did she mean?* What she just said sprouted a new curiosity in me for my ancestors for the first time. However, my mom rarely mentioned details about them as I only knew that they passed away in an accident that was still a trigger of pain for her as she was very close to them.

That night, I made my way to the attic as I knew that my family kept some old articles there. I discovered a box with something interesting. As I rustled through it, I stumbled upon a stack of old yellowing newspapers. Just as I thought I was getting sidetracked by the look of these pages, my eye caught attention to one word that appeared over and over. Whitlock. That was my mother's maiden name! At this point, my mind was questioning everything. Why would there be an article with my mother's last name? As I read the article, it started to make sense. It read, "Today is a sad day for the musical world as renowned musicians James Whitlock and his wife, Ashley Whitlock were tragically killed in a major fire accident in their home." I stared at the article in shock because those were the names of my grandparents. I only began to realize that my grandparents were famous. The date was April 24, 2002. No wonder on April 24th my mother had always seemed detached like she was in her own world. I read some more. "Whitlock and his wife were a well-known dynamic duo of the piano and violin." This got me. I took note of the address of the burnt-down place, and I was determined to visit that spot someday. Conveniently, it was in my city, but in the west end. We lived in the east end, so it was possible to go there but I felt that it would be hard to convince my mother to take me there as she rarely wanted to recall the accident. Until now, I was rather oblivious to the details that surrounded their passing. However, I had grown increasingly curious to know more about my grandparents.

The next day at school, I could not wait to break the news of what I had discovered at my house to Alex. I explained what I found out, and as soon as I mentioned the location of my grandparents' old address, Alex snapped, "We've gotta get you there!" It was like we had a new destination for an adventure to go to. For me, it would only be the beginning of learning more about my family's history. Alex told her parents about my brief discovery of an article

about my grandparents and the response I got from them was more than I expected. They were quite in awe that their daughter was the best friend of someone who was related to someone rather famous. They explained that Alex's grandparents often took them when they were young to various concerts and shows that showcased the Whitlock duo until their sudden passing. They also had records and photos of their performances. I decided that it was time for me to finally initiate a long conversation with my mother about music. I hoped that I could score a visit to the address that was recorded in the newspaper article.

That night, I finally took my violin to practice in order to get my mother's attention. As I played the ever-dry progressions of scales, my mother slowly but surely made her way closer to my room, eyes wide open, shocked but smiling. I carefully placed my violin down and invited her in, to her amazement. I revealed to her my recent discovery which prompted a talk that was at once deep, novel, and to me immensely meaningful.

My mother recalled how my grandparents met as young adults in music school. They married and decided to perform together and became world-renowned musicians whose performances would draw crowds to concert halls. They played their own compositions and many well-known classics as well. Their joyful performances would bring an audience to their feet while the more serious and sombre pieces would bring them to tears. When my mother had me, she recalled how my grandfather once said that music was humanity's universal language that spoke directly to the heart and that he hoped that the musical traditions in our family would continue for future generations. This probably explained why both my uncle and my mom were quite proficient at music.

My mom became quite emotional as she recalled how tragedy struck one day when the furnace of my grandparents' home exploded and fire engulfed their house so quickly that both

my grandparents perished in the accident. My mom regretted that she could not bring herself to talk about the incident before. However, she acknowledged it was perhaps time for me to learn more about our family's history, though it would trigger depressing feelings for her. In fact, our grandparents' home was still our family's property but under the management of my uncle. When I ventured to ask about visiting the site of their home, I was surprised that she agreed to bring me and Alex's family there! I had to admit that this talk surpassed all the satisfaction that I got from Roblox.



That was it! This was the house! Over a weekend, my mother and my uncle took me, Alex and her family to tour the house where my grandparents once lived. Some parts were rebuilt after the fire. There was old furniture and burnt marks in some areas but I was particularly interested in a room where there were various instruments. Suddenly, something caught my eye. It was a beat-up violin case with scorched marks. Carefully, I opened it. There were pieces of charred, broken wood in there. I motioned my uncle over to ask about it and he explained that this was one of the fiberglass violin cases that survived the fire. However, the violin inside was just remnants of a burnt violin that my grandfather often used in performances. On the inside of the lid, a single violin bow was locked in place. It looked old but in good condition. My uncle said that my grandfather owned a few very valuable violin bows, and this remaining one was a very special one that was made of Pernambuco wood, a very precious kind of wood for violin bows. As my hand approached the bow, my heart was pounding with excitement and reverence. I could not believe that I would be touching the

instrument that my grandfather once used. Although I had very faint memories of my grandparents, this tour brought me closer to them than ever.

My mother followed up with something that completely blew my mind. “Sweetie, in your grandfather’s will, he stated that he would love for at least one of his descendants to play the violin. He had played it all his life and enjoyed it immensely.” I was speechless but what she said enlightened me to the reason for me to take violin seriously and why my mother had always pestered me to practice. This tour sparked a renewed purpose and value for me to keep playing the instrument.



Months after the tour, I devoured all the recordings and videos of my grandparents. I learned so much about them online. The violin now holds a special place in my heart. I enjoy it more than I could ever have imagined, and to my surprise, even more than Roblox. Playing the violin even eases my anxiety. In the corner of my room now sits the fibreglass case with the most special broken wooden pieces, and every time I played with the Pernambuco bow, I felt as if I was holding my grandfather’s hand. I may or may not become an accomplished musician, but I would sure try to enjoy the violin, learn to play it as well as I can and share music with others.

“Amelia! Are you ready for your violin lesson?” my mother yelled as I was packing up my violin.

“Yep, coming right up!” I replied.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

The Dollmaker

By: Jane Stroud (Gr. 8)

more inside

On the night her engagement was announced, Cecelia went grave digging.

The ground was cold but spongy, making the difficult job a lot easier. Her shovel hit wood and she tossed it aside, hiking up the pants she'd stolen from the kitchen boy. She brushed aside the dirt to reveal a plain wooden box. She slid the kitchen knife under the lid and pried it open. The body inside was that of a young woman, her decades-long sleep left no meat on her bones. She carefully wrapped the bones and made her way into the forest.

In the old, dark forest the leafy canopy seemed to block out even the moonlight. The ground was cold and wet, and Cecelia seemed to trudge endlessly through it. She got to a clearing where the moonlight poured out of the canopy in an unnatural circle. Nothing was there. Disappointed, she turned to walk back when she noticed a bright cottage that hadn't been there before.

The door had intricate carvings inscribed on it and magically opened. Cecelia stepped inside. A creature sat by a table, wrapped in a shapeless cloak and beckoned her to sit.

"You know why I'm here," she said briskly

"What did you bring?"

She unrolled the tangle of rag and bone onto the table. The creature briefly examined the pile. "It's a good start, but more is required."

"What more does it need?" Cecelia inquired.

"It will need his blood, she must know her victim," the creature said, its long fingers twitching. "And the last," it trailed off, tracing a boney finger along her brow.

Cecelia shuddered but remained firm. "I'll be ready."

The creature's leathery face stretched into a too-wide smile revealing a hundred sharp and pointed teeth.

When Cecelia had gotten home she had been so exhausted that she'd fallen asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow, forgetting to take off her clothes. She awoke in a panic as her nurse walked in with a tray of food. She frantically searched around for a trace of mud only to find herself clean and the kitchen boy's clothes replaced with her chemise. "Dress fittings after breakfast," the nurse said, exiting the room.

Hungry, Cecelia removed the cloth covering her breakfast bowl, but instead of the usual porridge and honey, she discovered a calf's heart, its blood slowly seeping into the cloth. She felt a surge of love for her nurse.

Still hungry, she went down the hall for her fitting. The dress that Cecelia was to wear to her wedding was wonderful while the man that she was marrying was not. Sir Richard was forty-four, thirty years her senior. He peered at her while she was being fitted through a crack in the door. Cecelia could see him and tried her best to ignore him. The corset was tight and she was having a hard time breathing, and the seamstress was adding on the final details to the dress.

When the seamstress seemed satisfied she pulled away and Sir Richard entered the room, he was too close. "I love you in that dress, my dear." His hot breath sent a shiver down her spine as his long tongue moistened worm-like lips. His heavy cologne did nothing to cover up the stink of unwashed skin.

“And I’m sure you loved all the girls you put in this dress too. Beautiful young brides and beautiful young corpses. Charlotte, Margaret, Daphne, Agnus?” She said staring hard into his eyes.

He seemed taken aback before he smiled a wide smile and loomed over her threateningly. “Bad things happen to women who don’t learn to hold. Their. Tongue.” He turned and exited the room.

Nurse swiftly entered the room and helped to undress Cecelia, glancing at him with barely concealed disgust. “Sir Richard is a sickly man,” she said, her nimble fingers undoing Cecelia’s laces.

Each walk to the demon’s cabin was as arduous as the first. Once she had brought the heart the creature had examined it, turning wordlessly away from her to continue its task. Cecelia took this as a sign that her offering had been acceptable and trudged back to the manor.

Sir Richard’s physician could be careless at times, although Cecelia assumed that Master Alden wasn’t expecting her to steal something as distasteful as used leeches. He keeps them in little clay jars on his cart, which was left unattended in the hallway outside Sir Richard’s room. Cecelia could hear the loud voices emanating from within the white door as she plucked one leech and placed it in a glass jar. The leech squirmed and she felt nauseous, the leech slimy and cold in her hand.

Sir Richard had many friends from his years of service and Cecelia could make out the drunken words, all slurred together. “You’re marrying another young bride eh? No bruises, haven’t beaten her yet.”

“Oh those sweet young women are fragile headstrong things, a tumble down the stairs and I’m on another hunt! Their slender necks, so soft under fingers,” Sir Richard said, taking a long pull from his goblet. “It was difficult to get her father to agree but I was very persuasive. Better to lose a daughter to marriage than a house to flame.” They roared with drunken laughter echoing around the room. Their yellow teeth glinted in the light of the fireplace, wine spilling from the corners of their mouths like blood.

Cecelia felt a chill down her spine and horror flood her as she rushed to her room.

The light from the large windows in the demon’s cabin hit the old hardwood table where something lay. The demon had used the skeleton and bone to create a creature, a doll of sorts. Cecelia watched as the demon slice open the leech, Sir Richard’s blood dripping onto the doll’s hands. The demon did not look at her and Cecelia left, wearing an expression of grim determination.

The nurse was waiting for Cecelia when she entered her room through her small window. “Come with me.” She said, beckoning for her to follow.

The nurse led Cecelia to her own small room, where she began to unbuckle her old wooden trunk. She flipped up the rusted flaps and with gentle hands she shuffled through her few belongings until she pulled out a dress. It was a light purple with a long skirt and delicate embroidery. “This dress belonged to Charlotte,” she said, her face a mix of emotions as she caressed it with her fingers. “She was my first charge, and I loved her like my own.” She gently pushed the dress into Cecelia’s hands.

“I didn’t know enough about Sir Richard to protect Charlotte. I never dreamed you would be in the same situation. But I still whispered it to you, the story. I didn’t know it was real, the Dollmaker in the woods.”

*“A skeleton all stitched with twine,
A heart that beats as strong as mine,
Drop of blood from a heart of black,
Dress of she who will come back.”*

The nurse wiped away tears from her eyes. “And you know the last thing you’ll need.” The nurse placed a gentle hand on Cecelia’s shoulder. “A brave heart.”

Cecelia’s arms wrapped around the nurse. The nurse smelled like home, this was the woman who had loved her and raised her, she was more like a mother than Cecelia’s own.

A completed doll lay on the Dollmaker’s table. It had grown flesh along the bone and was almost perfect, except for the two large holes in its head. The doll sat up, looking at Cecelia with the eyes it didn’t have yet. The Dollmaker turned towards Cecelia. “You brought me a skeleton wrapped with twine. You brought me a heart as strong as thine. You brought me blood from a heart of black. You brought me a dress from she who will come back.”

Cecelia closed her eyes. “And now,” the Dollmaker reached for her face, “a final gift from thee.”

“My eyes so that the doll can see.”

Losing her eyes wasn't as painful as Cecelia expected. It felt more empty than anything, as if a part of her soul had left her as well. Everything was dark until the doll had open its eyes and looked around. Then Cecelia realized that she was crumpled on the floor. She had transferred herself into the doll, watching through her own eyes like a ghost as the doll strode down the long path to the manor. Cecelia watched as the doll walked through the hallways, grasped Sir Richard's silver handle and entered the room.

Sir Richard sat by the fireplace, asleep in his big chair, his snores echoing around the room. She watched as the doll's hands closed around his throat and squeezed. Sir Richard woke with a start, choking. He attempted to push away the doll's hands; he may be a large, strong man but this doll didn't feel pain and continued to stand like a statue. His eyes flared in recognition. "Char...lotte..." he choked out desperately, pawing at the doll's arms.

The dolls mouth stretched into a wide crazy smile but said nothing as the life drained out of Sir Richard, agonizingly slowly. His face turned an interesting shade of purple and he fell limp in his chair. The doll held him in place until his heartbeat stopped, then dropped her hands. Sir Richard crumpled onto the floor. The fireplace blazed as the doll walked into it, the fire licking at her beautiful purple dress. The doll's smile softened and it closed its eyes as the flames engulfed it. Within moments the doll had turned to ashes, which flew out the chimney. The doll finally felt at peace.

Cecelia felt the hard wood floor under her turn into dirt as the cottage faded away, leaving her alone and blind in the middle of the clearing. She heard familiar footsteps and hands reach to touch her shoulder. "She's free and now, so are we."

Cecelia felt blood-stained tears trickle down her face as she pulled her nurse into a hug, burying her face into her chest and holding on tightly. She felt the nurse's arms wrap

around her back and pull her close as she listened to the gentle sound of the trees swaying in the wind.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Better

By: Ava Simpson (Gr. 8)

more inside

Have you ever listened to a song and really gotten lost in it? The words flow over your skin like silk, and the melody just seeps into your pores like a sweet mist until you're hypnotized. Your muscles relax and when you breathe out the feeling, it revives your body, and that's when you know you're lost. That's a feeling I love, that's why I wear my headphones everywhere I go. During every moment I can steal, I put on my headphones and get lost. I don't have many friends but the one I did have, she made me feel like that. That's how I knew she was special when I met her. She wasn't perfect, no one is, she was just special.

I'm starting my story on a Tuesday, don't ask me what Tuesday because I have no idea, but I know it was a Tuesday in December right before Christmas. I'm sitting in an uncomfortable blue plastic chair at a desk you'd expect to see only in an elementary school. At this point I'm in grade six I believe. I have short chin length ash-blonde hair with confusing layers, my face is round with youth and my body is still soft from being in the middle of puberty. The class is giving out secret Santa gifts and guess who the only one that was left out was? I sit at my desk patiently waiting for the class to begin after the gift exchange. I'm used to not being included, so I don't mind the light laughter coming from all my peers.

Suddenly I look up from my inevitable daydream and there she is. She looks at me and says: 'Want a candle?' I don't use candles. The dollar store ones scare me especially because of the chemicals, but she takes me by surprise. I say yes without thinking, and thank her. She walks away quickly to her other friends. Right after school I find the lighter we use to light birthday candles, I light the fake orchid scented wax and watch the wick burn. It's after that moment she gives me the gift we start talking.

Fast forward two years, my best friend is in high school and I'm stuck in grade eight at the same small town country school I've attended for ten years now. At this point over the summer we've already tried to sneak alcohol (we all know I'm terrified of alcohol and would have chickened out anyway) And that didn't help with my parents already dampened approval for the girl. I never really step out of line, I more toe it to see my limits and recoil from repercussion.

My best friend however, breaks the rules with reckless abandon. I admire her for that, but that also means I'm stuck as the stubborn mother of the relationship, the friend who keeps the other one safe. While she's struggling with the constant hustle of high school life, I have to deal with the never ending drama of the people around me, and the petty arguments that never seem to cease. Now how would someone of my mentality go about that issue you may ask? I say sit in the bathroom and read your shallow vampire romances or go to the music room with your thermos of ravioli and compose something decent. Life is quite bland without her, so I do what any girl without a social life would do and decide to ask her if I can sleep over at her house for the weekend.

Things started out fine, we baked a lemon cake (made from the Betty Crocker box, added sprinkles, turned out quite good surprisingly) we painted each others nails (she painted my nails red and I tried to force her into letting me paint her nails but after a short scuffle including some choke holds she only settled for one single nail) and we called her current crush at the time (he had a friend over and I started interrogating him, safe to say we didn't like each other very much and I may have made him cry a few weeks earlier) and talked about life in general.

It was always calming when I was with her. Then we decided to go outside, it was nice out, a little cloudy but a good dry heat. That's when things went wrong. My friend thought it was a good idea to climb onto the roof to look at the clouds, I refused to go up and to this day I regret it. Maybe if I had followed her up I could have stopped her from slipping on a loose shingle. Maybe I could have pushed her out of the way. I'll never know now, because as she tumbled off the roof onto the ground from three stories up, all I could think was 'NO.' I rushed to her side as she lay with her light brown eyes wide open and unseeing, soft pretty face stuck in a permanent state of shock, her neck and limbs twisted at all the wrong angles, beautiful long sleek black hair that I was always jealous of whipped into a tangled mess.

I was too late. As she lay in the grass with my warm hand wrapped around her slowly cooling one, I listened as her mother dialed 911 and the ambulance arrived. Blue and Red lights flash across her face and I can't take the piercing noises of her parents screaming at her to wake up. That was the day my life ended. It took a very long time for me to even start living at least a little bit again.

The funeral was a catastrophe. I'll admit that's entirely my fault, but how else was a thirteen year old girl supposed to react to her fourteen year old best friends death? We were supposed to go to college and be roommates and raise our kids to be best friends like we were. Now she was stuck in a glossy wooden box, forever preserved in a peaceful looking dreamless sleep. I was sitting in the front row of the service. I was originally supposed to say a few words, but after the first sentence I couldn't take it. With the salty tears running in a stream down my face, I choked back my heaving sobs and ran out to the front room of the funeral home.

At the time I had wished I was numb, or that I had a delayed reaction, but looking back I'm glad I got the worst over with sooner. There was a burning hole in my chest, I couldn't breathe but I needed to scream, the pain kept building up inside of me and I needed to release it or else I felt like I would break into pieces, or tear in half. I started screaming. It was a primal animal sound, throaty and shrill, I didn't even realize it was me who was making the sound. I heard it like I was in someone else's body, I figured it out when I realized there was no one else in the room. I could have sworn I was dying, the pain in my chest was so radical.

I finally stopped screaming, my throat raw, I believe my throat was bleeding. As I tasted the iron I started to get angry. How was this fair? How could anyone who was up in the heavens take my beautiful angel away so soon? How could they when we were supposed to do so many great things? I was furious. At the world, at myself, at what could be a god, everything, everyone. The walls were covered in framed certificates from fancy mortician schools, probably very impressive but I didn't care. I pulled back my fist and smashed every single one of the delicate glass panes. Glass and blood was everywhere but I couldn't feel it thanks to the pure rage emitting from my soul. I pulled the glass out of my bleeding knuckles and picked up a china vase containing some plain white roses sitting on a shiny brown side table, and threw it against the wall.

That was when my mother heard the commotion and came to check on me. A few moments before she entered the room I simply stopped. I leaned against the wall and slid down into the fetal position, attempting to hold the breaking pieces splintering from my chest together through the sheer force of my arms. My mother softly opened the door to the front room, sensing the storm had passed. She took a second to process the chaos, then quietly sat beside me. I think she knew there were no words that fit quite right for the situation, so she

merely rubbed my back, waiting for my sobs to subside. I slowly sat up and crawled beside her, balling into her lap. We sat like that until one of the workers at the home found us and offered to help clean the mess.

She died in October. That meant basically the whole year of school to deal with the “I’m so sorry”s and the “She was a really nice girl”s from the people who never cared before. Not a single day went by where I didn’t think of my friend. Not a single day goes by that I don’t miss her.

In December, Christmas rolled around and we started deep cleaning the house to make room for the new. I was rummaging through old tupperware containers that had no specific logical organization purpose but were just filled with random knick knacks from over the years. I found the candle she gave me for Christmas that one year, the wick broken and black, the wax covered in dust. I picked it up like it might shatter into a million pieces if I held it the wrong way, and brought it to my room, abandoning the task at hand. I lit the candle and watched it burn slowly, thinking of what could have been. I cried a lot that night, the ugly back-hunching snot-running eye-puffing red faced kind of crying.

February is when I started to slowly heal. Instead of crying when I thought of her, I remembered good times and laughed to myself. It might sound cliché, but it does get better. In the moment and for a while after, it feels like the world is ending and nothing will ever be the same again. In a way, it is. The old world is ending but that means a new one will be born. Eventually instead of the sharp, stabbing pain of grief taking over your mind, it’s a dull bittersweet ache. It never fully heals, it leaves a scar on the inside (and sometimes your knuckles) and you can make that scar beautiful, make it glow with memories, thoughts,

smells, tastes. Don't dismiss the feelings, it's better to feel the edge of a thorn while holding a winsome rose than to throw the rose away because it hurts.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Orion Vale

By: Madison Cline (Gr. 8)

more inside

I can't say my memories from my childhood are things I like to remember. Growing up in Arbor Glen, a small town in a valley in the middle of a forest that goes on for miles, there wasn't much to do. On warm days, you could go into the forest, play in the river, but that always risked monsters finding you. On colder days, you could gather near the firepit in the center of the town, but that always got so crowded. Rainy days always meant blessings from Valyn, so a feast would be held and the entire village would attend. I was never allowed to do any of those things.

Being the son of Arbor Glen's mayor, and a direct descendant of Valyn, my entire childhood I had been seen as 'more valuable' than others. I was forced to stay inside the house most days, my only friends being two kids; Oliver and Brooks, and even then, I only saw them about twice a week. They were about two or three years younger than me, and we had first spoken when they had climbed up onto my windowsill to pick apples from the tree outside my window. At first, I found them loud, and disruptive. Eventually, they became entertaining, and since they were the only people around my age I ever spoke to, we became friends.

As much as I hated it, I was only ever permitted to leave the house during feast days or when my mother needed to show me off, so my friends and I never got to hang out like normal kids did. They would sit on my windowsill and we would talk – though it was mostly them sharing stories, and me teaching them the things I learned from my books. That was

how it was for most of my childhood. Those few days a week are the only fond memories I have.

Me and my mother never got along much. She was too busy as the mayor of Arbor Glen to properly care for me, leaving my care to the elderly woman next door. When I did get the chance to speak to my mom, it always ended up in an argument, like when I was twelve years old.

When I was twelve, I was told that in the following year, I would be sent to Nova Atheria, the capital of Atheria, and would be enrolled in a private school. That surprised me, and not just because it had come without warning. I may have been the son of the Mayor of Arbor Glen, but we were nowhere near rich enough to have me enrolled in a private school in *Nova Atheria* of all places, and I had never been tested for a scholarship, either. So, how had this happened?

“Well,” my mother said, “you are a descendant of one of the gods themselves!”

“I’m a descendant of *Valyn*, mom. Does anybody even know Valyn outside of Arbor Glen?” I argued, noting the curious gazes of Oliver and Brooks from the window. I could almost *hear* the amused smiles on their faces. “Also, Nova Atheria is all the way across the country! Why can’t I just go to Aspen Grove instead? Or Linden Square! They have some good schools, too! And they’re closer than Nova Atheria!”

Mom shook her head, “Orion, there’s no getting out of this. You’re going to Emberwood Academy whether you like it or not.”

I groaned, turning around and pressing my palms into my eye sockets. I scowled as I heard the laughter from Oliver and Brooks. They had always loved seeing me get into arguments with my mother. I huffed as I heard the door shut, and defeatedly, I walked over to

the seat next to my window and dropped myself into it, slouching in frustration. Oliver's giggles stopped as he tried to speak.

"Uh oh, Mr. Money's gotta go to a rich-kid school, boohoo!" He teased, his hair falling carelessly over his eyes. Brooks smiled, her eyes watching the leaves flutter to the ground, her hair tied into two buns at the back of her head.

All three of us were complete opposites. Physically, I was average for my age, nothing special. I have brown hair, not too dark nor too light, and amber eyes. I was the oldest. Oliver was short, with black hair and icy blue eyes. He was the youngest of us, nine at the time. Brooks was taller than I was, but she was only ten. She had dark brown eyes, almost obsidian, and shiny blonde hair.

We were only a little similar personality wise. Oliver was energetic and extroverted, always being the one to get caught doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing. Brooks was quiet and closed off, but she also enjoyed encouraging Oliver when he was being stupid. I had to act like the parent for the two, which was difficult when being separated by brick walls and chains covering the windows. We all had one thing in common; a mutual dislike for Arbor Glen.

"So, Rio, whatcha going to do to get out of it?" Brooks asked, spinning a leaf around between her index finger and her thumb, her legs hanging off the edge of the windowsill.

I sighed. "I don't know." I whispered, and it was true.

*

In the end, by the time I had turned thirteen, I was sent to Emberwood Academy in Nova Atheria, days away from everything I had ever known. I missed Oliver and Brooks. I missed my room. I missed everything.

Not only that, but it was painfully boring at Emberwood Academy. Even outside of class, there was nothing to do! How could such a big city with an even bigger population be so insufferably dull!?

Today, two years after I first enrolled, I sat in my history class, completely uninterested. We were listening to our teacher go on and on about the gods we already knew; Nessa; goddess of peace, and her brother, Iarus; god of chaos, as well as the twins; Azyr; god of romantic love, and Oryna; goddess of platonic love, Cirys; goddess of the sky, Mune; goddess of the dead, Yorn; god of health, Eryn; goddess of animals, Nathair; god of the ocean, Solir; god of the sun, and his sister Rilua; goddess of the moon, and of course, Valyn; god of nature, my great-great-great-great-grandfather.

Quietly, I exhale a deep sigh of relief when the bell finally rings and we all start to pack up, our History teacher raising his voice to speak over the rustling of papers and screeching of chairs pushing against the floor. Quickly, I followed my classmates into the hall. It was our last class of the day, so no other classes to attend. Some would go out with friends, others would spend their time in the library or the garden. I chose the garden.

The garden at Emberwood Academy was always beautiful, no matter the season. I sat against a tree at the very end of the garden, staring at the leaves that had now turned golden. I watched as they fluttered to the ground, littering the green grass with small wisps of yellow. Several leaves fell in my hair, but I didn't mind.

I shut my eyes and let my head fall back against the trunk of the tree, taking deep, soothing breaths.

That is, until I heard the crunching of leaves beside me, followed by the feeling of an unwanted presence beside me.

“Ya sleeping?” The unwanted presence asks. I don’t respond, until I feel a jab in the side of my ribcage.

I open my eyes and glare at the boy sitting next to me, “What?”

The boy smiles, “Nothin’.” he says, shrugging dismissively. I notice his light brown hair and hazel eyes, as well as his chipped front tooth. “You just looked lonely.”

“Lonely?” I repeat incredulously, “How do I look lonely?” I ask, though I know exactly how ‘lonely’ I look, sitting by myself under a tree in a garden with no one else around.

He shrugs again, “Dunno. Just thought I’d come and sit with you. Nobody else is here, anyway.”

I shift my body to move a little further away from him, “What’s your name, then?”

“Caspian.” He answers, putting his hands in his lap. “You?”

“Orion.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah.”

We don’t say anything more. I return to pressing my head against the trunk of the tree and shut my eyes, slowly inhaling through my nose and exhaling through my mouth. Caspian sits there.

*

Months later, it's winter break, and I sit, exhausted, on a train going to Arbor Glen, my cheek pressed against the cold window next to me, my eyes half-lidded as they watch with disinterest as tree after tree passes, waiting to reach a small town in a valley in the middle of a forest that goes on for miles. This had been the first time since I had gone to Nova Atheria that I'd been able to save up enough money to go home. Yep, I haven't been home in two years. My mother didn't even bother.

Just like on that day a couple months ago, I hear the abrupt sound of somebody sitting next to me, the leather seat squeaking. My eyes drowsily drift toward the person who, despite the many empty seats, sat next to me.

"You looked lonely." Caspian says. I roll my eyes.

"What are you going to Arbor Glen for, anyway?" I ask him, though I don't really care for his answer.

"Visiting my little brother." He answers, shutting his eyes and leaning into the seat, "You know him? I know Arbor Glen's a small place."

I probably did. Arbor Glen was a small place. I was about to say "probably", but Caspian spoke first.

"His name's Oliver."

My eyes widen and I turn to face Caspian, "Oliver? You're Oliver's brother?" I ask, my voice quiet. I hadn't been able to see Oliver or Brooks since I had left; only this year had I saved up enough money to pay for the train ride home.

Caspian nodded, "Yeah. I just live with our dad in Nova, so I don't get to see him a lot."

“He’s told me about you.” I say, blinking in surprise. Caspian and Oliver didn’t look alike at all, I never would have expected it! I only knew Oliver had a brother from the times he’d excitedly jumped onto my windowsill and tell me all about his older brother, though I hadn’t gotten the chance to meet him – until a couple months ago, apparently.

“He did? Are you two friends?” Caspian asked, smiling widely.

I nodded, managing a smile, “We are.”

Caspian and I spent the rest of the train ride through the forest talking. I’ll admit, it was nice talking to someone, after almost two years of having nobody.

*

Once we finally reached Arbor Glen, Caspian was greeted by an excited Oliver jumping into his arms. It was a shock how much Oliver had grown in the past two years. He’d only be twelve now, but he was only a few centimeters shorter than me, when he used to be almost an entire foot shorter. It took him a moment, but when he saw me, he very loudly gasped.

“RIO!?” Oliver yelled, his hands still on his older brother’s arms. Caspian laughed, and in a split second, I was being crushed by Oliver’s bear-hug. “Oh, Brooks’ gonna be so excited! She’s been so sad since you left! C’mon, let’s go see her!”

I nodded, Caspian, Oliver, and I headed off to go see Brooks. It was strange, finally being able to freely wander around town.

When we had finally found Brooks, and she had seen me, she broke down crying. She was taller now, too, but somehow shorter than Oliver, and her hair was longer. I hugged her as she cried, mumbling quiet apologies for taking so long to visit her.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Invisible
By: Emily Grant (Gr. 7)

more inside

BAM! I died. I was dead. I thought about it over and over again. The last thing I remember was getting hit by the car, and now here I was. Wait, how was I thinking? The dead didn't think. I opened my eyes. Ghosts. A ghost town.

"AH!" I screamed. I looked down at my body, "AHH!" I did it again. I was a ghost.

"Welcome Avery Alina." The voice behind me startled me and I slowly turned around. I hadn't heard my full name in a while. Behind me was an angel-looking ghost, with a white flower crown on her head. "I'm your angel guide, and I will help you throughout your time in The City of Souls. It will now be decided if you were good or bad. If you were good, you will be taken straight to the Good city, and if you were bad you will have consequences then be taken to the Bad city." The angel spoke without a breath, no brakes in her voice. "I will now check your score." The angel looked above her head and frowned. I shivered, wondering what it said.

The angel looked at me, then the score, and did that a few times before she spoke. "You, unfortunately, have been bad. How old are you, Avery Alina?"

I looked at the angel and muttered, "18. And you can just call me Avery" I cleared my throat and the angel spoke again.

"Since you died young, you have been given a chance. First things first, your worst nightmares will come to you, it will happen anytime. Second, you have 3 days before your time is up. You must find the reason why and change it." Change it? Why? I thought. This

angel was stupid and annoying and crazy. Ohh, ok I see why I was bad. But how do I change it? I'm dead!

The angel kept talking some more. "If you don't change it in 3 days time, you will be sent to the Bad city. In the bad city, everything is bad, everything is painful, you feel the pain of everyone around you. Anyhow, good luck Avery Alina. I will be here when you need me." And with that, the angel disappeared into thin air. I stood up, brushed myself off. The town was a dark, gloomy place with mountains in the distance.

Before long, I felt myself being lifted up and BAM! I was teleported somewhere and I saw...a memory. I saw myself, talking to my now dead sister Eli. This was the last conversation I had with her.

"Bye Avery! See you after school. I love you." Her voice was soft and loveable.

"Whatever." I was clearly annoyed. Then against my ghost body will, I was following Eli. She stopped at the crosswalk and I kept saying to my ghost self, "Eli stop!" but she couldn't hear me. When she started walking across the road, I tried to shield her from the bus that was about to hit her. I couldn't do anything. I was invisible. BOOM! The bus hit her, and she started to die. I sobbed, but nobody could hear me, help me or help Eli. She was dead and I was invisible. The memory played over and over in my head until I was brought back to the City of Souls.

I sat on a bench on the dark sidewalk and cried, until I saw someone familiar. "Mom! Eli!" I shouted, running toward their ghost selves. They ran up to me and hugged me.

My mom started crying and asked, "Avery, were you good or bad? Eli and I, luckily, were good, the other ghosts told us you were here." She pulled me into another hug.

“Mom, I-I was bad.” I told her that with tears in my eyes. My mother looked at me with a ‘what did you just say?’ look.

She frowned, “Don’t worry, they are giving me another chance. I just have to, uh, do a few things.” I put on a don’t worry I got this smile while I said that. My mom looked at me in disappointment, then sighed and said, “Eli and I are in the City of Souls for three days. Don’t fail.” She looked at Eli and they both walked off toward the visitors' hotel.

I went back to the same bench and thought. Maybe I just need to become a better person. I bullied way too many people in my early life, maybe it’s time to change. A familiar looking ghost walked by me. “Kay!” I practically screamed running over to one of the girls I bullied, hard. Kay looked at me, clearly disgusted and annoyed that I was here. “How did you die?” I asked.

“Well, I went to a friend’s pool party and Kyle pushed me in. I can’t swim, so I drowned.” She spat out, clearly still mad at me for how much I bullied her for having a limp ever since she saved her brother from getting hit by a car.

“I-I’m sorry.” I whispered, looking at the ground. “For everything.” I added. She nodded at me and floated off into the distance, I watched her until I was taken into another nightmare.

“Lets go, Jacob!” Kay screamed! It was the first day of school for her and her younger brother, Jacob. Jacob ran down the wooden stairs with his backpack and they both ran out the front door. They stopped at a traffic light, but Jacob went before it was time for him to walk.

“STOP!” I screamed until my lungs gave out. I tried pushing Jacob back to the sidewalk, but I was invisible. I tried everything, but I couldn’t do anything, I was invisible. Kay noticed that a black truck was going through the light and didn’t notice Jacob. Kay ran across

the street and grabbed her brother, flinging him out of the way, but the truck hit her. I screamed, I cried but I was invisible and I couldn't do anything about it.

I was taken back to the City of Souls, and ran around being nice to every ghost I saw. "You look great! Love the hat. I'm sorry you died." I kept saying stuff like that to a bunch of ghosts until I saw Kay again. I walked up to her and said loud and clear, "I'm sorry for being mean."

She looked me in the eye, our eyes locking before saying, "It's ok." And with that, she walked off again. It was the night of the 2nd day, I felt hopeless. A bright light came again and I was transferred to another nightmare.

"Mommy, where is daddy going?" I asked. I was 7 years old and my father was leaving the house with a large black suitcase that contained his belongings. "Goodbye." My father spoke while looking out the front door, then left. I sat on the ground and cried for hours on end. I missed my dad. "Somewhere safe." My mom replied to my question with tears in her eyes.

I was taken back to the City of Souls and cried on the bench, alone in the dark street. I kept crying and sitting there till the sun rose.

"Angel guide?" I asked, "you there?" The guide popped up and I told her my idea. "Is there any way you can send letters?" I asked hopefully. The guide nodded. Her white dress blowing in the wind. She was floating high above me, yet her dress still touched the ground. I looked up at her. "I want you to send a letter to every person I ever said one mean thing to. I want the letter to say "I'm sorry." The angel nodded, never speaking a word and disappeared in a puff of smoke in the starry night sky.

It was the morning of the 3rd day, and my angel guide appeared upon me with an ancient looking scroll in her hand. I widened my eyes, crossing my ghost fingers. "You were good." The angel spoke very softly. She looked at me with her black eyes, gave me a small smile and nodded. The angel disappeared in another puff of smoke, and a bright yellow light picked me up and took me to The Good city. I had done it, now I could be happy for all eternity.

(A long time later) I floated up the mountains, down the hills, living that dead life. The Good City was awesome, interesting, with twists at every turn. I walked through a park and found another ghost, sighing, sitting on a bench. He had a depressing frown on his face and a black scarf around his neck.

"Are you alright?" I asked softly, whilst sitting beside him. The man started to reply and opened up quickly, "It's just....." he trailed off for a moment before continuing, "I left my daughter and wife alone when I was alive. My daughter was young, maybe 6 or 7? Anyway, I've been trying to find her and her mother for years. I haunted the house they used to live in and haunted every place they might be. I even checked to see if they died."

The man started to sob a little bit. "And I.....I don't know how to find them. I'm going to be alone for all eternity." He continued to sob well burying his face in the scarf. I looked out at the shining blue pond in front of the bench and listened to the birds chirp in the high, tall trees.

I put my hand on his knee replied, "What was the daughters name?" I asked. He looked at me with a look on his face that had a smile of hope, "Avery." He said loudly, "Avery Alina." The sound of my name sent a wave of surprise through my body.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

The Disappearance of the Northern Lights
By: Camden Cryderman (Gr. 11)

more inside

Tonight, the northern lights are shining brighter than usual. The dark blue sky is dominated by lime green, electric yellow, and deep purple hues. As the colours continue to swim in the ocean that is the sky, they paint a beautiful picture above my head. The lights wave to me, and I can't help but reach out toward them. I know I won't be able to touch them, but I have hope that, maybe one day, the lights might reach back toward me. Sharing this moment with my boyfriend, Mahikan, is magical. The feeling of his body close to me warms mine, regardless of the chill of the autumn breeze around us. He looks down at me laying in his lap and smiles. I feel the same feeling I had inside when I first laid eyes on him; enchanted. I wish I could freeze time forever and stay outside with him feeling at peace and safe in my environment. This comfort weighs down on my eyes, and I find myself drifting in and out of sleep until I finally fall asleep.

I wake up to screams. Familiar screams. *Mahikan*. I think to myself. I jump up and notice that he is no longer outside with me. I run around my house to the front yard to locate the source of these noises. *Nothing*. I dash to the front door of my house and notice the noise is coming from the other side of the door. I kick open the front door and run inside when I suddenly realize I am no longer in my home, but instead at my school. Behind the desks, I see two men with uniforms that read "Ontario Child Welfare Services," holding both of Mahikan's arms. One of the men turns his head to me, and I look into his eyes seeing nothing but pure evil masked by the comfort of two large, caramel irises; I know I am in the presence of a true sadist. *But Mahikan is 17*, I think. *He is too old to go to a residential school*. But that doesn't matter to these

government workers. I try to scream as they drag him away, but nothing comes out. I start aggressively shaking in my seat as the adrenaline from this encounter gets to my head, but I know I can't get up and do anything without being punished. The sound of Mahikan's cries reverberates around my skull as I grab my throat, begging for my scream to be released. Everything begins to fade out as Mahikan is taken around the corner and out of my field of view.

I wake up once again to familiar surroundings. I am in the bed I've had since childhood, with somebody sleeping beside me. An idea sparks in my head, and I shake the person beside me

awake; it is Mahikan. I hold him in my arms, thankful that he is still here, safe and sound.

"What's going on?" Mahikan asks, still in a sleepy state.

"I just had a horrible dream, that's all," I reply. "I love you, Mahikan, I really do."

"I love you too, Danis," He somnolently mumbles before falling back asleep. I know I can't let him sleep for long because we have school soon, but I let him sleep for a few minutes. When the time comes to get ready for school, I wake Mahikan up, and he groggily gets out of bed and gets ready with me. As we eat our breakfast, the nightmare lingers in my mind. *Was the dream trying to tell me something? Could this be a warning?* I think. The world around me has been so perfect and happy lately; I know there's no way that this horrible dream would become my grim reality. Still uncertain with this feeling, I try to brush it off, and head off to school with Mahikan.

But something just feels wrong all day. A dark feeling lingers in my belly weighing me down as if my stomach knows something I do not. I keep trying to shrug this feeling off but it sticks with me regardless. As I sit in my classroom next to Mahikan, I look out a window to the outside, and I feel the weight in my body even harder; my inner spirit feels injured, or trapped.

“Danis, is everything ok?” Mahikan asks, sounding worried.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I shoot back, sounding more standoffish than I wanted to. Or, at least, that’s what I wanted to say, but my words were interrupted by the loud *CRASH* of the classroom door slamming open. My entire body freezes, and I have a horrifying epiphany as the exact two men from my dream wearing the exact same uniforms barge into my classroom.

The next few moments happen before I can process them. I hear the sound of a scratchy male voice yelling words I can’t understand, and see one of the men singling out individuals in the class.

“If you’re an Indian, you’re coming with me!” The one officer shouts.

One second I see a flash of colour as the officer reaches his hand directly in front of my eyes and grabs a hold of something, but not me. I look to my left to see his hand grasping Mahikan’s shirt and look to my right to see the horrified expression on my teacher’s face as if he knows what is about to happen next; I know what is going to happen too. When I look back at Mahikan, I notice that he is gone, along with the others that were chosen by these officers. The last I see of him is the shimmer of the beading on his shoes in the doorway reflecting in the daylight. Innocent children who were learning in a small classroom in the village were simply picked away by these cruel men who didn’t even know if they were Indigenous, or the right age to attend residential school. I kneel down to the floor and sob uncontrollably as fatal thoughts circle around my head. I act as though I am a newborn baby regardless of the fact that I feel closer to death than ever before.

Ever since that day, the next 10 months have become a blur. I barely move an inch every day and simply rot away, refusing to process the grief of losing Mahikan and not knowing if he is ever going to come home. In my delicate state, I stop attending school, I withdraw myself

from socializing in my community, and stare into nothingness for hours. Some days are easier than others to be productive, wash my body, and help around the house, but others are harder; sometimes, I can't even get out of bed for days on end. My parents seem to recognize the effect that Mahikan leaving has had on me, and don't pressure or push me too far.

I go outside every night to see the northern lights. I constantly think back to that night with Mahikan's arms around me watching the breathtaking lights and I crave his touch. But ever since he has left, the northern lights have left too. One of the Elders in my community once told me that the northern lights are our ancestors looking down on us, which has always stuck with me. But as I sit outside needing guidance from those who came before me, I am left with nothing but my cold, untouchable body looking up to the endless black sky. I feel more disconnected from my identity and beliefs than ever before. *Mahikan, come home soon.* I think before going back inside and closing the door behind me, and wipe a singular tear falling from my eye.

A few months pass, and I wake up to the sound of shouting once again. But these yells are not bad shouting, these are shouts of joy. I jump out of bed and run to my bedroom door, but before I can open it, the door opens for me. In the doorway I see the silhouette of a man, but my room is too dark to see who it is. I turn the light on, and a rush of happiness runs through my entire body when I realize the mystery person is Mahikan. I scream and throw myself into his arms. Oh, how I missed his hugs. I hold him close to me and refuse to let go before he pulls me back.

"Hello, my love," Mahikan whispers.

"Oh, Mahikan. I've been such a mess without you here. I'm so glad you're home, and you're alive!" I exclaim, marveling at the fact that this day has finally come. He pulls me in again for another hug and kisses me on the cheek.

“So, what happened-” I say before being cut off by Mahikan.

“I will never speak of the last 10 months to anybody,” Mahikan replies coldly. I quickly identify the sense of severity in his voice and know that he truly means what he just said.

“Of course. All that matters is that you’re home safe, with me,” I reply.

Mahikan and I did activities that we always enjoyed doing with each other all day. We went fishing, visited the people in our community to let them know of his return, and had a bonfire in my backyard. As the sun finishes setting and the fire burns out, I look to the sky, expecting the northern lights to revisit me, but am given nothing. *Even after everything Mahikan has been through, they can’t even give him a welcome home.* Who knows, maybe he isn’t considered Indigenous enough anymore for their approval. That thought infuriates me; for anyone to think Mahikan was not worthy of a welcome home after all of the sufferings he would’ve gone through in the past 10 months is no worthy ancestor of mine.

I look up at him as I lay in his lap, just like we did the night before he left, and I see that he’s looking into the sky. I wonder if he is thinking the same thoughts as me. I look at his cut hair, his new clothing, and the differences in his body language; he has significantly changed throughout his assimilative education. All of these thoughts infuriate me, but this anger is quickly overcome by weariness. I look back up at him and see a spark in his eye: the same spark that made me fall in love with him, the same spark that comes to life when we are practising our culture, and the same spark that warms up my cold nights. It is still here, never to be burnt out. I know that one day, the wounds left on Mahikan and our community will be healed, with or without the northern lights watching us. With time, his spark will become a flame once again, and I will stick by his side until we’ve reached the end.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

Broken Silence

By: Laura Forgrave (Gr. 10)

more inside

“Welcome to class GLE101. I am your teacher, Ms. Johnson. For our first unit, we will focus on proper note-taking techniques to help you excel in your classes. Your textbooks are in the back storage room, you can retrieve them now. Quickly, please!” She finishes signing and points to the door at the back of the class.

I don't want to be here. I shouldn't be here. This class, General Education, is considered the easiest (and most boring) class in the entire school. It is meant for kids who struggle to learn basic things. I'm a straight A student, but I somehow ended up taking this class. I received a letter at the end of August requesting my mandatory attendance from 6:30-8:30 am in the morning, before school officially starts. On the first day of school! So this semester, I am taking this course on top of my standard math, English, gym and geography classes. I have to show up every single day! For 2 hours! I should be sleeping right now. My parents were outraged when we received the letter. They think I've "not been applying myself". My boyfriend refuses to look at me. I don't know why I was enrolled in this class, but I plan on getting out of it as soon as I can.

As we walk to the back room, I glance at my classmates. Not exactly who I expected. Sure, there are the typical delinquents I'd expect to be here, but there is also Jason, Miranda, and a few other smart kids I'm surprised to see. Maybe the course selection computer program has a bug. I reach the back room first and flick on the light switch before opening the door. A man sits on a chair, staring back at me. I scream, breaking the Third Law of Noise. The earbud in my ear vibrates, recording my infraction. I'll be in big trouble later.

I slam the door and run back to Ms. Johnson. “Miss, there is a man in the storage room!” I sign frantically.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Melody.” She signs in reply. “I forgot to warn you about the mannequins stored there for the fashion course next semester. Here, I’ll go with you.” She walks over and opens the door, hurrying everyone inside. We go in and freak out. There are three people in there, and they definitely aren’t mannequins. Ms. Johnson shuts the door from the outside. The lock icon illuminates above the door handle. I scream again. Loudly. My earbud vibrates. And then the lights turn off.

* * *

When the lights flicker back on and I come to my senses, I am crudely tied to the wall with zip ties and fraying rope. I realize all my classmates are in the same position. In fact, there seem to be carabiner clips permanently attached to the wall for exactly this purpose. Am I caught in the middle of a kidnapping scheme?

I turn my attention to the three adults in the middle of the room. An older man stands confidently behind what appears to be a makeshift podium, glaring around the room. A middle-aged woman and a younger man stand quietly off to the side. The older man starts to sign. I notice immediately that his signs are sloppy and his form is horrendous. Not surprising, considering he likely only learned to sign later in his life. He was probably already in his fifties during the Reformation.

“Hello. My name is Mr. Ruthers. These are my colleagues, Ms. Pyler and Mr. Wilson.”

So this is a kidnapping scheme!

“I apologize for welcoming you so rudely, but it is a necessary precaution as I need you to listen to me without trying to frantically open the door.” He smiles slightly. “You all have

surely heard about the Reformation, the great revolution of about 20 years ago. Civilians formed the People's Committee Against Noise to protest against the loudness and chaos of everyday society. PCAN members voluntarily undertook a vow of silence and communicated only in sign. Their ideas about the necessity of silence for people to properly concentrate and reach their full potential spread across the country, and many of the founding members were elected into parliament. PCAN eventually formed a majority government, and with the approval of the populace, rewrote the constitution, all in complete silence. The Reformation created the three laws of noise: All forms of noise are distracting and unnecessary, all citizens will undergo a vow of silence at the age of 3, and violators of this vow will be punished. Earbuds were designed to report infractions, and help guide minors, like yourselves, through the process of silence.”

I roll my eyes. This is basic history, why is he bothering to explain what we already know?

“The Reformation was a completely silent and mostly peaceful societal reform, but it was not without challenges. Musicians were unanimously against the revolution. Music, after all, was a banned form of noise. This new silent society simply didn’t have a place for them. They were expected to find other professions, and a few did. Many others started violent protests, disturbing public peace and silence. These delinquents were arrested and confined in the country’s finest maximum security prisons, to ensure a safe and silent Canada for all. Eventually, the horrid generation of musicians will pass away, and Canada will finally be the safe and silent country it was always intended to be.”

Huh? He literally quoted the grade 7 history textbook! Except his signing is so sloppy, I could barely understand him.

“This history you already know. However, there is more to the story. Do you really think the police successfully rounded up every single singer, songwriter, musician and conductor?”

Of course they did. What is wrong with these people?

Ms. Pyle walks around the room gesturing for people to remove their earbuds and drop them in a small box. Jason tries to resist, but she deftly removes it from his ear and dodges his weak punch. Everyone else complies with her after that. She wraps the box with several blankets and puts it in a small side alcove.

“I thank you....Well, I thank *most* of you for removing your earbuds so quickly.” She glares at Jason. “Now we can all speak a little more freely.” She shoots a withering glare at the faces of my shocked classmates. “And yes, I mean *speak*.” She turns to Mr. Ruthers, opens her mouth, and starts... talking? He responds in a loud, booming voice that makes me cringe and try to cover my ears. After a brief discussion, they turn back to us. Mr. Ruthers starts to sign.

“Well, the police didn’t arrest every musician, because we are musicians. We’ve hidden for years in this room, trying to find ways to share music, and noise, with the world once again.”

Huh? These kidnappers are musicians? For the first time, I closely examine the room. It clearly was once a custodian’s office and storage room. A small cupboard is filled with mops and cleaning supplies, and a door opens to a bathroom on my right. However, the room has been converted into a living space for three people. Toothbrushes are lined up beside the sink, and three cots are shoved in various alcoves. A microwave sits on a stool in a corner. Mr. Ruthers continues speaking.

“You were selected for this course because we want to share music knowledge with you, in the hopes that you will share that knowledge of noise with others. One day, far in the future, long after I have passed away, I dream there will be a day when the world can be full of beautiful music once more.”

That’s a bit optimistic. And I really don’t see the appeal of noise. But, they aren’t trying to ransom us, so I guess it’s okay?

Ms. Pyler elaborates. “Now, I know many of you are likely skeptical and perhaps even want to report us to the authorities. I beg you, don’t. Not just for my own life, but for the life of music. Here’s the deal. You could report us, but it wouldn’t do anything. We can be out of here in under five minutes without leaving a trace. We’ve done it before, we can do it again. You would look ridiculous for reporting signs of music in an empty storage room. So, what I ask of you is this: try to learn music for a month. Listen to us, try your best, enjoy the course, and most importantly, keep this a secret. At the end of the month, I truly believe all of you will love music. If you still hate the idea of noise, you can turn us over to the authorities, and all three of us will come willingly.” Mr. Ruthers and Mr. Wilson nod in agreement.

“Now, let’s make some music!” Mr. Wilson exclaims.

They all pull out instruments that had been stashed in corners of the room. I think I recognize a trumpet, a flute and a French horn from pictures of confiscated items in our history textbook. They raise the instruments to their lips and start to play.

* * *

I walk out of the storage room in a daze, absent-mindedly twisting my earbud back into my ear. The music was phenomenal. Before they played, I had decided to tell the principal about the delinquent musicians. She could decide what to do. But once they started to play, I

completely changed my mind. It was beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. I understand why the government banned noise, but why did they ban *this kind* of noise? I'll try the course for a month, and see how things go.

The bell rings. I flick my wrist in the motion for *Darn it!*, and run down the hallway to my next class.

* * *

The lunch bell rings, and I collapse on a bench beside my friend Alexa. "How was your morning, Melody?" she signs.

"Exhausting. English and math were far too difficult for the first day. Waking up at 5 am probably didn't help."

"Right. That weird course you have to take. How was it?"

I wonder how much I should tell her. We left the class with strict instructions not to tell anyone about the music. Ms. Pyle threatened that they would not allow us to turn them in at the end of the month if we didn't follow their instructions until then. I decide to keep my options open. "Fine," I reply with a shrug, and the conversation switches to more interesting subjects.

* * *

Another day, another morning awake at an unearthly hour. I stretch and roll out of bed. I'm actually kind of excited for today's music class. Mr. Wilson said we will make noise on instruments. I dream of reproducing the beautiful music I heard yesterday.

I grimace as I think back to last night's conversation with my parents. They had both received phone notifications explaining that I had screamed several times between 6:30 and

7:00 am yesterday. I told them that I had tripped and fallen. I hope that doesn't happen again. I dislike lying to them.

When everyone has arrived at the class, Ms. Johnson just points towards the storage room with a smile. "Go grab your textbooks," she signs. We head towards the storage room and file inside. The door locks behind us, but this time, we aren't tied to the walls. The three musicians are waiting for us by the podium.

"Good morning everyone!" Mr. Wilson exclaims with sloppy signing but an enthusiastic smile.

"Put your earbuds in the box and grab a seat," adds Mr. Ruthers. As we follow his instructions, Ms. Pylar continues.

"We are going to try and make noise on instruments. I hope you enjoyed the music we played yesterday. I warn you, it will take a while before your music sounds that beautiful. Today, we will start with playing one single sound. If you try hard, you should succeed." She passes the box of earbuds to Mr. Wilson. "Additionally, once these are out of the way, we will start talking as well as signing when we communicate with you. I'm sure you've noticed that our signing is pretty terrible because we sign so infrequently, so the faster you learn spoken language, the better."

"Now," Mr. Ruthers continues, "We are going to assign you instruments." He holds up what I suspect is a French horn. "This is a French horn." He points to a heavy mess of metal tubing. "And this is a tuba. Miranda, Kylie, Liam, Sophia and Ben, come with me." They go to a corner of the room.

Next, Mr. Wilson steps forward. “This is a trumpet.” He holds up the instrument I saw him play yesterday. “And this is a saxophone. Noah, James, Owen, Natalie and Lucy, we’re going to learn to play these instruments together!”

Finally, Ms. Pyle calls her group. “Everyone else, you will be playing either the flute or clarinet with me.” Jason scowls as the six of us walk over to her. We drag chairs into a circle. Ms. Pyle hands everyone either a clarinet or a flute. I look at the shiny metal flute in my hands. It looks more like a weapon than an instrument. After lecturing us to be careful with the instruments and teaching us where to put our hands, Ms. Pyle finally lets us make noise. I can’t wait to learn how to play beautiful music, and this is the first big step.

I put the flute to my mouth and blow out, just like she instructed. And...nothing happens. Ms. Pyle comes over and adjusts the position of the flute slightly. A pitiful squeak comes out of the instrument. I try for the remainder of the class, and can’t do anything more than squeak. I head to English, bitterly disappointed.

* * *

The days pass in a blur. I wake up early, head to music class, go to English and math, enjoy lunch with Alexa, go to my afternoon classes, go home, do homework, eat dinner and go to bed. Day after day after day. My flute skills slowly improve. After about a week, I can play several notes. At the end of two weeks, I can play a short song with the other flute players. I am growing to love music and the three musicians. As strict as Ms. Pyle originally appeared, I quickly discover she is willing to do anything in her power to make me love music. As my excitement for GLE increases, Alexa becomes increasingly curious about what I do in the class. I always respond with vague answers, not wanting to reveal my newfound love for

music. But music is constantly in my head now, and I wish I could share it with her. One day at lunch, I finally break down and let her in on the secret.

“Look Alexa,” I sign. “I’m going to tell you what I’ve really been doing in GLE, but you have to promise not to tell anyone.” She makes her promise, and I tell her everything. I’d wanted to share my joy for so long that everything comes tumbling out. I tell her about the three musicians, and my flute, and the first song I played, and how beautiful it sounds.

She looks a bit confused and concerned at first, but she smiles, nods, and signs, “I can’t imagine ever enjoying noise, but I’m glad you’re happy.”

I smile back and go off to my afternoon classes with a skip in my step and music in my heart.

* * *

The next week flies by as I learn more about music. I start to speak out loud in music class, and the entire class plays a piece of music together for the first time. I’m walking to English one morning when Alexa walks up to me, looking nervous.

“I’m really sorry, but I’ve come to a decision. I know you love these music classes, but they just aren’t right. The musicians are tricking you into believing that music, and noise in general is a good thing, when we all know that can’t possibly be true. Music is all you think about now. You never talk about anything else at lunch. And when I tell you about my classes, you aren’t really paying attention. Your mind only focuses on music.” She takes a deep breath. “I’m going to go to the principal and explain the situation. Hopefully she can set you on the right path, and fix those delinquent musicians.”

I stare at her in horror. “Alexa! You can’t tell the principal! The musicians will be stuck in jail for the rest of their lives! And I can no longer imagine my life without music. It’s the best part of my day!”

Alexa looks disappointed. “It’s even worse than I thought. I’m sorry, Melody.” She turns and strides down the hall towards the office. I start to run after her, but realize it would be pointless. I’ve got to warn the musicians! I run to the GLE room.

* * *

I race towards the storage room, completely ignoring Ms. Johnson’s confused hand signals. I burst through the door and start signing frantically to the three musicians. I’m so worried, my signs are practically unintelligible. I try to communicate out loud, struggling to form the words.

“People....coming...get out...now!”

They finally understand. Mr. Wilson jumps up and shoves their personal belongings into bags. Mr. Ruthers and Ms. Pylar grab instruments and hide them behind old wooden crates at the back of the room. They work for several minutes, desperately trying to pack up everything.

They are just dismantling the clarinets when the door flies open and the principal walks in, followed by Alexa. Oh no. I was too late. They’re caught. My next thought is more selfish: What will I do without music?

The principal closes the door. She turns to face the musicians with a kind, genuine smile on her face. “I think we’ve had a little misunderstanding,” she comments.

The musicians look terrified, and Alexa and I are terribly confused. The principal laughs. “Don’t worry! I’m a musician myself.”

Huh? But she’s a principal! She continues.

“I used to be a music teacher at a high school. After the Reformation, I was forced to teach other subjects, and I eventually became a principal. I had assumed all the true musicians left in this world had taken up other occupations, or were imprisoned. Apparently I was wrong. I am thrilled to discover this secret music program, happening right under my own nose! The odd choices of students for the GLE course suddenly make a lot more sense.” She laughs again. The musicians are visibly relieved.

“I would love to support your music classes in any way possible. Additionally, I think it would be beneficial for all students at this school, including Alexa, to take music classes, so that incidents like this can be avoided in the future.” Alexa looks at me sheepishly.

“Based on what Alexa has told me about Melody’s obsession with these music classes, they seem to be a very effective way of proving the benefits of noise to the next generation. In the coming weeks, I will work with you to design a schedule that ensures all students can partake in these meaningful classes. For now, I want to thank you for your wonderful, and very secretive, work. How long have you been here?”

“20 years,” Mr. Ruthers replies with a smile.

Wow! I can’t imagine secretly living in this cramped room for twenty years, just to share my love of music. I am even more impressed with the musicians.

The principal appears satisfied. “Well, if Alexa and Melody are both satisfied, I will return to the office.” We both nod our consent. “Mr. Ruthers, Ms. Pyle and Mr. Wilson, I look forward to speaking with you in the coming days.” She leaves the storage room. Ms. Pyle turns to Alexa.

“Can I suggest that we play a piece of music to help you understand the true beauty of noise in our world?” Alexa nods, looking a bit frightened. The three musicians dig out their instruments and play.

The music is just as breath-taking as the first time I heard it. I can tell Alexa is equally inspired. We glance at each other and smile. All is forgiven.

Music. Such an interesting concept. Hated by some, loved by others. It can ruin friendships, or unite enemies. It can inspire hope, or bring fear. It can explain more than signs ever will. For me, music is life.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

Fate

By: Sabrina Guerrero (Gr. 8)

more inside

Wind blew silently but harshly on the empty streets of Sicily. It was quiet, yet loud. At least that's what Aria thought, as she stood on the balcony of her tiny apartment. Her parents were eating dinner, but she was not invited. Aria had broken a very big rule in her family, she couldn't visit anywhere on her own without telling her parents. After school that day, she had snuck into a bakery with the last of her allowance, desperate to buy a treat. She came home munching on a cannoli, with the thought that her parents wouldn't be home. Unfortunately, they had come home early from work, and Aria was scolded, her cannoli thrown in the trash.

Funnily, she had been trying for years to finally finish a cannoli, let alone buy one. No matter how upset she was, Aria was determined not to throw a fit and instead enjoy the magical view of the volcano in front of her. It was almost as if she could reach it.

How could something be so dangerous yet so beautiful? So many tourists have come to see Mt. Etna, yet Aria's parents never allowed her. They believed it was too risky.

All she wanted was freedom.

Aria decided today she was going to ask her parents if she was allowed to visit the beach. The water calmed her, brought her peace. She was a big nature fan. At school, no one really spoke to Aria. She wasn't caught up in all the drama, and people thought she was an outcast because of it. All she longed for was a bit of action in her life.

The wood creaked as Aria stepped back inside her room, the cold wind coming to a halt as she shut the glass door.

It smelled wonderful, her parents had made her favourite, arancini. How jealous she was of her parents who got to enjoy the fried delicacy.

Practically hopping, Aria made it to the bottom of the stairs and sprinted to the dinner table.

“Mum? Is it alright if I walk by the beach?”

“Aria, you are in trouble. Why would I let you go to-” As soon as her mum was about to finish her practically generated answer, Aria’s father stepped in.

“Honey, we are already banning her from dinner. I believe that’s far enough, and she learned her lesson. Yes, you may go on a quick walk to the beach, but be back no later than 9:00,”

“9:00! That's outrageous! You know what happens when it gets dark, right? Do I have to lecture-”

“Alright, alright. Is 8:55 ok with you?” Aria’s father asked.

“Yes, that's much better,” her mum agreed.

Aria couldn’t believe all it took was a 5 minute difference. It was enough to make her giggle, but she knew that would just bring her another world of trouble.

“Thanks, see you guys soon! Bye!” She yelled as she bolted through the door, into the street full of lights.

For Aria, walking had always been a way to calm herself. She had some anger issues - sometimes it was like looking through a blindfold of red. She had jolts in her brain and it was almost as if someone else was speaking for her. Her true feelings came out. Unfortunately, her honesty was usually never appreciated, and this is why she got in trouble often.

Her parents would kick her out of the apartment so she could go on a walk through the street, and if she was lucky, the beach. Aria would then always come back calmer.

The smells of the town bounced and floated through the air, pizza then cakes, barbeques then just flowers, and occasionally Aria would be hit with a blast of cool wind that brought a mix of all of them. The sounds of children laughing and chatting just warmed her heart, yet also broke it. She really wished for friends. She appreciated mother nature and all it has given her but Aria needed some human socializing to prepare for when she left Italy for high school. It was her dream to leave and have a fresh start.

Just a couple more months, she thought. Then she'd be on a plane, alone, off to live with her grandma in the US.

Aria then made it to the beach, where she stood silently for a moment, gazing out at the perfectly lined up boats bobbing on the waves washing up to the shore. She closed her eyes, and felt the sand blow against her face. As she opened her eyes, she realized she was only a 10 minute walk away from Mt. Etna. It was her dream to go.

I already broke one of my parents' rules, if they find out I broke another I will never see the light of day again, Aria thought.

Then again, my parents can just be so strict. I need to have a life as well. Plus, it's only 7:15. I have so much time.

She decided she was going up the volcano, to see the wonder she gazes at on the small wooden floor of her balcony. It was going to happen, one of her many dreams would be fulfilled today.

Aria sprinted through the crowd all the way to the tourist entrance of the volcano walk, hearing voices from all over.

“Welcome to the wonder of Sicily!”

“Momma, I want to climb the pretty triangle!”

“Does everyone have their tags?”

From the corner of her eye, Aria saw a sign that told her she had to pay 10 euros to have a guided tour of the volcano. Sadly, she had already spent the rest of her allowance on the cannoli her parents threw in the trash.

It can't be that bad to go alone, why don't I just sneak in through a different path? I've already rebelled against my parents by being here, why not go a bit farther?

Aria squeezed her way through the piles of people and saw a small patch of grass with only one direction to go: up. No one was looking, so she quickly climbed up. As she was walking, she heard a group of people gossiping and hid behind a chestnut tree, hoping to join them and that they wouldn't notice. Then, she saw all of them were wearing a tag, one that said, “I Paid, Time To Climb!”

It was at that moment that she realized she would have to walk alone. Aria did not have possession of one of those tags, and would be easily spotted if she were to attempt to blend into the group. Quietly holding her breath, Aria stood behind the tree and prayed no one saw her. Suddenly, she felt a swift bump on her right shoulder and wrist, and quickly turned her head to see what had bumped into her. She saw no one, and heard nothing but the fading voices of the group that had passed her.

So, she decided to continue her journey with her head and heart as company.

After what seemed like hours, Aria looked up to see she was almost to the top, and attempted to check her watch to find out the time. Then, she realized the horrifying fact that she didn't have it on her wrist. Where did she leave it? Did she take it off?

Wait a moment. Maybe the bump I felt wasn't my imagination. I think someone might have stolen my watch!

HOLD ON, this means someone SAW ME! I'm going to be in so much trouble if they tell..."

Aria began to snuffle, then sob, and do a very angry cry. Her heart began to beat so fast it felt as if she couldn't breathe.

Her brain was sending the jolts, but she attempted to block them out, she couldn't make a sound, someone would notice, someone would hear. Aria was getting madder and madder, her tears growing larger and larger.

WHY ARE MY PARENTS SO STRICT? I FEEL CONSTANTLY CONTROLLED! I COULD HAVE COME WITH THEM IF THEY'D LET ME. WHY DO BAD THINGS ALWAYS HAPPEN TO ME! THIS MAKES ME SO MAD I COULD..."

Suddenly, a sound interrupted her thoughts, an ear piercing scream.

"AHHHHH!"

Who was yelling?

Then Aria realized the scream was coming from her. She couldn't hold it in. It wasn't even about her watch being stolen, but how left out she always felt. How alone she always felt. That everyone ignored her, that her parents didn't let her live, that her dreams continued to shatter, that all she wanted was a cannoli and her parents wouldn't let her have that either.

"No way, Aria, get that thought out of your head. Give up on the cannoli already!"

"I'm never letting you climb that volcano,"

*"Uh, can we help you? Why do **you** want to sit here?"*

*"Am I **enough**..."*

*“You’re so weird, maybe people will like you if you just **change**,”*

Thoughts and memories flooded Aria’s brain like a tsunami crashing through a wall. She curled up into a ball and sobbed into her elbow. No longer could she control her mind. Once again, her thoughts were interrupted by a loud boom and a scream. No, two. Three, four, five, what was happening?

Aria looked up from her elbow to see people sprinting down the path she came up, and her eyes widened when she saw a ball of orange and yellow flying across the once blue now grey sky. Her lungs were crowding with smoke, as Aria began to cough and cough. Her eyes followed the colours because her feet were too tired and scared to move. She watched as the fire crashed into what seemed to be a home, and she watched as it burst into flames. She watched as people ran outside, the size of ants from up on the volcano.

HOLD ON. THIS IS COMING FROM THE VOLCANO. I’m on it. The feeling of dread settled in Aria’s stomach as the thought registered in her head. Slowly, she turned around to face the crater of the volcano, not too far above her. Her heart almost stopped beating when she saw a river of bright red and orange flowing right down to where she was standing.

I’m not dying today!

Aria bolted away from her standing spot, running as fast as she possibly could. Close to the bottom, she stopped for a breath and gazed out in front of her. She just HAD to make it out of this.

Aria finally made it to the bottom of the volcano and was suddenly bodychecked onto the hard cracked ground, left unconscious.

Once she woke up, she heard nothing and no one. She pushed herself up and inhaled a breath of smoke, eyes watering, she managed to look up and see everything and everywhere in flames, including her house across the street.

Aria began to cry. As she looked out to the bay, she saw all the boats that were once there had disappeared. Everyone had escaped and she had been left behind.

She peered behind her to see the lava inching closer, so no matter how sad she felt, Aria picked herself up and ran as fast as she could, dodging the rubble and flames. The only building that wasn't on fire was the bakery that she visited earlier that day. Rushing inside, she slammed the door.

Where do I go? What should I do? I never should have visited the volcano. What an idiot am I - this building will burst into flames any minute and I never even got to say goodbye.

Eyes letting out a waterfall, Aria gazed around at her final resting place. She saw in the display case another one of her dreams.

A cannoli.

A smile peeked through the corners of her mouth as she reached into the display case and grabbed the sweet delicacy.

She bit into it once, twice, thrice, until it was all gone.

She completed it, her dream to finally finish a cannoli. She completed her dream of climbing Mt. Etna. She wouldn't be able to complete high school, but otherwise, she felt fulfilled.

Not even a couple seconds after she finished her dessert, the lava flowed inside, taking down the door and bursting the bakery into flames.

Aria sat down and began to meditate, hoping that that would save her some of the pain. As the flames engulfed her, she wished her family well.

And with that, we end the story of Aria. Her family was devastated when they realized that she wasn't in the boat and regretted letting her go out alone. Once they returned back to Sicily after everything was cleared, they found their house in ashes. It took months to get their life up and running again, but eventually they did.

Since their daughter couldn't go to the high school she wanted in the US and live with her grandma, Aria's parents hired a professional and got someone to make a sculpture of Aria. Then, they shipped it to the US and had her grandma keep it, so Aria could be there in memory.

Life continued on, and the volcano that took Aria's life stayed tall and sturdy, as Aria always described Mt. Etna to be while she gazed out at the world from her balcony. You never know what's going to happen throughout your days in this world, and that's why you have to make the most of it. After feeling controlled and lonely all her life, that's what Aria decided to do. The sea still glistened, back to being filled with boats. The once grey and orange sky went back to a bright blue, and cannoli remained a delicious delicacy.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

Don't Tear Me Apart By: Sumatt Brar (Gr. 9)

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A maze within our world that is often overlooked, the realm of tears. The tears of sorrow or joy that fall heedlessly down cheeks. The exploration of the soul's deepest labyrinth—the human eye. The human emotion.

I wait in the back watching the other tears spewing out rapidly. The world jolts in a tremor and I hold tight to myself. "Hold it in." A voice tells me. In her head—my owner's head; she's telling me to stay back.

As I clung to the edge of her lower eyelash, I could feel the ripples through her eyelid as she tried to blink away the tears. With a sense of purpose, I took my first plunge, free-falling toward the crease of her eyelid. It was like descending into a vast ocean, but instead of the snug wash of waves against the shore, I drown in emotions.

I slide further down; the world is painted in colours of her iris, this kaleidoscope. Her eyes are a dewdrop brown of warmth, that simply feels like autumn summed up within a person, each hue within is a defined emotion. The more you squint the more you see. The blues of sadness, the greens of envy, and the warm browns of safety, mingled across her eyes blinding me with this mesmerising tapestry. This beautiful maze holds so much more than she ever saw. Her own eyes can't see how elegant they are.

I ventured closer to the centre, where I encountered the pupil—a void. The gateway to the soul or her gateway to a dark abyss, seemingly bottomless, her vulnerability confined within. That was always her definition. Her pupil dilates a little when her heart shrinks because of the sensation of fading away amidst the crowd of people she loves.

This is my chance to take a walk inside her mind. I see it all. She has been working so hard all her life and it feels like a complete waste, did she deserve all that pain? She wishes she could pack up her life in a car and keep driving until the good days come by. All those memories that she would craft in her mind when she struggled to sleep sometimes came alive, to only leave her feeling like it's better to remain stuck within her narratives.

Why did she have to let go of all those great days in respect of herself when she truly felt empty without them? Temporary joy is better than what feels like permanent pain according to her studies.

Her fingers covered in mascara, memories flashed by, a pang of pain hit her chest, her throat was aching, the taste of her tears streamed down into her mouth that seemed like a treat, until the clogged nose became unbearable. She held onto her chest and rapidly inhaled, trying to regain the oxygen that had been lost through hyperventilating mindlessly into this void, her lungs struggling to allow a breath to escape.

And so, as I clung to her eyelash—my parachute—I skydived, shooting down.

My world is tilted, watching her room shift to the left. Her pillow is now damp, forcing her to stop. Her shuddering shoulders are trying to calm down.

She's desperately inhaling to regain her breath, but every ounce of hope is seeping out of her like a deflating balloon. "Breathe. Breathe. Breathe," I tell her. She can't float away in her tears; she's not allowed. I forbid that from happening. "Just hold on. Just hold on!" Easier said than done.

"What is wrong with me?" she whispers to her pillow.

"Nothing!" I scream. "NOTHING!" I continue. It's like pounding on an invisible barrier, but the person on the opposite side can't hear you. You see them clearly and hear their words

distinctly because they are crystal clear, but one drop of ink pollutes them. She cannot hear me and she never will. My frustration I harbour for humans and their intricate thoughts wells up.

I warm her cheek as I slither down, grabbing onto each crevice of her face, hoping she doesn't wipe me away. The other tears have a black tint to them from all the mascara, but I am the purest of them all. I hold onto her and attempt to give her a well-deserved hug that she always denies.

I hold on because I know she needs a pillar of strength. Tears serve as a form of therapy, each carrying emotions within them. Whether they are tears of happiness, each one is coated with laughter, joy, or a quip; tears of anger intertwined with sadness, aggression, guilt, disappointment—such a strong array of words. Even tears of sorrow are laden with betrayal, loneliness, pain, denial. Every single tear personifies by its owners' complex emotional landscape.

I dig into her pores trying to stay there, watching her shaky hands attempting to drink a glass of water. "It's okay," I try to project to her mind.

She's my best friend. She's the only person I know and she doesn't deserve to feel this. I may have only known her for just 5 minutes and 23 seconds but I know enough about her. I am not trying to tear her apart. I am within her. I am part of her. I am a piece teared away from her.

As I stream down her chin, clinging on to the tip of her face, I realise I am nearing my death—on the cliff to my end surrounded in melancholy.

My efforts wasted? No. I was born to die. Aren't we all? Or, are we born to live? See, this is where viewpoints may alter.

I watch a tear rush down past me, hearing its shrieks as it collides with the fluffy blanket and disappears in a pool.

Tears emerge to comfort their owners. We aren't born to go see the world, but remain confined within our owners' thoughts.

I've taken a walk through her mind, peeked around each corner and saw this form of an algorithm, her brain not letting her view some of those thoughts. If you're feeling down, you are told it's okay to feel that way, whereas others suggest you shouldn't allow things to affect you. When you feel hopeless, you are told it's alright to have those moments and you should take a break. Whereas, another would say perseverance is key. It's odd how we get to hear everything we want, yet humans always believe life is the opposite.

So then, where do I land in that spectrum? If I'm just a tear, then why am I debating my own value?

As I fall over the edge, everything is slowed. My brief life has flashed before me as the humans often say. I will join the rest of the tears as one unified group that tried to heal her.

I drop to her blanket and I melt away. I am just a tiny part teared away from my owner, just a slither of her thoughts. I create a small puddle and my last thought is: Don't tear *me* apart. I am just a tear; I hold no value. I am not your weakness.

She stands in front of her mirror, her eyes staring back at her, the ones that used to be soft but sharpened by rubbing it against the rocks that have been thrown in her way. That's how a dull knife gets sharpened in the wild.

Those same eyes that would smile back to her even when she cried are now piercing daggers that can stab harder than any weapon of the world. "They won't tear you apart," she mutters, "But you will. I will. Me. *I* will tear *me* apart."