

2024

Short Story Contest





**BETTER
LIBRARIES
BETTER
WORLD**

Produced by Innisfil ideaLAB & Library
December 2024

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.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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The Innisfil IdeaLAB & Library would like to congratulate all the students who entered the 23rd 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 Children's author Erin Bow 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 2024 edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest.

Amy Eastwood
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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2024 Seepe Walters Short Story Winner

His Wooden Sword
By: Sarjana Shayanthan (Gr. 7)

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In the Kingdom of Roshar, where sun-kissed fields met rolling hills, lived a peasant boy named Juwete. With tousled brown hair and big, dreaming eyes, he was just an ordinary kid—until he stumbled upon the most extraordinary thing: a stick. It wasn't just any stick; it was the perfect length for a sword, sturdy enough to fend off imaginary dragons, and light enough for a quick swing.

Every day, after finishing his chores, Juwete would dash outside with his wooden sword, galloping through the fields as he transformed into the legendary Sir Juwete, defender of the realm and bane of all insects. He would engage in epic battles against buzzing flies and sneaky reptiles that dared to cross his path. “En garde!” he would shout, brandishing his stick with the intensity of a knight about to face a dragon. The flies didn't stand a chance; they'd scatter like leaves in a storm.

But then came the day when everything changed. The sun hung high in the sky, and a dark shadow loomed over Roshar. The air crackled with tension as news spread like wildfire: an unbeatable enemy had emerged, a fearsome warlord named King Rakshanth the Ruthless. With his army of mercenaries and an aura of menace that could chill even the bravest knights, King Rakshanth swept through villages, leaving destruction in his wake.

When the kingdom's knights gathered to confront King Rakshanth, they donned their shining armor and sharpened their swords. Juwete watched from the edge of the field, his

heart pounding. He dreamed of joining them, of charging into battle, his stick held high, but the reality was much scarier than his games.

The knights clashed with King Rakshanth's forces, swords ringing out like a terrible symphony. Juwete felt the fear gripping his heart as he saw the knights aim for King Rakshanth's chest and vital spots, but the warlord merely laughed, brushing them off like annoying flies.

"Is this the best Roshar has to offer?" he taunted, his voice booming across the battlefield.

With every clash, hope faded. The knights fought valiantly, but King Rakshanth was truly unbeatable. Panic surged through Juwete. Suddenly, an idea sparked in his mind. It was ridiculous, it was absurd, but at that moment, it felt like the only option.

Summoning all his courage, he took a deep breath, picked up his beloved stick, and ran toward the fray.

"Hey, you!" he shouted, waving the stick wildly.

King Rakshanth turned, his eyes narrowing as he saw the tiny boy charging at him.

Without a second thought, Juwete hurled his stick at King Rakshanth's toe. It flew through the air, spinning like a tiny missile, and with a sickening thwack, it made contact. In a comical twist of fate, King Rakshanth lost his balance and stumbled backward. His armored feet tangled in the laces of his own boots—seriously, who designed those? —and he slipped dramatically on a discarded knight's sword. It was as if the world had turned into a slapstick comedy as he flailed about, arms windmilling, before crashing to the ground with a resounding thud.

The battlefield erupted into laughter. Even the knights couldn't help but chuckle as King Rakshanth lay sprawled in the dirt, looking less like a fearsome warlord and more like a defeated octopus, flailing helplessly in the sand.

"What's wrong, mighty warlord? Can't handle a little toe injury?" one knight shouted, doubling over in laughter.

"Somebody get this guy a toe bandage!" shouted another knight, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. "Oh lord, he's crying!"

Rakshanth was soon enough crying like a baby who didn't get a lollipop after begging. Seizing the moment, the knights rallied together, charging forward with renewed vigor. With King Rakshanth distracted by his toe injury, they overwhelmed him in a flurry of swords and laughter. Before long, the infamous warlord lay defeated in the dirt, a tangle of limbs and armor, looking less like a fearsome conqueror and more like a fallen tree.

As the dust settled and the knights began to celebrate, they turned to Juwete, who stood there, stick in hand, a mix of disbelief and triumph on his face.

Juwete beamed with pride, the stick feeling heavier and more significant in his hands. In that moment, he was no longer just a peasant boy; he was Sir Juwete, the Boy Who Defeated the Ruthless. From that day forward, tales of Sir Juwete spread throughout the kingdom, each story more exaggerated than the last. Parents told their children about the peasant boy who single-handedly took on the warlord with a stick, while the children, wide-eyed with wonder, begged for more. Some claimed he had summoned magical powers with his wooden sword, while others insisted he had outsmarted King Rakshanth in an epic dance-off.

And as for Juwete? He never grew tired of his wooden sword. He would often find himself back in the fields, dreaming of new adventures, forever ready to defend Roshar—with a stick, a smile, and a heart full of courage. After he finished his chores, of course.

Junior Division Grades 3-6

The Princess and the Cursed Tree By: Marleigh Browne (Gr. 5)

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Twelve-year-old Princess Emreld lived with her mother and father, the king and queen, in a castle on a very large hill which, much to Emreld's delight, was surrounded by trees of all kinds. There were maple trees with crimson leaves, birch trees with pure white bark, and then there were the two willows on the castle grounds with their beautiful, long yellowish twigs blowing in the wind. Princess Emreld loved the biggest willow best. Emreld always found the bigger one to be more like a best friend rather than a tree.

She had lost her maternal grandmother when she was eight and her mother had been so swept up in her own grief that she was barely around to talk to. She tried her father, but he was so busy with his duties as king and now her mother's duties as well. She also didn't have any pets. With limited options, she went down to the willow one day and was surprised to find that the willow was easier to talk to and more supportive than she ever could have guessed. The bigger willow also had low branches and Emreld loved to climb them with her favorite book, *Water Horse Wonders*.

One day she was up in her favorite reading spot listening to the birds sing and worrying about a new school bully, when she fell off the branch she was on! But instead of landing on the ground she landed in a huge hole. Once the shock of falling had passed by, Emreld got to her feet and peered around. She saw that, despite the hole being inside a tree it was quite smooth. She also felt that nothing could go wrong and found herself wondering what she had been worrying about when she had been on the branch. Soon she came across a bound scroll. She picked up the scroll and examined it with the light that shone through the gap in

the tree where she had fallen through. She saw that the thing binding it was a wax seal imprinted with what appeared to be a glowing globe. After a few minutes of staring at the scroll she tucked it under her arm, climbed out of the hole and headed up to the castle.

Ten minutes later Emreld was in her bedroom with the scroll. She sat down on her bed, opened the scroll and began to read.

Dear reader,

The reason you are reading this scroll is because it is here to inform you that your favorite tree is cursed so it can never die no matter how much pain it is in. You should also know that the hole you fell into is magical and you may have noticed that all your worries and bad feelings left you when you were in there.

Emreld paused and remembered being in the hole and that when she was in there, her worries had been swept away. She continued reading:

By now you are probably wondering who cursed the willow and who or what made the hole magical right? It was me, the writer, and after reading all of the above you are most likely wondering if you can revisit the hole and if there is a way to uncurse the tree. The answer to one of these is yes. In order to uncurse the tree, someone who truly loves it must agree to never return to the magical hole again. Only then will the tree become uncursed. This is all I can say the rest is for you to figure out on your own.

Yours Wickedly,

Airamia Bodrick

Over the next couple of days Emreld thought very thoroughly about what the scroll had said. The willow had helped her through so much, yet the experience of the hole taking away her worries as soon as she entered it made for a very hard decision. But in the end, she decided to uncurse the willow. The next day after school she went to her room, took out a piece of paper and wrote: I solemnly swear to never go to the magical hole located in the biggest willow on these castle grounds. Then she dropped it in the hole.

Five years later...

Emreld was in her new favorite reading spot. She double and triple checked that she could not fall into the hole. While reading her new favorite book called Romance with Red by Anna Cordell, she heard a pop and then a crackling noise. She looked up and saw that in the trunk of the willow was what appeared to be a face carved into it. All of a sudden, the mouth opened and in a rather crackly voice said,

“Thank you, Emreld, for not going into the magical hole for so many years because now you have uncursed me. In return for your kindness, I will give you the thing that made the hole magical, a clearing globe. Choose where it goes and when you enter that room, it will take away all your worries. If you promise to make sure that before you die it gets destroyed, you can keep it for as long as you like”.

“Yes!” Emreld promised in a surprised voice. She had not expected something in return for freeing the tree. Next thing she knew, two of the branches below started moving. They reached into the hole, pulled out a silvery white globe and placed it in her lap. Emreld took the globe, thanked the willow, and headed up to the castle where she placed the clearing globe in her closet. She sat upon her bed feeling overwhelmed with gratitude for the willow. For, not

only had she been gifted the globe, more importantly, the willow had shown her that she was strong enough to face her worries, especially with the help of a good friend.

From that day on Emreld lived happily with the willow as her best friend and the clearing globe grew dusty as it waited to be used.

Junior Division Grades 3-6

The Great Thanksgiving Escape By: Athea Baerlocher (Gr. 3)

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Once upon a time, there was a turkey named Bob. He was a happy little turkey until he found out that people eat turkey for their Thanksgiving dinner. He was in shock! He was terrified! He needed a plan!

He was walking and walking trying to think of what to do. He wasn't paying attention to where he was going and he bumped right into a little girl. The girl had brown hair, freckles, a baseball cap, sunglasses and red shoes on. She had a sweet, friendly face.

Bob didn't know this girl but instantly started telling the little girl his problems. When he was done, she introduced herself.

"Hi, my name is Elliot", she said. "You have quite the dilemma Bob. I think I have a plan that just might work".

You see, Elliot was a huge fan of Taylor Swift. She thought if Bob disguised himself as Taylor Swift he'd be safe. Who would ever want to eat the biggest pop star in the world for Thanksgiving dinner?

She told Bob, to pull it off, he'd need to be really convincing. Step one would be to sign up for singing and dance lessons.

Bob wasn't too sure he could do either but he was determined to try.

The music teacher looked a bit confused when she saw Bob, but he was actually naturally pretty good at dancing and singing.

The next step was to look like Taylor Swift. Bob would need a dress, a wig, and shoes. Luckily for Bob there was only one Taylor Swift outfit left. And it was his size!

Bob started to wear his outfit everywhere he went. He even wore it to the store and library. Everywhere he went people kept chasing him, thinking Bob was the real Taylor Swift. People were yelling, "Can we have your autograph?" and "Can we have tickets to your next concert?"

Bob was so stressed! He didn't want to be turkey dinner, but he also didn't want to be chased. What could he do?

He needed a plan B. Bob looked at Elliott and thought for a minute. Then he said, "Do you mind if I borrow your baseball cap, red shoes, and sunglasses?"

"Sure", she said. "I get it! Now you are a turkey, disguised as Taylor Swift, disguised as a regular person! Perfect!"

Bob successfully made it past Thanksgiving without being eaten and when he misses dressing up, he now has a new gig as a Taylor Swift impersonator at kid's birthday parties to make the little and big kids laugh.

Junior Division Grades 3-6

The Asani Hunters
By: London Cochrane (Gr. 6)

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“I don’t wanna go!” Anna screamed. She meant to sound fierce, but her voice was wavering, whole body shaking. She was fighting off tears but unfortunately not very well.

“It is just for a little bit.” Her mother’s soft voice was calm, her warm hands were comforting as they touched her cheeks wiping away her tears. Lately, Anna’s city had been filled with violence. The News was constantly reporting tragic deaths.

Three weeks ago, a plane flew over the edge of the city and started dropping bombs. The city was in chaos. 15 minutes after the plane had arrived, it crashed right in the middle of the houses there. Thousands of citizens died and so did the people that crashed the plane. Their bodies were not found when the plane exploded so their identities remained unknown. There was a nickname the city had given them: The Asani Hunters.

It was a suicide mission. Anna couldn’t wrap her head around it. Who would want to kill so many people and then die themselves? It wasn’t just those that had been attacked that had died, because after the bombing the entire city had erupted with more violence. Mostly people from different races were being blamed. It wasn’t right. When the plane crash first occurred, the violence started on the outside of the town but had slowly begun creeping towards where Anna’s family lived.

“Why?” was all Anna could say before the tears started again.

“It’s not safe here, butterfly,” her Dad’s voice had lost its normal cheer. His face had been stripped of his smile.

“We already talked to Grandma. She will pick everybody up at the train station tomorrow,” Anna’s Mom explained.

“I’m scared,” Anna croaked, her voice barely a whisper.

“I know butterfly. I know,” her Dad came over and gave her a hug. Anna’s Mom joined the hug. None of them said anything. Just stayed hugging each other until they heard the school bus come to a screeching stop outside their house. As the twins came skipping inside the hug was broken up. Anna turned away and wiped her tears away. The twins came to a halt.

“What’s wrong?” Bella asked. Her little nose scrunching up as she let out a sneeze.

“So, we have something to tell you,” Dad broke the silence. “You guys are going to go on a trip to Grandma’s house. The train leaves tomorrow morning.”

“Are you guys coming?” Bella asked.

“Actually, no,” Dad answered.

“Okay. We’ll visit Grandma,” Liam said. There was a look of relief in Dad’s eyes. The twins may have bought it, but at 12, Anna wasn’t convinced. Anna knew the truth. Their town was preparing a unit of soldiers to fight against the violence, and Dad had gotten drafted. Then there was Mom. Anna had been noticing that she wasn’t herself, and felt sick all the time. Dad had told her that she should go with the kids, but she had refused. It had been decided. Mom was staying.

The next morning Anna was exhausted. She hadn’t gotten any sleep. Her mind had been racing with all the things that could go wrong.

When they arrived at the train station, their parents wrapped them all up in a group hug. It wasn’t until they heard the call for passengers to board that they let go.

Anna's Dad leaned down and whispered into Anna's ear "Take good care of them for us." Anna just nodded. She couldn't say anything. Hand in hand, Bella, Liam, and Anna boarded the train and found their seats. When they looked out the window their parents were there, waving from the platform.

The train started to move. All three kids watched as their parents were whisked away as the train picked up speed. It was going to be a long ride.

Surprisingly the train ride seemed fast. Anna must have fallen asleep because she awoke with a startle when the train jerked to a stop. She gathered their belongings and headed to the exit of the train.

After about 3 months of living at their Grandma's house, late one night Anna snuck downstairs and had overheard her Grandma on the phone talking to somebody. She could only make out a few words, but she managed to hear that her Mom was in the hospital. Anna was worried sick about what could have happened to her. She couldn't think about anything else until she called her Mom and heard her voice over the phone. After that, she had kind of forgot about it.

Then one evening, 6 months after they had arrived, their Grandma was sitting watching the news when an important broadcast had come on. Police had apprehended the leader of The Asani Hunters. It was now safe to return home. Anna didn't think she was going to be able to sleep. She just laid there staring up at the ceiling feeling the happiest that she had in a long time.

As the week slowly passed, Anna got more and more excited.

Finally the day came. All three kids were so excited they could barely breathe. Anna especially. As much as she loved being responsible and taking care of her siblings she felt

like a weight had been taken off her shoulders. She also felt like she didn't have to worry about her parents back at home either. Everyone was going to be okay.

When they arrived home, they were greeted by their parents. They all came together in a group hug. That was when Anna heard a baby crying. The sound was coming from a stroller that was tucked behind her Dad's legs.

"Anna, Bella, Liam, meet your new baby sister, Laura!" Anna's Mom smiled. Suddenly everything made sense, why Anna's Mom had been feeling so sick, and why Anna had overheard that conversation over the phone about her mom being in the hospital. It had finally happened. Her family had been reunited. Everything was perfect.

Junior Division Grades 3-6

The Glass City And The Flying Snowflakes
By: Sergiu Petrov (Gr. 6)

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This is a story that happened a long, long time ago, in a country far, far away, where it never snowed.

In the middle of the country there was one big and shiny city which was built out of glass only. The buildings were very tall, sometimes even taller than the clouds, and people who lived on the top 10 floors had their heads a bit more “in the clouds”.

All the children in the glass city were used to living inside their apartments and they were never allowed to play outside. They usually played on their iPad’s, mobile phones, or VR Headsets. The school was done online on big computer screens, and at lunch time they were allowed to mute themselves and turn off the camera for some privacy. Their parents worked in those buildings as well, at different floors based on their job importance.

Everything was different in the glass city, but the most unusual thing during those times was the fact that parents never kissed or hugged their children. These sort of gestures were considered inappropriate, quite embarrassing. The parents of the children thought that too many feelings would end up ruining a strong character.

Finn was a 10-year-old boy, with big grey eyes the colour of a thunderstorm and a small nose like pocket button.

One day, when Finn was doing his homework, he heard a big BANG. Initially he thought that the air system broke down, but the second BANG caught him with his eyes raised towards the windows. Finn got up from his chair and went closer to the window. Undecided on what to do, he glued his face to the window and that was when he saw a little

girl with black hair. The girl raised a page of paper on which she wrote: OPEN THE WINDOW!!

Finn immediately wrote on a sheet of paper: I DON'T KNOW HOW!

Then the girl shook her black hair and drew on the paper the map of the remote and the instructions on how to open the window.

“Finally,” said the girl. “I thought you would never open the window. What is your name?”

“Finn,” he said, after he adjusted his breathing to the new air.

“Well, Finn, I am Rebecca, and this is my grandfather, Zaky.” Only then did Finn see the old man in the wheelchair behind Rebecca.

“Do you want to play, Finn?”

“On the iPad?”

“No, from the window,” answered the girl in a hurry. “My grandfather taught me some games and you are the only friend who opened his window to me. I have tried to call other friends to open their windows, but nobody wanted to. Everyone is so scared.”

“How come you are not scared, Rebecca?” asked Finn.

“Maybe because my grandfather Zaky told me never to be afraid to be a bit different.”

Finn really liked Rebecca, so he agreed to play with her every day after his father left for work. He would open his window and she would teach him how to fold papers into airplanes, how to build walky-talkies, and how to fly kites made by themselves. After several weeks, at lunchtime, most of the children on Finn’s side of the building were playing with their windows wide open.

One day, Finn's father came home and that was the end of their adventures. Someone must have said something because no child was allowed at the window from that moment on.

But one night, something quite extraordinary happened. While everyone slept, the angry clouds and the sky reached a decision. Winter would come, but a different kind of winter, a snowy one, something that this city never saw before.

In the morning, when everyone woke up, there was a strange kind of light in each glass apartment and the glass windows started to open all by themselves. If this was not enough, from the sky, huge snowflakes started to fall down, like a curtain of fluffy popcorn, mesmerizing everyone who watched. Parents and children got closer and closer to the open windows, watching this magical show. But as the snowflakes were approaching the open windows, Finn noticed that they were becoming bigger and bigger, and on each snowflake's belly, a mirror appeared, so parents and children could see their image reflected into them.

All of a sudden, parents, one by one, started to disappear inside the mirrors because snowflakes seemed to hunt down only the parents, moving faster and faster, running through the apartments until each parent had a chance to see himself in the open eye of the snowflake's mirror. Parents started to yell and run, children started to hide behind furniture or closed doors, but snowflakes always made their ways towards adults. In only a couple of minutes, half of the parents disappeared into the mirrors, but the other half were left alone, scared and hugging their children.

When his father's turn came, and a huge snowflake entered their glass apartment, Finn ran in his father's arms and yelled from the bottom of his heart:

"Please, don't take him away. I love him!" The snowflake stopped and looked at Finn and then showed his mirror to the father and he recognized true love, so he hurried away to

the open windows. By the end of that morning, only loving parents were left to live with their children.

The people of the glass city learned a very important lesson, that loving and hugging each other was not a weakness as they thought before, but a strength that could save their lives.

From that day on, the children of the glass city were permitted to play outside and open their windows every day and the parents were encouraged to caress their children often without guilt. Finn and Rebecca wrote this story and when my great-great-great-parents died, they made me promise that I will keep sharing their story.

Junior Division Grades 3-6

The Islamic Cinderella By: Sanga Kamawal (Gr. 6)

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Long time ago lived a beautiful girl named Sarah. Her parents were really ill. The doctors did everything they could do but unfortunately her parents passed away. Sarah was adopted by her auntie who was really mean. She had two daughters who were really rude as well. Sarah was really nice and she would go to the masjid for salah every day. She wore an abaya and headscarf that her dad bought her. But her stepmom took it away from her.

The stepmother was jealous of her humbleness, generosity, and how she would pray salah five times a day. The stepmother used a different name for Sarah she called her Cinderella. One day the stepmother got an invitation to an Eid party. Cinderella wanted to go too, but her stepmother said “no”. Cinderella was washing the dishes in the kitchen she suddenly heard a knock at the door. She couldn’t believe her eyes: it was grandmother who had been gone to hajj a very long time ago. She greeted her and offered her to sit down and have a cup of tea.

Her grandmother explained that she couldn’t come home in time because there was a war going on in the country but Alhamdulillah, she was safe. Cinderella told her grandmother about her stepmom and stepsisters, and how she could not attend the Eid party. Her grandmother clapped her hands and suddenly she was wearing a beautiful blue gown, sparkling like the sun, glowing glass slippers, and a matching headscarf. Once again, her grandmother clapped her hands and a magical long black limo was right in front of the house.

Her grandmother said,

“You don’t have to be back on time because it will not disappear.” Cinderella hopped inside of the limo and though there was no driver, her grandmother had told her it was magic so it could drive by itself, the rider just had to tell it where you wanted to go. Cinderella then told the limo she wanted to go to the Eid party. Within seconds she was at the Eid party. When she walked in everyone was so surprised to see her beauty and the prince asked her to dance Cinderella said,

“Yes”.

When the azan went on, everybody was talking, but Cinderella remained quiet. When it was salaah time, Cinderella and a couple of girls went to pray but some people kept eating. The prince was amazed by her honesty and humbleness so they got married and lived happily ever after.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Ties That Transcend
By: Bethany Wu (Gr. 8)

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My ninety-five-year-old great-grandma used to love sitting comfortably on a recliner chair and wait for me to come home from school. Nothing had changed in the last five years. The moment I stepped in the door, she would kindly advise me with the same words everyday:

“Nicki, go get some rest for half an hour and grab some snacks before doing your homework!”

My response was always the same, like a little robot, but in a nice way,

“Sure I will, Tai Po!” It became our little ritual, a way to connect that only the two of us could sense and understand.

For all my life, my great-grandma was always my companion and close buddy. Everyday, I would rush home from school rather than linger and chat with my friends; knowing that seeing Tai Po would calm my nerves and relieve whatever stress or worries I had that day. Whether I had good news or sad news, she would be the first one to know without a doubt since both of my parents were often busy at work.

Due to her limited mobility, the only fun game we could play together was tossing a balloon back and forth. Weekends were our favourite time together as we could spend hours playing with balloons to keep her mind active. Our laughter filled the living room as we were tossing them. At times, she attempted to trick me and threw the balloon in the opposite direction. We burst into laughter especially when I missed the catch. No one could ever

imagine how a simple cheap air blown balloon could bring so much joy and contentment in a family.

Every time I had a conversation with her, she would hold my hand. Her age could trick lots of people since many would think she had limited energy. Her grip was firm yet gentle. As she was getting older, the roles began to reverse. I would take her hand, whether I was sitting beside her or pushing her in her wheelchair at the nearby park. In the evenings, I would crawl close to her bed, just to feel the warmth of her presence. Once in awhile, she would share stories of her past and tales of wisdom, but unfortunately, most of the stories never got to finish because Tai Po had often turned into a sleeping beauty before the stories hit the climax every time. No matter what the case might be, those half-told stories had become my life pillar of strength.

One day, as I was sitting by her bedside, she looked at me with a serene smile and said,

"If I ever pass away, I will come back." Her words confused me all of a sudden, but I didn't question them then. Instead, I focused on cherishing the moment, making everyday count, and creating memories that felt eternal.

A few months later, Tai Po's health began to decline. I noticed the change, but I refused to admit it. I tried to hang onto the belief that our bond was unbreakable and she would not leave me.

On December 4th, we had a special high tea in the sunroom, just the two of us. I prepared her favourite smoked salmon sandwich, mango tart, and green tea. As we were

reminiscing about our adventures together, all of a sudden, she looked at me with those big wise eyes and mumbled in my ears,

"Remember Nicki, I will always be with you no matter what."

My words broke up and all I could say was stuttering sounds. My eyes were starting to become watery, but I tried really hard to control my emotions. I knew once my tears were triggered, they would be unstoppable, so I refrained from crying and returned with a fake smile. I grabbed her warm hands and whispered back, "Me too, Tai Po!"

I went to school like usual the very next day. That morning, my Math teacher just handed back my Math test. I was thrilled to see I had scored 100%. I couldn't wait to tell Tai Po when I reached home. I knew she would be so proud of me and give me a big squeeze. However, my day took a sudden and dark turn when I was called to Ms. Giovani's office, my vice-principal. My heart raced as I was walking down the hallway, wondering what I had done wrong. After I got into her office, Ms. Giovani asked me to sit down. Honestly that made me feel very uneasy. The next thing she asked was to pick up the phone. I reluctantly picked it up and it was my mom on the other line. I had a deep feeling that something was wrong. My mom's voice wavered as she was delivering the news to me which shattered my world. She uttered in a quavering voice,

"Your great-grandma has just passed away peacefully on her recliner chair."

The sudden shock had left me numb and speechless, a heavy silence swallowing all the laughter. I felt my heart stop and splintered into jagged pieces. I tried to breathe while holding onto my tears. My mom on the line with Ms. Giovani by my side tried to comfort me as much as they could, but it did not work. My hands trembled, clutching the phone like it was the only thing tethering me to the moment. At that very moment, I knew I was still in the school

environment, so I had to control myself. Otherwise, I would have thrown the phone away, like it would erase the words I had just heard. The pain was indescribable as it wrapped around my heart, squeezing tighter with every passing second.

In the days that followed, I found myself lost in a fog of grief and despair. Not only was I unable to sleep at all, I was not even able to focus in school for weeks. Instead, I sat in the sunroom hoping to get some connection and rethink every word my great-grandma told me within the last few months. I felt entirely bewildered. As I was listening to one of her favorite songs and recollecting all the memories, I heard a faint whisper,

“I am here. I have never left you!” I bolted upright when my heart was pounding. It was impossible, but the room felt warmer, almost as if Tai Po was right there beside me.

Weeks turned into months, more strange things started happening. I found a balloon in the living room, though I had not seen one since she passed. The balloon kept floating and I followed until it stopped beside Tai Po’s bed. I tried to ignore it, but deep inside, I felt scared and overwhelmed. I ended up crawling onto her bed and covering myself with her blanket. Within seconds, the tears I had been holding back finally poured out instinctively, cascading down my face like a river. I could not handle this anymore. I felt lost without my great-grandma. Everything around me was no longer the same. When I was sobbing, my hands slipped under the pillow. I found a piece of paper. It was a letter written to me from Tai Po, months before she passed. She must have known her days on Earth were coming to an end, which led her to write this letter.

Following were the exact same words on the letter:

Dear Nicki,

By the time you read this, I am no longer beside you. You won't see me waiting for you on my recliner chair after school; or hearing me tell you to rest before your homework. You may not have anyone to toss balloons with you during weekends. I know you miss me so much and I am the same. But remember, I am still here. I have never left you. Please take very good care of mom and yourself! I love you always!

Love never ends

Tai Po

As I was still wiping my tears, I went upstairs to my room and tucked this letter into a locked drawer. Then, I quickly went to the washroom and washed my face with icy water several times before my mom came back from work. I pretended nothing had ever happened.

Mom and I had not made any progress on reorganizing Tai Po's room or throwing anything away. Whether we were still in denial or we trying to procrastinate, everything was still kept in the same place.

Until six months went by, I was trying to organize the living room one day. While I was wiping off some dust from Tai Po's empty wheelchair in the living room, a wave of memories came back instantaneously. My emotions started to act up until out of nowhere, an old woman who looked exactly like my great-grandmother appeared in front of my face. She smiled at me, a knowing look in her eyes, and said,

"Don't weep, Nicki! I have never left you." My tears kept falling down even more like a waterfall. When I was wiping my tears and trying to turn back to the lady, she had disappeared in the mist without saying goodbye.

Though I have never seen this mysterious lady since, in my quiet moments, I started to think that maybe my great-grandma was keeping her promise. Honestly, I still feel her presence, as if she has never left. Her words echo in my mind:

“I will always be with you no matter what.”

I know and believe that she is forever by my side. I feel our bond remains unbroken, transcending the boundaries of life and death.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

The Last Adventure By: Avery Horlings (Gr. 8)

more inside

In the small town of Maplewood, where autumn leaves turned vibrant shades of orange and gold, lived a girl named Lily. At fourteen, she had the heart of an artist, capturing the world's beauty in her sketchbook. Her most cherished companion wasn't a paintbrush or a pencil. It was a scruffy goldendoodle named Monty. With his wagging tail and soulful brown eyes, Monty was more than a pet. He was Lily's confidant, her protector, and her best friend.

From the moment Lily's parents brought Monty home, he had been a constant presence in her life. They grew up together, exploring the woods behind her house, running through fields of wildflowers, and spending lazy afternoons napping in the sun. Whenever Lily felt the weight of the world on her shoulders, be it a tough day at school or a fight with her best friend, Monty was there. His warm body pressed against hers, reminding her that everything would be okay.

As summer turned to fall, Lily began her favorite tradition creating a mural on the side of the old barn in her backyard. Each year, she painted scenes from her life. This year, she wanted to capture the bond she shared with Monty. With the scent of fresh paint in the air and Monty at her side, she spent hours sketching and painting.

One crisp Saturday afternoon, while working on the mural, Lily heard a soft whimper. She turned to find Monty staring at her with a concerned look. His once-vibrant coat had dulled, and his energy seemed to have waned. The reality hit her like a punch to the gut. Monty was getting old.

“Hey, buddy,” she said, kneeling beside him and wrapping her arms around his neck. “You okay?” He licked her face, a gesture that always made her laugh, but this time it only made her heart ache.

Over the next few weeks, Lily noticed more signs that Monty wasn’t his usual self. He struggled to jump into the car and seemed to tire easily on their walks. The once-bustling dog park they frequented became a place where he sat quietly, watching the other dogs play instead of joining in.

Determined to make the most of their time together, Lily planned a special day. She woke up early one Saturday, the air crisp with the promise of adventure.

“Today, we’re going on an adventure, Monty!”, she exclaimed. She packed a picnic basket with his favorite treats and some of her own sandwiches, cookies, and apple slices for herself.

Lily and Monty drove to Willow Lake, a serene spot where the trees dipped their branches into the water, and the sun cast dancing reflections on the surface. Monty seemed to brighten as they arrived, bounding out of the car with a renewed spirit. They hiked along the trails, the vibrant colors of fall surrounding them, and Lily captured moments in her sketchbook—Monty chasing after leaves, his fur glowing in the sunlight, and his playful bark echoing through the woods.

After a long hike, they settled on a grassy hill overlooking the lake. Lily spread out the blanket and shared her picnic with Monty, who devoured his treats with gusto. As they lay side by side, watching the clouds drift lazily across the sky, Lily felt a warmth envelop her. It was at that moment she knew this was a day she would always remember. “Let’s make a promise, okay?” she whispered, rubbing Monty’s belly as he gazed up at her. “No matter what

happens, we'll always be together." Monty responded with a happy bark, and Lily laughed, feeling a deep sense of peace.

As weeks passed, the shadows of worry crept in. Monty's health continued to decline, and one evening, after a particularly challenging day, he curled up beside Lily on her bed, his breathing labored. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she held him close, whispering reassurances,

"I'm here, Monty. I'll always be here."

The next morning, Lily woke to find Monty lying still. Panic surged through her, and she rushed to him, cradling his head in her arms.

"No, no, no! Please, not like this!" she sobbed, but deep down, she knew he was gone. The world around her faded into a blur of heartache as she pressed her face against his fur, wishing desperately for just one more moment.

Days turned into weeks, and the vibrant colors of fall slowly transformed into the muted tones of winter. The mural Lily had started remained untouched, a testament to the bond they had shared. Every time she walked past it, she felt a pang of loss, but also a spark of gratitude for the memories they had created together.

One cold afternoon, as she sat wrapped in a blanket with her sketchbook in hand, she felt an overwhelming urge to paint. It was time to finish the mural, to celebrate Monty's life instead of mourning his absence. She gathered her supplies and headed to the barn, determined to bring their adventures to life. As she painted, each brushstroke became a memory—Monty leaping into the air, splashing in puddles, rolling in the grass. She painted their adventures with vibrant colors, capturing not just the moments, but the joy and love they had shared.

When Lily finally stepped back, the mural was a beautiful tribute, a celebration of their bond that transcended the pain of loss. In the center, she painted a large, golden sun, radiating warmth and light, symbolizing the joy Monty had brought into her life.

As the final touches were made, Lily stood back and wiped away the tears that had fallen onto her cheeks. She felt a sense of peace wash over her, knowing that while Monty may no longer be physically by her side, his spirit would always remain in her heart.

Lily took a deep breath and whispered and she put her hand on the mural,

“Thank you, Monty. For everything.” In that moment, she felt a gentle breeze rustle the leaves outside, as if Monty were there, wagging his tail and encouraging her to keep painting, to keep living.

From that day on, Lily visited the mural every week, each time adding new elements to the scene—a flower here, a butterfly there, and even a little goldendoodle beside the sun. Monty may have left her side, but he would never leave her heart. And in that heart, their adventures would continue forever.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Falling Into A Fairytale
By: Harper Reid (Gr. 7)

more inside

“Abby! It’s time to get up, lazy bones!” Knox calls from outside my room. “There’s magic in the air this morning!”

“I wish there was,” I moan, sitting up slowly. “Every day feels like *your* fairytale, while I’m sitting here, waiting for mine to begin.” As I slip out of bed and into my slippers, I notice a bird perched outside the window on the swaying branch of a kauris tree. *I remember the name of this bird!* I think, trying to push the early morning fogginess out of my brain.

“What could possibly be taking this long?” Knox says as they barge into my room. “Abs, you’ve got to be kidding me. You’re in here bird watching while everyone else is outside eating breakfast! The Froot Loops will be gone by the time you get out there!” The bird flies away, and I turn around and see Knox cramming their face with cereal.

I sigh, “I’ll be out in a minute, I just have to get dressed.”

“Fine. But if you aren’t outside in five minutes, I’m coming back,” they warn. I quickly throw on a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, and then slide my feet into my shoes and tie my laces. I slug my backpack over my shoulder and jog through the hallway, and out of the cabin.

The minute I step outside, my lungs fill with the crisp morning air. The rest of the group is gathered in a small clump around someone who is talking, clearly about something important. I toss the idea of breakfast out of my head as I push through the crowd. I finally get to the front of the group, where there is a boy my age, getting ready to give a speech.

“Hello, and welcome ladies and gentlemen to Camp Wajiw!” His voice echoes as applause fills the air. “My name is Liam, and I am going to be one of your tour guides, helping

to guide you up the mountain for the next week.” More applause and whistles from the crowd, then he continues. “Yesterday, Mahmoud took you bird watching around the base of the mountain, so keep an eye out for all the birds you learned about once we get climbing. Also, last night you guys slept in a cabin, don’t get used to it. We will be sleeping in *tents* on the mountain.” As he said this, there was an audible sigh from the group. “I know, I know, but you signed up for this! Now, where was I...oh yes, I was talking about...”

His voice fades out in my head because, even though his hair is gorgeous, and his eyes are prettier than the night sky, I’m not in the mood for listening to a lecture about being safe this early in the morning. Besides, I’ve been rock climbing before, what difference does it make if the wall is just a bit higher?

I unzip my backpack, pull out my headphones, and place them on my head. I scroll through Spotify, and end up clicking on my favourite song, *Today Was A Fairytale* by Taylor Swift. I kick at the dirt, waiting for the guide to give us our climbing gear. Suddenly, someone taps me on the shoulder.

“What are you listening to?” It’s Knox.

I roll my eyes, “Seriously?”

“How can one person listen to an artist that much?” they snort.

“Because she’s a boss, of course! Are you excited to climb?”

“Well, you know how much I love the outdoors!” they say sarcastically, quickly smacking a bug off their arm. I look up from my shoes and see the group slowly following Liam towards a small shack.

“Come on, Knox, let’s go.” I click off my headphones and we follow the group to where Liam and another instructor are demonstrating how to safely put on a helmet and harness.

Knox and I begin to play tic tac toe in the dirt. "R.I.P. my white shoes," I mumble, and we begin giggling together.

"Hey, you two ladies in the back! Let's pay attention up here!" We freeze. My eyes dart over to Knox, and they look like they're about to throw up. I reach over and give them a pat on the back.

"Are you oka-" I start.

"Third time. That's the third time someone has done that here." They sound hurt.

"But didn't-"

"Yep," they interrupt again, "I put my pronouns clearly on all the forms. All of them."

"It's going to be alright" I reach over and give them a comforting hug. "Remember, there's magic in the air."

We finally decide to stop fooling around and pay attention to the demonstration. After that, they gave us our harnesses and showed us how to top rope belay. Then an instructor named Kelly tells us that she has assigned partners. Knox and I grab each other's hands and cross our fingers. The instructor gets to the end of the list, and she hasn't called my name, but Knox is with someone named Sophie.

Suddenly Liam walks over. "You're my partner," he says, running his hands through his golden-brown hair.

"Oh, okay," I smile shyly. Knox notices and begins to make kissy faces at me, but I shoo them away. "Not to be rude, but aren't you an instructor?" I question.

"I am an instructor, but we have an uneven amount of campers," he explains, "plus, I think we're the same age."

"Ah, I see." I'm not really sure what to say. "Well, shall we climb?"

We attach to the belay system, and Liam allows me to head up first. With every move I make, he pulls the rope tighter, making me feel extremely safe. After about ten minutes of climbing in silence, I look down and realize just how high we are. “Woah,” I utter, feeling nauseous.

“It’s okay,” Liam says comfortingly, “One step at a time.” After that, I fall back into the repetition of find handhold, reach for it, pull up, find foothold, repeat. I note just how peaceful it is and how relaxed I am, even though I’m so high up. I hear a whistle, signalling for us to meet up at the ledge to my right. Once we are all on the tiny platform of rock, Kelly shouts.

“Alright crew! We’ve made it to the first break! You’re all doing amazing. So, have a sip of water, and the next part of the climb is the fun part, a free-for-all! No more following the course. Climb anywhere you like, and meet back here in two hours, got it?”

“Got it!” the rest of us echo. Knox and I exchange glances, basically having a wordless conversation: *Hey, do you want to climb together? Let’s do it!*

Liam and I begin to head straight up the rock face, while Knox and their partner follow. Knox pulls themselves up next to me, and sighs. “This girl won’t stop talking! I didn’t ask for her life story - or the names of her three dogs! Which, by the way, are Cinnamon, Toast, and Crunch, which - guess what,” they make a surprised face, “is her favourite cereal!”

I laugh, “To me, that sounds like introvert problems!” We continue up the rock face and notice that it gradually becomes less steep. It continues like that until we can stand up. The four of us gaze at the crystal blue sky and watch as clouds drift by.

“It’s so pretty!” I exclaim, and everyone nods their head in agreement.

Sophie exhales, “It is, but I’m tired from that steep climb, let’s take a break.” Sophie sits down and urges Knox to sit down next to her. I continue to stand and gaze at the sky and

remind myself that this is why I came out here for a week. I begin to take a few steps back, to really capture the view, when all of a sudden, the ground disappears.

“Ahhh!” I shriek as I fall through an opening in the rock, and I feel my head bang against something. Thankfully, the hole isn’t too deep, and I land abruptly with a thud. My head starts to throb, and I reach my hand for the injured spot, hoping it will stop the pain. When I pull my hand back, there is a coating of red blood on my fingertips. “Help! Somebody help me!” I scream.

I hear footsteps approaching and then suddenly, Liam and Knox simultaneously poke their heads over the hole. “Abby!” Knox shouts, “Are you okay?” They obviously notice the horrific sight of my head, because they gag.

“Is it really that bad?” I ask. But before anyone can answer, Liam has already tied a rope to a nearby rock and is lowering himself down.

“None of us will know until we get you out of there,” he explains as he lowers himself down. Suddenly, I hear Sophie scream,

“Oh my- she fell down a crevice!”

Liam rolls his eyes, “It’s called a *crevasse*.”

“No, it’s not!” Sophie insists. As Liam begins to edge closer to me, I can make out the look on his face, which is saying that he is over this argument.

I try to stay focused on my breath, because I know that panicking will only make it worse. Plus, Liam is almost... never mind. I watch as the rope snaps and he falls straight down. When he lands, his body gets wedged in between the rocks, inches away from mine. I gulp, “Uh, hi?”

His expression is calm, but I know that is just a mask he's wearing for me. "Fancy meeting you here," he says, trying to lighten the mood. I blush. I don't know why, I don't think I'm attracted to him, and I don't think he's attracted to me. But then, I hear Knox shout.

"Hate to break up the love fest, but should I go get some help, or are we just going to wait for the rest of the blood to drain out of your head?"

Liam yells back, "Yeah! You two, go back to the meeting place. There will definitely be an instructor there. I hear their footsteps begin to recede, but then Liam calls, "Oh! And try to make it fast!"

That makes me nervous. The thought, '*What if I die here?*' pops into my head, but I can't afford to think like that. At least if I do die, the engraving on my gravestone is going to be epic.

I glance up at Liam, who is staring at me. "What are you doing?" I ask.

"Counting the freckles on your face," he replies.

"Am I going to be okay?" I ask, as my vision begins to go in and out of blurriness.

"I'll make sure of it," he says, "I just wish that I could reach behind your head and put some pressure on that wound." I try to shimmy my body in a way that would bring me closer to him, but it's hard because of the tight rocks.

"How about now?" I wait for his response.

"Maybe," he says, and begins to try and stretch his arm over my head. His face moves closer and closer to mine, until suddenly, our lips touch, and the world goes black.

I wake up in a hospital bed.

"What happened?" I say as I flutter my eyes open.

“Honey! I’m so happy to see you!” My mom exclaims, wrapping me in a warm hug. Then, over her shoulder, I catch a glimpse of him, and the memories come flooding back.

“Liam!” I cry, “You saved me!”

“It must’ve been the way you kissed me,” he smiles, quoting my favourite Taylor Swift song.

I see Knox standing beside him, and they whisper, “It’s time for your fairytale to begin.” Liam walks over to me and wraps me in a warm embrace, which, sorry mom, is the best hug that I’ve ever received.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Adrift

By: Anne Bowman (Gr. 8)

more inside

When people ask me what I want to be when I'm older, I don't know what to tell them. My life as a 16-year-old girl is really challenging. I'm not good in school. It's hard, especially because my math teacher Mr. Burness dislikes anyone who isn't pulling a B. My other subjects aren't much better, but at least the teachers seem more fair.

My social life isn't so great either. I've only got one friend, Ariana, and she is as uncool and unpopular as me. I think that she is nice and we enjoy hanging out together, but her hobbies and clothing choices are questionable.

As I walk down the road to the school bus stop, I smell the salty air of Halifax, Nova Scotia. I think to myself, only a few more weeks until summer, and this horrible school year will end. If only I could swim across the ocean and start fresh in England or France, in a place where I haven't screwed up my whole life. The bus is here now and I take my seat at the back. I usually sit beside Ariana, but she's late, *again*, and missed the bus.

As we pull up to South Halifax High School, I enjoy the last moments of aloneness before entering the crowd, trying to make it to my locker unnoticed, but no such luck.

"Hey swimmer freak!" says Luisa Taylor, the most popular girl at school, and a total jerk. "Ready for the math exam tomorrow? Or are you going to flunk it like every other test?"

Unfortunately, she's right. I try to study, but I know it will be like every other test, a C. This is the end of year exam, great. And the swimmer freak thing I could do without.

Last year, when we were in grade nine, we went to the beach as an end of year field trip. All the girls came with their bikinis and beach towels, but I came in my speedo swimsuit

and goggles, ready to go diving for shells. I was underwater for two minutes before someone noticed. I was just enjoying myself under the waves. I can hold my breath for three minutes, an unusual skill that I developed after years of swimming and diving. The lifeguard pulled me out of the water, and it turned into a big scene. When I tried to explain to everyone that I could hold my breath for three minutes, they were weirded out, and I was labeled as “swimmer freak” by Luisa. Everybody knows that she can’t swim, but she is too cool for anyone to tease her about it.

I try to make it through the day; a boring lecture in History, (I zoned out so I can’t tell you much more about it), a reminder about the math exam in Mr. Burness’s class, and a positive surprise, a B on my science project! That is my best mark all year! I did it on the different shells I collect from the ocean and I really enjoyed it. The rest of the day flies by and when I get on the bus to head home, I meet up with Ariana.

“Hey Jess!” She says cheerily, in her tie dye jumper. “Wanna go fishing tonight?”

“Ummm...”

“Great! I’ll see you at the beach at five!”

Oh, totally great, now I’m stuck fishing like a loser. Of all the hobbies, it had to be fishing? That’s not what the regular, cool kids do. I consider canceling, but I just convinced her to stop wearing her froggy bucket hat, and this is my way of saying thank you. Plus, I can go swimming while we’re there.

When I get home, I am greeted by my Dad,

“Hey Jess! Good day?”

“Mm-hm! I got a B on my Science project today!”

“That is really amazing, I'm so proud of you. Maybe this means that you will do well on your math exam tomorrow.”

Oh, right. “Sure!” I say, but I know it won't happen, even if I really want it. But I did well in science, so maybe I can do well in math too. I grab my notebook to practice for the exam. I focus on the things Mr. Burness mentioned. Linear equations and algebraic modelling. I have the basics solid enough, but the rest is still confusing. I sit down at my desk, and study for an hour before the grandfather clock chimes 5 o'clock. I quickly throw my bathing suit under a t-shirt and shorts, grab my collection bag, and run down the street to the shore of our little bay. I'm alone. Ariana is late, as usual.

I look out at the beautiful blue ocean, just off the beach, and the clear sky - a rare treat and a perfect day to go swimming. I tie my collection bag around my waist and dive into the water. I swim out to deeper water, and dive down to check out what the tide has brought in today. I'm happy, and relaxed as I dive down for seashells. Swimming back to examine my collection, I see Ariana waiting.

“Let's go and check my minnow traps!” she says. We head away from the beach and onto the pier. We pull up the traps and cast some lines out, but catch nothing. Ariana gives up and goes home. I'm glad it's over, and relieved that no one from school saw us. I head home to finish studying - I won't fail this exam.

My Dad comes in as I'm closing my books.

“Jess, I'm really proud of you for working so hard for this exam. I hope you do well. If you try hard in everything you do, I know you will succeed.” I fall asleep, ready for whatever will come tomorrow.

...

“Beep beep beep!” My alarm clock wakes me, and I head outside to the bus stop, not forgetting my math book. I plop down on the bus next to Ariana - who surprisingly, is not late today.

“Good morning!” she says. “You sure look cheery, what could possibly make my dearest friend so excited?”

“Well, I spent all of last night -”

“Oh ya! I forgot to tell you. When you were at the dentist last week, Mr. Burness told us that the math exam would be covering all of this year's math concepts.”

I'm so rattled that I can't even speak. You have got to be kidding me. I spent a lot of time studying for this text, and it just tripled in size?! And my best friend forgot to tell me? We arrive at school, and I have no time to study for the new sections of the exams, since the exam is during first period. This can't be happening.

“You're going to fail.” Luisa says as I pass her on my way to my seat.

I wait for the exam to be handed out and frantically try to remember everything about geometry, and statistics, because I desperately want to pass this test. The exam lands on my desk with a soft thump and I begin. All I can hear is Luisa's words playing over in my head.

“You are going to fail. You are going to fail.”

I have to guess on too many questions. The sections that I did study for are much more difficult than they were in my math book, and the time goes very quickly. The next thing I know, the bell is ringing and I have to turn in my exam.

The next few classes are a blur - I'm so worried about the exam. When I get home, I go swimming, but even the water doesn't calm my nerves.

The next day, I sit in Mr. Burness's math class, waiting anxiously to receive my paper. I flip it over to see the mark, hoping for a B and... an F. I'm so upset, I run out of the classroom. I've worked so hard for that exam, and stupid Mr. Burness had decided it would be a good idea to add another hundred questions, and give my irresponsible friend the task of delivering that information to me? I flip to the section that I tried to study for - all are incorrect. Like what the heck? My whole life is stupid! My teacher is stupid, my friend is stupid and I'm obviously the stupidest person on the planet. I'm going to fail math and there is nothing I can do about it.

I manage to make it to the end of the school day before the tears come. Instead of getting on the bus, I walk home.

"It's just an F, not the end of the world." Ariana says, concerned, while following two steps behind me.

"This is all your fault!" I say angrily, trying to hold back tears. "I practiced and practiced, trying to do well on this exam. School is hard. But this time I really tried for hours to do well, and you didn't care enough to remember to tell me that the test topics changed? Or maybe you didn't think it would matter whether or not I knew what was going to be on the test because I would just fail either way? You might not think that I care, but I do!"

"I -"

"No! You don't care enough about me or about anything I do! You make me go fishing with you and don't even wait for me to answer whether I can, or even want to go! I try to hint that the ways you act and dress are goofy, but you can't seem to figure it out. Why did I ever put any effort into keeping you as a friend?"

I run home before she can say anything else.

What am I going to do? I hear the front door open, and my Dad comes in.

“Hey Jess!” he says, but when he sees my face, he smiles sadly. “Ok, let's get on the boat.”

A boat ride is the best place to have a conversation. On the water, no one can hear you, and the rhythm of the waves is reassuring. We head out of the bay, towards a small cluster of islands. As we drop anchor, in the calm water between the islands, I explain what happened.

“I know what you are going through is hard,” says Dad. “You're struggling with math, and maybe you're not great at the other subjects in school either. But you still have to try your best. It's unlucky that the test topics changed at the last minute, but you still tried and I'm proud of you for that. And while you may struggle in school, you still have things you are good at. The luckiest people get to build a life and career using their own unique skills. We just have to figure out what yours is.”

I think about what he said. What are my strengths? Swimming? I wonder what I will be.

When I get to school the next day, word has gotten out about my F on the exam.

“Hey look! It's everyone's friendly neighbourhood failure. What's up, Swimmer Freak?” Luisa says. “Is swimming the only thing you're good at? Or is there another freak skill you have? You aren't showing signs of any other skills - or brains.” All her friends laugh, but I ignore her. “What good is being a swimmer? What's the point?” Luisa continues.

This fires me up. “At least I try at the things that I'm not good at,” I say. “I prepare for class, and sometimes I do well.” A crowd has formed, watching our argument with interest.

“Ya, like C+ is a good mark...”

“Better than you! I'm not good at math, but I try. You can't swim, but you haven't tried. In fact I'm starting to think that the only reason you call me a "swimmer freak" is because you

want people to think that swimming is a bad thing to make yourself feel better about the fact that you can't!"

Silence.

Luisa is shocked, and it's clear I've landed a direct hit on her own insecurity.

I get on the bus to go home and sit down next to Ariana. I tell her that I was wrong, and apologize for what I said the day before. She forgives me, in exchange for a weekend of making tie dye shirts, and I'm relieved.

As soon as I get home, I head over to the beach, but notice Luisa is also there, flapping around in the water, seemingly trying to learn to swim - but not doing very well.

Feeling intruded upon, I head out to deeper waters to look for shells, a little further than usual, so I can avoid her. I dive down, but get pulled sideways by a sudden force. I swim upwards to the surface, and feel myself being pulled out to sea. I know right away that I'm caught in a rip current.

Don't panic, I tell myself. You know what to do, Dad told you. Don't swim against it, instead swim parallel to the beach until you are out of the current. I turn to the left, and begin to swim. I've never been caught in a rip current before, and it is like nothing I've ever felt. It's as if a hand has hold of me by the waist, and is dragging me out to sea. I fight harder, kick faster, and make my strokes larger. As I break free, I'm relieved, until I see the most terrifying sight in front of me. The bully from the last two years of my life, is caught in the rip current too, flailing frantically, trying to stay at the surface and moving towards me. At this moment, I know what I have to do.

As I swim back into the rip current to catch her. I see others coming to help, but they will never make it in time. The look of fear in her eyes tells me that she can't hold on much

longer, so I have to act fast. I re-enter the current to get her and feel the pull of the invisible force on me again.

She slips under the waves and I dive down to find her. 10 seconds. Swimming downwards, holding my breath will be easy, but it is lifting her that scares me. 20 seconds. I see her, sinking to the bottom, but moving, still conscious. 40 seconds. I grab her under the arms. 60 seconds. I kick back towards the surface. 90 seconds. We break the surface, gasping for air. Thankfully she was too exhausted to struggle against me. I pull her across the rip current, into calm water. I can hear Luisa crying and coughing as I swim us back to shore. People help me once I'm closer and we collapse on the beach.

...

The story of the girl who saved Luisa Taylor spread quickly. I'm suddenly treated differently. People want to talk with me on the bus and go swimming in the ocean too. I am friends with Ariana again and as my confidence grows, my grades improve.

I feel something has changed. My value isn't measured by getting an A on an essay or 100% of a test. I have a new confidence in myself because I found something that I'm good at and something that I love. That day, my special talent saved the life of a bully who has shown me no respect or kindness. I'm proud of that.

When people ask me what I want to be when I'm older, this is what I tell them; I could be many things, but all I have to do is find something I love, and make it part of my life.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

The Breath Between
By: Gabriella Szypula (Gr. 10)

more inside

The sanguine broth of cells drips onto the ground like sand in an hourglass; the sole attractive colour in my neighbourhood, which appears peculiarly bleak today.

Everything is off.

The sun is an ugly blemish in the sky, just like the ache in my head from the impact of the fall. I don't have *time* to lie here and bleed. I'm running out of it.

I need to go.

I wince and shut my eyes on the sidewalk that bears my weight, the sidewalk that has always bore my weight. The toddler whose family just moved here learned to walk on this rubble. He kept falling, and now we both lay here in pain, though not seeing one another, only in memories or abnormal precognition. My momma told me that if I *could feel* like death, I wasn't actually dead. But of course, she said that when I was 6 and I dropped my ice cream, not when I was 16 and my head was bleeding onto the ground that I once dropped that dessert on.

Open your eyes Ajal.

The voice reverberated in my head so relentlessly that it didn't even sound like mine. I prayed about paranormality for the chance a ghost will have mercy on me, and possess me so I gain mobility, because I'm not sure I can get up on my own.

Ajal?

Maybe because the voice *wasn't* mine.

The jarring lights that bathe the court are the first thing I perceive when I open my eyes. Stares gazing from above overwhelm me like a team of persecutors, ready to punish me for my sins if my faults are tasty enough to feed their cruelty. Unblinking, unmoving, shocked figures they stand. The fogginess in my vision takes its time to clear, though allowing me to gain a plain view of the picture I'm painted in.

He's conscious. Ajal, can you hear me?

A team of persecutors does not surround me... but big men in jerseys do. Basketball players...? Jesus, how hard did I hit my head? Past them is a saturated court and thousands of bodies around the perimeter, watching this entire drama happen. I haven't stepped on a court since freshman year, when I quit ball. Puzzlement pierces through my head as if that gash wasn't enough. I gingerly touch the wound on my head, the thick red liquid seeming like the only sight that I can deem as real.

Get him off the court.

Hands.

Lifting me.

Dragging me.

I attempt to make sense of something, anything. The ultraviolet jerseys: my favourite colour. The gasps from the crowd. The squeaks of shoes in the court.

Ajal, do you know where you are?

My lungs break up with their intimate relationship with oxygen, my face white like the awful, fat number '4' on my jersey. I never liked that number. When I was younger, I had a

near death experience. There was a crash: four cars in that collision on the fourth day of the fourth month of the year. I looked it up when they discharged me from the hospital; the number four means 'death' in a couple of languages.

The Phoenix Suns, yeah? We're playing against The Clippers?

Maybe time travel is as real as the doubt ninth grade me had of going pro level. The *real* sun had a more foreseeable chance of exploding before I could ever *be* one, and I knew that when I quit.

C'mon man, you're our star point guard. You gotta say something.

Guess we're really on the topic of stars today, huh? It's like I'll wake up from a nap in science class any minute now, and Mr. Moreselli will be gabbing about some common sense on a slideshow about how all the planets revolve around the sun, because I was unlucky enough to get him two years in a row. But never mind what sick dream this is, being the sun feels... unerring.

Can he even hear me?

Oh yeah, right.

I hunt for breath in my body that is competent enough to propel my words as I still struggle to hold my corporeality, like its water I'm holding instead. My mouth gapes open, my vocal chords bracing to buzz. But as I exhale the birth of my bewilderment, the baby of carbon dioxide cries into my bleak grayscale neighbourhood, like suns never existed at all. Like Mr. Moreselli was wrong and we never were made from those suns. Sitting and shaken up, I watch as the transformed vision of my eye paints my unsettling neighbourhood once again.

What... was... that? A hallucination of what was once all I wanted? A mirage of what I could never be? Shoot I- I think I'm losing too much blood. The dull arrangement of road and houses and sidewalk is a stark contrast to the blinding vibrance of the unfamiliar familiarity of the court.

But hey, at least my eyes are open now,

I chortle to myself dryly. I stand unsteadily, lost in my motives until realisation is pointed like a gun at my heart. How much time has withered as I lay there like an idiot, indulging like a drunk in that stupid dream- or whatever that was? I shake my head rapidly, partly expressing my concern, partly attempting to shake off whatever has gotten into my head. I can't let it matter. *I don't have that time.* One foot lands in front of the other, over and over and over, like a physical mantra. I quicken my pace, though now attaining vigilance to avoid falling (so hard I literally hallucinate) because I obviously failed to before. I feel like I'm running through water, where life's pandemonium of uncertainty is deafened and the atmosphere buys silence for the cost of fatal impermanence. I have to learn how to swim before I drown.

I tread heavily upon the crumbling dirt.

Almost there. Just keep running Ajal.

I look up briefly to scrutinise how much longer it'll take to get there. I happen to be running along the outskirts of my elementary school. It's an empty sentiment, to see the soulless attitude of the playground, and the lack of those ugly florescent lights that gave you a headache shining inside, which complements the now uninviting ambience, when that school was once the home of vitality. Man, every kid there, with their own potential.

I used to run on this exact path during gym class. I was a speedy kid, fastest in my grade, which earned 8-year-old me a serious reputation. That was until a mean kid tripped me

and I broke my leg on the pavement. I still remember how the period bell rang, and the other kids started heading back to the school as I continued to lay there, like my pain was only existent through that 75-minute time frame. I couldn't really run the same after that. While I was trying to heal from the injury, the other kids were getting older and faster and I was just getting behind.

But when Momma took me to the doctor, and they fastened on that cast, Spiderman wasn't the only hero in my eyes. It was the first time I was sure the works of God lived further than the book. And as my leg mended, my prefrontal cortex did too, because for one... two... seconds I was healed and I knew what I wanted to do with my life.

I broke the same leg again four years later.

My lungs have been ignited on fire, the disgusting smoke like a parasite infesting the taste of my bile. It's been too long since I ran like this. My respiratory system ventures for a puff of air, but my wheezes are met with the formidable itch to cough. I lose the argument against the will of nature and my body, and it starts to hack with resentment against breath I cannot seem to capture.

Cough cough

Cough

Cough.

The noise is unsettling, it doesn't sound like me. I stop to take a breather, my hands resting on my knees like a lifeline.

Cough cough COUGH.

I'm trying to breathe- I'm breathing- I can breathe.

But the coughing persists.

Ajal are you focusing?

I wipe my clammy hands on my lab coat.

My lab coat.

My lab coat?

Did I say 'lab coat'? The rate of my breathing has cooled but my heart has not. I'm in a.... I'm in a hospital? I blink harshly at the environment around me. Gloves and masks and beds and more lab coats. I wince as the infuriating barking cough resumes. Is it my head again? Is that what's going on? I'm not like, going crazy or anything, am I?

I need you to be paying attention.

My gaze tentatively shifts to the taller peremptory man closely ahead of me. It shifts to the struggling senior patient on the bed whose greatest enemy is a proper breath. When the tall man sees he has finally grasped my attention, he nods.

I need you to listen as I ask the patient these questions.

I'm watching as the doctor begins chatting with the patient and scribbling his responses down, but not really. I'm more watching how I slowly seem to be going insane. First professional basketball, now a doctor? A doctor that doesn't seem to have very much experience apparently. I can't get caught up in this again. I need to get back, back to that agonising running before it's too late, before I-

Did you see how I did that? I want you to do just that for the lady in room 260.

It's like I'm back in a classroom, teachers telling me to do this and that, but I had other ideas in my head. I understood maths class as much as I understood these lunatic visions: I didn't. It's like- these 'visions'- the theme across them is starting to form a pattern.

I used to live the game. It was always, “I can't, I have practice.” or, “I'm so sore from basketball”. I was going to go D1, and in another reality, I guess I did.

I threw it all away.

Like I said, quit freshman year. And it wasn't because of some career ending injury, or I found a new sport to lose myself to. It was because I was paralyzed by indecision. Basketball was all I've ever known, but what if I was a baby born in a hospital, without knowing that the hospital isn't the whole world? I didn't know what to do, I didn't know if this was what I wanted. I never know anything. And I pity myself because that statement holds true, and I *want* to know everything.

After I left the team, enrolling in pre-med was still fresh in my mind. A life of stress, sure, but I found comfort in the stability. But committing to this meant waking up from sleep so I wouldn't have to be tormented by the dreams of my life. I wouldn't know what it's like to start a band, like me and my friends half-jokingly wanted to when we were 13. I'd never have the time to teach my kids how to ball. Why did gaining something have to mean losing everything? I hope everyone forgives me if I don't make it in time... I didn't want to live with regret for things that haven't even happened yet.

And ironically, I regret even that.

Suddenly,

It clicked.

The visions, the hallucinations, the dreams. They're not just reminders, but warnings.

I'm walking in the sterile hospital and I need to get out, I'm running out of time.

I need to get out I'm running out of time

Need to get out I'm running out of

Get out I'm running out

Out I'm running

I'm running

I'm running

I'm running.

I'm running along the outskirts of my elementary school. A tear escapes my prison of bones, and I hope the salty droplet makes it to heaven so that if my flesh undergoes the rot of the clock, I will meet it there and be comforted that I still exist, even within the body of a tear. The dreams, the... the realities, possibilities...the warnings and reminders. Warnings that if I don't make it there in time I won't have more tears left to cry, and reminders that, that isn't a good thing. What a mess I am, bleeding and tear stained. Funny to think that the version of me about 20 minutes ago who wasn't throbbing and weeping is still alive according to the keeper of time. That's what it's all about, huh? The gamemaster who deals the cards, the referee that calls the point. The clock that rules your fate. Every tick of the time is a decision and every minute you allow yourself to be decided. I guess no one would choose a career in basketball *and* medicine at the same time, but that's because we know we weren't given the choice. But it's sick and twisted I think, because were we ever even given the choice to choose?

For now I'm pretending we did, that I decided to keep moving, until I finally don't have to anymore, and my feet grow static. My heart should be pumping with the blood the colour of flowers, and my lungs should be exhaling the built up panic and replacing it with ease,

If I wasn't too late.

My eyes are glued to the casket they're lowering into the ground. My 'million-dollar smile', as Momma called it, and every aspiration will be buried 6 feet deep with me in that metal cage. My breath hitches as I watch her cover her mouth when her small motherly framed body starts racking with heavy sobs. Bittersweet that I always looked just like her, a spitting mirror image, yet now the mirror is broken because I'm dead and rotting but still full of ambition, and she's alive and buoyant but I can see the drive in her eyes is killed off.

They're throwing the dirt onto me. The dirt of the earth and also the dirt of knowing I did this to myself. I killed my potential because I couldn't kill my irresolution. And it's too late to go back. But time finally stopped like I wanted it to.

Perhaps that was my biggest dream of all.

My momma told me that if I *could feel* like death, I wasn't actually dead. But here I am, cold and stiff and- *dead*. I'm haunted by the fertile call for possibility, but I'm helpless to answer the phone. And the sorrow will swirl and swirl until I find my soul caught up in a tornado of it, and I scream and scratch, because Momma,

I've really never felt more alive.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

Power has its Price
By: Laura Forgrave (Gr. 11)

more inside

Gunshots sounded all around her. She raced through the crowd, handing out food and rescuing people trapped under debris. Moving as fast as she could, faster than should be possible, she was still unable to reach everybody. *You can't save the world, Luna*, she reminded herself. *You just try to make it a bit better.*

A man rushed up to her and thanked her profusely for a bottle of clean water she seemed to procure out of thin air. After answering him, she lifted a slab of concrete off a trapped family and provided them with directions to a safer place. Suddenly, the building behind them began to collapse. Raising her arms above her head, she struggled to stop it from crushing them all.

* * *

“BEEEEEEEP!”

Ada moaned as her hand fumbled to shut off the alarm. Her arms strained as she pushed herself up and grabbed onto her walker. Another sleepless night had concluded another exhausting day, and she had little motivation to get dressed and do it all again. *Don't think like that*, she scolded herself. She reminded herself of the lines that had pushed her through every day, every week, for years.

With magic comes great sacrifice,

Power has its price.

“I guess I'm the sacrifice,” she mumbled under her breath, letting out a rueful laugh as she headed to the kitchen for breakfast.

The options were not exactly appealing. The same nutrient supplement that had been sustaining her for years was once again on the menu. She chugged a glass of water to wash down the acidic taste, hoping Luna was enjoying breakfast more than her. Ada knew that her own sacrifice was probably the only reason Luna had any food at all.

She texted Luna to confirm she was still alive and received an unusually brisk response. "Still fine, Ada. Send more sleep!" Luna replied. Ada rolled her eyes. She had slept for only six hours last night and sent Luna all of it. After all, it was her duty. Her sacrifice. But how was she supposed to live like this? With a groan, several creaks, and a thump, she got dressed and shuffled out the door to work.

* * *

Luna sat in a luxurious train car, eating scrambled eggs and bacon. It was quite the change from where she had been mere hours prior, frantically moving debris to rescue people. Procuring the train ticket had been easy. Ada's sacrifice allowed her to travel anywhere with little difficulty. While Ada never left the city, Luna could get almost anywhere in the world in under 24 hours. It was just how their magic worked. For everything that Ada gave up, Luna could do it even better. Ada only ate nutrient supplements, so Luna could get food and water anywhere. Ada used a walker, so Luna could run unnaturally quickly. They were called Partners of Promise, as Ada made sacrifices so Luna had the magic needed to guide the world toward a more promising future. Although lately, Ada had been less than satisfied with this arrangement. It was almost as if she expected a life of her own, rather than dedicating herself to the good of the world. Luna rolled her eyes. Her friend needed to grow up and learn to deal with it. After all, Luna had been the one chosen by the previous Partners of Promise to do the actual magic. Ada was just her support team.

Luna turned her thoughts back to the laptop in front of her as she read the news, keeping an eye out for any world changing events. If you ignored her sneakers caked with mud, and her decidedly unkempt hair, she could almost pass for a businesswoman heading to an important conference. The image was surprisingly close to the truth, as with every turn of the train's wheels, Luna was approaching a major climate conference, where she hoped to push the world towards a more environmentally sustainable future.

She shut down her laptop and closed her eyes, exhausted once again. Ada claimed to have sent her sleep, but she struggled to believe it, and she reluctantly relinquished her body to rest as the train chugged towards her destination.

* * *

Ada waited for the elevator to take her up to her classroom, inwardly groaning at its slow and unreliable service. Suddenly, two students rounded the corner, chasing each other down the hallway and narrowly avoiding knocking her over. As she attempted to catch her breath, she thought, *that pair certainly won't become the next Partners of Promise.*

For as much as she loved teaching, it had not been her first career choice. She had wanted to become a doctor, but had been steered, or rather shoved, towards becoming a high school teacher by the former Partners of Promise. They thought it was an effective way for her to scout out teenagers that might become the future pair to guide the world. But although she had been teaching for over ten years, she had yet to find a pair that perfectly satisfied her, much to Luna's annoyance. Ada shuddered at the thought of sentencing anyone to the same fate as her, even if it was for the good of the world. *Maybe this semester*, she thought as the elevator arrived. Maybe she would finally be able to train someone who would take over her sacrifices, allowing her to live the full life she deserved.

* * *

Luna walked into the conference center, high heels clacking on the polished tile floor. It was amazing what a shower and a change of clothes did to her appearance. She looked the part of the experienced business leader she was pretending to be.

The first day of the conference went smoothly. No one questioned her role as she made speeches and encouraged prominent companies to change their practices.

On the inside, Luna was getting stressed. There was civil unrest on the other side of the world, and as she read news reports of lives lost, she mourned the difference she could have made. But the conference was important, and she was making a difference right there. Secretly, she relished the opportunity to enjoy a soft bed and hot showers for just a few nights longer. At the conference she would stay.

* * *

For Ada, the first day of a new semester was always the worst. The questions were nonstop and almost unbearable.

“What are we doing this year?”

“Why do you use a walker?”

“Why do we have to learn this?”

“Can I use the bathroom?”

“SILENCE!” Ada screamed.

The morning went more smoothly after that.

* * *

By the third day of the conference, Luna was fed up, sleep-deprived and pushed almost to her breaking point. So many world problems, and not enough time to fix all of them.

She envied Ada's quiet, idyllic life. So, she decided to pay her a visit. Maybe Ada could send her more sleep or make another sacrifice. She just had to help. It was her duty, after all.

* * *

The subsequent days of school went more smoothly for Ada, as her students began to settle into the new routine. As always, Ada kept a tired eye out for students who might make future Partners of Promise. But unlike most years, two students did stand out. A boy in the corner, quiet and content to do his work in silence. He reminded Ada of herself at his age. And a girl near the front, constantly the center of attention, seemingly everywhere in the school at once, solving others' problems, whether they wanted help or not. A perfect copy of Luna. By the end of the first week, Ada was convinced. She pulled out her phone to text Luna... but hesitated. If she told Luna, she was essentially sentencing the boy to her own life. It would allow her to escape the tight grip of the sacrifices, yes. But did he deserve that weight on his shoulders? Probably not.

Ada sighed and settled down in her chair. Luna would lose it if she found out Ada had been hiding potential students from her, but what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her...right?

It was only 5 o'clock, but Luna had been demanding more sleep than usual lately. If Ada slept long enough, maybe she could get some rest herself.

She had just drifted off when the front door banged open. Ada groaned. There was only one person it could be: Luna.

* * *

Luna barged through the door with her usual frantic energy, characteristic of someone attempting too many things and doing all of them poorly.

“Ada, you’ve got to help me! There’s just too much to do! The climate conference is going terribly, which isn’t surprising, as all anyone cares about is their business’ bottom line! And now people have gone and started another civil war! If that wasn’t enough, the drought has caused food prices to skyrocket! I can only provide food out of nowhere to so many people, you know. And in the south, they have the opposite problem! All their crops are under five feet of water after all the flooding!”

Luna finally paused for breath. The corners of Ada’s mouth raised in a tired smile as she remembered a similar conversation, many years ago, when Luna had rushed up to her, stressed about calculus homework, a history project, and a track meet. At the time, Ada had stood up, led Luna out the door, and gone for a run with her, brainstorming history topics and reviewing math terms as they went. Only a few months after that day, their chemistry teacher had chosen them as the next Partners of Promise. Now, Ada couldn’t keep pace with Luna. She could barely walk, let alone go for a run. But she could still try to help. A thousand sarcastic responses played through her head, but she held them in and took a deep breath.

“That must be really challenging. What can I help with? Maybe I could attend the climate conference while you try to negotiate a truce for the civil war? I could start a food drive at the local schools as well.”

Luna scoffed. “Like you could get anywhere fast enough to help. Remember our roles!

With magic comes great sacrifice,

Power has its price.

You make the sacrifices, so I can use the magic! And honestly, I’m not asking for nearly as much as you just suggested. If you could simply send me another two hours of sleep each

night, I would be so much more productive! I can't remember the last time I felt like I had a full night's sleep!"

Ada sighed. "I'm sorry, Luna, but I'm not sure how to fit that in. You've already been asking me to send more sleep than usual, and I do have to get sleep myself, you know, as well as be awake while I'm teaching."

"I'm trying to save the world, and you can't make time for two hours of sleep in your quiet schedule? What kind of friend are you?"

Ada gasped in astonishment. Luna had gotten angry before, but never like this.

"Fine," Luna continued, "I thought of another idea on the plane ride here. I'm unable to interfere diplomatically in many countries because I don't speak their language. What if you gave up your ability to speak and hear? Then I would be able to speak and understand any language."

Ada shook her head in disbelief. Luna couldn't possibly be expecting her to become deaf?

"Luna, you haven't thought this through. If I can't talk or hear, how would I teach? You know I need to teach to keep an eye out for potential Partners of Promise."

"That's what you're supposed to be doing, yes. But it's been over ten years, and have you found even one person who might be a possibility? I think you can give up teaching. I'll find a pair on my own."

Ada did her best to keep her expression neutral, but it was no good. Luna had been her best friend, and she couldn't hide anything from her.

"Oh... you have found a pair, haven't you? But you're hiding them from me...why? Oh! You don't want to subject one of them to your life, do you?"

“I just don’t think it’s fair to expect someone to make so many sacrifices, especially at that age!” Ada protested.

Luna rolled her eyes. She was clearly done listening. “Your empathy for other people is admirable, but annoying.” She glanced at her watch. “I need to make the six o’clock flight. Just give up your speech and hearing, and I’ll do what I can for the world.”

Ada’s patience was long gone. For the first time in many years, she stood up to her full height, towering over Luna. “I’m done making more and more sacrifices. I’ll join you, and help make the world better, or I won’t help you at all. I deserve a life too.”

Luna stomped her feet in frustration. “That’s not how this works! I get the power! You are the price!” she screamed as she ran out the door.

“Well, at least that’s over,” Ada sighed.

* * *

The final day of the conference began poorly and ended worse. Shockingly, Ada still sent her sleep, and Luna spent the night drafting reports and creating plans. She arrived at the conference that morning seething mad and ready for action. Around lunch time, she had just finished designing a plan to switch all of Google’s servers over to solar power when a woman in black approached her. “Good morning, I’m Chirstine, president of Rewop Industries. I heard of your excellent skills in the sustainable business industry and would appreciate your advice.”

Curious, and a little proud of her reputation, Luna allowed herself to be led through the conference as they discussed alternative power options. The woman was engaging and her company's plans were very forward-thinking. Suddenly, she realized they were no longer in

the conference hall, but in a rather quiet and neglected corridor. Slightly concerned, she asked, "Sorry, is your companies' office in a neighboring building?"

The women smirked, and then leaped forward and jumped on top of Luna, pinning her to the ground. "Who are you really, Luna? I think there's more going on here."

Luna managed to squirm out of her grasp, but several more people had crept out of nearby passages and surrounded her. There was no escape, and as they bound and tied her, her world faded to black.

* * *

"Wow, Luna must be mad," Ada muttered. Luna had failed to respond to her daily text. She had still sent Luna sleep the night before, her fear of what an exhausted Luna would do greater than her anger at her former friend.

Ada felt a tingle of dismay. Was Luna okay? Where was she?

* * *

Luna awoke to find herself in a dark room. Suddenly, the lights flickered on, and a voice spoke through a small speaker on the wall.

"Hello, Luna. Do not be alarmed. Your imprisonment is for your own safety."

"My own safety?!" Luna cried.

The voice continued, undisturbed. "You do an impressive job promoting climate advocacy. You are well-spoken, prepared, and somehow manage to attend many different conferences in a short amount of time. You move quickly... almost too quickly for one human being. My colleagues and I believe that there is more to you than meets the eye, and thought it best to contain you for further study."

"Further study?! You're treating me like a specimen, not a human!"

“Fear not, we will feed you well and ensure your safety while we attempt to discover the cause of your extraordinary abilities. Our current theory is that you have a twin, and we have only found one of the two Lunas. However, time will tell. While we wait, you will conveniently remain out of the picture and unable to interfere with the company’s business goals using your obnoxious environmental advocacy. Sounds like a perfect solution, doesn’t it?”

“Absolutely not! Let me go at once!” Luna banged against the locked door.

The voice laughed. “Just settle down and relax. It’s time to sleep.” The lights turned off again. Faint moonlight drifted through a dusty window near the ceiling.

Luna sighed and leaned back against the wall. Even with all her powerful abilities, she wasn’t getting out of here on her own. She needed Ada. And there was only one way to alert her that something was wrong: Luna needed to send Ada sleep.

* * *

Her alarm blared, and Ada awoke with a groan. She leaned on her walker and stood up, feeling surprisingly well rested. She had sent Luna all of her sleep.

Ada’s eyes widened in understanding. Luna must have sent her sleep. Partners of Promise could switch roles in extreme scenarios, but doing so was incredibly rare. Something must be seriously wrong. She had to save Luna.

Ada threw on clothes and rushed out of the house, hailing the first taxi she saw. Ten hours and one flight later, she arrived at the climate conference.

* * *

After a lot of sleuthing, Ada finally got a lead. Someone from Google had been talking with Luna when someone from Rewop Industries had interrupted and walked away with her. Luna hadn’t been seen since.

“Rewop Industries,” Ada muttered. A quick search revealed that the company didn’t exist. “Rewop...Rewop....Power!” Ada exclaimed. The fake company name was just power spelled backwards. Another search showed that Power Industries was indeed a real company, and that their headquarters were located in the same city as the conference. It seemed like too much of a coincidence. Had they kidnapped Luna?

Ada left the conference and caught yet another taxi. “Power, here I come.”

* * *

Luna was bored. It was a completely new experience for her. There were no pressing problems. No one to talk to. No life-threatening emergencies. She could sleep, eat and gaze out the dusty window. That was about it. She had never had to sit still before. Never had nothing to do.

She hated every minute of it.

* * *

Ada reached the headquarters, a large skyscraper in the center of downtown. She walked around it, looking for an open window, a small door, an easy way to enter. There wasn’t one. She was rounding the final corner, having just passed a long row of tiny windows, when she heard a banging noise behind her. A hand was hitting the glass of one of the windows. Ada rushed over and saw a familiar face peering up at her. “Luna?” she gasped.

* * *

Luna was absent-mindedly staring out the window when she saw familiar feet and a familiar walker moving by. “Ada!” she gasped as she pounded on the glass. “You found me! Can you open the window from the outside?”

“I’m trying, I’m trying,” Ada replied. With a final tug, the window creaked open. Ada reached down to pull Luna up, but a voice startled them.

“Luna, for your own safety, please stay here. If you leave, we will be forced to send people to recontain you. And your prison may not be as pleasant the next time.”

“You have no right to keep me here!” Luna screamed. With a grunt, Ada pulled her up.

“C’mon, let’s go!” Luna yelled as she began to run down the street, quickly leaving Ada behind.

“Wait up!” Ada shouted back.

“Sorry!” Luna replied as she waited for Ada to catch up. “We’ll only escape if we do this together. I’ll lend you some of my speed.”

Shocked but grateful, Ada abandoned her walker as they both raced down the street. They heard pounding footsteps behind them. Luna turned to see several people in black closing in, and she resisted the urge to throw a car in their path and jet ahead, leaving Ada in the dust. Ada glanced around and dragged Luna down the stairs into the nearest subway station, quickly hiding them in the crowd of commuters. They were both safe.

* * *

Several trains and planes later, they were back at Ada’s apartment. Ada unlocked the door, and they both collapsed on the couch in exhaustion.

Luna was the first to speak. “I owe you an apology,” she began. “I treated you like I could control you, make you sacrifice whatever I needed. But you’re my partner, not my servant. And you saved my life back there. So thank you.”

“Thank you for saving me. You could have ran off and left me in the dust. But you helped me so we could both escape. We need each other, Luna,” Ada responded.

“What if from now on we both make sacrifices and both gain powers? Work together to help the world?” Luna suggested.

“Maybe,” Ada said thoughtfully. “But I don’t think we need magic or special powers to make the world better. We can just be ourselves.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Luna sighed. “Let’s deal with that in the morning. I need some sleep.”

“Send me some!” joked Ada. “But really, let’s get some rest. Friends once again?”

“Friends,” Luna agreed.

They both closed their eyes and drifted off to sleep. Ada dreamed of ice cream, and running, and laughing with Luna once more. Luna dreamed of sleeping in, and reading, and relaxing around a campfire with Ada. But they both dreamed of one thing: a better world.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

Legacy of a Dead King By: Ava Dadollahi (Gr. 12)

more inside

The king lay ill in his bed. He wouldn't live to see tomorrow.

His children surrounded him, spending as much time with their father as they could before he breathed his last.

Elias, the oldest and the heir, sat with his hands interlocked in his lap. His eyes were rimmed in red from all the tears he'd shed. He had spent only nineteen years with a father and would have to spend the rest of his life without one.

Darya stared anxiously out the window, her pale complexion a reflection of the restless nights she'd endured. Peace had been stolen from her days, and she knew deep down it would be long before it would return.

And then there were the twins, Zara and Nila. Zara wept silently, her face buried in her small hands. She prayed no sixteen-year-old girl would ever have to endure the heavy loss of a parent. But Nila wasn't upset like her siblings. It was an ironic sight to see the same face twice, each guised with such starkly contrasting expressions. Only God knew what evil blackened Nila's heart.

"My dearest children. You have lived thus far with my love and I am hurting to know that I have to deprive you of it," the king said softly. His skin was sallow and his wincing showed that it hurt him to speak. "I am sorry that I have loved you for your entire lives, only to send you out to the cold world without it."

Elias burst into tears, his shoulders shuddering with every sob. The king didn't cry. He was in too much pain to cry.

“If God wills, we will meet again, in a realm where no soul knows grief,” he rasped out. The physician sighed and shook his head. The king’s time was near.

Elias stood from his seat and went to bury his face in his father’s chest, running his hands over his father’s withered face. Darya came to her father’s other side and lay her forehead on his shoulder, releasing the storm of emotions she tried to hold back. Zara broke out into a sweat and passed out.

The king’s children were a mess. All, except for Nila. She remained perfectly composed, giving a sidelong glance at her unconscious duplicate.

“Until we meet again.” The king shut his eyes. Death would be easier on him if he was asleep. Ten minutes later, his breath ceased. Elias and Darya left his bed, making way for the physician. The physician covered the king’s body with a white sheet.

The next day, the late king’s advisor gathered the princesses and the new king. He told them what they each inherited from their father. Elias became king, Darya was given six plots of land and gold, and the twins each got two plots of land and gold. But Nila was not pleased. In fact, she was furious because wanted more. About a week later, her body had been found in a river in a nearby meadow. Her face had been brutally disfigured to an extent that she was unrecognizable, and the only evidence it was her was her clothing. Hence, they deduced she had fallen from a cliff and struck the rocks. It had been declared a suicide.

Pure disbelief preceded grief as the siblings took in the news of Nila’s death. They’d never thought she would have been so upset about their father’s demise.

Zara didn’t leave her bed for a week. Before her heart could even bear the heavy weight of her father’s death, it had been crushed with the death of another—that, too, her twin. She’d never been particularly close with Nila. Nila had always been cold and independent.

She spent all her time alone and had always struck everyone as odd since she was a child. But that didn't mean Zara didn't love her. She would have *died* for her sister.

A series of knocks disrupted the princess's thoughts. Who was it, and why were they so aggressive? She slowly lifted herself out of bed and opened the door to be greeted by three soldiers, their eyes cold and their expressions unreadable.

"You have been convicted of several crimes," they told the princess. "We must take you away now."

Zara didn't even have a moment to protest before two of them flanked her, tightly gripping her arms. Shock tensed her muscles, stealing her thoughts. She wasn't granted a moment to think about what was going on. The entire trip to the throne room was a blur. She hadn't realized when they'd left and when they'd arrived.

Zara met the eyes of her older brother. King Elias's eyes held a grief Zara had never seen before, not even after their father and sister had died.

"You burned all the plots of my sisters' land, stole their gold, and then killed them," he choked out, his voice quavering.

The young princess stared at her brother, her face paling and her stomach churning. Perhaps if she stared into his eyes long enough, his irises would produce words—maybe reading the absurdity that had escaped his lips would allow her to comprehend what he'd said. It had been her first time hearing these accusations yet she was already liable. In the face of such immense confusion, she did not know whether to scream, to laugh, or to cry.

"I beg your pardon?" was all she could manage.

The king repeated himself, and so did the princess.

"What possessed you to commit such atrocious crimes?" he cried.

Darya was dead, but with her mind in turmoil, she couldn't understand the revelation. All she could think of were the series of crimes she had been accused of.

"How could I have done all of this when I was in bed?" She asked. "I've been bedridden for days."

"People saw you. There are witnesses."

Zara's eyes darted around the room, silently pleading this would end. She couldn't even begin to comprehend the string of accusations wrapped around her throat, never mind realizing her other sister was gone, too. She noticed the curtains were open, and her eyes caught a figure standing outside the window. No, not a figure, a mirror. Zara saw herself within it. Confusion riddled her mind as she fought to understand how the mirror reflected movement she didn't make.

Her ribcage constricted her heart and her lungs as realization dawned within her. The perfect trap! But it was too late. Nobody would believe Zara: she was already guilty.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

A Colour of Self-Acceptance
By: Caitlyn Ivany (Gr. 12)

more inside

A yellow bucket of chalk sits on a light wooden shelf, its once-bright colour now faded from the sun. Inside the yellow bucket, there are multi-coloured chinks, but one stood out the most—grey. Grey is taller, unlike the others who are worn from use. Red, the shortest of them all, the most popular, and possessing a sharp tongue. Red loves the attention and has a habit of mocking the other colours, getting himself into lots of arguments. His accomplice Blue is the complete opposite; he never says much or gets angry, often watching from the sidelines but never intervening.

The heat of the afternoon sun and the scent of freshly mowed grass hang heavy in the air. The children play in the distance, their sound of laughter blending as a distant hum, unaware of Grey's existence, who has been left untouched in the bucket. They can feel the sun's heat beating off of them, unconsciously burning their skin.

A small hand reaches into the bucket and pulls out Blue. The child, named TamTam, walked to the pavement and sat on the curb. Today was his first day at daycare, and he felt like a fish out of water. Out of place because of his light blond hair and light grey eyes. His skin is ghostly pale, and his figure is tall and lanky. The other children think of his looks as strange, avoiding him and leaving him out of group games.

Grey watches as the other colours are chosen from the bucket, leaving him alone. No matter how hard he tries, his thoughts wander back to his feelings of isolation. *Why does no one ever choose me? Am I really so useless?* The day continued, and soon enough the

sound of a bell echoed in the wind. The chinks were placed back in the bucket, and Grey was no longer alone.

“Grey, you haven't been picked yet, huh?” Red sneered, attempting to provoke Grey. The light sound of conversation goes silent, and the atmosphere of the bucket dampens. Grey shrinks under Red's words, the bucket suddenly feels too small, like all eyes are on him.

“How does it feel to be useless? Who would ever care for you?” Red yells in Grey's face, his words carrying a sharp tone. Blue glances over at his friend and eyes Grey with a gaze of disappointment. Although Blue didn't say anything, the look he gave alone made the sharp edge to Red's words cut deeper. *He's right, no one cares for me. Why was I even created in the first place?*

The bucket remained silent for the rest of the day.

Inside the daycare, TamTam sat alone on a colourful carpet decorated with the letters of the alphabet. Toy blocks in his hands as he tries to build a tower. His attempts to befriend the other children have been rejected, now he plays alone. A little boy approaches the carpet. TamTam's face brightens, hopeful for a new friend.

“Look at you all alone,” uttered a young boy. His dusty brown hair framed a snobby expression. His eyes were brown, speckled with copper, making them appear a shade of red in the light.

“W-what?” TamTam stammered the brightness in his face dimming. “Just admit it. You're a freak. Your skin is so pale you look like a ghost, and your hair is so light you look bald. Everything about you is weird, no wonder you have no friends.”

“Brayden! That's no way to talk to someone. We need to use kind words with each other. Are you ok, TamTam?” corrects the teacher.

“Sorry Miss, it won’t happen again.” Brayden gives TamTam a cruel smile, revealing it would happen again.

“TamTam, your mom’s here to pick you up, please go grab your things,” the teacher says. TamTam tidies up his blocks quickly, his hands shaking as he attempts to contain his emotions. His mom is waiting for him at the door.

“TamTam, how was your first day?” she asks gently. TamTam looks up at his mother, a sad expression pouring from his features. She is taken aback by his expression and softly asks, “What happened today?” Her words make tears well up in his eyes, all he wants is to go home and forget about today’s events. He holds her hand as they walk to the car.

“Did someone say something to you? If they did, please don’t let it bother you,” she buckles him into the car seat. “Kids can be mean sometimes, but you just have to learn to be better than them.” The car ride home felt like forever to TamTam. Brayden’s words swarmed in his head for the entire ride home.

The next day, TamTam returns to the daycare. His stomach knots as he enters the door, the harsh words from Brayden still fresh in his mind. For the first part of the day, he opts for colouring with the teachers and a blonde girl who smiles at him. Once the recess bell rings, he heads outside. Like yesterday, he reached into the chalk bucket, only this time pulling out a piece of pink chalk. He sat on the curb and began drawing on the sidewalk. He watches the other children laugh and play, feeling the sting of isolation. Brayden and his friends occasionally send mocking stares at TamTam, snickering and gawking at him like an animal in a zoo. Fortunately, the bell rings before they have a chance to approach. He lingered until all the kids went inside before making his way to the chalk bucket to return the piece of pink chalk in his hand.

The bucket had fallen over, and pieces of chalk were scattered across the ground. He crouches down and gathers the pieces of chalk, placing them back in the bucket. He reaches for the grey chalk and realizes it has broken right in half. It's a sad sight, as the rest of its body is perfect, untouched. Feeling bad for the chalk, he picks it up to fix it up inside. He walks over to the craft station with the two halves of the chalk in his hand. He finds a roll of clear tape and haphazardly places it around the two halves, making the chalk whole again.

"Here you go, little guy," TamTam placed Grey back in the bucket. "This should hold you together for a while."

Grey couldn't believe the child's kind gesture. When he fell to the ground, he thought he was going to spend the rest of his life melting and washing away in the rain. In the back of his mind, he thought that would have been for the better. Like an angel sent from above, the child had picked him up and made him whole again. When Grey returned to the bucket, he felt a new sense of confidence and happiness. For the first time, Grey felt seen and cared for.

The next day, TamTam reached into the bucket and pulled out Grey. He walked over to his usual spot on the curb and decided to draw something a bit more challenging today. A self-portrait. As he drew, TamTam realized the colour of the chalk was nearly identical to the colour of his hair. He stares into the reflection of himself with a sense of self-acceptance. Realizing he didn't look as strange as others told him. The dull colour of his eyes and his unusually light hair weren't strange, they were just different.

Grey felt happy to have finally been chosen and gained a sense of purpose. He was finally recognized by his peers in the bucket, and he now felt as if he was useful and wanted.

* * * * *

Grey became close friends with White and Pink, Blue even started standing by his side, the bucket felt brighter, and he finally felt like he belonged. Red finally quit bullying the others but was jealous of Grey's newfound attention and often spent time alone in the shadows of the bucket, much like Grey once did.

On the flip side, TamTam had also made a friend. A young girl named Julie. She had tightly coiled blonde hair and the brightest blue eyes TamTam had ever seen. Her smile lit up the room, and she was kind to everyone. TamTam admired her, the admiration slowly blooming into a crush.

For the first time, Grey and TamTam no longer felt out of place. They had found true friends who accepted them for who they were, despite their differences. In the bucket, Grey felt warmth, not from the heat of the sun, but from the new friendships growing around him.