

IT'S ALL WRITE

Teen Short Story Writing Contest

**Middle & High School Writers
Prize Winning Stories**

2013



2013
ANN ARBOR DISTRICT LIBRARY
IT'S ALL WRITE
SHORT STORY WRITING CONTEST
FOR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL WRITERS

Congratulations to the winners of this annual teen short story contest whose stories appear in this booklet. The Library recognizes the creativity and courageous efforts of all writers who participated. The awards and this publication were made possible through a grant from the Friends of the Ann Arbor District Library.



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|Teen Short Story Contest –Judges |

Middle School

Mac Barnett | New York Times bestselling author of children's books, including *Brixton Brothers* series and *Extra Yarn*, 2013 Caldecott Honor book.

Frances O’Roark Dowell | publishes teen and middle-grade fiction. *Dovey Coe* won the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 2000 and the William Allen White Children's Book Award. She's received numerous awards, including the Christopher Award, for *Shooting the Moon*, and the Vonya Book Award for, *Where I'd Like to Be*.

Jo Knowles | Recent teen novels are *See You at Harry's* c2012 and *Pearl* c2011. She recently received the Crystal Kite Award for her book, *Pearl*, and was the recipient of the 2005 Pen Literary Award.

High School 9/10

Justina Chen | An award-winning novelist for young adults, recent book is *Return to Me*. *Kirkus* named her book *North of Beautiful* a Best Book of the Year. She co-founded 'readergirlz' a cutting-edge literacy and social media project for teens, which won a National Book Award for Innovations in Reading.

Sharon G. Flake | The book *Pinned* received starred reviews in *PW*, *Horn Book*, and *Kirkus*. Sharon won the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe New Talent Award for her first novel *Skin I'm In* and is a two-time Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book winner.

Matt de la Pena | His novel *Ball Don't Lie* was an ALA-YALSA Best Book for Young Adults and an ALA-YALSA Quick Pick. He's authored an award-winning picture book, *A Nation's Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis*, illustrated by Kadir Nelson.

Lara Zielin | Her newest teen novel is *Waiting Sky*, about Jane, whose summer chasing tornadoes, could change her life for the better. Her *Donut Days*, was a Texas Lone Star Reading List pick. Lara says, "When I'm not reading or writing, you can find me running or working at the University of Michigan, or obsessing about the Florida Keys, a place I love very much."

High School 11/12

Steve Amick | Has published two novels, *The Lake, the River & the Other Lake*, a Washington Post Book of the Year (2005), and *Nothing But a Smile*, (2009). Both were 'Michigan Notable Books.' Shorter works have appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Playboy*, *Story*, *Southern Review*, *Five Chapters*, *New England Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The New York Times*, and *NPR*. He has a Clio and a CD of original songs. Steve was born and raised in Ann Arbor.

Don Gallo | is a recipient of the ALAN Award for Outstanding Contributions to Young Adult Literature and the editor of several short story anthologies for teens, including the highly praised *Destination Unexpected*. The American Library Association includes his anthology *Sixteen: Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults*, among the 100 Best Books for Young Adults.

Lauren Oliver | A graduate of the University of Chicago and NYU's MFA program, Lauren has showcased her talents from middle grade reads, *Spindlers* and *Liesl & Po*, to a best-selling teen trilogy which starts with *Delirium* and ends with *Requiem* which was just released in March, 2013.

Elizabeth Wein | Her latest novel, *Code Name Verity* has received widespread critical acclaim. It is shortlisted for the CILIP Carnegie Medal; it is a Michael Printz Award Honor Book, a Boston Globe/Horn Book Awards Honor Book, and an SCBWI Golden Kite Honor Book. It is also a New York Times Bestseller in young adult fiction. A previous book, *The Lion Hunter* (2007) was short-listed for the Andre Norton Award for Best Young Adult Fantasy and Science Fiction in 2008. Her new novel, *Rose Under Fire*, is a second gripping story set during WWII as with *Code Name Verity*.

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2013 Short Story Awards

Contest Speaker

Author A. S. King

A. S. King is best known for her award-winning teen novels, though she writes novel-length and short fiction for adults as well. Amy's newest YA novel, *Ask the Passengers* (2012) is a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Winner, a Junior Library Guild

selection, a *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publishers Weekly* & *School Library Journal* Best Book of 2012, an Indie Next List pick and has been called "Another thoughtful, and often breathtaking achievement" by *Booklist* in one of six starred trade reviews. *Everybody Sees the Ants* (2011) was an Andre Norton Award finalist, a Cybils finalist, and a 2012 YALSA Top Ten book for young adults. Her 2010 YA novel, *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* was a 2011 Michael L. Printz Honor Book, an Edgar Award Nominee, a *Kirkus Reviews* Best Book for Teens 2010, a Junior Library Guild selection and a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults pick. Amy now lives in Pennsylvania with her husband and children and is a huge fan of Kurt Vonnegut, corn on the cob, libraries, and roller-skating.

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Finalists

2013

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@It's All Write Awards

IT'S ALL WRITE

Teen Short Story Writing Contest

**Middle & High School Writers
Prize Winning Stories**

2013

MIDDLE SCHOOL

1st PLACE | The Soles of Our Shoes | Cynthia Jia

They lie in a pile of disarray, of scuffed toes and worn fabric, of shiny leather and stained laces fraying at the edges, of dirty rubber worn thin. Resting in the shadows of the hallway, they hold the quiet air of things left behind in the constant rush of everyday life, forgotten on the floor without a second thought.

* * *

The grandfather's slippers are caked with mud. Bits of soil fall to the tiled floor as they dry in the warmth of the house, ground into dust as others step by. The shoes themselves remain damp, after they've been soaked in the chilly muck of early spring, that time of year when the snow is just melting, and patches of ice lurk here and there.

The midnight before, he saw a tulip.

A single tulip in the snow, crimson as blood against the stark white, fully in bloom. It was the red of his mother's rough apron, bobbing through her vegetable garden, back in the days of romping through dried grass clippings and streams, when he was still so young. It was the red of peppermint candy from glass jars, the red of the veins in his father's bloodshot eyes. The red of the setting sun.

He *thought* he saw it...no, he was *sure* of it. As he clumsily slid out from under his blanket, as he placed his feet in his slippers and fumbled with the lock on the patio door, he watched the scarlet petals. He was scared they would disappear; afraid his mind had finally begun to pluck the strings in his head, tangling memories with thoughts, thoughts with dreams, dreams with memories. He struggled urgently through the wet snow and yielding earth beneath it, body trembling. But not from the cold.

Slipper met ice. As he stumbled, the flower was jarred from his sight, blurring away, out the corner of his vision. With a cry, he righted himself. Blinking in the bite of the wind, his eyes searched frantically, jerking quickly in their sockets.

But it was gone.

He stood in the snow and the mud, staring aimlessly as the hems of his thin pajamas soaked in the dampness of the season. Already his slippers were ruined, spots of dirt darkening the fabric, radiating out into the threads.

The grandmother came out moments later, rushed down to the cramped backyard where he stood, still and unmoving like something dead. Tightly, she gripped his hand. It was cold and rough against her own shaking fingers, and she tugged slightly, forcing him to look at her.

“What are you thinking?! It’s freezing out here!”

He gazed through her blankly, without recognition.

“Who are you?” He asked flatly, confused. He was so tired.

The grandmother said nothing for a moment. She stared into the distance, to the horizon where the moon shone bright and ripe in the soup of starlight.

“You...know me...don’t you?” Tears grew quickly in her eyes and fell in crystalline drops, the first time in many, many years. She held the grandfather’s hand even tighter, clenching it hard, as if it would tether him to her. But he was already gone, somewhere far away.

The grandfather cried a little bit too, but he didn’t know why. Watching the strange woman beside him sob just made his eyes well up, in fat beads that followed the paths of wrinkles to his chin. They stood together in the snow, in their matching house slippers, the ones they bought together on their 30th anniversary, until they could bear it no longer; until the corduroy seams of their shoes were permeated with the mud, the cold, and the tears of something that had finally come to take both of them away.

* * *

Although the mud has been briskly scrubbed away, a new stain is spattered across the fabric of the grandmother’s house slippers. They are placed neatly, side-by-side, pushed against the wall. It’s the way she’s always left them, her shoes. And everything else for that matter—tidy, tidy, tidy, nothing out of place. At least, that’s how it used to be. The house she lives in now is rampant with sloppy grandchildren pitching their things everywhere, messy like wild creatures. Perhaps at some point past, she would’ve picked up after them, or at least she would have made some small attempt. But in these days of leftover time, it seems the very most she can do is line up her shoes, toes to the wall, heels together, before she retreats away into the peace of her room, to sleep.

While she naps, she reaches for the grandfather, entangles her fragile fingers with his gnarled hands. The blanket rumples up around her ankles, exposing speckled, translucent skin, marbled with blue veins running up and down the muscle.

Her feet are bare and thin, wrinkled and frail like little baby birds.

* * *

The mother's shoes lay haphazardly among her children's, and every time she sees the pile she makes a little sigh—the kind she has been making for as long as she can remember, stretching through her late nights and rough days. It's the kind of breath that flips the little wisps of hair away from her forehead; the kind that makes her eyes look sad.

Hers are the dark ones, the leather flats that are all scuffed up around the toes. There is a little nick here and there, and a slight tear from the time she threw it at the wall.

It has been hard work with the grandmother and grandfather moving in, especially with the way the grandfather has been lately, but the mother doesn't want to just leave them at some retirement home, where they'll slowly shrink away.

"Momma, what will you do when you get old?" She asked once, when she was a child. Her mother braided her hair, combing fingers through the fine brown strands and plaiting them into long ropes down the child's back. "Are you gonna go to some fancy retirement island, and drink out of a coconut with one of those fancy umbrellas?"

"Hah!" The grandmother chuckled. "When Daddy and I get old, you and I can switch, and you'll take care of us, ok?" She smiled widely and tapped the little girl's nose.

Sometimes, the mother wishes she could love someone, the way the grandmother loves the grandfather. Jealousy is the word for what she feels, every time she sees couples cuddling together in the cold of the streets, when a girl's head fits perfectly in the hollow of her sweetheart's neck. Sweet, pure affection brings her back to a time when she thought the meaning of the word 'love' was clear. Before the marriage, the fights, the divorce.

His shoes are still in the closet, way in the back corner, stuffed behind a bag of threadbare socks and a pile of scarves; the nice leather ones she was going to give him for his birthday. It was going to be a surprise. He would smile the smile she used to know, and then maybe she could bring herself to love him again.

But it fell apart too soon. Her shrill scream and his loud yells echoed in the kitchen as they argued past the children's bedtime, through the night. Sometimes the lights stayed off, and she could hear his angry voice coming from somewhere in the darkness, behind the chinking shatter of glass and the clatter of furious movement. Like his body wasn't there; it was just her and the black of two o'clock in the morning, his words ringing and falling out of nowhere, all around like piercing hail.

The children were only in elementary school and kindergarten then, so she forgot him, and poured herself into the world of her son and daughter. She tried her best as a mother then, telling them "Good night, I love you...Mommy always loves you." Sometimes she bit her lip before the

word “love” and tried not to choke. Sometimes she just held them close and felt the warmth of their little bodies against her chest.

Although it’s been ages since the last time she could shop, just by herself in the mall, the mother has a beautiful pair of shoes that she hides away, in the same box as the patent leather men’s shoes. Her feet haven’t grown since high school, so on some nights she pulls them out and just looks at them for a while. Then she puts them on and twirls by herself.

She sings herself a simple melody and pretends like somebody’s arms are around hers, leading her into a dip, just closing her eyes and letting her body fall.

* * *

The son’s ratty sneakers are flung apart, laces in perpetual knots. They’re the kind with mesh in the sides, which were white on the shelf at the store. But by now the mesh has holes in it, and the whole affair has faded into a resigned sort of grey.

Despite their decrepit state, he denies any offers from his mother to buy new ones. He sees the way she looks sometimes, so tired from work, her two children, and their grandparents that she seems to be sagging under the weight of it.

He never knew his dad well, but sometimes it’s what he wishes for. Someone who can just help with this perpetual swirl of exhaustion and tired good-night kisses that still come when the mother thinks he’s asleep, even though the son is already in middle school.

“But honey, look at them! Oh, Christ, is that blood right there?”

The son just laughs a little and tells her that he likes the shoes he has now. He doesn’t mention that little pieces of gravel find their way in through the holes in the rubber soles, or that there is a perpetual blister on his big toe from the part that busted a few weeks ago. Instead he grins, flashing his goofy looking smile, and the mother laughs.

He doesn’t mention that it *is* blood right there. It doesn’t take much to remember that day, riding down the steep dirt hill on his bicycle, trying to balance both his backpack and his poster project, all the while fishtailing on gravel and trying his best to avoid the potholes. His mother had to leave early for work and unfortunately, he had missed the bus. His sister was already dropped off at elementary school, and he was alone. But that was ok; he could take care of himself. Riding his bike wasn’t a big deal. The poster complicated things slightly, but everything was fine. Everything was—

Before he even registered what was happening, the son was flying. For a minute, he was suspended in the air, weightless. He was a goldfish in the water, he was a cloud hung up in the blue

of summer sky. He was floating away somewhere in a tiny little soap bubble, surrounded by the shining rainbow colors that moved in iridescent waves.

But the moment was over too soon, and the son screamed as he was pitched violently against the earth, over the pothole he hadn't seen. First his arms crumpled with the impact, face and ribs following closely behind. He didn't feel the pain right away, tumbling into the ditch on the side of the road. Only the thumping of his own small heart, that seemed to fill his head with its heavy *bump-bumps*. For a few minutes, that was the only sound he heard, lying in the moldy leaves that had collected in the ditch.

The pain soon arrived though, just like it always does. Along with it came the warmth of dripping blood, and the pressure of tears behind his eyes.

"Don't cry," he spoke out loud to himself, through trembling lips and gritted teeth, as blood trickled from his nostril, falling on his shirt, over his hands, his shoes. "Don't cry," he repeated. "Gotta...get to school." Wincing, he gingerly wiped the blood away with his hands, discovering scrapes across his arms and legs. Beside the ditch, he stooped to retrieve his things, and carefully mounted the bike again.

With every pedaling motion he could feel the blood throbbing in his legs, could still hear the beating of his heart.

He was younger then, and his sneakers were still new.

* * *

The daughter is in 3rd grade now. She's almost a big girl.

That's what the teacher's heeled shoes told her, as she peered out from under her school desk. She heard the teacher say, Stop hiding under there, it's immature and inappropriate behavior. The daughter didn't budge. Instead she picked at the velcro on her little pink shoes.

Those shoes are lying between her brother's grubby sneaker and her mother's black flats. The daughter doesn't like to put them on very often. When she puts on her shoes, it means she's going outside. Which means she's going to school.

It started when she was in kindergarten, when her mother and father were still together. They went to a nice restaurant for a dinner party, one with cloth napkins and tablecloths, dangling chandeliers and waiters with crisp bowties. The son was intrigued, staring at everything, and her parents were lovely, dressed up nicely, leaning into each other and smiling real smiles.

The daughter's dress was itchy and she scratched at the straps, irritated. When her mother pulled her hand slightly to make her stop, the daughter tried her best to ignore the prickly fabric. But

by the time they got to the dinner table, she was in a terrible mood, growing more upset as the dress clung to her short frame, every movement scrubbing it against her skin.

As her parents introduced her to the others at the party, she pouted in her seat. The itch was crawling down her back, and she wanted to cry in frustration. Her face reddened and she clenched her hands into little fists, placed silently in her lap. Small crescent moons formed where her fingernails dug into the soft flesh. She regarded them with scrunched up eyes, as her father had something to drink, and laughed maybe a little too loud at someone else's joke.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time, even her quiet brother, who was laughing with another boy from someone or other's family. Nobody seemed to notice the little girl in a purple dress, with long pink scratch marks down her arms. So very quietly, very slowly, she lifted the embroidered tablecloth and slipped underneath, the fabric cool and soothing as it brushed past her skin.

The white linen closed behind her, whispering as it fell back into its smooth folds. Under the table it was dark and quiet, and she could barely hear the murmur of people, the clink of fork and knife on plates. The whiteness of the tablecloth surrounded her, as if she was sinking into a pile of snow that muffled the intensity of life; it was as if an angel was wrapping its soft wings around her and shielding her from the world. Closing her eyes, she felt so calm and still it almost seemed as if time had stopped.

But that was not the case. The cloth lifted up, a triangle of yellow light reaching her in the dimness, edges sharp like blades. Her father's arm shot down and pulled her up roughly, and she cried out quietly, frightened.

"Don't you behave like this out here. You are an embarrassment right now, you hear?" He whispered loudly in her ear, face red and meaty. He did not let go of her arm, although she was twisting in his grip. The son met her gaze and looked away nervously, and her mother was speaking quickly to her father, trying to calm him. Everyone was staring at them then, and her mother was hissing to her father, Don't make a scene here right now, dear.

The daughter closed her eyes then, and focused on the darkness of her eyelids, the little lights that danced about like fairies after she kept them shut for long enough.

They left early.

As soon as the front door closed, she could hear her parents talking in clipped tones, raising their voices. The daughter ran to her room and tore her dress off, trembling. She wrapped herself in a thick blanket and went to her desk, lying under it like she did at the restaurant.

Muffled shouts came from the floor below, reverberating through the floor and vents. The daughter focused on the underside of the table, the little splinters and staples protruding from it. She gazed up through half-opened eyes for minutes, or maybe hours, until she fell asleep to the sound of something breaking downstairs.

And so whenever she found herself upset, the daughter simply crawled under a table or desk, and lay down beneath its shadow, staring upwards like she was watching for clouds, like maybe the next one would be cat-shaped, and she would laugh, and point upwards to where the birds fly, and she would look at you and say, Hey, look, a cat...what do you see?

* * *

The daughter crouches beside the unruly pile of shoes. She pairs them all up, a left for a right, a right for a left. They are lined up, toes to the wall, heels together, the way she sees the grandmother put hers. She hums a simple little melody, a song she heard her mother singing as she twirled around at night, alone in the hallway, her skirt flaring like a morning glory blooming. Carefully, she brushes away the dried mud from the grandfather's slippers, and places them by the grandmothers, pushing them close together. After some puzzling, she begins to untangle her brother's shoe laces, sitting cross-legged on the cold tile.

Shuffling footsteps echo in the hallway, and the grandmother appears in the hallway, hunched over and coughing slightly. She sees the daughter arranging the shoes, smiles wide like she used to, when she still had teeth. Thank you for doing that, dear, the grandmother says. The daughter smiles a little smile, the one she saves for the undersides of tables. She finishes untangling the laces of the once white sneakers, and sets them down neatly. I think we should tell Mommy that he needs some new shoes, she says quietly, indicating the holes and rips.

The grandmother nods, still smiling, and turns away.

After she is gone, the daughter takes her pink shoes and throws them outside, somewhere in the bushes. Laughing, she lingers for a moment, watching them disappear in the foliage.

The daughter goes to the kitchen table, lies under the dark wood, which is covered in rings from wet mugs, empty plates and a scattering of little crumbs. She lies there, watching the shadows slowly stretch as the sun meanders across the sky. Soon it begins to darken, and the daughter's favorite color sky is outside, pastel yellow melding into deep blue, soft like a blanket against her cheek.

I thought I told you to stop that, the mother says, pale feet appearing, bare on the linoleum. She crouches low and strokes her daughter's hair.

The daughter says nothing.

Sighing, the mother straightens and stands, turns like she's leaving. But she stops, bends down again, and then carefully crawls under the table, and lies down, pressing against her daughter, who wiggles closer. The daughter can feel her mother's heart beating as the mother murmurs, Love...you.

Then the mother opens her eyes, watching the sun set. She is quiet for a long time.

"Maybe we all need some new shoes," she finally says.

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MIDDLE SCHOOL

2nd PLACE | Beach Glass | Sofia Kwok

My room is at the top of a three story house overlooking the sea. The walls curve inwards like the inside of a conch shell, sloping pink and white. A seashell hangs from the ceiling, turning slowly. My bookcase is in one corner, filled with college textbooks. My backpack is in another corner, ready to be used tomorrow. A dark shape crouches in the corner, the boxes from my old house. Most of them are scuffed and falling apart from the move. The labels are faded from the summer sunshine. I know that if I open the box labeled “Photography,” I’ll see them smiling at me. Their graves are in Kansas, where our old house was. It was quite a shock to come here and see the water.

I turn the radio on, but there’s so much static that it’s almost impossible to hear anything. “Hurricane Sandy is approaching New... Citizens advised to evacuate... Do NOT stay in your house... Election Day may be af...” I turn the radio off.

I pick my way downstairs, avoiding the sharp corners of broken stairs. My steps echo in the emptiness. When it was a boarding house, it must have been full of noise and movement. Later, when it was used for parties, it was probably filled with bad music. But now, it’s silent. Dust motes are illuminated in the weak daylight. The back door jambs host nesting spiders whose silk threads stream out into the brisk sea breeze. I open the screen door and step out onto the beach.

The air is fresher here, despite the darkening sky and the whitecaps that are now surging over the miniscule breakwater in the harbor. Sandy. I should go indoors. As I turn around, a ruby piece of beach glass arrests my eye. Its edges are smooth, battered by the wind and the waves until it’s tossed up on a foreign land. I pick it up and put it in my pocket. The sand shifts under my feet, creating a small sinkhole that sucks my toes into a puddle of seawater. The rain now falls in a steady flow of icy pins, and a distant flash of lightning illuminates the sky like a thin needle.

The sea is freezing in winter.

As I lean forward into the rain, the house looms up before me. I see an awkwardly assembled pile, as if a giant had lumbered its way onto the beach and just sat down there, right at the waterside. A three story house isn’t the best place to be in during a hurricane, especially if it doesn’t have a breakwater (or at least not a good one). But I don’t want to leave just yet. And the house has stood through worse storms, hasn’t it?

I make my way to the mailbox. The rain has thickened, streaking the brightly colored pieces of paper advertising shampoo and detergent. It hardly seems worth the ten steps between the mailbox, the door, and the cold soaking. But as I dump it out on the kitchen table, a pamphlet catches my eye. “What to Expect When Sandy Hits,” is in bold black letters on neon yellow. I briefly flip it over. The tone is formal and stiff, like one of the invitations to my grandmother’s parties when she was alive.

“... In the event of emergency, the gymnasium of Somerville High School will shelter evacuees. Evacuees are expected to bring clean clothes.”

I toss the pamphlet upon the wet heap on the kitchen table, letting it flop into the steadily growing pile of junk mail. The walls have begun to shiver with the thunderclaps. One-one thousand, two-one-thousand, three one-thousand, four one-thousand boom! One-one thousand, two-one thousand, boom! The shortening time between thunderclaps means the storm is moving closer, according to what my mother used to say. I head back to my room and the box of photographs. I dig through a pile of old photos until I find the right one. My mother and father are smiling, a white-capped mountain in the background.

“They were on their honeymoon in Switzerland,” my grandmother had said one afternoon, while I was sitting in her kitchen. She was slowly whipping chocolate icing with her wooden spoon. Chocolate and sugar wafted from the oven. “They loved to ski so much. I still have a cuckoo clock from their last time they went to Europe.” That was the last time I saw her. When I came back to her house for college, I found an empty place, lonely and sad. But it’s cheaper than renting an apartment.

I suddenly shiver. I jump in the bed and fall asleep to the sound of heavy rain, drumming on the roof.

I awake to the sound of high whistling. The wind batters the house, which creaks and weaves uneasily, like a losing boxer. I rise to my feet, groggy. Something is wrong. When I peer out the window, through the sheeting rain, I see what it is—the waves have completely surged over the breakwater, and the water has submerged the beach. I stand transfixed, as the waves surge towards the house, lapping at the door like a hungry dog. I have to get out. Now. I hastily grab my coat and run downstairs, scraping my foot in the process.

The wind and rain demand entrance, howling and beating upon the door. When I open it, they strike me in the face. I can barely see the silhouette of the garage, although it is only a few steps

away. As I stumble towards it, fine sand grains grind into my nose, mouth, and ears. I lurch to the thin gravel pathway. As I briefly glance back at the house, I can see that the waves are up to the front porch, trying to steal the rocking chair.

When I finally wrench open the garage door, I can breathe again. The rain has seeped through the garage roof, creating small puddles in the gravel. My sneakers sink into one, making a mournful squelching noise. I unlock the door of my Volkswagen Beetle and shiver for a few seconds in the driver's seat. Where am I going? Then the neon of the pamphlet flashes in my mind like a light. As I start the engine, I see that the sea has started to creep under one of the garage walls. When I start the engine and reverse, the wheels send up a spray of water, dyed red by the taillights.

I peer through the rapid movement of the windshield wipers and distortions of water, looking for the brick outline of Somerville High. The summer beach houses are shuttered and boarded against the storm, turning their faces away from me. I am lost. The bullying wind is trying to push my tiny car into one of the ditches that are on either side of the highway, and I must fight to keep it on the road. It's all I can do. A road sign flashes by, but the rain is so thick that I probably wouldn't know if I was in Kansas. I've been concentrating so hard, it is a surprise when the high school rises into view.

The gym doesn't seem to have lost power. The high, vaulted ceilings are illuminated by the lights. I squint in their brightness. Voices echo off the brick walls, murmuring. A haphazard assortments of colored cots fill the gym. Some cots have people slumped on them, others strewn with blankets, and still others are loaded with plastic garbage bags of hastily grabbed possessions. Others come in after me, voices buzzing. I hear a baby crying, but its cries are muffled in the vast space. I pick a cot and put my coat under it. The blanket is a little scratchy, rubbing against my feet. However, the pillow is surprisingly soft, and despite the noise, the people, the bright lights, and the storm outside, I somehow manage to fall asleep.

In the morning, my neck is sore. Coffee and donuts sit on several cafeteria tables under the basketball hoop. The coffee is fresh-brewed, warming my hands through the styrofoam. The chocolate-frosted donut is delicious, a little stale but microwaved into a semblance of freshness. After hesitating, I take another. It is filled with ruby jelly, which oozes a tart cherry sweetness when I bite.

As I drive through town, the air is hushed and quiet. Electrical wires lay limply, their frayed ends emitting jiggling sparks that jump and fizzle out. Traffic lights lay broken in the street, bits of

red, yellow and green glass strewn across the blacktop. Storefront windows gape empty, spangled bits of silver scattered across the pavement.

I arrive at the house. Or, where it was. I am not sure at first it is the right place, and I must pause for several seconds. The first floor still stands, black wood silhouetted against the wan sky.

I push through the screen door, which is only hanging by one hinge. Once inside, the kitchen is illuminated by a strange light. I glance up and realize that I can see the sky through the gaps in the second story floor. The stove and refrigerator are unmoved, but the refrigerator door is ajar, sand spilling out from the lower shelf. The oven's finish is scratched, pummeled by sand, wind, and water. I look out a window and see that my cardboard boxes are strewn on the rocks, their sides darkened with water, their tops gone.

I run outside. The contents are scattered upon the beach sand. The sea nudges the photographs gently and almost absentmindedly. Some photographs are drained of all color, now black and white. My parents smile, unaware of the sea surrounding them.

As I face the great vastness of the ocean, the sun broaches the gray expanse of sky and the beach is lit, light creeping over the waves. I see things glittering all around me. Beach glass has been washed up on the shore, glinting in the sun.

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MIDDLE SCHOOL

3rd PLACE | The Invasion of Lizzy Burnell | Mary Collins

My room is at the top of a three story house overlooking the sea. The walls curve inwards like the inside of a conch shell, sloping pink and white. A seashell hangs from the ceiling, turning slowly. My bookcase is in one corner, filled with college textbooks. My backpack is in another corner, ready to be used tomorrow. A dark shape crouches in the corner, the boxes from my old house. Most of them are scuffed and falling apart from the move. The labels are faded from the summer sunshine. I know that if I open the box labeled “Photography,” I’ll see them smiling at me. Their graves are in Kansas, where our old house was. It was quite a shock to come here and see the water.

I turn the radio on, but there’s so much static that it’s almost impossible to hear anything. “Hurricane Sandy is approaching New... Citizens advised to evacuate... Do NOT stay in your house... Election Day may be af...” I turn the radio off.

I pick my way downstairs, avoiding the sharp corners of broken stairs. My steps echo in the emptiness. When it was a boarding house, it must have been full of noise and movement. Later, when it was used for parties, it was probably filled with bad music. But now, it’s silent. Dust motes are illuminated in the weak daylight. The back door jambs host nesting spiders whose silk threads stream out into the brisk sea breeze. I open the screen door and step out onto the beach.

The air is fresher here, despite the darkening sky and the whitecaps that are now surging over the miniscule breakwater in the harbor. Sandy. I should go indoors. As I turn around, a ruby piece of beach glass arrests my eye. Its edges are smooth, battered by the wind and the waves until it’s tossed up on a foreign land. I pick it up and put it in my pocket. The sand shifts under my feet, creating a small sinkhole that sucks my toes into a puddle of seawater. The rain now falls in a steady flow of icy pins, and a distant flash of lightning illuminates the sky like a thin needle.

The sea is freezing in winter.

As I lean forward into the rain, the house looms up before me. I see an awkwardly assembled pile, as if a giant had lumbered its way onto the beach and just sat down there, right at the waterside. A three story house isn’t the best place to be in during a hurricane, especially if it doesn’t have a breakwater (or at least not a good one). But I don’t want to leave just yet. And the house has stood through worse storms, hasn’t it?

I make my way to the mailbox. The rain has thickened, streaking the brightly colored pieces of paper advertising shampoo and detergent. It hardly seems worth the ten steps between the mailbox, the door, and the cold soaking. But as I dump it out on the kitchen table, a pamphlet catches my eye. “What to Expect When Sandy Hits,” is in bold black letters on neon yellow. I briefly flip it over. The tone is formal and stiff, like one of the invitations to my grandmother’s parties when she was alive.

“... In the event of emergency, the gymnasium of Somerville High School will shelter evacuees. Evacuees are expected to bring clean clothes.”

I toss the pamphlet upon the wet heap on the kitchen table, letting it flop into the steadily growing pile of junk mail. The walls have begun to shiver with the thunderclaps. One-one thousand, two-one-thousand, three one-thousand, four one-thousand boom! One-one thousand, two-one thousand, boom! The shortening time between thunderclaps means the storm is moving closer, according to what my mother used to say. I head back to my room and the box of photographs. I dig through a pile of old photos until I find the right one. My mother and father are smiling, a white-capped mountain in the background.

“They were on their honeymoon in Switzerland,” my grandmother had said one afternoon, while I was sitting in her kitchen. She was slowly whipping chocolate icing with her wooden spoon. Chocolate and sugar wafted from the oven. “They loved to ski so much. I still have a cuckoo clock from their last time they went to Europe.” That was the last time I saw her. When I came back to her house for college, I found an empty place, lonely and sad. But it’s cheaper than renting an apartment.

I suddenly shiver. I jump in the bed and fall asleep to the sound of heavy rain, drumming on the roof.

I awake to the sound of high whistling. The wind batters the house, which creaks and weaves uneasily, like a losing boxer. I rise to my feet, groggy. Something is wrong. When I peer out the window, through the sheeting rain, I see what it is—the waves have completely surged over the breakwater, and the water has submerged the beach. I stand transfixed, as the waves surge towards the house, lapping at the door like a hungry dog. I have to get out. Now. I hastily grab my coat and run downstairs, scraping my foot in the process.

The wind and rain demand entrance, howling and beating upon the door. When I open it, they strike me in the face. I can barely see the silhouette of the garage, although it is only a few steps

away. As I stumble towards it, fine sand grains grind into my nose, mouth, and ears. I lurch to the thin gravel pathway. As I briefly glance back at the house, I can see that the waves are up to the front porch, trying to steal the rocking chair.

When I finally wrench open the garage door, I can breathe again. The rain has seeped through the garage roof, creating small puddles in the gravel. My sneakers sink into one, making a mournful squelching noise. I unlock the door of my Volkswagen Beetle and shiver for a few seconds in the driver's seat. Where am I going? Then the neon of the pamphlet flashes in my mind like a light. As I start the engine, I see that the sea has started to creep under one of the garage walls. When I start the engine and reverse, the wheels send up a spray of water, dyed red by the taillights.

I peer through the rapid movement of the windshield wipers and distortions of water, looking for the brick outline of Somerville High. The summer beach houses are shuttered and boarded against the storm, turning their faces away from me. I am lost. The bullying wind is trying to push my tiny car into one of the ditches that are on either side of the highway, and I must fight to keep it on the road. It's all I can do. A road sign flashes by, but the rain is so thick that I probably wouldn't know if I was in Kansas. I've been concentrating so hard, it is a surprise when the high school rises into view.

The gym doesn't seem to have lost power. The high, vaulted ceilings are illuminated by the lights. I squint in their brightness. Voices echo off the brick walls, murmuring. A haphazard assortments of colored cots fill the gym. Some cots have people slumped on them, others strewn with blankets, and still others are loaded with plastic garbage bags of hastily grabbed possessions. Others come in after me, voices buzzing. I hear a baby crying, but its cries are muffled in the vast space. I pick a cot and put my coat under it. The blanket is a little scratchy, rubbing against my feet. However, the pillow is surprisingly soft, and despite the noise, the people, the bright lights, and the storm outside, I somehow manage to fall asleep.

In the morning, my neck is sore. Coffee and donuts sit on several cafeteria tables under the basketball hoop. The coffee is fresh-brewed, warming my hands through the Styrofoam. The chocolate-frosted donut is delicious, a little stale but microwaved into a semblance of freshness. After hesitating, I take another. It is filled with ruby jelly, which oozes a tart cherry sweetness when I bite.

As I drive through town, the air is hushed and quiet. Electrical wires lay limply, their frayed ends emitting jiggling sparks that jump and fizzle out. Traffic lights lay broken in the street, bits of

red, yellow and green glass strewn across the blacktop. Storefront windows gape empty, spangled bits of silver scattered across the pavement.

I arrive at the house. Or, where it was. I am not sure at first it is the right place, and I must pause for several seconds. The first floor still stands, black wood silhouetted against the wan sky.

I push through the screen door, which is only hanging by one hinge. Once inside, the kitchen is illuminated by a strange light. I glance up and realize that I can see the sky through the gaps in the second story floor. The stove and refrigerator are unmoved, but the refrigerator door is ajar, sand spilling out from the lower shelf. The oven's finish is scratched, pummeled by sand, wind, and water. I look out a window and see that my cardboard boxes are strewn on the rocks, their sides darkened with water, their tops gone.

I run outside. The contents are scattered upon the beach sand. The sea nudges the photographs gently and almost absentmindedly. Some photographs are drained of all color, now black and white. My parents smile, unaware of the sea surrounding them.

As I face the great vastness of the ocean, the sun broaches the gray expanse of sky and the beach is lit, light creeping over the waves. I see things glittering all around me. Beach glass has been washed up on the shore, glinting in the sun.

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HIGH SCHOOL | 9/10

1st PLACE | The Gourd Tree | Marie Martelli

My Father's name was Josue AuSaulé. He was a man of the fen and like all fenmen, a man of few words and fewer friends. With his own hands, he cleared an acre of fen land, building our home beside the quiet river from bog clay and sod. My mother thatched it with bull reeds. The house was small and stout, warm in the wet, bitter winters and cool in the heat of summer. It had a cupboard and a stone hearth and shelves with pickled eel and smoked marsh hens.

The door was kept barred at night and Father never slept far from his gun, yet we were a happy family. When it grew dark Father would open a wooden box and take out his violin, resting it on his shoulder. His dark, serious eyes would throw sparks as his strong brown fingers danced on the strings, filling the darkness with strange, mysterious music. Mother would hold me in her arms, rocking quietly, eyes wistful, her pale, slender fingers stroking my dark hair. I would snuggle against her and hold her hand in my lap, tracing the black cloud of swallows tattooed on her palm. The birds flew away to her fingertips, their black wings glinting against her pale skin. Sometimes she would sing. In a voice like that of a small silver bird, she sang the songs of the gypsies and her eyes, like the curling of waves in the ocean, would become dark with the tempest of memories past. I could see those waves thrashing and roaring beneath a troubled black sky. Amidst that storm Father's gaze would come to rest on her, his brow dark and furrowed, face full of question. Yet Mother looked away, hiding the storm beneath a pale veil of lashes.

Twice a year, Father took the river raft and poled away down the quiet river, disappearing into the sea of cool, waving bull rushes and following the water paths to the Wide Ocean and the trading towns on the cliffs. In the year that my sixth notch was cut into the door frame, Father returned from one of these journeys, the raft laden with black tea and sugar, and gunpowder for the rifle. I ran out to meet him, Mother at my heels, but Father's face was wan; his eyes frightened and dangerous. I recoiled from him and Mother let out a sharp gasp. Father went to her and held her in his arms, taking from his pocket a folded piece of paper. He read it aloud, voice strained. I did not understand much of it, only the words *outlaw*, *murderer*, and *bounty* stood out to me.

The rain came down in gales upon the fen that night, whistling and howling through the great wood and with it came a wet, bone-chilling coldness. The three of us sat in agonizing silence, warming ourselves before the flickering flames in the hearth. Father stood suddenly and pushed back his stool, reaching for his violin, yet his fingers trembled violently on the strings and he could not play. Without a word, he put the violin in its case, the sharp click of the latch breaking the silence. Mother and I looked away, the firelight flickering across our faces.

“Two hundred francs,” Father’s voice broke the stillness, “two hundred francs, as if I were an ox would for auction.” He looked down at his big hands, tracing the deep lines in his palm. “Uprisers, they were. Killed them with my own hands, I did, crushed their throats as they slept... all but one. There was a boy who fled. Too young to be in the war. Fair-skinned was he, with dark hair and the innocent eyes of a child. I put his own sword through his back.” Father’s voice trembled, “So long ago was that! I was a young, reckless fool, then. All I wanted was peace. An end to the slaying, an end to the weeping of mothers whose children would never come home to them. I thought I could put an end to the uprising. Yet here I am, a murderer with a bounty hung about my neck.”

Mother put a trembling hand on his arm, “Josue, the child listens.”

Father ignored her, “I couldn’t help myself but kill them.” He began to shake, “The boy, he fell there beneath the moon, gasping and panting with blood coming out of his mouth, yet he shed no tears nor called out. When I went to kill him, he stood on shaking legs and told me I could kill him, but I could never kill the uprising. I broke the sword and left him there.”

He swore, “But that I had slain him!”

His eyes became wild, “what is this life? Trembling in my burrow like a frightened hare. A fenman! An outcast. No man am I, but an animal. A foolish, frightened hare. And you? What will become of you and the boy?” Father buried his face in his hands, panting.

Mother said nothing, yet her face was white as the ash in the hearth. She hummed quietly, fingers interlocked in her lap, the sea in her eyes roiling and tossing. She stood suddenly, took me in her arms as if I was a small child, and carried me to bed. I fell asleep with her tears upon my face.

I was but a boy then.

During The Great Winter, when my twelfth notch was carved in the door frame, Mother fell ill with bog cough and the silver bird flew away to rest with the stars.

Father and I buried her on an outcropping above the river, beneath the arms of a great willow tree. It was a blustery, frigid morn and the sun fell harshly on the thin grey snow. We worked with our sleeves rolled up and collars open despite the biting cold, for the ground was like ice beneath our picks. My fingers grew blistered and blood ran down my fingertips, yet I toiled beside Father without missing a stroke. The ringing of our picks echoed across the fen and all the birds fell silent.

When, at last, we had finished, the blackness of night was fallen upon the fen and a thin, sickle moon rose over the edge of the horizon. We went down from the outcropping and sat, warming ourselves before the coals in the hearth. Father took my hands in his, bandaging them, yet the blood flowed crimson through the wrappings. They ached and burned with pain as I had never felt before; however, I complained not, and shed no tears. Father spoke no words, yet his eyes met mine and I saw in them great weariness, but deep behind that, a profound respect. In that moment I knew I had already left my boyhood behind.

After that day, I called him Josue.

That winter was one of loneliness. The wind blew and whipped the snow into great drifts. The mangy, long-legged wolves keened in the great woods behind the bungalow. The violin slept locked away in its wooden case. The rifle leaned against the door frame.

That spring, we planted the gourds.

We planted them in soft black mounds of earth beside the quiet river. Josue watered them every morning, cupping the droplets in his large, square hands and sprinkling them over their pale leaves. All spring they grew, tender vines curling out across the ground, their small green leaves like a bucketful of stars flung across the rich fen-soil. Josue loved the gourds.

In early summer, they bloomed. Pale, sweet blooms, like a thousand silver moons. Josue and I went out and stood in the field of them beneath a wide, black sky, their glowing white blooms open to the stars, drenching the night in their soft honey scent.

My Father, Josue, was a man of scant words, yet he turned to me and, with a calloused hand, lifted my chin and looked at me, his eyes two pools reflecting a moonless night, “Tis like the breath of angels, Évariste.”

I nodded silently, drawing against him. He put a strong arm around my small shoulders, squeezing me, running a large hand over my dark hair like mother used to do. I buried my face in his shirt, smelling the good, clean, earthy smell of him.

The gourds grew all summer until their leaves were broader than Josue’s two hands put side by side. In the mornings when the fog was thick and white above the marsh, curling through the stands of birch and alder beside the quiet river, I would stand in the doorway watching the gourds, filling my lungs with the rich, pungent smell of the fen. Those days were quiet, lonely ones. On one hand could I count the number of fenmen we caught sight of poling down the quiet river on their river rafts, only to disappear around the bend again, hidden by the bull rushes and cattails. On those rare days when men passed by, Josue’s eyes would darken and he would put his hand upon his gun.

I grew strong that summer and learned to snare the long-eared marsh hares as well as weave eel traps to float in the current at the bottom of the river. Some days I would take the river raft with the long pole and float with the current, following the hidden waterways deep into the heart of the fen. This was how I came to learn of the slate-colored herons that nest on the great cyprus island and the shy, playful otters which live in holes in the mud of the river bank. I learned to call the ducks, and they would sail down in clouds around me, teal and gadwalls and widgeons and pintails. I saw herds of red deer grazing on the rich marsh grass at the edge of the great wood and once caught sight of a large, spotted grey cat disappearing into a stand of alders with a trout in its mouth. I grew strong that summer, and brave, also. Many a night I was reluctant to cease my exploring and would pull the raft into a stand of willows to sleep there on the ground beneath the stars, the throaty choruses of the frogs floating through the clear night air around me. Those were good, peaceful days.

That fall, we harvested the gourds, hanging them from the roof beams of the bungalow.

Autumn and winter, they hung there, but when the first breath of spring came blowing across the fen Josue took them down to cut round holes in them and scoop out the seeds. He boiled roots and berries to make dyes and taking the brush in his big, rough hands, painted the gourds all the colors

of the earth. They hung from the rafters, a sky of russet, scarlet, gold, blue like the ocean, green, orange, and purple. We would fall asleep to the gentle sound of them swinging against each other.

When the leaves on the willow were nearly as big as a rabbit kit's ear, we took the gourds out and hung them by their long, slender necks from the branches above mother's grave. They rocked softly in the wind, a spray of color against the blackness of the fen. Josue was pleased with the gourds, yet he was uneasy, also, and his hand rested on the knife in his belt.

Finally, with the last bits of snow melting from behind the rocks, the tree swallows came back, making their nests of grass and sphagnum moss inside the gourds. The swallows laid small white eggs, like tiny moons fallen from the sky. Their sweet voices, like a hundred bubbling brooks, filled our quiet days.

Josue marked on the door frame each day the eggs were sat upon and when at last they hatched, he took down the violin and tuned it with sure, large hands. I stood in the doorway watching him as he walked away, his strong, broad back turned to me. He came to the crest of the outcropping and stood beneath the swaying branches of the gourd tree. The sweet, mysterious notes of the violin began to mingle with the songs of the swallows and drifted down to me, spilling across the fen. It was the song of the quiet river which wanders like blood veins through the heart of the fen, which carries life to the trees and reeds and rushes. It was the song of the mist, which drifts over the hollows at night and hangs thick and silent above the bottomless black pools. It was the song of the tree swallows which dip and dart above the quiet river on silent, shimmering blue wings, their white breasts flashing against the clear, deep water.

I leaned in the doorway, eyes closed.

The high twang of a yew bow and the whistling of an arrow broke the melody. I heard a cry. Josue lied crumpled beneath the willow, the violin splintered in his big, rough hands, the long shaft of a bounty arrow piercing his heart. The tree swallows erupted from their nests, filling the air with the iridescent flashing of their wings and terror-filled voices. The gourds swung wildly from the willow branches.

My Father, Josue AuSaule, was dead.

A man emerged from the great woods, carrying a bow on his back. He was bare of chest, his step the sure, lithe stride of one who had spent much time in the great wood and his dark eyes were quick and watchful like those of a marsh cat. A wicked scar marked where a sword had pierced through his back and out the front again. He was half a dozen years older than me, but when his dark eyes looked into mine, they were filled with a pure, child-like innocence. Yet, when longer I had looked into them, I saw behind them an intense, blazing force, like a wall of fire, and I stepped back at the sight, so overwhelming was it.

I did not pick up the rifle beside me. He stood silhouetted against the fading evening sky; I could have killed him, my hand was sure and he was no small target. Yet I did not. We spoke no words and he passed by me, entering the bungalow. He took the two shovels from beside the hearth and put the smaller into my hands. I followed him up to the bluff and with trembling hands I pulled the shaft from Josue's back before we dug a grave there beside Mother's, beneath the swaying arms of the gourd tree, the rays of the setting sun spreading golden through the leaves. We spoke no words, the two of us. The ground was not so hard this time and it gave easily underneath our blades.

Two mounds were they beneath the gourd tree, beneath the swinging branches and the halo of painted orbs filled with the small, delicate voices of the swallows and their young. When we were finished, I took the shovels and flung them into the quiet river. They sank into the black depths. He left then, vanishing into the great woods. I walked on strong, knowing legs to the bank of the quiet river and loosed the river raft from its mooring, my fingers familiar with the knots; behind me, the swallows settled in their nests amidst the branches of the gourd tree. I slipped away down the quiet river without a last glance back, disappearing between the rushes into the maze of waterways, towards the Wide Ocean and the trading towns on the cliffs.



Private Julian Lackley's shoulders were beginning to ache. His tri-layered body armor was supposed to be feather-light, but the Galactic Infantry didn't have the funds to keep the gravity-repelling batteries charged, so the steel plates weighed him down. He was just four days into his assignment as a guard and already unease, shoulder pain, and the constant hum of artificial lighting were beginning to get to him. The Sunny Day Center for Hardened Criminals did not orbit any sun, so the governor merely decreed day and night. He spent identical shifts standing erect and immobile in a row of ten soldiers, all facing the translucent electric cell barrier that separated them from the man they were guarding.

Julian shifted as imperceptibly as he could, and let his eyes follow the prisoner—a tall man who seemed not to know or care what his lanky limbs were doing. He had a long, angular face, made longer by an unkempt beard. He grinned. He was always grinning. Julian watched him walk along the wall of the rectangular white cell, turn at the corner, and continue down the next wall, the grin never leaving his face.

A beep in Julian's earpiece informed him that it was his turn to blink, and he took advantage of the opportunity for a quick yawn. The room was hot; the thermostat never worked properly, alternating between planet-core-scalding and deep-space-frigid. The air quality regulator never functioned either, so the cell gave off a vague scent of sweat and lethargy.

The prisoner, who had noticed the yawn, suddenly ceased his repetitive journey and approached the electric barrier. He focused on Julian, who tried to look past him.

"Not much to do here, is there?" the prisoner asked.

Julian ignored him.

"Do you like it here? You look pretty miserable."

He's got that right, Julian thought.

"I suppose we're both here under duress," the prisoner continued. "Look at you: Years of Galactic Infantry Training—what do they call it? The Great Git?—only to end up here in this putrid cell for hours on end alongside your vegetative comrades, all with your battered P-15 Eradicators

pointed at me. You must feel like you've gotten rather the short end of the military stick. Yes, I feel fairly confident about that guess: you are one melancholy prison guard."

Julian did his best not to react, but he was startled. No amount of training could stave off the unending boredom of a Galactic Infantryman's life. His previous assignment had been at a dye mine on Zorus Minor, and he had thought that nothing could be more deadening than the headache produced by constant exposure to Zorus Yellowish-Blue. But this was worse. The only comfort was that however long his tour of duty here was, the convict's would be longer. Julian didn't know much about the man on the other side of the electric barrier, but what he had been told scared him. A murderer so far gone from the shores of reality that he killed like a Sub-Sentient, only with the precision and ingenuity of a deep-space microbiologist, they said.

The prisoner finally looked away from Julian, and resumed his rectangular trek. As he strode, he went on in his high pitched, drawling voice, in the direction of no one in particular, "As soon as I'm done here, I'm getting a dog. I can't bring him back to my glorious homeworld, of course: dogs don't survive long in the mostly-argon atmosphere. My mother had one—a magnificent greyhound, originally from Earth. It lasted just two Galaxy-Standard months, one week, and four days. But from the moment it died, I knew I would get a dog of my own. I think a Sirian Hound would suit me best: large and friendly, and such lovely wings. I'll call it Brunellus."

Dream on, Julian thought silently. You'll be lucky if you have a pet cockroach in here.

"But there still remains the question of where I shall go," the prisoner continued. "Somewhere far, far away from this fluorescent rat hole. Living as I do now in the very center of the Empire"—and he giggled a bit here—"one of the outlying systems seems appealing. I thought about Mu Cephei Prime, but it's just so...rubbery. A triumph of modern planetary science, of course—the trees *look* real enough. And a dog would love it. I mean, the whole planet is a chew toy. Too bouncy for me, though."

Julian heard the heavy tread of two duty officers behind him, and he recognized the raspy voice of Captain Savage. "Babble," Savage said. "Nothing to worry about. I'm sure it's meaningless." Julian was inclined to disagree.

Savage was making the rounds with Administrator Ophelius Jago, who had the misfortune of being in charge of this giant floating box of sadness and all its inadvertent inhabitants. "Double the guard," Jago ordered.

“No need,” said Savage. “He’s harmless now.”

“You weren’t here when he was caught, were you?” Jago snapped. “I went on the raid. He was a monster. Didn’t even know what he was doing, just bumbling around until dozens were dead. Everything was red except for the teeth in his wide grin—that, and the whites of his eyes. Now he’s talking about getting out, and I don’t like it. Double the guard.”

Julian heard another bleating tone in his helmet, the signal for a shift change. All ten guards swiveled together, turning to face their counterparts on the replacement detail. The prisoner’s motion was perfectly timed: one set of guards had their backs to the cell, blocking the next group’s view. As Julian stepped past his replacement, he heard a sharp intake of breath and turned back in alarm. When he remembered this moment later in life, he tended to leave out the expression of slack-jawed astonishment that decorated his face. He could see the electric barrier still shimmering, but now there was no one behind it. Snapping out of his stupor, Julian followed the other guards, who were already running down the corridor after the escaped prisoner. The man was fast, and he moved without rhythm, wildly weaving and ducking. Each leg would shoot out, then sink like a paper airplane, and sit lightly on the ground. Then the next leg leapt up. In this jerky fashion, the man somehow stayed ahead of the wheezing guards.

Some soldiers stopped chasing and instead tried to bring the prisoner down with their Eradicators, but in the narrow corridor they couldn’t get a clear shot past their fellows. Peering over the rows of helmeted heads in front of him, Julian slowed to a halt just as the prisoner slipped through the first airlock door, sealing it behind him. There were two more doors separating the cell block from the transport docking station, but Julian suspected the prisoner would have no trouble getting past them: There were only six or seven guards in the whole place who made a point of staying in decent shape. Julian was right: it took the prisoner only a couple of punches to a few ample stomachs and he disabled the guards and sprinted into the docking station, where three transports bobbed, tied to the prison by electromagnetic bindings. He switched off the power, gleefully liberated two of the transports by pushing them out into empty space, and hopped into the third.

All Julian could think as he watched the Galactic Infantry craft speed away was, “You lucky bastard.”

Julian Lackley had not been first in his class at the Great GIT Academy, and he was never the first to put on his uniform in the morning and begin his shift, or to finish dinner and get back to

work in the evening—but he was certainly the first to volunteer for the search mission that would take him away from the Sunny Day Center. The operation had to wait until several dozen dignified and professional looking men in uniform, holding each other's ankles, had formed a long chain through open space and rescued the drifting transports.

Although it seemed that the prisoner had miraculously diffused through the electric barrier, it turned out that the Galactic Infantry overseers had neglected the mechanism for so long that the electric charge fizzled out, leaving only a translucent trace. The escapee's superhuman abilities having proved nonexistent, he could only have reached one of three nearby planets: A, B, or C in the 67 Omega-Andromedae System. Julian had been assigned to search 67 O-A C, a rocky, scalding hell that bristling with jagged spires of rock, reaching deep into the smoke-filled sky. These needlestack mountains were constantly melting and reforming at their bases, creating a bleak landscape of shifting lava. It was a small, lifeless planet, but Julian still had a lot of territory to cover: three quarters of a continent all to himself.

Zooming in his speeder between rock spires and up slopes to try and get a better view of the terrain, Julian felt the wind on his face for the first time in a while. It was an experience he could have done without. It wasn't a cool or refreshing breeze, but a blistering, dry gust. The heat-sensing goggles that were supposed to help find the prisoner were of little use, since they detected the entire planet. Julian spotted a tall peak about seven hundred miles away and turned towards it, hoping for a better view of his surroundings, picturesque though they weren't. Half an hour later, he reached his destination. There wasn't enough room at the top to park the speeder, so he hiked up the steep lava slope. He gazed around—and saw nothing, only an endless expanse of rock. He idly considered kicking a boulder in frustration, but decided it wasn't worth the pain.

Then a distant glint caught his eye. He peered at it, and thought he could see the vague shape of a transport hull. Breathing a little harder, he knelt and opened his saddlebag, looking for his planetary observation high-mag binoculars. When he stood up again, he found himself staring at a hunted man.

Julian's training abandoned him, and he just stood there in shock. The prisoner—ex-prisoner, now—smiled winningly, reached into Julian's still-open bag, and pulled out the pair of high-strength neodymium-IV magnets meant for sealing gashes in the speeder's metal chassis. The man moved with such stunning nonchalance that Julian was rendered motionless. He watched as the prisoner raised one magnet as if lifting a glass for a toast, then reached around and attached it to the

back of Julian's armor. Before he was alert enough to struggle, the other magnet was fixed to a nearby rock, effectively pinning him to the ground.

Julian flailed and tried to get up, but the best he could do was an impression of a flipped turtle. He sat back, defeated. He tried to glare, but couldn't work up the energy. The man studied him with fascination and a bit of confusion. He seemed intelligent and slightly feral, and Julian felt as if he might receive a hard punch to the face at any moment. "They never told me your name," he said.

The man gave a wide smile. "Didn't they? No, I suppose they wouldn't."

"Well?" Julian demanded.

"My full name would have to be Severan Jones. But you may call me Sev."

"That your real name?"

Sev cocked his head, giving his grin a perplexing leftward tilt that made Julian want to lean in the opposite direction to compensate. "Did you come here to try to take me back? Terrible idea. Didn't they tell you how dangerous I am?"

"I'm a trained Galactic Infantryman, armed to the teeth and prepared to do anything to recover my prisoner," Julian answered. He looked back to try to get a glimpse of the magnet and the rock that held him, and made a halfhearted attempt to pull away. "But, given my current situation..."

Sev beamed, and swung backward until he was leaning against a rough ledge.

"Even if you could 'recover' me, it wouldn't do you much good."

Julian scratched his nose, grateful that his hands were free even if the rest of him wasn't. "What do you mean?"

"I watched you carefully in there. I was correct in my assumptions, wasn't I? If you managed to get me back, they'd laud you for a few days, maybe stick a ribbon on your chest plate, and then they'd send you back to staring all day at a man in his cell. Is that what you want?"

Julian scratched his nose a little harder. There it was again, that strange sense that this man *knew* him, that they had some kind of bond. No he didn't want that, but what else was there? He had been trained for the Galactic Infantry, and being a soldier was all he knew.

Sev started to say something, then looked pained. For a moment, the grin was gone. He swore quietly, then said, “I can’t leave you here. They wouldn’t find you for days, and by then you’d be dead of exposure or thirst. And that’s a horrible death.” He sighed and then continued, “On the other hand, I can’t exactly let you go, either. I’d have to skip town— I’d have to skip all the towns for parsecs around.”

“They’d find you.”

“Maybe. In any case, I’m left with a bit of a dilemma: Let you die or risk recapture.”

Suddenly, Julian was acutely aware of feeling imprisoned in the heavy steel of his body armor. The hot wind had torn at his face, the Infantry boots had blistered his feet, and now he felt an overpowering desire to let his shoulders slump and his hair grow out. He had lived his life according to a strict code, and now he was sick of discipline.

“I’ll come with you,” Julian said, slowly.

“You’ll what?” It was almost an oath. Sev’s eyes were sparkingly amused, but they were a little too wide. “You surprise me, soldier.” His eyes narrowed. “But tell me, why on 67 Omega-Andromedae C would I want that?”

This was about as far ahead as Julian had thought, and now he floundered. “Like you said...a dilemma. This is a solution.”

“And why would *you* want that? You’d have to remain my prisoner—forever, basically.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I’d join you. I just want to be free from them.” Sev cocked his head curiously, and Julian stammered on. “The Infantry, I mean. I just want – I don’t know, I just don’t want to lose what remains of myself.”

Sev looked agog at him for a moment, then started to shake his head. He paused, reconsidering, and gave a brief grin. Just as quickly, he assumed a businesslike posture and set his face into an unreadable configuration. His fingers twitched. “I’m not going to take care of you,” he said, finally.

“That’s not what I’m asking for.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about this.”

“Neither am I.”

Sev said nothing for a moment. “If both of us disappear and they don’t find any bodies, they’ll figure out you deserted. They’ll look twice as hard because they’ll know we’re together.”

“So we’ll have to run.”

“Not just for now, though. Always.”

“Sure beats standing around.”

Sev once again let that winsome smile flash across his face, and then he jumped up. He spun around a few times. He stood in place and blinked at the barren horizon. Then he turned his head back to Julian, bent over, and was suddenly very close to his face. “One more thing,” he said. Julian waited. “Space can get boring, just the two of us.”

This was not what Julian had been expecting. “I am...not sure what you mean.”

Sev grinned again, and yelled, “We’re getting a dog! A Sirian hound!” He unhooked the magnets binding Julian to the rock, strode gleefully to the speeder, leapt into the passenger seat, and waited with his arms folded. Julian got slowly to his feet. He methodically unbuckled his armor and, leaving it in a rusting pile on the hot dirt, ambled over to pilot’s side of the speeder. Still slightly dazed, he sank into the leather upholstery, yawned loudly and long, and pressed the ignition.

)O(

I yawned, stretched, and rolled over in bed to face the window, but it was still sunset. I hoped the sun would just hurry up and go down already. It was Noctnight, the beginning of the weekend, and I couldn't wait to go and just party like I did every Noctnight. The sun would probably go down soon.

I squinted outside. Was that a Sundweller? I couldn't really tell. It looked like *someone* was outlined against the sun, but I couldn't tell if it was a person. Nobody really understood Sundwellers. They usually slept during the night and were awake during the day, unlike the rest of us. They'd go outside during the day, too. Who would ever want to go outside in the sunlight?

I put any troubles from my mind and turned. I decided the sun was low enough that I could start getting ready for the night. I put on my best clothes and threw some water on my face, but I didn't really care. It wasn't like anyone would be able to see my face clearly.

Once it was a little darker, I walked outside. I didn't know where I was going to go, but I could just go into any house with dim lights on, as per the tradition of Noctnights.

When I turned the next corner I finally saw a house with dimmed lights. I walked up to the door and opened it, trying to make some noise so the people in there would know they had a guest, when the lights in the house turned out completely.

"What's going on?" I spoke uncomfortably into the darkness.

"Who's here?" asked another voice.

The lights turned back on. They were a little too bright for my tastes.

"Uh... aren't you having a party here?"

"I'm trying to get some sleep."

He wasn't a Moondweller. He was a tired Sundweller.

"Oh," I said, feeling more and more awkward. I opened the door and began walk back outside when he said, "Haven't you ever wondered?"

I slammed the door shut and hurried back outside, but his words felt like a spotlight, glaring at me and illuminating all the parts of me I wished could remain in shadow. I tried to put it out of my mind.

When I next went into a house with dimmed lights on, there *was* a party, and it was in full tilt. The top ten hits blared from a radio near the stairs, and I walked into the kitchen to find a

platter laden with what looked like Noct soda. I grabbed a glass and took a long sip. It *was* Noct soda, and it was a lot healthier than the other stuff you could end up drinking on Noctnight.

I didn't like that party much, so I left after that. I walked along the streets for a while. Someone had set up a massive boombox that felt like it was rattling my bones. A few people were dancing right in the street. I danced for a bit, too, with a girl I could barely see, before she moved on to some other guy. I wasn't surprised. It happened to me all the time. It happened to everyone all the time.

As the night went on, I grew more and more tired. At some point, I drank something that definitely wasn't Noct soda, that was sour and I tried not to spit out, and all the while the music crashed against my eardrums, pressing me, pushing me. Someone slammed into me, running from something, and I nearly fell onto a passed-out body that had been shoved to the side of the street. I felt sorry for whoever was passed out. Imagine waking up in the day, outside.

I shivered at the thought but blamed it on the cold wind that seemed to bite at me. It was cooler now, and what with the sound and wind I sort of wanted to go home.

Go home? I thought. *It's Noctnight! Only losers go home on Noctnight!*

There was a loud thudding noise behind me. I turned as a brawl erupted in the streets. It didn't really matter how it started. Nobody seemed to care how these things started, but people started pouring out of houses, either onlooking or looking for a piece of the action. I started to hurry away when a piercing scream froze me in my tracks. That wasn't the sound of an wrathful adult. It was the sound of a terrified young girl.

I worried about her. Would she be all right? Would she... survive?

I was going to walk away again when I heard the scream again. I hesitated. I couldn't do anything about it, could I?

The girl screamed. It pierced my ears. It pierced my excuses. I had to do anything I could.

I whirled around, closed my eyes momentarily, and recklessly charged into the rabble.

Someone punched me as I crouched and attempted to maneuver through the mob. I didn't care at that point. I could see the child now.

She was small; squatting with her hands over her head. I tried to get close to her but someone kicked me in the ankle, and I stumbled, colliding with a rough-looking man. I quickly moved forward, and gently scooped up the girl, who let loose another piercing scream. I clutched her close to me and tried to make it out of the fray. I was roughly shoved and barely kept my balance, though I sort of stepped on someone in the process. I pushed aside a burly- looking guy, and I was almost out, but the burly- looking guy turned around.

For a moment I stared into what I could see of his eyes. He was wild, unconstrained, and he stepped forward and brought a fist crashing into my skull. I plummeted, holding out one arm to break my fall, while the other tightly held the screaming girl, and I collided with the pavement. I saw a woman dash forward and pluck the screaming girl from my arms and left. I felt a pulsating agony in my head and I wondered if I was going to die for saving the girl.

I tried to muster enough strength to move a few times, but whenever I tried, I felt an agonizing rush and dropped back to the ground. Nobody touched me. Nobody even got close to me.

After a while, I could see the first rays of dawn peer over the horizon, and everyone else had gone inside. I wondered if I'd have to bake under the sun all day. I wondered if anyone else would help me, even tomorrow night.

I was barely retaining consciousness when I felt someone lift me up. It was starting to get brighter out. It was painful to be lifted, but it had been even worse on the ground. I watched the pavement slide by, all I could do at the moment, until I was carried into a house and I was gently put down on a couch. I was only aware of my back being supported until my body couldn't cope with the pain and I fell unconscious.

When I woke up, I felt at least a bit better, but I was extremely hungry. The room was dimly lit by the sunlight leaking through the drawn curtains. There was a table across the room, laden with a few boxes of cereal and some milk, and I couldn't imagine anything more delicious right now. I tried to sit up, but it brought an explosive pain to me head, and I dropped back down like a rock.

I rolled over, falling off the couch and landing on my hands and knees. I crawled over to the table, and grabbed the arm of a chair and began to pull myself up. I pulled the back of the chair too hard and it tilted and fell, sliding off my back and falling to the ground with a clatter. I cringed, realizing for the first time that the house probably wasn't empty, but moved on to the next chair. I pushed it out this time and clambered onto the front of the chair.

A door opened and a woman in pajamas hurried out of a nearby door. I glanced nervously at the toppled chair, but she didn't seem to care.

She gasped. "Are you alright?"

"I... I think so."

"We were so worried- would you like something to eat?"

"I...yeah, thanks."

She grabbed a bowl and a spoon for me, poured me some cereal, and I ate vigorously.

For a minute she didn't say anything, but gazed at the drawn curtains as a man came out of the room and sat next to her. I saw a bit of glare from his finger, and I realized they were both wearing rings.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"I- well, so there was this fight."

"What about?"

I shrugged. People fought all the time.

"Were you in the fight?"

"No... well, sort of. I saw it start. I tried to get away, but then there was this scream. It was this girl, this young girl, and she was in there somewhere."

"And you... just charged in there? How many people were there?"

I shrugged. "Probably twenty or so."

She looked aghast, and looked like she was going to burst out saying something, but the man put an arm on her shoulder and said "Let him talk."

I swallowed. "So then I pushed through them, and picked up the girl, and tried to get her out, but I got punched, and then some woman took the girl away but left me there, and then I couldn't really move, and then you guys brought me in here."

I sighed. No one spoke for a while, and I finished my breakfast. I guessed that it was around breakfast time, except in the day, which felt weird.

"Are you guys... Sundwellers?" I asked, hesitantly.

They both nodded.

"Oh," I said. "I just... most people I know have thicker curtains, and their houses are darker colored. But if you're Sundwellers, why's the house so dim?"

"You."

Oh. I hadn't thought that they'd do it out of respect for me.

"I...thanks. Thanks for..." I glanced around. "For everything."

The woman smiled. "Any time."

"Do you... usually do this? To other Moondwellers?"

I felt weird. I'd never talked a Sundweller like this before. I don't think I'd ever had a legitimate conversation with a Sundweller before.

"All the time," she said. "We take you in, try to fix you up, and then you leave. What do you think happens to the Moondwellers who end up passed out on the side of the road?"

I shrugged. I'd never really thought about it before, other than assuming they were sort of... lost. I never considered they'd get a second chance.

“So... what do you guys...do?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” asked the man.

“What do Sundwellers do all day? How do you withstand the day?”

“Well, for the most part, we’re similar. We have jobs, families, and friends, like you. And what do you mean, ‘withstand the day?’

“How can you stand to be outside and see everything clearly?”

“What’s wrong with seeing things clearly?” he asked.

“Are you kidding?” I said. “I’d *never* want people be able to see me clearly. I don’t want everyone to know about me. I just want to be accepted.”

“Why do you need people to not be able to see you to accept you?”

I thought about that for a moment. “Because if they could see me, then they would guess about me. They could judge me, they could formulate opinions about me before I’d ever even talked to them.”

“But if they can’t see you,” said the woman, sounding gentle and inquisitive, “then how can they accept you? They can only accept another generic shadowy form.”

The words seemed to sink into my brain, landing right next to the words of the person who’d said “Haven’t you ever wondered?” to me yesterday. He never had the chance to elaborate, but now I was really starting to wonder without his help. I wondered if the woman was right. I wondered if I’d never been right my whole life. I wondered if anyone had really accepted me. I wondered if I’d ever be accepted. I wondered if light was really... all that bad.

“Well, we’re leaving,” said the woman, “to go to a friend’s house. We’ll back after nightfall, so you can leave whenever you feel comfortable, and feel free to take whatever you want from the fridge.”

I nodded, still staring at my bowl. They walked to the door and started to put shoes on.

I breathed deeply, and glanced up.

“Well... bye,” said the woman.

For a moment, I looked at the two figures.

“Can... can I come with you?”

For a moment, they just looked at me, then the man said, “We’ll be going, you know, outside. And their house is lit up.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I...” I took a deep breath. “I know.”

I stood up and walked to the door. My heart began racing. They offered for me to walk out first, but I let them lead. They opened the door and a bit of light came. I shrank from it, almost involuntarily, and they walked outside. They turned around, looking at me expectantly. For the first

time, light flooded into my eyes. I wondered if it was killing me, or if it was cleansing me. I could feel the light pressing against my eyes, but I wouldn't let it in. I stepped back, and stared at my shoes. There was a beam of light falling before them like a starting line. I squinted back outside, and began to see their outlines more. Slowly, my eyes started to adjust.

For the first time I could see them clearly. They looked kind, welcoming, loving. I tried to walk outside, but I stood frozen there, just on the brink. I stared at my own shoes for a moment, not really sure what I should do. I sighed deeply and teetered forward, then rocked back. I was about to deny everything I'd thought was normal for the most part of my life. Was this really the right way to go?

"How... how do I know that this is the right thing to do?" I asked, looking at them. I sounded panicked.

"I can't tell you whether it's definitely right. But no one can," said the man. "There's not always a clear-cut choice in life. Sometimes, you just have to trust your best judgment, cross your fingers, and make a decision."

I glanced the beam of light that fell right in front of my feet, glanced at the two figures in front of me, then took a deep breath and stepped outside.

)O(

The Auctioneer was a dark-haired, ageless man who seemed to exist solely for Sundays, his face frozen in a toothy grin and his trademark navy suit always ironed to perfection. The inhabitants of Finer Fronds often wondered what he did the rest of the week, but only in the sort of idle way that drifted in people's heads when there was nothing better to think about, and slipped back out again once there was. In the end, it didn't matter if he took the bus to work or bought whole-grain bread or had a family of his own. All that mattered was his voice, cast out over the town square every Sunday like a fishing net tossed into a hopeful sea.

As much as everyone tried to deny it, Finer Fronds had lost its grip on fall and was sliding down the gradual slope of winter. This Sunday was already drowning in flurries, and when it was time for the auction to begin people came out of their homes reluctantly, their mouths shut tightly as if to keep their warm breath from seeping out. Cecily Pierpont and her parents were among the first to arrive. They stood stiffly at the foot of the great marble steps of the courthouse, collecting a thin layer of snow for nearly half an hour before the Auctioneer burst through the gilded doors.

"Good morning!" he bellowed, as always. Responses of various degrees of enthusiasm trickled out through chattering teeth.

"We're running a little low on inventory today, what with all the storms getting in the way of the delivery services, but I do think we have a batch of winners today!" the Auctioneer exclaimed. He gestured vaguely to the gathering, and Cecily could've sworn that he winked at her. "So before we're all waist-deep in snowflakes, let's get started, eh?"

That was the cue for those bright double doors to swing open again and for the caretakers to trickle outside. It *was* pretty slim pickings as far as auctions went, but people had ceased to be picky years ago. One woman ushered out three toddlers who waddled onto the top step, each with a thin rope encircling their wrist that secured them to the woman's belt. Another lady pushed a stroller with one hand and held a completely-covered child to her chest with the other, her eyes downcast. The last woman was balancing two infants in her arms, rocking them gently back and forth, humming a soft, nondescript lullaby.

Cecily peered eagerly at all of them, straining to see past the folds of heavy fabric to the children inside. It was a good variety. A sleeping baby with skin the color of coffee beans. A

cerulean-eyed little girl with a tumble of nearly-white curls. Cecily fingered her own sleek black hair and examined a tan finger. She cast a furtive glance at her parents, who were both fair and pale. Some couples bid only on children who matched their coloring or facial structure, but to hers, race clearly hadn't mattered. She scanned the kids again and wondered if her younger brother would look anything like her.

The Auctioneer glided to the nearest caretaker and scooped a wailing pink little girl out of her arms. He smiled at the baby, shushed her, and held her up for the crowd to see. A ripple of murmuring began as families bent their heads together to deliberate.

Cecily looked up, but her mother shook her head. "We decided on a boy, remember? Plus, she's crying already."

Her father put a hand on her shoulder. Its weight was solid and reassuring. "This is a big decision. If we don't find him today, we can wait until next week. Wouldn't want to rush into anything, would we?"

The Pierponts had been discussing another child for a few months now, but this was the first auction they had actually attended. Initially Cecily had been adamant about it being a girl, so she could dress her up and have tea parties with her, but she had been overruled. She decided that she could still have tea parties with a little brother.

From somewhere in the middle of the throng, a young woman raised her hand, her eyes shining. "Eight hundred," she announced. Those two words set into motion a frenzy of numbers thrown like daggers from the mouths of eager men and women into the capable hands of the Auctioneer, who prodded the chaos along, stroking the girl's squashed-up nose. The price rose and the feeling of breathlessness built until Cecily buried her face in her father's pant leg to try and block out the noise.

"One thousand!" crowed a man who already had a small army of children playing at his feet.

"One thousand, one hundred!" offered an elderly lady, her hair like layered spider-webs.

"Two thousand!"

"Two thousand, five hundred!"

The Pierponts waited out the session in silence as the volume escalated and the people around them lurched forwards, waving their hands in the air and pressing up against the marble

steps. When the price hit four thousand, many of the voices died down until it was only the first woman, her fingers wound through her hair, bidding against a barrel-chested man. They shrieked at each other until five thousand. Then the man threw his hat onto the ground and scowled, and the woman dragged her dazed-looking husband up the steps to embrace their new daughter. She stuffed a giant bundle of cash into the Auctioneer's upturned top-hat. When she turned to face the city, there were tears dripping into her smile.

"Our very first," she proclaimed. People nodded and chimed in with their congratulations as the Auctioneer noted the purchase in a small log book that had seemingly appeared from thin air.

As icy wind clawed at the fingertips and noses of those in the crowd, the Auctioneer held out a pinched-faced baby boy with a shock of red hair. Cecily's parents raised eyebrows at one another, but Cecily shook her head.

"No. Not him," she insisted.

Her mother ran her thin, bony fingers across Cecily's hair, rearranging the part. "Sweetie, why not?"

There wasn't anything wrong with the child. He looked healthy enough, although a bit scrawny, maybe. But Cecily couldn't imagine herself holding him when he cried, or cooing at him from his crib. He had the kind of thin, pale mouth that was frozen in a perpetual frown.

"He feels like a stranger," she said.

"Honey," Mr. Pierpont said gently, "they're all strangers now. Once we buy them, we'll get to know him. That's how you build a family."

Cecily stuck her hand in her pocket and began fiddling with the coins she found there. "But not him, Daddy, please. I'll know when I see him. I'll know."

A troubled, wary look flashed between her parents, but Cecily was sure of herself. She could feel it like the beginnings of a cold, something creeping up her throat and taking root in her every breath—something just around the corner.

"Five thousand three hundred, going once, going twice? Gone!" Since he was lacking a gavel, the Auctioneer simply stomped his feet and did a short jig. After passing off the redhead boy to a middle-aged couple, he reached for the next infant without missing a beat.

Prices climbed higher this year than they ever had before; parents were getting desperate. Between the strange illnesses that had left the residents of Finer Fronds unable to conceive their own children, and the storms, and dangerous roadways that made deliveries tougher and tougher, people's lives had begun to revolve around the Sunday auction. These imported children could be from any overpopulated corner of the globe, sold by poverty-stricken parents to places like Finer Fronds where people were willing to cough up a pretty penny for an addition to their family.

The third, fourth, and fifth children were all girls, so the Pierponts clenched their fists and waited. Now the only child left was a squirming bundle cocooned deep inside layers of periwinkle fabric. Cecily wondered if it could breathe through all that cloth. The caretaker who held it moved more carefully than before, stepping forwards with a quick glance at the crowd. People waited expectantly for the blanket to fall away, but she froze at the top step, her lips pursed in a thin line.

"Alright, ma'am, if you'll reveal him for us all to see?" prodded the Auctioneer. He pulled at his tie as if it had suddenly become too tight.

Cecily brushed the snow from her shoulders and waited. The woman nodded hesitantly and curled her fingers around the blanket, tugging it down out of his face. And then, as if on cue, the entire congregation quieted.

The child was dark-eyed and dark-haired, and, like Cecily, he looked like he came from somewhere sandy and tropical where the local language didn't include a word for "snow." But here he was: dusted in white, greeted with silence, and marred by a scar. The eyes of the town stared at his cheek, where the burn mark started—a mottled red patch that covered the entire right side of his face and disappeared under the blanket.

"Let's see the rest of him!" cried a man near the back, his voice bouncing off of every tree and stone until the air was ringing with his demand.

A teenage girl to Cecily's left was shaking her head. "He'll freeze if we unwrap him," she murmured. But she made no move to stop the Auctioneer as he plastered on a smile and pulled at the fabric until it fell to the staircase in a heap. This time people didn't stifle their gasps. The noise blended with the rustling wind, making it sound like Finer Frond's very earth and skies were inhaling a sharp breath.

"Oh, poor baby," sighed Cecily's mother.

The jagged pink scar continued down his neck and across his shoulder, circling his back and disappearing underneath his diaper; the skin was shiny even in the gray winter light. His soft folds of infant fat were a mottled mess of scar tissue; he looked like some patchwork doll that had been taken apart and put back together, some pieces mismatched and others forgotten altogether. He waved his hand in the air as if saying hello, and Cecily clutched her hands to her mouth.

The caretaker snatched the blanket off of the ground and glared into the crowd. “You’ve had your look now,” she hissed, folding it around him and cradling him to her chest.

The Auctioneer scanned the crowd. “Let the bidding begin.”

A crowd of people suddenly became very interested in inspecting their boots.

The child giggled. It was a high-pitched, infectious sound, and one that was entirely at odds with the situation. Cecily found herself staring at his eyes as he laughed, at the way they crinkled in the corners and glistened like they knew something.

She took a step forwards.

The Auctioneer only shrugged. “He’s otherwise healthy.” When that was met with noises of disbelief, he narrowed his eyes. “Listen—the blizzards are only going to get worse, and deliveries will stop coming. This might be the only batch for months.”

“Then we’ll wait.”

“Send the poor child back where he came from.”

Cecily looked up at her father, who was taking care to look at the ground. Everyone knew that kids were never sent back. Auctioning was a one-way street, and Finer Fronds was a dead end. Parents couldn’t exactly afford to be choosy because of the limited inventory, but on the rare occasion that a child didn’t receive a single bid, he or she disappeared behind those golden doors and was never seen again. There was no city orphanage, no charity-house nursery. If a child couldn’t be sold, if couldn’t be cared for.

Looking defeated, the Auctioneer scratched under the child’s chin. “Alright, then. Best wishes to the new families, and—”

“Wait!”

For the second time, the entire group froze, but this time they turned to look at Cecily. She swallowed and forced herself to keep her eyes on the little boy, on his little smile.

“Miss?” said the Auctioneer.

Cecily’s parents stood ramrod straight, looking like ice sculptures behind her. She cleared her throat and pulled a wad of crumpled bills from her jacket pocket. “Four dollars.” A silver coin slipped out from in between and clattered to the ground. “Actually, four dollars and twenty-five cents,” she amended. The allowance that she had so carelessly stuffed in her pocket the day before now felt like a treasure-trove of gold.

“Ridiculous!” squeaked a mousy-haired woman. “She’s only a child. She can’t bid.”

Cecily sucked in a breath. She could feel the air crackle as it went down her throat. “Auction rules say the child goes to the highest bidder. Unless anyone is going to bid higher than four dollars and twenty-five cents, that’s me.”

The Auctioneer smiled at the crowd as if daring them to object. He plucked the child from the stunned caretaker’s hands and held him up for the whole town to see. “Four dollars and twenty-five cents, going once?”

Cecily wiped a snowflake from her eye.

“Going twice?”

Her mother stepped forwards and gave her a shaky kiss on the head.

“Gone!”

When Cecily realized what that meant, that she was supposed to go up and pay now, she lurched forwards and found that a path had been cleared for her. Her neighbors and friends watched in astonishment as she hurried to the courthouse steps and took them two at a time—and then in numb horror as her foot caught on the top step and she tipped backwards. For a moment her arms whipped through the air like windmills. Before she could fall, though, a strong hand caught her shoulder, and she looked up to see the Auctioneer smiling down at her.

This time, he definitely winked.

After she dropped the wrinkled bills in his hat, someone thrust the boy into her arms. He was solid and warm despite the chill in the air, and the flurries suspended in his long eyelashes. She

ran a finger over the uneven pink skin on his cheek, which immediately made him burst into laughter. Soon, unable to help it, she was laughing too, and the brother and sister stood on the top step laughing uncontrollably while the rest of the city tried to burrow themselves further into their coats.

“Hello, beautiful,” Cecily murmured. “Welcome to the family.”

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The fog clings to the lake at the south end of town long after the rising sun has burned it off the streets. Some days the fog never leaves the surface of the water, only thickens as the damp night falls. The fog is a pervasive problem in the valley, coming faithfully most mornings from November to March. Cars rear-end each other, and half a dozen people have hit the tree in the center of town, scarring its thick trunk.

Over those months the fog visits several times a week, quickening in the cool nights. “Better than snow,” many reckon, and they live by a curfew enforced by the weather. The townspeople get home at night before the fog is too dense—no one wants to add a gash to the tree. And in the morning they dress unable to look out the window, for there is nothing to greet them to the day.

This is the scene Emily met on Saturday morning. She peered out the window to the south, and realized she couldn’t see the horizon. The fog matched perfectly the pale colors of the cold water and the morning sky so that they transitioned seamlessly, one into the other.

Carrying her shoes, she tiptoed down the dark corridor in her home. She took the stairs one at a time, placing her toes carefully near the outsides to be quieter. Her cousin Nick and her parents dozed behind their closed doors. She didn’t want to wake them. As she entered the living room her cat raised his head and meowed. She patted his head, her fingers riffling his downy fur, then opened the back door. The cat rushed out and quickly disappeared from view, his gray body melding with the fog.

With her shoes now on, Emily walked over to the dock and gently placed her light blue kayak into the water. It made a gentle sound just shy of a splash. With one glance back at the house to make sure no lights had come on, she shoved off the faded wood of the dock with her paddle. Pushing the paddle against the water left small whirlpools alongside the kayak and sent ripples out to the middle of the lake where they joined one another before vanishing entirely.

Soon, she couldn’t see the house behind her. The fog surrounded her—she could see nothing beyond a short stretch of water all around. Nothing would indicate her presence to a person on shore. She breathed deeply, and as she settled into the hard plastic seat of the

kayak, it was as if the vessel itself disappeared. She felt suspended, held afloat by the water collected in the lowest part of the valley, buoyed by everything that had run downhill.

She remembered how one foggy morning she had come out on the lake without a compass. It seemed like she had paddled for hours before she found a shore, and when she did it wasn't the familiar one by her house. She tried to paddle back in a straight line, but it wasn't until the fog started to lift that she knew in which direction her home was. Now the gentle slope of the roof and the deck whose stain she had watched fade over the years were out of sight.

She sat in the kayak in the middle of the lake for an hour, watching the power of the sun grow. Its rays refracted in the water suspended in the air so that instead of an orb, she saw a misshapen blob. The sun through the fog never looked the same way twice.

Realizing her parents would soon be up and worry if she wasn't there, she turned back towards home. The fog absorbed completely the sound of her paddling.

The cat meowed as she came in his line of sight. She took off her shoes on the porch, carrying them so as to make less sound, then stepped inside. The television was on, just a little too loud to be courteous for this time of the morning.

Nick picked up his head to look at her. "Morning," he said with a raised eyebrow.

"Morning," she replied, her mouth tense. She expected him to be sleeping, to be able to have a few minutes alone in the house. Her cousin put his head back down on the couch and resumed ignoring her.

Ever since Nick had joined them, the routine of the day was unpredictable. The time her father used to spend in his home office he now spent trying to connect to Nick, to approximate a father for him. Her mother would come home early to make dinner, something she never did before her brother, Nick's father, died. And Nick was always there—the hours Emily used to be able to spend between school and her parents' arrivals home were now filled with the chatter of the television and the bulk of boy. When the day was clear and she was on the lake, she knew that the windows of her house weren't empty. She felt eyes on her, always.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized the coffee pot wasn't on—her parents must still be asleep. But as she climbed the stairs, her mother appeared at the top

of them. “Emily,” she said, grave. Her voice hummed, drawing out the “y” sound. Emily cringed. Her parents had forbidden from taking the kayak out alone, especially in the morning fog when no one would be able to see her on the lake.

“I was—,” she started, but her mother cut her off with a murmur of dissent.

“Not alone,” her mother said. Ever since Emily’s uncle had died, her mother had been attuned to even the smallest dangers. Things that were once innocuous were now disasters waiting to happen.

Emily spent her Saturday under eyes. Friendly eyes, but eyes all the same. The fog was off the streets, so her mom convinced Nick and Emily to accompany her to the farmers market. Nick knocked over a stack of cheeses in a display of his Midwest clumsiness. Even as she went to sleep that night, she could feel the looks of people embarrassed for them.

She laced up her shoes again the next morning, but when she went outside to slide the kayak into the water, the paddle was nowhere in sight. Her parents must have taken it. So instead, she stepped onto the nearby pavement of the street and began to run. The cool air hurt her lungs—running tired her much more than paddling leisurely around the lake. The omnipresent fog was like a wall she could never hit. For every step forward she took, the fog retreated a step. She felt as though she was chasing something she could never reach, racing something she could never beat.

She wound her way northeast through town, knowing exactly where she was although she couldn’t see more than a block at a time. With every step she revealed a little bit more of the world. Emily ran through the center of town, past the scarred tree, which, for a moment, filled her entire field of vision.

Gradually the upward slope of the ground increased, and Emily’s steps became smaller as she battled the land. Suddenly, the wall of fog ahead of her disintegrated, and the sun became bright. Emily could see far more than just a city block. The fog pooled behind her, just a few feet down into the valley. Only a few snaky tendrils seemed to reach out beyond it towards her still.

The flat expanse of fog beneath her stretched to the mountains in the west like a roiling sea, tumbling from air currents in the valley. For a moment she was looking across a white ocean. Then, continuing up, she was above the clouds, looking down.

She glanced to her right, where the path climbed another few hundred feet. A figure sat on a bench, looking across the valley, the sun hitting his back. She pushed herself up the slope finding that the air up here seemed much easier to breathe. It didn't catch in her throat or burn her lungs—it was warmer, thinner, less laden with water droplets.

The figure on the bench turned as the sound of her footsteps hit his ears. He raised an eyebrow. "I see you decided to outrun the fog."

Emily had nothing to say for a moment. She had assumed that Nick was at home, sleeping. She felt as if he had just cannonballed next to her kayak.

"I come up here some mornings. The fog is just suffocating. We never had that at home," Nick said.

He shrugged and looked back out at the valley, where all the water-laden air had collected. "I miss the snow."

Emily seated herself beside Nick on the bench. She imagined having to go live with Nick's family, in a reversal of circumstances. She could see herself staring out at the snow and ice, wishing the water would unfreeze to return the familiar weight to the air. She could imagine shielding her eyes from the glare of the winter, waiting for the weather to warm so she could go back to feeling her hands and her feet. And she could see how here everything seemed heavy to Nick, how everything slipped out of his hands and hit the ground. He couldn't see, he couldn't breathe with this unfamiliar air.

Now he turned his head towards Emily. His eyes, for a moment, were her mother's, the color of the fog, gray with flecks of gold.

"Come on, let's head back." Emily spoke softly, not convinced Nick would follow her as she stood up. But he did. They ran back together, disjointed at first, then matching their strides, the walls of gray retreating with each step forward, their spirits buoyed by everything that had run downhill.



HIGH SCHOOL 11/12

3rd PLACE | Breach | Leah Awkward ~Rich

It had been two weeks and five days, and the baby still did not have a name. Marjorie had seen him rushed into the NICU during the first few minutes of her shift; she had helped to prod his newborn skin with the appropriate needles and to nestle him into an incubator, had shushed and cooed at him through the tough plastic until his wailing soothed into sleep. The baby had been delivered three weeks prematurely and had been treated for a severe case of sepsis with a steady deluge of antibiotics. As he fidgeted now beneath the glare of the fluorescent lights that bathed him in warmth, Marjorie reviewed his chart for the third time that morning. The little boy had been eating properly, breathing without the help of the respirator, and displaying a normal temperature for the past 48 hours: he was ready to be discharged. And yet he still did not have a name.

Marjorie glanced up at the clock through her bifocals, its plastic-coated face brushed with the blinking glare of the NICU's countless monitors and machines: 3:32 pm. She would need to have the baby's discharge papers signed and ready by 5 o'clock. By five o'clock she would need to complete his birth certificate. And by 5 o'clock she would need his name, inky and final within the blue-black lines of the document. As the minute hand on the clock ticked to 3:35, Marjorie looked at the doorway. And, like every day for the past two weeks, a girl appeared in the glass of the door, her black curls askew and her chest heaving as if she had been sprinting. *She probably has been sprinting*, Marjorie thought as she turned the metal knob of the door with a gloved hand.

"Hi, Nurse Reeves," breathed the girl, struggling to catch her breath. *Susan*, Marjorie mentally chided herself. *Her name is Susan*. Since her son was always just *the Baby*, Marjorie could not help but think of his mother as *the Girl*. The Girl got pregnant and gave birth to the Baby, and the Girl rushed to the NICU every afternoon during visiting hours to see the Baby. It all made sense, and, at 65, Marjorie was too set in her ways to desire change with any amount of seriousness.

"For the last time," said Marjorie in a gruff voice, "you can call me Marjorie." Susan ducked her head in embarrassment.

"Okay.... Marjorie." The girl formed the word with care, pronouncing every syllable so that the letters dropped from her lips like small, round pebbles. "Marjorie. Okay." She flashed the nurse with a quick smile that created creases around her large, dark eyes. Marjorie shook her head slightly. The girl was certainly pretty, in a flighty sort of way. She was naïve, too. Marjorie supposed that

these characteristics had slammed together and jostled inside the girl's brain. Marjorie supposed that the pregnancy at 17 made sense.

"How is he?" asked Susan. She did not look into Marjorie's face or even at the baby encased in plastic in front of her. She looked at her hands, worried the ragged cuticles with unkempt nails, bit her chapped lips.

"The kid's doing great," said Marjorie after a beat. "He's been eating regularly and doesn't have a fever anymore, not for the past two days. We're discharging him." She continued, almost as if it were an afterthought, "As soon as you name him." As she spoke, she took the little boy into her gloved hands and handed him to his mother like the ordinary miracle that he was.

"Great," Susan whispered, her voice turning thin and soft.

Every day was the same. The girl arrived, breathless, in the NICU, after hurtling two blocks from where the city bus dropped her off at the Whole Foods. The glass of the door framed her expectant face; Marjorie let her in, handed her the baby amid the sighs of infants' slumber and the bleeping of the machines that could keep them alive in ways their mothers couldn't. The girl tenderly held the baby, cupping him in her trembling hands like two halves of a broken heart, until her parents came to pick her up promptly at 6:30 pm. The girl's parents never came to see the baby, although they had attended the birth with a graveness Marjorie reserved for funerals; the father, specks of grey lightening his bushy black beard, had cut the umbilical cord with solemn hands, as if taking communion, or pulling a weed. Marjorie had wanted to ask about the baby's father, but had finally learned the necessity of polite silence after nearly 40 years of being a nurse.

Something always snapped in Marjorie at the sight of the girl cradling the baby in her terrified arms. It was as if a toy shovel had raked a small amount of blood and cells and bone from inside her chest. She never felt quite right afterwards, when the girl had gone home; the hole was always filled in only partially, leaving sections of her to be lapped away by the tide of her breath. Marjorie could not remember feeling like this before. She had never been broken in quite the same way; she had had no babies of her own to rend her heart in tiny, indifferent fists.

"Susan," she said, as gently as her sharp tongue could manage. The girl looked up from the baby's face, a foolish smile parting her lips. "I can't let you take him home until you name him. The boy needs a name." Susan's face fell, and worry furrowed her brow.

“Nur- I mean, Marjorie,” she stammered. She took a breath as if steadying herself. “I’ve had nine months to get used to the idea of being a mother. I had that day on the floor of my mother’s bathroom when I found out, all the way up until today, when I’m here, holding this little person. I’ve had so much time, and I’m still not ready. I feel like I’ll never be ready. *I can’t...*” Susan broke off to stifle the sob that had swelled in her throat. “I’m sorry,” she gasped, turning her face away from the infant in her hands. She knew somehow that her tears, if they fell onto him, would stain her son all his life. “Naming him makes him mine. Really mine. I can’t...”

“He *is* yours,” replied Marjorie sternly. “You’re his mother, and he’s your son. If you weren’t ready to have a baby, you shouldn’t have had unprotected sex. You’re a smart girl- you should have known better.”

“I know,” breathed Susan miserably. She wiped her tears onto the sleeve of her sweater. “Everyone has been telling me that. I’ve heard nothing but that since April. ‘You were so bright, so successful.’ ‘You were on the right path, you were going places.’” Susan paused, and looked Marjorie right in the eyes. “I’m not so smart. I wasn’t going anywhere. I was doing what I thought I was supposed to do, and I did that well. That’s all. I didn’t feel good about it. None of it. I got the grades and the scores and the teachers loved me. But I felt this empty place inside of me that nothing could fill, not the A’s or my friends or my family.” The baby began to cry. Marjorie wordlessly handed the girl a bottle of formula across the incubator.

When the baby had quieted, Susan looked up fiercely. “You’re told all your life, since you’re two and dreaming of princesses and magic slippers, that there is this thing called true love out there,” she said. The baby turned his face away from the bottle. “Everyone has one. And it’s hammered into your brain by books and movies and pop songs. The idea is always there; it’s pervasive. It catches your breath when you least expect it. It makes you sob into your cereal and in the bathroom stall at school and on the bus on the way home.” She gently turned the baby onto his stomach to burp him. “You look around and everyone has it except for you. Your parents, your friends, your teachers. You find yourself 17 without ever having been loved.” The baby’s eyes were drooping. Susan flipped him onto his back and nestled him into the crook of her arm. “So when a boy starts to love you, or seems to, you turn into something you’ve never seen. You’ll do anything for him. You’ll disobey your parents; you’ll abandon your homework.” Susan looked down at the sleeping child in her arms. “You’ll have his baby...” she whispered, shutting her eyes. “Part of you won’t care that he doesn’t want anything to do with you anymore. You were loved,” she said after a

long while, opening her eyes. “You were loved, and that’s important. That’s vital, and that’s real.” She smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. She smiled, and her heart was unspooling inside of her.

Marjorie blinked. She looked at the girl, shrouded in dark hair like Hester Prynne on the scaffold. She could have had Marjorie’s blood flooding her veins. The nurse carefully removed her gloves and laid them aside. She stuck out her right hand over the incubator. Susan looked at it quizzically.

“Name him Michael,” said Marjorie firmly. “That was my father’s name. He was kind and serious and good. Name him Michael and he’ll be mine too. He’ll be a part of me and a part of you. I...” she faltered, looking at her hand and its wavering reflection in the incubator. “You won’t be alone. You don’t have to be alone. Whenever you want my help, I’m here. You can just come in here to sit and breathe when things get too hard. Name him Michael.”

Marjorie looked up into the girl’s face, into *Susan’s* face; she was crying. Tears leaked from her eyes, but she grabbed Marjorie’s hand, mouthed *Thank you*. Marjorie had never done something like this before. She was cool and impartial usually, careful and professional. But the hole that the girl and the baby had dug in her chest was not so gaping now. It yawned politely, and was quiet.

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| Screeners – It’s All Write |

Nikki Brugger-Dethmers	AADL Staffer and MFA Graduate
Tim Drouhard	Librarian and Teen Services Advocate
Philip Cartman	Reader and Reviewer of teen books
Eva Colas	Former Winner of several ‘It’s All Write’ contests
Sue Budin	Retired Teen Librarian and Poet
Kurt Browne	Musician and Poet
Patti Miller	PHD studies in English and Teacher of Composition
Alice Holbrook	826michigan Volunteer
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