

# FIRST PRIZE

## Ever After

MY SOCIAL WORKER had to have the wrong address. On the front porch, ringing a bronze gong, was a stout old lady wearing bright-orange overalls and a plaid shirt.

“Ever!” she shouted as she put down the gong. “I’m so glad to see you!” She jumped down the porch steps and thrust her arms around me.

“Um . . . hi?” I said wearily, awkwardly patting her on the back.

Mrs. After turned to face my social worker, her arms still wrapped around me. I tried to wriggle away, but she just squeezed tighter, forcing my face further into her armpit.

“I think we’re all good here, Miss Parker!” she yelled. “I’m sure Ever will fit right in!”

I choked back a laugh at the irony of her words. I had never fit into anyone’s family, including my own.

“HAVE A SEAT, DEARY,” Mrs. After said as she placed a lidded silver platter in front of me.

“Uh, thanks, Mrs. After,” I mumbled.

Mrs. After turned to face my social worker, her arms still wrapped around me. I tried to wriggle away, but she just squeezed tighter, forcing my face further into her armpit.

“Call me by my first name. Petunia.”

I stifled a snort.

“My husband, Flint, will be home soon. But we can start without him.” She clapped her hands. “Shall we?” She showily lifted the lid to reveal an earth-coloured concoction.

“What is this?” I asked, disgusted.

“It’s spinach mixed with the finest tofu and fresh quail eggs.”

I decided too late that I preferred not knowing.

I made no effort to pursue further conversation, but Petunia seemed perfectly fine talking to herself for the next quarter hour.

I heard the garage door squeal, announcing the arrival of Flint After. Bright-purple briefcase in hand, he rang the gong that was sitting in the entrance.

I gestured towards it. “Is that, like, a thing, or . . . ?”

“Yes,” said Petunia, and left it at that.

Flint walked to the table, pausing to do some sort of complicated handshake with his wife.

I pushed my chair back from the table. I couldn’t stay with these nutjobs. I stood up, preparing to gather my bags and climb out the first window I saw.

“I’m, uh, . . . I’m just going to go to the bathroom.”

“Seventh door to the west!” Petunia chirped.

“Uh-huh . . .,” I murmured. I turned to walk out.

“Ever, before you go. . . .” Petunia took my hands and stared startingly deep into my eyes. “Ever, I know you’ve been to a lot of homes, and you’ve probably heard this a bazillion times before, but . . . I really do like you. And I’m glad you’re here.”

I nodded slowly and backed out of the room.

Maybe I could tough it out for one night.

*by Rachel Hesom* (Grade Seven)

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# FIRST PRIZE

## The Immigrant

AS THE SOUND of the first morning bell rings, I hustle a little bit more, and continue through the school doors, where Ravir awaits in the corridor. He greets me with his naïve smile, as he does every morning. I grit my teeth and intentionally let my backpack strike his stubby, pathetic frame, sending him hurling towards the wall. Just then, the doors swing open again, and John and Cristin enter. Ravir bounces back up and greets them in a similar manner, receiving two grunts of acknowledgement in return. I walk down the corridor and turn right, attaining my locker. Out of the corner of my eye, I see David and Ravir conversing, cracking jokes, and prattling on together.

“Dumb David,” I mutter through gritted teeth. “Making friends with the immigrant.” I grab my books when suddenly, Ravir, rushing to get to class, bumps into my shoulder.

“Oh, um, sorry, Jake!” exclaims Ravir, his tiny figure shaking.

“Get out of my face, Ravir!” I bellow, slamming the books out of his hands. Truthfully, I had barely noticed Ravir bumping into me, given his minuscule size, but I needed to show him who is boss around here. This is my school, and no immigrant is going to disrespect me in my territory.

As Ravir makes his way towards the washrooms, a particularly malicious idea comes over me. I know I will be late to class, but it doesn’t matter—anything to teach that foolish kid a lesson. I take a spare string from my pencil case and quickly tie it around the doorknob, rendering it impossible to open from the inside, a technique I had mastered from my own father, who is an army general. I quickly sneak off, hearing Ravir’s cries in the distance. They don’t faze me—that’s what he deserves for getting a free ride in our country.

I enter math class, where Mr. Smith greets us with a sheet of problems on our desks. Sighing, I start to trudge through them when suddenly, the abrupt screeching of the fire alarm assaults my eardrums.

“Everybody out, single file, no talking!” Mr Smith exclaims over the clamour of the students.

I’m not panicked: I have no reason to be. It is definitely a drill, and even then, we are about ten feet away from the emergency exit.

As we make our way out the steel doors, the racket of the students suddenly grows much bigger. I look up, and immediately understand why; the walls of our school are in flames.

As panic and rumours spreads throughout the group, suddenly, my realization hits me like a ton of bricks.

*The whole school has evacuated, but I forgot about innocent Ravir!*

**by Jonathan Safaris** (Grade Eight)

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# SECOND PRIZE

## To the Other Side

“TICKETS, PLEASE.”

The soldier opened his eyes. He was slumped in a seat, head resting against a window. He looked outside. It was blinding white, but he couldn't make out any shapes. Everything was rocking back and forth. He was on a train.

He looked up. The conductor was standing above him.

“Where am I?” the soldier asked.

“Sir, may I please have your ticket?”

The soldier sat upright. His hands were empty. “I don't seem to have one.”

The conductor smiled. “Yes, you do, sir. It's right here.” He reached into the soldier's breast pocket and pulled out a red ticket. He punched a hole in the ticket and handed it back.

“Where am I?” the soldier asked again.

“The war is over, sir,” the conductor replied. “You're going home.”

There were two other people in the car. Three rows away, an old woman was knitting. Further down was a young girl looking out the window.

“I don't remember how I got here,” the soldier said.

“I can tell you that!” the old lady replied. “You got on at the last stop! You must be very tired if you don't remember.”

“But what about the other soldiers?” he asked.

The young girl stood up and walked towards him. “You were alone,” she said. “But you're like us. You're going home.”

Something felt wrong. He turned and looked through the window into the next car. It was empty. No one else was on the train.

He went back to the old woman. “Where is everybody?” he cried.

“It's just you, dear,” she said.

He sat down and tried to remember.

*It was a battlefield. They were going over the top, into machine-gun fire. Then thick, green gas. Some didn't put on their masks quickly enough. Explosions and screaming everywhere. Then darkness.*

He looked up. “I was in a battle, but I don't remember.” He swallowed. “How did you get here?” he said to the young girl.

She smiled. “Just like you. I think I got on a few minutes earlier.”

“You were in the war?” he asked.

“No, silly,” she said. “I got sick.”

He looked confused. “You don't look sick. Are you going to the hospit—?” he asked.

The old woman interrupted. “We're all going to the same place,” she said. “We don't need hospitals there.”

“I don't get it. What's going on here? I can't even remember who I am!”

The conductor stepped forward. “Your name is Benjamin Kerr. You died on the Western Front two days ago. None from your squad survived. They all took the earlier train.”

He smiled. “Don't worry. We'll meet them when we get to the other side.”

**by Gavin McAlpine** (Grade Seven)

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# SECOND PRIZE

## Hatch

DEEP IN ALGONQUIN PARK, through the tallest trees and down a twisted path, there was a nest. This nest may have looked ordinary, but life for one of its inhabitants was about to change forever—or rather, begin.

ALL HE EVER KNEW WAS WARMTH. It had never, until now, occurred to him that he would have to leave this state. Instinct was telling him to break the confinements of his home, and although he was quite content in his egg, he felt his beak slowly moving towards the white wall he had never dared touch before. Suddenly, he dared touch it, because somehow, he knew he was ready. The readiest he had ever been. His beak pierced the shell, and as he opened his beak in surprise, a gust of coolness entered his beak and travelled down into his lungs!

As the gust became too overwhelming to hold in, he realized he could not keep this gust trapped inside him forever, so he slowly exhaled. This felt natural enough, so he continued this pattern of in and out. Next, it was time to see what lay beyond the shell.

He opened his eyes and was blinded by colours and light! As his eyes focused, he could clearly see two heads blocking his view, shielding him from the glare of the sun.

Two words popped into his mind: *Mother and Father*.

“Do you think he sees us? He looks confused,” said Father.

“Of course, he sees us! And he can probably hear us too. Come out, Child, don’t be afraid,” said Mother.

If these birds could talk, he would try to answer them. He tried to let out graceful chirps, but all that came out was a big, embarrassing squawk. In fact, he was so embarrassed that he decided he should retreat into his egg and stay there. As he re-entered his head into the egg, however, he realized he couldn’t breathe! Whatever gust he had let in, he couldn’t live without. . . .

In a panic, he flailed his wings and legs and shook his head violently, completely shattering the egg! His heart rate slowed as he let the cool gust back in and out of his lungs. Instead of lingering by the shelled remains of his old home, he nervously approached his parents who, to his relief, welcomed him with open wings. They stayed together and joyous for that happy minute, and then a *crack* sounded.

The second egg had begun to hatch.

*by Lily Baty* (Grade Eight)  
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# THIRD PRIZE

## Behind Closed Doors

IN ENGLAND, in an ancient manor covered with vines, lived twelve girls. They were born and lived in this manor with nobody visiting or leaving. The girls were trained day and night to walk in parallel lines and be synchronized like robots.

One day, a boy decided to visit the manor. *Why is someone new coming? What is this word “boy”?*

Suddenly, they all heard a bang! The girls and staff jolted in their seats as two bodyguards walked in, with a young boy in the middle.

“This is the manor owner’s son coming to visit. Please welcome Feral!” the staff announced.

The girls were all perplexed and eager to interact with this creature, except for Gloria, who was uninterested in this new gender of “males.”

*What’s the point of this “boy” here?* Gloria thought.

It was spring, and Feral was strolling around the garden when he encountered Gloria walking around mindlessly as the aroma of flowers filled up her nose. Feral tried to spark conversation.

“Why are you even here?” Gloria exclaimed. Feral saw the pain in Gloria’s eyes from the controlling and depressing lifestyle she led.

“Are you okay?” Feral asked, worried. It was the first time anybody had asked how Gloria felt. She’d never felt any feelings in her life; she was numb.

“I’m fine.”

“Something’s wrong. The staff are hiding something. Did they do something to you?” Gloria shrugged and walked back for supper.

Afterwards, Feral kept pondering over his encounter with Gloria and the pain in her eyes.

At midnight, Feral sneaked into Gloria’s room and woke her up. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

“Leave!” Gloria whispered.

“It’ll be quick.” Feral snatched Gloria’s hand aggressively, and they ran out the back door. Gloria couldn’t pull away, despite her protests.

The stars shone bright in the sky with a brilliant moon looking down upon the two. Feral stopped at a hill far from the manor. “Look at how beautiful the world is,” Feral said dreamily. Gloria gasped softly, seeing the town and the beautiful stone houses and fields, flowers, and streams. “We can run away, live a life up the mountains and beyond,” Feral whispered. Gloria’s face distorted into a sweet smile, and she sighed longingly as she imagined running through the thick grassy fields and rolling down hills.

Feral dragged her to the town as they explored. Gloria’s cheeks hurt as she was smiling and laughing while she smelled the daisies. With the cold breeze brushing against her face, she dragged Feral up the mountain as the sun rises.

**by Ava Fan** (Grade Seven)

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# THIRD PRIZE

## Once They Came

AT FIRST, I did not notice how quiet my house had been, how vacant. But it was this same peacefulness that made it all the more noticeable—once the space was no longer void of any presence, with the exception of myself.

I was currently sitting by my window, overlooking the view of the overgrown field to the side of my home, which faded into the distance, above which the sapphire-blue sky took place. I lived in an old, rundown cottage a twenty-minute drive away from the nearest town. It had been almost four years now, just two months and a handful of days until it would become five.

*Three years longer than intended*, I noted thoughtfully. I did not mind my current home to an extent, and it was in no way overpriced, which I was glad about. That was why I had bought it in the first place. Although I stayed for a different reason now, as now *they* were in the picture.

Blue. That was the name they went by, as it was their favourite colour.

I turned my head at the sound of a marble dropping to the floor of the kitchen, listening to the hollow echo as it bounced before continuing on rolling across the ground. Only once it came to a stop did I then start to get up and stalk towards the kitchen.

There was almost no pause before the next occurrence took place, the sliding of a fridge magnet making a subtle scraping noise. I had thought of these letter magnets during the first few months after Blue came, my clever idea proving itself useful to this day.

Each letter slowly moved supposedly on its own, before stopping to spell out “ha-ha” in a disorderly fashion.

“Ha-ha?” I voiced back, racking my brain for what they might mean.

After a few seconds, another marble dropped, this time in the living room.

“Oh! Laughing. Comedy,” I voiced before continuing, “do you want the TV on?”

I walked across the open room before reaching for the TV remote. Once I had a comedy show playing, I went and sat on the couch, deciding I might as well join what I had discovered to be a ghost.

Once in the past, I had only planned to stay here a short while, but I had discovered something here—or *someone*, I should say. While I would never hear the melody of their voice, or see the warmth they held in their eyes, I knew it mattered not, for those things couldn’t describe who they truly were.

And so, I settled into the couch, facing the TV as we watched the show together.

***by Nevaeh Corbett Nelson*** (Grade Eight)

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