

FIRST PRIZE

Birding on Akpatok Island

Patience, time, and a good set of binoculars, that's all that's needed while sea-watching. In my opinion, sea-watching is the most exciting form of birdwatching, as it entails frantically trying to photograph small seabirds as they swiftly fly by. That is exactly what I was doing on a tiny island in northern Québec: Akpatok. This isolated, jagged pinnacle of rock juts out of the sea like a dagger. Nothing surrounds this windswept rock except for the distant shore of Baffin Island.

I was perched on its crown. Despite my constant shivering, I was monumentally excited. I had a panoramic view of the open ocean. The rasping wind sent shivers down my spine. Kneeling inside my tent, I combed through the flocks of thousands of assorted seabirds, searching for a rarity.

In mid-morning, I spotted a mixed flock of ducks near the shoreline of the island. I craned my neck, so I'd be able to view the entire group. I immediately reached for my camera. I slowly rotated my camera on its tripod. I uttered the four-letter species codes under my breath, although I couldn't hear anything except for the wind battering the side of my tent. "C-O-E-I, C-O-E-I. Wait, what?" I spied a small piebald duck floating within a cluster of eiders. Suddenly, all of the waterfowl dove in unison, excluding the minuscule duck. I thought to myself, *Is that a Steller's eider? That would be pretty rare here in summer!* Then it turned towards me.

My mouth dropped wide open. I couldn't believe my eyes. I continued to look through the camera's eyepiece, watching the minute duck feed on the plentiful mussel beds below the surface. After I was able to obtain clear photos, I immediately zipped up my tent. All of the correct field marks were present on the small duck: a yellow bill, a sleek white face, and a piebald body. I had just taken the first ever pictures of a live Labrador duck. The Labrador duck was once common in New England; yet early settlers overestimated their population and slaughtered thousands of them. Thought to be extinct, the last one seen alive had been in the 1890s.

Despite the thrill of my discovery, I decided not to tell a soul. I knew from previous experience that if I released my findings, birders from all over the continent would travel here to catch a sight of it. I didn't want to be the person responsible for causing the Hudson Strait to lose its element of isolation and pure, natural beauty. In the last thousand years, the only humans to have ventured here are the Inuit, European explorers, and me—it is best that it remains that way.

by Cole Gaerber (Grade Nine)
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FIRST PRIZE

Help!

“Help! Daddy, help!” she yelled, jumping up and down.

“Addie! What’s wrong?” he shouted back, his steps coming closer to her room.

“The back of my dress is open; can you zip it up please, Daddy?” she politely asked as soon as he opened the door.

Her dad’s worried face switched to a sour one in an instant. He looked at her tea party set and looked back at her. She innocently smiled at him, waiting for him to do what she told him. “Addie. . .,” he said slowly, clenching his teeth, “*this is the last time you are calling me.*” he grumbled. He rushed to her and zipped her sparkly, poofy, pink dress.

“I’m sorry, Daddy, I won’t call you again,” she replied, mischievously smiling.

He sighed and before exiting said, “That is what you said last time. I am *not* coming up again if you need anything. Understood? You are getting on my nerves, Addie.”

“I love you, Daddy” she answered, blowing a kiss at him.

He growled and closed the door.

She giggled a bit before running to her big dresser and spotted her crown on top of it. “I want my crown!” she told herself, before running to her tea party set and grabbing a chair. She placed the chair in front of the dresser and climbed it. She extended her hands, desperately trying to reach the crown. “*Daddddy!*” she yelled, still trying to reach her crown.

“What did I say, Addie? Not now!”

“But, Daddy!”

“You heard me, Addie!”

She pouted and got off the chair before kicking it, mad. She crossed her arms and screamed: “*Urrgh!*”

At that moment, a brilliant plan crossed her mind. She looked at the dresser and slowly began to climb it. Once she reached the top, she grabbed the crown, her eyes filled with excitement. She reached it all by herself!

“Wow! Good job, Princess Addie!” she said, voicing for Miss Cherry Berry, her stuffed animal.

“Thank you, Miss Cherry Berry!”

Suddenly, her heart skipped a beat. She looked down from the dresser and felt nauseated. She was on top and couldn’t move, too scared to fall. “Daddy. . .,” she said slowly. “Daddy!” she shouted louder.

No answer.

She began to cry and screamed for her dad, but he would not reply. And so she thought, *Maybe if I shake the dresser, it will fall and I’ll jump before it lands on the floor.* And so she began shaking the dresser.

The object slowly moved. Suddenly, it leaned forward, falling. But she was paralyzed and didn’t jump as she had planned to do. “Daddy, help! Help, Da—” she screamed, her crown still in hand, before being submerged into darkness.

by Madjiguène Thiam (Grade Ten)
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FIRST PRIZE

Healed, Not Cured

I urgently run under the red lights illuminating “Emergency.” The ambulance sirens are cut off with the swing of the door.

Amid the chaos and uniforms scrambles the triage nurse. Blowing dishevelled wisps of hair out of her eyes, she emits a voice worn down from fatigue, “Nurse, they need you in OR-3.”

“I’m heading there now,” I state as I weave my way through the congested hallway, thick with the tangible complaints of patients.

The sharp scent of antiseptic penetrates my nose as I secure my mask. The cold water flows from the faucet as I scrub off the memories of yesterday. Looking into the bleached white room, I shudder at the reminiscence of the unfathomable crimson floor. I rinse off the soap along with the memories of death, watching it spiral down the drain.

The doctors had tried everything, but a woman left the hospital as a widow.

And this is the room where it happened.

My stomach churns with the thought of the body being carved by scalpel in the morgue below. Shaking off the feeling, I step into the operating room with the blinding lights and deafening screams. The dark red stains are gone, the room a sterilized white.

“Push!”

A woman’s shrill screaming swallows the doctor’s commands.

The ungodly taste of copper settles in my mouth. I steady myself on the instrument table, trying not to gag. Eagerness unravels into fear as the red line on the monitor begins to plunge, an alarm that can’t be stopped. The shrieks cease, the woman’s mouth frozen open in a silent circle.

“Nurse, the scalpel.” Panic slips through the doctor’s usually calm façade.

The silence is petrifying, more than the initial screeches. Trembling, my brain is overwhelmed with images of a tiny coffin, yet propelled by routine and training. I hand him the blade.

Confusion and terror cuts through the room as the knife slices through the soft skin. The doctor’s concentration keeps me from unhooking from the table and fainting.

Finally, machines magnify a faint heartbeat. Little lungs fill with oxygen for the first time and relief emerges on everyone’s faces.

The doctor hands him to me.

I wrap the warm, pink flesh in a blanket. Cooing, the unblemished infant opens and closes his petite hands. Tears of joy erupt as I walk towards the new parents. I relish in watching the unknowing eyes opening for the first time to a world full of wonder and potential.

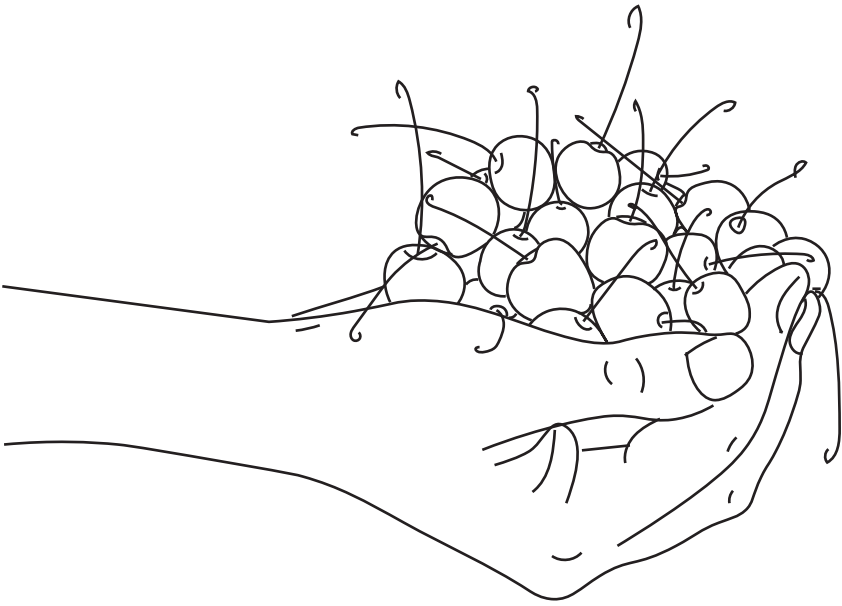
Out the corner of my eye, I can see the doctor discreetly wiping his wet eyes.

They leave the hospital as a complete family. Where there was once death, there is life.

And this is the room where it happened.

by Miranda Tsuyuki (Grade Eleven)
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FIRST PRIZE

Bone Cherries

The stars are terribly large, as are the many moons hanging overhead, and yet the darkness is so complete the wandering child cannot rightly find her way. The ground beneath her feet is soft and sucking, unsettlingly flesh-warm as it pulls at the soles of her feet, her shoes lost long ago. Something sharp scratches against her bare foot, and she recoils. Her eyes strain in the dark to make out a jagged, reaching shape, and her heart stutters in her throat as she thinks of the unspeakable things reaching to the sky, squirming and coiling in the distance.

Then the shape does not move, and at closer look is ornamented with tiny, bone-white leaves. Nestled among them are round balls, red as flesh, and her empty stomach tightens and roils in time with the watering of her mouth. Far too hungry to be cautious, she gathers handfuls of what are hopefully berries and pools them in her shirt. Edging away from the sharp, spiny thorns, she sits and begins to eat.

They *are* berries, sickeningly warm but sweet all the same, with pits as cold as ice. She cannot help but glut herself on them for a moment before remembering her purpose.

She folds her hands, rubbed red and raw with juice and cold, and waits. Breath mist trickles from her mouth, falling instead of rising. Something moves in the shadows, and her fingers tighten, the wet squish of burst fruit echoing in her ears.

“Would you like something to eat?” she offers, and the beast laughs. He does not emerge; there’s nothing but a pair of too-bright eyes burning from the dark. She offers a handful of berries.

Chuffing softly, he stalks forward. His fur is grizzled iron and silver to black, and he is far taller than any man she has ever seen. “Why are you here?” he asks.

“I cannot find my way,” she admits.

“Go back, then.”

“I cannot do that either.”

“Pretty little fool.”

“I must go further.”

“Further, there is only dark and awful horrors.”

“But I *must!*” she urges. “I’m needed. The stars spoke to me, and I must go.”

The beast does not laugh as expected, staring at the fruit instead. She offers her hand, but he growls. “Never offer a beast your skin, child. Learn that first, learn it well.”

The berries drop.

He crouches to eat, teeth flashing. “You are small and soft. You will not survive. I will not protect you.”

“Fine,” she says impatiently. “But will you guide me? The stars said you are the oldest and wisest of all.”

“Flattery and bone cherries. Is that my price?”

“Please.”

He sighs and rises to leave. “Follow then.”

by Leah Duarte (Grade Twelve)
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SECOND PRIZE

The Plight of Wings Aglow

She watches them dance outside the window, glowing white-winged fairies so small that it feels as if they could disappear in your palm, leaving only a little tingle from their tiny, silk-clad feet. They swirl in an ethereal dance, each one of them seemingly arbitrary in the vast, dark sky, but so formidable when they come together outside the window.

“Do you see him?” calls the girl’s mother once more as she has every five minutes for the past half hour.

She peers through the swirling fairies. “No.”

The white glow around them looks cold, although it might just be the feeling of the glass beneath her fingers or the subsequent conclusion of her breath condensing upon the windowpane in front of her mouth.

What a sight she must be to the glowing fairies outside. A pink-faced creature, pressing her round nose and chubby fingers soundly against the glass that separates them from her and the warm, golden glow and glorious scents of the room behind her.

The fairies come every year around this time, though, so the little girl’s pink face and equally pink fingers are likely no longer a surprise. The little girl’s face must be quite familiar to them now, enough for recognition. After all, it is the third time they’ve come face to face.

Although, if they do recognize her, they certainly don’t show it, which, if you asked her, is most rude of them. If there were any contempt on their small, pale faces, one wouldn’t be able to tell either way. Innocent until proven guilty. *Humph*. The little girl shakes her fists angrily at the indifferent fairies.

Then, he appears. The fairies fall upon him in a whirl of white. “Mommy!” the little girl yells, delighted. “He’s home!”

Her brother is home for Christmas. Precariously balancing a tall stack of beautifully wrapped boxes in his arms, walking through the snow that falls upon him in a swirl of white.

He opens the door and brushes off the dead fairies that fall from his shoulders. She watches in anger as they lose their white glow and disappear.

Those who can’t see the plight of the fairies will just end up killing them. That’s why it’s our job to educate the ignorant.

The little girl tugs angrily on her brother’s sleeve. “Can’t you see the fairies?”

by Jessica Zhu (Grade Nine)

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SECOND PRIZE

311Claudia

Who is he? Why is he there? It's such a freezing day, why would a little boy be sitting outside alone? He seems so weird, even the snow bypasses him.

People walk by fast and get attracted to this weird boy; one after another shoots a curious glance at him. A middle-aged lady walks towards the weird boy. The boy slowly raises his head and stares at her with his grey eyes. She has never seen such beautiful eyes like his; they're as the deepest sea, so deep that you can never see through. They don't seem to belong to any human, but now their owner is this boy.

"What's your name, dear?" she asks.

"311Claudia."

That's weird, a girl's name! she thinks to herself. "Where do you live?" she continues with patience.

"Main-belt asteroid, between Jupiter and Mars. Would you please send me home?" The boy's eyes are filled with expectations.

This kind lady smiles. She used to be like him and had a lot of unrealistic ideas; she guesses this kid is lost and she knows how to help him. "I'll help you, my dear." She takes the boy's icy hands. "You can call me Ms. Charlois; my husband is an astronomer."

"Really? Then he must know where I live!" A big smile appears on the boy's pale face.

Ms. Charlois nods and begins to walk faster, as if thinking of something.

It's white everywhere, you can't see the end of the street. It seems that if you continue walking, you might walk until infinity. They walk in silence until Ms. Charlois breaks it: "Here we are." They stop at a building.

They go in the warm room. Ms. Charlois sets the boy on a bench in the corner and tells him to wait. Then she goes into a room with a man in uniform. After a while, they come out. Ms. Charlois explains how the police will help him. The boy nods in silence. She then pushes the door open, and waves to the boy for the last time. The boy keeps his expressionless face. Ms. Charlois walks out, leaving the boy behind.

As Ms. Charlois gets home, her husband is waiting for her to share with her his latest discovery: "I found a new main-belt asteroid, and we've named it 311Claudia."

311Claudia!

Ms. Charlois immediately runs to the police station, but no one remembers the boy. *How could they forget?* The boy's grey eyes stick in her mind. She pushes the door open and walks into the cold air, walks until infinity. . . .

by Renli Zhang (Grade Ten)
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SECOND PRIZE

Into the Night

It was late at night when I received a call. He asked me if I could go take a walk with him.

I saw him standing under the street light, looking out into the dark meadow lined with a few lonely trees. I approached him quietly and we stood in silence. For a good ten minutes, we didn't say anything, but we acknowledged each other's existence all the same.

He turned around. I looked up at him and I searched his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but his words were just a whirlwind of incoherent thoughts that caused my head to spin at a million miles per hour. All I saw were the stars above my head going in a never-ending circle, cycling between the words "I'm leaving" and "I'm sorry." I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. . . .

Then, everything stopped spinning. The world went still and time froze. His arms wrapped around me as he pulled me closer towards his chest. He warmed me from autumn's chilly air and he comforted me despite my shattered heart. Still, tears trickled down my cheek as he held me tightly against his beating heart. I was going to lose my best friend and my only brother.

We'd always been together; we went to school, we walked home, we went shopping, we read books, we did homework, we played games, we shared secrets—we did everything together. I felt as if I were losing a piece of myself, as if I were being torn in half in broad daylight.

And then, he let go of me; I felt so vulnerable and helpless. I wanted to grab onto his sleeve and pull him back into my world—into my reality; but he was gone before I knew it. His presence dissipated into the night and I was left alone under the blinding street light.

My eyes slowly fluttered open. *It was just a dream*, I thought.

I walked onto the patio only to see a note sitting on the railing: "Dearest Lia, I am very sorry to inform you that your brother has recently passed away due to an unfortunate car accident that occurred at the street light just outside the meadow. Deepest sympathy, Dr. Carl."

My heart sank into my chest as I tried to understand the scribbled words of pity; a sea of tears flooded my cheeks, my heart ached in pain, and I could barely breathe yet again.

I ran to the meadow and I saw him standing at the street light waving his last goodbye. I raced towards him, trying to catch him with my cold, frail hands—but he disappeared, and this time, he'd never return.

by Decassia Poon (Grade Eleven)

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Vancouver, British Columbia



SECOND PRIZE

A Maid of Honour?

Nora sighed as she stripped the bed of its sheets. *Eight rooms down*, she thought to herself, tiredly envisioning the remaining dozen that still required her tending to. Though there were many maids employed by the hotel chain she worked for, the sheer enormity of the building still left each of them with a large daily workload.

A rap on the door caught Nora's attention. Evelyn, a fellow maid assigned to the floor above hers, stepped into the room, worry creasing her brows. "I need a favour," she stated simply.

Nora nodded, waiting.

"Grayson got in a fight at school again, and the principal just called. I have to pick him up immediately." Evelyn's eyes dropped to the floor. A single mom, she never felt as if she were able to do enough for her troubled son due to the constantly increasing cost of living and the struggle of working to make ends meet. "I only have about five rooms left to do on my floor. Would you mind covering for me today?"

Nora pursed her lips. "Don't worry about it. I'll finish up for you. Go ahead and take care of Grayson."

With a look of relief, Evelyn thanked Nora before turning and hastily making her way down the hall, towards the elevator.

Nora sighed again, her increased work weighing heavily on her mind. She worked quickly to finish her room.

As she was vacuuming, she heard another knock over the din. Her manager walked in, clipboard in hand, as Nora turned off the machine. "I won't keep you from your work, but I've just been informed that we have received several complaints regarding the lack of cleanliness of rooms on this floor. I trust you will take this into consideration as you continue, and as a result, your pay will be affected for the week." Her manager paused and looked over the rims of her glasses. "Don't let this happen again."

Stunned, Nora wondered how she would get by that week.

The next day, Nora hurriedly punched in her time card and tied her apron on, preparing for another day of work. Passing her manager's office, however, she noticed Evelyn sitting downcast inside, as she received what seemed to be a thorough admonishment from her superior. A flash of pain gripped at Nora's chest, and she quickly grasped the wall beside her as she realized what she was witnessing.

I forgot to clean her rooms.

Nora quickly readied for her cleaning duties and strode towards the elevator, hoping to avoid Evelyn. Before the elevator doors could close, she caught one glimpse of a tear-stained face, confirming what Nora already knew. She had cost Evelyn her job.

by Libby Giesbrecht (Grade Twelve)
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THIRD PRIZE

Delusion

She stands still, waiting politely in front of my doorstep.

“What do you want?” I ask gruffly.

“Hi,” she says, not fazed by my rudeness, “I’m going to the park. Would you like to come?”

I look at her, watching her eyebrows move ever so slightly, and I shake my head. “No, thanks.”

She keeps her smile and bobs her head. “Okay, next time then. Hope Jonah gets better soon.”

She starts to walk down our driveway, and I’m filled with a sense of relief.

“Hey, Mina!” a voice behind me says. “Come try one of my cookies before you leave.”

I sigh and glare at my mother. She loves Mina and thinks we’re still best friends.

Mina comes back on our doorstep. “Mrs. Haynes, I would love one. You make the best cookies in town.”

Ugh. Why is she so polite? I reluctantly move away from the doorway so Mina can enter. She brushes past me, into the house.

I follow my mother into the kitchen. Might as well get a cookie too.

“Mina, I’ve heard a lot about your prize-winning project,” my mom says, handing her a cookie.

“Well, it was pretty fun!” Mina replies. “By the way, how is he doing?”

They continue talking, but their voices fade away as I think about the day it happened. Mina, my younger brother, whose name is Jonah, and I were walking towards the corner store when a car swerved onto the sidewalk. It was like watching a slow-motion film. Mina jumped out of the way, leaving Jonah exposed. The only thing I remember after was the crunch of bones and squeal of tires.

Jonah is still in the hospital, but thankfully not dead. But if Mina had pulled Jonah away, he wouldn’t have been hurt. He would have been able to walk again.

I start feeling really irritated. *Why did Mina only save herself? My mother says it wasn’t her fault. Hah.*

I hear Mina mentioning Jonah, which suddenly brings my attention.

“—really sorry about Jonah. I wish I could have done something, but it happened so fast.” Mina snuffles.

Is she going to cry?

“Maybe I could have pulled him out of the way. Maybe I—”

My mother interrupts her, “Hon, there was nothing you could have done. It wasn’t your fault.”

Then it starts. Mina blubbers and soon her face is streaked with tears.

I look at her and feel a twinge of pity. *Maybe she actually feels bad about Jonah. Maybe it wasn’t actually her fault.*

I see Mina look up with surprise when she hears a voice.

“Don’t blame yourself.”

I’m even more surprised than her when I realize it’s mine.

by Tiffany Matthe (Grade Nine)

École Gabrielle-Roy

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THIRD PRIZE

Fifteen Steps

Step to the left. Clap.

The music is too loud. I lean against the railing of the staircase. My body aches to join in the revelry downstairs, aches to join the throngs of girls and boys dancing across the impromptu dance floor. But I don't go down. I lace my fingers through the cool slats and hold on until my fingers ache. I used to be one of them. I used to be just another girl, revelling in the feel of sore muscles and soaked t-shirts. This is the life I've chosen to leave behind.

I know that I should go back to the library. I know that on the table in the far right corner, beside the non-fiction section, there will be a precarious stack of textbooks and overflowing binders. That is where I should be, slaving away, making connections between flat facts and a technicolour reality that is anything but real. But today, I find I don't care if I'll return to find everything gone. That loss would be nothing compared to the aching in my chest. *This is ridiculous*, I remind myself. *It is foolish to wish for a time machine. I am trapped on my mother's path. There is no dancing, no jumping, no smiling on this path. I shouldn't have ignored the sign at the head of the trail.*

My gaze is inexorably locked onto the fifteen steps below me. They beckon me, promise me relief from the nothingness that has taken over my life. I think of the five measly steps behind me that will take me away from a brightly lit world and towards one of black and white. I have to fight the absurd urge to jump, to vault over the silly railing between me and happiness and leave hell behind. I clench my fists and think of eulogies and freshly covered graves. I owe this to my mom, who once loved and has now moved on. The music winds to a close.

I pick hell and turn resolutely, only to see the graffiti letters that decorate the step in front of me.

"Live *your* life!" it proclaims in loopy script. The realization that this is my life hits me like a ton of bricks. For so long, I have tried to be selfless. For so long, I have hoped that self-sacrifice might stop time from turning and cancer from crushing. For so long, I have lost myself.

I freeze. For a second, time seems to stop.

And then I am in motion, bounding down those fifteen steps, down to take my place among the crowd. The music starts again and this time. . . .

I let myself dance.

Step to the right. Clap.

by Linda Xia (Grade Ten)
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Surrey, British Columbia



THIRD PRIZE

The Itch

Henry walked into the bedroom to see Ken scratching at his leg furiously, the latter paying no attention to his husband. Ken's attention remained on his leg, which was bright red, a result of his incessant scratching.

"What are you doing?"

"The itch, it's not leaving! It has been here since last night," Ken replied exasperated, staring at his leg.

"Did you try applying moisturizer?"

"I did, but it didn't work. I swear, Henry, this itch is unbearable."

"Try taking a shower," Henry supplied, trying to help.

"I already did. I even soaked my entire leg in water. This itch isn't leaving no matter what I do!" Ken cried out in frustration, digging his fingers harder into his skin, causing his leg to start bleeding.

"Stop that!" Henry said, walking over to Ken and smacking his hand off of his leg.

"I'm trying!" Ken yelled, grabbing the sheets and glaring at the ceilings.

"I'll go get Tom and see if he can help. Till then, I'll put on some music so you can distract yourself," Henry said, walking over to the music player.

"Before you go, can you pass me that glass of water?" Ken's pained voice came from the bed.

"Sure," Henry said, passing Ken the water before racing out the door to fetch his neighbour.

Tom was quick to answer the door, and even quicker to run back with Henry. Unfortunately, by the time they reached Ken, it was too late.

Henry came into the room and promptly fell to his knees while Tom covered his mouth, trying to prevent himself from vomiting.

Ken was sitting on the bloody bed, staring at his leg. Rather than scratching all the way to his flesh, he had discovered that the cause of the itch on his leg was a fresh pair of green scales growing right beneath his skin. Using a shard of the broken glass of water, he had dug all the way to his new skin. Alas for Ken, the itch had now spread.

"Can you help me to the bathroom? The itch is everywhere now," Ken writhed as he looked pleadingly at the horrified faces of Henry and Tom.

The pair slowly walked over to Ken, picked him up and took him to the washroom. Ken looked at Henry with the saddest look he had ever seen. "Don't look at me, Henry. Plug your ears."

Ken took the glass and pierced it through his skin. Each time he opened his mouth to scream, Tom would clamp a hand over it, regardless of how disgusted he felt.

After the literal bloodbath ended, a panting Ken smiled softly at the traumatized pair. "The itch is gone."

by Tusharika Tyagi (Grade Eleven)
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THIRD PRIZE

The Age of Wisdom

The pure morning light shone through the window, falling on Daniel's sleeping face. Shifting his body to stand up, he found himself incapable of moving his arms and legs. After a short moment of panic, he remembered the wisdom teeth, the surgery, and the anesthesia.

Daniel scanned the surroundings, absorbing the atmosphere. There was a wooden bureau on the left of his cot, and the bedroom's patterned wallpaper showed signs of peeling. Hanging directly across from his bed was a large wooden cross. Daniel wasn't in a hospital room.

Pulling at his limbs, he realized his wrists and ankles were all clasped tight in some kind of plastic bands. An IV was plugged into his arm, connecting him to a hanging bag of clear, white liquid. He was completely unable to move.

"Help! Someone, help me!"

A noise came from somewhere in the house, and then the door creaked open. A lanky woman scuttled in, her greying hair in a tight bun. "You're awake!" said the woman. "How are you feeling, Daniel?"

"Aunt Muriel? What's going on? Why am I tied up?"

Muriel crept to the right side of his bed, her face forced into a smile. "Now, now. Don't overexert yourself, Daniel."

Muriel looked nothing like he remembered—her prune-like face had aged in the few days since he had last seen her. Daniel took a deep breath and resumed his questioning. "Aunt Muriel, where's Dad and Mom?"

She hesitated, and began to bustle around the bureau, moving bottles and tubes around. "They . . . they died," she mumbled.

"What do you mean, they died?" Daniel's mind was still muddled from the anesthesia, and he was having trouble registering what his aunt was saying.

"Daniel, you've been asleep for four years. You reacted to the medication, and they couldn't wake you up. The doctor said to just keep you on life support."

The room fell silent as Daniel processed the news. "My parents are gone? How did they die?"

There was no reply.

Daniel squirmed in his bed, trying to release himself. "Untie me!"

She stiffened. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"What's wrong with you? You're insane!"

In an instant, his aunt whirled around and crouched beside his face; he could feel her moist breath on his ear. "That wasn't very nice, Daniel. I've been so good to you." She retrieved a large syringe from the bureau and jabbed it into the plastic IV. "Maybe you're not ready to wake up after all."

A heavy wave of sleep filled Daniel's mind, and his eyelids drooped into slumber.

by Ian Kemp (Grade Twelve)
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