

FIRST PRIZE

The Enchanted Willow Tree

As Julia skipped through the mossy forest, she heard birds chirping and a squirrel chatting. Life was good. Then she heard a sound. It sounded like someone or something was singing. It was the most melodic sound Julia had ever heard. Spellbound, she started following the enchanting sound until she reached a mossy cobblestone path. Still mesmerized by the strange, yet beautiful music, she finally reached a baronial willow tree, standing all by itself, with the sun spotlighting the grand tree. But Julia didn't understand how the magical music was coming from the willow tree.

"How is this possible?" Julia asked herself. Julia did not get the chance to answer the question for her mind had suddenly gone blank. All of her thoughts seemed to drift away, like nothing mattered. Bedazzled she walked to the base of the tree and lay down. She felt like her spirit was being sucked into the ground, and rooting itself into the rich soil. She could stay there forever.

Suddenly, it wasn't so peaceful, for she now felt trapped. Her body lay limp, unlike her mind, which swirled with confusion. There was no fair music anymore, there was only silence. She understood now it had all been a trap.

She was tumbling into darkness, the light getting smaller and smaller, and the darkness enclosing her. She couldn't scream, she couldn't move. She couldn't even croak.

As she thought how sad it would be to never see her family again, she felt as if she were being lifted from the darkness into the light. She could think again! Then she was dragged back into the darkness. It was a battle between light and darkness with her in the middle, being ripped apart. Exhausted from the struggle, Julia finally passed out.

When she awoke she was underneath the willow tree, unharmed and alive. She heard the birds chirping once more, but no music. Had it all been a dream? She didn't want to stick around and find out. She jumped to her feet and frantically ran towards the cobblestone path. As she got close to the path a gnarly root reached out of the ground to grab her ankle. Behind her she could hear the music starting again. Terrified, she leaped over the root and ran, stumbling and tripping over the moss-filled cracks in the cobblestone path. As the music was getting fainter and fainter, Julia looked back over her shoulder to see the willow tree disappearing into the ground, never to be seen again.

by Iris King (Grade Six)
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FIRST PRIZE

Home

I am there early morning to late at night, grabbing arrows from my quiver, nocking them on my bowstring, and shooting at the target. I shoot more from instinct and experience than anything else. Every evening when I stop my fingers are raw from grasping the bowstring, and my shoulder muscles ache. Archery is my getaway. The shooting range is my home. I ran away last month, and I've been living in the forest.

My hands sting and my forearm is bruised, even though I wear a leather bracer. But I use the pain to try and keep my thoughts from drifting back to *him*.

I remember his gentle fingers on mine as he would correct my hold on the bow. "Now shoot, Pipes," he would say, stepping away. "Make me proud." I would sight the target, then release the arrow. In the beginning it would go flying way off course. But eventually, I was hitting the bull's-eye almost every single time.

All that has been ripped away. When I was nine Dad went to Afghanistan to fight with the Canadian Armed Forces. I didn't see him for three years. Finally, I saw him last month. In his coffin. Lying still, with pale hands crossed on his medal-covered chest.

Fresh tears run down my face. Trying to forget him just isn't working. Furiously, I dash the wetness off my face and place another arrow on my string. I shoot effortlessly, and the arrow thuds into the middle of the target, its shaft quivering with the force of the impact. Finally, my quiver is emptied and I slump to the ground.

Piper, go home, says the clear, rich voice of my father. I haven't heard that voice for almost four years now. *My time is up. But your mother needs you. Stay strong. I love you.* More tears course down my cheeks. "But I can't live without you! Besides, Mom probably hates me for running away," I say aloud, brushing the tears away. The voice doesn't speak again.

After a long moment, I stand up, sling my bow and quiver onto my back, and trudge towards home.

Mom is standing on the porch looking off into the distance when I come into view of the house. It is almost as if she knows I am coming back; she is waiting for me. She wraps her arms around me, my head on her chest. "Oh, Piper, my love," she repeats over and over again. "Oh, Piper."

Silently, I hug her back. It's good to be home.

by Kaylan Mah (Grade Seven)
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FIRST PRIZE

The Babysitter

She was absolutely beautiful. Her big blue eyes sparkled in the sunlight while her long blonde hair swayed when she walked. Everything about her was perfect. She was the love of my life, and I wanted her to be mine forever. She was coming to babysit me at my house tonight when my parents were going out for dinner.

Tonight I was going to confess my love for her so we could take our relationship to the next level. I had it all planned out. My parents would leave and I would quickly go and get the romantic dinner I had prepared: Kraft Dinner with apple juice. After we ate, I would bring out the dessert I specially made. I had collected all of my last year's Halloween candy and melted it into one big delicious chocolate surprise. Next, I would start the romantic music playlist I made from my sister's old Disney *Princess* soundtrack.

I would stare deeply into her gorgeous eyes, kneel down on one knee, and ask her holding my cherry ring pop, "My love, will you be my girlfriend?" I knew my plan was going to work; I couldn't wait to see her reaction.

Ding Dong! the doorbell sang. My heart was beating as fast as a racehorse. She was finally here. My palms started getting clammy and I could feel my cheeks getting hotter. I sprinted downstairs to get the door before my parents could. I took a deep breath and reached for the door handle, nearly too tall for me. Seeing her face again made me melt. She was perfect. She was wearing pink sweats and an old grey sweatshirt. I quickly ushered my parents out the door so I could continue the big plans I had.

I peered around the staircase into the living room where she was sitting on the couch watching TV while painting her nails. I wrapped my fingers tightly around the now somewhat sticky ring and started to walk forward. But before I could reach her, I was stopped abruptly by the sound of a deafening knock at the door. She leapt off the couch and skipped to the door right past me. She opened it and greeted a mysterious man with a long, romantic kiss. I despised him. I envied him. I wanted to be him. I wanted to cry, but all I could do was watch in dismay. I ran to my room and grabbed my faithful purple bunny and hugged it tight. Tears welled up in my eyes and I felt them start to trickle down my cheeks.

I was never going to come out again. I was never going to love again.

by Samantha Lucas (Grade Eight)
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SECOND PRIZE

Cracked Luck

It was in late August of 1979 when we left Vietnam. I left with my two older brothers and ten other men. It was a dark breezy night. I was devastated when I found out I would leave my mom and all my sisters I loved to death. My oldest brother, Hanh, said, "Ever since the bad guys won the war, they have been changing the law. We have to leave Vietnam."

The clock struck twelve and tears started rolling down my face. I gave my mom one last hug and waved to all my sisters goodbye. I had a feeling I would never see my mom again.

The next thing I knew I was crammed in my dad's tiny fishing boat and we were headed for the Philippines; however, there was a typhoon that night that kept our boat inland.

Four hours later the sun started rising. We looked back and saw Vietnam. We were startled and thought they would see us trying to escape so we fled in any direction. If we were caught we could have been shot.

About two hours later we realized we were lost, and out of fuel. Now we were stranded. I cried so much because I knew I would never see my mom ever again, but my two older brothers stayed by my side. They told me everything would be okay and someone would find us.

Two weeks later nobody came and we all started to lose our hope, food, and weight. But then we saw a giant fishing vessel about fifteen metres away and we waved and signalled for help. They were headed in our direction and we were all so happy someone would help us. They threw us a rope ladder and we climbed in the fishing vessel with joy and excitement. Right when my two older brothers and I got into the vessel they took out their guns and started firing at our boat. Our boat sunk like a rock, but worse, they killed the rest of the men on the boat.

Later they took us into a room and they checked us for gold or cash. They shouted and beat all of us, demanding gold. My oldest brother, Hanh, started coughing up blood. He raised his head with his eyes full of anger and rage and spit blood into their faces. We got punished because of my brother and they threw us into a shipping container.

About two days later we started to feel the container moving, and then it started tipping; it started tipping more and more and suddenly we felt a drop. . . . *Splash!*

by Duy Tran (Grade Six)
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SECOND PRIZE

Untouchable

Habibu is lying on the filthy, dusty ground of a small town in Uganda, Africa. The poor African girl is listening to the soldiers blast their bullets at innocent people, while gripping a crocheted hat over her ears that was made by Ma before she died. She hears nearby voices of the people in her tribe yelling, “Save yourself!” The soldiers are stampeding on them. Habibu quickly heads for a hiding place.

Under a pile of hay in an abandoned shack she hides quietly. She hears soldiers walking closer to the shack and tries not to breathe. The soldiers march away. She’s lucky . . . this time. Then it becomes absolutely silent. For once Habibu can’t hear gunshots, people crying, or blood splattering everywhere. All she hears is complete silence.

After what seems like hours of complete stillness, she finds herself remembering Ma. She remembers the horrific day when she was killed, the details of which will stay with her forever, permanently ingrained in her mind. That day, the soldiers stampeded into the streets, and chased the villagers until they tasted blood. They found Habibu and Ma in the abandoned shack, under the mound of hay. She remembers how the soldiers swiftly lifted the heap covering them, and shot Ma repeatedly until her body was still. Ma’s lifeless body was covered in blood. That day, Habibu somehow escaped untouched, without even a scratch.

Then Habibu forces herself to remember happier memories of Ma—laughable, pleasant, and loving memories, playing *kudoda* and *ga-da*, cooking and baking *bobotie* and Moroccan chicken together, feeling her affectionate hugs and kisses. She remembers Uganda when it was safe and beautiful before it drastically changed to a world of cruelty.

Habibu then suddenly wakes from her memories and somehow feels . . . different. She looks at Ma’s bloodstains on the pieces of hay and clasps her crocheted hat against her heart. Wanting to weep to let her tears wash away her pain, she is too scared. She cautiously escapes from the shack that holds so many memories and shakes the hay bits from her hair. Nervously searching for her tribe, Habibu feels anxious walking through her village alone for fear the soldiers will suddenly reappear and kill her. She’s glad there are no murdering, blood-thirsty soldiers in sight. As she looks around, all she finds is destruction.

Habibu can still hear the whispers of Ma’s soul. She hears Ma’s voice say, “You’re untouchable. Habibu, you’re untouchable.” She is completely alone—no family, no friends, no tribe, no Ma . . . but what she does have is her spirit of invincibility. With this strength in her heart she knows there is nothing she cannot withstand. She can conquer anything.

by **Annalise Grammacione** (Grade Seven)
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SECOND PRIZE

Together

I sit in the worn-out tent, waiting for my brother to return from the canteen with breakfast. I am ever so thankful to have him, the only person I care about left in the world. Awakening every day before dawn to bring me our rations, offering me his share of bread, even as I watch his eyes widen, yearning for more. He is only seven, half my age, but I have never met anyone so kindhearted.

We walked on the far end of the battlefield together, away from where most of the fighting occurred. Matt and I stood with our father, watching the sun set. The sky was a magnificent amber colour, the sun a radiant ball of fire sinking into the ground . . . it was the perfect reunion.

I hobble out of the tent, wincing as my broken leg hits the cold, gravelly ice. Most are still in their shelters, dreading the possibility of a biting cold, but I enjoy the cool breeze. I see Matt in the distance, coming back, looking emaciated and exhausted.

Suddenly, I heard a noise like booming thunder. Ceaseless gunshots rang out and bombs rained down from the sky. Grabbing Matt's hand, I ran, tears streaming down my face, my eyes burning from the smoke, my throat scorching from the ash. I tripped over a rock and fell to the dusty ground. I felt a hand tugging on my arm, a tinny voice begging me to get up, but all I felt was searing pain in my calf.

Matt comes close enough to see me, and a smile spreads on his face, so rare since we were left alone. He runs towards me, setting the food aside, and embraces me. I can feel his pointy ribs pressing into me and I can hear his laboured breathing.

The tugging was relentless, but I was unable to stand. After what seemed like hours, the shower of explosives ended. I looked around, straining to see through the darkness, until I spotted a limp form on the ground. My heart froze. I dragged myself to the body. My father's eyes, just moments ago filled with love, were blank. "No," I whispered brokenly. I let out a ragged wail, my throat raw. Matt was soon beside me. I pulled my brother into my arms, attempting to soothe him despite my own sobs.

I am ever so thankful for Matt's courage and resolve. A single, glistening tear slides down my cheek and onto his messy hair as we sit together. The sun slowly rises, ascending into the rosy sky. *We'll make it through, I think. We'll survive.* "We'll be all right, Matt," I say. "As long as we're together."

by Irina Petrovic (Grade Eight)
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THIRD PRIZE

Proteus

I was anxious the day I left Earth. It had been my home for eleven years, and I still had much to explore. I had never left Canada, but I had travelled across all the provinces. I loved my country, and had no desire to leave. Unfortunately, I didn't have any choice. Only two weeks ago, great astronomers discovered a huge asteroid hurtling towards Earth. A week from now, it would eliminate all life on Earth. People had been shipped out from around the world every day, and today I would embark on a new adventure on an uninhabited moon named Proteus, far away from Earth.

I awoke early, and struggled to pack my belongings without breaking down into tears. My family and I took our last look at the home we had lived in all our lives, before driving to the launching station. When we arrived, I thought sadly, *This will probably be the last time I will stand on Earth ever again.* We would have to wait at least a century until the dust cleared from the rogue asteroid.

I waited for what seemed like an eternity for our rocket to be prepared, and finally, we were allowed to enter. Five days later, we would reach our new home on Proteus.

Finally, we caught our first view of Proteus. It was nothing like we expected. The surface was smooth with a few craters, and it was a dull shade of grey. It appeared to be deserted, except for a few huts we would use as houses, which were built by astronauts the week before. The rocket landed gently on a flat surface between two craters, and a few minutes later, we were allowed to explore and move into our new homes.

I raced out of the rocket, breathing in the fresh air. Various unfamiliar trees and flowers dotted the ground around our houses. On the door of each cabin were the names of the people who would live inside. I was glad to see my family would be living together in a hut to ourselves.

I was heartbroken to leave Earth behind, but deep down I was excited because the few people on our small moon were the first of many to live on this unique world. It may have been very different from Canada, but I knew we would soon adapt to our new surroundings.

104 years later, the dust cleared and I made my way back to Earth as a frail old woman. I stood on the lifeless soil sadly, knowing my home was no longer here. It was on Proteus.

by Lia Ferguson (Grade Six)
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THIRD PRIZE

Deception

Crash, snap, crackle. . . . It's coming. I can't run, my feet won't move. My heart pounds like a heavy drum, trying to burst out of my chest, I feel the cool sweat trickle down my spine. The thing bursts through the trees and I scream!

I wake up in a cold sweat. I move my legs and sigh in relief. If it did come I could run. I peel out of my bed and frown. *Where is Dad?* I notice the bow is gone. *He must have gone hunting.*

I open the flap of the tent and go into the forest. I breathe in the cool fall air. The trees I love tower above me. This has been my life for as long as I can remember. The only thing not to my liking is the beast living somewhere close to my father and me. It has been terrorizing us from the very start: stealing food, disarming our traps, and it killed my dog.

"Run, you fool, run!" I look up and see my father bursting out from the thick foliage. "Get inside, save yourself—"

His call is cut off as he screams in agony and falls from view. "Dad!" I cry and sprint to the area where he has fallen.

As I near, I hear whimpers of fear. *My father doesn't whimper, does he?* I break into the clearing and see my father clutching his knee in pain, quiet moans escaping his mouth. *If my father isn't whimpering, who is?* I see the leaves on the nearby tree rustle. I whirl around and see a small child, possibly seven at the oldest, cowering in the bushes.

"Hey, it's okay," I softly say to him.

He tears his eyes away from my damaged father and looks at me. His eyes fill with terror and he starts screaming. "It's the beast! Help me, it's the beast!" he screams in panic.

I hear dry twigs snapping as a girl about my age emerges out of the shrubbery. In her hand a large knife glitters with my father's blood. My brain barely registers this before I am tackled to the ground. "Leave us alone, you beast," she says, her eyes gleaming with malice.

"I'm no beast," I say, my confusion growing. *I am definitely human; why is she accusing me?*

"Why should I believe you?"

I let out a sigh. *She has me there.* "Maybe because I didn't kill your brother," I suggest. She produces her hand and helps me up. "Thanks for not hurting me," I say.

She cocks her head and smiles. I suddenly see her large, sharp, teeth. "Don't thank me yet," she snarls. Then she attacks.

by Lauren Proctor (Grade Seven)
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THIRD PRIZE

The Thief

I stumbled past the overgrown roots, calling for my friend, “Ren! We don’t have much time, and there is something I must warn you of! The villagers have been speaking! You’re to be—” I burst into the clearing, but I was too late; the citizens had found him first.

“Witch!” they chorused, with every boney finger pointed at Ren.

His bewildered expression turned to horror as the true meaning of their words sunk in. He glanced around frantically, finally settling his gaze on mine, and in his desperation he declared, “It is not I who is the sorcerer, but she! We must burn her to free us of the taint she has brought.” And so he cried, “Kill the witch!”

Empty. So this must be the feeling one gets when they have been forsaken by every living being they have ever known. How peculiar. I had assumed misery would play a rather prominent role for someone in my current predicament. My mother had always told me I was destined to face an obstacle no mortal could ever hope to overcome. I had been skeptical, careless, and unfaithful, yet now I comprehended the magnitude of my incredulosity. No one can escape Death.

I did not struggle as they bound me to the stake. The burning was to take place at the heart of town; ironic for these heartless, barbaric townspeople all too eager for murder. How sickening. A torch was lit and ceremoniously thrown into the pyre. The flames licked my feet, and I winced. It seems we who possess supernatural abilities shall forever be condemned to battle the elements, dying whether we are victorious or not. If we survive against one, another shall consume our breath.

The support behind me splintered; the sudden weight thrust me forward and thudded down on top of me, digging its way between my shoulder blades. One thousand lashes couldn’t have been worse than the intense pain searing through me. A scream was ripped from my throat, drowning every possible sound to be heard within miles. It may have lasted for minutes, though it felt like hours. I heaved with short, raspy breaths. The silence surrounding me was positively deafening.

Before my demise I had managed to sputter a curse on the boy I had once called friend. Each and every night, he shall hear my cry and watch me perish, only to awaken when I am ashes again. I believe it shall prove to be a fitting punishment for his cowardice. Suffer as I have, thief who stole my life.

by Jennifer Hua (Grade Eight)
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