

# FIRST PRIZE

## The Good Fire

He still walked slowly, this man—her dad—holding her hand, but she was afraid being outside after dark. She wanted to run home, where she was safe with her mom. Her dad scared her, so big and still strange to her. He was probably all right because her mom looked happier now than Jeannie could remember. He seemed nice enough; he called her his “big girl,” even though she was only five. Still, he was new to her since Wednesday when he came home from the war.

Strange or not, she wouldn’t have left him, not when she knew he was hurt so badly. She had watched her mother bathe one of the great stitched-up gashes that stretched out from the plaster cast. She knew the war did that, just as it had dropped a bomb on the corner shop, killing Mr. and Mrs. Brownlow. Only a week later, it had dropped more bombs that burned up a whole street of houses.

The war was over finally. No more bombs would fall, all the dads would come home—well, most of them. Soon, she could have eggs for breakfast whenever she wanted.

“We’re going to celebrate.” Her dad leaned heavily on his walking stick as they set off down the street. “We’re going to the bonfire, you and me, while your mum has a nap.”

“A bonfire?”

“Yep. Maybe fireworks too; red and gold sparks exploding in the sky.”

“Exploding? Like bombs? Why?”

“It’s how we used to have fun. We’d have bonfires and bake potatoes in the ashes, and there would be a lot of fireworks. Maybe we’ll have music tonight too. You’ll love it. Will you dance with me, Jeannie?”

She giggled because it was funny, him thinking he could dance when he could barely walk. She relaxed a little and skipped a couple of steps. Her dad tried for a skip, caught his breath, and stood very still for a moment.

“We don’t have to go to the bonfire,” she said. “I’ve seen big bonfires before.”

She would never forget them. The corner-store explosion had flashed red through their blackout curtains. And when the whole row of houses two streets over was hit by fire bombs, she had thought the flames would burn them all alive. She remembered heat that hurt and an overpowering smell of burning. Panic tightened her throat. She slowed down.

“Maybe there’ll be gingerbread and hot chocolate.” He limped a little faster.

“Chocolate that’s hot? Do they make it in the bonfire?” Asking gave her an excuse to stop walking.

“Jeannie. . . .” He tried to bend down but straightened carefully. “Jeannie, love, I know you don’t remember before the war, but you’ll like this, everyone happy together around a big fire.”

“But why did they make a bonfire?”

“It’s not a *bon*fire, it’s a *bon*fire. It isn’t scary, it’s fun.”

She looked at him, disbelieving this still-strange man who thought that flames—huge, roaring, devour-everything flames—could be fun.

He paused, his big hand stroking a strand of hair back from her forehead. “The war was scary for me too,” he said. “But when I was fighting in France, I learned that over there *bon* means good. A *bon*-fire is a good fire.”

He took another step towards the great pile of broken chairs, beds, and shelves from bombed-out houses. She pulled back, wanting to run home to where she was safe with her mother, who had kept her safe during the air raids. This tall dad seemed nice, but would he—*could* he—protect her if the fire came for her? Could she trust him?

He paused, leaning on his walking stick, watching. Finally, he asked, “Jeannie, could I lean on you? Can I trust you to help me walk? I’ve so much looked forward to a big bonfire celebration when I came home.”

He released her fingers, and she felt his hand resting on her shoulder. It felt heavy, as if she were supporting some of his weight, as if she were as important to him as the heavy stick he relied on.

She heard the *whoosh* as the great pile of old wood furniture ignited. She watched flames shoot roof high and smelled burning. Her feet wanted to run away. But her dad was injured. He needed her to be strong. He trusted her.

She took a deep breath and stood taller. Bearing his hand on her shoulder, she led him safely towards the bonfire.

***by Valerie Fletcher Adolph***

Delta, British Columbia

# SECOND PRIZE

## The Crow

The crow remembered the day the girl had hit him with a wooden spoon. He had been watching her from the limb of the cottonwood tree. She had spread out a tea in her backyard, with dolls and stuffed animals sitting in chairs at a dining table. There was a pink cloth on the table and an array of good things to eat. The girl poured lemonade out in tall plastic glasses for her guests.

“Sit still, Panda!” she yelled at a stuffed bear sitting sideways on his chair. She put bread on his plate and a cookie. “Eat!” she barked.

To the Barbie doll sitting on a chair across from her, the girl said, “If I have to tell you again to stop slurping your drink.” She fingered the spoon beside her own plate. “Quit blubbering,” she shouted.

The crow hopped down the tree limb to get a closer look.

The girl took a tart and put it on her plate. “Elbows off the table!” she shouted suddenly.

The crow wasn’t sure who the offender was.

The stuffed grey rabbit slid from his chair so that only his head protruded from the edge of the table. A gust of wind took the napkins and sent them flying around the yard. The girl scrambled to catch them.

While her back was turned, the crow took flight and lit on the edge of the table furthest from the girl’s chair. He measured up the refreshments. The tarts on the table oozed raspberry jam and lemon curd, the bread smelled deliciously fresh, and the cookies sported bright-coloured sprinkles.

The girl marched back to her chair and set the napkins back in place. “Continue!” she shouted, waving her hand at the guests. “Eat up or you’ll go hungry to bed!” She picked up a cookie and snapped off the crusty edge then swept the crumbs from her lap.

The crow measured the distance between the cookies and the girl then flew to the centre of the table.

Down came the wooden spoon with a *whap!* “Get out of here!” the girl shouted. She gave several more *whaps* in the direction of the crow, and the last one hit him on the wing.

He cawed in pain, hobbled to the far edge of the table and tried to fly. His wing dragged badly. Finally, with the help of a gust of strong west wind, he flew up to the cottonwood tree and sat nursing his wounds. When he felt a little stronger, he cawed at the girl several times in rage, but she ignored him and carried on with the tea party.

Then, for several weeks, the crow did not see the girl outside. The tea party had all been dismantled and put away; the girl had disappeared. His wing healed, and he had begun to feel stronger.

One day, the girl reappeared again with her tea party. She had a cast on her arm, and she served all the food with her good arm.

He flew down to the party and perched on the opposite edge of the table. There were cupcakes with pink icing, tiny sandwiches, and a bowl of jelly beans. He liked the red ones best.

A tall, thin woman came out of the house. Her black hair was tied up in a bun. She carried a spoon in one hand and banged it against the opposite palm as she headed for the tea party table. “It’s time for your medication.”

The girl nodded. “I know. I’ll come in soon.”

*Whap, whap, whap* went the spoon against the woman’s hand.

The crow watched and was ready to fly off.

The woman turned and walked back into the house. The girl wiped something from her face and sat quietly, eating a cupcake.

The crow took a few steps in her direction. He wasn’t sure how he would get even with the girl or if he really wanted to now. Maybe she had what was coming to her already.

“Take this,” said the girl, offering half of her cupcake to the crow. She held it in her good hand. There was no sign of a wooden spoon. “It’s for you,” said the girl.

The crow hopped cautiously to the girl's chair, snatched the piece of cupcake from her hand, and flew back to the cottonwood tree. The sweet treat was more delicious than anything else he could remember.

*by Connie Cook*

Melancthon, Ontario

# THIRD PRIZE

## Overpass

That instant, the boy made up his mind. His father yelled at his mother and older sister as usual, raised a fist, and stared hard at the boy. His father threw a teacup hard to the linoleum floor, and it shattered and splintered. His mother dutifully bent to sweep and scoop the mess, while his father kicked the door, yelled some more, and retreated to the backyard, a kind of solace, where rabid greyhounds strutted back and forth inside caged sheds and bared their teeth at anyone except him.

The boy told no-one. He woke earlier than normal, dressed, and left the house before dawn and walked to the stone quarry behind the school, where he collected three large stones, and, with patience and not without dropping them, he hauled them atop the overpass that arched over the main road from the suburbs towards the city.

His father was a paradox, even to his young mind—a man of routine, a man of fiery temperament. The workday and workplace had a way of returning him back to a man of dignity, a nine-to-five jobber, as dishonest as that may have been. The boy knew with certainty that at three minutes after seven o'clock, his father would drive under the overpass in the black Hillman, speeding with no seatbelt. The boy knew the sound he was waiting for, the flash of purple light and fumes as his father's car accelerated through that section of road. When the car came, the boy dropped the stone, the rock hitting the windshield and smashing through glass, the car swinging wildly one way then the other, flipping, rolling and rolling, and ending in a hissing, steaming mesh of twisted steel, glass, and death by roadside.

The boy ran.

He felt nothing—no fear, no surprise at his convictions, no sadness. He ran back through the school courtyard, where the kids played handball at lunchtimes, jumped the perimeter fence, and out through bush tracks and nearby cubby houses he'd made with his mates. Soon into the city's outskirts, he ran along jugged roads and past old barns and into a place where his mind turned opaque and empty.

When dusk began to settle and the air cooled, he retraced his steps, and his stomach rumbled. His mum wasn't home when he returned. His sister said, in a deadpan voice, "Did you hear? Dad was in a car crash this morning. He's dead."

The boy looked at her as hard as he could. His eyes stung, his shoulders hunched. His sister stared back at him. "You know anything, Bobby? Where've you been anyway?"

The boy didn't much care for dialogue with his sister. But he felt sorry for her years of torment, for her quiet suffering, for her reluctance to speak out, for her ugly breasts that were getting bigger. "Just went for a walk." Then, he couldn't speak anymore. He poured himself a glass of water, drank quickly, and went to his bedroom.

Mum returned hours after dark. He must have fallen asleep. When he walked into the kitchen, he saw her eyes were red, hair dishevelled. She called the boy and his sister into the living room. "He died on impact. Funeral is in two days." Her words were quiet, with undeserved tenderness only a mother could afford, and she stepped closer to the boy and his sister and put an arm around each of them. "I'm sorry," she said, "for this, and for everything." She wiped a tear from the boy's cheek, retraced the wet line back up his face to his lower eyelid, and paused, as if waiting for words to come. "I guess you both must be hungry," she said.

The funeral came. Men in suits and ties and women with styled hair. A few kids. The local policeman said a few words as well as a man from the church they visited infrequently. Mum declined to speak, and the boy and girl weren't asked.

Life resumed. The greyhounds sniffed and snarled until the boy became the man, and then he fell in with them and often slept in the cage through the night. He never dreamt of the rock nor the overpass nor the sound of screeching tires and grating metal. Survival was all-encompassing, harder than death, and he knew, full to bursting, that his mother's tenderness would linger on and on until long after she was gone, and his worst memories would, one day, begin to fade.

*by Kerry Hale*

Comox, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Gun Metal

Lydia watched Tinker Belle through the kitchen window. The dog bounded through the yellowing orchard grass, feathered tail flying, chasing real or imaginary mice, and only finding withered apples, which she proudly carried off to lie under a tree and chew. The kitchen table leaned against the peeling wood-framed window. The table was worn and gouged and had never seen a cloth. Lydia's father sat at the table this Sunday morning, crusted cereal bowls and sticky toast bits now cleared, newspaper lying across the top.

Yesterday, Lydia had turned eight. Her mother had made a three-tiered lemon cake for her party, brilliantly iced and decorated, with miniature circus animals prowling around the tiers and a sparkling carousel set on the top layer. Pink and yellow and blue ribbons curled and fluttered from the eight lollipops that circled the carousel. The cake was wonderful. So were the presents brought by Lydia's school friends and the games they had played: telephone; button, button; musical chairs; and pin the tail on the donkey.

Lydia dreamily relived her party, only half hearing the clink of metal as bits tumbled onto the newspaper. Her father was cleaning his gun as he did every Sunday morning. The pistol usually hung on the belt of the uniform he wore when he was patrolling their small town nestled in a BC river valley famous for its potatoes and roadside castle built out of used glass bottles. Lydia sighed, bored, then turned her head to watch as he carefully chose each piece of the gun, oiled and rubbed it until the scrap of white rag turned a greasy grey, and then just as meticulously placed the piece back on the paper. The handle of the gun lay to one side. Once he had finished cleaning and buffing the metal parts until they gleamed, he opened the tin of polish and chose a clean rag and picked up the handle; he was completely focused. He whistled an old love song under his breath as he meticulously cleaned and polished each groove in the carved rosewood handle until it glowed. Lydia had smelled the smell of the polish every day of her memory. It made her woozy.

A shaft of sunlight streaming through the dusty window made Lydia's eyes water, and she sneezed. Her father looked up, startled out of his reverie, surprised to see her. Lydia flinched. Now that he was reminded of her presence, she knew what came next. The lecture: "Never touch this gun, don't even ask. It is a weapon. It is a dangerous weapon. I am a cop. I am a crack shot. I have my crossed pistols and crossed rifles badges on the sleeves of my uniform jacket. That means I am good. The gun is never loaded except when I need it to be. I lock the gun and bullets away every time I come home. People are afraid of my gun, and you should be too."

Lydia's father began to put the bits of the pistol back together. Once again forgotten, Lydia looked out the window—no dog, just yellowing, dying leaves escaping from the branches of the apple and pear trees and drifting sadly to Earth. The Hutterite women and children in their dark polka-dotted clothes and bonnets had arrived last week, as they did every year, and picked all the fruit her mother didn't need. Winter was coming and Lydia anticipated the snow that would soon fall. She loved winter.

She turned her attention back to the pistol and watched as it was once again restored to its working self. Her father gathered up the gun oil, the polish, and the rags, and got up from the table to put them away. The rags went into the laundry bin, and the oil and polish into a leather bag kept under the kitchen sink. Whistling the same old love song, he scrubbed his hands with dish soap and dried them carefully with a clean dish towel. Lydia's mom would not be happy about the oil stains in the white porcelain sink and on the cloth.

The gun was still on the kitchen table, lying sullenly on the newspaper. She picked it up . . . two hands. It was heavy—really heavy. As her father turned from the sink, Lydia pointed the gun at him. She cocked the gun and pulled the trigger.

"Bang," she said.

*by Lynn Gaskell* (70 years)  
Victoria, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Serpent

The water was dark glass, undisturbed as they floated between two towering peaks. The fjord seemed lifelessly still. A bulky Viking of a man sat at the back of the boat behind two unsightly tourists. The tourists pointed their phones about, frantically trying to capture the raw essence of the untouched landscape. The Viking simply gazed, unperturbed. He cracked a can of energy drink and took a sip.

“Are there even any fish here?” asked one of the tourists. “I haven’t seen a thing.”

“Yes, there are fish. Seawater fish and some rare species that can’t be found anywhere but in this fjord.” He was surprised by the tourist’s ignorance. Most came specifically to catch a glimpse of the ancient and wondrous fish.

“The water is so dark, I doubt we’ll see anything down there,” the tourist sneered.

“I know, right? They need to put, like, lights down there so you can actually see something,” the second tourist spoke through her nose, shrieking like a saxophone.

The Viking smiled politely, put down his can, then began to row. They moved slowly, inching towards a narrow passage framed by mountains. The passage was just barely wide enough for the boat to pass, and as they threaded through, the tourists ran their hands along the stone. “These cliffs, they are called Öndvegissúlur,” their guide said proudly. “They are the great pillars that stand guard to the throne. It is a very sacred place for us.”

The tourists mumbled something between themselves then snickered.

As they left Öndvegissúlur behind, the three travellers found themselves in an expanse of crystal water. “This is more like it,” said the nasally tourist.

The place was suddenly alive with a thousand heartbeats. Fish scattered and splashed in huge groups, birds fluttered and soared overhead, calling and singing to one another. The water was clear and visible many metres down. This was truly the mythical land from brochures, where fairies played and giants slumbered among the mossy stones. Serpentine fish slithered and circled the boat before taking a dive into the deep salt water.

“Eels, eels!” screamed the nasally tourist. “I saw eels.”

“Probably a tusk or ling,” said the Viking. “They are long fish. Kind of look like eels, I suppose.”

“I saw, like, three really big eels,” repeated the tourist, shaking her friend’s shoulder.

The Viking rowed slowly, allowing the tourists to gawk at everything that moved. Then, suddenly, he stopped. “We are directly in the middle now,” he declared.

Several minutes passed, and everything again grew still. The fish disappeared. The passengers at the front of the boat began to fidget. They seemed uncomfortable with the returned silence. “What happened? What are we doing just floating here? Why are the fish gone?”

“Patience, just wait, and you will see.”

The male tourist rolled his eyes.

The water began to churn, rocking the boat up and down. The fish returned, leaping from the water, their scales glistening in the sunlight. Silver, red, and bronze flashed all around. The tourists’ mouths fell agape. Their phones hung in their limp hands.

“Now, when she comes,” said the Viking, “do not call her an eel. She will not like that.”

From the depths, the monster rose with ferocity, spiralling, dancing. Her scales were thick and scarred, her eyes piercing with a prism of hues. She seemed infinitely long, weaving in a figure eight with no end. As she approached, she ran her body against the boat. The Viking held out his hand. The beast flared her nostrils; she shifted her basketball-sized eyes to meet his, and an invisible communion formed between them. A thousand words from a thousand ages passed from one to the other without sound. The Viking and the serpent conversed like old friends, like battle-wearied partners. His long hair swayed in an ethereal breeze as her head lifted above the water, eyeing the other passengers. The air hung heavy with judgement.

Then, it was over, and suddenly and violently, she dived straight back from where she came. The tourists sat, rigid and paralyzed. “What the . . . actual . . . fuuu . . . ?” the nasally girl managed to say. She was in shock, her entire body trembling.

“Turns out you didn’t appeal to her appetite—at least not today anyway. Lucky for you,” the Viking laughed. He lifted his can high in honour of the great serpent, then turned the boat around and began rowing to shore.

*by Evan Bleakney*

Oakville, Ontario



# HONOURABLE MENTION

## The Cost of Water

“It’s the water, isn’t it?” Dmitry asked.

“Yes.” Kendra nodded.

Dmitry stared out the window at the abandoned playground.

“The few remaining children are being hidden from the government,” she said, annoyed.

Shaking his head. “You can’t blame them, Kendra. Look at all they have done,” he said, throwing his hands out and motioning to the playground. “They took rich, spoiled men who have never really worked a day in their lives, and we gave them all of our faith, money, and confidence. We put everything we had into their incapable hands, and now, the few children who are still alive have phthalate poisoning and the men have all gone sterile!”

With a loud sigh, she walked to the fridge. With the door open, she stared at the water container. “Dmitry, the military is going to take what little supplies are left to keep those incapable rich men alive while the rest of us suffer. I overheard a few colleagues talk about going to the Great Lakes to set up a commune of sorts. The water is fresher, and we might be able to survive a little longer.”

“And if the military comes there, then what?”

“We are dead already. Without being able to attempt treatments on the children, we are an endangered species,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Months turned into years on the banks of Lake Huron. Kendra’s knowledge of science and Dmitry’s of farming served them well as they created a small homestead.

Dipping her test tube into the water, Kendra felt that prickling sensation on the back of her neck that someone was watching her. Quietly crouching close to the ground, she swivelled quickly to her left and then lost her footing, falling on her behind with a splash.

The delighted giggles of a child echoed all around her. Kendra sat stunned in the freezing lake, staring at the little girl. The sound of heavy footfalls and branches breaking brought Kendra to her feet.

“Evangeline!” an angry whisper came from behind a tree.

“Asher, come see her wet bottom. She fell in the lake!” the little girl giggled, delighted.

“Now!” the boy’s voice asserted.

The little girl’s head dropped as she sauntered off towards the voice.

“I have food,” Kendra called, trying to stop the girl, “and fresh water,” keeping her tone gentle. She walked towards the girl with her arms out to the sides and her palms flat to show she had no weapons. “My name is Kendra; my husband, Dmitry, has a large garden.” She pointed to the greenhouse surrounded by rain barrels.

Stopping mid-step, the child turned back at Kendra with desperation in her eyes.

“We are not military,” she said reassuringly.

The girl looked to the tree and motioned for the boy to come out.

She went inside and put together two plates of food, returning to the front step with Dmitry. The two dirty, starved children ate greedily.

Asher was skittish at first but enjoyed regaling them with his harrowing tales of escape along with a group of gypsies they were sent with when the government mandated all children be handed over. Shortly after that proclamation, the government fell, and martial law ruled the lands now.

Evangeline and Asher had been travelling with the gypsies for longer than they could remember. They came to the Great Lakes with the notion some mega city would be here to save them, but all they found were Canadian winters and starvation.

They welcomed the two children into their home, and in a short time, they became a family.

Dmitry’s symptoms came on slowly, but it was obvious he was sick. In a panic, Kendra tested the kids’ blood as well.

“What are you staring at?” Dmitry asked, collapsing into a nearby chair.

“They each have the antibodies,” she said, stunned, still looking into her microscope.

He began to chuckle. “It is obviously because of my blue-ribbon-worthy zucchinis!”

“Nature finds a way.” She shared in his laughter. An evolutionary change had taken place in the children. She worked quickly to replicate the antibodies and give them to Dmitry. If it worked, she could share it with the whole world.

Standing in the garden, she was surrounded by the silence and the slow creep of nature taking back what it once ruled, taking comfort in the knowledge that those children could be humanity’s last hope. Her excitement quickly turned to sadness. Who would she tell? Where would she go? It was too late.

*by Cynthia Cassidy*

Burnaby, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Night Diner

“Why don’t you see a doctor if it’s that bad?” Ben asked in a tired voice.

Sitting across from him in the booth of the all-night greasy spoon, Jake was scratching at his chest through a sweat-stained t-shirt. “I’m done with doctors,” Jake said. “After my car accident four years ago, they did nothing but fill me with pain pills. Those glorified drug pushers cost me my job. You remember?”

Ben remembered. How could he forget Jake’s late-night calls asking for money? “You won’t need any drugs,” Ben said calmly. “It’s just a rash.”

“Just a rash,” Jake repeated, and then, as if to illustrate how bad the condition truly was, he scratched more furiously. “This feels like bugs are crawling inside my skin.”

Ben also remembered hearing *that* line before. “Don’t do that,” Ben said. “You’ll only make it spread.”

“Spread? It’s already spreading. Look.” Jake pulled on the collar of his t-shirt, revealing red swaths of inflamed skin underneath. “Please. I don’t know who else to ask. Can’t you help?”

Ben crossed his arms. He knew where this was going, and he needed to be firm. “I’m not giving you any money,” he said. “If you’re using again, you need to get professional help.”

Jake slammed his fist on the table and shouted, “Is that what you think this is about?” He scratched at his neck. “I’ve been clean for months, dammit!” He scratched at his sides and chest. “You’re supposed to be my friend!”

“Jake, relax,” Ben said. The diner’s few customers were staring now. Jake cursed at him and Ben had heard enough. He pulled himself out of the booth. “If you don’t want to see a doctor, then I can’t help you,” he said then walked away.

Later that night, a car rolled into the driveway of Jake’s trailer home. Ben had been unable to sleep and decided to make amends. Maybe twenty dollars would smooth things over. He turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car, thinking, *Here we go again.*

He checked the side of the house. Sure enough, a light was on in Jake’s bedroom window. Ben reached up, tapped on the glass, and waited to the sound of crickets chirping in the night. There was no response. That wasn’t good.

*I’ll just peek inside. Make sure he’s okay.*

Ben laid a nearby milk crate under the window and stepped on it. Then, he could see inside Jake’s room.

The sight made him gasp. Jake was lying face-up on his cot, his eyes open and unblinking. His shirtless body was fully exposed, and Ben could see that Jake’s entire torso was covered in purple scabs and bloody sores. In the centre, running the length of Jake’s sternum, was a mangled gash, like a cut made for heart surgery, except the flesh appeared torn rather than incised. Panicked thoughts raced through Ben’s mind: *Call the police! An ambulance. What if it’s a disease? My God, did I touch him?*

He thought back to the diner meeting: *Ben walking up to the booth, saying hello, and then—yes—they had shaken hands. . . .*

Just then, something on Jake’s body moved. Ben wiped the dirty window, trying to get a better look.

At first, Ben mistook what he saw for signs of breathing. *Could Jake be alive?* But then he realized, *No, it isn’t Jake’s chest moving, just the ragged edges of that gash in the middle. What the hell?*

Ben watched in horror as the opening in Jake’s chest pulsed and stretched. Something was starting to push its way out—something that resembled fingertips at first but became more wormlike as they extended further in long, bloody tendrils.

That was when Ben stumbled off the milk crate and ran for the safety of his car.

Behind the wheel, breathing heavily, he started the engine. *Get help!* Yes, but first he held up his right hand under the car's interior light and inspected his skin. Everything looked normal, but he would keep an eye on it.

As he sped off in the direction of the police station, a sliver of light appeared on the horizon. Soon, in the sobering daylight, he would convince himself it had all been a strange nocturnal hallucination. He would tell himself, *Self-mutilation is common among drug addicts—so is suicide*. But Ben had forgotten that Jake, a southpaw, had greeted him at the diner with a *left-handed* shake.

He would remember this later . . . when the itching started.

**by *Reece Smith***  
Kingston, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

19/69

Morning cracked its egg in the eastern sky and began its all-day breakfast across that big blue platter, its path uncomplicated by clouds, and its heat turning those polyester specks of humanity below into a forest of tiny embers. Was it sweat or did hot butter just drip down from that celestial chin and land on Emily-Jo's Crimplene mod dress? Maybe it was the LSD talking.

Her dress was a kaleidoscope of burnt and discontented yellows, oranges that aspired to be browns, and white flower petals that could dance and mesmerize from unsafe distances. It was a gift from her mom on her recent birthday: nineteen in '69. Groovy time to be alive, man. And it was a trip for Emily-Jo . . . up until the black ink from those passport stamps on the walls of her brain started leaking out her eyes. Right there in the park and everything. Her two-year-old daughter, Sahara Moon-Willow, was too busy on the playground pendulums to notice her mother's freak-out. Yet, it did not escape the eight-foot alligator, strutting around upright, singing "Wichita Lineman" into the back of a broken alarm clock. With a tongue made of writhing, loosely knotted earthworms, the reptile licked the sand off two eyeballs it had rescued from the playground floor and, on the ends of its scaly thalidomide arms, offered them to Emily-Jo.

"Sometimes, the children use my tail for jump-rope but, alas, its whip can be less than playful," the alligator explained remorsefully, "and their eyes pop out from the force of their tears."

A smile fainted and fell from Emily-Jo's lips as she dried her cheeks with one hand and accepted the gifts in the other. The rising humidity made the playground swimmable now, wetting down the fragile wings of her chemical flight. The mother knew her daughter couldn't swim, and, as water rose and thickened around her, Emily-Jo fishtailed her way bravely through the curdling gruel. But she could only watch as Sahara's body sunk limply into a large recreational cylinder. The sludge water muffled Emily-Jo's scream, reducing it to pointless, inarticulate syllables.

*"Sa-ha-ra!"*

With determined strokes, Emily-Jo swam over to the mouth of the slide and waited for Sahara to emerge. And waited.

Just then, a finger tapped Emily-Jo's shoulder so roughly it could have damaged the frail bone beneath. "Excuse me, ma'am! Could you please move your head outta there? My son wants a turn!"

Emily-Jo craned her neck and saw a toddler waiting to slide. Then, she turned to see the young mom anticipating his descent with a held-up cell phone.

"But my daughter's inside," Emily-Jo sparked up weakly. "I'm waiting for her."

With an exasperated sigh and a wounding stare, the mom cocked her head to inspect the diagonal tunnel.

"No one's in there!"

Emily-Jo's eyes cracked open wide, and her voice and hands began quivering in unison. Words came unglued from her tongue, one at a time. "That's . . . impossible. . . ."

Defeated, Emily-Jo's body slumped into the sand next to the slide, tears bleeding from her eyes. One of her wrinkled hands travelled slowly through her grey hair like a cat creeping through tall grass. "What happened to my daughter?" she cried, loud enough to attract an audience of concerned strangers.

"Must be off her meds," came a whisper.

Before long, two uniformed paramedics cast their shadows across Emily-Jo's sobbing, crumpled body. They observed a small tag that read Valley View Care Home along the seam of her pale-blue dress. "Must have wandered off," the one voice said to the other.

"Happens," the other added, assisting the fragile sixty-nine-year-old to her feet.

"But Sahara was just here a minute ago!"

And, with that, Emily-Jo commenced to storytelling. Yet, the words forming in her mind were quite different from the ones that escaped her lips: *See, I was talking to this tall man and he starts giving me the eyes and singing to me. And for a moment—right then and there—time stood still. But next thing I know, my water’s breaking, and I’m ready to give birth to a beautiful daughter, Sahara Moon-Willow—*

Emily-Jo stopped when one of the paramedics got a call on his CB radio.

“Is she okay? What’s she saying?” it asked.

The paramedic paused, and with Emily-Jo’s rambling tale of alligators and eyeballs and Glen Campbell songs still echoing freshly in his ears, he calmly pressed the talk button on his CB and gently smiled into the microphone.

“She’ll be fine. She’ll be just fine.”

***by Tony Gryner***

London, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## The Salt of Seas and Sorrow

“So, it was all just a lie?”

She couldn't look at him. Not knowing the hurt and confusion she would see in his eyes—that much was obvious from his tone. Instead, she looked to the sea. The lullaby rush and flow of the waves against the sand had never sounded so melancholy.

“It's not exactly safe for me to be . . . open,” she said.

“How long were you going to wait until you told me?”

“I-I don't know.”

“Were you going to lie forever?”

“No. Maybe. I don't know!” Then, she did face him, annoyed and ashamed by the tears that burned her eyes. “This isn't easy for me either, you know.”

He scoffed, shaking his head and stepping away from her. “Yeah, I'm sure.”

“Adam, look at me. I had to make up a whole different life for myself. I have to go back to the sea every seven months. I have to hide and protect my coat at all costs, or I'll be a slave to whoever finds it.”

“And in the end, after all that, you'll still leave.”

She scowled at him even as a few tears slipped free. Swiping them from her cheeks with a frustrated sigh, she turned away. “You don't get it.”

“Of course I get it! This is just a game to you. You don't really care about—”

“I do care!” she snapped, whirling on him again. She strode towards him with her next words, causing him to drop his indifferent stance and start frantically moving backward, tripping and falling in the sand. “I care more than you can imagine! I love you—but I love my family too. I came to the land because selkies are dying. I'm safer here if I can keep my secret, and finding a mate here means helping my species survive. Don't you get it? What you did—outing me—that could spell disaster for me and my family and our whole kind!”

He stared up at her, wide-eyed. Then, as the waves continued to thunder against the shore behind her, his gaze narrowed and lips curled. “Good! Go back to your sea! I'll tell The Normalcy Alliance to send out an extra harpoon for me.”

“The Alliance?” she stammered. Her anger ebbed, blood running cold at the mention of the horrific organization. “Please tell me you're not involved with them. Adam! They kill supernatural beings for sport.”

“No, they protect humans and the interests of normal people,” he spat as he staggered to his feet, “. . . of what's right.” Then, he turned and stalked away, up the beach and back towards the road, ignoring her calling after him.

Nearly blinded by her tears, she stumbled away, almost tripping over a soft grey pelt. The hurricane of emotions that pounded through her heart like the relentless waves of the ocean surged even stronger at the sight of her coat, at the memory of him tossing it at her as he raged about what he had learned—about what he had already told his family.

*Oh, god. Who else had he told? Did he really know someone in The Alliance?*

She started to pull on the old seal skin again, ready to return to her home, but stopped. Looking out to the ocean, she thought about her own family—her brothers and mother and one lone cousin; everyone else had been killed, casualties to overfishing, boat accidents, or being deliberately hunted down. They wouldn't be safe in the sea anymore. But if they left, if they had no home to return to in the watery depths . . . then selkies as she knew them would cease to exist. Being on land for so long would cause them to become human permanently, absorbed by the civilization that sought to destroy them. *Which is worse: destruction through death or destruction by assimilation?*

She squeezed her eyes shut, savouring the rush and flow of the ocean, the comfort of her own skin in her hands, the hope of seeing home again.

Then, eyes open, she strode forward, stopping when her feet were on the cusp of where the waves lapped the shore. She bowed her head, crying into the sea foam.

When seven tears met the salt of the sea, she stepped back. Seven tears to the sea. One for each relative. One to call each of them—compel them—force them to come to land.

They would make a new life here. It was the only way they could survive.

***by Rachael Arsenault***

Oromocto, New Brunswick



# HONOURABLE MENTION

## The Letter Writer

Dear Richard,

*If I ever share a taxi again, I will think of you. Even now, riding the elevator in my building, your phantom hands stroke my body. Your breath still melts my skin. But you refuse to leave your wife—and I will not be neglected. You can't just use and discard women like paper cups or condoms.*

*I ache for you, Richard. I do. But I'm disgusted by you too. I stuffed the satin bedsheets in the garbage and smashed both the wine glasses. Go back to boring sex with your wife. We are finished. If you follow me home again, I will call the police. I mean it.*

*(I will never forget you, though. I keep rolling your last cigarette back and forth on my tongue.)*

—Roxanne

Each sentence she wrote emboldened her. Rereading the letter made her feel better. Faint whispers of praise came from long-gone days in creative writing class. Eventually, she folded the perfumed paper, pressed it flat, and slid it into a pale purple envelope.

"I'll leave you with the posh doctor's receptionist on my way to work this morning," she said matter-of-factly—and her Wednesday began.

One hundred strokes of the hairbrush, as the magazine advised, but was her tawny, blunt-cut hair any more lustrous? She scowled at her reflection.

"You've still got that disappointing chin," she jeered at the bathroom mirror. "Mango body scrub, cocoa butter, tea tree oil. . . ." She fumbled through a wicker basket crammed with creams and lotions. "Why buy all this crap?" she spat at her reflection. "You could bathe in bird shit. No one on the subway will notice you."

She applied several products anyway—exfoliating, replenishing, and pampering her skin. Her shaggy, grey bathrobe absorbed most of it though. Back to the bedroom.

The spartan closet mocked her, as it did every morning. *Which will you wear—the jeans or the jean skirt? Which plain cotton blouse? Which cardigan? All six buttons secured—or just five?*

Raisin toast and tea for breakfast. Tuna sandwiches for lunch. "Can you overdose on tedium?" she mumbled. "If you could, I'd have had *rigor mortis* years ago."

Nevertheless, there is security in routine. Routines nudged her through weeks, months, and years. She woke at six each morning—alone. Ablutions. Breakfast. At work by eight a.m. The monotony of processing customer complaints kept her nameless, faceless, and negligible. Nearly seven years. No promotions. No friends.

She purchased famous products. She watched gory, glamorous TV shows. It didn't matter. Loneliness was part of who she was. She was insignificant. Invisible. Just like back in high school.

Every one hundred days, however, just before dullness morphs into despair, she selects a piece of pastel paper from her bedroom dresser drawer. She sits naked at her kitchen table and she writes.

Dear Leo,

*One of us must be bold enough to end this before we are caught. Yes, it is thrilling. Carnal. Passionate. It is also immoral and against the law. You know this better than anyone.*

*Each weekend, we seek intense pleasures. We commit to more dangerous risks. But I loathe myself once I return home, and it will ruin you if they find out. I am keeping the photos and the fingernails as insurance against your betrayal or reprisals. I know I will still be tempted, but I cannot sustain your erotic appetite. I fear what we might do next.*

*Never contact me again, Leo. I will try to do the same.*

—*Sophia*

“This one goes to that new lawyer in the office on the corner,” she announced, gingerly licking and sealing the envelope. “Time to get ready for work.”

***by Maria CampbellSmith***

Ottawa, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## The Power of the Mind

Veronica lay motionless on her hospital bed exactly as she had for the past twelve days. Nurses had offered to “turn her” in an effort to dress her bed sores, but she would allow no one to touch her other than to gently prop her lower back just enough to slip the bedpan beneath her.

She had no visitors. She talked to no one except to expound vehemently concerning her “rights” when staff insisted she allow them to give her a bed bath. She could neither eat nor drink. She could not sit up nor get out of bed. Her skin-and-bone arms had not the strength to lift themselves from her sides. Her forty-seven pounds could barely stretch themselves over her five-foot seven-inch frame. Her face was etched with the agony of being trapped between two worlds.

Day in and day out, Veronica stared at the ceiling with lifeless eyes, peripheral vision catching dangling tubes of the various solutions that were feeding her. She had been withering away for weeks. Her lifespan had left her behind, but she continued to breathe voluntarily.

Doctors and nurses conferred regularly, hoping to glean even a small piece of information as to why Veronica still lived. According to all medical protocol, she should have passed on at least two weeks prior.

As was tradition, the palliative unit of the hospital where Veronica was a patient offered annual co-op placement for social work students graduating from the local college. Julie had just joined the staff for a six-month assignment. Her first day there, during rounds with the medical team, a wave of compassion came over Julie when she saw Veronica lying seemingly lifeless on her bed. Not knowing the situation, and somehow not being able to help herself, she instinctively took Veronica’s hand in hers and sincerely asked, “How are you today, Veronica?”

To the surprise of those present, who were all expecting the habitual negative reaction, Veronica turned her head ever so slightly—just enough to meet Julie eye to eye—and responded, “I’m okay.”

Later that day, Veronica’s doctor called Julie to his office. He had detected the possibility of a bonding between his patient and the yet naïve and inexperienced student. Julie’s first assignment would be to befriend Veronica, and to hopefully become aware of the reason she refused to die.

Now fully apprised of the situation, however, Julie’s first visit with Veronica was exceedingly awkward. She wished the doctor had not shared details with her. The assignment would have been much easier had she not been aware of the extenuating circumstances. Julie struggled for conversation. Veronica said little but did not send her young visitor away. Much of that first visit together was shrouded in silence, which just might have been a blessing in disguise, for as Julie rose to leave, Veronica said, “I like you. You don’t talk ‘at’ me, and you don’t try to get me to do things I don’t want to do. Will you come to visit me again, please?”

Conversation increased with each visit as trust level grew. Julie enjoyed learning about the highlights of Veronica’s life, and Veronica seemed to draw energy from the young woman sitting on the end of her hospital bed.

The morning of their fifth visit, as Julie entered the room, she was alarmed to find her patient weeping uncontrollably. “What has happened?” Julie asked with grave concern.

“I have such bad memories, and I’m afraid to die without correcting them!” Veronica blurted. “There have been four people in my life immeasurably harmed by my words and my actions. I need to ask their forgiveness! Julie, I can’t sit up and hold a pen, but *you* can. If I dictate exactly what to say, will you write down word for word from my mouth and promise me that you will mail each of my letters?”

Because of Veronica’s frailty and constant state of exhaustion, it was impossible to complete more than one letter a day. Veronica conscientiously, methodically, and meticulously gathered her thoughts, and with racking sobs dictated her pain to paper. As Julie wrote, she,

too, wept—deeply aware of the privilege she was being afforded while sharing the innermost sanctum of another human being.

Precisely twenty-seven minutes after the last letter was written, Veronica was gone . . . with a beautiful smile on her face! Julie smiled back, as she left Veronica’s room for the last time.

**by Gale Griffith** (80 years)  
Rockland, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Monday

*I wonder what the last straw was.*

As I stride into National Bank one dreary Monday morning, my brain tries to puzzle out just why I woke up to a note on my partner's pillow saying he was done seeing me, and that he never wants to see me again.

*Was it the fact that I wake up at an ungodly hour every morning? Was it the way I sometimes forget to clean out the coffee filter when I'm done using it? Or maybe how I absolutely detest picking up after myself, which is why you would end up tripping over a balled-up sock or crumpled pair of jeans every few steps in my apartment?*

A bolt of pure lightning escapes my fingertips, violently knocking over the security guards from the colossal amount of power. Screams ring out. People scramble out of my way as I stride calmly through the bank, quickly disposing of anyone in my way.

*Oh. Maybe this is why.*

*I suppose I can understand that accidentally discovering your ditzy girlfriend is a deadly, notorious supervillain one day can be a huge turnoff. But still, did he have to leave me on a Monday of all days? It's really his fault that I'm viciously attacking this National Bank, honestly. The jerk took all of my spare cash on his way out, and I really can't be bothered to wait in line like a normal upstanding citizen.*

"Please, spare me!" a woman sobs at my feet, her perfectly manicured claws brushing my bare ankle. "I have a family—"

"Oh my God, just shut up!" I cry out, giving her an irritated look. "Can't you see a girl is trying to get over an awful breakup? I can't concentrate on spiritual healing with you shrieking in my ear!"

The woman just starts sobbing louder. With a groan and flick of my wrist, I knock her unconscious, and the infernal racket ceases. *Great, I can feel a migraine coming on.*

"All right, you stupid upstanding members of society, listen up!" I roar. As an extra measure, I shoot a blast of lightning skywards that strikes one of the many ceiling lights. Screams echo in the large hall as sparks fly. With one more menacing look, the bank settles into an uneasy silence that is occasionally interrupted by a small sob of despair.

"My stupid boyfriend just broke up with me, I haven't had my morning coffee, and I'm in serious need of a couple of twenties! So, how about you all play the role of good little hostages and let me get through my day, eh?" my voice rings through the hall, jarringly loudly in the silence. "Maybe then I won't fry you to a crisp, and you can continue on with your perfect, ordinary little days! *Capisce?*"

Everyone seems to be pretty compliant, except for maybe that stupid blonde banker in the far-right corner who's trying and failing horribly at being stealthy while reaching for the emergency button. Without looking, I point in her direction and release a zap of electricity. I hear a yelp and a muffled thump, letting me know that she's unconscious. *Good. Now, no more attempts at bravery.*

I make quick work of looting the ATM and locked safes, tucking the crisp dollar bills into the pocket of my coffee-stained hoodie with a satisfied sigh. The hostages watch on in horror as I casually make my rounds around the bank, searching for anything else of interest. In the end, there is nothing (I mean, obviously, it's just another boring bank), and I decide that my time here is done. I probably would've just casually walked out of the bank with my hands in my pockets, but I figure the swarm of police cars that has just skidded to a halt in front of the bank wouldn't have appreciated it. Instead, I rupture all the lights in the bank to distract the hostages from my hoodie-clad body busting through a back window and escaping onto the streets.

*I wonder if that really was the last straw.*

*Aren't young men always thirsting after the badass villainess in the movies? Why would he leave me because of my preferred career choice? My stomach clenches uncomfortably. At first, I think it's because I'm hungry, but—Ew, no, it's because I'm emotional.*

“Stupid mortals,” I snifle, kicking at a loose rock on the street. “I need my damn coffee before I decide to start a national riot or something.”

***by Hava Sky***

Laval, Québec

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Approaching Dawn

The scaffolding groans from the endless assault of the windy night. Rain slashes across the sky, needle-like shards of icy pain striking viciously against the dull grey concrete and the thick, void windows of the empty towers. Covering my face as best I can with the hood of my jacket, I continue up the side of the building. My soaked feet feel numb in my shoes, and with a loud squeaking noise, they let slip on the wet surface of the plywood plank. I tumble from the platform. An uncontrollable shriek begins to build up in my ears as the wind whistles past me and the temperature plummets. Lightning splits the sky, and I realize that I am falling. I frantically grasp for the iron bars, and with a muscle-tearing jerk, I slam into the grid of the scaffolding sideways and come to an instantaneous halt.

I am safe for now. As I climb back into the metal skeleton, I hear the sound of a vehicle, approaching fast from the winding streets that lead to the construction site. Quickly, I scurry into the doorway of an elevator shaft, crouching against the steel frame. The doors of the car slam, and I hear the raspy voices of two men. I feel queasy as I realize that they are Combine officers.

“Karl, there is nobody here. Why would anybody come to an abandoned construction site so far from accessible places in the city? C’mon. Get back in the car. It’s cold, and anybody who thinks that revolutionary pest could even make it half the way here on foot on her own is insane.” The man’s thick, Western accent confirms my fears that they are part of GFI, the secret police of Combine. I try to hide further in the shadows as their high-beam flashlights rake across the concrete pillars.

“Hans, you know the colonel would not spare any chance and we would be put in detention if we didn’t at least come out here and search. Nevertheless, it is terribly cold. Let’s go. If the girl is still out here, let somebody else find her. I’m finished with this nonsense mumbo-jumbo. I’m not risking getting sick just to track down some pesky brat.”

I hear feet shuffle on the gravel, and soon, doors slam, and the car starts up. I crawl from my crouched position. Rolling to the edge of the floor, I look through a giant window, and I spot it: the seal of a red eagle with a spear of gold in its claws. The symbol of the Autarch of Combine, whose ruthless guerilla forces secretly occupy and terrorize my town. I stare as the car speeds off.

In the distance, a faint hue of burgundy peeks over the horizon. The sun is slowly rising, and I must climb swiftly. Time is trickling away, and my cover of darkness is commencing its recession from the rising light. With a swig of water from my bottle, I adjust my backpack and begin my ascent. With each stride, my feet become ever sorer, and my back turns into a slab of numbness, but with each breath, I push one more step. The fate of my people is inside my bag, and I must bring it to the top of the tower.

Hours of climbing finally lead me to the roof. I unpack my cargo, sliding out the metal cylinder. Tapping a passcode onto the screen, it purrs to life. The transmitter is ready. As the indicator light blinks to a vivid amber, I whip out my battered Datapad, and I frantically punch in the addresses to every online forum and news channel I can remember. My thumbs type faster than the beat of a hummingbird’s wings, their movement blurring as I send out my frantic calls for help. It will not be long before Combine’s intelligence agencies detect outgoing signals from an unregistered site.

A terse half hour passes as I send out my final dispatch. My job is finished. I watch as the sun finally reveals its full face from behind the cover of the horizon, projecting its blazing glory, illuminating the sandy terrain and the waking city underneath. In this moment, I am finally at peace. Faint sirens and the sound of helicopters arise from the distance, but they do not matter to me now. The beacon of hope has been lit, and no darkness can corrupt the purity of the faith in its light.

*by Kelvin Ling*

Richmond, British Columbia