

FIRST PRIZE

The Painting

The bell to the musty antique shop tinkled gently as I stepped inside. Strolling around in the dim lighting of the tiny shop, I glanced at dusty items sitting untouched on shelves. My gaze landed on an intriguing painting in which people stood on a cobblestoned street. Determining instantly that it'd be a nice addition to my home, I brought it to the checkout counter to pay.

A wrinkled old man glanced up with thoughtful blue eyes as I held out the money. "Good choice," he chuckled, handing me the change. "A magical canvas is sure to spice up your life."

I ambled home, confused about his strange comment. As soon as I had the chance, the new work of art was hung up in my living room. When I was finally satisfied with the arrangement, I plopped down into my leather recliner and carefully inspected the painting.

A man in a 1700's waistcoat seemed to be pounding on the surface of the canvas with his fists, and as I watched, a woman in a heavily frilled blouse and skirt mouthed "help" at me.

How strange, I thought, *it seems as if they're trying to escape*. I immediately dismissed the notion and told myself repeatedly that it was just a hallucination. I closed my eyes, wishing these strange people away, but once I opened my eyes again, there they were.

I curiously stood up and lifted the painting gingerly off the peach wall. Tilting it, I was astounded to see a small piece of paper flutter out of the frame and onto my carpet. In handwriting, two lines were scrawled neatly on the weathered paper:

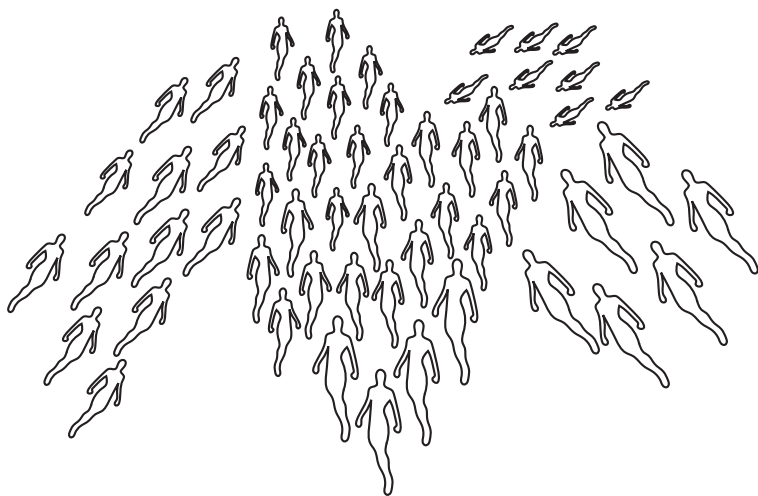
*"Hidden in me is the answer you seek
To save these people from a future most bleak."*

I attempted to decipher the strange message, to no avail. Frustrated, I traced my callused fingers across the painting's shiny, black frame. A subtle, uneven ridge captured my attention, and I cautiously applied more pressure to it. Suddenly, a compartment door swung open with a *click*, revealing a tiny eraser I picked up and held in my hand. I experimentally brushed the eraser along the canvas a couple of times, staring in astonishment as men and women from different eras emerged one by one from the picture and stepped, bewildered, onto my carpet.

Recovering from my state of shock, I became aware that my house was horridly untidy, and that it wasn't fit for guests yet. I ushered all six of them to the front door and watched in relief as we parted ways.

I guess you never know what fun you may have when you purchase a magical painting, I thought, satisfied, before heading to my room.

by Stephanie Huynh (Grade Seven)
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FIRST PRIZE

The Migration

“*Shh.*” The girl puts a finger to her lips and quietly leads her brother into the hallway.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

The girl’s eyes light up. “Somewhere special.”

She opens the door to the fire escape and starts climbing. The boy has never really been good with heights, so as he follows her, he looks out ahead.

They call it the city that never sleeps, yet tonight, there seems to be tranquillity, a stillness even, amid the vehicles rushing beneath them as they ascend. The boy breathes it all in and tries not to look down.

As they climb higher, he realizes that their footsteps aren’t as loud as usual, as if the eerie silence over the city affected these as well. He wonders how much higher they will go.

Finally, they reach the top of the fire escape. From here, the boy can see all the buildings in the neighbourhood, maybe even the entire downtown area. From here, the boy can ignore everything and pretend he’s the king of the world.

They stand in silence for a few moments, sibling and sibling, until he speaks: “Why are we here?”

She replies, simply, “Watch.”

Suddenly, as if on cue, thousands of pale, bluish figures emerge from the buildings, the houses, everywhere. The figures float just above the siblings’ heads and gently glide in the same direction—the distant waterfront. The boy’s heart skips a beat.

There’s no scary factor to them, strangely, but an eerie contentedness, a sense of satisfaction. Several of “them” pass through the boy, and despite the chill in the air, his body fills with warmth.

He watches thousands of the figures glide towards the lake, each one unique. He occasionally picks one out from the silent crowd to study. Some are tall, some are small, some are large, some slim; however, they all share the same pale, blue hue.

The mass now seems to have changed direction and is gliding away from the water. The boy notices that they seem to be moving a little faster. Their speed increases steadily, steadily, until suddenly—

The figures disappear as quickly as they came. The boy looks around, startled. *Where did they go?*

His head floods with questions. *Who were those things? Where were they going? How did she know about them?* He doesn’t have time to ask, however, because before he knows it, she’s rushing him back down the fire escape and leading him to his room. She ushers him into bed and kisses his forehead. Before she can leave, though, he finally finds his voice. “What was that?” he asks, breathlessly.

“That,” she whispers, her eyes sparkling in the darkness, “was the migration.”

by Katya Arifin (Grade Eight)

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SECOND PRIZE

Flight for Freedom

Jane was done. She had enough of working endless hours, enough of the scores of wounds from going too slow—enough of the whole town. She was going to escape to the woods, and she was going to escape tonight. She quickly slipped into her cabin and started to pack. The few clothes she had, she stuffed into her bag. She had it all planned out. She would sneak into the kitchen to get some food, and then slowly creep along the path until she was the closest she could get to the woods. From there, she would make a break for the woods and continue to the river. The river would be her salvation, where she could flow down it until she reached the city of Free.

She crept towards the kitchen and winced as the door creaked. Slowly, she took the food and plopped it into her bag.

“What are you doing here?” yelled a chef, making Jane drop a piece of cheese.

Her plan was forgotten as she bolted for the door, while the chef sounded the alarm. As she made her wild dash for the woods, she was relieved when no one seemed to be following her. Then shots rang out as she tripped and fell. A sharp burn worked its way up her leg. All was quiet, until she heard a snuffling sound. Heavy footfalls echoed in the forest, and a branch snapped. She dragged herself further into the woods, stumbling over the rocks and twigs that brushed against her legs.

She couldn't help noticing deep scratch marks on the trees as she scurried to a clearing. More shots rang out of the silence. She heard them zip over her head, bouncing off rocks and trees. Then she heard one hit its mark. The sound that emerged from the beast behind her wasn't human. She quickly ducked behind a tree as the animal staggered inside the clearing, lurching with convulsions. The gruesome sight made her head spin. She had forgotten about the animals in the woods.

“Don't faint, don't faint,” she whispered, trying to quiet her breathing. Her heart pounded in her chest as the creature stumbled past her. It moaned and fell against a tree. A groan emerged from it that shook the trees. The beast crumpled to the ground and lay there, not moving. In order to go forward, she would have to pass it.

She tried to quietly slip past it, but it raised its head at her. Yet surprisingly, she didn't see pain; she saw compassion. Then she knew: the beast had sacrificed itself for her. She stood there for a moment, and then rushed towards the river and towards freedom.

by Lydia Berghuis (Grade Seven)

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SECOND PRIZE

Growing Pain

The “Song of the Swans” transmitted from the broken ballerina music box couldn’t soothe my melancholy. Since May 3, 2009, Julia was destined to be my nemesis from the very moment she was born. I couldn’t bear seeing my mom holding Julia to her bosom, gently caressing her hair. I detested watching my dad kissing her tender cheeks and remarking, “Honey, look how cute our princess is.” She practically stole all of their affection—at the expense of mine. Despite being only a foot away from my parents, I felt we were separated by an invisible wall, me being cocooned in my isolated world.

One Sunday morning last autumn, when the first rays of sun filtered through the blinds, I trotted down the stairs, heading towards the family room for my “Sponge Bob” cartoon. The first image reflected in my eyes ruined my blissful mood. Julia was tiptoeing around the black leather couch, enthralled with her music box. I hated her bouncing ponytail. I hated her sky-blue bubble skirt. I hated every single genetic advantage she had inherited from my parents, including her blonde hair, her luminous eyes, and her gracefully pointed nose. I hated Julia.

“Ted, can I borrow your harmonica?”

“Sure! Exchange with that one,” I replied, pointing my finger at the music box.

“But . . . that’s my birthday present,” Julia murmured in a depressing voice.

“Then scam out of here!” I purposefully raised my voice.

Julia spontaneously looked down to avoid my eyes. As she quietly inched away, tears welled up in her eyes. As usual, she didn’t cry, knowing the domino effect it would trigger. I was internally thrilled for gaining supremacy over her.

As green maple leaves turned red and returned to the ground, my hatred towards Julia morphed into remorse. Doctor Alex, an oncologist, announced that Julia had been diagnosed with leukemia . . . advanced. Her velvety hair got thinner every time she underwent chemotherapy. Within weeks, she lost half of her weight. I was guilt-ridden as I saw her visage turn pale and creases engrave themselves into the corners of her eyes while she moaned with unbearable pain.

As fate would have it, I was the only next of kin with suitable marrow. It was the first time I felt grateful for being able to save Julia from her eternal darkness. The next morning, I brought her the musical box, hoping it would bring luck.

“Ted, do you hate me?”

Her question took me by surprise. “No . . . I love you—more than I ever expected.”

Julia gave me a faint smile. She lost her grip the moment she intended to pass me her treasure. The musical box fell, shattering into pieces.

by Max Koh (Grade Eight)
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THIRD PRIZE

Mount Flattop

I run as fast as I can up the mountain. They're still on my tail; I'm hoping that I will lose them in the harsh snowstorm. The mountain is steep; however, there is a tricky path that leads up to the top. That is what I want to reach . . . the top.

Rumours say that there is a massive amount of riches at the top of this tall mountain. Many people have attempted to climb it. But they've all been stopped by the police rangers; it's against the law to climb Mount Flattop. Nobody knows what the government has hidden up there. I'm about to find out. The rangers are far behind me.

I stumble as I climb the steep path. Snow flies in my face. There's no way the rangers will catch me now. Snow tumbles down beside me. I try not to lose my footing.

After a tiring hour, I finally reach the top. I look over across the mountaintop. It is completely flat, except for a large building. I get up and walk over to the building.

There is a small door at the side of the building. It seems to be frozen shut. I use the pick-axe buckled to the side of my belt. I break the ice easily, but it takes at least five minutes to hack the door open. I run into the building.

I seem to be in a large, empty room. I start walking to the other side of the room. I stop halfway. There seems to be some sort of clear barrier. It isn't solid. I can't exactly tell what it is. I slowly reach my arm out to touch it. I feel nothing. So, I step in.

I scream. There are people sobbing in pain. They lie spread out over the floor. I can tell from their transparent glow, and their chilling presence, that they are ghosts. They are dead.

One calls out to me. "Girl!" she says between sobs. Her arms are bloody and she looks tired.

I ignore her. I walk around the piles of ghostly bodies. I look around. There is nothing but walls. I feel the walls. They're stone hard. No way out.

I run back to the barrier, it has become hard too. I realize why the government had been shielding this from us. It was for our own good. I know what is going to happen to me. I will die up here and become a ghost. Here, I will spend my eternity.

Sadness fills my body. I lie down on the cold floor and begin to sob, just like the other ghosts. I am one of them now.

by Jasmine Teixeira (Grade Seven)

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THIRD PRIZE

Silence

“Hey, sweetheart, how was your day?” my grandmother says as I struggle to get into her white pickup truck.

I don’t answer; instead, I just re-apply my black eyeshadow all over my eyelids.

“I bought some apples, we can make some pie later. I know apple pie is your favourite!” She smiles, looking at me.

Silence. I act as if I don’t hear her, reach over, and turn on the radio.

As we pull up to my grandparents’ house, I see my grandfather mowing the lawn. He looks up and smiles at me, as if everything is normal. I get out of the truck and walk past him, not acknowledging him at all. “Kelly?” he yells. I keep walking.

I open the old wooden door and look around at what is now known as “home.” My parents’ cat, Charlie, runs to greet me at the door. He’s my only family left.

I bend down, drop my bag, and start petting his matted orange fur. He purrs, licking my face. I smile, for the first time in ages. “I love you,” I whisper, rubbing the back of his ear. He purrs louder, letting me know he loves me back. I kiss Charlie goodbye, then walk upstairs.

Three weeks ago, my life was completely different.

Memories of my mom flood my head as I walk past my mother’s old room, the baby-blue walls, the pink carpet, and her bed, untouched. Now, it has no purpose, for no one will come back to sleep in it. I brush away a tear and run into the guest room, where I am now staying. I grab my once white pillow and bury my face in it, so deep I can barely breathe, and sob. I miss them so much. I just wish I could tell them that.

“Kelly!” I hear my grandmother scream. I ignore her, I just keep sobbing. “Kelly!” she screams again. “It’s your grandfather!” I hear the pain in her voice. “Please, I need help!” she cries.

I lift my head, looking at the door. I’m not in the mood to talk. I stand up and close my door.

A soft sound breaks the silence, getting louder and louder. *A siren?* The loud noise is now shaking my room. Doors are slamming, people are talking. *What is happening?* I grab my pillow and run down the stairs to see my grandmother climbing into the back of an ambulance. “Wait!” I holler.

With both of my grandparents inside, the ambulance rushes away, leaving me behind. Now, I’m the one being ignored. *Meow*, Charlie cries. “Tell me it’s gonna be okay,” I beg.

Charlie turns his head, and walks away.

Silence.

by Carina Braam (Grade Eight)
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