

FIRST PRIZE

Countdown

CATHERINE BAILEY WAS AN ORDINARY GIRL. She was as plain as a dormouse; with her simple, straight locks of brown hair, she blended perfectly into the crowded streets of France. But it was this ordinary girl who first heard the distant sounds of an air raid.

Flames burst in red golds on the horizon, accompanied by frightened screams of terror. Catherine paled and dropped the rolls she was carrying, the bread spilling out onto the cobblestone. She turned and sped back down the street, muttering obscenities as she ran. Blood pounded in her ears as her shoes skidded on the pebbles of the rough road. Heart racing, her thoughts immediately darted to her beloved pet.

“Lucky!” she screamed. Civilians had seen the fires, and the gossip of the square morphed into frantic shouts. “Lucky!” She swept past clustered groups of fleeing families, straining her ears for the meows of a cat. She halted at the sight of a familiar face. “Monsieur Bernard!”

The old tailor turned towards her as he readied a carriage. “Catherine! You must go now! The bombings—”

“Have you seen Lucky?”

“*La chatte?* Last saw her going through the library—”

The library—of course! She ran off with newfound determination.

“Sweet child,” Monsieur Bernard mused as he watched the girl disappear. He heaved a sigh and threw another bundle of fabric aboard. Just in case.

Ten.

She ran past the fish market, the orphanage, and the fromagerie, the clicks of her heels blaringly loud in the vacant streets. The library, once the greatest pride of France, was now considered a waste of space. With its rotting wooden boards and peeling paint, it was a sight for sore eyes. Rooms that once held unimaginable amounts of knowledge were suddenly empty, their books consumed by rats and mice. Catherine allowed herself one shuddering breath before stepping inside.

Five.

Moving past a moth-eaten curtain, she leapt across a bundle of discarded manuscripts. “Lucky. . .” A cockroach emerged from the loose floorboards, scuttering away as if sensing the danger above.

Four.

Dread dropped to the bottom of her stomach like a stone, and Catherine slipped to the floor in defeat—but a flash of orange caught her eye. Could it be?

Three.

“Lucky?” The name was a question, the last feeble attempt to call for the young kitten.

As if on cue, the animal prowled towards her, meowing pitifully. She laughed with relief.

Two.

The bombings were here—here, at the library; planes were roaring in the sky above her. She pulled her cat into her arms and smiled.

One.

Catherine Bailey, an ordinary girl, held her cat devotedly to her chest as her world came crashing down around her.

by Abigail Chan (Grade Seven)

Centennial Public School

Waterloo, Ontario

FIRST PRIZE

The Case of the Jewels of Venice

FLINCHER MANOR ALWAYS LOOKED EERIE in the moonlight. The towering stone columns, crouching gargoyles, and lifeless trees were no help, and Sybil could not help but shudder as the cool evening breeze wafted over her. Sybil made her way down the path and saw the porch light turning on in the distance. Its yellowish glimmer shed little brightness but enough to see Jarvis Flinchler step out of the shadows, his gangly figure framed in the dim light.

"Jarvis!" cried Sybil and flew to his arms.

"You've grown," he laughed, ruffling her curls. "I wish I could've visited under happier circumstances."

Sybil's smile faded. As expected, Cassidy stood waiting for them on the front porch, tapping her heel on the ground. "Finally," she snapped, and marched back indoors. Rolling her eyes, Sybil followed.

"Now that we're all settled in, let's discuss the Will, shall we?" Sybil's sister flattened a sheet of paper in front of her. In the candlelight, Cassidy's frog-like features looked even more grotesque, her bulging eyes and stubby fingers illuminated by the candle's glow.

The Will was short and to the point. Mom had left Cassidy and Jarvis thirty thousand dollars each.

"And to my little gem, I leave not only the remaining thirty thousand, but her favourite item of mine, the little porcelain doll on the dresser."

Cassidy slid it across the table. Sybil smiled and held it close.

After a pause, Jarvis spoke. "That's all? What about the Jewels of Venice? Mom's gems worth millions of dollars?"

Cassidy squirmed a little. "The jewels seem to have . . . gone missing," she said slowly.

"What?" cried her brother. "They couldn't have just gone missing without being stolen!"

"They're searching for them as we speak. In the meantime, I have thirty thousand dollars to spend, so I'll be heading out now. I'll see you both when they find the jewels." Rising from her chair, Cassidy glided out the door. Jarvis kicked the table and stormed out after her.

"Cassidy is greedy," said Mom.

Sybil laughed, "That's true."

Sybil unclasped the doll's necklace and laid it gently on the table.

"Jarvis isn't greedy," said Sybil.

Now, it was Mom's turn to laugh, "You have yet to discover your brother."

Where the necklace had been now displayed a thin crack on the doll's porcelain neck. Sybil clasped its head and twisted it to the left.

"Are you sure about this?" said Sybil.

"Positive," Mom smiled. "You deserve it, my little gem."

Hands shaking, Sybil placed the doll's head on the table. Leaning over, she peered into its hollow body. The Jewels of Venice shone up at her. Just as they had planned.

by Bianca Gudino (Grade Eight)

Mary, Mother of God School

Toronto, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

A Dive Bomber's Peril

FREDERICK SAT IN THE COCKPIT of the plane, staring aimlessly out the window. In one hand, he gripped the cold, metal steering wheel. In the other, he held yesterday's newspaper. "September 1, 1939. Germans Invade and Bomb Poland." Frederick never thought that in his short nineteen years of life, he would ever see such a thing—or be a part of it.

His assignment was to dive bomb one of Poland's military bases. He was probably going to die alone in the stuffiest plane he'd ever been in. And he had no choice. Frederick took the news well; he played it cool in front of his friends, but deep down, he was frightened.

He slammed the newspaper down on the aluminum floor, then reached into his pocket and pulled out several photos. First, his baseball team photo. Most boys on his team had been drafted into the military like himself. Frederick switched pictures. A family photo, with his parents and younger sister, Alice. His family loved him so dearly, he couldn't imagine a life without them. He shed a sigh of misery. Frederick flipped to the last picture. Martha. His sweetheart. They said they were in love, and they truly were, but Martha's parents didn't believe it. He stared at Martha's face longingly. A dirt-saturated tear streaked down his face. He knew he'd never see her again. He slipped the photographs into his pocket.

Frederick returned his gaze to the dusking atmosphere; the reflections of heaven's twilight glimmered in his teary eyes. He could see the final destination far away. As he neared his target, his palms began sweating profusely, hands slipping on the wheel. Perspiration dripped down his face instantaneously, as his cheeks flushed a beet red.

Once two miles away, he manoeuvred the airplane into a death-defying plunge. Dropping at an excessive velocity, great beads of sweat swept into Frederick's hair. Quickly, Frederick pressed a button, releasing a large metal bar, which swung down to avoid sending the explosive into the propellers. The missile had been launched.

Terror-stricken, Frederick pulled on the wheel, but before the plane could respond, the engine resonated a terrible noise. His heart sunk. The motor of the airplane sputtered and died. He had been caught in the blast of the explosion. As the airplane descended, Frederick felt himself being ripped apart, the flames searing and sizzling his skin. He screamed in agony, but nothing was to be heard. His life flashed before his eyes. A dizzying array of images danced. Suddenly, everything turned white. All feeling was lost, and a slight ringing could be heard.

He was home—he was where he needed to be. All was nothing.

by Kaia De La Campa (Grade Seven)

Ellison Elementary School
Vernon, British Columbia

SECOND PRIZE

The Seeker

THE TABLET CALLED TO HIM, a vague whispering in his ears, a Pandora's box begging to be opened. "Take me," it cried out, almost in anguish. "Take me home." His feet absently carried him towards it, his fingertips brushing across the inscriptions.

The next thing he knew, he was standing on the shores of Easter Island, Rapa Nui, clutching the stolen tablet in his hands, searching for the treasures the ancients had left behind. He felt a pull drawing him through the dark, greed fuelling his hunt.

Aaron clutched the tablet in his rough, calloused hands, the ancient wood flaking around the edges. The paper holding the translation crinkled in his pocket. The stars glimmered overhead, thousands of twinkling fireflies lighting up the dark sky.

He passed the towering stone head of one of the island's guardians. Its dark pitted eyes gazed ominously out towards the centre of the island, as if staring into his soul. The shadows cast from Aaron's flickering flashlight making it appear as if it were alive.

Aaron trudged up the rest of the hill, determined to reach what lay beyond. He fell onto the grassy slope, reaching down and clawing at the ground lining the side of the hill. He threw chunks of soil aside, desperately tearing at the earth. Until, finally, he had done it. Lying before him was the entrance to a tunnel. He climbed through, stepping down into the stone passageway.

Darkness enveloped him, a midnight mouth swallowing him whole, but he kept forging on. Burning desire drove him forward until he felt the air around him change. The tunnel had opened into a larger chamber.

Aaron turned his flashlight back on, and the room lit up. Piles of treasure, ancient gold, came alight in the cave. His fingertips brushed against the cold, dusty surface of the coins. He gracefully plucked one from the pile. It glittered unnaturally in the darkness as if a pale light shone within the gold plating. He suddenly felt a ripple run up his arm, and the coin shot across the room.

His arms trembled violently, surges of energy coursing through him. His limbs flailed, jerking out. Agony tore through him, shredding him from the inside out. A bloodcurdling cry ripped from his throat as he felt his living essence being torn from his body.

Aaron's sanity began slipping away, and in his last moments of consciousness, he watched as a glowing wisp drifted out from the coins into the darkness, the spirit of another greedy soul finding peace. And then, he was gone. His mind no longer his own, cursed to guard the treasure he so desperately wanted to possess for all eternity.

by Ayshia Burchill (Grade Eight)

Acadia Junior High School
Winnipeg, Manitoba

THIRD PRIZE

The Move

THE LONG ROAD STRETCHED OUT before Anton and his mom. The long drive from Calgary to Vancouver in the sizzling summer heat had been boring with nothing to do. Behind them, they had all of their possessions. Anton and his mom had left Calgary after his dad died and his mom accepted a job offer as a professor at an art school in British Columbia. The drive had started yesterday, progressing into the next day.

Finally, they arrived in the early afternoon. Moving to Vancouver had been hard for them, and the boy had been melancholy. Their new house wasn't special or anything, but the neighbourhood looked friendly.

After they had finished unloading everything from the car, his mom said in her kind voice, "Why don't you go see if there are any other kids your age around here?"

"Why?" he asked. "I can help you unpack everything, so we don't have to do it later. Also, I don't really think there are any other twelve-year-olds in this neighbourhood."

"Instead of standing there, go see."

"But I don't really want new friends."

"Go," his mom told him, "I think it will be good if you do."

He stepped out into the searing heat, getting a better look around. He saw a park near his house and went over, crossing the street. The park was expansive, and the boy heard moving water. He wandered into a grove of trees. As he entered, a boy jumped down from a tree.

"Oh, sorry about that," the boy said.

"You have to be more careful," a girl's voice spoke.

"Hi, I'm Cyrus, and the girl is Serena, my sister," the boy declared.

"Hi, I'm Anton. I am new here," he replied to him.

"Well, we live in this area too," Serena started. "Want to meet up tomorrow? We can show you around."

"Sure, I'll ask my mom," he replied.

When he went back home, he told his mom about the two kids he met, and she told him he could meet up with them. He still felt reluctant to go, and as if she knew this, she told him, "My father died early, too, but you know what helped me through that?" Anton listened to her as she said, "My friends helped me, and I think the people you met can help you, too. So, go tomorrow. Please, Anton, for me."

Anton met up with them the next day, the day after, and the next. He felt better, growing out of the sad, miserable trance he had been in. The boy became best friends with the two. They spent the summer together, and the boy found some happiness again.

by Joaquin Padolina (Grade Seven)

Northmount School for Boys

Toronto, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

Spitfire

I'VE ALWAYS WONDERED what the sun looks like. Squinting your eyes at the ball of fire, the orange and pink melt into the clouds. Mom says the sun is always there, watching you. I hope that's true.

WAVES CRASH ONTO ROCKS. Seagulls cry in the distance. Seagulls are odd. Never finding food for themselves, living off others. I'm the same way. I depend on people. My books describe seagulls as sky rodents, closely related to crows. They sound unique—unique is beautiful.

I never understood caring about appearances. How people get together because they're both attractive. I never pay attention to looks. Even my own. I don't look in the mirror. When I do, I don't see anything—or don't comprehend what I'm seeing. I see a blank slate. Everything I see is a blank slate. The characters I read about are always attractive. They impress royals with their beauty. I know this isn't reality.

I grew up reading. Imagining luscious hair on beautiful princesses. The baggy shirt on the prince. I imagined their happy ending. I want a happy ending. Books with unhappy endings are sad. If I got a happy ending, I would be one in billions.

I think glasses are amazing. Mom says I don't need glasses. I said they'll help me see. She says that's not how it works. I imagine glasses being portals. A relief during the day. My books say glasses accentuate the eyes. Hopefully, people think my eyes are pretty.

I've got surgery tomorrow. My mom didn't tell me anything. I think that's weird. People should know what their surgeries are for.

Mom keeps a hand on my thigh as we drive. I'm nervous. What could we be doing? Maybe Mom secretly planned a vacation. The heat of the sun shines through the window, focusing on my thigh. Mom gives me the pill I use to sleep on planes. I dry swallow it and feel drowsy. I fall asleep with the world.

I WAKE UP IN BED. A medium comfy bed. A bandage covers my eyes. I can tell because of its awkward warmth. My ears ring. I feel pain but can't pinpoint where.

A soft hand caresses my cheek. A ticklish breath hovers over my ear. My mom's whisper flows into my ear. Her voice is delicate. With soft hands, she unwraps my bandages. I turn my face to the window. My eyes open. I take a breath.

I've always wanted to see the sun. The vibrant colours. Squinting against the violent rays. My eyes open. I shed a tear. I've always wondered what the sun looks like; now, I know.

by Jordyn Derricott (Grade Eight)
Pine Grove Middle School
Edson, Alberta