

FIRST PRIZE

Grampy's Boat

I feel the sun on my shoulders. The water shimmers in the sunlight. I look admiringly at Grampy as I rebait my line.

A small boat approaches from the left. "Any bites?" a man bellows as he nears our location.

Grampy's response is always the same, regardless. "Eh . . . a few small ones," he replies. This always makes me chuckle.

Grampy and I have always had an unbreakable bond. "Well, boy, it doesn't look like they are biting today."

I respond as I have hundreds of times before. "That's okay, Grampy, I don't mind." Suddenly, I notice a storm cloud approaching. It is huge and black and seems to be moving eerily fast.

Within seconds, it is upon us. I feel my momentum violently start to shift from left to right. We are now taking on water. I look over to Grampy in panic. He seems to be moving in slow motion as he utters, "Gedovaboar!" I look at him in confusion. The water around my ankles now seems sickly warm and has changed from crystal clear to crimson red. I look back to Grampy in terror. "Gedovaboar!" he repeats.

Boom! A large thunder cloud erupts with rage as I am blinded by a flash of light.

"Get overboard!" Sergeant Slater is now screaming in my face. "Do you hear me, Private? That's an order!"

Before I can become fully aware of my surroundings, I leap. All at once, cruel realities hit me as my body plunges into the icy waters of the English Channel. First, I am not fishing with Grampy, who has been dead for over three years. Second, I am no longer a fourteen-year-old boy but a seventeen-year-old private in the 3rd Infantry Division in Northern France.

I immediately feel the massive blow to my chest, sending me soaring backwards. I am so cold.

"What was that?" I ask, not really wanting an answer.

So cold.

I wonder if anyone will someday speak of this moment.

So cold.

I feel my body start to go numb, almost warming against the night chill. I close my eyes as everything starts to lighten around me. All sounds of war fade away and are replaced by the sounds of loons on the lake. I feel the sun on my shoulders once again.

I am fourteen and sitting in Grampy's boat. We are fishing, as we have countless times in the past. He turns to me and states, "Well, boy, it doesn't look like they are biting today."

I smile as I respond as I have hundreds of times before and will for eternity. "That's okay, Grampy. I don't mind. . . . I don't mind at all."

by Nicholas Cain (Grade Nine)

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Rothesay, New Brunswick

FIRST PRIZE

Don't Pet the Bees

I'll always remember those summer days as a little girl when I went outside to play with the bees. I was so careful to avoid being spotted by my parents, who routinely lectured me on the importance of staying away from them. They didn't understand. Just because the bees stung me occasionally didn't mean they didn't have big golden hearts beneath their venom.

I can recall successfully sneaking out back into the garden and scanning the mounds of bright flowers for a glimmer of yellow and black. Some days, I wouldn't get to pet the bees because they were too fast. Instead, I would watch them, my young eyes swelling with awe. But despite my endless interest in watching their delicate little wings flutter about, I always felt a pang of disappointment when I didn't get to touch them.

When they didn't fly away from me, my heart would begin to beat faster and faster. I would reach out towards their furry coats, breathless. I'd feel the thrill as my fingertips grazed their soft backs. I'd imagine running back inside with one of my new friends perched on the nail of my index finger, a smug smile dripping down my rosy cheeks.

But when I actually made contact with the bees, they stung me each and every time. At first, I always wailed in agony, holding out my hand as my mother played nurse. I let myself be pitied, and I tried to ignore the smirks of my two older sisters. When I got a little older, I learned to hide my pain. After being stung, I'd grit my teeth and slink back inside. I'd walk upstairs quietly to tend to my wound. I learned how to cope with the pain, because I couldn't stand that "I told you so" look that invaded everyone's eyes.

Thirty-three years later, you'd expect that I would've outgrown this silly habit. Yet here I am, crumpled at the bottom of the closet that we share, muffling tremulous sobs. Bruises run up my left forearm and down my neck, too, from his tight grasp. A mixture of salty tears and fresh blood tumbles down my cheeks. I didn't see the wine glass that he had hurled at me until it was inches from my face. By that time, it was too late to dodge it entirely. I can hear him yelling from outside, and I'm waiting for him to break open the lock of the closet door. I'm gripping my phone tightly, wondering if I should call my mother for help. But after all these years, she'd be so disappointed to know that I'm still petting the bees.

by Erika Hunter (Grade Ten)
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FIRST PRIZE

Six Candles

There is one candle in the centre of a white-frosted cupcake. Its flame trembles as the small baby sputters at it. Across the table, his father smiles, holding a video camera and training it on his young son and his mother with her arm around the boy. As the flame flutters out, the family applauds and cheers. The baby giggles.

Two candles come quickly, along with a thick puff of blond hair and some fractured sentences. The mother smiles, but it fades as she turns to see him, cell phone in hand, frantically typing an email. She firmly elbows him; her grin reappears when he puts it down and cheers as their child blows out his candles.

When three candles arrive, they come with a brightly coloured box, and the boy tears it open eagerly. She watches him pull out his gift, a loud, yellow plastic truck, and glances towards the father, who takes a moment to look up from his laptop to grin tiredly and say, “Happy birthday, son.”

The atmosphere feels cold when four candles stand. The boy watches the tiny fires blaze. She’s staring disapprovingly at her husband, who seems oblivious to her expression. The boy extinguishes the candle excitedly, but his energy diminishes with the flame as he notices their faces. His mother sees his concern and quickly flashes a tight smile, her eyes flitting away sadly.

Five candles come, and the boy waits expectantly for his parents and for the gifts and smiles that are sure to come. As she brings out the cake, the mother sighs but wears a tired grin as she places it in front of her son. “Your father’s not coming,” she huffs but softens and kisses his forehead. “Happy birthday, sweetie,” she says and picks up a knife.

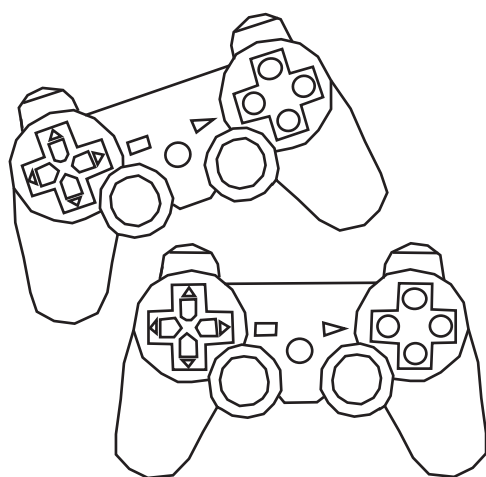
He wakes up, expecting six candles today, but is instead greeted by stiff stillness. It’s stale, as if nothing alive is inside. But there is something—*someone* sitting at the kitchen table, looking down at his hands, his eyes red and bleary. “Hey,” he says simply, his voice raw as his son enters. He puts down what he was looking at: a photograph . . . one candle, a smiling, happy family.

The boy looks around. “Where’s Mommy?”

His father doesn’t answer his question but opens the fridge and says quietly, “She left you something.”

As the young boy looks inside the refrigerator, something on the lowest shelf catches his eye: a small, round vanilla cake coated in blue icing and topped with six striped candles. Piped in red icing on the cake are two words that even a six-year-old boy can read: “Happy Birthday.”

by Bethany Chong (Grade Eleven)
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FIRST PRIZE

For One More Game

I slam the trunk shut, wincing at the finality of the bang. I imagine the car breaking down halfway to college. I find myself hoping it won't even start, hoping to postpone the moment of departure into the unknown. With a shrug (or shudder), I shake off the apprehension.

Just then, I'm aware of the emptiness in my pocket. *Wait—where's my phone?*

I trudge back to the house, through the carpet of leaves littering the driveway. Inside, I clatter upstairs and into my room.

I'm rooting through the drawers—*Where is it? Where is it?*—when I hear scuffling from behind the huddled cardboard boxes. Frowning, I shove them aside to find my little brother digging through the one labelled “toys.” He's using my phone to illuminate the contents. His curls are covered in Styrofoam, making him look like a snow angel. The sight only makes me angrier.

“Get outta my stuff, Gavin!” I yell, snatching the phone. “For crying out loud, I haven't even left the house yet!”

He answers as only little brothers can. “You're not the boss of me!”

I groan. “You're not supposed to be in here, this is *my*—”

I stop short. It isn't my room, not anymore. “Go away, Gavin,” I manage, weakly.

He stomps away, muttering, “I'm glad you're leaving. I hope you never come back.” Then, he's gone.

Sighing, I turn to close the box. Then, I see something, sitting atop the stuffed animals: a pair of video-game consoles.

Memories wash over me. . . . My older sister and I, each clutching a game in our hands, faces lit up by the pixelated glow. “*Bet I can beat you at this, easy.*”

When she left for college, I'd stay up late, playing the old games. But victory was stale without someone to cheer with. Eventually, I stopped playing. I never stopped missing her.

I remember begging her to stay. “*Just one more game, just one more.*” I remember standing on the porch, watching the leaves scatter across an empty driveway.

Still holding the two games, I slip into my brother's room. He's lying on his bed. “Bet I can beat you at this, easy,” I say, softly.

He half turns, one eye peeping at me from over his shoulder.

I hold out the games. *Just one more game. Just one more.*

“Those are like a thousand years old,” he scoffs. He takes one anyway.

I'm late for my first class at college. I couldn't care less. I'm smiling for the first time in a long time.

“Can't we play one more game? Just one more?”

“I'm coming back, Gavin. And when I do, I'm gonna beat you at this, easy.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

by Rebecca Rocillo (Grade Twelve)

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SECOND PRIZE

The Flower That Sparkled

“La, la, la,” the little girl sang cheerfully. She soon started to skip. The young brunette had decided that today was a good day, and the end of the world couldn’t change her mind.

“What’s got you so happy, Lily?” the man walking with her asked.

“We’re gonna see Big Brother today!” she replied with a wide grin.

They continued to walk until Lily stopped suddenly and crouched down. “Look at this flower, Daddy; don’t you think Big Brother would love it?” she exclaimed, pointing at a beautiful, pure-white flower. For a moment, it seemed to sparkle.

“He’ll love it,” her father replied.

Some time later, the pair arrived at their destination. As they entered the building, the flower in Lily’s tiny hands, she stopped skipping. She was as quiet as a mouse. She always had to be quiet in this strange building filled with machines and people dressed in white.

The silent girl frowned as they turned a corner. “This isn’t the way we normally go, Daddy,” she whispered.

“I know,” he told her with a sad smile, “your brother’s in a different room now.”

They walked into the room slowly, but Lily was soon rushing to a teen, sitting up in bed attached to a bag filled with liquid. “We got you a present, Big Brother! Look, look!” the child stated, eagerly giving him the flower.

“Wow!” he replied. “A Calla lily; I didn’t know they grew around here.”

“A lily!” she said in amazement. “Just like me!” She was practically bouncing with excitement.

“I’ll think of you whenever I see one,” he told her solemnly.

“You’ll see a lot when you become a florist!” she responded cheerfully.

“Yeah,” he agreed, his voice cracking, “a lot. Can you make me a promise, Sis? Will you think of me whenever you see a Calla lily?”

“I promise,” she replied in a serious tone. She paused for a moment. “I need to use the bathroom,” she told them as she ran out.

“She’s only five,” he whispered, sorrow dripping from his voice like tears. He took a moment, and then continued, “Do you think she’ll remember me?”

“How could she forget her big brother? You mean the world to her,” he stated.

“Thanks, Dad,” the thin teen replied.

“I’m just sorry there isn’t more I can do,” the father added.

“Take care of her. That’s all the comfort I need.”

Many years later, Lily sat in silence on the steps to her house. She felt a tear fall as she stared at the wilted Calla lily before her. “I miss you,” she whispered as the wind picked up the once sparkling flower and carried it away.

by Brooke Sawatzky (Grade Nine)

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SECOND PRIZE

Flawless

Our Community is a wonderful machine. Community never breaks, never stalls. Community must always, always be perfect. That is why we, the members of Community, are all so delighted to take part. Born and raised in our pods, we only leave them at exactly 7:45 a.m. to retrieve the mail. Why, in a system so perfect, would we need to leave our pods for such a menial task? Simple. It allows us to see the wall. The wall protects Community from the outside, whatever is out there. Our daily excursion reminds us of this.

It's 7:45 a.m. Swallowing a nutrition tablet, I leave my pod as always, sleek doors automatically sliding open. I look ahead, scanning the wall of seemingly infinite height, following the familiar, smooth surface with my eyes. I look to the left; there's Don outside his pod. *Good.* I look to my right. *She is missing. Today, she will not retrieve her mail. She has made a mistake.*

I step forward and stand on the edge of my patio, just enough to see that her pod door is open ever so slightly. I immediately retrieve my emergency buzzer from my rightmost shirt pocket. Instinct. *"If anything strange happens, use the buzzer."* Taking one last glance at the door of my pod and one look at hers, I make a decision. Clambering onto the railing, which I have never so much as touched before today, I jump onto her side.

Seconds after manually opening the door, something seizes my arms roughly from behind. Peering down, I notice that a woman's hands are clutching me. My fingers automatically tighten around the buzzer. Twisting me towards her, she stares at me with piercing blue eyes, "You, come with me. We have to leave."

Ah, one of these cases. I see now.

She exhales. "I can't stay in this mind-numbing 'Community' any longer, and I can't survive alone. You're . . . different from the others." A pitiful smile forms on my lips as I place my thumb directly over the red, flashing button of my buzzer. Her eyes widen. "No, please . . .," she begs, stiffening her grip on me.

I press the buzzer. An alarm resonates throughout Community, the ear-piercing sound banging in my ears.

She, betrayed, lets go of my arms. "I thought you'd understand." Her voice shakes.

My gaze rests on her again, watching her sharp blue eyes brighten as I finally reply, "I *do* understand." Pushing her away, I whisper, "Run, head towards Block C. I'll lead the authorities elsewhere." I look at her one last time, then turn away, face slowly twisting into a crooked grin.

That's one flaw removed from the system. Only 1,274 more left to go.

by Caresse Lepage (Grade Ten)

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SECOND PRIZE

Evals

“Are you tired of getting your hands dirty? For the small price of \$250, you can own a brand-new cleaning machine! It just needs to be fuelled up two times a day, and it’s ready to go. Don’t forget to let it empty itself if you don’t want it to leave a mess on your floor. Small enough, this virgin cleaning machine can fit through any small space! Evals can please all your needs! It comes in multiple colours: black, brown, yellow, and white. Depending on the colour and the quality, the price may vary. This high-class product is too prestigious to be available in stores! Call 8888-Evals to lift all that weight off your shoulders!”

Xander was instantly sold. He scurried to his savings and saw \$420. Contemplating, he didn’t know if he should either buy the Evals or the new gaming system. Subsequently, he thought of his mother. Working day and night at the factory, his mother was trying to provide for the family with no other support. Having an Evals would definitely be appreciated; thus, he reached his conclusion. Hands shaking, Xander leaped with joy and embraced the thought of having his very own Evals. He barrelled towards his mother’s laptop and checked the person’s contact information. Immediately, Xander called them.

“Hello!” Xander beamed. His fingers fidgeting, barely keeping the phone in place.

“Hello, sir!” the man chimed. “I believe this call is for the Evals advertised on Raven Market?”

“Yes! I was wondering if you have any available.”

“You’re in luck. There are a few more left. Three blacks and a white. The white is untouched; thus, the price will be increased.”

“How much of an increase?” he inquired, biting his nails as sweat dropped, gazing at his money.

“Hundred dollars.”

“That would be perfect!” Fear relinquished itself from Xander’s body. “May I have the white one?”

“Of course! It’ll be ready by Sunday. I’ll text you the address.”

“Excuse me, sir. Can’t you just mail me the machine?”

“Ha-ha! You have a great sense of humour. Mailing an Evals? Hilarious!”

“Yeah, hilarious,” gulped Xander, horror creeping back.

“I will—”

“Help . . . me,” someone whispered, interrupting the man. Their voice ached with agony and laced with desperation. Choked sobs were heard with every word uttered from their parched lips.

“Damn machine!” the man hissed.

Xander listened closely. He heard some mumbled threats, then the distinct sound of a slap followed by a blood-curdling scream. The person was crying, their tears suffocating them as the onslaught continued.

“Hello!” the man boomed.

“Hi,” he replied after taking a deep breath, inches away from dropping his phone.

“Sorry about that. You know how Evals are.”

Do I? Xander pondered.

by Jessica Daveshar (Grade Eleven)

Rick Hansen Secondary School
Abbotsford, British Columbia

SECOND PRIZE

The Escape from That Night

“Passport?” the woman said, smiling as she took our passports from my hand. She looked down at the face on the small plastic booklet and then back up at me, still with her delighted poised smile. Then, she did the same for Luna, lifting her head back and forth from the picture to my daughter. I could feel sweat trickling down the back of my neck as I stood there, waiting for her approval for us to proceed.

“Have a wonderful flight,” she said, smiling brighter than before.

I grabbed Luna’s hand, and we made our way down the narrow hallway towards our plane.

My backpack was heavy, and I felt an ache in my lower right side. I looked down at Luna, who was clinging onto a stuffed plush bunny her mother had given her on her fourth birthday two years ago. In that moment, my eyes started to burn, and my vision went blurry from tears. I thought I was going to cry.

I began to see the entrance to our plane and knew this moment wasn’t the time to break down. “Now, remember,” I said softly to Luna, “if anyone asks, we’re going for a holiday to Barbados.”

Luna looked up at me a bit nervous. “Yes, Poppa.”

We boarded the plane and found our seats. I felt a rush of relief flood through me, and I began to believe we would actually make it.

I looked over to Luna, who was sucking her thumb and holding on tightly to my hand. She reminded me so much of her mother, with her soft brown hair and big brown eyes. I smiled and squeezed her hand.

The seats on the plane started to fill up. I took out my notebook and flipped through old grocery lists and doodles. I couldn’t afford to draw attention to myself at this point; I had made it too far.

“Sir?” a voice bellowed from above me. I looked up to see a tall man towering over me. He was wearing beige khakis and a light-blue button-up dress shirt. “What a wonderful day to be flying, isn’t it?” he said as he sat down in the empty seat beside me.

“Yes,” I replied, trying not to sound nervous.

“Where are we heading?” he asked, smiling.

“Barbados . . . for a holiday,” I replied.

“Not bringing your wife?” he questioned.

“She couldn’t make it,” I said and turned to face Luna.

Does he know what I did . . . to her? The anxiety from that night flooded through me like a sharp breeze on a windy day.

The plane started to move down the runway, and I shut my eyes.

Let’s not go back. Let’s never go back.

by Valerie Durant (Grade Twelve)
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THIRD PRIZE

Destination

Somewhere above the Arctic Circle, a boy sat alone at a bus stop.

The wolf sat apprehensively a few metres back, quizzically staring at the human. His shoulders were slouched against the bench, and although he had a sandwich in his hand, he showed no interest in eating it. The sunset's golden glow hardly seemed to lighten his sombre demeanour.

Having become accustomed to begging for food from bus passengers, the wolf crept up to the bench, positioning himself in line with the human's view but far enough away he felt safe.

The boy glanced up with dull eyes, not remotely surprised at the wild animal standing in front of him. After a moment, he turned his eyes back to his sandwich as if the wolf didn't exist. Frustrated, the wolf moved closer, whining slightly.

With a sigh, the boy's eyes met those of the persistent canine's. "Fine, you can have it," he said with resignation, tossing the sandwich towards the wolf, "I wasn't going to eat it anyway."

The scavenger hungrily caught the sandwich and chewed with content. He looked up at the boy as he swallowed and suddenly felt as if the sandwich were worth something much more than food.

"Are you staying or leaving already?" The wolf's ears perked up at the boy's words. He was tired and his paws were freezing, but he trotted up to the boy and nuzzled his head in the gloved hand.

"Leave, mutt, I don't have any more food," the boy snapped fearlessly. The wolf circled a place near the boy's boots and stubbornly sat down.

"You're not very wild, are you?" A hint of emotion rang through the boy's cold words. Tenderly, he reached down and scratched the wolf's tangled, snowy fur. His hands were cold, but the wolf didn't mind. It had another source of warmth now.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," the boy confessed as the sun slipped over the horizon. Much to the boy's surprise, the wolf made a reassuring whine. He talked some more, and the wolf continued to listen as if it understood. It suddenly dawned on the boy that he was keeping something in that should have been talked about long before—and talking about it seemed to be changing him. Soon, words were tumbling out of his mouth, racing to get the heavy weight off of his shoulders.

Finally, when the sun was long gone, a bus began nearing the stop. "Well, I guess that's my ride," the human told the wolf, gathering his bags. When he turned to say goodbye to the animal, though, only wind was in its place.

Somewhere above the Arctic Circle, a man boarded the bus.

by Natalie Houle (Grade Nine)
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THIRD PRIZE

How to Un-brainwash Yourself

“You’re broke,” said your son, exasperated.

“I’m fine,” you sighed.

“Why do you let her rip you off? You have my financial support.”

“But you’re minimum wage. No, my prices are unreasonable. I’m lucky she comes back.”

She came back. Every morning for the past two years, her smile illuminated your lonesome ice-cream shop. For a half hour, you could pretend she was yours. It wasn’t romantic per se—you just enjoyed the company. When you’re an old man who’s moved to a new country, with a son who’s constantly working and a wife who’s no longer here, the company of another elder can be liberating.

“The usual.” She smiled.

You stacked two scoops of butter pecan onto a cone, hiding your joy of feeling needed—at least for a split half hour; at least for a daily ice-cream cone.

“How much—?” You cleared your throat.

She handed you a crumpled dollar bill.

You noted yourself shrinking in her presence, not wanting her to leave. “T-thank you,” you stuttered.

“You overcharge for the double scoop,” she stated.

“You’re right.” On your price list, you cross out “3” for a double scoop and replace it with “1.”

“So, how’ve you been?” she asked.

As you recounted anecdotes, you marvelled at how similarly you used to talk with your family (and friends who felt like family) before old age and moving countries got in the way and interaction became more inaccessible. Did she feel like family? Her face, familiar like home? You hoped so.

“What about you?” You braced yourself for the answer.

“I went to Roland’s Ice-cream Parlour. They never have butter pecan, which if you ask me, is the only flavour worth having.”

“It’s the best flavour,” you agreed, ignoring the nagging concern that for the past two years, she’s spent your half hour complaining about Roland’s. You listened intently, but found it ironic this time how she’d complain about no butter pecan while holding it in her hand.

“Every morning, I’ve gone there hoping, but they never have any.”

“It’s okay, I have lots,” you joked.

“Yeah,” she muttered, distracted. “I need to go.”

You watched her push away her stool forcefully and stride out with an aggression unfamiliar to most elderly. You shook away the fear that she was nothing but a stranger who crumbled the walls of your ice-cream shop.

Now, you’re broke. Your shop’s falling apart, the lights dim and floor creaking, but you make sure you’re never out of butter pecan ice cream.

However, after another month of watching your fragile stool get shoved against your counter, you grab a pen. Crossing out the “1,” you trace over the crossed-out “3”—once, then twice.

by Crystal Xue (Grade Ten)
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Toronto, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

Left Behind

The thick molasses air of mid-summer suffocates me, smothering my airways and pressing on my lungs. The ripe, sickly sweet scent of summer along with the heat rolling off me is nauseating. I gag as the putrid smell of rotting animal sneaks past the slightly ajar window into my room. Likely, the animal's bones were crushed by the weight of tires being driven over it without ever being noticed. It is unnervingly silent, the hands of the upright clock moving only when necessary, the echoing lost in the dense air.

It should've been winter.

The Toraja of Sulawesi keep their dead for months if not years: a hollow body worshipped as one living. Perhaps the result of desperation, of human longing . . . it is not by choice, but by need, an act of tradition but also of necessity. Here, by western custom, this will be the last and only night for my older sister's corpse to rest on her bed, where her last sigh escaped her lips quieter than night. She's gone, a mere step away from adulthood. The flowing curtains of her room are drawn, just the way she used to hate them.

"Only a cold," my sister had originally reassured.

Later, "Just a bad fever."

When it was too late, "I'm sorry, don't cry."

A fever was all it took—a fever and naïveté. Her hands are still concealed below the quilted white sheet, abraded and bloodied where her nails scraped her skin again and again, fighting the pain with more pain. Now, her hands are cold, despite the inescapable, clinging heat of summer.

I hate that I don't cry all the time anymore. It has only been a day since her passing, and tears no longer fall with the slightest movements. I have to think—no, *remember* how her small hand was always pulling me along. We were two tiny girls, one a head taller than the other, left behind in the rushed world of adults. We only had each other.

I start to feel my way to her room after hearing my aunt's horrid, artificial wailing going past, likely draping herself across the poor visitor who came to quietly mourn. My white cane leans against the bed. The house has aged alongside me; I can see it with my sightless eyes. My fingers wrap around my cane as I get up. Right to left and back again, the tapping matches the rhythm of the muffled clock, the harsh beat preparing me for the reality I will have to accept.

I gently turn the knob and step into her room, the door creaking all the same. *The curtains are closed, so why is the sunlight still seeping in?*

by Amanjot Dhaliwal (Grade Eleven)

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THIRD PRIZE

Ascendance

William unlocked the door to his house and walked in to find Nathan sitting in the dining room with his textbooks laid out on the table in front of him, but his eyes were clearly driven somewhere else by his mind.

“What’s troubling you, son?” William asked.

This time, Nathan’s eyes darted at his father. “Something unbelievable happened to me today,” Nathan said. William arched an eyebrow. “An owl spoke to me. It said something I can’t get my head around,” Nathan explained.

“An owl told you something? Son, have you been taking your pills?”

Nathan made his way to his father with steps of a giant. He stood close enough to see William’s pupils dilate. Nathan clumped in some air. “Tell me what happened to Livvy—what *actually* happened,” Nathan demanded.

“Son, you know that your sister was kidnapped when—”

“We both know otherwise, Dad.”

“Well, what do you think happened to her?”

“She ascended . . . to another world.”

“Another world? Do you hear yourself? You sound like you’ve gone mad,” William said with a chuckle.

“If what I’m saying is madness, then why aren’t you shocked?”

Silence snuck in and lingered for a few moments. Their gaze had the strength to pierce a brick wall. “The truth you seek is a burden not even the strength of a thousand planets could carry.”

“Try me,” Nathan shot back.

William walked to the bookcase along the left wall of the room. He removed a book from the bottom of its centre and dug his hand to the back of the shelf to take out a small, grey notebook. “If you want the truth, follow my instructions carefully, along with what’s in this,” William said in a stony voice as he handed Nathan the notebook. “As you walk out to our back garden, keep moving towards the woods. You will find two trees, both with a symbol engraved on them, same as that on the notebook,” William explained. “Stand between them and open to the page with calligraphy, then read what’s written.”

“And?” Nathan questioned, asking for more.

“You wait,” his father replied, “and do whatever your madness tells you to do.”

Nathan did as instructed. He went outside, stood between the trees, opened the notebook to what turned out to be page thirty-seven. With quivering breaths, he uttered the words.

Seconds later, Nathan’s breath stuck in his throat. He wondered if he had actually gone mad. A trail of faint yellow light glowed up, leading deeper into the woods. Nathan followed.

by Ayaat Rabaa (Grade Twelve)
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