

FIRST PRIZE

Sugar Packets

THEY'D WALKED THE HALF MILE into town for a newspaper. Bored in the absence of other kids, Brian tagged along knowing he could convince his father to stop by Majestic Diner, just across the road from the marina.

Brian sucked on his chocolate milkshake and got nothing. The paper straw had pinched shut. Frustrated, he peeled off the plastic lid and reached for a spoon.

His father looked up from his crossword. "Too thick?"

"Too thick."

Brian stirred his shake and pulled out a spoonful.

A tiny brass bell jingled as the door opened behind them. A short freckle-faced boy with a buzz cut strolled in and clambered onto a stool at the end of the chrome-rimmed counter. Four empty seats separated the boys.

"Hiya, kiddo," said the middle-aged waitress. "Catch any fish this morning?"

"Couple little ones, Ma."

She set a tall glass of ice water in front of him. "Grilled cheese?"

"Sure."

His mother called out the order through a window into the kitchen and carried a large empty tray towards the far end of the restaurant.

Brian watched as the boy stacked paper sugar packets, one on top of the other. He'd piled on about a dozen when it toppled.

"Bet I can build a bigger one," said Brian.

"I don't bet suckers, I buy 'em."

Brian wasn't sure what that meant or if he'd been insulted. "You live around here?"

"Upstairs. How 'bout you?"

Brian wished he lived above a restaurant. "Toronto."

"Fishing's way better here."

"The swimming sure is."

Brian's father nudged his arm and whispered, "Introduce yourself."

"I'm Brian."

"I'm Liam, and I'm ten. Almost eleven. How old are you?"

"Twelve. Almost thirteen."

"Whatcha doin' up here?"

"We rented a cabin, just down the road."

"The old Miller place?"

Brian shrugged. "Maybe."

A plate appeared on the kitchen ledge. Liam slid off his stool, walked to the opening, and reached for it on his tiptoes. "Thanks, Dad." The boy set the plate on the counter then struggled back onto his stool.

It smelled good. "Your father's the cook?" said Brian.

"It's his diner. Used to be Grandpa's."

"Want the ketchup?"

"Better without." Liam wolfed down a large bite and then another.

Brian spooned out some milkshake.

"Hey, Mom, this kid needs a new straw."

She set her tray beside the dishwasher and reached for one.

Brian peeled an inch of the paper off one end. He put that end into his mouth, pointed the straw towards Liam, and blew as hard as he could. The remaining wrapper sailed off, flipped in the air, and landed on the counter halfway between the boys.

Liam laughed, then Brian too.

He stuck the new straw into his shake and attempted a sip.

“Don’t suck so hard,” said Liam. “And keep the other end near the top where it’s melted.”

Brian followed the boy’s directions. The straw delivered a tasty payload.

“You like girls?” Liam drank some water.

The question surprised Brian. “They’re alright, I suppose.”

Liam took another bite.

Brian waited for him to follow up.

Instead, he set down his sandwich and started to construct another tower.

Brian’s father excused himself and stepped into the men’s room.

Brian watched Liam for a while. “Why’d you ask me that?”

“Ask you what?” He added a twelfth packet.

“If I liked girls.”

“I got four sisters. They’re always hoggin’ the bathroom.”

“Oh.”

Liam placed another packet. “Thirteen. That’s a new record.”

Brian dragged his shake two seats closer. “Try for fifteen.”

With the tip of his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, Liam added a fourteenth and was about to place the fifteenth when the bell above the door jingled again. Startled, he knocked over the stack and groaned.

Ignoring the tower’s collapse, Brian watched as a pretty girl stepped into the diner, crossed the tiled floor, ruffled Liam’s hair, and left through a wooden door at the back marked PRIVATE. Mesmerized by her slender beauty and deep tan, Brian decided she was at least fifteen. He watched the closed door, hoping it would open and she’d return.

“I saw you staring,” said Liam with a grin. “You do like girls.”

“Not when they hog the bathroom.”

Liam laughed.

Brian’s father returned and reached for his newspaper. “Ready to go? You can bring the rest of your shake.”

“Can Liam come over for a swim?”

“If it’s okay with his mother.”

“It’ll be okay,” said Liam. “Can I bring my sister?”

“Bring them all,” said Brian.

by Edmund Fines

Toronto, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

Camp Cryo

“I DON’T SEE WHY I have to come here! I’m old enough to stay on my own. Don’t you trust me?” Troy pleaded with his parents while he absently swatted a fly buzzing around his head. They were in the intake area, and Troy was having conflicting sensations of wanting to simultaneously bolt and vomit.

“Oh, Troy,” his mother sighed resignedly. “We just want you to be safe. A month is far too long to be on your own. And before you say it,” she warded off Troy’s expected rejoinder with an imperious wave of her hand, “we aren’t foisting you off on one of your aunts or cousins. That sort of thing just isn’t done. We will be back before you even know we are gone. You’ll just wake up, and we will be right here.”

She spoke with finality, but Troy had one more card to play. “But you know cryo isn’t good for people. It took me forever to recover last time. How many brain cells did I lose? Permanently! And you’re going to do it again!” He leaned into the parental guilt but knew it was useless. They were already here, after all.

“Troy,” his father looked over his tablet and reading glasses to squint at his son, “this is happening. We are going on this vacation. You are staying here. You’ll be fine.” Under his breath he muttered, “It’s not as if you actually use your brain. . . .”

Troy dramatically flopped back into the chair. “You’re killing my brain cells,” he said with all the angst he could muster.

“Troy,” his mother said pleadingly, “you’ve read the forms: ‘Cryo is safe. Negligible cognitive decline.’ Negligible! ‘It’s a life-changing technology for parents and caregivers. Going on vacation used to be a burden. Finding daycare in an emergency? Need a nurse for your aging parents? Not anymore. Cryocare has simply been life altering!’” She beamed as her thoughts turned inward, towards the thirty-day cruise she and her husband had booked. She stood and clutched her purse under her arm.

Troy reached for her arm and tugged on it from his seat. “What if you don’t come back?” His eyes widened with moisture. “Joey’s grandpa was put in here three months ago, and he’s still here! They just left him, and now they can’t afford to wake him up. Joey says the account is ‘delinquent.’ It’s triple payments on delinquent accounts. You could never afford that. What will happen to him? To me?” Troy once again sat back as this fresh horror permeated his thoughts. He swatted once again at the fly, which was really starting to anger him. Once he was put under, that fly would have its way with him. *Oh no!* What if it laid eggs in him or something? *No, no, no*, he screamed internally.

Troy’s mother placed her arm around him and her head on his shoulder. “Oh, Troy,” she soothed, “we’ll be back. Our cruise is already paid for. Ships run on a tight schedule.” She shooed the fly away from her son’s head.

The fly finally lost interest and blithely buzzed away, down the corridor, through ventilation shafts, and unnoticed through a board room where the director of operations was pontificating.

The director gathered his papers and spoke to the various marketing experts, client associates, and an entire row of corporate lawyers. “Phase 2 is initializing today. Here at Cryocare™ and Cryocamp™, we can now expand our mining of delinquent accounts, from three months delinquent to now only six weeks—stem cells, hemoglobin, platelets, even bone marrow. And in another year,” he nodded in the direction of the lawyers, “duplicate organs, veins, ova, and spermatozoa. The world,” he opened his arms expansively, “is indeed our oyster.” The director rose smugly but remained on the dais, as the others beamed up at him from their seated positions. He continued, “Your NDAs have been updated,” directing

his words to the associates in the first rows. “Please leave with your assigned lawyer,” beckoning to the back rows, “and sign off before you leave today.”

As the occupants left the meeting room in matched pairs, a lone figure approached the director. “Our contacts in travel are positioned,” he paused, allowing the director to be fully present in this moment, for this pronouncement. “Let’s just say that air, land, and water will experience significant delays in the coming weeks.”

Six floors below, the fly finally alighted on a smooth, reposed brow and began its grooming stridulations.

by Becky Hingley
Severn, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

The Route Taken

LEAFLESS BRANCHES HUNG over the snow-packed trail as Paul, hands steady on the wheel, coaxed the Buick down the slope. The front tire caught a patch of ice. “Easy, girl,” Paul said as he turned into the slide. The tires found dirt and bit in.

“When can we take the ferry again?” Stephen whined from the back seat.

Elsie turned to her four children crammed together. Joseph and Mary pushed each other while Michael, squished by his siblings, pouted between them.

“At least another month,” Elsie said and adjusted Margaret on her breast. “The river hasn’t started breaking up yet.”

Stephen crossed his arms and sunk into the corded seat. “Why do we even have to go?”

“Your grandmother,” Paul said as he focused on the road. “It’s time to say goodbye.”

The trees opened to a cloudless sky, and the road evened. A sign marking the ice road sat ahead, and indistinct wheel marks trekked across the wide river. Margaret pulled herself off Elsie and rubbed her little face as the tires of the Buick eased onto the frozen crossing.

“Down there,” Elsie said, glancing at the white river disappearing into the distance. “Does it look as if the water is opening?”

Paul slowed the car. His eyes narrowed, and he set his jaw. “That spot opens early every year. The sign says the river is passable.” He nodded once and moved his foot to the gas.

The tires crunched across snow and ice as the forest grew smaller in Elsie’s mirror. A family of deer hugged the trees and watched the car cross the expanse.

“Over halfway there,” Paul said, turning to Elsie with a smile. “The deepest part of the river is behind us.”

A sickening *crack* erupted beneath them and echoed across the river in a descending *tek-tek-tek*.

“What was that, Mama?” Joseph said.

Paul’s grip tightened on the wheel as another *crack* cut the air. The car jolted backwards.

“Paul.”

“Not now.” The engine revved, and the car dipped again.

“Mama!”

“Out,” Paul said, jamming the gearshift into PARK. “Take the children. Walk to your parents’ and get help.”

“You’re not staying here.”

“We can’t lose the Buick. I’ll get it out.” Paul stared deep into Elsie’s eyes. “Take the children. Go.”

Elsie tore her eyes from her husband and turned to her children. “You heard Papa. We’re walking the rest of the way.”

“Mama, no,” Mary said, shaking her head. “I want to stay with Papa.”

Elsie looked sternly at her daughter. “Papa will catch up.”

Another *crack*. The vehicle lurched. Mary screamed.

“Now, children,” Paul said and reached towards Michael. “Climb over the seat.”

One by one, the children clambered over the seat. With the weight in the front, the vehicle shifted and another *crack* thundered down the river. Paul rushed around the vehicle and opened Elsie’s door. His feet were under six inches of water, and in his eyes, Elsie saw a fear she had never known.

“Pass the children to me.”

Nodding, Elsie helped one child after another across her lap and to their father’s arms. When all four children were on solid ice, Elsie, holding Margaret to her chest, stepped from the vehicle.

Water colder than ice rushed into her boots. Knives stabbed her feet. Elsie gasped.

“Go, Elsie. Take the children and go.”

“Come with us.”

“The Buick isn’t going much deeper. Look how thick the ice still is,” he said, motioning to the fissure. “But I’ll need help to get it out.”

Seeing the determination and unfathomable stubbornness in her husband’s eyes, Elsie nodded. “Be careful, Paul,” she said and kissed him on the cheek. “This family needs you.”

Turning her back on her husband, Elsie waded towards shore, slipping every second step, as the sun threw sparkles across the open water. “Let’s go, children,” she said and ushered her kids towards the trees.

“But Papa,” Mary cried.

“Your papa is smart. He’ll get the car out, and we’ll see him soon.”

Michael was fixed in place, tears freezing on pudgy cheeks. “Come along, Michael,” Elsie said and scooped him onto her hip as she clutched Margaret to her chest.

Her feet were cinder blocks as water sloshed in her boots, the icy knives now no more than tingles.

When they reached shore, Elsie turned. Paul’s pants were darkened to the knees, and he braced against their Buick, fighting gravity and the North Saskatchewan River.

by Laura Frost

North Bay, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Absence of Starlight

THE WATER POOLED along the walkway, resembling shallow puddles of crude black oil.

No stars tonight, I thought, as I scanned the puddles for tiny pricks of light. There were no stars any night. For all I knew, above the clouds that loomed like floating continents, space itself had ceased to exist.

Splashing through the puddle in my high-topped rubber boots, I sighed. The facility ahead beckoned, as impatient as my grandmother.

I stepped through the swinging front doors into the lobby as she lectured the young nurse struggling to transfer her between chairs.

“Stella, now!” insisted the nurse, her teeth clenched.

“Don’t you Stella me,” she retorted. “I may be five times your age, but I’m not vegetative . . . yet.” She swatted away the woman’s attempts to brace her arms in assistance.

Tucking my gloves into my coat pocket, I crossed the room, my boots making small puddles of their own upon the linoleum floor.

The nurse straightened. Her name tag said Myrna. Grandmother sat silent, staring straight ahead. She hated to be reminded of her condition. I gave Myrna a nod, and we both placed our hands to gently support her arms, but she thrust us off with a generous push. My hands flew to my hips, and Myrna threw hers up in exasperation.

“I’m not feeble, fragile, helpless, weak, or delicate,” Grandmother lectured, “and if the ability to list those synonyms is not proof enough of my mental prowess, at least have the decency enough to allow me to move myself from one chair to another.”

“Fine,” I said.

Myrna’s jaw dropped, but my grandmother’s lips spread into a thin line, curving at the edges.

I knelt down beside her, my voice soft. “Grams, it’s not raining tonight,” I said.

Her eyes softened, and she wiggled her nose back and forth several times before snapping her fingers in Myrna’s direction. “Well, don’t just stand around gawking at the poor, old widow,” she ordered. “I’m tired of this horrid facility, so do your job, and Celeste and I shall be on our way.”

Myrna rolled her eyes, but together we made short work of the transfer. After thanking the frazzled nurse, I helped Grandmother adjust her skirt around her skinny legs and pushed her towards the exit.

“Don’t thank that brown-nosing new girl. I miss Justin, my old nurse. He was a true gentleman.” She breathed deeply as the cool night air met us on the opposite side of the door. “And he had a nice—”

“Grams!” I interrupted, not caring to hear her to discuss the *derrière* of any facility staff. Grandmother simply chuckled.

I thought of her starlight narrative—stories of the world of her childhood, when the night sky sparkled with tiny specks of light. All my life, I’d watched heavenwards, waiting for the sky to clear. All my life, I’d been disappointed.

“Why am I still here?” she said, my thoughts interrupted.

I had to stop mid stride, for I felt the very words were a physical wall I could not pass. “I’m sorry I was late this evening.” We both knew it wasn’t what she meant.

“Celeste,” she said, gazing heavenwards, her voice gravelly. “Every day, you bring me here, where I spend my waking hours hooked up to machines, and every night, you take me home, where I lie in sleepless agony watching the starless skies, pretending that these treatments I’m doing are the same thing as living.”

I followed her gaze to the billowing grey pillows looming overhead. Sometimes, I swore she could see right through them.

“Please let me go,” she whispered. “I want to count the stars again.”

I continued down the watery path, though now I could barely see. The puddles seemed to have jumped up and covered my eyes. I knew what she wanted, but did I have the strength to grant her desire?

The rain returned as we left the dreary city behind. Grandmother just stared out the window, snoring at one point. More theatrics.

We arrived at the farm, greeted by a warm, toasty fire, but the chill had set into my bones. Grandmother wheeled her chair to her room without another word.

Sleep eluded me, as I lay under my canopy of glow-in-the-dark plastic stars.

She was right. I was keeping her here, holding her captive; my only link to the sky I so desperately wished to know but had never met.

Could I stand to lose them both?

by Amanda Thomson

Magrath, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Bringing Home Baby

HI, IS IT OKAY if I sit here? My name's Cherry. No, not Sherry. Cherry, like the fruit. I love riding on these buses with upstairs, don't you? It makes me feel more important than them down on the sidewalk or driving cars, them who has drivers' licences. I'd like to have a driver's licence, just so that when they ask me for it, I don't have to pretend I lost it.

This social worker I'm supposed to meet at the hospital, she'll ask for my driver's license, although I don't know what that has to do with my baby. See, my baby, Josh, he was born last Sunday, but they wouldn't let me take him home. They said he had jaundice and had to stay. That's not true. I heard the nurses talking. They said I'm not good enough to look after a baby 'cos I have issues.

The social worker, that Miss Evers, she's seen our place, and I could tell she thought it wasn't good enough. She looked down on Brian, my boyfriend, 'cos he doesn't have a job. Well, how can he? He's just out of jail! I was proud when he talked back to her. She deserved it with all her nosey questions.

Today I gotta talk her into letting me take Josh home. I love him so much, even though I only held him for a few minutes. He's so cute and cuddly, with that little wisp of blond hair. Imagine that! Real hair when he's only just born! Here, look, I took a photo. Isn't he sweet? He's even smiling. Miss Evers says tiny babies can't smile. That just shows she don't know everything.

I even bought clothes for him. They look new; blue, you know, for a boy, and the hood even has pointy ears. My mom says babies can sleep in a drawer, so I cleaned out my underwear drawer for Josh. Miss Evers saw all my underwear on the floor, and she said I'd have to clean up the house before she'd let the baby come home. That wasn't fair because I'd taken all the empties back before she came. I never thought she'd open the closets, but of course, she did, and she saw all Brian's stash for the weekend.

I been trying to think what she will ask me today so I'll have good answers. I can tell her the Food Bank has baby foods, diapers too. If Josh cries, I'll pick him up and hold him, rock him back to sleep. Those'd be good answers, right?

I've tried to look like an office worker today, so Miss Evers will know I'm mature and capable. Do you think I look sorta professional? My skirt isn't too short? I've never worn this much mascara before. Does it look all right? Not too much? Did I show you a picture of my little Josh? I did?

I love him so much. He'll hug me tight, and he'll love me no matter what. Not like that Brian. He says he loves me if I ask, and he pays the rent on that room we have, but he gets awful drunk. Do you think the mascara covers my black eye? At least she won't be able to see the bruises on my arm.

Thank you for listening to me when you don't even know me. You look like someone Miss Evers would listen to. What would you say if Josh were your baby and you wanted him real bad?

A job? Well, I've worked at McDonald's and places like that. Not for long, 'cos I've had to keep looking for new ones. For better pay, you know. But I've always done cleaning and shopping for old Mrs. Klein down the street. She's been in a wheelchair forever, and she pays me. It's enough to buy food. Miss Evers wouldn't call that a job.

I get off at the next stop—that's the hospital, the big building with the H. Bye now. Wish me luck, 'cos I don't know what I'll do if Miss Evers takes my baby away. She has no reason to, though, does she?

I been thinking if she says I can't have Josh, it'd be a good idea to say I'd kill myself. I could say I'd jump in front of a bus. She'd give me my baby if she saw I am that desperate, wouldn't she?

by Valerie Fletcher Adolph
White Rock, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

And Just Watch Fish

THE SUN HAD HIT the middle of the spring sky, and it was time to go out and make the best of one of the few nice days that occur each year.

“Let me pack these last bags into the boat. You just rest there for a bit,” Andy said quietly to his younger brother, Marclin. They had only a small rowboat, packed for an afternoon out on the water enjoying the fresh breeze.

“I think this might even be our first time back in this boat since one of our old family camping trips,” said Marclin. Not much else was said, not much more was needed.

They had been waiting for the right day to launch out into the branching waterway of the Thousand Islands for one last brotherly boat ride. With an endless view of the beautiful blue waves rolling past the boat, there wasn’t anywhere else in the world to be that day. Andy was slowly rowing. Eventually, the somewhat thick air between the two boat seats had dissipated, and they could begin to relax into the atmosphere that they had both been long waiting for. The time was set for reflection and reconciliation.

It didn’t take long for the small fragments of conversation to turn to the darker side of their past. A little bit of wind stirring the tops of the tall pines back and forth wasn’t quite enough to fill the moment. Andy started it off.

“You know, I’ll never quite understand how everyone managed when you were sick. I was too young to know exactly what was going on anyway. But since I never got to talk to you about it, I’m not sure if you understand what it was like to be left behind without you. There’s only one possible person out there who is anything similar to me. And where were you? Letting me struggle with my problems without you around. Often, I’ve just felt so abandoned by you. Left out here all alone to figure out the world on my own. Always feeling as if I’ve been set up very badly for life. And I’ll also never understand why you were meant to leave us like that.”

A few moments passed, and then Marclin replied, “I never meant any grief to you. And how do you think I felt? I was all alone, too, don’t forget; at least you had Mom and Dad with you—all that I could have ever wanted. I spent my last moments gasping for the air that you have been easily breathing for your whole life.”

Andy looked down at the floor of the old boat. “You’re right, and I’m sorry. I also didn’t fully appreciate the last moments we shared together. I was lost in the downward spiral of trying to heal you so that everything might turn out all right. And much like coming to the end of a jigsaw puzzle and realizing the last needed piece is missing, I cannot remember if we had said goodbye.”

The water had then calmed.

“I think we’re almost at the perfect spot,” Andy said.

“Yeah, it doesn’t matter all that much where you let me out of the boat, I’m just going to float around and explore all these areas eventually,” replied Marclin.

“That sounds really nice. Now, you can simply float along being free. And just watch fish swimming along next to you,” Andy suggested.

The clear waters were swaying back and forth gently in a nice slow rhythm, which Marclin knew would give him the steady heartbeat that his body had been looking for.

“You can always come visit me. I’ll be right here,” said Marclin.

Andy stopped rowing. He took a moment to look out across the water and take a deep breath while some tears slowly started to blur his vision.

Andy brought the lightly dripping oars slowly back into the boat and set them down along the sides. As they touched down softly, his eyes closed for a while. He then rose from his seat and went into a kneeling position, reaching across the boat to pick up the round metal tin that was sat on the opposite seat. He returned to his seat holding the tin and sat for a moment before opening it slowly to look down into it. This was most definitely the perfect spot. With one strong toss, he scattered his brother’s ashes into the water, and he was free.

by Peter Pharand
Kingston, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Robots and Dinosaurs

“MOMMY, you said no toys allowed at the dinner table!” I put on my best haughty look and glowered at Uncle Tommy who was holding a large silicone baby.

“It’s not a toy,” Mommy said through gritted teeth. “This is Uncle Tommy’s baby.”

“Baby? I love babies.” My white-haired grandmother woke from her nap and looked curiously around the room. Hunched over in a wheelchair, she was more than a hundred years old and often dozing off during the day regardless of family events. Recently, the doctor had put some metal cylinders behind her chair, and her face was covered with clear tubing and a mask, making her resemble the supervillains we watched on our television cartoon shows.

“Mom, this is Baby Ryan,” Uncle Tommy said. He was a large and clumsy man, but he was handling the baby very gently as if it were real. “He was born yesterday.”

I made a face. *How come they can play with toys and I can’t?*

Mother must have sensed a seething protest erupting, so she dragged my brother and me into the kitchen. “You boys understand that Grandma’s very sick, right?”

“Yes!” As the eldest and wiser ten-year-old, I answered first. “She has Lou-something dementia.”

My eight-year-old brother piped in, “She’s been calling me ‘kitty cat’ all day! When is she going to get better?”

Mother sighed. “Anyhow, I wanted to tell you boys to pretend Baby Ryan is real.”

My brother and I looked at each other with wide eyes and said in unison, “But that’s lying!”

“*Shhh!*” Mother put a finger to her lips. “Grandma’s only wish before she got sick was for Uncle Tommy to marry and have a family. She’s leaving for the nursing home tomorrow, so for tonight only, pretend Baby Ryan is real.”

“Uncle Tommy is married to Leila, isn’t he?” my brother asked.

I rolled my eyes; Leila was a giant blonde lady robot who smelled like pizza because she cooked a lot for Uncle Tommy. *Besides, a person can’t be happy living with a robot—or can they?*

“Leila is his—well. . . .” Mom looked perplexed. “I guess Leila is his girlfriend or wife. The baby did come from her, after all.”

“Leila made a baby?” My eyes grew large. “Can she make me a dinosaur?”

“Leila used a 3D printer to combine her facial characteristics with your uncle’s to create a baby. She could make you a dinosaur. But you have to be good at pretending! If Grandma finds out Baby Ryan is a printout, no dinosaurs for anybody!”

Throughout the dinner, I looked at Uncle Tommy, Baby Ryan, and Grandma frequently. I wished Dad could be here, too, but he was doing something complicated called double-time night shift. Grandma had a look of love as she held the baby. Mommy used to look at us like that, a long time ago before Grandma got sick. These days, Mom was angry at us most of the time and had stopped playing with us. This made me sad, and I missed my mom, but I didn’t know what to do to change things.

I WAS THERE to say goodbye with Uncle Tommy when we buried Baby Ryan with Grandma. In the years following Grandma’s death, Leila and Uncle Tommy didn’t have any more babies, but she took care of him tirelessly until the very end. I think they had a good life together, even though she was a robot.

“Daddy, look! Leila made us some dinosaurs!” My youngest clambered up my lap and showed me some green figurines. Instead of decommissioning Leila, Uncle Tommy wrote in his will for Leila be shared among families. The toys she made were considered obsolete, but my children were glad to play with anything.

Looking up, I smiled at the immortal female figure with bright-blue eyes and a long blonde mane of forever-silky hair. “Thanks, Leila!”

“You’re welcome,” her monotone voice replied.

I sucked in my breath. For a moment, I saw Grandma in a wheelchair holding Baby Ryan and Uncle Tommy standing behind her. There was much I wanted to ask Leila: if she could see into the afterlife, whether she was still connected to her husband and baby, if she held more wisdom than all of mankind. Instead, I just smiled, held my child close, and buried my face into his messy hair, glad to be alive in this present moment.

by J. F. Garrard
Scarborough, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

We Survive

AT THE END OF THE WORLD, there was no Rapture, there was no Hand of God, no salvation.

Right before the end of the world, the richest ones left. That was how it began. The mass exodus of celebrities and billionaires and royalty, bound for whichever Luxury Orbital Station they desired. Then, came what news outlets called the Second Diaspora—as though they were explorers charting a course to a brave new frontier and not CEOs and millionaires desperate to leave the planet before it burned.

TV died somewhere in the beginning of the Third Diaspora. But the internet and radio stuck around. They felt easier to maintain—no need for the polished glamour and niceties of TV. The internet turned glitchy and reminiscent of early '00s dial-up towards the end of the Third Diaspora. It finally died at the mid-point of the Fourth Diaspora when the denizens of the Fourth Diaspora took what was left of the technology with them, killing radio while they were at it.

And so, . . . at the end of the world, there were only a handful of tired people left. Only a handful of people left to watch as the last ships of the Fourth Diaspora roared into the atmosphere, leaving only a blinding flash of light, a wave of heat, and silence behind. Only a handful of tired people, all with shaking bottom lips, weary, sagging shoulders, and a matching sense of resignation.

Oh. Well. This was it then.

There were only a handful of tired people left at the end of the world, people who'd been turned away from the last of the ships. And slowly but surely—as they stood at the docks they'd been unceremoniously left at—they began to speak to one another, putting aside the distrust that had been the common theme of the Fourth Diaspora.

“What’s your name?”

“Why were you left behind?”

Those were the questions that every one of the handful of tired people heard and every one of the handful of tired people answered over and over again in the first few days after the end of the world.

What’s your name? There was Cedar. *Why were you left behind?*

Cedar just shook zir head at the question and pointed to the fading colours in zir hair and the tattoos crawling up zir arms. “My parents made a choice,” ze said. “We could stay behind as a whole family. Or they could leave me here and go.”

What’s your name? There was Esther. *Why were you left behind?*

The only answer she gave was a sardonic smile as she reached into her t-shirt and pulled out a Magen David on a tarnished gold necklace. “No room for G-d’s Chosen in the Orbital Stations,” she said dryly.

What’s your name? There was Deshawn. *Why were you left behind?*

Deshawn laughed with the same nihilistic humour as Esther’s sardonic smile, and gestured in a circle around his face. “No room for people who look like me either.”

What’s your name? There were Lily and Georgie. *Why were you left behind?*

Lily balanced on Georgie’s arm for a second and held up their cane then lightly poked Georgie’s leg with it. “I couldn’t run to keep up,” they said, “and Georgie’s too stubborn to leave me behind.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“We survive.”

“We survive?”

“We survive.”

The first of the Orbital Stations exploded in the summer after the end of the world. The noise sent birds scattering to the skies.

Esther flung open the window of the farmhouse they'd all claimed as theirs. Georgie raced up from the basement at the sound, flinging open the door and frantically searching for Lily. Their shoulders sagged in relief, seeing Lily sitting on an old bedsheet sorting seeds into piles for planting. They handed Lily their cane with shaking hands and helped them to their feet. Deshawn set his wheelbarrow on the ground and crossed himself out of habit. Cedar stuck zir head out of the back door, a half-knitted sweater clutched in one hand.

“Was that a fluke?”

“Are they all going to do that?”

“What happened?”

“Oh my God—sorry, Esther.”

The Orbital Station was a fireball in the sky for hours afterwards, almost like a second sun. They watched it the whole time until it faded and flickered and finally winked out of existence.

“Well, shit.”

“What do we do now?”

“Same thing we've been doing.”

“We survive?”

“We survive.”

by Katy Tearle

Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

How Can I Help You?

“HOW CAN I HELP YOU?” Stacy asked, using the standard greeting she’d been trained to since her first day on the job almost eighteen years ago. She did her best each time to breathe a little life into the phrase, so that it didn’t sound like the 16,000th time that she’d actually uttered it.

The woman sitting across from her was in her late thirties, dressed in slightly less than what was considered appropriate for the “office casual” expectations of the corporate world. Her black lacy blouse only partially hid the colourful tattoo on her shoulder of a curvaceous dancer leaning back against a pole that was not used for javelin throwing.

She leaned closer, and Stacy was compelled to let her eyes drop down to the ample cleavage exposed above the top button of the peek-a-boo blouse. *Now THOSE can’t be real*, she thought to herself and quickly averted her gaze back to the beseeching face that hung above.

“I really do need your help,” said the woman, and her face blossomed into the most beautiful “help me” smile that Stacy had seen all week. It also revealed two gaping holes where her two front teeth should have been. On closer inspection, the woman’s makeup revealed it was doing double time to camouflage the slight purple-green hue of a healing bruise just beneath it.

Stacy smiled. “Well, this is your lucky day, because that’s exactly what I’m here for,” and she grabbed a pen to take notes. “Are you looking for work?”

“Yes, yes I am.”

“Excellent, you’re in the right place. Did you happen to bring your résumé with you?”

“I did, but that’s where I need your help. I’ve been working in the same industry for years, and I’ve never had to have a résumé. But it’s time to make a career change, and I don’t know where to start. I’ve always worked, but I’ve been stripping since I was eighteen.” She lowered her voice and glanced at the piece of paper in her hands. “I’m looking for non-naked work now.”

“Oh, okay. I see. Great,” Stacy replied, managing to keep any hint of surprise from creeping into her facial expression. It wasn’t every day that she helped a former stripper update their résumé.

“I know that my skills aren’t what most would call transferable skills, . . . but I have really good people skills. I can read a room like nobody’s business. I can tell just by looking at you that I can trust you.” She handed the single piece of paper over the desktop to Stacy.

At the top of the sheet, the name “Amber Ambrosia” had been crossed out and Lynn Ann Thornton had been handwritten beside it. Stacy ran her finger down the page, nodding and pointing at the list of accomplishments. Encouraging her clients for their preliminary footwork had always been a critical component in establishing a positive relationship.

“You’re off to a good start!” she praised. “Do you mind if I just make a few minor adjustments?”

“Absolutely not. Please, go for it!”

Stacy grabbed her pen and began crossing out titles and writing in alternates. “Have you done any volunteer work?”

“Yes! I volunteered at the women’s shelter from November until just after New Year’s.” Lynn Ann’s hand gravitated to her face, and she unconsciously fingered the purple-green mark on her cheek.

Stacy pretended not to notice and wrote on the paper: “Peer Support Volunteer,” and added some dates. She stopped briefly, staring at the paper for a moment, and then glanced at Lynn Ann and said, “I volunteered there once myself.”

Continuing down the page, Stacy crossed out “Pole Dancer” and wrote in “Promotional Model/Dancer—Various Establishments.”

Stacy asked, “How do you feel about adding an opening statement about yourself that highlights those people skills of yours? It’s the first thing an employer will see about you.”

“That would be amazing!”

Stacy wrote, “I am an excellent customer service representative with advanced communication skills. I have expertise communicating with, managing, and assisting clients. I have listening, networking, and teamworking skills, with practical experience in conflict resolution, customer service, and guaranteeing customer satisfaction.

Stacy turned to the computer screen, typed up the résumé, and pressed PRINT. She grabbed the updated résumé from the print tray and reached across the desk to Lynn Ann. As she did, the long-sleeved sweater she wore crept up her arm slightly and exposed one tiny, red-stiletto-heel tattoo.

by Lois Kelly
London, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Dirty Dishes

“I DON’T WANT KIDS EITHER,” she lied.

“Really? I’m surprised you’re still single.”

She wasn’t surprised. Her eyes flashed to her closet, overstuffed with everything she would rather hide from a first date. “Thanks. I don’t do this much.” Another lie.

“And I’m the exception?”

Looking him up and down, draped across her sofa, she thought his good looks were the exception to her usual mediocre dates. “Hardly,” she teased, sipping her wine. “Thanks for dinner. I’ve never eaten there before.” She couldn’t afford it—her credit cards were overcharged after too many nights of online shopping.

“Did you like your food?” he asked.

“No. I’m not good with impulse decisions. Or first dates.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“Well, I can be kind of weird.”

“Weird? How so?”

“I hate dirty dishes.”

He laughed. “That’s not weird.”

“Okay, well, how about a lifelong obsession with UFOs?”

He blinked at her. There was a pause, and she took another swallow of wine.

“Why are you still single?” she asked, louder than she intended.

He shrugged. “I was married once.”

“Me too!” she blurted out.

He smiled, and she didn’t care that she hadn’t meant to share that part yet. “Four years,” he said, holding up his fingers, a faint tan line around one.

“Two,” she admitted.

“Finding someone is hard,” he said. “Keeping them is harder.”

She nodded. “I was in my kitchen, washing the dishes, when he told me about the affair.”

“Oh—I’m sorry.”

She took a swig from her glass. “I remember the smell of the artificial lemons, and I remember the shouting and then throwing things at him, but I don’t remember calling 9-1-1 or anything after that.” Now, she shrugged. “Three years later, and I’m still not sure if I meant to hurt him or not.”

He didn’t seem surprised or repulsed. She knew she should slow down, but he was a good listener.

“I don’t think he ever really respected me, looking back on some parts of it.”

He nodded and placed a hand on her knee.

“And not just because of the UFOs,” she said with a bitter laugh.

“UFOs are real.”

Good looking and a fellow believer? “Right? Duh!” she said. “I remember seeing a UFO when I was three, but no one believed me.”

“You were five.”

“I dreamt after I was actually inside the alien ship, but—” she stopped midsentence. “Say again?”

“You were five when you saw the UFO.” She swallowed and tilted her head at him. “Remember when you were sick as a kid, in kindergarten?”

“I had the flu.”

“No, you didn’t,” he said.

A chill ran down her back. “What are you talking about?” Her voice was a ghostly whisper.

“You were abducted by a UFO when you were five, for three nights.”

She needed a moment, to get some air, but her balcony outdoors was still too hazy from forest fires. Trying to stand, she found instead the floor had rushed up to meet her, and she spilt what was left of her drink onto the carpet. “I think I drank too much.”

“I can give you what you want.”

“Want? I don’t know what I want. I want not to get the spins right now.”

“You want to be a mother—I can help you.”

“Help me? Why?” She ungracefully climbed back on the sofa.

“You were chosen, at random, and tagged for review at a later date.”

“Okay?”

“And after our date tonight, I have assessed what you need: a child.”

She stared at his handsome face, unsure exactly what to say or think just then. “So, big deal, I want to have a kid. And you think with just anybody?”

He stared at her, waiting.

“Won’t it be an alien baby?”

“Perhaps, but only a small portion.”

“Only a small portion,” she muttered, standing to walk into her kitchen. She should call someone and talk about this first—but who was there for her anymore?

Pacing about, she dropped her empty glass on the floor with a smash. “Oops.”

Staring at the shattered pieces, she took a breath before pulling open her cupboard and methodically smashing all of her glassware. He appeared in the doorway. Her hand impulsively stroked her stomach. She turned away from him, in one last plea for sanity, but all she saw was a sink full of dirty dishes.

“What did you say your name was again?”

by Archie Nicholson

London, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Bones

FRAGILE SNOWFLAKES FLITTED over the snow-covered ground, creating shapes that wove over each other like ghosts. Weak sunlight filtered through dusty clouds, spreading meagre warmth onto the mountain. The area would have appeared desolate, if it had not been for the fluorescent orange tents and digging materials strewn about on the mountainside.

“Damn.” Emilie set the pickaxe down heavily.

“Lost it?” Ted called from down below.

Emilie, looking over her shoulder, nodded.

Nala brushed snow from her hat. “No wonder. Can’t see jack shit in this weather.”

It had been four hours since they’d regrouped and made their way back to the digging site. The weather on the mountain was so unpredictable that the entire landscape could change in an instant. Earlier, wing bones had been visible, along with what appeared to be three tail fins.

“We’ll have to come back.” Ted had made his way up to Emilie and Nala.

“And risk the weather changing again?” Emilie gave the snow another blow with the pickaxe.

As she continued to hack away, Emilie saw Nala shrug her shoulders out of the corner of her eye. Ted trudged back down the mountain, shaking his head.

“You know,” Nala started, picking up her own pickaxe, “if we were paleontologists looking for dinosaur bones, we’d be exposing all sorts of stuff right now.”

“And we’d be sitting in the dust and sand sweating our asses off,” Emilie replied.

Nala began to pick apart her own section of the snow. “I’m just saying, as far as our job goes, it seems as if we got the short straw.”

“And yet, how many people can say they’ve dug up dragon bones?”

“True.” Nala set her pickaxe down. “Still, those diggers who unearth truckloads of dinosaur bones have no idea how hard it is.”

“That’s the point. I didn’t go to school to do something that’s been done hundreds of times before.” Emilie fished a protein bar from her pocket and took a bite. “Besides, you have to give them some credit. It’s not as if they’re discovering dinosaur bones every single day. It’s no easy work.”

“No easy work, huh?” Nala gestured to the mountainside, her voice echoing.

EMILIE WAS BENT OVER a map of their current dig site when Nala marched into the tent, bringing a swirl of snowflakes with her. She zipped up the flap quickly.

“It’s no wonder the dragons didn’t freeze out here.” She stomped her boots, ridding them of any excess snow.

“I don’t understand,” Emilie muttered. She was studying the initial pictures they’d taken of the fossil before it had been covered in snow. “We should be right on top of it.”

“Maybe the bones got up and flew away,” Nala laughed.

“That’s not funny,” Emilie traced her finger along one of the tail fins.

“You never know.” Nala flopped into a beanbag chair, patting the squishy blob. “I love that we brought these by the way.”

Emilie continued to flip through their research, scanning notes from their last visit. Everything pointed to there being a dragon fossil close by, but she couldn’t understand where it had gone. Despite the trying weather conditions, they weren’t such bad paleodracologists to have lost the fossil entirely.

“I’m not joking about the bones flying away.” Nala’s voice pulled Emilie from the confines of her mind. “Dragons were magic.”

Emilie finally looked up. “You do realize that’s just a myth, right? Dragons were *not* magic.”

“Whatever you say.” Nala stretched out on the beanbag chair.

“She’s right, you know,” Ted put in.

“Shut up, Ted.”

Emilie groaned, running a hand over her face.

Leaving the warmth of the tent, she headed for the site. The wind had died down some, and most of the clouds had moved off, revealing a shining sun. Hefting her pickaxe, Emilie began to dig again, determined to find some piece of evidence.

Hours passed, and Emilie’s efforts seemed to be leading nowhere when she lifted a particularly large piece of snow from the ground; however, what she found weren’t bones at all, but bone-shaped indents in the ice.

“Guys!” Emilie fell to her knees and started to tear at the snow with her hands.

“What?” Ted breathlessly asked, coming up behind her.

Nala was on his tail. “You find ’em?”

“It’s not what I found but rather what I *didn’t*.” Emilie gestured frantically.

Ted and Nala both crouched down beside her. After a moment, Nala raised her head to look at Emilie. “Somebody stole our fucking bones?”

by Hannah Peebles

Milton, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Moon

THEY SAY WE NEVER sleep well at the full moon.

There's a blank space beside me in bed. I must have been snoring. He hates it when I snore. And he can't use earplugs because they feel strange in his ears; he's sensitive. So, he just goes out onto the couch to sleep when I'm disturbing him.

I miss him when he's gone.

“YOU'RE GOING TO REGRET eating that.”

I stare at the round white plate. He's right. I know he's right. I always do.

I eat it anyway, and later, when I'm crying, he sighs. “Babe, you can't keep doing this. You know neither of us is gonna be happy if you keep gaining weight.”

He's right. I sniff and straighten up. “I'll stop. Tomorrow, I'll go back on my diet.”

He nods.

I TRACE SLOW CIRCLES in my own palm, a soft touch. He always tells me not to do this, says it makes me look weird. But he's not here.

WE CIRCLE EACH OTHER the way we do every time. Usually, it's just our arguments going around in an infinite loop—but today, he paces around me in the room, like a lion.

It occurs to me that he could kill me, right now. I wonder if all women think these thoughts.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I thought that—”

“I don't give a shit what you thought, dear.”

I swallow. *Don't talk to me that way.* What comes out: “That's not . . . please. Don't.”

He continues pacing, his hands clenched into fists now. “You always do this. You drive me crazy, and then you apologize as if that makes everything better.”

I don't tell him he does the same thing. It's not fair. I don't say anything, just sit down on the couch quietly.

After a few minutes, or maybe a few days, he comes and sits down beside me with a sigh. “Let's just go to bed.”

I TURN OVER—and over again. Something wet and warm brushes my cheek—my own hand. I must have been crying, again. I don't remember. I worry about stains on the white silk sheets, his favourite sheets, the ones we couldn't really afford. But he wanted them.

HE SEES THE TEARS before I can wipe them away. “Why are you sad if you hated him?”

“I didn't hate him,” I say. “He was my father.”

“Well, have you decided if you're going to the funeral?”

The tears burn.

“I need to know if you want a ride or if I can make other plans.”

He's always putting me first. “I'll let you know.”

I CAN'T SLEEP in the empty bed. I get up and walk to the kitchen. There's a knife in the sink, his pale ceramic one. I try to wash it, but I can't get it clean.

“WE SHOULD INVITE your father. Since he's sick, and all.”

I stiffen. I want to say no. I say nothing.

“Hey. Are you listening to me?”

I am frozen, an icicle about to fall. I can't tell him.

He says something I don't hear.

My body shakes, or maybe just my head. The memory is there, on the edges, pushing to get in. I can't let it in.

He's left the room.

I WASH THE DISHES in the kitchen sink, the way I always do, but I can't get the knife clean. I wash it and wash it.

IT'S MY FAULT for not leaving.

I see it in the eyes of my sister, who won't talk to me about him anymore. I hear it in the impatience of the nurses' voices at the hospital. If I had been stronger, smarter—

A woman in the waiting room catches sight of my black eye. She puts her arm around her teenage daughter. She's thinking, *I'm going to raise her to know better*. Beside her, her son is playing a game on his phone. They always tell the daughters. They don't tell the sons.

MY BED IS TOO EMPTY.

I look down at my hands, red and unrecognizable.

The moon shines bright.

by K. S. Palakovic

Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Buffalo Pound

THE TWO-LANE BLACKTOP turns off from the prairie and travels west. The distance is not vast yet has the feeling of forever, because you are so close to that place that your heart calls home. The big sky above never stops moving, rolling in its endless expanse. There is nothing like the prairie sky. Here, there is space for the soul to take flight.

You pause the car at the crest of the plains; in front and below are the yellow-green rolling hills of the Qu'Appelle Valley and the blue-green waters of Buffalo Pound. There is history here of the First Nations people. Later, horrific misuse as the location of a residential school, a time when tears fed the lake. These are the stories and history of a place that became entwined in the fabric of who you are, all the things you will become. The call to return will always be there, quietly waiting for that big sky and those rolling hills.

She was nine when you met her. The same age as you but already older, wiser, sadder. You were too young to understand that her sadness was both historical and current. She didn't smile as much as everyone else, but she still loved to play. The time spent exploring and following deer trails through the tall grasses bonded you in a way that blood does not necessitate. You became fast friends and would remain that way through the distance and time that separated you both.

You've learned a lot, but everything you really need to know got taught to you in the cool shadows of shady trees and while floating on black inner tubes in the summer waters.

You were sixteen, impatient to become an adult. This was the summer she told you about the abuse. She had lost everything—her identity, her culture, her innocence. You floated together, arms outstretched holding hands, anchored in the soft current. To this day, you wish you had words then that could have helped ease her pain. Instead, you added your own tears as you both floated in those warm loving waters.

You don't know it, but that was to be the last summer you spent together. After that, jobs, boyfriends, and life would compete to keep you away from Buffalo Pound and this seminal friendship. You had family, but the only sister you'd ever have was sitting next to you.

She told you she thought she might drop out of high school. Something inside your gut dropped, but you were years away from finding out about the violence that chews up Native women, of highways that make them disappear. You didn't know as you sat under the dome of the night sky that this girl would soon go out into the world, fodder for the beast.

The Qu'Appelle Valley was dark; the stars were out, and the fire flickered, and in the space of this friendship, there was no need for words. You would come to learn, in the long hard journey of life, how very precious that silence is.

Adult life began and took you far from the prairie and the big sky, but they were not entirely forgotten.

When the call came, you were gutted. You felt as if you'd been kicked in the stomach, and you raced to the toilet where you retched so fiercely you burst blood vessels in your eyes. It was the antithesis of everything you loved. She was gone, and you could only remember her dark-brown eyes locked onto yours as the current took your floating tubes and spun you in lazy circles. You saw her running as light and sure as a deer—her long hair flying out behind her like an ebony cape as you played on the shores of an ancient lake.

Beside you in the front seat of the car is the box with the urn carrying her ashes. You have brought her back to Buffalo Pound, to the waters that hold love and memories under the unrelenting prairie sun and the endless expanse of sky and cloud.

You wade into Buffalo Pound up to your chest. Standing there, feeling the tug of the current, you stare at the grass-covered hills that are so familiar they might as well be part of your body. You release her into the lake, and you watch as her ashes float on the surface before being taken downstream away from you but becoming part of everything.

Goodbye, my friend, you say. Goodbye.

by Jeanne Faria

Pefferlaw, Ontario