

The Muse



SOPHIA HOPPE | Grade 7

GulliverPrep
UNPARALLELED

Middle School Literary Magazine • Issue #24 • 2023-2024



MILLA NAUMOVICH | Grade 8

“It's no accident, I think, that tennis uses the language of life. *Advantage, service, fault, break, love*—the basic elements of tennis are those of everyday existence, because every match is a life in miniature.” -Andre Agassi

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Selections are labeled to indicate students who received special recognition at the Miami-Dade County Youth Fair's Creative Writing Competition, at the 73rd Annual Beaux Arts Student Artist Showcase, and at the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards.

**Gulliver Prep • Marian C. Krutulis PK-8 Campus
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A Dance in the Moonlight

Beneath the moon's bright glow
A dance unfolds
A celestial show
Silent whispers
In the midnight glow
As shadows dance

Dancers twirl

Their silhouettes glow

A magical scene

A dance in the moonlight

-Estelina Zhou, Grade 5
Blue Ribbon

a bad dream

“Goodnight,” your mom says
as she kisses you on the cheek.
You slowly drift off into what you think,
Is the ocean.
You are in the middle of nowhere,
Just alone,
In the thick dense fog,
With only your flimsy lantern.
You hear creaking.
Your boat starts shaking.
Suddenly it’s silent.
Too silent.
Soon, you are surrounded by a long row of teeth.
You scream for help,
Nobody is there.
As the teeth close up around you,
You fall.
You wake up,
Sweating,
And run into your mother’s room...

-Spencer Leinoff, Grade 5
Blue Ribbon

Mountains of Gúorômān

In the lands of the elders,
and on the rocky hills and mountains of Gúorômān
A strong disturbance has resided over thousands of years
For the elder himself was attacked
Now in the forests of Drëlkûs
Warm blood of children is shed
Since the crown was destroyed
It’s never been the same
Armies of Jorëntæ march over the soft wilderness
A group of small dwarven men rise to the church
at the peak of Mount Mjørønelanik
To make things right
King is poisoned
Wolves drowned
Army awaits on the Gøeranj Downs
Is this how it ends?
Can’t be...history bends...
Our world stays the same, the forests still a flame
It doesn’t end so abruptly – the armies are to blame
This isn’t how it ends. Right, boss?
We huddle next to our fire
Atop the castle tower
Overlooking.

-Santiago Krauze, Grade 5
Blue Ribbon



KIMI LAMPIDIS | Grade 8



Flowers

A spiral of nature
 so bright and so bold
 a twirl of colors
 for everyone to see

When winter comes
 then spirals fall
 When summer comes
 the twirls emerge

When a flower blossoms,
 the air is filled with sweetness
 the grass dances
 and the petals sing!

-Dante Jian Mando, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

The Movies

Walking towards the silver screen
 The bright lights immersing me
 As the lights begin to dim
 The screen starts to widen
 Bursts of color being emitted through the projector
 The sounds traveling through the theater like small birds
 The stories and worlds displayed at this place, like no other
 On the edge of the chair
 In the climax of the experience

Sucked into a distinct world
 Eyes being filled with colors
 Ears being filled with sound
 Mouths being filled with snacks
 Creating a lively experience
 When the lights start to brighten
 The projector turns off
 When the silver screen turns gray again
 And when there is no more sound
 The movie ends
 And our mind is now stuck with a new core memory

-Luke Gelber, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Flowers

Flowers
 Beautiful
 With a soothing aroma
 Variety of hues
 As delicate
 As a wounded heart
 Swaying
 From side to side
 In the fresh wind
 Flowers.
 Come in many shapes
 Assorted sizes
 But they are all gorgeous
 In their own way
 Just like a person.

-Vania De Los Rios Belmont, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Warrior

My feet pressing against the floor
Breathing deep strong breaths while keeping a steady pace
Creating a balloon of air inside my stomach
Stretching my legs and swaying my arms
I can feel my heartbeat, rushing through my chest

First three miles I think of my pace
I move my body like a well-oiled machine
Keeping a steady rhythm to the beat of my music
I rely on my experience and practice over the last year
After so much hard work, I'm feeling good

More miles in and I'm starting to run out of breath
This is all a mind game and I need to push through
My music gets louder as my agility takes power
Motivational quotes floating inside my brain
This is all I've worked for, and I will dominate it

Halfway done and I'm focusing on speed
I raise my velocity and start to push
The breeze flowing through my slicked hair
I feel my body running out of fuel
The exhaustion will never stop me

Just a few more miles left, and the rest is determination
I look back on all the endless nights of training
My pains blend into my grit
The sweat is all worth it
I battle through this last fight and come through as a warrior

-Ana Leyba, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Snowfall

Walking through the powdery snow,
The blazing sun under the horizon,
The bright moon emerging in front of my eyes,
Gusts of rough, dry wind pushing against me,
The smell of majestic pine trees,
Dead on the outside, but full of enchanted stories,
In front of a fiery, crisp campfire,
People sipping on warm, flavorful cocoa,
They tell me to join them....
And we all join together
To enjoy this frigid, wintery day.

-Patrick Shie, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

A Bright Sun

Sand as soft as snow
Bright sunrise
A bright light
Glowing trees
Where tranquility consumes all
Calms all who visit
Glistening sand
Calm blue sea
Bombarded with life
The beach
A tranquil place.

-Enrique Ubarri, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

MILLA NAUMOVICH | Grade 8



A Winter Wonderland

A white horizon filled with fragile trees
Crunching of glistening snow
Whistling of the calming wind
Silence of the resting birds
Steaming hot cocoa fills people's cups
Presents decorate trees
Raging fires fill chimneys
Calm fills people's hearts
And there is peace
And there is silence...

-Antonio Padoveze Goncalves, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



NORAH HENFRIDSSON | Grade 8
2nd Place – Beaux Arts Student Artist Showcase

A World on Stage

The world is a stage
Where there is no place for crying
Why cry when you can laugh instead
Humanity is always tricked,
 so smiling can hide every lie hiding
On a stage with no curtains
The moon hides itself from its own shadows in fear
As we stand in them waiting for the moon
 to come into our line of sight
The waning light which dawns late
Has always hid its inner beauty in an eclipse
They are like us as they reminisce a mask
A mask of lies and possibilities
A mask of ebony and porcelain
One that shines light to the world but hides
 the darkness too well
As we are placed on this stage from time to time
We place on this mask of disarray to hide our true selves
To hide the person we are
The world became a stage
Where crying is shamed
Where laughter brings disruptions and lies bring truths
We believe it solves our life and brings us to the surface
But we fall deeper into the salty waters
 as our own breaths bubble and leave
No wonder the world is different from a single person
Humanity is too easily tricked
With nothing or no one for it to be known

-Katherine Bardet, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



Sensation

The light drops of crystalized water
 Tickles my skin
 A crisp icy feeling flows through my body
 A fresh sensation

A crackling firepit
 With a toasty hot chocolate
 The warmth and love tingle my spine
 A safe sensation

An emerald tree
 Dazzles with color
 All unique and bright
 With a gold star on top
 A joyous sensation

Laughter and cheer fill the air
 As music softly plays
 Jazzy and smooth
 With plates of food all around
 Chocolate cake
 And Noche Buena
 A full sensation

-Natalia Botty, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

When He Was Ten

On the wavy green grass stood a boy
 A boy with dreams
 Dreams to travel the big and vast universe
 Dreams to run on different planets
 But he's only 10

Oh, if only he wasn't so sensitive
 If only he would not be teased for dreaming
 If only he would not care what people thought
 He would find out how smart he really is
 Even though he is only 10

The little boy soon became a man
 A man that denied being curious
 A man that never made anything of his life
 Even though he was a genius
 When he was 10

The man later became an old man
 A grumpy old man
 One day he got the news he was having a grandkid
 The grandkid was smart and clever
 Just like when the old man
 When he was 10

-Marco Valle, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



MILLA NAUMOVICH | Grade 8

Chile

Something so dry it makes our noses bleed,
but makes me smile
It has spiders that can make you green if bitten
Scorpions that are feared
Rugged mountains with mountain lions
Waterless plants sit waiting for care
And dirty rocks cover the floor
which makes it hard to walk

But still, I love it
In my eyes, instead of black and white
I see colors greeting me
In those mountains I see tall trees
swaying through the breeze
Bunnies grazing through the grass
at the peak of the mountain

Mother foxes nurturing their young
And at the top you can see the real beauty
Wispy clouds touched by Mother Nature

But all it takes to see this type of beauty
requires a person who has patience for nature
Who doesn't judge at first glance
Who waits to see the beauty

But this is not for everybody
Some people prefer seeing immediate beauty
Everything and everyone has its flaws
That's what makes this dry land beautiful

-Alexa Weinstein, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Forest Fire

Run!
Hide!
It's coming!
A flaming tide!
It lights up the dark!
It's coming to swallow us all!
A tiny hissing spark
In the dry forest wall
Exploding in an inferno of flame
Ravaging the great proud land
To ash and dust the shrubbery became
It challenges the sun and chokes the sky with a
 smokey hand
The flames like a sadistic snake
It burns through the brush in bliss
And dances around the lake
Releasing its low droning hiss
The birds circle the skies as the beasts run below
Some trapped in the raging forest flame
When it will end no one knows
The inferno a beast none can tame

Like a giant enraged boar
Scorching all in its wake
With its horrible crackling roar
Till charred trees snap and break
Till the ground is blanketed in dust
When there's nothing left to burn
And even steel will break and rust
To nothing the strong will return
And it slowly fizzles out
Till the fiery beast is dead
The fire once spread throughout
Dies a tiny bug instead
A single ember flies
The sun sets
And again, it will rise.

-Firas Ul Haq, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon
and
Judges' Award



Worthless?

A minute mite
Formicidae
A flawless home with tall walls
A palace, Versailles could not compare
A mountain, much large than Everest
Yet carelessly,
The home of the family in perfect order
Demolished with a sole
 much larger than the ones they own

Worthless,
Yes worthless,
Quite worthless,

A songbird
Sparrow
Its low hum is heard through the woods
His carefully curated song blesses the ears
A symphony, far better than that of Sammartini
An orchestration, Kleiber could not dream of
Yet negligently,
His watercolor feathers fall
As a cartridge pierces his side
Closing his swan song

Worthless,
Yes worthless
Quite worthless,

A slithering writhing creature
He gracefully travels along the ocean floor
 in search of his muse
His portrait conveys his emotions
 shaking the inner being
A masterpiece, the Louvre struggles to capture
A magnum opus, Botticelli wishes he could illustrate
Yet neglectfully,
His display of truly beautiful colors is destroyed
As the fisherman's net steadily ascends
It suffocates my treasured artist

Worthless,
Yes worthless,
Quite worthless,

A gentle prancing creature
She lightly skips down the path



Her grand jetés and pliés bewitching
A choreography, Anna Pavlova could not imitate
A ballet Tchaikovsky envies
Yet thoughtlessly,
In a failed attempt to leap she suddenly
 clashes with the ground
As the vehicle slowly scrapes forward
Applause is audible, coda

Worthless...
Yes worthless,
Quite worthless,

A grand and wise animal
Her mind holds memories older than time itself
Every moment displayed in her head like a picture book
An intellectual, on par Curie
A scholar, obviously instructed by Plato
Yet inconsiderately,
She falls making ground quake
The poacher's poisoned arrow penetrates her leg
Epilogue

Worthless...
Yes, worthless...
Quite worthless,

A phlegmy mammal
Dust and grime on his face,
A bohemian style
He lightly strums his guitar on the pavement
An instrumentalist, possessing more talent than Beethoven
Virtuoso, playing as diligently as Bach
Yet unsympathetically,
He is punctured with a blade
As his fedora of notes is stolen
His joyous eyes now stare blankly fogging over

Worthless...
Quite...
Worthless...

Yes...
Worthless...

A smile so selfless
Oblivious to the world
A heart much purer than those around her
A saint, a Mother Teresa for her years

A humanitarian, Mandela would
 marvel at her largesse
Yet unmindfully,
In her bassinet she screams and cries out
It's as if she screams "Mother!"
The pain of her malnourishment too much to bear
Her young and fresh face is suddenly dull
Her tiny hands repose

Worthless...
Quite worthless?

You,
An ordinary homosapien
You,
Are demolished by a sole
Pierced by a cartridge
Strangled in the fisherman's net
Flattened by an automobile
Penetrated by a poisoned arrow
Punctured with a blade
Starved

Is it so

Worthless?

-Clarissa Perez, Grade 7
*Blue Ribbon
and
Judges' Award*



MAYA WELLE | Grade 8
Scholastic Art & Writing Award – Silver Key

The Ballad of the Forest

Hear it rustle to the light blow,
Hear it sway to the hardest gale,
Hear it sing a lullaby.

See it charm the beasts of woodland,
See its eyes look down at you,
See it dance to its own song.

Smell its scent of pine,
Smell its undertone of fauna,
Smell its harmonic aroma.

Taste its savory freedom,
Taste its fresh mountain air,
Taste its offered sense of warmth

Feel its shield of shade,
Feel its four sides of season,
Feel the ballad of the forest.

-Abigail Costales, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon
and
Judges' Award





Day to Night

The sun peeks over the horizon
Lighting up the world with its own special rainbow
Slowly the sun rises, like a shining ball of gold
Reflecting yellow, orange, and a pink that turns clouds to cotton candy
It lasts just for a moment, the sun's morning rainbow
Look to the east to enjoy the show

As the sun takes its place and its show of colors ends,
People awaken from their slumber
The world is a busy place in the morning
Cars shout at each other as the road floods with them
Parents rush their kids to school
Others rush to get to work on time
But once everyone falls back into habit
The streets become calmer
The day goes on with its ups and downs
Before the sun tires out

Slowly the sun retreats to the west
Reigniting its rainbow
As it slips below the horizon
Once again, the reign of the sun is over
A new, more humble source of light emerges

This day, an elegant silver crescent in the sky
An ever-changing form
The moon
Along with the moon, stars come into view
As if flecks of white paint on a large navy canvas
The night steals the bright shade of blue from the sky, darkening it
But it cannot snuff out the moon and stars, shining from afar
People follow the sun
They too retreat to their place of slumber
To a land of their imagination in the moonlit night

-Siena Lunt, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Sun Rise

The sky is dark and gloomy
All is quiet and still
A light breeze blows
Against the soft sand
Ruffling the trees
The moon glistens
Into the calm ocean waves
And the birds start to chirp
As the orange lining begins to display

The sky becomes vibrant
Full of pink and yellows
Pastels and neon
Blended together like watercolors
Reflecting on the glass-like sea

Radiant and vivid
The golden sun starts to show
From behind the horizon
Dancing in the clouds
As the night waves goodbye

The earth is awoken
A bright blue soon covers the sky
People walk by
Singing a happy tune
The sun's rays beam
Into the ground below
And the trees rise tall
Kids walk to school
Or go on bikes or in cars
All is well
When the new day starts

-Bianca Harley, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Spring

The earth emerges from its deep slumber
And the bitter frost of winter
Leaves without a trace
Saplings and greenery spring from the ground
Flowers bloom
Frozen rivers thaw and flow
Animals drowsily wake
From their warm, cozy dens
The honeybees begin their routine round
Pollinating flowers
And releasing the scent of sweet honey
That the bears crave to taste

The birds sing their soothing melody
Breaking the forest's silence
Making music and heralding
The arrival of Spring
The pine leaves regain
Their lush and beautiful hue
From which they lost in Winter
As snow entombed their fate

The squirrels reclaim their buried acorns
And begin their harvest
To save and store new nuts
For the next cold season
As the day ends,
The sun begins to set
Upon a new world
Symbolizing nature's triumph
over the cold, withering grasp
Of Winter

-Oliver Taylor, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Eclipse

I gathered around amongst many others
To celebrate an unparalleled occasion
Of a beautiful yet blinding sight
One so very rare
Only occurring every four years

Everyone sits and directs their eyes to the sky
I sit anxiously waiting
Preparing for what happens
Waiting for the day so dark
When the sun cannot be seen

It's getting close
The moment is arriving
All goes quiet
And we wait and wait
Darkness arrives

Like a lamp turning off
Day is shrouded into night
I look at the stunning beauty
As the veil that is the moon lifts
Last, I see light peeking through

I slowly start seeing more and more of the sun
I take a glance at the sun and the moon
Knowing I would not be able to revisit this moment
It felt like a second, but it lasted far longer
And now the sun takes back the day

The powerful rays that belong solely to the sun
That coat the grass in beautiful light
And the two begin to go their separate ways
For one will be stalking the night
The other to sink into the vast seas

-Henry Strong, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Truth of the Forgotten

Prey

Brothers
They are a different species
The house is their main habitat - the jungle
In which they prowl
Like predators
Ready to pounce on prey the first chance they get
They are animals
Chaotic, noisy, wild
Every move being watched
Just like a predator watches its prey
A role model
Can't make any wrong move or BOOM
Everything goes wrong
The pressure
Can't make any mistakes
You have to lead by example
Or else

Running through the jungle
I can hear the blood pumping in my ears
Heart racing
Eyes glancing rapidly
They pounce out of nowhere
All three of them
Ganging up on you
They are bloodthirsty
Out to get you
Can't wait to pick this fight in which they win
Blaming you
For things you didn't
Why is it all your fault?
It's all on you
You are the oldest they say
It's your responsibility

They take any chance to get out of what they did
Find every little crack and crevice to escape
And by doing so
It is all on you
You are defeated, killed
Prey

-Zara Malik, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Rain,
A greedy being.
One that takes,
For its selfish needs.
No, it never seems to be satisfied,
For how often it repeats.
It trickles,
Gaining more and more speed.
It flaunts its greatness,
To the lonely world below.
An obnoxious sound,
Rain.

Rain,
A beautiful occurrence.
A new life has been made,
As blooming wildflowers dance into the world.
The petals take their first breath,
As if it were an infant,
Tears fall down the leaves of the newborn.
It is trapped in an isolated world,
A world that overlooks beauty,
One that is so clear to see.
A lonesome being it is,
Rain.

Rain,
An unwanted concept.
It is told to leave as it comes,
Yet for no reason,
None at all.
The wails of its tears slowly become distant echoes,
The last drop hit the ground slowly with a ripple,
Into a puddle.
A puddle with a reflection,
A reflection that can be seen as,
Greedy and obnoxious.
Yet beautiful though lonesome and unwanted.
One that can be,
Human.

-Kylie Marie Landsom, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Skittles, My Colorful Celebration

Skittles: my sweet, tangy, tasty loves!
Magically sour and sharp,
The rainbow of fruit flavors.
Which one do you love?

A long-awaited date,
Removing the metal from my mouth.
Finally, a chance to fully enjoy chewing without any worries.

I have no favorite. All of them are perfect.
Each one satisfies me. But, each one makes me want one more.

Do skittles have feelings? I wonder as I eat them,
Which satisfies most? My pearly whites find the flavors.

I am forced to find a favorite before this bag is done.
A favorite to call my own. A favorite to keep to myself.

Bold red, a strawberry. For most, the most important.
Strong and sweet, for many, an easy choice.

Mysterious purple, a grape, doesn't taste like grapes at all!
Chewy and tangy, yet it always hits the spot.

The orange skittle, tropical and tasty,
Citrus flavor surprise! Wait, did it taste just like green?

Green is lime - the bag says so. I thought it was apple,
But it's sour. I was fooled!

I've saved the best for last. Like orange, but yellow.
Like lime, but different. Lemon - smooth and sharp!

A party in my mouth, three long years I've waited.
My forever treat of choice,
Continues to win first place.

Five fun flavors.
Five fantastic colors.
Each a separate personality.
You can tell by the taste - I think.

-Stewart Dixson Cohen, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

April 20, 2024

Months of preparation
My legs shake, palms sweat
Blood pressure rising
Do I remember the words?

Big deep breaths in
Close my eyes and exhale
I begin to chant
Ancient text full of meaning

As I stand at the *bimah*
I honor the past
While at present, my people defend
Their homeland at stake

The meaning of this moment
Is not lost on me
Standing where my dad and brother stood
So many years ago

Both a child and a man
My future ahead of me
I wait with anticipation
To see what tomorrow will be

This is my day
The day I will never forget
I have to carry on
And make time slow down

Today I become a man
Tears in my parents' eyes
Pride in their hearts
Prayers for peace

Months of preparation
And now it's time to party!

-Cameron Biondo, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

This is Writing

You reach for the paper
The texture confuses you
Coarse
Yet smooth
Lost, wandering thoughts
It is like a maze
A confusion so intense
You lose focus
Your pen on the paper
Mind lost with monsters
Makes your head spin
You write silly things
They don't make sense
Amused yourself you have
This is writing
Confusion
Wonder
A maze
Trying to focus

Soon
Let loose those monsters in
your mind
That rattle their cages
Exploring the world below,
Monsters dance with a pen
Monsters put rain on a
papery Earth
It becomes a gloomy day
Gray thunder covers the
skies
A light in the darkness
appears-

The angels from Heaven,
They come down to the
paper,
The pen-
Flying gracefully with them
Like summer on a sunny day
Then all of a sudden, Hell
and Heaven shake
The Earth cracks
You begin to feel a tingle
Then it is a sharp feeling
Again, you are lost
In swirling ideas
Like a word with no meaning
You can't recognize it
Immediately, it is pain
Your arm hurts
From the tips of your fingers
To the ends of your arms
Hurts so much it may fall off
It goes numb
Feels like a thousand pins
and needles trying to escape
your grasp
That is writing
Hard work
Determination
Feeling

You continue to jot down
beliefs, imagination, and
curiosity

You realize that in literature
In everyday life
There are no limits
No stop signs
No obstacle
No big wall in your way
Just your mind there to tell
you NO

But your imagination shines
brighter than the sun and
truer than truth
There is only your creative
power
Like a pilot afraid of heights
A doctor afraid of needles
A teacher afraid of students
It makes no sense
Yet it is humorous
It is imaginative
It confuses you
There are no limits
In writing
In creating
In everyday life
You can write your dreams
Your fears
And
Your pain
This is writing
Confusion
Pain
Imagination

-Juliana Sanchez-Tobar, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

MILLA NAUMOVICH | Grade 8



Life in Motion

I feel the refreshing water finally reach my whole body
As I look through the crystal-clear sea
And a burst of shining colors come into sight
With a scene of beautiful sea creatures sailing by

Bright pink, orange, and dark blue reefs reveal themselves
As I start to glide with my flippers towards them
With the calming sway of the water
Psht, psht, psht

As I look down at the reefs from above, I notice each and every detail carefully
Like the tiny glowing green fish dancing in their home
Or glimpses of big dark blue fish, with silver stripes along them
As happy as can be in their deep, turquoise waters

Water I hear surf over me
Purifying the ocean
Serving as the traffic signals of the sea
While the active fish fulfill their marine responsibilities

Each and every fish is different
With their own pattern, size, and color
Each one carrying their own beauty
As they swim calmly with no panic, even after they have seen my presence

A performance begins right in front of my eyes
With synchronized fish swimming so peacefully
And an ancient turtle moving slowly through the obstacles of the ground
With none of the sea life lacking a color

The act proceeds while I look toward the ground and through the coral
A family of starfish appear in my sight, lying still, like statues

I dive down to feel their rough backs, yet smooth bottoms
So colorful and vibrant that their appearance cannot be mistaken

The marine life all in action
I take a moment to realize how this can never be taken for granted
The creatures, the scenery, the setting
Of life in motion

-Arielle Tzur, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



DANIELA BAER | Grade 7

Siblings

In the realm of siblings, life unfolds side by side
From those days of taking those first steps
To the quiet exchanges, in a language only we truly grasp.
Up in the boxes hold fragments of our past
A collection of old toys, faded photographs and cherished memories.
Laughter fills the air as we reminisce on shared experiences
While our footprints slowly fade away in the passage of time.

Through days and stormy weather, we embark on our journey together
As a united front facing whatever challenges life throws our way.
Silent glances and unspoken words become our way to communicate
Rivalries casting shadows that deepen our connection.

Our friendship is one filled with both love and strife
Two souls engaged in an endless battle
Yet fate binds us together too stubborn to let go.

Scars etched upon our skin bear witness to battles fought fiercely
Each mark tells its story within our narrative.
In the symphony of interactions between us two
Bickering and playful banter create a melody.

Two souls forever tied by blood forming a bond for life,
Voices that harmonize beautifully within life's composition.
Within the gallery of memories faces may go,
But the essence of kinship remains an unwavering constant.
In the tapestry of our shared past
Love between siblings flows, unencumbered and vast.
No need for words in the exchange
A bond unspoken, yet never subject to change.

A painting on canvas brushed with moments we share
A tribute, to the beauty of sibling pairs.
A journey defined by threads of connection and care
Siblings, a story woven within hearts own repair.

-Eric Macedo, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



NORAH HENFRIDSSON | Grade 8

The Joy of a Sunset

The hue of colors
Like melting crackling lava
When your gaze meets it
You become at peace
Chanting the fish to sleep
A blazing star that will not part

Burning through the morning
Hiding in the night
It keeps falling out of grasp
Constantly running away
And then coming back
And you beg for it to stay

Rousing the birds in the morning
The feeling of a new day
A fresh start and a pristine page
The colors of purple, pink, and blue
As salty wind rushes through your hair
Woosh!

Its shadows cast everywhere
Enveloping the sky
A mellow harmony
Ringing in your ears
While the waves in the beach rush by
You stare at the glowing yellow clouds

Mountains bowing in the horizon
That is the joy of a sunset
The ocean reflects its shadow
That is the joy of a sunset
The warm shining breeze
That is the joy of a sunset

-Isabella Rodriguez, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Summer Speeding

The air is warm,
Now once again.
I feel it on my skin
As it turns a light golden.

Camp,
Seeing long distant friends.
Wrists now colorful,
Beads and bands.

Salty hair,
Stuck together.
Wet towels now piled up,
Leaving their scent.

Letters sent from home,
Away for weeks.
In the cabins,
Counselors too.

Walking gravel roads,
Up and down hill.
Till leaving camp,
The season will leave with it.

Last minutes are always
Spent working.
Long books,
Essays too.

Hit submit,
No more stress.
Packed backpacks,
Ready to come alive again.

School soon starting,
Though it just ended.
Beg for one more week,
Of summer.

-Sofia Gonzalez, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

She is the Ocean

The color blue radiates off the surface,
Waves crashing into each other
 making the sound of broken glass,
The tide rises and fills the beach,
Calming,
The fishy smell evaporates into the air,
The bright coral making a pattern,
Sharp but dull,

She is full of life,
Boats riding with the water,
Dolphins rhyming with the waves,
Sharks slicing the exterior of the water,

She is a place to fear,
The Seven Seas,
Hurricanes form with the warm water,
The ocean floor filled with stingrays,

Not all has been discovered,
Secrets to unfold,
Some never come back,
Stuck in her trap,
She is mysteriously huge,
But nothing compares
 to what's deep down in her,

She is one with the world,
And gives comfort,
But is rewarded with pain,

The sun shines warming her like a hug,
The rain bathes her like a cold shower,
Her tide licks the sand,

She is lonely,
But is filled with so much life,
She is the ocean.

-Thereza Lara Nogueira Milano, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

NORAH HENFRIDSSON | Grade 8





The Winter Serenade

Joyful bells are singing,
In sync with the winter serenade,
The falling snow, like shimmering crystals in the sky,
Shows off its shiny, soft surface.
The snow as quiet as a mouse,
But the beauty as bold as a lion,
Asserting its dominance.

The smell of pine trees,
So sweet, so fresh,
The lush texture soothes anything it touches,
Mesmerizing people around the globe.
Crisp ginger cookies, a taste to savor,
Molecules merrily melting in my mouth,
the most delicious flavor.

Christmas carols bring delight,
'Oh Saint Nick!', the children sing at night,
Their exuberant faces glowing with glee.
The Star of Bethlehem is a light beam in the sky,
One day a pathway for the Three Kings,
Now a symbol for the birth of Christ.

-Lucas Mora, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

My Memorable Christmas in New York

I hopped on my flight to New York
There was a beautiful sunset out the window
Pink and orange filled the sky
through the cotton candy looking clouds
As the bright sun was sinking down

When we arrived, it was colder than Antarctica
With my fingers numb and my nose as red as Rudolph,
I couldn't wait
Cars honking, people talking, whistles blowing,
the city was roaring
All the tall buildings were calling us to come

Down 5th Avenue
Christmas lights shined as bright as the sun
Lighting up the night sky as tall as a giant
Stood the Rockefeller tree

As we walked through the sea of people in Bryant Park
Sweet smells of freshly baked waffles filled the air
As hungry as I was, the ice-skating rink took center stage
Before I knew it, I was on the ice, skating freely

Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, we saw the city disappear
Tall buildings replaced with glammed up houses
We walked the streets taking it all in
Making it a very memorable Christmas in New York

-Annabelle Rivas-Vasquez, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Beautiful Beach

The Wonderful Gift

Nature an absolute gift
From the crystal-clear waters of Australia
The waves crashing like a tsunami
To the mountains of Nepal that reach the sky
With snowy peaks as white as a sheet of paper
Even the trees dancing to the wind all over the world,

Nature blooming around the corner
Forests drowning with life everywhere
The ants gathering food
To the tigers hunting down their meal for the day
The beauty of nature is the apple of my eye,

The world is a gift
Through thick and thin
The elegance of nature is something to enjoy
Including the animals we all adore
From the pelicans of the Caribbean Sea
To the polar bears of Antarctica
The astonishing diversity is what makes this world unique

-Paulo Martinez, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

As the waves smack the sand
I smile
Admiring the beauties of life
The sand soft
Like a pillow
Not a cloud in the sky
Water a light shade of blue crystal clear
I jump in
Salty Water
I exited the water

The wind seemed to pinch my face
The sun gleaming
My eyes shining
I jump in one last time
Sun setting now
Sunset a feast for my eyes
Dreams come true at the beach
I lay back in the lounge chair

A giant wave crashes in the beach
And a light breeze brushes my hair
Then the sound and smell
Brightens my senses
Pleasure floods me
As I take in the beautiful seas
Glad to be in a little slice of heaven

-Noah Celic, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

ALEJANDRA ORTEGA GANEN | Grade 6



No Limits to Art

Art is a universe, full of life
Imagination creates the world
Light made from the tip of the pen
Draw away to your heart's extent

Creations divide from one to another
But we all feel the same
About an impressive piece
There is no limit, no limits at all

Art makes one feel different emotions
Art can smile and make you happy
But also frown and make you sad
Each a distinct response

Art is as free as a bird
The only limit is how much one tries
Create a white bird
With bright blue dots
Do what you want

Draw and draw
Form the terrain
Generate your sky
Invent your wave

Break free from the limits
Restrictions don't matter
Color and paint
Art is endless

Art is the world
There are no,
No limits to Art

-Kai Hanada, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



CHRISTOPHER ARANA | Grade 8

Growing Up

When I was five years old
I would play around in the park;
I could ride slides, climb trees
And play around for a million hours

I never understood why the older
kids sat inside staring at their
phones

When I was eight years old, I looked
at my mom as she put makeup on
even though I told her she looked
pretty without it

I never understood why people
covered up their face with products
concealing their natural beauty

When I was fifteen years old I finally
understood why the older kids were
always inside and glued to their phones

I never felt like going to the park
anymore, it wasn't "cool"

I started wearing makeup because I felt
I wasn't pretty enough

Growing up you understand things that
you might not have been able to before
which I realize now was a blessing
in disguise

I miss not knowing, having the freedom
to feel as light as a feather and do
whatever I wanted without being judged
or misinterpreted

-Antonella Ciocca, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

apologies

i'm sorry
apologies flow off people's tongues
as earnest as the next
carrying sincerity as they go

i'm sorry
these words carry meaning
not given lightly
though to them, their reluctant murmur is blaring

i'm sorry
the words are thrown around
carelessly, there is no meaning this time
slipping out of their mouth as if nothing

i'm sorry
peering at the person in front of you
it's easy to tell
how much these words matter to them

i'm sorry
no matter what
the same response is given
every single time

i'm sorry
it's okay
the phrase is like Chinese handcuffs
the only way to get out of it, is to not resist

i'm sorry
but it's not okay
the joke was unfunny, the action was too cruel
"it's ok."

-Jude Robinson, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Two Masks of Art

It may be two masks,
But there is so much more.
A whole new world,
New personalities await.

I love theater,
And so do others.
It brings us all together,
New moments await.

The mask can laugh,
The mask can gloom,
And all you have to do,
Is put it on.

The sets are beautiful,
As beautiful as mountains.
Made with such beauty,
It makes me smile.

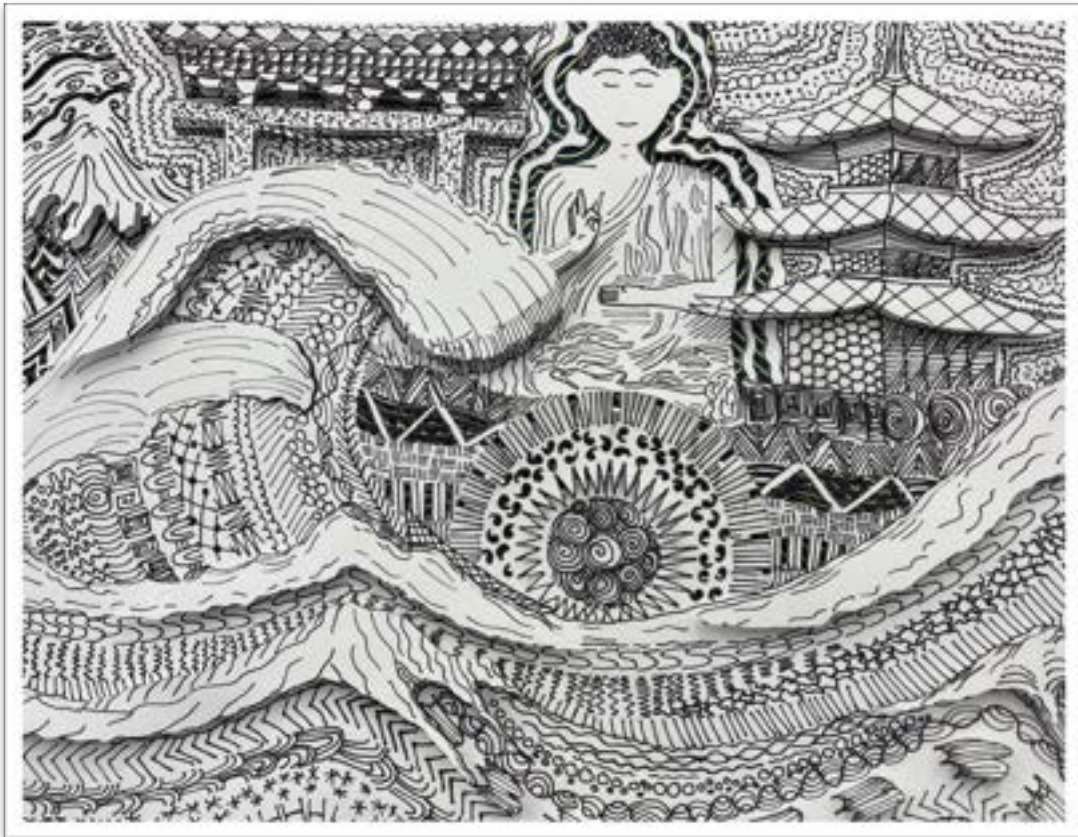
Words mean a lot,
Each and every one.
Some might cause glee,
And some can cause a tear.

When it's finally over,
You're drowned with claps.
Then you wait and stand,
Take in every one of them.

The story might be done,
Only for now though.
When someone else reads it,
It becomes alive again.

-Luca Komaransky, Grade 7

Blue Ribbon



HANA SMITH | Grade 7

if you tell a lie

The truth always gets tangled in lies
Lies conceal you from the sincere truth
A truth that some don't want told
for reasons they can't reveal
They spin a web drenched in lies
until the truth comes out

Some don't know how much the truth hurts
until they discover it for themselves
they realize the lives they have bruised
the people they have damaged, scarred, harmed,
the personalities they have mutilated.

Don't be someone who
inflicts harm with their words
words then re-spoken in a
different manner to others
then you are the one at fault
you are the one who has brought
dread to the lives of others

Don't tell lies that will be
wired into a wreath, a wreath
that is covered in thorns
thorns someone will eventually
remove and find the authentic truth.
They will then be hurt by the lies you have told
They will spread it around like a virus

You will be blamed and accused
you are the one who will end up
with all the lies coming back to you
like a boomerang
impacting you just like you
did to others
Living a lie you created

-Sofia Caprio, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



The Michelin Stars That Once Were

In the Mediterranean,
A little North of Barcelona,
I lived a luxurious life...yet,
Now I'm abandoned

My beautiful art, danced with the noisy ambience
My tables and chairs visited by the world's most glamorous,
Demanding, and wealthy
My kitchen, my chef...the very best the world had seen
My music was the calm before a storm
My soul so complete

Night after night, the smell of truffle
Mixes with the world's most expensive perfumes filled my senses
Night after night,
The big, bright, bold moon shined like never before

My space, as known as the sun,
My tables, filled like fish fill the sea,
My elegance, like the red carpet at the Oscars,
My precision, like the world's best opera singer

And one day he said,
"Enough, I've had enough."
And here I am today,
Abandoned, sad, smelling only the salty breeze,
Thinking about the Michelin Stars that once were.

-Siena Ringel, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



MILLA NAUMOVICH | Grade 8

All At Our Hands

It is innocent.
The way that the shore rises,
How the wind dances the leaves,
How the creatures play,
The song the water sings when the shore rises.
The way that it provides for our people.
Innocent it is.

It is also cruel.
Violence,
Poverty,
Inequality,
Discrimination,
Corruption,
Cruel it is indeed.

It is our home.
Our beloved Earth.
The land that we love so dearly.
But is there truly any love?
Our people are as wicked as the devil himself.
Our people are unconsciously the root of our
home's ruin.
From innocent, to cruel
The end is near
And the irreversible damage is all at our hands.

-Nicolas Hasbun, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Cars Are Valuable

Cars are like statues
Some can be weak
Pistons moving up and down like a dolphin
Some are a bull
They can be fast like a cheetah
Or slow like a turtle.

Old and rusty
Squeaky clean and new
Wheels spin like dancers in a grand ballet
Some knew some didn't
But they would get destroyed.

Well ridden or untouched
They can all turn brand new
Tires kiss the road, in a beautiful way
Headlights beam, like stars in the sky
Guiding travelers through night's dark cage

Cars are like stallions, free and bold
They race, they zoom
Across their lengthy abode
The roads are their home.

-Alex Finsky, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Sparkling Moon and Ocean

Sleeping in the nightly breeze
Opening the curtains and the light hitting me
The moon like a light with no fuse
The full moon so bright like heaven was opening
The moon laughing down at the ocean

As I look under the waves crashing each other
The waves making me feel at peace
The waves like the sound of harmony
Crash as the waves collided with each other
the waves and moon working together like a bridge of peace

As I sleep peace overcomes me
The cold going through my blankets
With such grace and beauty
The sound of the ocean rolling through my spine
As I sleep, I wish to never wake up.

-Miguel Trujillo, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

NORAH HENFRIDSSON | Grade 8



The Forest

Rays of light illuminated the heavens.
Birds chirped throughout the woods.
The cold air blew blissfully through the trees.

The river melted from its icy cover.
Flowers opened themselves to the sun.
The leaves began to whisper,
as the sky came into sight.

Squirrels burst out of the trees searching for food.
While in the cave, the bear was craving honey,
The deer grazed upon the dew.
And the owl was fast-asleep.

Before long, there was a change.
Petals had reduced to dust.
Most trees had become stumps.
The wind had gone down,
Whilst the river enveloped a blight.

Mountains of concrete and steel erupted from the ground.
Peaceful meadows decreased to roaring streets.
Loud, noisy vehicles materialized.
Even the lakes vanished without a trace.

There was no hope.
A forest full of life,
Had become a concrete jungle.
And had it been built with the forest in mind,
Wouldn't the forest and the city be in harmony?

-Zain Khan, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

TV Screen

In a room full of glossy cameras and directors
That direct my every step
Criticizing me in every sense
I act to change myself for the people
behind the TV Screen

I seek the rare wide smiles of approval
It vacuums the pure soul out of me
It is an addiction, a temporary happiness
I regret it but still crawl and beg for more

I seek to be the comedian
Though I always end on the fool's side of the table
It works as a bitter medication
Only with an abundance of side effects

Even with the constant reminded imperfections
All of which poke like needles in my heart
I strive to change for them
Anything for the people behind the TV Screen

The amount of sheer force to push through
Is a struggle between clashing conflicts
A burn quite impossible to describe
That makes the world blur in dark colors

Even though I may have lost my voice
My say in what I do
The passions for what I love
I still display myself to appeal to those
behind TV Screen

It is a forever chain nearly routine
Maybe one day I can take my voice back
Maybe I can untie myself from the ropes
of others' expectations
Because breaking free is bittersweet

When the cameras begin to stop recording,
When the past lays clear and the future is done
Maybe as I watch the movie at its end
through my own TV Screen,
It will be worth the popcorn

-Sophie Nogueira, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Good Bunny- Un chico pobre pero con suerte

by Josefina Sanchez Lago

Grade 7

*Blue Ribbon
and
Judges' Award*

Tiene un vaso y revuelve las monedas adentro. Con solo monedas, un cartón como cama y un nombre que no muchos saben, Pablito Castillo Ruiz Torres. Era sólo un chico de siete años cuando los papás lo echaron del pequeño apartamento en el que vivían. Aprendió a vivir con personas sin hogar. Pero ellos no le prestaron mucha atención, no podían hacerse responsables de un chico cuando para ellos sobrevivir era demasiado difícil. Igualmente, Pablito era un chico muy inteligente para la edad que tenía y con una voz increíble. Empezó a cantar canciones que muchos conocían. Aprendió con el radio que encontró en la basura cuando estaba buscando comida.

—Despacito... pasito a pasito, suave suavecito—cantaba Pablito.

La gente empezó a bailar a su ritmo y a los del hogar les empezó a gustar cuando cantaba porque atraía a gente que les donaba a ellos también. Con solo quince años, él ya tenía suficiente dinero como para vivir en un refugio y eso lo hacía muy feliz. A pesar de que estaba solo en el refugio, estaba mejor que viviendo en la calle. Pudo bañarse después de mucho tiempo, y finalmente dormir en una cama.

Un día, mientras buscaba un trabajo, empezó a cantar enfrente de una oficina de un señor que era un productor de música. El señor era muy conocido por todas las canciones y cantantes con los que había trabajado. Estudio Rítmico se llamaba su empresa y él se llamaba Señor Krawski. Cuando salía de la oficina lo ignoraba completamente porque estaba ocupado. Pablito veía al Señor Krawski en la televisión todos los días, y él era su ídolo. Pablito conocía de memoria los horarios del Señor Krawski, cuando iba y volvía a la oficina. Pablito estaba convencido de que él podía atraer la atención del Señor K con su voz. Mientras esperaba al Señor K le cantaba a la gente que estaba sentada o caminando por ahí. A pesar de sus grandes shows de música, solo atraía la atención de ellos. Pablito necesitaba un nuevo plan para impresionar al Señor K.

Ringgg, ringgg, ringgg, suena el teléfono de la recepción de la oficina de Estudio Rítmico.

—Hola, buen día — dice la recepcionista.

—Hola, buen día a ti también. Me llamo Pablito Castillo Ruiz Torres. Solo quería ver si puedo aplicar para cantar y hacer un álbum con el Señor Krawski. Si hay alguna posibilidad por favor avísame— dice Pablito.

—Bueno, el Señor Krawski está muy ocupado con muchos otros cantantes famosos y no está disponible para usted. Si quiere puedo organizar una prueba con otro productor de música para ver cuán bueno sos y ver si tienes alguna posibilidad—dice la recepcionista.

—Si eso es lo mejor que puede hacer, claro que puedo. ¿Qué día está disponible ese otro productor?— pregunta Pablito.

(Organizan un día para la prueba.)

(Día de la prueba.)

Pablito practicó y practicó para este día importante. Entró al cuarto para conocer al productor y cuando empezó a cantar el productor lo paró inmediatamente. Pablito le preguntó qué había pasado y qué había hecho mal. El productor preguntó si tenía otra canción para cantar. Pablito le dijo que solo tenía una más pero que no la había ensayado. Lo dejó cantar por solo unos diez segundos hasta que volvió a pararlo. Pablito no entendía lo que pasaba. El productor se levantó y se fue del cuarto sin otra palabra. Pablito se quedó solo en el cuarto con la



asistente del productor. La asistente le dijo a Pablito que lamentablemente buscara otro productor o que buscara un trabajo en Mc Donalds. Pablito se sintió tan decepcionado que partió hacia el refugio. Una de las trabajadoras en el refugio llamada Sofía Camarena le preguntó qué le pasaba. Pablito le contó lo que sucedió, y Sofía le dijo unas palabras importantes.

—Siempre va a haber alguien que va a tratar de hacerte sentir inferior, pero si trabajas duro y no paras, un día ellos van a querer estar con vos y ser amigos tuyos.—

Pablito la escuchó y quiso probar una vez más pero en otra oficina. Con veintitrés años, Pablito consiguió un trabajo en otra oficina de música. Esta oficina era más chica y el productor trabajó duro con Pablito. Después de muchos obstáculos, Pablito logró conseguir su primer álbum, su primer concierto chico, y sus primeros mil dólares. Pablito no podía estar más feliz. Sofía y el productor siempre le ayudaron dejándole saber que él tenía lo que necesitaba para ser exitoso. La gente empezó a escuchar las canciones de Pablito, y así consiguió sus primeros cien mil seguidores.

Después de cinco años, Pablito se compró una casa grande y se empezó a enamorar de Sofía, a pesar de que ella era un poco mayor que él, se enamoraron. Pablito la llevó a un restaurante y le propuso matrimonio a Sofía. Ella le dijo que sí y que lo iba a acompañar toda su vida.

Un día, Pablito tiene un concierto muy grande y el productor de Estudio Rítmico, que un día lo rechazó, va a verlo cantar. A él le gustó tanto la música que después del concierto lo va a ver para felicitarlo. Le preguntó a Pablito si quería trabajar con él. Pablito lo rechaza y le dice que ya era demasiado tarde. El Señor Krawski lo va a ver también. Por mucho que a Pablito le gustaría trabajar con él jamás podría dejar a su productor, que tanto había confiado en él durante todos estos años.

Pablito ahora tiene la mejor vida que puede tener con Sofía y sus tres hijos. Su carrera es muy exitosa y le va muy muy bien. Hoy es conocido como 'Good Bunny' o 'Conejo Bueno'.

Hasta la gloria

by Lucas Mora

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

Es julio 19, 2026, la final del Mundial. Se enfrentan Colombia y Brasil en la final más esperada para todos los colombianos y brasileños. Nunca ha llegado tan lejos Colombia en la etapa eliminatoria de los mundiales, nunca han ganado. Brasil, ya tiene una historia de ganadora con cinco mundiales bajo su nombre. También iba ser el último mundial de Neymar, que está en muy buena forma, marcando seis goles en ocho partidos. Por otro lado, Luis Díaz, el héroe de Colombia, tiene seis goles en ocho partidos también. Los dos son los goleadores del mundial y cada uno quiere ganar este trofeo. Va a ser una final muy tensa, con mucho apoyo por parte de los aficionados de ambos equipos.

El comentarista dice, —Y esta es la alineación de Colombia. Ospina de arquero, Muñoz, Mina, Lucumí y Mosquera en la defensa. En el medio campo están James, Carrascal, y Lerma. Y los delanteros son Díaz, Borre, y Duran. Ahora la alineación de Brasil. Ederson de arquero. Lodi, Bremer, Gabriel, y Augusto de defensa. Douglas Luiz y Guimarães son los dos en el mediocampo. Y por último tenemos a Vinicius, Neymar, Vitor Roque, y Endrick de delanteros.—

—¡Beep! —Empieza el juego con el silbato y Brasil empieza con la pelota. Los primeros diez minutos Brasil empieza dominando la pelota, con 70% de posesión. Cada minuto Brasil se ve más cerca de hacer gol. Después, en el minuto veinte, Neymar coge la pelota y da un tiro desde el arco de afuera del área.

—¡GOL!!!!!!” —Grita el comentarista mucho a la desesperación de los colombianos. Por ahora Brasil es el equipo que va a ganar. Después, en el minuto cuarenta y cinco, Mina comete una falta en el área.

—¡Falta, y hay penal!— exclama el comentarista. Este día solo se pone peor para Colombia. Neymar otra vez tiene la pelota para poner a Brasil por arriba 2-0 sobre Colombia.

—¡¡GOL!!!—Ahora se puso difícil para Colombia y entraron en el vestuario perdiendo dos a cero.

—Tenemos que tener determinación y entrar a la última fase. ¡Si no nunca vamos a llegar a hacer gol! Ya llegamos muy lejos para parar aquí. Hoy vamos a ser ganadores del Mundial. ¡Vamos! —Exclama el entrenador de Colombia. Colombia entra al segundo tiempo con furia, buscando su primer gol de la final.

—¡James la tiene en el mediocampo, y encuentra a Luis Díaz! ¡Luis Díaz arranca y pasa a Augusto! ¡Solo le queda el arquero para pasar, y, y... GOL!!!” Colombia marca su primer gol de la final, por Luis Díaz. Ahora Colombia tenía confianza para hacer otro gol y estaban jugando mejor.

—Muñoz le pasa a James en el area y James lo controla con el pecho. Da un tiro al arco y... GOLAZO!!!!!!!!!!—James replica su gol del Mundial de 2014 contra Uruguay, y Colombia empata. Es el minuto noventa y los dos equipos están tratando de ganar.

—¡Colombia tiene la pelota en la última jugada del partido! Mosquera la pasa a Jefferson Lerma. ¡Lerma a Borre, y Borre lo cruza, Díaz trata de hacer una chilena! ¡Y.... GOL!!!!!! ¡Colombia es campeón del mundo por primera vez en la historia!

Díaz y Neymar empatan y comparten el trofeo de goleador con los dos marcando ocho goles. Fue una final del Mundial inolvidable para los colombianos. Para llegar a la gloria se necesita tener determinación y no rendirse.

El diente con alas

by Annabelle Rivas-Vasquez

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

Un día, una niña chiquita, Marisa perdió un diente. Ella estaba muy feliz de que se le había caído el diente.

—¡Yay! ¡Se me cayó un diente!—dijo Marisa.

Estaba muy feliz porque ella recibiría dinero del “tooth fairy”. El tooth fairy le da 10 dólares cada vez que se le cae un diente. Esa misma mañana ella vino de la escuela muy emocionada.

—¡Se me cayó el diente! El tooth fairy va a venir esta noche. —dijo ella.

—¡Guao!— dijeron los niños.

Estaba tan feliz que le dijo a todo el mundo. Le dijo a su mamá, su papá, su hermana, su tía y su bisabuelo. Cuando llegó de la escuela, ella lavó el diente y estaba preparándose para ir a dormir. Puso el diente debajo de su almohada para que el tooth fairy pudiera venir en la noche.

—¡El tooth fairy va a venir esta noche!— ella le dijo a sus padres.

—¡Guao! Tal vez te va dejar dinero— respondió su mamá.

Cuando se durmió, empezó a soñar con el tooth fairy que venía a recoger su diente. A ella le encantaba como sonaba esto y estaba muy feliz por recibir el dinero en la mañana.

El próximo día, cuando Marisa se despertó, el diente todavía estaba allí y no había ningún dinero. Ella se puso muy triste y le dijo a sus padres que no había venido el tooth fairy.

—¡Oh no! ¡El tooth fairy no vino! Mi diente todavía está aquí.— Marisa le dijo a su hermana y a sus padres.

—¿Por qué?— respondió su hermana.

Después, ella fue a la escuela muy triste. Sus amigas le preguntaron sobre el tooth fairy. Querían saber si había venido.

—El tooth fairy no recogió mi diente, —Marisa le dijo a sus amigas muy triste.

Esa noche, ella se puso a pensar. No podía concentrarse porque estaba pensando en lo que ella podría hacer para que el tooth fairy viniera. Se le ocurrió una idea muy buena.

—¡Yo puedo escribirle una carta preguntándole porque ella no vino!— Ella pensó para sí misma.

Después, se puso a trabajar. Su lápiz se estaba moviendo muy rápido. Cuando terminó, dejó la carta en su mesa y se fue a dormir.

—¡El tooth fairy respondió!— ella gritó.

Ya se habían despertado y habían comido desayuno cuando Marisa miró para ver si el tooth fairy le había respondido.

—Perdón que no recogí tu diente antes. Tenía muchas cosas que hacer. Pero ya lo recogí y también hay algo más debajo de tu almohada,—escribió el tooth fairy.

Marisa se puso muy alegre. ¿Qué hay debajo de mi almohada?, ella pensó.

—¡Había diez dólares y unos chocolates! —Marisa dijo con una sonrisa.
—¡Guao! ¡Qué rico!—respondió su mamá.
Después, fue a la escuela con su dinero y chocolate y se los enseñó a sus amigos.
—El tooth fairy vino y recogió mi diente. ¡También me dio chocolate y dinero!— dijo Marisa.
—¿Me puedes dar un chocolate? ¿Guao, cuánto dinero? ¿Puedo ver?— dijeron los niños.
Toda la clase quería hablar con ella. Estaban muy emocionados.

The Scholastic Assessment Test Experience

by Nicolas Burneo

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

ISABELLA POSADA | Grade 6



I woke up. Most kids my age like waking up. I used to like it too, back in my old school at least. Not anymore, though. Here, waking up during this time of year was a reminder to work. Am I exaggerating? Probably, I don't know, but it's not like I care either. I turned my head to stare at the SAT handbook on my desk. God, I just wanted to shove that thing down the garbage and forget about it forever. But I couldn't, because if I did, it would have made these last three weeks of practice pointless, and while I am lazy, I don't waste my effort once I've made a commitment. *Here we go*, I thought to myself as I walked to my desk.

"Question 1...", I said aloud as I read the question. "Thank God I had the history page first," I murmured under my breath with relief. I loved history. Out of all my subjects in school, I always had the most fun with history. The stories, the lessons, the people, and the places! It's incredible, and a lot more fun than math. Math. *Right, I'll have to do math next*, I thought to myself. Math was never my strong suit. I never liked the increasingly complex questions and the amount of work I have to do on a scratch sheet just to get through one equation. Even worse, with my ADHD, I

always get distracted with the most random and insignificant things. My dog barks? I get distracted. My pencil falls? I get distracted. It's hard to see my hyperfocus as a superpower when it's so easily broken. Luckily, I have medications that help me with my problem of distraction and make me feel like I want to work. *Maybe I should take one now*, I thought, standing up from my desk.

I was about to reach for the handle when my dog, Panda, opened it for me. She may not have opposable thumbs, but she can still open doors either way. I petted her back as she strutted by me to jump on the big bean bag in my bedroom facing the window. I walked out of my bedroom out into the living room. The beautiful rays of sunlight beamed from outside into the room and clashed with the deep blue colors of the couch. I walked past the television, fighting the urge to turn it on and rewatch a Marvel or Pixar movie. I sighed as I opened the medicine cabinet in my kitchen. I saw a note left by my mom on the counter. I read it carefully, as I didn't know how much I was supposed to take.

- Nico,
I want you to work on ten pages of your SAT handbook. I know this may seem like a lot, but I believe in you! I will be back at 9:00. I am trusting you to do this on your own while your dad and I are at Costco. After you're done, you can watch TV.
- Love, Mom

Why!? I thought to myself angrily as I slammed the paper on the counter. I grabbed the ten-milligram pill case. It had a Post-it note on it that said to take one pill from it, and one pill from the five-milligram case. *Why does this happen to me? It's a Saturday, I should be relaxing!* I thought as I grabbed the five-milligram pill case. I took one of each, like the note said to, and stomped angrily to my bedroom. I normally do five workbook pages, so I was upset. Of course, I should have seen this coming when I played games with my friend instead of doing my pages on Friday, but it was Friday! The one day that I could enjoy myself all afternoon, where I could put off all my responsibilities until the next day, where I could relax! But of course, life is life, and I have to do 10 pages now. This always happens to me one way or another: I relax on Friday and get a reprimand on Saturday, but this was different. I was fine with reading 60 pages instead of 30, doing two IXLs instead of one, and I was fine with doing swimming on Saturday instead of a workout on Friday, but I absolutely drew the line at 10 pages of SAT instead of five.

"I absolutely despise the SAT, and I always will," I said, gritting my teeth as I sat down. That's when the pills kicked in. My mom says the pills don't do much at all to change me, but whenever I take them, my entire mindset changes. I took a deep breath and focused on my work. I zipped from question to question with ease and did amazing. It stayed this way until page 4. That's when I began to get frustrated. I was on the math page. My breathing grew more and more rapid, and I grew more and more angry.

"Uuuggghhh!" I yelled as I threw the SAT book onto my bed. I was upset. I felt like I couldn't keep my cool, or focus. I was tired from staying up late, I was sick of the stupid math section, and worst of all, I was not even halfway done with my pages. I tried breathing in and out, but it wouldn't work. The anger was building up more and more, and I was beginning to feel like I was going to explode. I couldn't hold it in any longer. I had to take my anger out on something.

"Why does this happen to me?!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. I kicked my backpack really hard, and it skid across the floor as I began to calm down. My breathing became controlled, and my face went back to its normal color as it faded from a light red. I decided to pick up my book. I had calmed down, and I was ready to get back to work. But I was still frustrated, and that was going to take a while to get over. But then, when I walked over to my desk, something caught the corner of my eye. It was Lil' Kin! The pumpkin origami I had been so proud of making so long ago in October of 2023. It was February of 2024 by now. I walked over and picked up Lil' Kin. I walked to my desk and kept on working. The time eventually went into my subconscious.

"Done!" I said, triumphant, satisfied, and very relieved. *Finally, time to watch some TV!* I thought to myself. Things were looking good. That is until I walked outside of my room. Then, everything suddenly changed. My dad was home.

"Nico!" My dad said, happy to see me.

"Hola Papa," I replied, happily. I went to him and gave him a hug. This lasted for 3 seconds.

"Did you do your SAT pages?" he asked me.

"Yes!" I replied, proud of my accomplishment.

"Did you read your thirty pages?"

Ok, you may be wondering why I wouldn't be happy to see my dad come inside after a long trip to Costco. Now, I have a perfectly good reason. My dad makes me read a book a week, 30 pages every day. He says it's what CEOs do, and I believe that. There's only one problem: I already have enough things to do, and don't have a lot of time to read 30 pages of a book with size 12 font. So, I try to meet the daily requirement every Saturday or Sunday. I still hadn't done my pages that day, and I had just come out of my 10 pages, so I didn't want to dive straight into my 30 pages. So, I very carefully replied with a foolproof answer:

"Nooooo..."

"No?"

"Nope"

"Well, go read them now!"

"But I just finished with my ten pages of SAT!"

"Alright, you can have 30 minutes to relax."

"Deal!"

So, I went and relaxed for the short time I had. I was glad I reached a compromise, but still wanted to relax for more time. But when you reach a compromise, you just stay satisfied with it. But, once again, the time flew by. Before I knew it, I had heard the timer go off. It was time to read.

"Wait, just ten more minutes!"

"No, go read, you had your time to relax!"

"But-"

"No buts, go read!"

"Fine!"

I walked to my room and shut the door. I was lucky I only had to read 30 pages, as I hadn't read my pages the day before. I was still frustrated, though. Luckily, the time flew by yet again, and before I knew it, I had finished my pages. I decided to relax for the rest of the day, as I was exhausted. I watched a few movies, played some games, and then went to bed. *What a nice day.* I thought to myself, satisfied. I drifted off to sleep. I woke up. Everything seemed fine. Everything was fine, until I checked the time. 6:20. *That's weird, I normally wake up earlier... wait.*

"6:20?!" I yelled out loud to myself.

"Yes, it's 6:20, stupid!" My sister yelled as I got out of bed.

This was a problem, as my bus left at 6:40 to school. I couldn't be late. I dashed to my desk in my pajamas as I scrambled to pack everything I needed in my bag before I did my other chores. *Writing journal, laptop, folder...Lil' Kin?! Whatever, no time to decide!* I packed him in my backpack and dashed to breakfast where my sandwich was ready. I cramped it into my mouth and chewed as fast as I could. I nearly choked on the cheese as I quickly rushed to the bathroom to brush my teeth and hair. It was 6:30. I finished brushing and dashed to grab my swimming bag and ID. I didn't put my Apple watch on in time, but it didn't matter, as I had no time. I rushed out of the front door and into my car. My mom managed to take us to the bus stop just in time. I rushed in and sat down. I gave a sigh of relief. The bus moved and I settled in peacefully. When I got to school, I headed to my first class. Literature. It was gonna be a long day. I got inside and started doing my work. Next was science, and after was math. Finally, it was lunch. I sat down and started eating my pizza. I was exhausted. *Thank God I only have 3 more days before my trip.* I thought to myself. But I knew that when I got back, I knew I would have the final SAT test. The stress was building up in the back of my head. I went to the writing lab, my last class. Today, we were writing about our experiences in dude ranch. Of course, most of the class was doing what they did at home as they all felt the same way as Tyler, who told me it was the worst going to dude ranch. Me and my friend, Simon, were probably the only ones in our class who actually went there. I felt good, as we were the only ones in our class brave enough to go. But as I was writing I felt stuck. I tried looping back to dialogue I did in my realistic fiction writing, when I realized I had deleted it by accident when I had gotten home for the break. The past is the past, and the present is the present, so I kept on typing. I got on the bus home and decided to call it a day, which means...*SLEEP...* The SATs had ruined my entire flow. I now had to sleep during the ride home because of too much work in my brain. I dreamed about something *strange*. I dreamed about Lil' Kin. Yes, I did dream about him, but why? What purpose did I have to dream about a little origami pumpkin? He turned around. I was startled. My dream seemed so real. I swear I could hear his voice. Slightly higher than mine, but still not too high. He said:

"Welcome, Nico, to your SUBCONSCIOUS!"

"Woah..." I said, astonished.

"Woah is right, my good friend. This is where all of your school knowledge is transferred right after class," he explained.

"Wait, what?"

"Yup! That's why you always randomly forget important pieces of information when you really need it!

Here's an example:"

I saw a strange device appear out of thin air in front of me. Suddenly, a vivid memory appeared in front of me on a floating screen. It showed a date on the top right corner: 12/18/23. Right below it was a name: chapter's Five and One test. I had been worried. Very worried. I couldn't remember half of what I had been doing.

"WHY?!" I asked, shocked.

"Because the brain doesn't work with you all the way. It makes 90% percent of your life easy, and 10% of your life slightly inconvenient in all the most annoying and pointless ways." He explained.

"THAT'S JUST STUPID!"

"HOW DARE YOU, STUPID IS MY JOB!"

"You work?"

"Yeah, of course I work! I am a data computer in the subconscious system! How else do you think your brain receives this info correctly?!"

"How does your job work?"

"Oh, it's simple, I study the data you receive, and then send the newly learned information out of my brain and through the neuron connections!"

"Ok, can you please dumb it down?"

"Fine, I basically send bits of what you learn to your subconscious."

"YOU WHAT?!"

"CALM DOWN!"

"YOU'RE THE REASON I DIDN'T GET PRINCIPAL'S LIST!"

"LOOK, THE ONLY REASON I DO THIS IS BECAUSE I WAS MADE TO DO THIS!"

"THEN WHY AREN'T YOU DOING IT NOW?"

"BECAUSE I HAVE TO TALK TO YOU!"

"Alright, go on then."

"Look, the reason I have to talk to you is because there has been an information overload in the neuron path that leads to my station. Why? Because of the SATs."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

I thought about this for a minute. It made sense when I thought about it. The SATs had been so much work for me. I wasn't used to compressing all this information, so I guess that explained why I had been feeling so out of place.

"So how do we solve it?" I asked.

"There are two solutions: The convenient way, and the inconvenient way." He explained.

"Go on..."

"The convenient way would be me and you studying together. Because I compute what you send me through school, I would know everything you're talking about, and would be able to help. The inconvenient way is that I cram in all the information clogging the neural pathways and transfer it all to the subconscious. This would make it insanely hard to do the final test."

"Alright, what's the catch?"

"What catch?"

"You know what I'm talking about!"

"What?"

"What is the downside to going the convenient route?"

"Ohhhh, I get it now! Why did you say catch instead of downside?"

"JUST TELL ME!"

"Alright! Sheesh! I'll tell you: You have to work really, really, really hard to finish studying."

That was a downside. I thought for a second. If I worked hard enough for enough time, I could get a good grade! It could work in my favor if I put in the time and effort. That was if I put in the time and effort.

"Alright, I choose the convenient path!" I said.

"Good, let's get to work now!"

I got home as quick as I could and got on my bed with my SAT book. We started with math. It really sucked. All the complex equations frustrated me, and there were a ridiculous number of questions to get through. Next was history, I did great. Then writing, literature, and science. The days passed in this cycle of work. Finally, I got to go on my trip. The plane ride was long. Really long. Luckily, I had something to do: study. I studied math the entire trip to Colorado. The more I did the questions, the easier they became, and eventually, I got the hang of it! Was this what I had been missing for years? Did I finally understand that math wasn't bad? No, probably not. But that didn't stop me from getting better at it either. The days in Colorado were great! I skied, the fresh powder flying by me as I sped up. The wind howling past my ears as I leaned forward, the blur of the objects around me as I shredded down the mountain. And then I returned home. The days went by as I continued to study. Finally, the day of the test came. It was time.

"So, this is it then?" I asked Lil' Kin.

"Yup..." He responded.

"Well, I would like to thank you for your help with this..."

"Yeah, it's been a nice bunch of days."

"I'm gonna miss you, man."

"Well, it's not like I'm going anywhere."

"No, I mean I'm gonna miss having someone to talk to, regardless of the time or place."

"Oh, that? Yeah, me too."

"Well, Goodbye then."

"Good luck, buddy."

He faded away. I was ready for the test. I walked into the classroom, and finally, I didn't feel the same way I did that day I did the extra pages. I had been industrious, and it had finally paid off.

Legendary Loops

by Ava Gabay

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

Behind the big red shopping cart, I walked with my mom, and beneath the bright glaring lights from the supermarket, we turned the corner into the cereal aisle.

"Can we get some cereal?" I asked in an excited voice.

My mom responded, "Only the organic type."

"But Mom, that one tastes like bread dipped in milk."

"I don't want you eating unhealthy food."

"But I won't have it all the time."

"You either get the organic one or nothing at all," she responded.

I debated whether or not I wanted no cereal or one that tasted terrible. It took me moments to decide, but I eventually decided to go with the healthy option. I dragged my feet down the aisle with utter disappointment. When I got to the organic section, I tried to pick out the one that I thought would taste the best. Then something caught the corner of my eye. I hesitated a little to go and look at it because it was in the aisle my mom was shopping in, and she had strict rules about not having unhealthy cereal. I tried to run as fast as possible so she wouldn't notice anything. I dashed to the other aisle, and little did I know I ended up running into a poor old lady.

"Sorry, miss," I apologized.

"It's alright, sweetie, just pay attention next time," the old lady responded.

I think it was just me, but I heard the lady saying, "Go and get what you want; you'll need it."

I didn't pay much attention to the comment because I was busy looking at my mom walking my way with an angry face. I knew I was going to be reprimanded.

"I asked you to do one simple thing and get some cereal. You made a big scene and ran into a poor old lady."

I wasn't paying any attention to my mom. I was just thinking about the legendary cereal box that I saw.

"Hello. Hello, Ava, did you pay attention to anything I said?" my mom asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"Yes," I said in a guilty voice.

In reality, I didn't hear anything she said, but I didn't want my mom to be even more infuriated with me.

"I have had enough of this behavior. Let's go home," My mom insisted in an annoyed voice.

"Wait, Mom! I still haven't gotten the cereal you promised I could get. I will be quick and won't disturb anyone," I pleaded.

"Fine, but you better be quick."

I ran as fast as I could to the organic cereal aisle. All I could think about was Legendary Loops Cereal. The unhealthy cereal section was tempting me so much that even though it was risky, I slowly made my way there and got the cereal that I wanted. Even though I was disobeying my mom, it was worth a try to ask her if I could get it. All I could think about was the golden toucan, with its bright colorful letter and how it said 'legendary' right across the front of it. Why was it legendary, and what made it different from the other Fruit Loop cereal boxes? Admiring

all of the boxes' glory, all I could think about was that I had to get it.... Then the thought of my mom getting even more mad at me popped into my head. I tried plotting all the ways I could sneak this by my mom but all of them led to me just putting the box back. I didn't want to give up that easily, so I walked up with the cereal box in my hand, not trying to lie, and I asked her very politely if I could get the cereal box. It took a lot of contemplating and me complaining, but she gave in and decided that I could only get it this time. I was so excited that I couldn't control my emotions.

"Come on, Mom, let's go to the checkout!" I said in an excited voice.

"I'm going, I'm going," she responded.

After checkout, I left the store and ran quickly to the car.

"Slow down, Ava. You can't run in a parking lot!" my mom said, screaming at me in the distance.

I think my mom regretted letting me have the cereal. I hadn't even had a bite of the cereal, and I was already having a sugar rush of emotion. We got in the car and my eyes were so focused on the words legendary that when we got home, I almost forgot to get out of the car because I was so mesmerized by the words, Legendary, Legendary, Legendary.

"Ava, come on, you have to get out of the car! Ava! Ava," my mom kept saying.

"Sorry, Mom, I wasn't paying attention," I responded.

"It's fine, just help me with the groceries."

Not paying attention to what she was saying, I hopped out of the car and went running into the house right past my dad to find a bowl and some milk. As I poured my cereal in the bowl, I imagined it like gold pouring out of it.

"Why is that cereal so special Ava?" my dad asked.

"It's the only unhealthy cereal that mom lets me have," I responded.

"Don't waste it all then."

"I'll try not to, but it looks so good."

As soon as I put a spoon full of it into my mouth the excitement left me. The cereal didn't taste as good as I expected. Disappointment filled me. Then I realized that I couldn't tell my mom this because I begged her so much and she finally agreed even though it was unhealthy. I decided to pretend I liked it by eating it super-fast with a smile on my face.

"Woah, Ava, slow down. You're going to be sick," my dad said in a surprised tone.

I was going to be sick because it did not taste good, but I can't show that I didn't like it. After a few painful minutes of eating the cereal, I put the cereal away. As I closed the lid I saw a piece of paper on the inside.

"OH MY GOSH!" I said excitedly.

"What, what happened!" Both of my parents screamed.

"It's a ticket saying that I can go to Fruit Loops Land!"

"Oh, honey, you know that's not true, it's just for advertisement."

"No, it's not. I can see the address, time, and date for when I should be there."

"Let me see that," my mom said, taking it away from me.

My mom realized that it was not just for kids' amusement, but a place where I could go to. I asked my mom if we could go, and she said that it was a waste of our time. After endlessly complaining, she decided that I could go.

"When is it?" my mom asked.

"May 2nd, 2023, on a Monday at 1:00."

My mom saved the date in her calendar realizing that, that day was today in 2 hours, and it took 1 hour and 30 minutes to get there.

"Ava, get in the car. May 2nd is today! We might be late and don't forget to take the ticket as the letter says that we would need to bring it to register," she said rushing me.

I swiftly sprinted to the car because I didn't want to be late.

While I was in the car, I fantasized about all the things that I was going to experience at Fruit Loop Land. I was dreaming of so many things that the hour finally went by.

"You have arrived at your location," the navigation app in the car said.

"We're here! We're here!" I said screaming.

When we parked, all I could think about was that this place was going to be fun, and it would make up for the terrible-tasting cereal. It would also make up for lying to my mom. As I walked up to the building, it was painted with white dripping marks and fruit loops cereal painted on the side of the building. This was exactly what I

had imagined it to be. As I walked into the store, I went straight up to the front desk to check in and make sure I was registered for this adventure. That's when I saw an old lady that looked familiar, but I couldn't pinpoint when I had seen her last. I realized that this was the old lady in the store that I bumped into. I didn't want to say anything because she was looking at me like she had remembered me too. I thought this was what the old lady was talking about when she said that I would need the cereal box for something.

"Hello, I'm here to register my daughter. Her name is Ava Gabay," my mom said.

"Alright, let me see the ticket, please," the old lady at the register responded.

"I should have it somewhere in my purse."

While waiting for my mom to get the ticket out of her purse I made myself comfortable and sat in the lounge on the pink-colored throne. I knew it would take a while for my mom to find the ticket because her bag was like a Mary Poppins bag. Her bag was so big that you could practically remove a toilet out of it. A few minutes later my mom finally found the ticket and I think the lady had fallen asleep by then. The old lady opened some doors, and little did I know these doors led outside into a run-down carnival based on Fruit Loops Land. All I could see was signs that were breaking, a slide that looked like it was going to break, and there were no prizes for me to win. Disappointment filled me. I was not happy with what I saw because I thought I was going to the best carnival ever. I think my mom was also surprised because she had that look on her face. I felt so bad because I asked my mom to buy me this cereal that I did not like and then asked her to drive me to an amusement park that was almost an hour and a half away. I decided to confess to my mom why I lied. So, I walked up to her and said,

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"Why are you saying sorry," my mom responded.

"I lied to you. I told you that the cereal was good so that you wouldn't be mad at me for insisting on buying the cereal. I should have told you in the first place that I did not like it. Then I lied to you about it and tried to tell myself that it would be okay because I would be having fun at the carnival."

My mom didn't talk to me for a while because I think she was mad or disappointed with me. Shortly after she said, "Let's just go home, and we can talk about this in the car."

When we got to the car all I wanted to hear her say was,

"Everything was going to be okay, and I was not mad at you," but of course, she said,

"In the future, just tell me what you are thinking. It would be helpful for you to listen to me because I know a thing or two about what you like and don't like. In life, you need to start appreciating the things that you receive and have before you go off to get more things. I'm not upset with you, just disappointed," my mom responded in a caring voice.

We spent the rest of the car ride singing Taylor Swift songs and laughing at our disappointing, legendary-loopy adventure of a day.

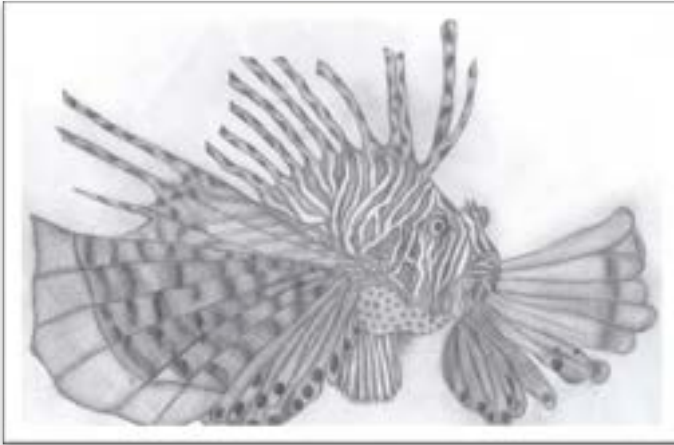
Five Wave Reef

by Luca Vucetic

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

MAYA WELLE | Grade 8



“What a lousy day!” my little brother whined. “It’s going to be impossible to swim out!”

“Stop whining! Get back to waxing!” I commanded.

It was a cloudy day with strong thirty-five-mile winds from the Northeast at St. Jean, but it didn’t change my ecstatic and excited mood for the upcoming surfing session.

“Get your bottom movin’ out!” ordered Coach L.

Coach L. was definitely a unique coach. He was a bit of an impatient man and a risk-taker, but these unique traits

were of utmost importance for a junior trainer. The man was known for his multiple victories at the Surfer’s Cup in Nazarè, Portugal, where the waves were recorded to be 100 feet and above.

Even though the sun was not out, the water was quite warm. It was, however, murky from the churning of the waves.

“There won’t be any sharks here!” I shouted over the roar of the waves.

“None to my knowledge at least,” replied Coach L.

“Well, that was a reassuring answer,” I murmured.

My brother and I, accompanied by Coach L., finally reached the sand bar and began our preparations.

“When the next wave comes, paddle as hard as you can, and when the waves pick up, jump up on your board,” directed Coach L. “Should be simple enough. Also, if you fall, curl up into a ball and hold your breath.”

As the wave approached, I gripped the side of my board. The wave swiftly picked me up. I paddled as fast as I could and kicked as hard as I could. I was off. Now, the only thing left to do was to jump up onto my board. Pushing my body off the board, I sprang to my feet. Immediately and in an awkward manner I plunged into the foamy sea below. *Curl up and hold your breath*, I thought to myself, flying down the steep wave. After a couple of seconds, I emerged from the wave without a single scratch. *I should swim back to the coach*, I thought.

“Nice!” Coach L. shouted. “Next time just put your front foot a bit closer to the other foot.”

Easy to say, hard to do, I reflected.

I approached the starting position and waited patiently, but excitedly, for the next wave to arrive. After a couple of minutes of frustration, I saw the perfect incoming wave. Standing seven feet above the water and starting to break, the wave was magnificent. I went down the gushing water slope. *Kick paddle and jump up!* I kept repeating in my mind. I did just that and the next thing I knew, I was coming out of the pipeline victorious! Even though the clouds were thick above me, I could see the sunshine breaking through. It was the most exhilarating feeling I have ever experienced. The feeling of accomplishment and delight were probably the best two feelings that could blend together.

“Bien! Good job! Want to try something bigger and very different guys?” asked Coach L.

“I am fine for the day,” said my brother. “I’ll swim back to the beach.”

“Me? I want more! Bigger and more dangerous would be awesome, Coach L.!” I said.

“In that case, Knox will swim back to shore. Luca and I will go a bit further out to the next reef for a more thrilling experience,” instructed Coach L.

As my brother started swimming toward the beach, Coach L. and I went farther into the deeper water. Because of the reef’s proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, the swells would be more intense and more frequent. Here,

the ocean floor quickly changes elevation from one hundred feet to ten feet. This causes the swells to become larger and the breaks to become more glorious.

"Uh oh, these waves are much much bigger than the previous ones," I pointed out.

"No! Don't worry, the difference is just a couple of feet. It's nothing to worry about," Coach L. replied.

As I started down the wave, I understood that, although the size difference was insignificant according to Coach L., I could really experience the difference. Right away, I collapsed into the wave and dove deep down into the watery abyss. I could feel the current pulling me down and I viciously fought against it. I emerged from the foaming water gasping for a breath of much-needed air. I quickly pulled in my board and swam with urgency from the break zone. In the distance, I saw Coach L waving to me. "Luca, that was good! Try not to jump off, when the wave collapses on you. Stay and hold your balance. You can even bend your legs a bit to help yourself out," Coach L. suggested.

"Ok Coach L. I'll try again," I said, hearing some fatigue in my voice. The next wave was just as big but despite my fatigue and some fear I took the wave with success and emerged from the gushing water victorious.

"Awesome job Luca!" praised Coach L. "You did extremely well back there. Now let's try a few more times. If you want, we can later go to the other reef and try out some bigger waves."

"Ok, Coach. No problem!" I replied. While continuing to surf, I thought *Should I go to the bigger reef? I feel so tired!* The next few waves were rather good and without a scratch I emerged from each pipeline.

"Luca, would you like to try to surf an even bigger wave?" asked Coach L. I thought, for a few seconds. I knew that this could probably be the last time I would ever get such an experience.

"S-S-u-u-r-e," I said with a faint tremble in my voice. (If I had known what awaited me, I probably would have declined the offer.)

"Luca! Here is the Five Wave Reef. The swells here get up to twenty feet!" proudly announced Coach L. "I Remember surfing here during a giant swell. How awesome it was! Now it's your turn, Luca. Remember, just like the smaller waves. Paddle, when the wave starts carrying you, jump, hold your balance, and try to get into a pipeline. Oh, don't forget that there are other surfers here, be careful of them. A lot of them like to surf here and I have witnessed a few dirty collisions in the past."

"Understood," I said with a grin.

The swell was becoming bigger, and more and more surfers were going out to the reef. If you'd looked from the beach, you'd probably see a colorful array of different surfer boards and tiny figures of the surfers themselves waiting for a wave. It didn't take very long for the swell to come. They looked rather innocent from far, but up close they were massive, gigantic waves crashing onto the reef. Sprays of water flew everywhere.

"Luca!" shouted Coach L. over the roar of the waves. "This is your chance!"

"Ok coach!" I replied, gripping the wet sides of my board even tighter and getting ready. The wave came rising over me like a massive tower. I knew I would not be able to take it and dove deep down into the water. I could feel the vibration of the wave slamming which brought shivers down my spine. Emerging from the depths of the ocean I saw Coach L. desperately looking for me. I could see the worry in his face.

"Luca, you alright?" he asked.

"Yes, I am fine," I replied. "I will take the next wave."

"Just be careful," warned Coach L.

As the wave approached, I started to paddle. When the wave picked me up, I jumped onto the board, centering my feet for maximum stability. I could feel the wind and splashes of water hitting me directly in the face. With the side of my eye, I saw something approaching me. I tilted my head to the side and went pale. Someone's abandoned board was approaching me fast. I had no time to turn or to get out of the way. Either I had to abandon my board or experience a head-on collision. With no time to think, I leaped out of the way and belly flopped into the wave. I was dragged up and then viciously thrown down onto the reef.

I had no clue how long I was blacked out. I remember coming back to my senses seeing myself on a beach with my parents huddled around me. I remember seeing the horror on their faces and thinking *Where am I? What happened?* The questions were quickly answered when I saw myself covered in bruises and scratches and my right hand's fingers completely deformed. I remember biting my lip down so I would not yelp from the pain I experienced. *Five fingers broken at the Five Wave Reef*, I thought with an agonizing smirk.

Snow Bounce

by Mark Zipse

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

Cranking the shiny metal handle to the right, I could not wait for my prize to come bouncing out of the machine. I lifted the metal slot and the bright red rubber bouncy ball with blue swirls fell out into my hand. I bounced it up and down a few times and was amazed at how high it could reach with a single bounce. When I turned around to go back to the table for lunch, my mom was standing there shaking her head.

"Is that what I gave you that quarter for?" she asked.

"Can I keep it?" I replied.

"No, you will lose it," she returned.

"Please, I will be responsible," I said.

She gave me a head shake of disapproval; however, I persisted with the begging and pleading. Eventually she gave in, and the ball was in my hand before our meal had arrived. After we finished lunch, my dad, my sister, and my mother and I ventured to a ski resort that had tubing. The cold was harsher than I was used to, so I stuffed my hands into my pockets where I had kept the rubber ball.

When we reached the tubing location, we had to cross a rocky road. No one was looking, so I took the ball out and bounced it on the rough street. I lost control of it, and it bounced away from me. A car was coming my way, but I thought I had enough time. My family was almost on the other side at this point. I took the risk and lunged to grab the ball, then rushed towards where my family was standing. I made it across just as the car passed behind me.

"Mark, what were you thinking?" my mother exclaimed while pulling me closer to the sidewalk.

"I'm sorry. I was not thinking!" I answered.

"Come on, we have to get in line," my father interrupted.

I continued on, thinking that it was not my fault and that nothing bad had actually happened. My parents were just simply overreacting. We rushed into the line and got our tubes. I stuffed my ball in my pocket as it was time to head up to the mountaintop. We went up on a rail and waited in another line. Finally, it was our turn. My family had split up by now, and it was just me and my sister going together. I stared into the vast expanse. The white of the falling snow, combined with the green of the surrounding trees, created a beautiful scene that was even more admirable from the height where we stood.

I was nervous, as this was one of the biggest mountains I had ever been on, or even seen. At last, it was our turn. We stepped up and a worker helped us get positioned within the tube. She strapped us in and only gave us a slight nudge because the steep slope of the mountain was already enough to send us hurtling down the mountain rapidly. The images of the surrounding trees rushed behind us as we rocketed down the slope. Our speed rapidly increased until we crashed down hard at the end. I could see a flash of white from the snow in the air from our impact, then I saw a sudden flash of red and blue rolling down the sea of white ahead of me.

"Julia, my bouncing ball!" I exclaimed. She turned around to face me, but did not say anything as we were still moving.

When we came to a complete halt, I searched my pockets, and the ball was indeed missing. We both got up from the tube. With a quick search around the area, I located my ball. I told my sister what had happened. The ball was in a clearing filled with snow that was a bit steeper than the snow where we were standing. It looked risky, so I debated whether or not to go. Then I thought about what my parents had said, and I did not want to prove them right.

"Should I go get it?" I asked Julia.

"It seems risky," she replied.

Without warning, I quickly made up my mind and plunged into the thick snow. I rolled around trying to reach my ball, but it proved to be a complicated endeavor. I tried to get free, but it was far too deep. "Help!" I shouted out.

"I can't, you're too deep," she said. My sister looked around and realized that she could not find the way back.

"Oh no, Mark. I think we are lost. What if they can't find us!" she yelled in a worried voice.

"It's ok. When I get out of here, we can find the way back together," I begged, trying to persuade her into at least attempting to free me.

With some hesitation, she finally put her shaky hand out for me to grab onto. With a big lunge forward, I grabbed onto her hand. She stepped back and tried to pull me up with all of her force. I thought I was going to be freed, but then her glove started to slip.

Inch by inch the glove came loose. I prayed the glove would hold, but then it kept on slipping. The glove was hanging off her fingertips by now, until it fell off, sending me plummeting back to my icy prison. The momentum was so great that it pulled Julia in with me. We lay there in the freezing snow struggling to even move. We were lost, and now we were stuck. Even if we broke out, it was not certain that we could find our way back. Every time I tried to move my leg it would just plunge in deeper. We continued on, however, inching our way through the snow, but eventually we got very tired. I looked back at my sister who had given up by now. We had forgotten to put our scarves on, so our faces were freezing. We lie there helpless in the snow.

I thought to myself, *how could I have messed this up so badly? What if we don't get found?* Out of the corner of my right eye I spotted something. Two figures were moving in the distance. *Could it be my parents,* I pondered. In a desperate attempt to get free I shouted out, "Mom, Dad!" They did not turn around. My sister followed my lead and also shouted for help. It worked! We got their attention and now the figures were moving in closer. As they started to run towards us, their faces cleared up. It was our parents. They plunged into the snow and picked us up. I clasped the ball tightly in my hands while being pulled free. Once clear of the deep snow, our parents laid us down gently.

"What were you doing in this area?" my mother questioned.

I thought about the ball, and I almost told her, but then I realized she would just call me irresponsible.

"We just got lost!" I screamed desperately as I kicked some snow out of frustration. I looked at Julia, hoping she would support my lie.

"No more tubing for you, you almost got lost!" my mother exclaimed. My father gave a head nod of approval.

"But why? It's not like I was irresponsible. I just got lost!" I explained.

"Mom, please. Tubing was the only thing I was looking forward to," I begged.

She hastily grabbed my arm and dragged me away. I looked back and saw all those people having fun tubing in the distance. Shortly after we packed our things and headed back up the mountain, through the line, and into the car. I was devastated, as tubing was the highlight of this trip for me. I did not even get to experience much of it, so I sat there angry, sad, but most of all, disappointed.

That evening at dinner my family was reflecting upon the day, but I kept myself out of the conversation, because I was still angry. As they were talking, I was secretly bouncing the bouncy ball underneath the table. I bounced it up and down until it bounced too hard and flew behind me.

I turned back to see it bounce into the pocket of a woman's coat that hung on the back of her chair. The ball had caused me nothing but trouble, twice. It even caused me to miss out on tubing. I started to wonder if my parents were right. I had learned my lesson by now. The ball only brought me bad fortune, so I decided not to retrieve it.

"Well, Mark," said my mother from across the table, "at least you did prove to be responsible with the rubber ball."

In the days after the trip, I regretted lying to my mom. I regretted missing out on tubing in the snow. Most of all, however, I regretted not seeing the look on that woman's face when she put her hand in her pocket and found my red and blue bouncy ball.

Celebrando mi herencia hispana

by Tomás Lazcano

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Diferentes culturas alrededor del mundo demuestran la diversidad de los humanos y lo que es ser humano. La cultura hispana para mí es muy importante por varias razones, especialmente porque siento que comparto el idioma y ciertas costumbres que mis padres me inculcaron desde muy pequeño que me conectan a lugares y cosas que disfruto hoy. Mis padres, siendo de Argentina, nunca dejaron de tener contacto muy cercano con la familia de allá y nos hacen viajar y pasar mucho tiempo con ellos. Es así que fui aprendiendo valores y costumbres que son importantes para ellos. Por ejemplo, estar cerca de la familia y conocer a muchos primos, o comer asados todos juntos cuando nos reunimos. Para mi familia y para mí, estar juntos es muy importante. En las vacaciones de verano, y por lo general en las de invierno también, hemos ido a Argentina y nunca ha faltado un buen asado, una pelota de fútbol, y muchos, muchos primos por conocer. Esto me ha hecho muy cercano con la mayoría de la familia que tengo allá.

La historia de mi familia es una historia muy interesante por los dos lados. Conozco mucho más el lado de mi padre. Por ejemplo, este verano estuve en España y conocí e investigué sobre la historia de su familia. Primero encontré una página web de gente con el apellido "Lazcano", mi apellido, y la historia del nombre. Encontré un comentario que era específicamente sobre mi familia, y después descubrí que lo había escrito mi tía abuela. El comentario hablaba sobre mi pueblo natal y como se había mudado su abuelo, o mi bis bisabuelo, a Argentina hace mucho tiempo. Mi pueblo natal es un pueblo chiquito en el noroeste de España que se llama Mutriku. Es un pueblo pequeñito, costero muy lindo de más o menos 5000 personas. Allí encontré lo que creo que es la casa de mi bisabuelo. Esta experiencia me ha traído mucha más cercanía con la familia de mi papá. No es lo mismo con el lado de mi mamá. En este caso, aunque no conozco la historia, si tengo mucho contacto con la generación actual dado que mi mamá tiene 65 primos y todos ellos tienen muchos hijos. Creo que nunca me he sentido desconectado de mis raíces porque la verdad es que aunque vivo a 8 horas en avión de la mayoría de mi familia, los quiero mucho.

Cuando yo sea mayor, conectar a mis hijos con mi familia y mis antepasados va a ser un aspecto muy importante para mí. Personalmente, creo que la familia es una de las cosas esenciales en la vida. Conociendo a tu familia, aprendes tu propia cultura, y más importante, te conoces a vos mismo cada vez más. Una manera de lograr conectar a mis hijos con sus antepasados sería, como lo hago yo, ir a visitarlos todos los años y mostrarles que la familia es algo increíblemente enriquecedor y una razón para estar agradecidos.

Wixy's Freedom

by Ely Ashraf

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

ANTONIA MORENO | Grade 8



I was lying in bed reading a book when I heard a sound outside the window. I turned my head to look, and I noticed a beautiful cerulean parrot, perched on my windowsill. Seeing unique birds wasn't unusual in Brazil, and parrots often came up to my window. This time though, when I took a photo of the parrot and googled it to see the breed, I realized what parrot it was. Little did I know how this parrot would impact my life for the days that followed. It was known as a Spix Macaw. These parrots fell into the endangerment list around January of 1932 which was 23 years ago. There are approximately now only two of these parrots left in the world. One of them was known as Wixy. I only knew this because of a missing bird poster outside my house. She could be identified with a yellow spot on the back of her neck. I slowly walked over to the window, careful not to make a sound and scare away my rare, feathered friend. Sure enough, there was an oval-shaped yellow mark on her neck. I was astonished to come in contact with such an exquisite creature. I took a few photos before it flew off without any notice. At first, I stood there in disbelief, unsure of what to do next.

I decided to take a walk outside in hopes of tracking down the bird. I stepped out of my front door, and into the arbor paradise. I carefully inspected the luscious green trees, and there I found her sitting in a nearby tree.

With a sigh of relief I whispered, "There you are," under my breath.

My relief quickly faded to despair when I saw the men with blue shirts that read "Clownin Around Circus." I had come upon an unfavorable article about that circus a few years ago and they had been known to mistreat and neglect their animals, unbeknownst to most of the public. I stood there silently watching as the men expertly netted and took Wixy away.

This rankled me to my core, so I exclaimed, "Hey clown idiots! Why are you taking this bird away? Just let her be free, the poor thing doesn't need to be caged and mistreated anymore!"

One of the guys in the blue shirts said with a sly grin, "Mistreated? Why would you say that? We take *very* good care of our animals."

Tears formed in my eyes as they put Wixy in a cage once again as she continuously squawked for help. Soon after, they drove away in their big blue truck. I felt disappointed and angry with myself. Why couldn't I have been stronger? There was nothing I could do. Just as the first tear fell from my eyes, I heard my mom calling out to me.

"Aurelia, lunch is ready, please come inside."

"Okay I'm coming," I said in a quavering voice.

My mom made me a bowl of fresh steaming hot ramen. It was delicious, though it didn't fix my rightfully spoiled mood. I ate the ramen begrudgingly and went back upstairs to my bedroom. I thought about how at the very least, Wixy should be in a sanctuary where she belonged, if not in the wild, free to roam and explore nature. To make matters worse, the neighbors down the street, Ezra and Dahlia Charmaine owned part of the circus. Their multi-million-dollar house was proof that they made a lot of profit while the animals suffered in silence. I mustered up the courage to stop being silent as I took action and made my way over to their house to ask them about Wixy. I nervously knocked on the door, and Mrs. Charmaine opened it.

"Hi Mrs. Charmaine, I heard your Spix Macaw got away. Is that true?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business, young lady," Mrs. Charmaine replied snarkily.

I was genuinely shocked by her abrupt and rude response, "Uh ok sorry for bothering you I guess."

“Good day,” she replied with a pout on her lips as she closed the door in my face.

As I was walking away, a thought occurred to me. Instead of waiting around for someone to help, what if I just stole Wixy from that horrible abusive circus, and set her free? It wasn't a well thought out idea, but it would all be worth it if I could stand up for a bird that cannot stand up for itself. I decided to embark on this journey because it's what my instincts told me I should do (something my dad always emphasized to me when I felt nervous or afraid to approach anything in life). All of a sudden, an overwhelming feeling of regret came over me as I remembered getting into the car the day my dad died...

I pulled myself together as I tried to distract myself from missing my dad. I got on my bike and rode home. The wind was blazing through my hair, and it felt good. This is what it must feel like for Wixy to fly in the open skies. Now more than ever, I understood that my mission was clear. Wixy needed to be set free. I got home and stepped into the shower to freshen up. After my shower I rode my bike to the box office for Clownin Around Circus and immediately bought an entrance ticket with the bitcoin I received for my birthday. The transaction was successful and hopefully my mission would be too.

I saved the ticket in my smart glasses and saved the receipt that read, *thank you for buying a ticket at our circus. Your seat number is 15A.* I hated the idea of handing over \$200 to the circus but I had no choice. If I had any chance to save Wixy, I would have to get on the inside. I cleaned myself up and got ready for bed as tomorrow was a big day.

“Rise and shine Aurelia!” my mom called out, “Breakfast is ready on the kitchen counter.”

“Good morning,” I croaked, “I'll be downstairs in two minutes.”

I rolled out of bed and dragged myself downstairs. I had to act as naturally as possible so that my mom wouldn't suspect anything out of the ordinary. As I ate my cereal, I went over my plan in my head. I would get to the circus and quickly get seated. I would wait until the first two acts were done, and during the intermission I could rescue Wixy.

It sounded like a good plan, and I decided to carry it out later that day. It was only when I actually got to the circus, the nervous feeling in my stomach took over and I had to fight with all my courage to remain wedded to the plan I had so bravely hatched. The seats started filling up with parents and children of all ages. Some with snacks, some with plush versions of their favorite circus animals. I felt sad looking at the people settling in to enjoy the show with no idea of how the animals they came to be entertained by were leading such tortured lives. I sat down in my seat that was next to a large door that led to the outside and prepared myself.

The show finally began. First up was the elephant, of course. The majestic creature wowed and thrilled the crowds with breathtaking tricks. People clapped and looked on in amazement. During this time, I scanned the area looking for the best way to sneak backstage during the intermission. There was a decent amount of security at all entrances that led backstage, but there was one entrance which was less guarded, and I decided that would be my way in. I got up and started to make my way out of the row, while stepping on peanut shells and popcorn on the ground along the way. I stood close to the entrance which led backstage. The time had come to collect every last bit of courage in me. As luck would have it, one of the audience members tried going into the ring with the animals and the security rushed over to prevent him. This was my chance. I dashed towards the door, pulling the curtains in front away and stepping through. What I saw on the other side had me trembling with fear. I stood face to face with the king of the jungle in its cage, yawning so that I could see all his sharp incisors. I calmed myself down by taking a few deep breaths and looked around the room for Wixy. Out of the corner of my eye I saw what looked like a small bird cage. As I walked towards the cage, I noticed the yellow spot on her neck and knew that it was Wixy.

Suddenly, I heard a loud deep voice yell from behind me, “Hey! What are you doing back here? Get back to your seat right now before I call security on you, young lady!”

I whipped around and immediately recognized who this was. It was now or never. I picked up the bird cage and ran past a very angry Ezra Charmaine. As I bolted away from him, I could hear his loud voice reverberating throughout the walls of the space. I ran to my seat where the large door was. I put the cage down for a split second. It was just a split second. I turned around only to see three brutish security guards heading my way in a rather hasty manner. They did *not* look happy. I fiddled with the doorknob but couldn't get it open. It was in that instant that I had a flashback to the day of the car accident. My dad and I were in the car, and he was driving. All of a sudden, he lost control of the car, and we landed in a ditch. He was knocked unconscious, and I was badly injured but managed to get out. As much as I tried, I could not get the door to the car open to pull my dad out. I was too little, and the door was stuck badly. I sat on the side of the door pulling the entire time until the paramedics arrived. I always blamed myself for not being able to save him and history could not be repeating itself.

It was then that I snapped back to reality and pulled with all my might and finally got it open. Just as the security guards were about to be within arm's reach, I picked up the cage and opened the latch to free Wixy. Just as they seized me, Wixy spread her wings and flew away.

The security guards held onto me tightly and dragged me away. I could only focus on watching Wixy soar to freedom.

The next few days were tough for me. I was in trouble with my mom and banned from the circus for life. I had to write an apology letter on how what I did was wrong, even though I didn't believe that it was. I really worried that Wixy would come back and would get captured again by the circus. At that point there would be nothing I could do to save her.

I went for a walk to my favorite hill near my house to calm my nerves. As I reached the top and watched the sunset, I spotted Wixy with another bird of her kind. I was amazed, but remained quiet, watching her enjoy her newfound freedom. I smiled as I watched them fly into the sunset, knowing that Wixy would never come back.

A Mysterious World Away from Home

by Keanu Bain

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

"T- Minus 10, 9,8,7,6,5,4 3, 2, 1, BLAST OFF!" I heard the speakers call out.

I was nervous about the mission ahead and was hoping for a safe trip. I had an earbud in my left ear, and I could hear the mission control communicating with me and with themselves. Then after those ten seconds, the ship slowly started to launch. The ship started to shake heavily, and I got a bad headache. From the first twenty seconds, I could tell that this adventure would be physically fierce. Despite all of this rumbling, the ship seemed to be going on track. Migraine after migraine, I couldn't see straight; the flashing lights of the ship were blinding me. These harsh conditions made me think about how good my mission was for the future. The goal of my mission was to explore an unknown planet that was seen on a telescope two years ago. I had no idea about what would be on this planet, and I did not know if there would even be oxygen. For this reason, mission control made sure my space suit had a huge oxygen tank to let me breathe for longer. Although this sounded like a cool space suit, its heavy weight made it very difficult to move around. This meant if I ran into danger I was probably going to be chased down very easily.

"The ship will be landing in precisely 3 hours and 25 minutes," the audio played in my left ear out of nowhere.

Slowly but surely my migraine went away, and I became very hungry, so I started to move around the ship to find some food. The ship was very small but manageable. The one thing that the ship did have a lot of was food. There was a huge room that opened with the click of a button on my space suit, and it was full of snacks and substantial foods. Also, this room had a comfortable couch in the middle that was fully white. Without a doubt, this was my favorite part of the ship. I spent three hours in this room relaxing and it lowered my level of stress which I had before.

"Twenty minutes, I repeat twenty minutes till landing," mission control said.

I was ready to land and was anxious to get off the ship. The next 20 minutes went by very fast, and it was just time to land on the planet. I could barely see the planet from the ship, but I could see that the planet had a purple-ish color. It has a tall structure. The landing was very slow but smooth.

"The ship has landed. It is now safe to go outside," I could hear mission control say this through my headphones.

The door opened and I set foot outside. I could hear a strange noise coming from the structure I saw when I was on the ship. The structure was about 200 feet tall but was very long and I couldn't see the end of it. The structure was dark purple and almost blended in with the planet. I had a mini camera in my pocket to record my findings. I took quick pictures of the structure and then started to walk closer and closer. I was about 10 feet away, and I saw a little door; about the size of two rulers. It was tiny so I slowly proceeded to the door and opened it. All of a sudden, I felt a large blow at the back of my head and then everything turned black.

"Fsh fsh fsh fsh fsh fsh fsh fsh fsh fsh," I heard this sound repeatedly in the distance.

I slowly started to regain my sense of touch. However, I was very dizzy and didn't remember anything. I felt a bunch of hands of slimy creatures grab my arms and legs. I was carried and then placed down on some sort of cushioned table. My head was to the ceiling and my back was on the table. I started to gain my vision back, but everything was blurry. I saw a group of green and light blue figures that moved very fast and clumsily. I didn't know where I was and started to freak out.

"Where Am I? Where Am I?" I asked.

"At home," one of the creatures said.

"This does not look like my home," said I.

"Now it is," replied the creature.

I was very creeped out and wanted to go back to the ship, but I couldn't because there was a small door that looked like it was made of metal and had a lock in the middle of it. I looked unbreakable and tiny. I fully gained my vision back and could now see the creatures that I now thought were aliens. They looked like something that would be in one of my wild dreams. I thought for a second and remembered that I had an earbud that was connected to my spacesuit, but when I went to click the call button the aliens jumped onto the table, and I got worried they would take my headphones. I untimely decided to wait for a better chance to call. The aliens' faces were very creepy, they had only one eye and had no ears. Out of nowhere, three aliens came through the door with a plate with some sort of red jello on it. These aliens looked the same as the others except they had black suits on and looked more important.

One of the black-suited aliens said, "Here is your food, sir."

He handed me the plate, and all of the aliens stared at me. The look in their eyes gave me the feeling that I should eat the jello. If not, I was sure that there would be consequences. I ate the jello, and it tasted fine, but it started to stick to my mouth, and I couldn't swallow it. Then about ten seconds later the more black-suited aliens came in with more jello, but this time it was blue. I got scared that this would kill me, so I came up with an excuse to use the restroom.

"I'm sorry, can I please use the restroom?" I asked.

They brought me out of the room to the right into an all-silver bathroom. I quickly called Mission Control and told them the situation. They said that they would send help, but it would take a couple of days since they didn't have a spaceship available.

"Hansen, for the next couple of days you are on your own," this is what they told me.

I started to lose hope and burst into tears. I sat in the bathroom for about five minutes until I heard a siren. Then I heard loud knocking noises on the bathroom door. I opened the door in a very nice tone.

"Greetings, what brings you here?" asked one of the aliens.

"Oh, Oh, Um, Uh, I came here from a planet called Earth, and one of my people saw your planet on a telescope, so I came to explore," I said.

"Earth!?!?" exclaimed one of the aliens.

"Yeah?" Hansen questioned.

"Some of us are also from Earth," said some of the aliens

"No, you aren't," I replied.

"Yes, we are, we came about thirty years ago as astronauts and slowly have evolved and changed physically. We are humans too. Slowly you will turn into one of us," said one of the aliens.

"How long do I have until I turn into an alien?" I asked.

"You don't have much time, probably about three days," replied one of the aliens.

"While I was in the bathroom, I called mission control and they said they would be here in a couple of days, but now I can just go back to my spaceship, and let them know I don't need help anymore," I said.

The aliens and I walked to the spaceship and found it destroyed because a huge meteor fell on it and turned the ship into two.

"Such bad luck," I thought to myself.

Although I was very scared at first and was now worried about my way back home, this conversation lowered my level of stress because I now knew that the aliens were not evil. The aliens took me around the building which was just a bunch of communal homes. They reminded me of college dorms. Every house had a mini bathroom and two double bunk beds. After looking at the rooms the aliens took me to their so-called, "Food Stop" which was one huge cafeteria that had all kinds of delicacies. One of the weirdest things I saw was one of the aliens eating living squid, with big pink tentacles. I ate at the "Food Stop" for dinner and then went to a room with

one other roommate whose name was, "Herald." He was very kind and greeted me well. I started to learn that although these aliens were technically humans, they still had some weird thinking skills. For example, to take showers, the aliens would leave their clothing on; to brush their teeth, they would use soap; and to wash their hands, they used toothpaste. Herald and I shared a bunk bed, which I enjoyed. He told me all about how he got to the planet.

"I left in 1983 on a spaceship with a couple of my friends from Earth to explore space for fun. I was very rich and had my space shuttle. However, this was a huge drawback because I was inexperienced and didn't go through much training. I launched the spaceship well, but easily got lost in space and ended up here. I left everything I knew behind and was very sad. I realized that this place was a common planet where most astronauts got lost because there were other astronauts like me when I got there. For the last couple of years, I have been thinking about if this planet was cursed, but I didn't have enough evidence. Once you got here, I instantly could tell that this planet is definitely what I thought it was, and if you send help from Earth, they might not be able to go back. I hope your people break the curse," explained Herald.

"Oh wow, this is super crazy. You are super smart to figure this out. Well, all we can do is hope for an unbreaking of the curse," said Hansen in a hopeful tone.

I was so scared of what was going to happen next, so I thought the best thing to do was to just fall asleep. I went to sleep and woke up because my leg started to turn blue. I knew that this was a sign of me becoming an alien.

Two days went by, and I started to turn more and more into an alien. My face was the only thing that still looked like a human. Mission control hadn't talked to me yesterday, so I wasn't expecting an arrival. However, they arrived at 1:00 PM that day. They landed and were surprised to see me as an almost full alien, but they went with the flow and took Herald and me home, and I told them the story in the spaceship. Before I left, I made sure to take as many pictures and videos as possible, so that I could have proof of my findings. The rocket went smoothly, and the closer I got to Earth my alien characteristics went away. Once we landed, Herald transformed into a tall, strong man with dark hair and light brown eyes.

"Wahoo! I'm back to normal, and I haven't even aged. I get to relive my life the good way, back at home," said Herald happily. After the mission, Herald and I became best friends and now we talk almost every day about how we are both so lucky to have made it back home.

Mission: Survive

by Marco Caesar-Iglesias

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

One day, exactly November 10th, 1999, at 10:58 PM, Nolan Schroder, a man of great wealth, was taking a walk around his friendly neighborhood in Boston, when disaster struck. Suddenly, everything went dark. It felt like he had just been knocked out of his existence. After what felt like an eternity, Nolan awoke.

"Where... Where am I?" said Nolan in perplexity.

He slowly stood up. Taking a deep breath and a good look of his surroundings, he found that it seemed that he was on a remote, cold island. He scanned the area and saw snow falling and a big mountain around the middle of the island. Fortunately, Nolan was covered by a jacket and a puffy coat, supplying him with warmth.

"How odd this is," implied Nolan, "It's like someone took me here without me knowing."
In confusion, Nolan started to step into the forest, to find shelter and maybe some sort of human life or civilization. He walked for a



CHRISTOPHER ARANA | Grade 8

few hours around the island, trying to find materials for a shelter, as midnight was falling soon. While walking, he was questioning everything.

“How did I get here?” he asked himself. “I don’t understand. Why am I, all of a sudden, on an island, which I can guess, is thousands of miles away from my home?”

He continued walking until he found what seemed to be an abandoned teepee. This gave Nolan a feeling of hope. He concluded that this would be his shelter for the night, as it seemed it to be midnight. As he approached the teepee, he smelled what had to be the worst odor he had ever experienced. He looked inside the teepee, but found nothing, other than a few clumps of radishes and carrots. Still inspecting the teepee, he walked around it and found something grotesque. He found a dead man. He had on brown sandals, and what seemed to be a handmade leather pouch. After a few seconds of inspection, Nolan concluded that the man was completely dead. It looked as if a wolf had eaten him alive. Now educated on the fact that animals lived on the island, Nolan had to take a lot more precautions. Starving and thirsty, Nolan grabbed the carrots and radishes and found his way to the nearest pond to get some water. Nolan guessed that it was around one in the morning, and he was getting tired. Even with the terrible odor of the body, Nolan went to the teepee and fell asleep.

The next morning, Nolan woke up and decided to keep moving forward. Carefully, Nolan removed the leather pouch from the man's hand, and immediately ran towards the pond to get rid of that horrid stench. After this, Nolan loaded the pouch with the leftover carrot and radish and continued his adventure.

After what seemed to be two hours, Nolan heard a bush rattle. Nolan, keeping in mind that he had no form of knowing what time it was, looked at the sun, estimating that it should be almost noon. There was too much light to hide from the threat that could be awaiting Nolan in the bush. Scared, Nolan slowly approaches the bush. The closer he got, the louder the noise got.

On the other side of the bush, was a pup, whimpering in pain. This pup, around five months old, had a bleeding foot. This was probably caused because of the pups' young age, and immaturity and clumsiness. He had tripped bad on a pointy rock, and with his muscles still developing, the rock slightly pierced through his foot. Medical attention was needed immediately.

Nolan, getting more and more scared every step, all of a sudden, stooped. He heard a high-pitched sound, almost like a dog cry. With more assurance that the sound maker was hurt, Nolan walked around the bush to find a young pup whimpering and lying on its back. He inspected the pup and saw his foot. Nolan, always being a kind-hearted soul, wanted to help.

“What's up, little guy? Looks like you hurt your foot pretty bad! Let's see if I can help ya,” said Nolan in a comforting tone.

He picked up the pup and walked over to the nearest pond. He put the pup, who he named Footy, on the ground next to the water. Gently, Nolan scooped up water with his hand and poured it over the wound. During the night of his kidnapping, Nolan was wearing an oversized T-shirt and a puffer jacket, as it was a bit chilly that day. His clothing selection that day played a big role in his curing of the pup. As a substitute for bandage, Nolan ripped off a large chunk of fabric from the bottom of the shirt and proceeded to wrap it around the foot of Footy.

After all that walking and work, Nolan himself needed a break. So, as Footy's foot healed, Nolan took a nap for an hour of two.

When he woke up, he saw Footy's foot, and the blood had stopped oozing through the bandage. After this, Nolan said bye to him, expecting it to go on and live the rest of his life, but, instead, it clung onto his foot. Nolan assumed that this was his way of saying thank you. But after walking a few yards, he noticed that Footy followed him. He walked for what seemed to be a mile, and still, Footy was trailing his steps. Nolan came to the conclusion that Footy wanted to be with him, and he needed company himself, so they became best friends.

After walking for five more hours, Footy started barking, ferociously. His head was faced towards a bush. At first, Nolan thought something was threatening. But when he looked up, he saw a smoke cloud, the size of a great sized door frame.

On the other side of this bush was a man named Henry. Henry was a 65-year-old man, (he assumed he was 65 because he had no access to what time it was and how many days he was on the island) with great knowledge of survival. He had been on the island for, he assumed, thirty years. He was very wise, about six feet tall, and had a range of wrinkles on his face, but to say the least, he looked great for his age. Henry had not interacted with a human in years, not since a man named Daniel, who he assumed had died from the Yeti phenomenon. Even with the limited resources on the island, Henry had created his own proper civilization with one member, himself.

"Okay bud," said Nolan to Footy, "let's see what's going on over here." Nolan was in a complicated emotional state. He was excited that there might be a human, but at the same time, there might be something awaiting him, something dangerous. Both Footy and Nolan walked carefully through the bush, and their eyes met with a man.

In pure happiness, Nolan exclaimed, "Oh my goodness! A human! A warm body! This is the best day of my life!"

But as he approached the man, Henry, he put his hands up in guard. Confused, Nolan asked "What's going on? I am just a visitor, I'm not armed! Long story short, I have zero idea on why or how I'm here."

"No, no, no! My guard is not up for you," chuckled Henry, "it's up for the wolf."

"Oh! What a fool I am! But do not worry, he is harmless. Very loving and friendly dog. I found him injured and after curing him, he never left my side," implied Nolan.

"Oh, okay," replied Henry. Right after the words left his mouth, Footy ran over in a playful manner to Henry and started licking his leg.

"Told ya!" giggled Nolan. "Well, I have not introduced myself yet. My name is Nolan. I'm thirty-nine years old. I have no idea on how I got here. It's been about two weeks that I've been here."

"Nice to meet you, Nolan," responded Henry. "My name is Henry, and I've been here for, what I assume, thirty years and I know a lot about this darn island."

"Wow, that's terrible," said Nolan.

"Well, either way, make yourself at home, there's plenty of space around camp," offered Henry.

Nolan toured the camp. He noticed that the smoke from earlier was from the fire Henry had made. There was one big shed. The shed was made of wood, and there were many nicely sewed carpets around. The beds consisted of a carpet as a mattress, a cotton stuffed pillow, and a leather blanket. The kitchen had a few cabinets, and right next to it was a table that sat two people. The bathroom was outside, where you had to urinate into the plants behind the shed, and for feces, you had to walk a few hundred steps away from the campsite.

While touring the cabin, he saw Henry setting up another bed, which he assumed was for Footy, as the size difference between his and Nolan's was great. Also, after finishing the bed, he walked outside and started cooking over the fire. After finishing the tour, Nolan and Footy approached the fire to see what was going to be for dinner. They saw two fish, probably tuna or cod. When they asked how Henry got the fish, he led them a few hundred feet away from the site, where they found the shoreline.

"Every day, I wake up early and fish for an hour. I usually catch between 3-5 fish a day, and I leave most of it in this shack, so the site won't smell like fish all day," explained Henry.

"Do you eat fish every day?" asked Nolan.

"Unfortunately, yes, because the land animals that provided meat went extinct a few years ago. But I do grow fruit and vegetables close to the site," replied Henry.

They returned to the cabin because it was getting quite dark outside. Henry called out for dinner, and they sat outside, on a log. Henry rationed food so everyone gets two-thirds of a fish. While eating, Henry tells Nolan about a problem.

"I doubt you know about this, but there is a big, snowy mountain a few days from here," said Henry. "According to the legend, the only way to get out of the island is through the mountain, which houses a yeti, better known as Bigfoot."

In disbelief, Nolan asked Henry, "Why are you still here? Were you too scared to make the journey?"

"Well, I have seen anyone make it. So, to answer your question, yes, I am terrified," sighed Henry.

"Well, how about this! We leave tomorrow! I am going to get you out of here!" exclaimed Nolan.

"I have never met someone so confident that they will make it. I'm telling you, it is a tough journey," cried Henry.

"My friend, I know it is threatening, but you have to take risks in life. If you don't, what's the point in living?" questioned Nolan.

"You're right. I have been here far too long. I don't deserve this!" he cried.

After dinner, they all went to bed immediately, as they had a long journey ahead of them the next day. They took their final use of the bathroom and went to bed.

The next morning, everyone, except Footy, woke up, and started packing. Nolan was in charge of weapons and resources for the journey, while Henry was in charge of food and heat. Nolan went into the cabin. He found a big leather backpack. He put in two sharp knives, one heavy axe, and most importantly, the book of the legend. He

also had two carpets, pillows and one large blanket. Footy would have to share a bed with Nolan, as another bed would not fit in the bag. He also had a decently sized rock in his pocket, just in case.

On the other side of camp, Henry filled two large backpacks, one with fruit and vegetables, and the other with packaged fish and his fishing rod. He also added two big jugs of water. Minutes later, they woke up Footy, and they were off.

The first day went by easily. They walked for a few hours and then stopped to eat salmon. This was a particularly big salmon. Even though the size was larger, the rations were cut down a little, as they had a long journey ahead of them. At what they thought was 9 PM, they set up camp for the night and then slept.

The second day, however, was a little bit rougher. It started snowing badly.

"What great weather today," said Nolan sarcastically.

Even with the bad weather conditions they pushed through, eating a rationed three meals. During the night, before heading to bed, Nolan saw Henry praying outside in the freezing snow, but he could not hear him.

"Heavenly Father, guide me and my friends through the right path throughout these next few days, Amen," he prayed. When he returned to Nolan, they spoke about the plan for the next day, and passed out for the night.

The third and final day of the journey, Henry woke up extra early to fish, as their supply had run just a bit short. He caught three fish, two tuna, and one salmon. Before waking Nolan and Footy, he cooked the salmon so they could wake up to a nutritious breakfast.

When Nolan and Footy woke up, they all enjoyed their breakfast and packed up. This day would be the hardest to traverse, by far.

The first few hours were just like the day before, snowing, but easy ground to move in. However, when they got to the mountain, which was at least ten miles long, and had a high slope, the wind picked up greatly. This ground was a lot trickier to move in, as there was ice everywhere and pointy rocks pointing out of the snow. The first two miles had a low slope, but the next few had a very high one. The next two miles were a warm-up. The men made it with not much problem, but Footy slipped a few times. The next two were very steep, and by the look on Footy's face, Nolan figured that he had to carry him. He grabbed Footy and shoved him in his coat. Even with the unbearable weight that the men were carrying, they made it to a mile of no slope. At that point, it had been around five hours since they had eaten. Henry pulled out and made a small fire that slowly cooked the tuna. They ate and returned to the hike. There only remained 3 miles, but the last mile was easy, what they had to worry about was the next two.

"Henry, these two miles are going to be the worst we have," implied Nolan.

"We have to be confident. Push through, life is going to give you obstacles, you have to figure out how to get around them," replied Henry.

They continued up the two miles; these two took them at least one hour and a half. The wind brushed their faces and almost froze them. But finally, after so long, they had made it.

"What an easy hike!" said Nolan, snickering.

Henry was so cold that he couldn't speak. Nolan pulled out some fruits for a snack along with some water. He finally released Footy from his jacket. When they regrouped, they walked up half a mile and set up camp for the night in a small cave. The Bigfoot cave was about half a mile away from where they were staying. After putting down their bed, all of them almost immediately fell asleep. They were exhausted.

The next morning, the well-rested fellows ate and got ready for Bigfoot.

"Here's the plan:" said Nolan, "When we get up there, I will run into the cave and distract him, then you and Footy will quietly run around him into the exit of the cave. Then I will figure it out from there."

"What if you don't make it?" asked Henry, sounding worried.

"Oh, trust me. I'm going to make it," said Nolan confidently.

So, they were off. They got to the entrance. Bigfoot was asleep, but covering the exit, so Nolan took this chance to get higher ground. He prepared himself and finally yelled:

"Hey, you! You think you're so tough because you own this island, huh! Come fight me, I'm not scared!" screamed Nolan.

In reality, Nolan had never been more scared. Besides the point, this awoke Bigfoot, and once he saw him, he started roaring. The second he started getting up, the daylight from the exit shined brighter than ever. Henry and Footy swiftly ran across the cave and made it out with ease. Now only left Nolan versus Bigfoot.

Now that Nolan got a good picture of Bigfoot, he noticed that he was a lot bigger than he thought. Bigfoot punched the wall he was standing on, which made him fall. He was trapped in a corner, with Bigfoot eyeing him

down. Nolan was at his darkest moment, because he had no way out, but at this moment, Nolan felt something stronger than anything in his life. It was not an emotion, or an action, rather it was an... instinct. That was it! Even at his darkest time, his instinct to survive allows him to make it out. The question was: how?

Since his childhood, Nolan had always been very clever and quick. This applied to now. He had to create a distraction. Nolan scanned the area and saw that there was a big, snow-covered rock on a ledge right next to Bigfoot's foot. With the rock in his pocket from before, he thought that if he threw the rock at his eye, Bigfoot would get hurt for a moment, and in that moment, it gives Nolan just enough time to climb the ledge and push the rock onto his foot, giving him an everlasting pain. From there he would escape with his speed. He had one chance. He couldn't mess it up. With his friends watching from the exit, he went for it.

In an instant, Nolan pulled out the rock and chucked it at full strength at his eye. He struck, but the job is not finished yet. When Bigfoot reacted by grabbing his eye, Nolan flew into action. He climbed the ledge in seconds, and before Bigfoot could recover and find Nolan, the rock was already pushed, and it hit him hard. Bigfoot jumped in pain and grabbed his toe. Nolan sprung into pure speed and made it out. He looked back and saw that Bigfoot fell to the ground and surprisingly slid out the entrance, down the entire mountain, instantly killing him.

They had made it out! Now all that remained was the climb down the mountain. They climbed down the mountain in a flash because of the excitement. When they reached the ground, they noticed that the grass was greener than ever. There were animals dancing everywhere, there were flowers blossoming and a light breeze. They walked through this majestic forest.

"I'm so happy! How did you do that? We made it out! Yay!!!" exclaimed Henry.

"I'm glad we made it out, but we still don't have a ticket home" replied Nolan modestly.

"Well," wondered Henry, "we can try to find the shoreline and make an SOS sign. Maybe someone will come, you never know."

"That's not a bad idea. Wait... Where is Footy?!" yelled Nolan.

After looking around, Henry pointed him out and said "Look! There he is! In the pond. He is having a terrible time, I see. I'm going to go play with him. You should come, you deserve it," chuckled Henry sarcastically.

They all happily jumped into the warm pond water. It was one of the happiest moments of their lives. The best reward, time together. After they got out, they started traversing towards the shoreline, which was only a few minutes away.

When they got to the shoreline, Henry and Nolan collected big sticks, and after an hour, they had made quite a big SOS sign. Now, they just had to wait.

A few hours later, Footy started barking very loud. This raised awareness to the men. They looked at where Footy was barking, and they saw a ticket home. A helicopter was landing on the beach. Once it landed, the men and Footy were given food and water. They mounted the helicopter and began the flight home.

During the flight, Nolan brought up a previously asked question.

He said, "Henry, when you asked me how I did that, I didn't answer. But now I will."

"Go ahead," replied Henry as he was munching on his food.

"Well," stated Henry, "when I was trapped in that corner, something hit me. The instinct of survival hit me like a truck. And that instinct opened a door that made me realize that I had to use my attributes. When I was younger, I was playing in the basketball final for my 4th grade team. We were down by one point, with ten seconds remaining. Our coach called time-out, and my dad pulled me to the sideline. He told me these exact words 'It's not over 'till it's over. Always have hope. Remember, use what is provided. Right now, what you have is the basketball, and your speed, your intelligence, and your cleverness. Never give up.' We ended up losing that game, but I learned a very valuable lesson that I used today. Never give up, always have hope, and use what's provided. When in my darkest moment, today, I followed those three statements, and I made it out. No matter how hard it gets, keep moving forward, never give up."

The helicopter flew into the horizon.

A Different World

by Oscar Campo Marino

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

He breathed slowly and carefully, aware of his every exhale. He felt that it was too delicate to be near. Then he remembered that it was he who created this beautiful device. Inside of his modest home in Lubbock, Ronny was beginning to salivate at the doors of possibilities that seemed swung open all of a sudden. He was dying to escape his reality. In all of his life, Ronny had not faced any struggles, nothing to challenge his will, nor peak his human interest. Until this moment, he had felt caged by the smooth ease of his life, dying to reach out and bite what makes life livable.

"Finally," he began, "I am free."

You see, what Ronald Anderson had just done, was finish the creation of a device capable of traveling into different realities, happening at the same time as his own. He was an acknowledged and prestigious scientist at Innova Inc. who had been borrowing pieces of technology from his laboratory over the past few months to slowly but surely assemble the greatest invention in man's history. Yet, at forty-seven years old, he had not once left the state of Texas in his life, and what he held in his very hands now was very much able to prevent him from ever coming back.

Suddenly, Ronny heard his phone ringing; it was James.

"Speak now, for you won't have the chance soon!"

"Have you finished it?" he asked.

"Just right now!"

"What do you plan on doing with them?" he asked. "Will you use them yourself or will you present the model to the pre--"

"No. Absolutely not. Neither the press nor any sort of media should find out about this; it's dangerous. In today's world, these adolescent technocrats will create a functioning copy before sunrise, and I refuse to think about the other ways these can be used in the wrong hands. No, I think I'll keep this one private."

"Well, knowing you, you've surely got a name for it already," James settled.

"Of course! I think the "Parallel Spectacles" shall suit it just fine," I replied.

He closed the conversation and said, "Alright, I rest assured that you have sufficient brainpower to be careful with this gadget, but I'll advise you either way. Neither you nor I, nor anyone knows what may exist outside of our present. Thus, it is imperative that you consider everything that you may be faced with in a new world, as well as what you will need to prepare for it, because I know there is nothing I can do to hold you back from using this instrument. Goodbye, Ronny. I'll see you soon."

As he hung up the call, Ronny felt mildly taken aback by this warning. However, not because he did not already know the information that his dear friend James had given him, but because created a new possibility in his head, and that was that his life could not only be changed in another world, but it could be ended.

"The moment's emotion must have gotten to me," he confidently thought to himself, "a concept so naive such as death is incapable of scaring me!"

Due to his inconceivable intelligence, Ronny had already been able to calculate several thousand situations that could be occurring in the multiverse which he should choose to travel into. Nevertheless, there was one thing that was nonexistent in his perfect brain, and that was wisdom, because wisdom can only originate from reflection, reflection about experiences and events which make a human reconsider values and beliefs, and since simple-minded Ronny had been trapped inside of a perfect bubble. Oh, how that would change during the most eventful period of time Ronny had ever had the chance to experience.

There was no more hanging about. Chance was a very powerful force, and Ronny was falling victim to it.

Yet he questioned, "Should he say his farewells and goodbyes?" "No," he resolved.

It would risk the sudden rise of powerful emotions, which could put a dent in his confidence and make him doubt about embarking on the journey as a whole. Despite his speculations and calculations, Ronny understood that it was impossible to truly determine his fate as soon as he left his world, and that excited him.

Ronny had programmed the Parallel Spectacles in such way that one had to turn the right frame of the spectacles a certain number of notches to travel through a certain number of multiverses, which could resemble

the action of rotating the dial on a vault. To return to one's own reality, the left frame had to be turned the same number of notches as had been turned on the right.

H.G. Wells pictured the feeling of traveling through *time* in his apocalyptic science fiction novella, *The Time Machine* as, "excessively unpleasant," and comparing it to, "a helpless headlong motion." This assumption may very well have been accurate about time travel, however, traveling through realities was only comparable to being excessively unpleasant, as instead of a dizzying motion, Ronny's case could be better compared to what felt like a heavy blink. It was as if every hue of a color spectrum had passed repeatedly at the speed of light, all while one's entire body violently palpitated.

Before Ronny had left his own reality, there were bright, yellow rays of light shining through the panes of his window. When he came to an abrupt stop in what is now known as one of the Left Worlds, the sun no longer shone through his window because there were no panes and there was no sun. In fact, he was sitting in a six-foot deep trench, next to piles of seemingly endless dead bodies along each side of the hole in the ground. He was violently appalled by the scene that had welcomed him, but he was once again brought to attention as he heard the footsteps of another young boy running across a rain-soaked field that was somehow Lubbock. He was panting and sweating as he ran, with blood stains all over his arms and legs, yet he seemed to have no cuts. Penetratingly afraid at the moment, Ronny felt the urge to follow him, and he obeyed it.

In case he was in possession of weapons or if he was dangerous at all, he followed subtly so as to be as inconspicuous as possible. After Ronny followed him through wild bush for what seemed like over an hour, but more likely amounted to a few minutes, they arrived at a place that Ronny was able to recognize as Folbur Park, an area that had been abandoned in Ronny's world for as long as he could remember. Yet here, there was a group of people huddled over a fire as well as small children as young as three-years old fiddling with rifle magazines. However, here, he could no longer go unnoticed and as he walked amongst the park, he received several noticeable glances of fright, which prompted Ronny to attempt to communicate with those around the fire using English.

"Hello," he began, "I am not from here, nor anywhere near here. Could someone please explain to me what is happening?"

After a few seconds of quite uncomfortable silence, Ronny heard a slow and hesitant voice. It was the boy whom he had followed. He once again led Ronny to a corner aside from the rest, although this time consciously, and began interrogating him.

"What is your name, strange man? Where do you come from?" He questioned me.

"I'm Ronny, and I'm from New York," he joked.

The boy stared at Ronny with a puzzled expression. It struck him that he did not know anywhere else apart from the sole city he occupied, and Ronny doubted that he had any sort of education.

Ronny quickly changed the subject and asked, "Do you have any family, any relatives?"

"My father died several years ago, and my mother has been gone for quite some time, although I'm hopeful that I'm close to seeing her again."

"How did you lose your father?" Ronny inquired. As someone who grew up without a mother or a father, he was beginning to feel that he could relate to this boy.

"During one of the great raids, my mother and my father and I were separated amidst the chaos, and he was shot while we crossed into safety. However," he continued, "I recently heard word of the whereabouts of my mother and some others with her, and it has given me hope."

"Hope for what?"

"Hope that I can live in this miserable world with someone by my side. My mother is the only person I have left. I would give anything to breathe freely; to wake up one morning and appreciate my surroundings because it is my only care."

At that moment, Ronny promised the young boy, "I will help you find your peace so I can return to mine."

Live (A True Story)

by Sebastian Carrillo

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

MILLA NAUMOVICH | Grade 8



I woke up, startled; it felt like a roller coaster! As my eyes began to understand what they were seeing slowly, they saw my dad, vigorously shaking me.

"Sofía, Sofía, apurate, ya vamos tarde," said my dad in a hurried tone.

"Hay Pa, de que hablas, si ni ha salido el sol," I responded, barely knowing what was going on.

"No te hagas la boba, nos tenemos que ir pa' la casa de la abuelita María," he responded with his back turned, already walking out of my room. Finally, my brain woke up and I realized that today was the first day of Winter Break. I would go to San Agustín to my grandma's house, and I would play with my cousins. I knew that I would have the

best two weeks of my life. I sprang out of the bed and got ready.

"Cinco minutos chicas," my dad yelled across the house, even though he was the only one who wasn't ready. Finally, after a few minutes, we left the house and got into the car. The drive was a dreadful four hours with turns and bumps in the mountains of Colombia. I looked out the window, anticipating the seconds of light from the streetlights. It was like a dream, a beam of light, allowing me to see past the darkness and see the beauty that lay ahead. I sat in the car with my head being sustained by my hand and daydreaming about the things I would do once I got to San Agustín. I was thinking mainly about my cousins and seeing my grandma.

Slowly, the sun rose, annihilating the darkness that hid the beauty of Colombia. Within two hours of our ride, I was able to see all the mountains tower above the cars. I saw the people laughing, living their own lives in the little huts that surrounded the road. It was like a road society. A moment of realization hit me as I imagined what they were talking about, or even what they were going to do in Winter Break. It made me realize that I wasn't the only person with intricate thoughts and a vivid life. Everyone, even the people of the road society had their own life with their own struggles and story. A sudden stop of the car broke my bubble of thought, and as I looked out from the car window, I saw my grandma's house and my grandma running away from it with her arms wide open. We all got out of the car and went to say hi to my grandma.

"Hola mamá, qué más," my dad asked, hugging my grandma

"¿Hola hijito que rico verte, se quedan a comer?" my grandma asked him.

My mom ran from the car with her bags, interrupted, and excitedly hugged my grandma and said, *"Hola María, ¡Claro que nos quedamos!"*

I stood there watching the interaction when suddenly my grandma turned to me, knelt down, grabbed my cheeks, and said in a high-pitched voice *"¡Hola gordita, has crecido mucho! ¡Qué rico que estés acá!"*

"Hola abue, me has hecho mucha falta," I said, almost in gibberish as my grandma was still grabbing my cheeks.

"Vengan, seguro que hay hambre," said my grandma leading us to the feast. I climbed into my chair and saw my grandma walking over with a giant pot of ajiaco, which, in my opinion, was the best soup in the world. The plate is placed in front of me, and I stared at it and grabbed my spoon, accepting the challenge of finishing the entire bowl. I picked up my spoon but suddenly my dad grabbed my hand.

"Tienes que esperar, sé que tienes hambre pero si empiezas a comer qué van a pensar, que te crié mal, no señorita," my dad said teasingly. I knew he was joking but I still knew I had to wait. The wait seemed endless but finally, everyone got a plate, and my dad gave me a look of approval. *"Ahora sí mijita,"* he said, now allowing me to devour the bowl.

After a while, I finished the seemingly endless bowl of ajiaco.

"Gracias abue," I said with a smile on my face while holding my stomach.

"De nada gordita," she replied shocked but pleased I finished my food.

My dad glanced at my mom and knew it was time to go, *“Bueno María, muchas gracias por todo pero ya nos tenemos que ir.”*

“Hay no que lástima, ojalá se podrían quedar más,” she replied in a sad tone. They all began to stand up and we all walked together back toward the car. During the short walk, I had very mixed emotions. I was extremely excited, two weeks without school with my favorite cousins! But, on the other hand, I would not see my parents for two weeks and I would miss them dearly. I saw my mom and dad say bye to my grandma.

“Chao mamita, me vas a hacer mucha falta, ojalá nos veamos pronto,” said my dad in a rather sad tone.

“Hay si, ojalá; me vas hacer mucha falta hijo,” my grandma said, sharing the same sadness.

“Chao Maria, que chevere poder visitar, muchas gracias por la comida,” my mom said with sadness, but not as sincere as the sadness shared by my dad and grandma.

“Hay chao Angela, fue rico verte,” replied my grandma. They all hugged and talked for a while more and, finally, it was my turn to say goodbye to them.

“Chao hija nos vemos pronto,” my mom said, this time with sincere sadness, and kissed my forehead.

“Chao ma, me vas hacer mucha falta,” I replied.

My mom went to use the bathroom one more time and my dad started to walk toward me.

“Mira Sofía, aquí tienes unos pesos, sé que no es mucho pero disfrútalos, y no le digas a tu mami,” my dad said smiling while looking for my mom making sure she didn't hear.

“Ay muchas gracias papi, me vas hacer mucha falta, pero nos vemos en dos semanas,” I said with a smile.

“Yo a ti mi princesa, pero recuerda que tu mamá y yo te queremos mucho,” my dad said lovingly as he looked into my eyes. Before I knew it, he tapped my nose and walked away to a bright red car that would forever live vividly within my memory. I saw my dad smile at me, wave goodbye, and get into the car. They drove away and that was the end of that; now it was time for my Winter Break! I walked back to the house while holding hands with my grandma. My cousins arrived at my grandma's house; we played restlessly. Finally, the same darkness that I had seen this morning swept across San Agustín and covered it in a warm blanket allowing all to sleep peacefully.

The next day I was woken up by my cousins who wasted no time in screaming at me.

“Sofía, despierta, despierta, vamos a ir a comer algo al centro,” one of them yelled.

“Bueno, bueno, denme un segundo y ya vamos,” I replied in a haggard tone. I proceeded to change as quickly as I could and went to meet my cousins at the door.

“Vayan con cuidado,” my grandma reminded us. We stepped out the door and instead of the beautiful sunny day I anticipated, the day seemed to be cloudy and gloomy.

“Qué lindo que está el día,” said my cousin. And although the color of the sky was gray and gloomy, I made it my goal for the sky to have a superfluous effect upon the mood of my mood. All I could think about was jumping in puddles or hopping in the rain. Even when presented with gloomy days I had always been optimistic as I learned that pessimism would bring nothing but pain. My cousins and I roamed around *“el centro.”* We sang and danced in the rain, getting the most out of the rain that for others brought sadness. We ate a delicious breakfast that consisted of arepas and jugo de maracuyá. We thought of going back home but, instead, we decided to walk around some more. We went to candy stores and saw bom bon bunes, we saw obleas and even a chocolatina jet. We left the store and suddenly I remembered the pesos that my dad had given me.

“Me pueden acompañar a comprar algo,” I asked my cousins.

“Supongo,” they responded. We went around the blocks of el centro y chismosiamos. We had so much fun and were walking around when one thing caught my eye. Through the glass of a dusty store, I saw a case of colored pencils. I knew I had to get this.

“Mira, mira,” I exclaimed pointing at the window.

“Cómpralo,” they encouraged. We entered the store and bought the colored pencils that immediately caught my eye. After all the jumping and playing on the seemingly sad day, we went back to my grandma's house. We arrived at my grandma's house just in time to avoid the *aguacero* that fell mercilessly upon the fragile Colombian ecosystem. We arrived at my grandma's house and there was an eerie silence accompanied by a stare I had never seen on my grandma before. A stare that had no emotion whatsoever; it seemed to pass right through me. She just stared into the abyss.

“Sofía, nos tenemos que ir, porfa empaca y apurate. Ustedes se quedaran con el tío Rafa, pórtense bien, Sofía vamos,” my grandma said, focusing her eyes and forcing an unsettling smile. Without a second thought, I ran to my room to pack. What could have happened? Maybe it was a surprise, I thought to myself. At this moment, my eight-year-old optimism blinded me from the truth, a tragedy had happened. A sudden loud knock hit the door like thunder and interrupted my thoughts. Everyone in the house jumped, everyone was on edge.

"Llego el tío Rafa, pórtense bien. Sofía ya nos vamos," my grandma said, in the same cold tone she had before.

"Ya estoy lista," I replied smiling, oblivious to what was going on. My grandma and I left through the door, this time, without holding hands. We left in such a rush that I didn't even have time to say bye to my cousins, I just looked back at them and waved helplessly. We got into the car and the silence was deafening. It was scary, I had never seen my grandma like this. Our car was surrounded by a prickly darkness that surrounded one and all; it was inescapable. We were also getting beaten and bashed by the rain that seemed to be seeking vindictive rage upon the world. I had to break the silence; it was driving me insane.

"¿Qué paso abue?" I asked innocently.

"Nada gordita," said my grandma, still without any vestige of emotion. By asking this question, I hoped to exonerate any pessimist thoughts that inexorably lurked within my young innocent mind. The four-hour car ride was interminable. With every lightning that struck the mood tensed; it was unbearable. The rest of the car ride was torture, the silence, the absence of light, and the unrhythmical pounding of the ruthless rain. And still, in contrast, the road society was sleeping blissfully, without, in my eyes, a worry in the world. My thoughts ran restlessly. Finally, I felt the sudden stop of the car. The big "surprise" would be unveiled. I slowly walked out of the car, not getting any pity from the restlessly cruel rain. My grandma and I walked to my house. The door slowly opened, and I saw all of my dad's family. I finally got it; it was a family reunion. This optimism was immediately crushed as soon as I paid more attention to the details. No one was looking at me. All their heads were down; they were constantly wiping their tears. Even in my family's eyes lived the remorseless rain. The shut of the door got their attention and their heads perched up and stared at me and my grandma. Their eyes were red, and the sound of sniffles filled the room. Everyone from my dad's family seemed to be here, except my dad.

"H-H-Hola h-hija," my mom said, barely able to talk through the tears, hugging me but not letting go.

"Hola ma, que pa..." I was interrupted by a knock.

"Papi," I exclaim with excitement as I sprint to the door. As I ran, I realized my mom's sobs suddenly got heavier. I opened the door and looked up. The man in front of me was indeed not my father, it was my uncle Raimundo. It was at that moment that I began to understand what was happening. Although my innocence blinded me, I refused to believe it. I ran back to my mom whose eyes were still leaking of the evil rain.

"Mami, dónde está papi," I asked my mom, wanting to prove myself wrong. To my anticipation, the stream of her tears became heavier.

"No-No sé hija," my mom sobbed, and she put her arms around me.

"Co-cómo así," I asked, as my voice and my heart cracked. I could not help but to deny in my head that this was not possible. My optimistic thoughts were barely clinging to my broken soul. I stood there in the room, helpless. The tears rolled down my youthful cheeks, and my stare became emotionless, just like my grandma, just like everyone else in my house. Suddenly, my uncle Raimundo grabbed my arm and dragged me away from my helpless mom. My uncle knelt down to my level and destroyed my world with a few words.

"Sofía, tu papa desapareció hace unas semanas; no se sabe exactamente lo que pasó pero se piensa que lo secuestraron a él y al amigo con quien andaba. Estamos haciendo lo que podemos pero quiero que sepas que, es probable que no vuelva a aparecer," said my uncle, looking me dead in the eye, making sure I fully assimilated what he just said. And I did, and it broke me, my heart was shattered. What I had been denying for so long became a truth. But I still refused to believe that he was gone forever, that I would never see him again. I walked to my room, head down and my tears plopped to the ground with the same unrhythmic beat that the rain fell outside. I fell on my bed helplessly and lay there throughout the whole night, unable to sleep. I was trapped in my room at the will of my now pessimistic thoughts.

My silent thoughts hijacked my mind, and I was completely distracted. My sad thoughts were interrupted by the sudden opening of the door. I heard everyone stop what they were doing, the silence was unbearable. Suddenly I heard my mom and my uncle talking. As soon as they stopped talking there was something worse than the sound of silence, the sound of my mother's hysterical sobs. I heard nothing else except the sobs of my mother and soon everyone else in the room. The tears from my mother were contagious and even reached me. A few minutes later, I heard footsteps coming to my room. I had been expecting those ominous footsteps, but when I *really* heard them, my heart palpitated faster than ever before, and I felt nauseous. The next words from my uncle would forever change my life.

"Sofía, te tengo que decir algo," said my uncle, the same one who told me my father had disappeared. From those few words, the loud cries from outside the room, and the red eyes of my uncle I knew what he would say. I covered my ears, refusing to hear the painful words that I knew were coming. I refused. I needed hope, I

needed my dad. My uncle waited, watching me, and tears rolled down his eyes. Seeing him I finally took my hands off my ears and listened to something I already knew.

"Tu papá está muerto; encontré el brazo en el río, lo siento, si qui..." his words were immediately interrupted and drowned out by my cries and screams. He silently left the room and abandoned me with my thoughts and emotions, the worst punishment of all. That night I not only lost my dad but also lost my mom and myself.

That night I pulled out the only thing that could distract me, the colored pencils I bought with the last thing my dad gave me. As soon as I saw the colored pencils I began to cry. Still crying I pulled them out and drew. I drew all night to distract myself from my thoughts. I decided to draw a card for God. I prayed, prayed that this was only a nightmare. I prayed that my dad was still alive, only missing one arm. I rationalized all my thoughts and they all had one thing in common, the fact that my dad was alive. It was the only thing I wanted.

I couldn't sleep, my colored pencils needed to be sharpened, and I had nothing else to distract me. Finally, I resigned to my thoughts. I allowed the thoughts of my dad to take over my brain and tears and screams escaped my body. I think about how, but more importantly, why. How could my beloved Neiva and beloved Colombia do such a thing? I loved my little town, especially the people. To know that someone within my community that I trusted so much and loved so much did this; I felt betrayed. How could someone take the life of a human being, knowing that they would put the victim in peace but put the family in a living hell? My whole family was shattered, my mom wouldn't stop crying, and every time I saw her, I felt her pain and my heart shattered even more. Every day my heart ached, longing for the warm embrace from my father, one that I knew I would never feel again. I left my mom alone and went to my room. I sharpened my colored pencils and began to work. Although I knew I wanted to forget, I knew I couldn't. I decided to take a sheet of paper and write today's date and what had happened. Now I will never forget, I will never forget how much I love my dad.

I woke up in the morning and decided I needed to know more; I needed to know what happened to my dad. Rather than going to my mom who was destroyed and grieving, I went to my uncle who was staying at my house. It was scary to talk about the death of my father, but I had to.

"T-Tío, qué pasó con mi papá," I sadly asked my uncle.

My uncle was hesitant but decided that I needed to know this, it was important. *"Bueno, ahorita no se sabe, pero estamos tratando de averiguar,"* my uncle said with a disappointed sad voice.

I ran back to my room crying more than ever and spent the rest of the day drawing. Thinking about what my town had done to my family. The next morning, I decided I needed to know more. I went back to my uncle with more questions in mind.

With fear and a lump in my throat I asked, *"Por qué estaba el brazo en el río?"*

"El gobierno tiene el poder de matar a cualquier persona y necesitan una forma de botar el cuerpo de los muertos. Entonces ellos botan los cuerpos en el río, por eso estaba buscando allá," my uncle said half crying.

I once again ran to my room, crying but this time I was not only thinking about my dad; I was thinking about all the other people the government had killed. I felt something I had never felt before, anger. I was furious with the government and the people who not only killed my dad but everyone else who talked badly about them. I desperately wanted revenge against them. I wanted them to feel the pain that everyone else felt when they took a life. I wanted them to go through what I was going through. The next morning, I stayed in my room and didn't ask any more questions about my dad, as I was scared to know the response. The next few weeks passed by the same way. My face was sore from crying so much, and I hadn't talked to my mom in days. However, the next day I was going to a new school with my cousins and my best friend Gabi. I went to bed, fearing reintegration with society after such a big change. Would people know what happened? What would they say?

The next day I went to school walking with my cousins and best friend, Gabi. We got there and I went to my first class. I don't think I was ready to go back to school, I couldn't think straight and in the middle of class; my eyes got watery thinking about my dad. Some girl saw me crying and made fun of me

"Jaja, mira la niña que no tiene papá," She laughed. People started to point and laugh. I couldn't take it. I left the class and started to cry. How could someone be so cruel I thought to myself as I cried in the bathroom. Eventually, I heard the door open, and it was Gabi, my best friend. She saw me crying and didn't say a word but just hugged me. She knew what was wrong and didn't ask; she knew it would only hurt me more. Eventually, with the help of my friend, I stopped crying and went back to class, even though it was hard with the stares and laughs I got through the first stay of school. The following school days went by the same, I was unable to control my emotions and often started crying and went to the bathroom. But there was one constant, Gabi. She was the only

one who helped get me through this hell. It was her continuous unconditional friendship and love that helped me see the good in human nature which was once impaired by the death of my father.

Around a month passed and I adjusted to school. I was now more able to control my emotions and could think more clearly. Every day after school Gabi would come home with me, we talked, and she never asked me any questions about my dad. She helped me distract myself from my dad and helped me slowly overcome the sadness that was brought with it.

That day my uncle went into my room and said, *“Oye Sofía, tu mamá y unos policías estamos tratando de averiguar lo que pasó con tu papá y su amigo. Como tu mami es una jueza, con esa información va a meter a las personas que mataron a tu papá y su amigo en la cárcel.”*

“Gracias por contarme, ojalá lo encuentren,” I said a little bit sadly. With the thought of my dad abruptly hitting my head, I started to cry but didn’t think much about it.

Some months later I got very sad, cried, and grieved. I started thinking about the investigation and decided to ask my uncle what had happened.

“Hola tío, que pasó con la investigación,” I asked curiously.

“Pues, encontraron el carro de tu papá y su amigo en una base militar. Entonces piensan que fue el gobierno,” he told me sadly.

“¿Que va hacer mami?” I asked with optimism, hoping they would bring justice against the government.

“Tu mamá no puede hacer nada. Le dijeron que como es probable que sea el gobierno si dice algo contra ellos le podrian hacer algo a tu mamá y tal vez a nosotros. Entonces no se puede hacer nada a las personas que mataron a tu papá,” my uncle said, starting to cry.

I ran back to my room, once again crying. I was furious. We couldn’t do anything against the people who killed my family. It was so unfair, but I didn’t want what happened to my dad to happen to us, so I, like many of the rest, stayed quiet, giving up hope and resigning to the corrupt government.

Life is a merciless river, flowing nonstop, and beating down anyone naïve enough to resist it. But it is also something beautiful that changes and adapts to the giant boulders which once seemed impossible to move around. A river tells the undeniable story of the past. It shows how the gift of life has flowed and will continue to flow all around the world. A river is something that shows the struggles of moving past that big boulder. Trying to stop or block the river is inevitable; it will beat you down and break you if you resist. So why resist; why get stuck on that boulder? Why get stuck in the past when you could be doing so much more? I am not saying to become a slave to the river and submit to its power, but don’t get stuck on a moment or an event; accept that the river will never stop and will only go forward, so don’t “go” with it, but live it. The boulders and rough currents are part of a river, but the beauty of the river is how it adapts to these “obstacles;” it is what makes each river unique and beautiful. The river tells your story. So, don't be afraid to move on, move forward, and, as my father said, “Pásala bien.”

The Slope

by Aston Conrad
Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

The cold November rain fell from the sky upon the quiet house as the breeze swept into the room through the partially open window. The cold gentle wind stung Aston’s face as he looked at his watch and marched into Oliver’s room.

“Come on, we have to leave.”

“Wait up, I'm almost done.” Oliver said as he zipped up his cold ski jacket.

“I’ll be by the car,” Aston responded, *“come down when you're ready.”*

Aston and Oliver were in a small community in the outskirts of San Francisco, California. Compared to the city’s cultural and busy lifestyle, Mill Valley, just across from the Golden Gate Bridge, was the complete opposite. Mill Valley was a small, charming, and friendly town. Aston had been visiting his uncle Oliver during his vacations for many years. Aston came to visit him again this year - and a goal for this trip was to go skiing at Lake Tahoe. The idea had always lingered with them; they both were avid skiers; but skiing on those beautiful slopes had never materialized. This year, however, would be different.

The loud thumps echoed into the stairwell as Oliver descended toward the garage. Aston was warming his hands in an attempt to lessen the sting of the crisp winter air.

"Did you bring any gloves?" Aston asked, "It's freezing."

"Shoot, I'll go back up," Oliver said, biting his lip, upset that he had forgotten them.

"Don't worry about it," Aston said, now walking towards the other side of the car, "we have to go, we can pick up a pair later at the ski shop."

"Fine," Oliver said, as he turned back to the car.

They were now both in the car rushing to get the heater on. As they drove down the steep road, a notification came through the car's digital screen.

"What is it?" Oliver asked, focused on the winding road.

"It's something about weather updates," Aston said as he glanced up from his phone.

"Open it please," Oliver said, still focused on the road.

"Ok - let me check your phone," Aston said as he put his phone down, "Oh, wait a second, it's about Tahoe - a storm is forecasted to come next week, but I'm sure we will be fine."

Aston focused back onto his phone as Oliver was reassured by the update. They talked, laughed, and listened to music as the hours flew by. Everything was going smoothly, but that was about to change as the sunny morning morphed into a cloudy afternoon.

"We're almost here - should we stop by a station for a bathroom break?" Oliver asked as he showed the need to use the men's room.

"Yeah, why not?" Aston responded as he saw Oliver's expression.

The two jumped out of the Jeep and walked to the station. They stopped midway when a gust of wind almost sent them tumbling down the road.

"Wow," Oliver said regaining balance, "it's really windy!"

"Yeah, but the weather channel said nothing about bad weather today," Aston said.

"Let's use the bathroom really quick and get out of here," Oliver said, unable to wait any longer. While in the bathroom, Oliver overheard a conversation between two locals,

"Fred, did ya hear about the blizzard headin' our way?"

"Yep, should be hittin' us any time now."

Oliver thought to himself, *I guess they didn't hear the weather - the storm is not coming this weekend.* Well, he didn't have time to debate the weather with these two, so he brushed the thought aside. He had to get back to the car where Aston was impatiently waiting to get on the road.

They were out in five minutes, and back on the road when it suddenly started raining. "Huh?" Oliver said confused and enraged. "Shouldn't it be snowing? We are already high enough; it shouldn't be raining."

"Yeah," Aston responded equally confused, "well I guess it's not a good sign."

"Ugh," Oliver moaned, annoyed as his thoughts became clearer, "the slopes better not be ruined."

"Let's not worry about it and make it to the cabin." Aston said, trying to sound as if nothing was wrong.

The sound of silence suffocated the car as the cold rain clacked on the metallic roof. The two sat in silence for what seemed like a mountain of eternity before they made it to their cabin somewhere in the woods. They unpacked the Jeep and quickly started a fire in the cabin's chimney to unwind from the long drive. The internet signal was down, and both the TV and phones were useless.

"Gosh," Oliver said thinking out loud, "The rain will ruin the slopes and now, the signal is down. No news, no calls, nothing!"

"I was just thinking the same thing. Something is up, but we have no way of finding out without any internet," Aston concluded.

"Do you think this could have something to do with the storm we heard about earlier?" Oliver went on.

"Could be," Aston said as he recalled the details, "the update said, 'next week', but it could explain the loss of internet signal."

Oliver nodded as he thought through possible connections.

"Well, we won't find out until tomorrow, so let's get some rest and if the day is nice, we are skiing as planned." They both agreed and went to their rooms. As Aston laid in bed, he secretly wished he was back at Mill Valley. He did not feel safe or comfortable with every minute that passed.

As the night disappeared and the morning arose, the sound of the birds' tranquil singing had awoken them. With the warm sunlight rays beaming onto them, both boys jumped out of bed with a smile on their faces. The morning sun already warm on their cheeks welcomed them, the complete opposite feeling they experienced upon their arrival.

"What a beautiful morning!" Aston said as he brushed his teeth, "What's the plan?"

Oliver sipped his warm coffee, "I want to find out more about the weather before we decide to get our ski gear and buy the lift tickets. If all checks out, then we might find ourselves skiing this weekend."

"Sounds like a plan." Aston said as he poured milk into his cereal.

The boys finished their breakfast and made their way to the car to start their day. They were bundled up with their ski gear ready for the weather. There was no sign of any bad weather, so they made their way to the ski shop where they found some locals to chat with.

"Hi, how are you, can I ask you a couple of questions?" Oliver asked as he walked into the heated ski shop with a smile.

"Sure, go ahead," one of the ski attendants answered.

"Do you guys have any internet or signal?" Oliver asked.

"No, we had nothing since the storm power outage."

"What do you mean?" Oliver said, intrigued.

"Well, yeah - we lost all power and communication a couple weeks back and we just managed to get the power back up and running."

"Yikes, that is not good - what about the downpour of rain yesterday. Do you think it will affect the conditions of the slopes?" Oliver asked as he found himself nervous about the response.

"Well, I have to admit it was weird but storms from up north have been messing up weather patterns. It can go from nice to ugly in a flash but ... As to your question, I wouldn't worry too much about it. Machines have been blowing snow for a couple days now. We are good until next week when the next big storm is scheduled to arrive." The worker said with a grin from cheek to cheek.

"Ok cool - In that case, let's get ski gear for myself and my nephew." Oliver said happily, ready for an expensive credit card swipe.

They were fitted with gear and then they were quickly out on the slopes. There wasn't a cloud in the morning sky, and so far, the snow conditions were good. They finished their first run and stopped for a quick coffee break.

"Did you know that we are bordering Nevada? We could go over to the other side of the mountain and be in another state. Do you want to try it?" Oliver said in an excited tone.

"Yeah- why not?" Aston asked excitedly as he sipped his hot cocoa. They finished up and sure enough, they went off skiing down the opposite side down to Nevada.

"Stay close," Oliver said, trying to put his mask on, "I don't want to lose you." They skied down the cat trail until they found a small opening with a beautiful view of the lake.

"Wow!" Oliver said, "Look over here!" Oliver said completely mesmerized with the view of Lake Tahoe. Aston followed Oliver's pointed finger. Yes. It was too miraculous to ignore. The frozen lake, with parts unfrozen painted in deep and light blues. It was massive and it was beautiful. They rested there taking pictures left and right, almost completely forgetting about the time. It was a special moment that Aston would never forget. It took a while for the clouds to begin forming, but once they did, they didn't lose a second to escalating weather conditions. A sharp wind woke them from their picture-perfect moment, and the mood quickly changed from happy and peaceful to stressed and scared.

"Uh-oh," Aston sighed, looking down at his watch.

"What?" Oliver asked, still taking pictures.

"It is 3:45 PM. Don't they close the chairs at 4:00 PM on this side, here in Nevada?" Aston said nervously.

"They do!" Oliver gasped, as he looked at his watch. "Darn! We need to get down to catch that chair now, or we are stuck on the wrong side of the mountain - worse yet, a different state!"

Just then, the boys realized that the fog had quickly covered up the view of the lake, and worse yet, their visibility had been reduced drastically. The wind just kept getting stronger.

They skied close to each other as they tried to get down as fast as possible. It was hard as the wind kept pushing both boys, side to side, making visibility even harder. It was as if the wind was mad and unleashing its anger on these last two boys on the slope. Aston and Oliver were both freaking out. To make matters worse, they couldn't see anyone or anything. They managed to make it halfway down before noticing a chair lift station that was already shutdown due to the high winds.

"We need to get down fast," Oliver yelled from the inside of his ski face mask, "They already shut down most of these lifts due to the wind."

Aston tried to say something, but just then, out of nowhere, a large old pine tree fell right next to them. The force of the snow threw them off balance and sent them tumbling out into the slope. The visibility was close to zero, and as they both laid covered in white snow, the boys could no longer see each other. Out of sheer desperation, Oliver pulled himself out of the snow that had covered most of his body and started yelling for Aston. An intense sense of fear and panic overtook him, and he started screaming as loud as he could.

"ASTON ... ASTON... ASTON...ASTON."

He screamed over and over but it was in vain. The wind was screeching and nothing could be heard or seen. He searched for Aston for an indefinite amount of time before realizing that he needed help to find Aston. Alone, it was useless.

Oliver made it down to the chair and as the chairs were closing, he called the emergency services for help. The ski patrol came and was going up the slope in an instant.

Aston had been struck by that pine tree that fell. By the Grace of God, it had not hit him directly. A large branch hit him on the side and eventually fell on his leg. He laid unconscious for a while, probably during the time that Oliver had been yelling out for his name. As Aston recovered and awoke from his unconsciousness, he realized that he was all alone and half covered in snow. Minutes later he began feeling the pain on his right leg. The massive branch lay over it. Moving his leg was impossible, and the sharp pain he felt was one he had never felt before. With frostbite dangerously settling, he waved his ski poles in a desperate call for help.

The snowmobile attendant made his way up, and as the wind got stronger, he went slower. From the brief explanation that Oliver gave him, he knew that Aston was not far. Soon enough, he ran into the fallen pine tree, and saw the ski poles waving in the air.

"Gotcha buddy, hang in there," the ski patrol assured him as he drove as close as possible to the fallen tree.

The ski patrol pulled Aston out of the branch and onto the snow mobile. Aston possibly had a broken leg, but the pain was nothing compared to the happiness of seeing the ski patrol on the snowmobile to help. As the ski patrol buckled Aston tight, a high-pitched noise coming from the patrol's walkie-talkie broke through the screeching whirls of the wind. Through broken sentences, static, the exalted voice came through.

"Warning, Avalanche Imminent. I Repeat, Warning, Aval- Imm- rea- ent..."

Is This Paradise?

by Gabby De Haan

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

It was 1:25 AM and I had not slept all night. I had been crying for hours. My room was pitch black except for the streetlight shining through my window. That tiny bit of light just made me cry even more. That light reminded me of my mom. She was the only light in my life that made the dark disappear. Even though we didn't have the greatest relationship, I still knew how much I needed her in my life. In the other room, I could hear my little brother crying too. I knew however what I was feeling at that moment was less than three times as much pain as he was feeling. My mom was his everything; they were so similar, so they understood each other. Not many people understood my brother; he was different. Knowing how much pain Walker was in I got out of bed to go comfort him.

"Hey, Walker, can I come in?" I whispered through the crack in his door.

"Yea, come in," Walker mumbled from under his sheets.

As I walked into his room, I immediately knew how I was feeling. His room was a complete mess, with clothes, trash, and blankets thrown everywhere. I believed that one's mind looks like one's room and that was clearly the case here. I sat at the end of his bed waiting for something to pop into my mind on how to comfort him.

"I am not here to talk to you about some not-realistic things, I just want to be here to listen to anything you want to say, or I can just sit in silence," I told him.

He started to cry harder now. I moved next to him and just sat there hugging him until we both fell asleep. From that moment on I knew that I was the new mother of the house, and nothing would be the same.

It had been five days since my mom died and everything was different. It felt like my heart had been ripped, crumpled up, and beaten until broken into pieces.

"Jacky, Walker, breakfast is ready if you guys are hungry," my dad called from downstairs.

I got out of Walker's bed and went downstairs to have some breakfast with my dad, James. My dad was a quiet man but kind and smart. My mom always brought the energy out in him and now that she was gone, I don't know how he would ever be happy again. I tried to make him cheerful but who was I kidding; no one should be happy after his wife dies.

"Hi, Dad, how are you?" I asked him.

"I am ok sweetie; how about you?" he sighed.

"Not great obviously but I just hope things will get better," I hoped.

"Me too love," my dad responded.

A couple of minutes later Walker came down the stairs with a blanket around him and his hood on.

"Hey, buddy, did you not sleep well?" my dad asked him.

"No, it was a long night," Walker said.

"Do you want some food?" I offered him.

"Sure," he sighed back.

The days went on like this for months—grief and sadness. Until I realized that there were only two weeks left of summer and I knew that Mom would be very mad at us if she knew that we spent our whole summer, crying



MILLA NAUMOVICH | Grade 8

about her instead of having fun. So, that night at dinner, we talked about what was something Mom would want us to be doing right now.

"I think we should go on an adventure somewhere. We know how much she loved adventure," Walker suggested.

"I think that is a good idea, but where should we go?" Dad questioned.

"Let's think of places Mom has always wanted to go but was not able to," I stated.

"Well, she had always wanted to go to an island and live in that paradise," Dad said.

"OK, then we should go to an island for a week and have an amazing time like she would want us to have!" I explained.

"Sounds great," Walker and Dad replied.

The next day we packed and booked tickets to the Bahamas to have a great vacation for her. By the next morning, we were off on a plane from Canada to Nassau. We were all excited but still wished Mom could be here with us. We arrived in Nassau that afternoon and immediately went to our hotel to drop off our baggage to then go rent a boat. The boat was small but cute and had just enough room to fit all of us. My brother took us on a boat ride around the nearby islands and we went swimming around in the water. For once in a long time, it felt like old times. We were actually having fun without thinking about Mom. After a couple of hours of fun in the sun, it was starting to get dark, so Walker started to drive us home when we realized that we didn't know where our hotel was. We tried looking around the islands for a building, but we could not find anything or anyone in sight. All I could think about was that mom would know exactly what to do in this situation. Hours passed and it was dark at this point, and we could still not find our hotel anywhere. So, we just started to prepare for a night at sea.

I woke up around twelve PM and I started to hear thunder in the distance. I immediately woke up my dad and Walker, knowing that this couldn't end well.

"What should we do?" I asked my dad.

"I don't know; maybe just take cover and expect a stormy night," he responded.

"Love you guys. Goodnight if you guys can even sleep," I said.

"I love you too, Dad and Jacky," Walker stated.

"Love you, kids. Sleep tight," my dad said.

It was a long and wet night, but the night was not half as bad as the morning to come. Walker woke up first that morning to a straight sight.

"Umm guys, we are on an island, and it's not the one with the hotel on it," Walker cried.

"Oh, my goodness the boat is destroyed, we are stuck here," I exclaimed.

"Ok, let's just think of what Mom would do right now. She would probably ditch this boat and go explore the island. So that's what we are going to do, OK?" my dad explained.

For the next couple of hours, we explored the island and found nothing on it other than palm trees and coconuts. We just had to keep exploring to find things to live through the night here. By the end of the day, we had a bunch of stuff like wood, sticks, leaves, and food. We used to build ourselves a tent and a fire to cook some food. The struggle was very difficult but over a couple of days we started to get the hang of things, and we were not hating living here anymore.

One day I was walking around the island when I tripped on the rock in the sand. But this rock did not look normal; it had these kinds of beads on it. And once I realized what it was, I started to dig it out. I had found a treasure chest, but it was locked. There was a map attached to the top of the chest, though. I examined the map and saw that there was an X marking where the key was, and I had to go find that key to save my life along with the things in the box.

After a long day of looking for this key, I started to lose hope of getting saved off this island and not dying here. We were running out of food and firewood to keep us alive, and no boats had passed by in a week. The days started to get awful, hot, and wet. The fun of camping was over. We all just wanted to live now.

All of a sudden, one afternoon Walker ran up to me and my dad with an amazed look on his face.

"Look, Look! I found the key," Walker exclaimed.

We all ran to him and examined the key, hoping it was the right one. The second I saw it I knew that it was the right one, so we then ran over to the treasure test to open the box. It was a struggle to open the chest but after around fifteen mins it finally opened. Inside the box there were three flares. And at that moment I knew I was not going to die here. I could be saved now. This amazing adventure truly changed my life after my mom's death, and I know I would never forget these weeks.

"OMG, we did it, we are going to get saved! There is hope guys," I cried.

"Yay, this is amazing. We aren't going to die here!" my dad yelled.

"Guys this was fun, but I am so glad to get off this island," Walker explained.

It was starting to get dark, and we didn't want to waste any of the flares when no one was going to be out on the water at this time. So we went to bed that night happier than ever. Early that morning we launched the first flare but no response after thirty minutes. The happiness started to die down and doubts started to spring upon me not getting saved. Two hours later we shot the second flare and no response immediately, but about an hour later we could hear this boat engine coming towards us. Our excitement grew faster and faster as we knew that this could be the end of our time on the island. Thirty minutes later a boat had arrived at the beach, search, and rescue teams on it. We rushed to the beach with so much joy and happiness knowing that we were going to be safe and be able to go back home with this amazing experiment in our back pockets.

On the boat ride home, I realized how important this journey was for my family. It brought us all so much closer together in such a sad time. It was truly the best thing we could have done to remember our mother. On this trip we all took parts of her personality and brought it into ours because that's what we needed to do to survive. After this adventure, I will always use my family as my support system and try to think like my mom.

The Nerve of Some People

by Siena De Maria

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Dear Diary,

Today I had the weirdest day! Whenever I think about school, my stomach starts hurting a lot. I told my mom, and she said it's just nerves, but I knew I was too tough to let nerves get to me, even though I felt nauseated. I woke up super early to get stuff done before I left for camp, and I wanted you to know that I will be writing to you from my cabin once a week. I can tell I am just talking to a piece of paper and of course there are no answers back, but sometimes I just need someone to talk and express my feelings to. I've been wondering about my emotions lately, I don't know if I am excited, sad, or even *apprehensive*. Tomorrow, I leave for summer camp- one that is known for rich, snobby kids. Oh well, I hope the counselors are nice. I don't want to have another bullying situation... I just have to fit in. Until next week.

Love,
Maria.

The place smelt earthy, the cabins were painted bloodwood, a tough color. The people seemed nice enough.

I tossed my suitcase on my cot and a puff of dust arose, which diminished the spider web on the corner stool. I glanced around, taking in the rustic conditions I would be staying in for the next three weeks and forced my arms to unpack my clothes. Opening my suitcase brought a moment of joy: my mom packed the sweater I was begging for! All of a sudden, there was a blast of music, along with the appearance of a brown-haired, blue-eyed girl who could only be my roommate. After a few minutes of loud music, I couldn't take it anymore, so I kindly said, "Hi, I'm Maria. It's nice to meet you! Could you please lower the music?"

"Oh hi, my name is Ariana. Sorry, I'll turn it down."

"Thank you so much! I'm going to be unpacking my stuff over there," trying to sound as nice as I could be.

"Okay," she said with indifference.

The space for my clothes was small; I only had three drawers, so I decided to fold my clothes extra small. It wasn't a big deal anyway because I would only be here in California for three weeks. After unpacking, I thought to myself, *I've been so worried about what I will do at camp, that I still haven't had the chance to appreciate this wonderful place*. The next thing I knew, I left my stuff on the bed, grabbed my cabin key, and went out for a walk. I felt a little hungry, so I made my way to the cafeteria. I passed by four girls as I found my way through; they placed their hands over each other's ears and gossiped. I tried looking the other way so they wouldn't see me. By their

bratty style, I just knew they weren't a good influence, so I made sure to stay away from them. One of the girls stared at me with her piercing green eyes as I passed by them. My heart dropped.

"I don't know you. Why is that?" she asked.

"Oh, I... I'm new; this is my first year here," I answered quickly.

"You're really pretty," she said with a long voice.

"Thanks," I smiled.

Another one of them said, "You know, you should really consider sitting with us at lunch."

"Okay, I'll see you there!" I said without thinking.

"Bye..." they all waved at me like princesses do.

I changed my mind; they did seem pretty nice after all.

"Where are they? This place is crowded," I whispered to myself.

I looked everywhere, and then I spotted them at a small table. I was too scared to join them; their personalities were so powerful that I felt ashamed to be myself. I took a deep breath and went up to them.

"Hi guys!" I said, with a food tray in my hand.

They all looked at each other and laughed.

"Ha...ha, what's funny?" I said slowly.

The green-eyed girl stood up and said, "Oh, you really thought we were for real when we told you you could sit with us?"

"Uh, yea."

"Hahaha, do you even know who we are?" the blonde one asked, giggling.

My blood didn't take its time to rise to my head.

"Look, if you think you are cool enough to be able to sit with us, you are going to have to jump off Mountain Rock."

"Mountain Rock?" I ask.

"It's the cliff behind the boys' cabins," a brunette one added, "but don't worry. You land in the river."

It sounded terrifying. I am deathly afraid of heights. Looking at her straight in the eye, I could see her smudged mascara, I could smell her fruity perfume, and I could even hear her thoughts. Time stood still.

But only for a second. The words began to flow, "Perfect. 8:00 tonight!" I yelled, making sure that all the spoiled brats heard. They all glanced at each other and left. I looked around and everyone was staring at me thinking I was crazy.

I walked back to my cabin, and I saw Ariana on her way there too. She heard what I agreed to do and told me that she was going to be by my side no matter what. I felt really happy, no one had ever said that to me before.

The time was getting closer, and closer. I put my bathing suit on and headed out. Ariana came with me to the top of Mountain Rock. It was really high up. "Just breathe," said Ariana trying to calm me down and be supportive. Suddenly, I realized that we were not the only ones there. Of course, the princesses were there, along with all the rest of the campers. I started to hear the crowd yelling, and then the countdown began, "*5...OMG is this really happening... 4... What am I doing? 3...Wait, why am I doing this? 2... This is way too high!...1" I can't!*

There I went, soaring through the air as free as a bird, and in a split second, landing in the water as confident as a seagull catching a fish. In the icy silence of the underwater universe, life paused; my fears washed away, and I emerged a brave new girl. I started to hear the shouting and the cheering. And it was at that precise moment that I realized what I had just accomplished.

The princesses were the first ones to come over, "Oh my god Maria, that was literally insane! You are so eating lunch with us from now on!"

"No thanks."

Dear Diary,

I am really proud of myself. This has been the best first week of camp of my life! You won't believe what I did. I faced my fear of heights and jumped off a cliff! But what's most important, I faced a bully, and showed everyone how important it is to stand up for yourself. It wasn't the ideal situation. Basically, I was humiliated by these girls, the princesses. But I wouldn't let them win. I showed them, and I showed

everyone else that it's not ok to be mean. Now they are together but alone, and everyone at camp thinks I'm really brave and wants to be my friend. I feel really good about myself. Until next week.

Love,
Maria.

Strange 49er

by Sakshi Desai

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

As I stood at the top of the stairs I could smell the delicious birthday cake. I knew it was time.

"That smells delicious," I said.

"I hope you like the cake I baked, I worked really hard on it," shouted Mom from below.

I ran down the stairs and rushed towards the cake. As I ran into the living room everyone shouted,

"SURPRISE!"

"Oh my gosh! This looks so good. Thank you everyone!" I said as I rushed over to the presents.

"Time to open up the presents!" my dad called as he was recording with his phone.

After removing the wrapping from the first present, I pulled out a hat that was an old sports hat. This is not what I had asked for, but it would have to do.

"I love it," I said when I really didn't.

I continued opening the gifts. I got a collection of many things such as lip gloss, candy, socks, and clothes. But my big gift was supposed to be the old, filthy sports hat from the 49ers. Although I expected more since it was my thirteenth birthday, I decided not to be greedy and instead to try on the hat. As I looked at the reflection of myself, I accented that the hat was not that bad. Then I decided to go to my mom to ask her what we were going to do today.

"Hey Mom," I said.

As I looked at her, there appeared some type of speech bubble on top of her head that read, "I hope she likes the hat because that is all we could afford, and I thought it might be a good luck charm."

"Hi honey, what's up?"

"Nothing much, what do you want to do?" I said as I was super confused about the speech bubble.

"I was thinking about taking you to the mall. How does that sound?" Lindsey, Avery's mom said.

"Ya, that sounds good. I am going to get changed."

I rushed back up to my room and wondered where this speech bubble came from. The only new thing I added to my outfit was the old 49ers hat. I thought in my head that maybe the hat could be the problem. I was thinking about what I should do with the hat but then quickly realized that I should experiment with it. Maybe that happened only for my mom. We don't know. I quickly changed into a new outfit with the hat in my hand and went into my sister Jewel's room.

"Hey, Jewels! Are you coming to the mall with us?"

As I looked at Jewels, I saw another speech bubble! What is happening? The speech bubble read, "I only wanna go to the mall if we can get a pretzel."

"Sure," Jewel said, "but can we get a pretzel?"

"You've got to ask Mom," I said.

Then I decided to take off the hat. As I was standing looking at Jewel, the speech bubble disappeared. I thought to myself that something was strange with the hat. I wondered if the hat would be an advantage or disadvantage today, but I decided to take it to the mall to see what other surprises this hat could hold in stock for me. As Jewel and I walked down the stairs my mom told us to get in the car.

"What stores do you guys want to go to?" Lindsey asked.

"We could go to American Eagle, Sephora, Lululemon, Forever 21, Claire's, and Aeropostale," I exclaimed!

"I don't mind, as long as we get a pretzel!" Jewel shouted.

When we reached the mall, we went to a bunch of the shops but once it was time for lunch I decided to put on my hat because my hair was a little bit messy. We were going to eat at Shake Shack. I love the shakes from there. I saw yet another thought above my mom and it said, "I am super hungry. I might get a burger."

"Mom, let's get a few burgers, a few sides of fries, and a few shakes. Is that good?" I said, as I wanted to make her happy.

"That sounds amazingly appetizing," said Lindsey, "let's order that!"

Later that day we arrived home after shopping for four hours. We got a bunch of clothes so I can wear them to school! I was especially excited about what I was going to do tomorrow at school. The next day I woke up excited to choose an outfit. I chose lululemon shorts and a top from American Eagle. My mom drove me to school today and I had the hat in my backpack to investigate more and to show people at school what I got for my birthday.

"Hey Brittany!" I shouted to my friend!

"Hey Avery, I love the outfit you are wearing," said Brittany. "Is it new?"

"Yes, I just got it yesterday at the mall, and my mom got me this hat. She calls it a good luck charm."

"I like the hat. It looks vintage."

"Thanks," I said, as I knew that she was lying, "let's go!"

As I walked through the hall I looked around and people were complimenting me on my outfit. I felt ecstatic and I saw some thought bubbles above people's heads. Once I read them, I felt happy because they all said nice things about my outfit. But I came across one thought from this boy named Ben that really got me thinking. The thought said, "I don't know why anyone likes her, she's not all that." I felt super bad, and I decided to say hi to Ben because maybe that will turn his thoughts around.

"Hi Ben!" I said, "how's your day going?"

"Fine, I guess," Ben replied. "Why are you asking?"

"I just felt like being nice today," I said.

"Okay," Ben said, showing annoyance.

"Anyways, bye!" I said as I walked away.

A grimace appeared on his face. He was probably wondering why I was so nice to him. But then I went to my first period which was art. For art I had to take my hat off, tie my hair, and wear an apron. After that period was done, I went to math, then I had a break. I did not wear my hat for the next 3 hours since I wore my hair in a braid. Then I went to go to lunch, and I met up with Brittany, Alex, and Lexa. I put my hat on since it was sunny and yet another thought bubble popped up. This time it was on Lexa's head. It said, "I am so excited for Avery's secret surprise birthday party!" I looked up from the thought and I was so surprised but also super sad because it was supposed to be a surprise party that I didn't know about. I felt super confused about what I should do so I just decided to take a break of that hat for today. I decided to try to forget about my party and to talk to my friends.

"Hey guys, do you guys want to hang out on Friday?"

Brittany said, "Sure, maybe we can go to the smoothie shop near my house! Does that sound good?"

Everyone said yes and we continued to eat our lunch and we went on with the rest of our days. As I reached home, I finished my homework, but I glanced at my bag and saw my hat. I really started to question if I should even wear it anymore. I started to try and focus on my book that I had to read for school, but I came to the end of the book and the message was to focus on the present not the past or future. This quote really stuck with me for a while. I got a group text that Alex sent to the group chat with Britany, Lexa, Alex, and myself. The text said to meet at Alex's house so we could watch a movie together and finish homework. I got super suspicious once my mom knocked on my door and told me I should wear one of my new dresses to Alex's house. I honestly didn't want to go because the surprise would be ruined but I realized that spending time with my friends is more important than anything else.

"Honey, let's go!" My mom said as she started the car.

As I arrived at her house, I knocked on the door, but the house was pitch black so, I decided to open the door to see if anyone was there but, I jumped so high because there was an adrenaline rush sent through my body.

"SURPRISE!" They all said in excitement.

At this point I just enjoyed my friends, and we went outside and danced in the sun. It was 9:30 PM when my mom picked me up, and of course, I didn't finish my homework, and we didn't watch a movie, but I wouldn't switch it for anything. As I got home, I packed my bag, and I came across the quote again in the book. At that point I decided what I wanted to do with the hat. I tucked it away under my stuffed animals that lay on my shelf. I

wouldn't pick it up again. The real point of life is to live in the present and that is exactly what I wanted to do. Earlier that day my sister was complaining about her friend giving mixed signals, and I felt bad for her.

As Jewel stood at the top of the stairs, she said angrily, "I wish I knew what Abbie was thinking."
I looked back and smiled.

YIELD!

by Ivana Di Mise Diaz

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

"Aim and release," said my mother for the 100th time.

I did as my mother asked, and the arrow still missed its mark.

"Now, it is not your aim, but your breathing," stated my mother. "You're not breathing right."

She was always so irritating. I hated having my mother as my coach. I could never concentrate with all of her constant critiquing. Every time I missed the bullseye, it seemed like my mother would go on an interminable tirade. When she wasn't coaching me, she was very sweet and calm, but when out of range, she was quite irascible.

Later that day, I was still on the field, and she continued to get more and more irritated with me. I kept missing because, every time I was about to shoot, she would scream out a new critique.

"Keep your shoulders out, keep a good stance!" exclaimed my mother. "Keep practicing while I finish up dinner," she continued.

I sat on the grass to clear my head. I had been training for the National Archery Championship since I was four years old. My mother and father both won first place when they were around my age, so I had to make sure that I kept up the legacy of winning. I could not imagine how disappointed my parents would be if I had gotten third for the third year in a row, but I would never win if I continued practicing this poorly. All I wanted was to see the glistening trophy in my hands, with my parents finally giving me the look of approval I have always sought. Instead, all my mother did was critique each and every arrow that is shot, even if it hit the inside circle of the target.

"Diana, fix your posture," my mother shouted all the way from the kitchen. "And make sure you are aiming right to the middle!" she exclaimed again.

"Mom, I'm taking a break - I don't even have the bow in my hand right now."

I was completely frustrated at myself and at my pestering mother. I drank from my water bottle and then went back to shooting arrows. Every time I lifted an arrow from the caddy, I would hear the voice of my mother buzzing in my ear like a bee.

I notched, pulled, released, and yet it was too far to the right. The second time it was too far to the left. Then the third was too low. The next twelve shots were not much different. Too far up, too close to the corner, and then the last one didn't even make it into the target. I was about to give up, but I decided to give it one last try. I could see my mother peeking out the window from the corner of my eye. I made sure I had a good stance and a good aim. Sweating and shaking, I was about to release when I got distracted by another critique from my mother.

"Diana, fix your elbow!" she hollered.

And there went my arrow! like a shooting star across the sky. It went into the blazing sun and was out of sight for several seconds.

"Mom, you made me lose an arrow. What if it hits something?" I screamed at her. "Why would you holler at me right before I'm ready to release? Are you crazy?"

"I only yelled at you because your posture is horrible. You should be used to me critiquing you by now because you never get anything right," my mother argued.

I did not argue back because I knew it wouldn't do any good. I could never win an argument with my mother; she always came up with an answer that I could not compete with.

I looked around the bushes and the trees in my backyard. Each time I passed a bush without an arrow in it, I started to panic even more. All the different problems my stray arrow could cause raced into my mind. I looked beyond my backyard, searching nearby houses, but I could not find it.

I decided to check the neighborhood streets to see if I could find my lost arrow. As I began looking, I felt like a lightning bolt had struck me right in the chest. I saw a tow truck taking a car away, all broken and destroyed. Broken glass littered the street like a sheet of ice shattered into a million pieces. Could my arrow have caused the car crash? Was anybody hurt in the crash?

Further down the street was a neighborhood filled with barking dogs in their backyards, and this did not make me feel any better. What if I had hit one of the dogs, or even worse, a child playing outside? Either way it was life in my hands.

My head started to spin with many different dreadful scenarios. I felt like I was about to vomit. This moment did not even seem real. I wanted it to all be a dream. I wished I could be in my bed hiding from reality. These thoughts were too much for me. I even thought of turning myself into the police; I could not live with this amount of guilt anymore. I should have never pursued archery and should have never let my mother coach me. I wanted to go back in time and never touch a bow... or an arrow, again.

Without thinking, I started to run. I didn't even know which direction I was headed. All I knew was that I did not want to face any possible situation that my hands and my arrow could have caused. I ran and ran and ran some more, until I became too tired to even move my legs. I was disoriented, lost.

I looked up to see what street I was on, and there was a bright yellow yield sign... with my arrow embedded in it.

I tried to pull it out from the sign, but it wasn't budging. I endeavored to remove it again, again, and again. I realized that the only way I was going to get my arrow out of the sign was to break it.

As I was walking home, I started to wonder if I was just as broken as the arrow I now held in my hand. I used to love archery, and I enjoyed practicing with my mom. Ever since I put so much pressure on myself, however, it had made me feel like archery was all about being perfect. My love for archery was still there, but I realized it had turned into something stressful. I never wanted to have stress and pressure come in between me and something I cared about. I needed to yield to all the things that were taking my love of archery away from me.

I finally got home and threw my broken arrow in the trash, along with all my stress. I went to the backyard, picked up a new arrow, got my compound bow, and was ready to try again.

"You have an improper bow grip," my mother yelled from across the yard.

I heard her, but I was not listening. I was committed to letting go of everything and to just focusing on the sport I had fallen in love with years ago. I looked at the middle of the target and drew back.

Bullseye!

Mushroom

by Sam Foemmel

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Will slowly opened one eye, his pupil darting from his sleeping brother Alex in a nearby cot to the triangular opening of the tent. He carefully moved his pale arm out of the sleeping bag and onto the metal railing of his cot. Breathing softly, he slowly pulled himself out of the bag like a mole coming out of a burrow, keeping his eyes on Alex the whole time. He carefully put his left foot on the tent floor, silently feeling the sticks on the balls of his foot. He brought his right foot over his knees to the other side of his cot and placed it on the floor, the only noise being the soft rustling of leaves under the thin tent floor.

The only sound was his brother's loud snoring. He stood up, shifting his balance to his feet, and took a tentative step towards the tent flap. He was focused on not making a noise to awaken his brother, still eying him down. His brother was much older than him, eight years older. Will slipped his socks on and carefully opened the flap a sliver to not wake Alex with the moonlight. With a snort, Alex's eyes opened suddenly.

"What are you doing?" Alex slurred sleepily.

Will's heart felt like it was trying to make a break for it out of his chest.

"Nothing," Will said with feigned nonchalance. He hoped Alex would go back to sleep. Alex humphed with his eyes closed again.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Alex warned before dozing off again. Will stood still as his heartbeat returned to normal and waited for Alex to start snoring again. When his snoring continued, Will sighed with relief and finally stepped outside of the tent and took note of his surroundings.

The full moon's light was filtered by the surrounding trees' leaves but still bright. The brown hues of the bark, leaves, dirt, and sticks blended in the moonlight. On the large lake to his left, the full moon's reflection was uninterrupted by trees or foliage, so Will could see that the moon was barely above the horizon.

Looking out to the lake, he turned around completely and headed deeper into the forest where he could find his quarry. He began walking along the trail looking for his goal. His mind was occupied by memories of his route that got him here only an hour ago.

Will was walking about ten steps behind his big brother on the thin hiking trail. Will was angry that his parents made him do this hiking trail, that he would be gone for three days, and that he would miss his friend Cody's new drone he got as a belated Birthday gift.

"Watch your step up here," he remembered his brother saying as he turned and pointed at the ground, "on the root."

Will had an erratic burst of fury. Why did his big brother think he wouldn't notice?

"I can see that," Will snarked. Alex let out a barely audible sigh and turned back forward to continue the march. Suddenly his attention shifted to a patch of mushrooms.

There were probably twenty in total, four or five large ones, four or five inches tall, and many smaller mushrooms, about two inches tall. They seemed to glow faintly even in the waning light of the evening; they were white with blue fringes on the edges. Will could never explain why, but he wanted to have them. He stooped over to pick them up, and with a satisfying plucking sound, grabbed two big ones off the ground. He stopped walking and looked at them for several seconds and began to bring them to his face. He brought them up to his nose, and they hovered there for a second before he brought them back to his mouth and opened his mouth.

"Hey!" called Alex, now facing Will, "put them down." Will jerked his head towards Alex and had had a dazed expression on his face, as though he just woken up.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked concernedly.

"Nothing," Will replied.

"Put them down," Alex said.

"Why?" groaned Will.

"They could be dangerous," Alex explained as Will rolled his eyes. He placed them on the ground and moved on following Alex. But he couldn't keep them out of his mind. Will felt indignant. He wasn't going to let Alex decide what he did in his life. He decided he would go back to see them.

Will was walking by himself for what felt like an hour and recognized a gnarled knot in a tree that reminded Will of a crow. He finally stopped and he saw a glow. When he found the source, he saw his prize. In the night they glowed even brighter, and he saw a pattern he hadn't seen in them before. He picked them up and looked closely. The pattern was full of whorls and curved lines that reminded Will of fingerprints.

He popped one in his mouth and chewed it down. The taste was intriguing, like leather coated with butter and sugar, with the texture of chicken.

Will stood still and felt the mushrooms going down his throat. He waited for a minute, then vomited his dinner on the floor. He weakly lowered himself onto the floor and emptied his guts once more, with a horrific retching sound.

Will, now lying down on the forest floor, was too weak to walk. He felt as though he had just been beaten by a club in his midsection, and that he could never use his muscles again. Will felt miserable and had nothing to do but wait.

After about twenty minutes, the moon was now at its zenith. Will didn't know how he knew, but he knew if he didn't get any more food, he would die of starvation in this stupid forest. But he had no energy to catch anything or look for any plants he could scrounge. He would have to formulate a plan. He saw a pile of leaves an inch to the left of his right hand and got an idea. With his right hand, he began to dig into the soil, moving only his wrist and fingers to conserve energy. He prayed he would find what he was looking for, but a sick feeling grew as there was nothing but dirt on his first few scoops.

On his fourth scoop, he found his prize. An earthworm, still squirming, was cut in half from Will's thumb's fingernail. After five seconds, the worm stopped wiggling. He placed it on top of the pile of leaves and flipped the

pile upside down, so the worm was at the bottom of the leaves. He scooped up the pile with his right hand, flipped his hand, and let go. This meant his hand was hidden under leaves, and the worm was on top of the leaves. Will had no idea if his trap would work, but this was all he could do at the moment.

Will watched the worm intently for what seemed like hours. The moon was now well past its zenith. With an imperceptible burst of hope, Will saw a hedgehog scampering near his right hand. Will made sure not to move a single muscle until the hedgehog was above his hand. It took its time, flitting to a nearby tree. When it came to Will's hand, he waited for it to be in the middle of the palm. Adrenaline flowed through his veins like it never had before. He closed his palm around the now active creature's underbelly, getting poked by some spikes, but he didn't notice, he moved its tiny head towards his right molar. It struggled and flailed, but with Will's newly found strength, it was held in place. With a sickening crunch, the hedgehog stopped moving. He enjoyed his feast as his adrenaline began to plateau. He wondered why he didn't feel better but decided to wait before doing anything drastic. After ten minutes, he was reinvigorated. He stood up, curled his fingers inward and outward, flexed his somewhat bloody knuckles, and began walking back to the camp.

By the time he arrived, the sun was almost up on the horizon, and he knew Alex would wake up soon. When Will got into the cot, he didn't even go into the sleeping bag before falling asleep.

"Wake up Will, we have to get a move on," Alex said while jostling Will's shoulder back and forth.

Will stood up groggily and began to say "Oka-"

"What happened to your hands?!" Alex interrupted.

Will paused for a moment and said, "Nothing."

Unplugged

by Sofia Franco

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

In 2172, virtual reality became essential, blurring the lines between fiction and real life. However, the creation of DreamScape, an innovative VR technology enabling users to craft their own utopian realms, altered society's course. As people became captivated by these perfect paradises, the virtual worlds transformed into destructive addictions, posing a threat to humanity itself. This epidemic disrupted lives, leading to job loss, family abandonment, and fractured relationships. During this chaos, Ryker, a 17-year-old from New York, formerly immersed in DreamScape, emerged as the prominent face of the anti-DreamScape movement.

It all began on a cold November morning in 2171. Ryker's routine started with his alarm clock waking him at 5:30 am. As a dedicated member of the football team, he knew the importance of an early morning workout before school. Despite sacrificing some typical teenage experiences, Ryker embraced the values of hard work and discipline enforced by his military father. As he completed his routine, the sound of his siblings' footsteps echoed through the house. The delicious aroma of coffee and bacon indicated his mother had finished breakfast. Quickly getting ready, Ryker joined his family downstairs. "Good morning, Mom," Ryker said warmly. "It smells amazing! I'm starving."

His mom chuckled, expressing concern, "Good morning, sweetie. No wonder you're so hungry. Remember, finding a healthy balance between football, academics, and your social life is important too."

Ryker's dad, Jonathan, interjected with conviction, "Sylvie, let him be. If he wants to be a champion, if he truly wants to succeed in life, this is what he needs to do. A life without hard work, tenacity, and discipline is worthless."

Ryker interrupted the conversation, trying to lighten the mood, "Come on, guys! I just said I was hungry. Let's not turn it into an argument about my life."

After their quick breakfast, Ryker's mom turned to his younger siblings with a smile. She told them to get their backpacks ready because Ryker would be dropping them off at school that day. Excitement sparkled in their eyes as they rushed to gather their belongings. Ryker felt a sense of responsibility and pride as he prepared to take on the role of the awesome older brother.

That morning, the school buzzed with festive energy as homecoming week was in full swing. Ryker, as the quarterback of the team, brought attention to himself wherever he went, making him feel like a movie star on campus. As he walked into the crowded dining hall, his best friends Lux and Xander eagerly awaited him.

"How's the Eagles' superstar doing this morning?" Lux teased with a grin.

Ryker rolled his eyes playfully. "Oh please, stop it...not you too," he replied, brushing off the attention.

"Did you see how absolutely everyone is staring at you?" chimed in Xander.

Ryker sighed, his honesty and transparency showing when around his lifelong best friends, "Yeah, sometimes I wish I could just ignore the fact that everyone has so many expectations placed on me."

Just as they settled into their seats, a passing girl and her friends started chanting, "Go Eagles! We are counting on you, Ryker."

Ryker's expression shifted instantly, his charm and confidence taking over as he reassured everyone that they could rely on him. Later, in the classroom, Ryker's math teacher requested they have a private conversation. His grades were not as exceptional as usual, and he needed to maintain them in order to continue playing football. It was ironic how this so-called "perfect boy" with a "perfect life" was truly crumbling on the inside. Living a life filled with towering expectations and relentless demands was far from easy. The illusion of perfection would soon come back to haunt him, making him pay a far greater price than he ever anticipated.

Later that day, after a disheartening loss in the homecoming game, Ryker drove home feeling exhausted. He knew deep down that he needed to slow down, but he was unsure how to do so. Lost in his thoughts, his attention was suddenly captivated by a massive billboard that loomed ahead. Its bold letters read, "DreamScape: Unlock your perfect reality! Turn right on the next exit and experience the bliss of living your best life for a few hours a day. Be a DreamScaper and find peace in your own utopia."

The temptation was too strong to resist. It had been one of those days where the idea of escaping, even for just a minute, sounded utterly enticing. Without fully grasping the consequences, Ryker impulsively decided to give it a try, unaware that this seemingly harmless choice would mark the beginning of a dangerous spiral, leading him to face the most significant challenge of his life.

"Good evening. How can we help you?" greeted the beautiful DreamScape worker, her voice carrying a subtle and harmonious tone.

Ryker found himself captivated by the enchanting atmosphere that the entire place had. As he glanced around, he couldn't help but notice the celestial ambiance. There was ideal lighting, costly furniture, and a backdrop of enchanting music. The people emerging from the immersion pods seemed to possess an otherworldly glow, further adding to the intrigue. The pods were white and when turned on gave off this purple light. They were magnificent and impossible to stop looking at.

"I was driving by, and I saw your billboard. It sounded super cool. I'm really interested and would like to know more," Ryker expressed, his curiosity piqued.

The worker smiled warmly, her smile shining with a hint of mystery, "At DreamScape, we believe that the best way to understand our product is to experience it yourself. Words fail to capture the true essence of the journey. Trust me."

She began to check what appeared to be a guest list, her fingers sliding effortlessly across the screen, "You're in luck. We have an available pod right now. Would you like to give it a try? The first session is completely free."

Ryker glanced at his watch, knowing he had to pick up some math notes at Lux's place. Despite the time constraint, he reasoned that the notes could wait until tomorrow. After all, this was just a trial, a mere hour of his life that wouldn't hurt anyone. He took a deep breath and nodded, a mixture of excitement and apprehension building within him. "Yes," he said, "I'd like to give it a try. Why not?"

The DreamScape worker's smile widened. She was gleaming with anticipation, "Wonderful! Just follow me and I'll guide you to your pod."

Little did Ryker know that this innocent decision would set in motion a chain of events that would change him in ways he never imagined. The allure of a perfect reality fascinated him, but the price he would pay remained covered in uncertainty.

"Oh, I forgot to mention," the DreamScape worker intervened, her voice carrying a note of importance, "Before we proceed, there are some consent forms you'll need to read and sign." She handed Ryker a stack of documents, including one that authorized DreamScape to have access to his social media accounts. Though a bit of concern came over him, the promise of personal information confidentiality that they gave him eased his worries, and he decided to sign.

“Thank you,” the hostess said graciously, “Now, please change into this plain loungewear. You must be a medium. And remember, you won’t be able to bring any personal belongings into the pod.”

Ryker followed her instructions, slipping into the comfortable loungewear. As he entered the pod, he noticed its cocoon-like shape, seemingly empty at first glance. However, once inside, he realized that every inch of the pod was covered in screens.

The hostess closed the pod and activated it. Darkness surrounded Ryker, and then a gentle voice broke the silence, “Hi Ryker, I’m Molly, your personal virtual assistant. Welcome to DreamScape. Are you ready for the best experience of your life? Are you ready to create your dream world? Are you ready to unwind and live worry-free for at least an hour a day?”

Ryker’s excitement mingled with hesitation as if he were conversing with a real human. Molly’s voice sounded so lifelike. “Yes, I am ready,” he replied, his eagerness and caution combining.

“To create your perfect universe, I’ll need to ask you a few questions,” Molly continued, her voice guiding him deeper into the DreamScape experience.

As Ryker explored the captivating world of DreamScape, the lines between the enchanting environment and reality began to blur, seamlessly connecting to create a truly immersive experience. In this perfect paradise, the landscapes mirrored the dynamics of his relationships, and enhanced the bonds between his friends and family. The meadows, once adorned with colorful wildflowers, became the backdrop for playful gatherings, where Ryker’s brothers, their laughter filling the air, chased each other through the tall grass. The innocence and joy of childhood illuminated their faces. Xander and Lux, Ryker’s best friends, became constant companions. Their friendship thrived, unburdened by the weight of responsibilities or the constraints of time. Ryker’s parents guided him with their love and wisdom. They walked with him along the shores of the tranquil lakes, offering a listening ear when he needed it. The sunset painted the sky with traces of gold and pink, as if reflecting the affection he was receiving from his parents. The flowers bloomed brighter, and the mountains, once mere features, now stood as symbols of strength and resilience.

DreamScape had skillfully merged the beauty of the surroundings with the depth of Ryker’s personal connections. The addictive charm of DreamScape was not only found in its incredible landscapes, but also in the sense of belonging and fulfillment it bestowed upon those who sought comfort in its digital embrace. This distorted Ryker’s perception of time. What felt like a mere second in the virtual world was actually an hour of pure bliss. The experience left him yearning for more. Immediately after his trial session, he signed up for a package that offered three sessions per week. The days passed by slowly until his next session. However, as he returned home from the experience, he found himself in the monotony of daily life, struggling to meet the expectations of others.

As Ryker walked through the door of his home, the message on his answering machine caught his attention. It was Lux, questioning why he did not attend their study session. His heart sank, torn between the truth and the desire to keep his DreamScape sessions hidden. He believed that sharing his struggles would make him seem weak in the eyes of his friends and family. With each passing day, his addiction to DreamScape grew stronger, and the three sessions per week were no longer enough for him. He found himself venturing into DreamScape every day, losing touch with what was real and what was not.

In the midst of his downward spiral, Ryker’s grip on reality began to slip. He would unknowingly reference events that had occurred within DreamScape as though they were genuine experiences. His actions also became erratic. The consequences of his addiction became evident, as he neglected his study sessions and even started missing vital football practices, jeopardizing his chances of getting a college scholarship.

Six months passed, and the transformation within Ryker had not gone unnoticed by his friends and family. They were extremely worried as they observed the contrast between the person he once was and the person he had become. They knew they could no longer ignore it, and they needed to intervene and uncover the truth behind his alarming behavior.

One evening, Lux, Xander, and Ryker’s family gathered together, their expressions filled with concern. Lux spoke up, her voice trembling. “Something is not right with Ryker,” she said. “He’s been distant, missing study sessions, and neglecting his football practices. He is not the same person he was six months ago.”

Xander nodded in agreement, reflecting his worry. “I’ve noticed him acting strangely, like he is living a different reality. We need to find out what’s going on and help him,” he remarked.

Ryker’s mother, her voice filled with determination, added, “We can’t let this continue. Let’s confront him, express our concerns, and encourage him to open up about what’s happening.”

“We should plan an intervention, a way to show Ryker that we are here for him, no matter what. We’ll help him find his way back to reality and support him through his struggles,” concluded his father, his voice having a tone of compassion.

Days later their intervention took place. Lux, Xander, and Ryker’s family gathered in his living room. Lux spoke first, her voice gentle yet firm, “Ryker, we care about you, and we’ve noticed the changes in your behavior. We want to support you even though we don’t fully understand what you are going through.”

Everyone else spoke and shared their thoughts on the situation. With a renewed sense of hope and the support of his friends and family, Ryker fully confessed, and embarked on his journey to recovery, knowing he had a loving support system to lean on.

After Ryker’s recovery, he was determined to get his life back on track. With his newfound clarity and focus, he excelled in his studies and got back his place on the football team, ultimately securing his scholarship.

However, Ryker’s journey did not end there. Fueled by his own traumatic experience with DreamScape, he felt a deep sense of responsibility to protect others from falling into the same trap. Armed with his personal story and a growing collection of experiences from countless addicts, Ryker launched a movement to raise awareness about the dangers of DreamScape.

He took advantage of the power of social media, organizing online campaigns and sharing stories from addicts and their families. His anti-DreamScape movement gained traction as it resonated with people all across the nation, who realized the devastating impact of the addiction to these utopian realms. The News, bloggers, and influencers started covering Ryker’s story, amplifying his message to a wider audience.

As hundreds of thousands of addicts began to emerge and share their tales, the public sentiment towards DreamScape shifted. The nation became divided, with passionate debates erupting on television, radio, and social media. Some defended DreamScape as a harmless form of entertainment, while others joined Ryker’s cause, demanding change and accountability from the powerful tech giant, Tristan Dagger, the creator of DreamScape.

Ryker’s movement caught the attention of influential figures within the tech industry who had concerns about the addictive potential of virtual reality platforms. They recognized the validity of Ryker’s claims and the need for greater regulation. With their support, Ryker was able to form an alliance of activists, experts, and concerned individuals dedicated to combating DreamScape’s harmful effects.

Together, they embarked on a tireless crusade, gathering evidence, conducting research, and collaborating with addiction specialists, psychologists, and lawmakers. They presented their findings to government officials, highlighting the risks associated with unregulated virtual reality platforms and the urgent need for measures to protect users.

Ryker’s youth and personal story became a potent motivator for change, capturing the attention of the media and the public. He was invited to speak at conferences, universities, and even to testify before Congress, sharing his firsthand account of addiction and the devastating consequences it had on his life and the lives of others.

DreamScape, feeling the rising pressure, was forced to respond. Tristan Dagger initially dismissed Ryker’s claims and tried to discredit him. However, as the evidence against DreamScape continued to mount and public outrage grew, Tristan was forced to address the concerns seriously.

After intense investigation, DreamScape was ordered to implement a series of regulations and boundaries it had never considered before. Stricter age restrictions, limited session directions, mandatory counseling, and addiction prevention programs were introduced. The company also designated resources to support rehabilitation for those affected by addiction, acknowledging their responsibility for the damages caused.

Ryker’s firm determination and the collective efforts of his allies led to a defining moment in the tech industry. The battle against DreamScape triggered an even deeper conversation about the ethical implications of virtual reality and the need for responsible innovation.

Ryker looked back on his journey with a sense of pride and accomplishment. While he might not have single-handedly defeated the tech giant, his bravery, resilience, and dedication played the most significant role in bringing about this most needed change. The nation recognized him as a symbol of hope, a voice for the voiceless, and he became the face of a responsible and compassionate technology advocacy movement that would become his lifelong journey.

In the aftermath of Ryker’s triumph, something awakened inside, an appreciation for simplicity. He set aside the constant connection to technology and shifted his focus to the genuine connections in the world around him. Ryker disconnected from the digital realm, embracing a balance between the wonders of innovation and the serenity found in offline existence. In this act of unplugging, he discovered a profound clarity that led the way to a

more fulfilling life. As he navigated through reality, he carried the message to all who were willing to listen: in the pursuit of true connection, sometimes unplugging is the first step towards finding oneself.

Beyond the Starting Gate

by Pia Garcia

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

MILLA NAUMOVICH | Grade 8



An empty office sat waiting for the interview. The tall man entered first, followed by the short, fit one. The tall man was dressed in formal clothes, a red cotton vest, over a jet-black turtleneck. He took off his beige, wool coat, all covered in snow from being outside, and hung it next to the door. He set up a wire recorder and sat down. The short one grabbed the empty wooden stool and patiently waited for the following questions.

“Beyond the starting gate, what did you see?” asked the interviewer.

It took a moment of undisturbed silence, for as the jockey stared blankly into the interviewer's eyes, thousands of flashbacks flushed through his mind, coming back to the one specific moment in time.

“I saw,” he paused for a moment, reviewing what he was going to say, “millions of people...yelling and booing Old Flow’s name.”

Charles Walters quickly jotted down a few notes and continued. “What did you feel?”

“I felt the urge to give those people a race they’ve never even heard of before,” the jockey replied confidently. “Something not even the press could write about.”

Charles remained silent; he checked if his recorder was on, and then looked at his notebook. He read his notes, mumbling a few words that were hard to understand.

“So,” Walters began to say, “did you ever lose confidence in yourself? Especially after hearing the odds of you winning?”

“I mean, I can’t deny that I remained the same.” the jockey chuckled, “My odds were 100-1,” he mumbled a few words, unable to be heard, “but I wouldn’t have chosen any other horse to win that race other than Flow.”

“Not even U2?” asked the interviewer.

“He is an exceptional horse, I won’t lie, but he doesn’t love running like this one does.” The jockey looked at a photo of Flow behind the interviewer, “In fact, I’ve never met another horse who loves to run as much as him.” Charles opened his notebook and jotted a few things down, looked up, and then looked back down again.

“Do you think you could’ve won the race on U2?” said Walters, while looking down at his rushed notes.

“Well, I knew it wouldn’t have been possible, as soon as the accident happened,” replied the jockey quickly.

“What *did* happen?” asked the interviewer, as he leaned close on his stool. He rested his elbow on the side table and waited as the jockey continued to speak.

“The rain was greater than before, I told the coach not to send me in with U2, but he insisted as it was the last practice before we flew in. I tried to control his speed, but he just kept going. It was pretty amazing. But it was

too muddy, and he took a wrong step and we slipped." The jockey took a moment to reflect on what was said, and looked towards the ground, "At that point I knew, U2 was not going to be healthy enough to race, so I had to find a new horse."

"How did you know Flow was the one?" he asked, straightening himself.

"It was the spark and desperation to race that he had, of which I saw the day I met him," the jockey recalled, straightening himself. "The owner believed that I would be the only one who could create a strong connection with that horse. He was an underdog, and I was the best-" the jockey paused, clearing his voice, and placing his bruised hand over his mouth, "definitely the best horse I've ever ridden."

Walters couldn't help but smile, intrigued by the jockey's words. "How was it working with him in such a short amount of time? Did you ever lose hope?"

Lost in his thoughts, the jockey took a moment to reflect on the question. He remembered lunging Flow around the arena, with a long, navy-blue lead in hand. In the midst of his training, he noticed someone approaching him from the corner of his eye. He silently prayed that it wouldn't be a certain individual.

"Hey Pincay!" a rider yelled, interrupting the jockey's focus, "Do you really think you'll have a chance with a horse like that in such little time?" The rider laughed, his confidence evident. "You might be the best right now, but mark my words, in no time," he leaned closer and whispered, "my name will be all over the records." With a smug grin, he turned his attention to a tall, chestnut gelding grazing nearby.

The jockey felt a pang of doubt creeping into his mind. Could he really succeed with Flow, a horse that had been deemed a long shot by many? The words of the rider echoed in his ears, threatening to undermine his confidence. But deep down, the jockey knew he couldn't let negativity consume him.

Suddenly, the jockey heard his name being called repeatedly, snapping him back to reality. He looked up to find the interviewer staring at him, waiting for his response.

The jockey smiled, "Working with Flow in such a short amount of time was challenging, but I never lost hope. Not only did he improve but I also realized something incredibly important-" the jockey paused, looking for the right words. "I realized that I never had a true bond with U2. I got on him, rode him, got off, and left! These are real animals, with feelings, being able to connect with a horse is... one of the best things that can ever happen."

The interviewer nodded, clearly intrigued. "How did you feel the day of the first triple crown race?" he asked.

The jockey thought for a moment, remembering the adrenaline rush and excitement that filled the air that day. "I was petrified. I knew it was a big moment in my career, and I didn't know how Flow would react to racing with so many horses. But I also knew that Flow was capable of greatness, and I was determined to give him the best ride possible."

Walters pressed further. "What was it like witnessing a very disturbing accident during that race?" he asked, his voice somber.

The jockey's expression clouded with memories. "It was one of the most shocking experiences of my life," he replied, his voice trembling. "The horse in front of me suddenly lost its footing and stumbled, resulting in a terrible fall. I could see the fear and pain in his eyes, and my heart went out to him. The jockey got crushed under him, and I can still hear the screams. It was a reminder that even though we may strive for success, there is always an element of danger involved."

Walters nodded, allowing the jockey to collect his thoughts. "And how did you cope with that?" he asked.

The jockey took a deep breath. "It was tough," he admitted. "But, uh, I had to put it behind me and focus on the task at hand. I knew that if I let myself be consumed by my emotions, I wouldn't be able to give my best performance. So, I focused on Flow, gave him my confidence, and hoped that we would win the second race as well."

"Speaking about the second race, there were some rumors that you saw a jockey whom you know of, drug their horse. I understand you've had some trouble with that jockey before, so," the interviewer looked at his messy, smudged notes to re-read the question he was about to ask. "How did you feel, seeing him do that?"

The jockey's expression darkened as he remembered the incident. "It was disappointing, to say the least," he said. "I wouldn't say I was surprised, as I know how Moore is." The jockey stayed silent, thinking.

He continued, explaining his decision, "I approached his coach privately, expressing my concerns and offering to provide any evidence I had. I wanted to ensure that he wasn't the one with the idea, making Moore do that."

Charles took notes, processing the jockey's response. "What was the outcome?" he asked, curious to know the result of their confrontation.

The jockey hesitated for a moment, his voice filled with regret, "The trainer denied any involvement," he replied, "Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do beyond that", he said, the weight of disappointment evident in his tone.

An awkward silence hung in the air, filling the room. Charles, feeling the monotony of the situation, absentmindedly doodled small cartoon figures in his notebook, depicting boredom. Meanwhile, the jockey sat on the wooden stool, lost in his thoughts, replaying the incident over and over again.

Breaking the silence, the interviewer shifted gears, asking about the jockey's recent victories. "So, tell me, you won the past two races on Flow. What prepared you to win the last and longest race?"

"Winning a race, especially a long and grueling one, requires more than just skill and talent. It demands preparation and a strategic approach. In the case of my victories on Flow, his success can be attributed to the bonding preparation he went through prior to the race with me," replied the jockey.

The interviewer nodded and looked down at his notes, he began to say, "Many people believe that this was the match race between Flow and Whiplash. What do you think about this?"

"Why would it be a match race?" the jockey argued. "Whiplash has come second to these races both times, and what, they just think he's as good as Flow?" he scoffed. "Flow is who won; Flow is who proved everyone wrong."

The interviewer and the jockey continued to converse. The jockey began explaining to him about how the race happened, -

The bell echoed through the air, marking the commencement of the third race. The audience cheered and booed. The thundering gallop of hooves resonated like a symphony, the horses launching forward with a power that defied gravity. Pincay found himself drawn to the railing, captivated by the raw energy of the race unfolding before him. Pincay and Moore surged ahead; their horses propelled faster than anticipated.

Pincay, determined to secure the lead, shouted over the clamor, "GET OFF ME, MOORE!" His voice carried a blend of urgency and competition as he surged into the coveted first position. The track, churned up by the rapid movement, sent clouds of sand swirling into the air. Goggles covered in a fine layer of grit obscured the jockeys' vision. Each rider skillfully removed the obstructing layer, their movements swift and practiced, revealing the intensity on their faces.

The final turn approached rapidly, each horse's head—Whiplash's, followed by the Flow's, and then another, and another. Finally, Pincay began to release the reins, trusting Flow to sprint, and indeed, he did.

"Alright, Flow, let's show 'em!" Pincay exclaimed. They accelerated, gaining speed with each stride. Two lengths, three lengths, four, five! With remarkable velocity, they crossed the finish line. At that precise moment, a renowned photographer captured the iconic image of Pincay, his arm raised in applause for Flow's triumphant run.

Pincay proudly displayed the photo to Charles—a dedication to Flow and Pincay's skill.

"This is amazing," Charles remarked.

Pincay chuckled, "I mean, not only did you win, but you were also the first woman to do it."

"Yep, Moore didn't get the best of me," Pincay replied, and they both shared a laugh.

"Thank you so much, I loved your answers," Charles expressed his gratitude.

"Thank you for coming," Pincay responded. They shook hands, and Mr. Walter retrieved his wool coat, donning it as he made his way toward the door.

"Have a good one, Jemma," he said while opening the door.

"Have a good one, Charles," she replied as he departed.

Safe at Last

by Ava Goldstein

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Bill Hawkins stared blankly at his telephone screen, opened to his messages. His heart raced. He picked up the phone and slowly began to type.

It's over he typed. Then, with some thought, added an exclamation mark and pressed send. He turned his head slightly to look at the window, and then back at his phone. Three dots danced momentarily on the left side of the screen, then disappeared. He turned off the phone and stared at the black screen. His reflection looked back at him, tired and bleak. Jet black hair, brown eyes, and a plain, forgettable face. Nothing set him apart from the crowd. Except one little thing. He was the best detective in all of Crested Butte, Colorado. Granted, it was a tiny village with a mere population 1600 people, but still, he considered it an accomplishment.

After only a few minutes of silence in his office, Bill begrudgingly welcomed a sharp knock on the door. "Come in," he said.

The door creaked open and three anxious looking people entered the room. He recognized one of them as the manager of a nearby ski resort but had no idea who the other two were.

The manager spoke: "Hello Detective Hawkins, this is Mr. and Mrs. Miller." The weary looking couple barely mustered a smile. The manager continued. "Their daughter is Hannah Miller. I'm quite sure you have heard of her." The middle-aged couple appear sad and concerned, anxiously glancing around his office. Of course, there wasn't much to look at, just a couple of awards and a photo of his family. The woman's eyes rested momentarily on his sister's face, then down at the ground.

"Sure, I have!" Hawkins exclaimed. She is the best snowboarder in all of Colorado. Mrs. Miller looked as though she was about to cry.

"Well," continued the manager, "she is gone. She was supposed to compete today in Nationals, but she hasn't been seen since last night."

"Oh my," the detective replied. Mr. Miller nodded as though in a trance. "Well, if you don't mind," said the detective, "I would like to have a word with Mr. and Mrs. Miller." The manager nodded and left the room.

"Please," said Bill Hawkins, "sit down. When did you last see Hannah?"

Mr. Miller started: "Well, we were supposed to go out to dinner with Hannah last night, to a pizzeria. You know, we always go there before her competitions. But she seemed especially nervous yesterday"

"She said she wanted to go for a walk alone and she left..." Mrs. Miller let out a sob.

"Anyway," her husband continued, "she said she would be back soon, and, you know, she usually goes to sleep early before the competitions. She really cares, you know. So, we trusted her to come back at a timely hour. But her room was empty and her bed untouched this morning..." Mr. Miller put his head in his hands.

"Where does Hannah usually go for her walks?" the detective inquired. Just for a moment, he had a peculiar look on his face, as if he already knew what their answer was going to be.

"She usually wanders around the village, down Elk Avenue, not far, you know. I mean anyways, this is a small town, there aren't many places she could go." The detective nodded along.

"Did she have her phone on her when she left?" asked the detective.

"No, she usually leaves it at home when she goes for walks," the woman explained.

"Okay," said the detective. "Could she have gone to stay with friends?"

"She would never," said Mr. Miller. "She wouldn't do that before competition."

"Does Hannah have any enemies?" asked the detective.

"Not our Hannah!" Mrs. Miller scoffed. "Everyone loves her!"

"I understand," the detective nodded. "Can you show me her picture?" Mrs. Miller pushed her phone to Detective Hawkins. From the screen, a lovely girl with hazel eyes and brown locks smiled.

"I will look into this right away, and please don't worry. We will find your daughter."

The Millers thanked him and left the office.

As soon as they were gone, Bill leaned back in his chair. *Poor girl*, he thought. He really did feel bad. He lifted himself out of the chair and walked over to the mini fridge in the corner of his office. He grabbed a bottle of Fanta and a sandwich and left the room.

The detective got into his car and inserted the keys into the ignition. It was so old; he was surprised it had even started. He had meant to take it to a mechanic, as it had stalled on the road several times. He drove out of the parking lot and onto the street. The road ahead of him was slippery, covered in ice and snow. As he drove, he thought about his newest case. It didn't really seem much like a coincidence, one of the best snowboarders in the country, missing the day before her competition. Either way, the criminal had done a good job covering his tracks.

Right as he pulled into the driveway of his apartment building, a text message appeared on his screen. *How are you?* He typed a couple of letters, then deleted them and set his phone away. With another thought, he picked it up again and wrote: *Fine. This is harder than I thought.*

The detective got out of the car, zipped up his jacket and shoved his phone into the front pocket. He walked through the front door and felt relieved by the warmth of the building. Again, his phone buzzed. Reluctantly, he picked it up and flipped it over in his hand, staring at the new message. He didn't bother responding. He had no control over what happened now.

He walked up the stairs and pulled out his keys from his jean pocket. He unlocked the door and sat down at his desk. The detective opened his computer. He preferred to do his research for cases at home. Fewer distractions. *Hannah Miller*, he typed into the search bar. Within milliseconds, a photo of the famed Hannah Miller appeared on the screen. Standing on the first-place podium, covered in flowers and gold medals. Next to her, two girls stood in the second and third place spots. Third place: a girl he knew as Cally Gould. Second place: Isabell Hawkins. *Cally Gould*, he typed. "Is it plausible that Hannah's opponents would do such a thing?"

The next morning, Bill Hawkins pulled his car into the parking lot of his office building. He was meeting Hannah's family again. He was nervous to tell them what he had found, mostly because it wasn't much. He didn't know how to deliver the news, but he knew it would be a difficult task. It proved just as challenging as he had expected.

"What do you mean?" shouted Mr. Miller, slamming his fists on the wooden desk. "It's been over 24 hours and you've found nothing? What kind of detective are you?"

Bill couldn't even get a word in before Mrs. Miller yelled, "Our daughter has been missing for a day and the 'best detective in Colorado' has found nothing." Hawkins felt his pride slightly bruised by the use of finger quotes and resorted to spinning in his chair to face the framed certificate on the wall. Finally, he turned around to face the couple.

"I apologize deeply. I am working as hard as I can. But there are no leads." Just then, his phone let out a buzz, vibrated slightly, and managed to fall off of the desk and onto the floor. He bent to pick it up, and briefly looked at his newest notification. *We need one more day*, the message read. Then, he put his phone in his pocket.

"I have just received a notification from my team that there is a possible suspect," he lied. "And as they say, find the criminal and you will find the victim."

"Well, that's good to hear," said Mr. Miller with a gleam of hope. "Please call us as soon as you find anything." He and his wife left the office. Hawkins felt bad about lying but had no other choice.

It was nearing midnight when Bill Hawkins received a call from the ski resort manager.

Using words only appropriate for mature audiences, he had said something along the lines of "You need to find the girl, right now." At the same time, another message buzzed his phone. *Time to finish*. Standing up from his desk, he walked over to the mirror in the bathroom. Quietly, he rehearsed something he had been practicing for a while.

"...and that's why I needed the money," he whispered. Then he grabbed his keys and ran out the door.

The snow was falling fast when the detective made his way out of the building and into his car. He typed something into the GPS and began to drive. It wasn't a far drive, but the icy roads made it 30 minutes until Bill arrived at his destination. He hopped out of the car and ran into a dilapidated building across the street. He snuck around the back and found his way to a door he had only ever seen at night. Carefully, he unlocked it.

"Hello?" he said in a whisper, yet it seemed that the sound of his voice reverberated through the room. There was no reply, but he heard a muffled movement. He stepped down the stairs, not sure when he would reach the floor. When he did, he felt his way to the corner of the pitch-black room and flipped on the lights. A young girl sat in the corner of the room. She was crying and had a gag in her mouth. She was medium height and had an athletic build. She was Hannah Miller. Hannah began to cry even harder when she saw the detective, but he walked over, took the gag from her mouth, and grabbed her wrist.

"Promise me that you will not scream. I'm taking you home," he said. She wept even harder. She did not believe him.

"Why did you bring me here?" she managed.

"You can't always go out winning everything, now, can you?" the detective said with a sly smile.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"While you went 'missing,' my niece won the national snowboarding competition, and won \$50,000" he said. Hannah Miller's tears and shock slowly started morphing into anger.

"Let me go!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "Help!" The man's grip around her wrist tightened as she tried to pull away.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said. "But my reputation *cannot* be tarnished." He began to drag her into the car.

When they were both seated in the car and driving, the detective began to speak. "My niece needed to win this competition; do you understand me? I needed to pay her back, as a favor. Her mother saved my life, and now she is very sick. I need to save her..." He paused right as the girl began to speak.

"Do you think I care?" the girl exclaimed. "You kidnapped me! You are evil. Don't try to trick me into feeling bad for you through your sob story, because I don't want to hear it. It's probably all a big lie anyway. And the nationals were two days ago anyways. What took you so long?"

"I didn't want to make it too obvious. I thought this out, you know."

"Sure, you did," said Hannah.

The detective said nothing. The girl said nothing. They were in the middle of nowhere. Suddenly, the engine sputtered and the car stopped. *Blasted engine.* Before Bill could finish his thought, Hannah swung the car door open and sprinted. She ran and ran, until only the gleam of her red jacket was visible in the distance. She ran until just her shadow was visible in the detective's mind. She ran until police sirens could be heard in the distance, and she ran and ran until the detective was pushed into the backseat of the police car and taken away. The detective stared blankly through the window as he imagined Hannah running to the warm yellow glow of her house, safe at last.

Immortal Earth

by Finn Grainger

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

A room of white, large windows showed the green expanse of my world. Sitting around a large aluminum table were my family and my great-grandfather, the Immortal Man.

"Well," the Immortal Man said, "I think it's time to tell you of my past, of my world."

"This world?" my sister asked.

"No, but it was a beautiful world, a world that is now dead."

"How did it die?" I asked.

"I will tell you, just wait."

"Go on," said my mother.

"It was 2124," he started, "our earth, my earth was dying. Humanity brought too much harm to the planet. The air became toxic, and it became unlivable for everything, including us. We were starving, we could not stay. But in December of 2124 we found our only hope."

"What is it, what is it!" My younger brother exclaimed.



CAMILLA DRESNER | Grade 8
1st Place – Beaux Arts Student Artist Showcase

"Our last hope was here! This planet, Xb-3, was humanity's last chance. In January they started evacuating the people rich enough to buy a ticket on The Ambition."

"What's Ambition?" asked my brother.

"It was the first of three ships to leave earth; we were being left behind. My daughter, my wife, and I were all left on earth to die with billions of other people too poor to escape."

"That is horrible," I said. "Why couldn't they take you?"

"There wasn't enough space, there were sixteen billion people on earth but only space for four billion people on the ships. The rich had the priority, and then the middle class. By then no space was left. I remember lucidly that I looked at the skyline of the dilapidated New York City and the Statue of Liberty. I wondered what happened to our rights, our right to live! Billions of people were being murdered. My family and I watched as the Resolute, the second ship, left earth for the last time. Our last chance at life was the Independence, the third and final ship. It departed in two weeks. I was determined to find a way to get on. I brought all of the Digital Money I had and went to the nearest ticket seller. There were four tickets left, but I only had enough money for my wife and daughter."

"I rushed home and told my wife the news, I could not muster up the courage to tell my daughter, at least not yet. Her expression changed to one of a deep sadness kept within herself, she was holding back her tears."

"We will find a way," she said, trying not to break in front of our daughter."

"A week went by, and I decided that I would try to stowaway on the Independence, it was my last chance, I would die anyway. The day came, humanity's last hope was leaving. My family and I went to the Independence launch area; it was larger than anything I had ever seen. I waved goodbye to my wife and daughter as they walked onto the ship."

"I faintly heard my daughter say, 'Mommy, why isn't Daddy coming?' then, they were out of earshot."

"I found that the best bet for me getting on that ship would be through the cargo port. I came upon a stack of huge boxes and one of them was open. I slyly wriggled myself into the open box and waited. I fell asleep and was woken up by a jolt, I was being moved. *This could actually work*, I thought to myself. Little did I know, I would be caught."

"Wait, if you got caught, how are you here?" my brother asked.

"Don't worry I will tell you. Let's get back to the story," said the Immortal Man.

"Before I knew it, it began to get darker, this was my sign that I was inside the Independence. I waited, staring at the inside of the dark box, when the ship started to rumble loudly, like a fierce lion growling. At this moment I realized that earth and all the twelve billion people on it were left to die. And on paper that included me. I began to whimper, images of kids crying and people starving and suffocating filled my brain. I thought of the twelve billion people; I thought of the world. It gave us life and in return we killed all of its plants, animals, and its perfect balance. We, humans, killed and destroyed our own birthplace, our home."

"I can't even tell you how long I was in that box, I lost count of the days. One day I suddenly heard loud clanking footsteps on the metal floor, then I saw a ray of light shine over the opening of the box, I believe from a flashlight. Then the box began to open, *I'm done for*, I thought. Then a man who seemed to be a security personnel grabbed my arm and flung me out of the box."

"He yelled 'BOYS WE GOT A STOWAWAY' on his Holotalkie."

"What is a Holotalkie?" I asked.

The Immortal Man replied, "It's a holographic walkie talkie."

"CLANK, CLANK, CLANK I heard as more guards came to arrest me. *Running is my only chance*, I thought. I took all of the energy I had, and I sprinted down a dim metal corridor. While in my dazed state I felt a sharp pain in my right arm, it felt like I had been stabbed with a red-hot wire. I collapsed onto the ground and began screaming in agony. Then one of the guards grabbed me by the shirt and dragged me across the floor. It was torture, he purposely threw me into every corner and wall he could. I tried to stand up again, but right as I did, I was tased for the second time. Then, it went black."

"I am not sure how long after, I woke up in a tiny cell with only a small bed and a toilet. I was brutally beaten by the guards. At one point, my whole body was covered in bruises and dried up blood. I was losing hope, I wasn't sure if I would make it to even see my family. *I can't lose hope*, I thought to myself, *I can find it somewhere in my soul, I have to!* I was in the cell for at least a week or so when I tried to escape. There was a specific shower room that had a vent on the ceiling. When the guards brought me to the room to shower, I began my plan. They left and I climbed on the divider and the shower head. I got up to the vent and tried to break it open. It made a very loud screeching noise. I could hear them running towards me. The pain hit me again then it went dark."

"I began to see a faint light. *Am I dead?* I thought to myself. Then I blinked and the bright fluorescent light startled me. I heard faint murmuring, I felt like I was outside of my body, I didn't know what was happening. Then I heard a quiet beeping from some type of monitor. My vision became clear, and I saw doctors surrounding me. I tried to move my arm, but something was stopping me. I looked to my left and saw a handcuff chained to the bed, I turned to my right and saw the same."

"'Good morning', said one of the doctors."

"'Where am I?' I asked in an anxious tone."

"'You are in the Med Bay, you have been in a coma for a month; you had a cardiac arrest,' said another doctor. 'We have injected you with an experimental medicine that cures all diseases.'"

"'What will this medicine do to me, I thought.'"

"'Are there any side effects?'"

"'Not that we know of, but you are only the second person to take the medicine,' Said a doctor standing in the corner of the room."

"'WHY DID YOU GIVE ME AN UNTESTED MEDICINE?!' I yelled."

"'One of the same doctors said, 'We tried everything, it was our last hope to save you.'"

"'Thank you, I owe you my life,' I said to the doctors."

"I was on bedrest for another week. Every day I pleaded with the guards to let me go once I was healthy. Over a few days they were beginning to like me. But they persisted and still said no. I knew I had to keep trying if I wanted to see my family again."

"'What did you do?' asked my little brother."

"I kept asking, every day. It was my mission to get out. My bedrest was over, and the guards brought me back to the cell. Then one of them said something I was not expecting."

"'Once we land on Xb-3 in two months we will let you free. You will see your family again,' said the guard."

"I didn't know how to feel. I was jumping up and down and tearing up at the same time. I felt as if a thousand-pound weight was lifted off my back."

"'Thank you so much,' I said while tears ran down my face."

"Those two months felt longer than my whole life up to that point. The hours moved at a snail's pace. I was counting down the minutes until I could see my wife and daughter again. One month, one week, one hour, the time was almost here, we were almost here. Then I began to think about how I would find my family after I was let off the ship. *There are so many people on this ship, how will I find them?* I thought. Then, mid thought, a tremor reverberated through the ship. We were landing! Excitement and Anticipation filled my body. After all, I hadn't seen my family for over five months. The lion came back alive and began roaring. Another tremor ran through the ship. We had landed on Xb-3, our new home."

"A few minutes later a guard walked into my cell. Click, click, and I was freed from my restraints."

"'You are free to go,' said the guard."

"'Thank you,' I said. I followed the exit signs until I found myself at a large metal gangway that was slowly opening. But oddly there was nobody there except for the door operator. *Where is everybody?* I asked myself."

"'Hey, where is everyone?' I asked the door operator."

"'I dunno,' he said. 'I think the first group is let out of their rooms in fifteen minutes.'"

"'Thank you,' I said."

"A loud noise rang through the hallway as the gangway opened fully. I looked out and saw a beautiful expanse of green. It was a new home, our new home, a fresh start. Butterfly-like creatures flew around the garden-like expanse. Amazing buildings interacting and molding with the landscape. *Maybe this time we can get it right, maybe we can work with nature instead of against it!* I thought to myself. Taking large strides, I began to walk down the metal ramp. Before my last step onto our new planet, I paused."

"'Humanity's new life begins now!' I yelled."

"I took my first step onto Xb-3 and started running around like a child. The cool air rushed across my face and body as I sprinted playfully around enormous trees and flowering bushes. It was truly spectacular; I had never seen this much green and nature in my life. I know it's normal for you kids, but it was so new to me. From this moment on, I knew I had to make my mission to protect this planet as much as I could. Then I heard what sounded like a large group of people. Hundreds, maybe thousands of eager footsteps were rushing around the metal halls of the ship to reach the exit."

"Then hordes of people started to file out of the ship. Almost everyone was in awe of how incredible the scenery looked. Their jaws looked like they were touching the ground. I heard murmuring in the crowd."

"Isn't it amazing!" exclaimed a woman in the crowd."

"This is our beautiful new home, now we must keep it this way," I said."

"It seemed like the whole crowd united as one. One being, nodding its head in agreement to my words. Then I remembered my one and only love. My family, I waited as more people left the ship. After about an hour I became hysterical. As hard as I tried, I could not find my family. *Did they disappear*, I thought to myself, *Where are they?* I found a picture of my wife in my right pocket. I decided that I would show this picture to people and ask if they knew anything."

"Have you seen this woman?" I asked."

"No sorry, I hope you find her!" Yelled a mother as she walked away with her family."

"I asked another person."

"Have you seen her? Please I am begging you, she's my wife," I pleaded on the verge of tears."

"I haven't, I'm sorry," Answered a man in a gray coat."

"I sat down and rested my back on the trunk of a very large tree. I put my hands on my forehead and sobbed like a hopeless baby without his mother. Even in this new world sorrow existed; it existed horribly, as horribly as it did on earth."

"Daddy?" said a child in the distance."

"I had a minute to think, and I realized it was my daughter's voice. I looked up and saw her and my wife walking towards me."

"Daddy!" she said while running straight for me."

"She ran right into my arms, and I held her tight, like I would never let go."

"You've grown a lot!" I said while still embracing her."

"I stood up and hugged my wife. It was a loving embrace, one only had after a long time apart."

"We made it! We really made it!" I exclaimed "What do we do now?"

"We check into the temporary housing and wait until our dwelling in the countryside is finished," replied my wife."

"We walked to our unit and settled into our new home. A few months later we were notified that our dwelling was finished; the dwelling we are in right now. Weeks turned into months and months turned into years. I had to come to grips with the fact that I would outlive my wife and eventually my daughter. Thirty years later my daughter, your grandmother grew up and my wife ended up in the hospital. A new world also brings new challenges. New diseases that our bodies weren't used to back then killed many, including my wife. For months I was devastated, so devastated your grandmother had to take care of me."

"I overcame my grief and slowly watched my daughter grow old. Fifteen years ago, your grandmother passed away peacefully in her sleep. Around this time, I got a message, it read-

Khalid Johnson,

You have been invited to speak at the 2235 UN convention. You are the last person alive who came from earth in 2125. We would like you to speak about your experience on earth and how to prevent the same thing from happening here. You are the last bit of earth we have.

Sincerely,

The UN Council"

"I was taken aback by the offer. I participated in the convention and became a regular speaker at UN events, especially ones focused on conservation. This became my job and I helped to advise in creating much of the clean energy infrastructure today. And even the city we live in is named in my honor, Khalid Metro-Forest. The city of innovation and unity with nature."

"Your name is Khalid?" asked my sister, "I thought you were the Immortal Man."

"That's my nickname; my real name is Khalid Johnson," he replied.

"I, we, needed to prevent the atrocities that happened on earth from happening ever again. My speeches became famous, and in your childhood, I know your mother has shown them to you. But I have never told my full story until now; it has just brought me too much grief. You children are the future of our family and humanity. Make it count, preserve our home just like I have. I, Khalid Johnson, am the Immortal Earth."

The Convict

by Giacomo Harris

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

"Convict 40!" screamed a guard with a baton in his hand, who looked as if he hadn't slept in a week. The guard was wearing a black blazer and button-down apparel that one might wear when going to church. Yet, he was not in a church, quite the opposite, he was surrounded by other men wearing similar attire. A scrawny man with patches of brown stubble and bruises all over his body stumbled into the room. He had a look of horror on his face when he walked in.

"Yes, sir," the scrawny man said, with desperation in his voice.

The guard's eyes narrowed as he circled the convict, studying him with a sinister grin. "You're the lucky one, Convict 40. Or maybe *not* so lucky. You've got a one-way ticket to Veinara."

The convict's eyes widened at the mention of the dangerous planet. Fear and uncertainty washed over him, and he stammered, "V-Veinara? But... I've heard no one sent there has ever returned."

The guard chuckled darkly, relishing in the convict's fear. "That's right. You're on a suicide mission. But hey, if by some miracle you survive, you earn your freedom. Consider it a chance at redemption, though most don't live long enough to enjoy it."

The scrawny man, now known as Convict 40, clenched his fists. His mind raced with thoughts of the crimes that had led him here, the desperate choices that had brought him to this point. He was a man with a past shrouded in fear. A past he could never escape.

As the guard barked orders, Convict 40 was escorted to a small, grimy spacecraft waiting on the edge of the ship. The vessel seemed barely held together by bolts and rust. Inside, the air was thick with tension, and Convict 40 could feel the weight of his impending fate.

The spacecraft rumbled to life, and Convict 40 couldn't help but glance back at the receding spaceship. Memories flashed before his eyes, memories of a life left behind, of a world that had rejected him.

As the ship hurtled through the vast emptiness of space, Convict 40 felt the cold grip of isolation. Convict 40's thoughts were a tumultuous storm. He wondered if the unknown dangers awaiting him on Veinara were worse than the demons he carried within. The journey to the dangerous planet loomed ahead, and Convict 40 knew upon arrival his every step on Veinara would be a dance with death. Yet, still whilst alone in a space pod, Convict 40 found himself remembering his happy days on earth, and even his few happy days on the ship. He was once happy with his family; he had a wife and a child. But sadly, Earth started to become inhabitable for humans due to pollution, but the select rich people of Earth were sent aboard a ship to find a new planet. Convict 40 had snuck onto this ship, in doing so he left his wife and child to die on Earth. In his rickety pod, guilt started to rise over him, as it always did when he thought of this.

"Damn!" he yelled to himself in frustration, but he still had a while to go until he made it onto Veinara, so he decided to think about something else: a friend he made on the ship. Convict 12 had been his only companion during his three years living aboard. But six months ago, Convict 12 was sent to Veinara and never returned.

Convict 40 had even forgotten his own name. It was a way of his brain blocking out the trauma of his horrible decisions on Earth. Instead, he adopted the name "Mobo" due to Convict 12 calling him this. Having a new name gave him a sense of a new beginning, but when the guards found out he had given himself a name, he was beaten to a pulp. A prisoner such as him was not allowed the most basic human freedoms like a name.

There was a loud thud as Convict 40 finally reached the surface of Veinara. The rusty metal door opened, and he stepped out. Upon looking around, he was stricken with pure terror. It was a red dusty planet, with oceans of what looked like blood.

"Convict 40," echoed the disembodied voice from the metallic intercom within the pod. The words sent shivers down his spine, and he strained his ears to catch every syllable. "This is your guide through the perils of Veinara. Listen carefully, for your survival depends on it. Your spacecraft is not merely a vessel for the surface; it doubles as a submersible, designed to plunge into the depths of the ominous oceans that surround you. Beneath the crimson waves lies the key to your redemption. You must explore the uncharted abyss and unveil the mysteries that Veinara conceals." Convict 40 screamed his fear and frustration, but as there was nothing else for him to do but proceed, he went into the bloody oceans to explore.

The moment Convict 40 submerged into the blood-red waters of Veinara, he felt a chill that transcended the temperature of the alien ocean. The spacecraft transformed seamlessly, adapting to the underwater environment. Dim, eerie lights illuminated the abyss, revealing bizarre, otherworldly creatures that seemed to materialize from nightmares. Convict 40's heart pounded in his chest as he maneuvered through the dark, uncertain depths. The voice from the metallic intercom continued its cold guidance, directing him toward a submerged cavern that held the key to his redemption.

As he delved deeper, the pressure outside the spacecraft intensified, and Convict 40 could feel the weight of the ocean bearing down on him. His breath quickened, not just from the limited oxygen, but from the overwhelming fear that surrounded him. The walls of the cavern were adorned with strange, luminescent markings, casting an ethereal glow in the otherwise desolate environment. It was a cryptic language of Veinara, a language that held the secrets of the planet's mysterious past.

Guided by some sort of intuition, Convict 40 maneuvered through the maze-like cavern, each twist and turn revealing more of the haunting symbols that seemed to tell a story of ancient civilizations and cosmic entities. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched; that unseen eyes bore witness to his every move. The remnants of guilt over his past deeds clung to him like the persistent darkness that surrounded him.

Then, in a split second, he stopped in his tracks. As he shined the light from his space pod, he saw a rickety pod, looking exactly like his. Looking closer he saw something in the pod, it was a human, who had been ripped limb from limb. Looking at the slowly rotting corpse of a face Convict 42 could instantly tell that it was none other than his old friend Convict 12. Terrified, Convict 42 quickly tried to direct his pod back up to the surface of the water, but the pod was suddenly stuck. He directed the lights on the pod up from the bottom only to find in front of him was a sea creature with an eye twice as big as the pod he was in.

"Get away from me!" he screamed at the top of his lungs as he tries once more to get the pod loose from this monster's grasp. By some miracle, Convict 40 broke free of the monster's grip and sped back to the surface of the water.

Scared for his life, he got the pod onto land and started running. He did not know where he was running to, but he felt too vulnerable next to the ocean of blood. Whilst running, the convict stumbles upon a cave. Tired, he walked into the cave to try to sleep, but did not realize the small pool of water leading down into the cave. Convict 40 fell asleep, terrified.

Waking up the next morning Convict 40 felt a sense of pride, like a new man who is ready to conquer a beast. The metallic intercom crackled its final words saying, "Look down". As the Convict looked down in fear, he saw a tentacle emerge from the water and grab his legs. He was quickly pulled in the water without a last breath.

"Convict 87," a guard calls, as a dirty man walks in. "You are going to Veinara."

Checkmate

by Tomas Iribarren

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

"Good luck," I said. My hand shook. I knew that once I did it, there was no going back. It was my choice to see how this went. There were two options, but there were infinite possibilities.

Why did I go to sleep at two yesterday, I thought to myself? I was too tired to be doing this.

Don't do it, I heard a voice say. I still do not know where this noise came from.

Everything was pointing towards me not doing it, but I had to if I wanted to stay, I thought. This was a two-faced situation. The first option was light, and the second option was risky, but I didn't know where it led.

This is why my thoughts led me to the first option. It was the one I know more, and the one I had practiced for my whole life. This was my dilemma: it was the more commonly known one or the less known, more risky life. I did it, I did the riskier option.

What have I done, I thought to myself, *these are uncharted waters, and I am just now trying to figure them out, In one of the riskiest situations. This was a horrible idea,* I thought.

"Have you ever done this before?" I asked.

"No, not really, but I have seen professionals do it," he responded.

“Good to know,” I told Andrew, a friend, who I had just started getting to know better this year. I was happy to be doing this with someone I knew.

Andrew asked, “How have you been? I see that your blonde hair is looking great so that leads me to believe that you haven’t been messing with it that much recently.”

“I’ve been good, but since this is the first time today, I haven’t had to get many things done. How about you?”

“I’m also good and this is also my first time today.”

“Well then, best of luck.”

“Thank you, you too.”

‘d4,e6,e4,d5,e5’ Now this was something I knew. This was what I normally did if I had been in Andrew’s position. ‘c5,c3,Nc6,Nf3’ This position was a very tight one in fact there was only one way to blow it open. ‘Qb6,Bd3’ This was a little trap that my father had once shown me the idea was for him to make a mistake. ‘cxd4,Nxd4,Nxd4,cxd4,Qxd4’. He had fallen for it. ‘Bb5+’.

“Woah!” Andrew exclaimed. “Now that is something you don’t see every day.”

“Yeah, this is something you have to keep watch for in the future.”

“I resign, good game.”

Andrew was escorted out, and I stayed watching the other games. This was the first ever chess tournament in my sector, and I was overwhelmed by everything I saw. These were some very interesting games. There were positions that I had no idea how to attack. It was amazing how 200 of us (including the ones who had already been escorted out) had gotten together to see who was the best.

I had reached the end of the first round. We were all in a never-ending ballroom that seemed to get smaller with each passing of a round. At the end of the round, I had seen a bright red light when I glimpsed at the doors of the ballroom opening.

At the beginning there were 200, now there were only 100. It was now the second round, and this would continue until there was one winner.

My move again started with ‘e4,e5,Nf3,Nc6,Bc4’. This was the Italian game. This opening is one of the usual openings and it has a very nice sacrifice that can be used.

“The Italian game is my favorite,” I said.

“Shhhhhhhhhhh!” I heard from every other player. They were all deeply concentrated.

‘Nf6,Ng5,d5,exd5,Nxd5’ This was the sacrificing position where I could sacrifice my knight and risk them knowing what to do or retreat and play defensively. I knew that I had to take the chance, but I was really nervous since one of the better/more experienced players was watching my game. He had been winning his games in under 5 minutes every time. This player gave me a menacing look when about to retreat. It looked like he was trying to tell me to risk it, personally I wouldn’t have risked it but because of this stare and him looking at my game out of all the 49 games going on at the time I had to. ‘Nxf7,Kxf7,Qf3+’. Three things could have happened here: two of them would tell me that he wasn’t an experienced player and one of them would lead into a rabbit hole with an inconclusive ending. ‘Kg8’ Our spectator scoffed that he wasn’t happy with what my opponent did. This led to me winning the match since he was stuck in a corner. When my opponent abandoned the room, he had left with a loud whoosh that was heard all around the room but only I really knew who had made the whoosh.

It was clear that this would be a hard competition. Every time someone lost, they were escorted out. I continued spectating games, trying to figure out the weaknesses of my future opponents.

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‘e4,e6’ The third round had started and there were fifty players left. After each round half of the people would be escorted out. There hasn’t been a game that has ended in a draw yet. Although I’ve heard rumors that if the game is drawn the two people would be escorted out. This would be fatal since games now couldn’t end in a draw.

‘d4,d5,exd5,exd5’ I supposed that he had done this variation because of this rumor that had spread. No one wanted to lose because of a draw and if we followed up with another variation it was inevitable that it would end in a draw.

‘Nf3,Nc6,Nc3,Bg4’ This was an interesting way of playing the game. I had never been in such an open position since I had started playing what Andrew played in our first game.

‘h3,Bh5,g4,Bg6’ My bishop was getting harassed. It was getting pushed back and forced to a corner just like I had forced my last opponent to a corner. This would be interesting because this seemed like my first tough

match of the day but we continued swiftly with the moves 'Bd3,Bxd3,cxd3,h5' I blew the side open I set a trap and the only way for him to fall in it was to do a random move and then I would take his pawn and he would take mine so I could take his rook. 'Bf4,hxg4,hxg4,Rxh1' He lost. I was up 5 and he was ready to lose, although he kept on playing knowing he was going to get escorted, he resigned a few moves later. I went on to spectate my future strongest opponent, the same guy that had spectated my last match. My one goal was to get to a game where I would play him before I didn't know this, but it was imminent that I was going to play him. In his game at the moment, he was completely winning and was ready to throw the final blow. He was ruthless; he didn't let any of his opponents have any breathing room. I had seen the tip of a laser in the corner of my eye, but I didn't think much of it.

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The 4th game came to an end; there were now twelve players. My 4th game was quite boring. We traded down all our pieces and I had won the endgame. My opponent, unlike me, was not a master at endgames. I had to just dwindle him down until he had nothing left. My 5th game though really was something. We had gone through a lot of the theory of the game, and it had required my mind to think of all the possibilities, not just the one right in front of me. Although the game itself is a soft game that doesn't mean it's a game for the weak. It requires people with the ability to deny what they can do and accept what is being done to them. This mentality would lead the stronger one to the win and the weaker ones to get escorted. It was like a game of cat and mouse. You had to know when to be the cat and when to give yourself up. I had learned this in my 5th game since I had to think of ways to sacrifice pieces and ways to attack the other person.

It was my time. There were six players left and we were in the semi-finals. I had to win this game. To get to at least the finals it would be a tough one since I was very nervous. This had been my first tournament. I had gotten so far yet I was still missing the last stretch.

'e4,d6,d4,Nf6' This was a very advanced opening that only great well-experienced players played. I had no idea what to do if I wanted to play what I would normally play or to just wait. I did none of those, so I went towards the center. 'Nc3,g6,Bg5,Bg7,f4,0-0' It was clear that we both didn't know what we were doing but my idea was to attack his knight. 'Nf3,e6' This was a big mistake as he had left his knight wide open for the taking. 'E5,dxe5,fxe5'. He gave up and walked out the doors and gave me a frown as he walked out.

* * *

It was the finals. There had been a draw in the last round so both of them had been escorted out. It was me and my worst enemy, the one opponent that existed in my nightmares. He was the guy that had spectated my 2nd game. I had to win this game for dignity, 'e4,e5,Nf3,Nc6,Bc4,Nf6' This was the exact start of my second game. It had perfectly repeated and this time again I was wishing for the sacrifice although I knew he knew what to do I still wanted to try it. 'Ng5,d5' The table went turbulent after every move. It was groundbreaking how intense the game was. 'exd5,Nxd5,Nxf7,Kxf7' The sacrifice had worked as planned for now, his king was wide open. 'Qf3,Ke6' The idea was to force his king to the middle and to try and checkmate him there. It was a hard idea, but I had to try. 'Nc3,Nb4,Qe4' He was in a really bad position; he had to play with a masterclass performance like he had been in all his other games.

'Bd7,Nxd5' With every move came another long thought process.

'Nxd5,Qxd5' With every thought process came another question.

'Kf5,Qf3' With every question there came another doubt.

'Kg6,Bf7' Like this it followed through all the last moves.

'd4,Kh4' I knew I had Won.

'Qg3' The final blow.

I had won. I had outlasted 199 other players and had come out on top. The championship had been great, and I had had a lot of fun trying to be the best, which I had accomplished.

I ran outside and was stunned by a blood red sun eclipsing, along with the sound of an air cart whooshing past. A chessboard-patterned lawn stood in front of me, full of players lying on the ground as if they were fallen pawns in what I now realized was a game of life and death.

The armed guard grinned at me with his evil smile and exclaimed, "You, get to live another year. Checkmate!"

The Redemption

by Julia Kay

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

“Mr. Wang, for your crimes of aggravated assault and holding a hostage, you will be sentenced to fifty years in prison without parole,” announced the judge.

Those were the last words 25-year-old Mr. Wang heard before he was unavoidably cuffed and sent to a hopeless prison around the outskirts of Kyoto, Japan. He accepted his penalty, and prepared himself for the certainty of a horrible afterlife that Sensei Ito warned him of before his irreversible actions.

The first months were challenging, but also moving for Mr. Wang. During his days of reflection, he spent time facing the same grey walls getting greyer and darker each day. This allowed him to get over his actions but found him facing destructive thoughts of not seeing an angel when his heart stopped pumping and he drew his last breath. After a few meetings with Sensei Ito, an old Kannushi, he attempted to become a better version of himself, to save himself.

“Life is like a game of cards,” said Sensei with a sharp-witted voice. “The hand of cards given out can't be changed, but you can discard them as soon as there's a chance.”

Mr. Wang's curiosity was always based on the beliefs of the Kannushi, which made him find desire to change. Mr. Wang aimed to reach a goal of two good deeds per day to feel satisfied. He found an elderly prisoner who had been robbed of his daily rations of food. He happily gave up his portion of rice so the man would feel no hunger. On another day he helped sweep the cafeteria floor. He soon became admired by his fellow inmates and was soon called “The Helping Hand of Kyoto Prison”. After many years he was recognized by the Kannushi as a reformed prisoner.

“I've heard stories of all the good deed's Mr. Wang has done,” Sensei stated.

“I've seen it with my own eyes,” replied the judge.

“I believe after these thirty years he's developed a great change in his character, and he has shown a development of empathy for others,” continued Kannushi.

“I will take this under advisement as I look over his case and consider the options for shortening his sentence,” advised the judge.

Mr. Wang continued his passion for helping others and for seeking the end of his destructive thoughts.

He finally found the freedom and peace to change out of the orange jumpsuit suit to his old tight clothes and heard the most meaningful words come out of the judge's mouth.

“For the improvement of Mr. Wang's behavior, you are now free of your 50-year sentence,” announced the judge while banging the gavel.

Mr. Wang's happiness overtook him, and he shed tears after several decades in jail. He opened the door and felt the warm sunlight refresh his worn-out body. This gave him hope to keep on chasing heaven and the feeling of giving back.

No family, no sense of home, but the presence of hope outshined the negativity. Sensei Ito gave him 2856 yen for the taxi. He jumped out of the taxi and was greeted with an advanced world. I never thought phones would have computers on them, he thought to himself as he looked over the crowded built-up city, far from the simple life he left behind the day he was sentenced to jail. Begging for money wasn't a choice for Mr. Wang. While deciding what his future would hold for him, he wandered upon a sushi restaurant for a small meal that was missed by his taste buds. He had 1,000 yen left, just enough for a meager meal that his stomach screamed for.

Timidly, he opened the door and was treated with a warm towel that he applied to his face. He felt different pairs of eyes set on him and others followed. The embarrassment shook him when he saw the guests using it for their hands. The dirt that clogged his face was all over what was once a white sanitized towel. He was welcomed with a giant, computerized talking device that rolled side to side. Mr. Wang's confusion grew, and he was speechless. With an indoor tone, the robot proceeded to take his order. The miso soup on the table next to him captured his eyes and nose. He didn't know if the soup was in his price range, so he took a wide shot and ordered it anyway. The soup gave him goosebumps that wasn't just from the warmth that shook throughout his body but of the mixture of flavors that exhilarated his taste buds. He savored every last slurp until the black booklet that contained the evil check arrived at his table. With disbelief and not much luck, he was 100 yen short.

The cashier saw his unfortunate situation and was content to give him the opportunity to pay off his debt. He was enlightened by such an offer and promptly accepted the invitation as an opportunity, like a light in the darkness. This was the sun that wasn't covered with clouds; it was the hope he had desired that was worth waiting for. He began to wash the dishes for the first hour and then was dismissed; however, he was determined to find a living, so he requested to continue working and responsibly said not just for money but for the helping hands. He was a benefit, but also very charming, and he created a bond with anyone he encountered throughout his day.

Once the night came crashing down, he was asked to come back the following day and was sent home with two meals. While having the thought on where he would stay till morning, he enjoyed a meal of sticky rice and sashimi. He continued to walk on the empty, quiet streets that blew a hushed wind that fell upon his back. He followed a shadow of the form of an old lost man, sleeping on the streets, and not knowing where to go. He placed the warm meal at his side, not waking him up. He didn't want to be always known for his gesture; he did it for an improvement of his character.

The next couple of days Mr. Wang arrived continuously right on time when the restaurant opened. He started becoming the reason why some customers came. More and more people started lining up and filling tables at the sushi restaurant. Mr. Wang was soon paid the highest within the workers and he would always receive double the amount of tips.

After many months of gathering money from working twelve-hour shifts, Mr. Wang invested in a small broken-down apartment. He didn't mind because he had a roof over his head. He had a little extra money that he donated to The Stroke Foundation and their survivors. Mr. Wang thought to himself, it's better passing to the floor with no pain instead of rushing to the hospital feeling pain and the need to close your eyes, but the refusal stops you.

He rushed to what was now his full-time job and continued with his daily routine. Any time he saw a way to help he would take it, "Two acts of kindness a day keeps your soul awake," Mr. Wang would always repeat.

After nights and days of growing older and pumping out blood for the ones in need, feeding the poor, and smiling to create an everyday cheer Mr. Wang would always be remembered. People thought of the everyday, heartwarming, love and generosity he provided to everyone, even to the unknown.

A shiny, bright light gave me warmth and held out a hand that took me closer to the light narrated Mr. Wang. It was a strange feeling that tickled your stomach, not knowing if I was passing to the unknown of heaven or the underground doom of the evil and guilty people. It was so quick, my head reaching the floor then in just an instant I saw the light. The light that determined my destiny and fate in the afterlife. The clouds divided evenly and left a wide opening, as if an airplane gilded right through it. The sun's reflection showed a pathway. I wasn't sure I wanted to follow. The unknown decision wasn't up to me, it was up to the gods to reflect my decisions on the life I lived. I was escorted to a hallowed place, of a long staircase in midair and a marble type door that arched through the clouds. A small, quiet, and trusting echo whispered, "Follow your path." Fear started to overcome my body as I climbed up. Shaken with fear I departed into the glorious light. I felt the darkness abandon my body and disintegrate into thin air. Then my whole surroundings were white. I was sucked into the memories when the presence of my family was together and was the strongest bonding bridge I had. Except the outcome wasn't a memory. Several light-shaded, familiar, ghost-like figures ran to me. To my confusion I stood there gliding in the air as if breathing in gravity was normal. I had a closer look as they came toward me. It was the creators and the ancestors and the relatives I had loved throughout my life.

The Avalanche

by Tomás Lazcano

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

It was a beautiful Sunday Morning in Clarington, Georgia. The sun was just slivering up and Giac was ready for a busy day. His green eyes and long, slim body slowly rose after a good night's sleep. It was a great time for Giac as he had finished the stress of grades and college applications. Giac was a great student throughout his younger years and finished school with a high GPA and SAT. He had inherited the passion for soccer from his father and had played throughout his teenage years. Because Giac had finished school in a great way, his parents decided to lend him money for a trip with his friends.

After waking up Giac moped towards the bathroom to take a cold shower. Giac followed his everyday morning routine and prepared himself for the day. Fifteen minutes past nine Chris arrived at the door. Giac opened.

"What's good bro," Chris said.

"Hey man, what's up!" replied Giac.

The two had been friends since second grade and were very close. Chris had blonde hair and brown eyes and was a little bit shorter than Giac. Chris and Giac conversed for a few minutes and about ten minutes later Dorian arrived. Dorian was the third of the friend group and they had met him in 9th grade. Even though they didn't know him as much Chris and Giac were very close to Dorian. Dorian was the cockier out of the group. Dorian always messed with the two and even though he was very nice, at times he could get irritated.

Giac started, "So, where are we going to go? I was thinking about it a lot last night, and think that the French Alps are a great option. There are some cheap hotels I found in the area."

"Yeah and no one is going to understand us and all we're going to do is eat baguettes all day," Dorian answered jokingly. No one liked his comment and Dorian quickly put a straight face.

Then Chris stated, "I like that idea Giac, but even though Dorian said it as a joke he does have a point. Communicating is going to be difficult. I was thinking about going to Switzerland or Italy. Given that you're Italian, Giac's communication will be a lot easier. If you want to do the Alps, both of those have beautiful mountain views and scenery. On top of that, there are some great activities to do around the area."

Then Dorian exclaimed, "I heard there is bungee jumping around there, that sounds fun!" Finally, Giac states, "Alright so the Alps it is."

The three spent the rest of the afternoon organizing the expenses of the trip and activities they would do. After that single day of planning the trip was complete. They would depart on the seventh of June and arrive in a little town called Asterisk in the north of Italy.

The day had finally come, and Giac was all packed and ready to go. He checked his phone and the date read "June 7, 2023." When he arrived at the airport, he thought about all the memories that he would create with his friends on this trip. After a bit of waiting at the airport, Chris and Dorian arrived and they all said farewell to their families. The three passed through normal airport security and went on their way. On the plane, they talked about the trip, and they talked about all their past lives and memories.

Giac spoke, "You guys remember that time when we all went camping together in seventh grade?"

"Oh yeah, I completely forgot about that," Chris responded, "We couldn't sleep all night because of the mosquitos. What a terrible night."

Then Dorian said, "I remember you stepped on an ant pile Giac! That was pretty funny."

They conversed for a couple of hours and then all went to sleep. Giac opened his eyes to see a sliver of sun coming up behind the lush Italian Dolomites. The plane was about to land, and he started gathering his stuff. Chris and Dorian were still sleeping soundly, and he hurriedly woke them up. When the plane landed, they were on their way.

First, they had to take a train to arrive at Asterisk. After that, they had to take a taxi to the Airbnb which was a couple miles outside of Asterisk. It was located amid the mountains and was connected to several mountain trails which they planned on completing most of them by the end of the trip. The train ride there was short but

incredibly beautiful. As the train went on Giac saw the horizon full of the same lush mountains he had seen on the plane. The three were completely silent as they were still waking up. A calmness in the air relieved Giac from the stress of traveling. Through this, he dozed off into sleep again.

Giac was woken up by the screeching sound of the train's brakes. By then Chris and Dorian had already woken up and ordered a small coffee. They got out of the train and were greeted with a refreshing mountain breeze. Asterisk was your typical European mountain town. It was quiet, beautiful, and cozy. It consisted of a small church, a single supermarket, a couple of rental places, and one restaurant. The main part of the village, which is where most of these places were, was a small plaza with an extravagant fountain in the center. Most people living there were either old grandpas in their retirement or young adventurous skiers or climbers. It was a great contrast but being an outsider from the United States, meant that locals wanted nothing to do with Giac, Dorian, and Chris. However, Giac being Italian helped a whole lot.

Once they arrived, Giac and Chris went out to get groceries for the week. The house they were staying at was a small two-bedroom cabin with two bathrooms. Giac and Chris returned with the groceries and some pamphlets that showed maps and good hiking spots around the area. For the rest of the day, the three rested from the traveling until late in the afternoon when Giac went outside for a short exploration while Chris and Dorian cooked the dinner.

Outside it was a little chilly but good enough to wear only a hoodie. Jack woke up on one of the trails for about fifteen minutes and was able to get to a small mountain peak. There he saw the most beautiful sunset that he had ever seen. The sky had transformed into a canvas of vibrant colors including pink, red, and orange. Giac thought about how great this trip was going to be. The day was a great start to an exciting trip.

The next day the three were up at about eight in the morning. The first stop of the day was a beautiful waterfall named Iris. It was named this for the beautiful rainbows it created, Iris being a waterfall in Latin. It was about a three-hour hike from their house, so they brought food, got ready, and were on their way. The hiking scenery was beautiful. They passed through a small forest with vibrant Evergreens and Columnar Spruce. Passing the forest, they arrived at a green open valley which they had to climb through a long winding path. The valley was filled with purple bellflowers, and it created a breathtaking appearance. It looked like a Windows wallpaper Giac thought. As they were climbing the trio did not speak much. It was as if the scenery had paralyzed them and captivated them. On top of that, all of them were tired. However, when they started going downhill, they would start to talk. When they were able to get over the valley they started to speak more.

Chris started, "Wow, that has to be the most beautiful view I've ever seen."

"Yeah, and we've still got another hour and a half to go. This is terrible. On top of that, I'm running out of water," Dorian quickly replied.

Then Giac said, "Can't you just appreciate that you're in nature for once? Look at this, we don't have any of this back home. If you want, we can take our lunch break in a bit."

Dorian replied reluctantly, "Yeah sure, whatever."

They continued on their long hike and sure enough, in twenty minutes they stopped for their lunch break. They packed sandwiches and quickly devoured the whole bunch because of how hungry they were. They continued on their journey admiring the beautiful scenery and spotting cute wildlife such as deer and marmots. Throughout their journey, they encountered a couple of hikers which they conversed with for a while and then went on their way.

Finally, they had arrived. As they passed a large corner cliff there it stood, towering over all of them. It roared with the noise of pounding water. They collected water from it and filtered it. None of them spoke, they just admired the natural beauty, in awe. On top of its immense size, the waterfall created an incredible rainbow which the three also admired. After about fifteen minutes of straight staring at it and taking a rest the three recollected water from the small pond surrounding the waterfall.

"We should return a different way," said Chris. "I was looking at the map and I saw that trail number four led us straight back home." He pointed at the wooden marker that marked *Sentiero three*. They decided to go back that way and they returned. As they arrived the sun was setting, and it created a beautiful arrangement of colors as the day before. After an incredibly long day of walking, they cooked a quick dinner and went to sleep early.

"I think we should take it easy tomorrow and maybe do something like walking around town," Giac said.

Chris replied, "I agree today was a very long day."

And so, they took their day off. They slept until about twelve and woke up slowly. The three took the day to get familiar with the town and its surrounding area. They decided to rent out some bikes for a couple of days later. Little did they know that day would never come.

On the third day, they woke up at around ten in the morning and ate breakfast to prepare for the long day.

"We should climb that peak today," Giac said pointing at a jagged rock towering over the rest of the peaks, "I saw that there is a trail that leads up. It is a five-hour advanced hike, but I think we could do it. I read the reviews online and it said that it wasn't too difficult."

"I am not," said Dorian assertively, "climbing that mountain."

Giac said, "Come on, it'll be fun! I told you it isn't that hard. But if we want to do it, we have to leave now"

Then Chris said, "I'm ok with it. Let's do it!"

Dorian reluctantly agreed after a tedious twenty-minute argument. He went out in a bad mood and insulted the two. All they wanted to do was explore and have fun but Dorian being in a bad mood killed the mood. The hike was very, very long. It was their second hour when they realized that they were less than a quarter of the trail complete. It was too late to go back though they could see the peak and that is what gave them motivation. As they climbed, they were able to see a large set of clouds from the east rolling in.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Chris said.

"Yeah, I'm not sure about continuing," Giac also said.

Surprisingly Dorian responded sort of angrily, "You guys took me all the way up we might as well finish. The clouds don't even look that bad. Let's go."

They continued and the clouds slowly drew closer like a fleet of battleships in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. About twenty minutes later while they were still on the trail the clouds completely consumed them and it started to lightly drizzle. Visibility was extremely poor. The farthest they could see was their own hands stretched outwards.

"I think we should continue forward so we can be above the clouds to gain better visibility," said Dorian.

"I don't know about Dorian; these conditions are really bad. I think we should wait it out." Said Chris.

He checked his phone to see if he could get any access to a radar but there was no signal. And so, they decided that the best decision was to continue. As they walked slowly attempting not to lose the trail in the process they heard a large thunder in the background. It started to rain harder, and they were all drenched.

"Oh no!" said Chris, "I think I've lost the path."

"Have you guys seen a trail marker by chance," Dorian exclaimed in a worried way as it started to rain harder and harder.

As the day continued, they very slowly advanced without a clue of where they were going. Their only sense of direction was going up. The rain started to turn into snow, and they started to get cold. Walking became miserable but they had to keep going for a chance to survive.

Although visibility had cleared up a bit, the trio was traversing a long mountain wall much below the summit of the mountain when disaster struck.

"Is it just me or does anybody else hear that," said Giac.

"No, that's not just you," replied Chris.

And that is when they saw it. A massive wall of snow tumbling and rumbling towards them at the speed of a cheetah. It was unavoidable and breathtaking. It was...an avalanche. The three were left paralyzed by the sheer size and speed of it until Giac screamed, "TAKE COVER!"

They took action and hid behind the rock and waited, waiting for their deaths to arrive. The avalanche came tumbling on them with an incredible amount of force, like a massive wave in the bay of Waimea, Hawaii. It swallowed them up like the clouds had previously done and there was nothing they could do. All Giac saw was white, he was trying to stay above the surface and not suffocate by the immense power of the avalanche. It was plunging them down the mountain while they were trying to stay above the surface.

Finally, the rumbling came to an end. Everything had gone dark. Giac had been knocked unconscious and luckily, had been buried only under a bit of snow. He was suffocating but he still hadn't realized it yet. It was almost like he had accepted his fate until something, Giac had no idea what it was, but some unrecognizable voice told him to keep pushing. And so, he opened his eyes and started to dig above him and with instant relief, he popped out of the surface with a massive gasp for air. Immediately he was lightheaded and again passed out.

When Giac woke up it seemed to be the afternoon and he had no idea where he was or what had happened to him. However, he knew that he was cold and suffering from hypothermia. Giac thought that his first goal was to be able to escape the ocean of snow that he was stuck in. He started digging and digging. Giac dug for hours and hours which got his blood pumping and he started to feel better, however still freezing. Finally, Giac reached solid land where he was able to step and walk properly on about a foot of snow. Giac thought about

where his friends were but could not remember what had previously happened. So, he marched forward, but he saw that the sun started to go down and the temperature was very quickly dropping. He decided that the best decision at the time was to find shelter and sleep in the wilderness.

The first step to survive the night would be to get warmth. Luckily, he had a lighter with him. He gathered a couple of sticks and loose pieces of wood and began a small campfire. This made his miserable day feel a bit better. His next step would be to create shelter but given how weak he was because of the hypothermia that was almost impossible. There he stood in the harsh, unmerciful wild, freezing to death. He tried to sleep to see if maybe he was just in one big nightmare, but he never woke up. The fire was slowly dying out, but he was on the floor, too weak to stand up. His eyes slowly start to close, and death starts to capture him and at that moment, he hears it. The swooshing blades of a helicopter hovering over him. He did not know how much time had passed but it was dark out. A ladder sticking out of the helicopter had a man and he read on the helicopter. *Aiut Alpin Dolomites*. The Dolomites Rescue Service. After that, once again, he passed out.

Giac woke up and was blinded by the bright hospital lights. He heard the beeping of the hospital machinery.

Someone spoke in the background, "His pulse is slowly starting to rise again, he should be fine."

It took Giac a minute to fully gain consciousness again and that is when all the memories started flooding back in, the hike, the avalanche, the trip. He started to cry. A thought started to sliver into his which he could not avoid. He wondered reluctantly not wanting to accept it, where Chris and Dorian were. Giac looked to his left and he was able to see the familiar face of his great friend, Chris. Then he looked at the hospital screen and saw that his heart was beeping, and he let out a sigh of relief. A minute later he felt a pain in his stomach as soon as the thought of Dorian came into his mind.

After all he had experienced, Giac received the worst news of his life.

"I'm so incredibly sorry to tell you this, but Dorian couldn't make it. We tried our best," said the nurse in her not-so-good English. Giac couldn't accept it. He had underestimated the power, unpredictability, and strength of Mother Nature.

A Story to Tell

by Alexandra Leal

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

“Ring ring ring!” made the sound of Emilia’s alarm clock. It is finally summertime in New Smyrna for Emilia. She woke up startled and called her friends. “Hey guys, are you ready to go kayaking?” she said.

“Yea I’m on my way already,” replied Paula.

“Me too, I’m almost there,” responded Olivia.

“Great,” Emilia said as she was getting ready to go, “I’m about to leave the house.” Emilia hung up the phone and left her house and started biking to the bay. She got there and immediately saw her friends. She had the biggest smile on her face. She was so excited to go kayaking since she barely goes anymore. They rented some kayaks and began to push them into the water.

“This is going to be so much fun. We can take so many cute pictures of the sunrise!” exclaimed Olivia.

All the girls nodded and smiled as they began to paddle farther out into the sea.

After paddling for a while, they jointly decided to stop moving as they realized they were on top of a beautiful coral reef and wanted to take a little swim. They all jumped off of their kayaks and made a very big splash. Emilia injured her foot on one of the corals by jumping in and blood started gushing out from her foot.

“I think I cut my toe on the coral!” Paula rushed over to her and helped her get on the kayak.

“Let me take a look at it,” Paula examined her foot and grabbed a towel and tied it around her foot to stop the bleeding. They all went back into their kayaks.

“Hey Emilia, how bad is the bleeding? Did it stop?” Olivia asked.

Emilia, with a little worried look on her face, answered, “I don’t think that it’s that bad, but we should return.”

Olivia then said, “But if it’s not that bad then we can just stay a little bit longer since we never get a chance to do this together.”

Paula gave her a serious look and said, “Are you kidding me? She is hurt! We have to go back!”

While they were discussing whether they should go or stay, Emilia did not realize that she was still bleeding into the water.

All of a sudden Paula screamed, “I see a fin! I see a fin! I think it’s a shark!” The other two girls turned around but did not see anything. Paula being the free spirit that she is was always the joker of the group and of course, no one believed her.

“Stop with the jokes, Paula. Are we staying or are we leaving?” said Olivia, now annoyed. “Come on, Emilia, you know Paula is trying to scare us because she wants to leave. Do not fall for it.”

Paula retorted back, “It’s not a joke this time. I really did see a fin. We definitely should go.”

In the midst of their conversation, Emilia felt something bump her kayak. She screamed, “Something hit my kayak! Something hit my kayak! Oh my God did you guys see anything?!”



NORAH HENFRIDSSON | Grade 8

The other two girls said no, and Olivia thought they were playing tricks on her. The situation was getting tense as none of them knew whether any danger was lurking under the water. To make matters worse, the sight of lightning and the sound of thunder startled the girls. A storm was brewing on the horizon. Ominous, dark clouds were closely approaching, and it was getting harder to see.

“Are you kidding me?” said Emilia. “Oli, there's a storm coming, and you still are thinking of staying? I really felt something bump my kayak and I believe Paula really did see something! Let's get out of here now!”

As they were preparing to depart back to the dock, they quickly noticed a large shadow swimming under their kayaks and they all screamed in unison, “SHARK! SHARK! SHARK!” In a fraction of a second a huge creature lunged out of the water and hit Emilia's kayak with such force that Emilia went flying into the water. The shark turned around and went after Emilia. Paula quickly grabbed her oar and started splashing the water to distract the shark from going after Emilia, and it seemed to work. It was going straight towards her now. The shark attacked and grabbed onto the kayak with its powerful jaws. Sensing the opportunity and without any thought or hesitation, Paula started hitting the shark in the nose with her oar while Olivia joined the fracas and started doing the same.

The shark got startled and rapidly began to swim away as it did not expect to get hit in the nose with such force and promptly disappeared, thus, eliciting a sigh of relief from the girls.

After a couple of scary minutes while the girls were still processing what had just happened and were still trembling from the experience, Emilia exclaimed “Wow! I thought I was going to die! You guys are so brave! I want to cry!”

Olivia and Paula still had not yet grasped what had just happened. Once they did, they started shaking uncontrollably.

Now it was up to Emilia to calm them down. “Guys, don't worry, the shark is gone. I saw it swimming away. Nothing happened. We are okay. Another story to tell...although no one will believe us.”

The girls were gathering their thoughts for a few minutes and finally calmed down. Soon, a big bright burst of lightning and an extremely loud thunderous sound interrupted the moment, as if to say ...not so fast.

Wind picked up violently and they all felt a radical drop in temperature. Rain and hail started falling from the sky and sure enough relief turned into horror once they realized they were in the middle of a scary storm.

What was there to do? They were still far from land and with the dense fog moving in there was basically no visibility at all which could make it almost impossible to get back to safety. Fear was about to set in when all of a sudden out of nowhere they heard the sound of a boat engine.

Like an angel passing through the clouds, they see this human-like figure with extended arms calling out their names. “Emilia!! Emilia!! Is that you? Paula! Olivia!! I am here!!!” screamed the man in the boat.

A warm sensation washed all over them. Emilia recognized that familiar voice! I was her dad!! Once the girls were able to physically see Emilia's dad approaching in his boat a huge smile appeared on their faces and they let out a huge scream.

“We are saved! We are saved!” yelled Olivia.

They were going to be ok. Even though the girls had originally set out for a fun time kayaking, it ended up being a pretty eventful time. Injuries and shark sightings aside, they made it to safety probably just in the nick of time. The weather forecast later stated that there was a tropical storm brewing and they got off the water at the perfect time. The last thing they needed was for anything else to go wrong. Emilia was right when she said they would have “a story to tell.” That is for sure!

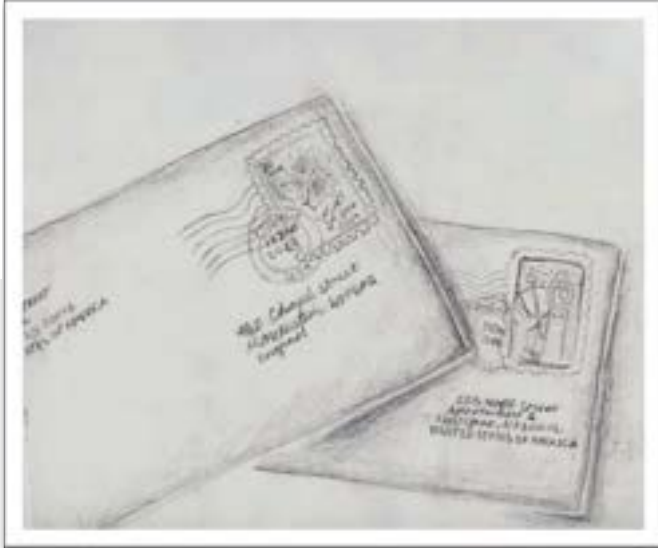
La Isla Magica

by Chiara Maal

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

LULU STORM | Grade 8



Sometimes being right can be wrong. It amuses me how doing the right thing can seamlessly turn into doing “the wrong thing for the right reasons.” There are twisted, unhappy people out there who can blur the lines and reverse any possible situation to cause conflicts to benefit themselves. And the worst part is that most of these silly people simply find amusement in causing problems and watching it all unfold before their very eyes. Those people are intelligent folks, but they use their intellect to manipulate others for their own, greedy satisfaction. That is what I think, and it is a thought that revolves in my mind and, when it reaches the front again, sends me into deep confusion and frustration.

Many people didn’t know what I was talking about, and the vast majority thought I was crazy. But, one day, my ideas manifested tangibly at the end of an event in my extremely meteoric life, as some fool believed that they could manipulate *me*.

Seventeen winters ago, I was still an inexperienced youthful lad at the age of twenty-six, searching for a job with a degree in cartography. My seemingly useless degree had me doubtful, but I knew that coincidence would send me a job if it was what fate had decided. As for most people in the year of 1959, fate had decided to put them on the streets. I knew that if I worried about becoming one of them, well, that is what would happen. I was walking down a street in Manhattan on my daily stroll, which I would use to smoke and think. On the tail end of my walk, every day a quarter ‘til seven, one of those snotty little boys who deliver the papers pelted a wrapped newspaper at me from afar. It hit the cigar right out of my hand. Luckily, it did not make direct contact with my body. I fixed my eyes on those wretched boys; it seemed to be four of them, high fiving the boy who hit me.

“You good for nothing rats!” I scolded. I wasn’t even upset about the fact that they’d tried to hit me, I just despised the fact that they laughed at me. Not to mention that was my only cigar, as I had limited myself to one a day after the news came out of them causing cancer.

“Boo-hoo!” the boys responded, pretending to cry, and being the foolish children they were. Out of anger, I picked up the rolled newspaper and threatened to throw it at them, and they ran away. I would say that I wasn’t really going to throw it at them, but that would be a lie. I thought I might as well read the paper since it’s in my hand. So, I removed the rubber tie and unfolded the paper.

“NEW ISLAND DISCOVERED OFF THE COAST OF GUYANA! LOOKING FOR SOMEONE WILLING TO EXPLORE AND MAP. PAY OF \$40,000,” It read. Then, it listed a number. I gasped audibly and alerted the people around me. I hurriedly returned to my apartment and dialed the number, without even removing my coat or my shoes.

“Hello?” A female voice answered.

“Good evening. I’m-”

“*You are calling because...?*” The woman rudely interrupted. I didn’t care. I just wanted the job, no matter what. Later, I learned she wasn’t the only one.

“I’m looking to take the job of mapping the island. The one on the news?” I eagerly replied.

“*Okay, hold on,*” she sighed, ecstatically. I heard the phone being set down. *I just know she adores her job,* I thought to myself. As I waited for the woman to pick it back up, I then removed my shoes and my coat. I returned to the phone and sat down. This time, a man picked up. They’d transferred me to another line.

“*Hi. You’re calling about the island?*” the man yawned with excitement.

"Yes, I am."

We shared a very uncomfortable silence. After a long moment, he asked me several questions about my identity, and I answered them.

"Oh, and do you have a college degree?" He asked as if it weren't of large importance.

"Yes, in cartography," I replied.

"Really!" he gasped. "Hey, this one's got a degree! In cartography!" He shouted, although it seemed like he was yelling away from the phone, to someone else in the room. "I'm going to give you an address, and you're going to write it down, are you ready?"

I was not ready. I scrambled to stand up, then I couldn't find a pen. Luckily, there was one in my coat's pocket, and now I only needed paper. The man began to read the address, so I gave up and wrote it on my hand.

"Thank you, sir, and thank the lady who picked up the phone," I exhaled, although I didn't mean it. Especially not the woman who picked up the phone. I hung up the telephone and put my shoes back on, swiping my sweater off its hook as I ran out the door. I sprinted down the stairs and walked briskly down the street until I reached the street written on my right hand. I cannot recall how long it took me to reach my destination, but as I proofread the numbers on the building, I couldn't help but realize how atrociously sweaty I was. The cold breeze pushed the droplets to the side of my face, and for a brief moment, I was very conscious. I could feel my socks in my shoes and each individual, cold drop of sweat running down my face, and it tingled. I took my handkerchief from my pocket, wiped my forehead dry, and entered the building, without even examining what it looked like.

It was rather empty, and everyone inside looked in my direction as I walked in because of some stupid bell that rang as I opened the door. I pursed my lips with a slight smile, and everyone continued on with their business. As I approached the front desk, I recited in my mind what I would say:

"Hello, I am here to find out more about the island off the coast of Guyana," I whispered to myself. I walked up to the table with a woman looking down. "Hello--"

"One moment please." She put her index finger up in my face. I noticed that she had the telephone pressed up against her ear. Nevertheless, I became frustrated and upset. I stood there for about three minutes until she put the telephone down and looked at me.

"Hello--" I started.

"Hi."

I became increasingly angry. She wasn't following my script. I had planned it the way that I wanted it to go, and she was interrupting me. I took a breath.

"I'm here to find out more about the island off the coast of Guyana. I called earlier today and the man on the phone told me to come here," I explained, impressed that she hadn't interrupted me once in my entire two-sentence speech. The woman looked me up and down, her long, false eyelashes almost creating wind in my face.

She then asked me for my name, age, and several other things that were not relevant enough to replace any thoughts in my mind.

"Okay, one moment, please," and she typed into her computer, which was a large box with keys. She typed slowly. I sat down, unaware of why, and looked around. The interior was very nice, and the place felt very hollow. I could hear the footsteps of the few people echo throughout the entire building. It was warmer in there than outdoors, meaning that there were heaters. The couches on which I sat were made of leather, and they squeaked deeply as I sat down on them. There were lights, although they were dim, and only coming from the ceiling above the front desk, which was lower than the rest of the building. I believe there were only about five stories. In the duration of which I sat, one person entered and ascended into the spiral staircase in the center, and two people left.

The woman whom I spoke to called me back to the front desk, and standing next to her, was a man leaning against the counter. He was wearing a grey coat, similar to mine, although his seemed to have an excessive number of pockets. I could not think of a use for all those pockets in one coat, and I wondered if he made a purpose for each of them. As I walked up to him, I shook his hand. He led me to an office, where we both sat down.

"Good evening, sir. I have been informed that you would like to take a job in the cartography of our newly discovered island. Is this correct?"

"Yes, it is," I responded. I did not know what this man was going to discuss with me, and I did not have a script prepared for this scenario. We spoke for about half an hour before he shook my hand once more and led me to the door. He had instructed me to go on a plane to Charity, Guyana, and then to take a boat to the island. They did not have a name for the island yet, so they were calling it "Chatsopano" which means "new one" in a language

I am unfamiliar with. Luckily, the official language in Guyana was English, so I would not have any trouble communicating with the people there since I did not speak nor understand any Latin languages. I followed the man's instructions almost robotically, as it was my first job as a cartographer, and even the slightest thought would set me off into panic.

In my satchel, I brought a notebook, a pen, ink, a compass, and several large sheets of folded paper, which I would use to map this island. In my backpack, I had a sufficient amount of clothing to last me for my visit, I had a tent, in which I would sleep, a lantern, and a sleeping bag. I had a deadline of a week, as the island was only about three-square miles. I was to send a letter to the company which sent me here every morning, as a mailboat came at six o'clock every morning until my stay was over, providing food and water.

When the boat dropped me off at the island, I decided to find a place of high ground to set up my tent, where I would be staying. Upon arrival, I checked my watch, which read sixteen o'clock. I planned that I would explore the area until dusk and then return to my tent before dark.

I was always very good with mapping due to my photographic memory and artistic skills. I had done something similar to this in university, but it was not a fraction of the size of this island. I found it a bit strange that they'd send me alone to an uninhabited island, but I did not think too hard about it since I was already there. I was informed that a group of men had wandered the island during the day, and there were no signs of dangerous wildlife or anything such.

As I wandered the area, I found a large incline in the ground. As I reached the top, I got a much better view of the island. It was truly beautiful and very colorful. It was a perfect mixture of flowers and planes and tall trees. It was not as cold as it was in Manhattan, far from it. I could certainly feel the humidity in the air as I set up the tent. After an embarrassingly long amount of time, I finally got the tent up and looked somewhat like a tent next to a tree. I left my backpack in my tent and brought my satchel with me to explore the island. I did not enter the trees right away, as I was afraid I'd get lost. However, I did walk along the ragged edge of the small forest. This was not a good strategy, as the roots grew very far, tripping me as I walked. One of those trips led to a tumble, and I sat on the ground for a moment after having fallen, reflecting.

"Let's go somewhere else, then," I told myself, standing up and walking away from the trees. Before they left my sight, I took one more long look at them, to make sure I knew what they looked like. After that, I turned around and continued walking. I was to explore as much as I could between the trees and my tent as possible, then return to my tent and write the letter. I walked up to a thin, fast-moving river, about four feet wide. Inside the river, rocks were tumbling, but there were no fish. I looked to my left, and my right, and the river divided the island perfectly in half. I looked down at my watch and it told me that it was six o'clock. I looked at the sun, and it was just touching the horizon. It left a golden hue on everything it reached, a yellow glisten in the river. It was golden hour, and I knew that after golden hour came darkness. I had about an hour before I had to return to my tent, so I started on my way back.

Upon arrival, I sat down in my tent and opened my notebook. I drew out the shape of the island and labeled "trees", "river", and "hill" which is the one I sat on as I wrote. I quickly sketched out the trees, river, and hill, with my tent on top. Then, I sketched the port of where the mailboat came in. That reminded me that I had to write a letter to mail to the company.

"Good morning,

Yesterday, I made little progress in mapping, as I arrived in the evening. I set up my tent at the top of a hill, and there is a river that splits the island in half. So far, there have been no signs of animals, and the temperature seems to be about ninety degrees Fahrenheit."

I was tentative about what to write, as I had only just arrived. I decided that my note would be sufficient for the first one. I folded the note and put it in my satchel, where it would remain safe until I delivered it to the mailboat in the morning. By then, the sun had set, and I turned on my lantern. I opened my notebook and crossed off the date on the calendar. I had thirteen more days to conquer the entire island. It excited me, but I was slightly afraid of finding an unwanted predator. That night, as tired as I was, I could not sleep until past midnight. It felt as though I was on a boat, swaying back and forth. It set my stomach into a spiral, which kept me awake for a long time. I do not recall exactly when I finally gave in and fell asleep, but when I woke up, the strangest of things happened. I was awakened by the annoying caw of a bird. I checked my watch, and it read five-thirty o'clock. I scrambled to get up, hitting my head on the stick holding my tent up. It shook my tent, but it did not fall. Immediately as I set foot outside my tent, I stepped into a river. Luckily, it was shallow, so I was not soaked past my lower calf. This greatly puzzled me, as there had not been a river when I went to sleep the night before. I looked around at my surroundings, and there was no longer a tree next to my tent.

“What on Earth...” I said to myself. “I must be going insane! All this smoking has finally gotten to me,” I laughed.

I began to run towards where I came from after descending from the boat in which I used to come. But I did not find the ocean. I found the forest of trees that I had encountered the previous day!

“Have mercy! Let me get to my stupid boat!” I was afraid that I would miss the mailboat and I would get in trouble with my company. I pulled my map out of my satchel and attempted to follow my twisted way back to the dock. By the time I finally reached the water, the boat was already just a speck in the distance. I checked my watch. Seven o’clock. I was terribly late. “Hey! Come back!” I yelled desperately, but I had no answer. I stomped on the ground. “What is wrong with me?!” I yelled. A bird cawed in return. A mocking jay. This eased my temper, as it distracted me from the fact that I had already disobeyed one of the first things that I was told to do. I whistled a tune, and a number of birds echoed it back to me. As I walked around, I whistled a tune, and the birds repeated it to me.

I mapped out the area for the entire day on a new sheet of paper. Everything was completely different than what I had drawn on the map from the previous day. I found a new lake, and I was very confused. I assumed that I was just very tired the day before from the traveling and made up the evening in my mind. As I approached the new location of the trees, I noticed that their roots were not sticking out of the ground like I remembered they were. As the sun set, I began to walk back to my tent, feeling more confident about what I had mapped out, since I had filled out the entire map. When I returned to my tent, I wrote another letter:

“Good morning,

I apologize greatly for having missed the first letter. Something very strange happened. The entire land around me changed overnight! It may seem unreal, but that is what happened. Although, I do think that I might have just been very tired and imagined everything. I am already done with almost half the island, and I will use the next several days to complete the other half. The soil is very soft, and the trees are plentiful. It was less humid today than yesterday, so I felt like I got more done. That is all for now.”

I folded the paper and put it into my satchel. I sketched some of the things I found into my notebook, such as flowers and rocks, just to make sure that I knew definitively that I had seen what I’d seen, and that I was not hallucinating from exhaustion. I fell asleep fairly quickly, and when I awoke, it was still dark. I turned on my lantern and looked at my watch. It was nearly five o’clock. Although it was early, I felt rested enough to start my journey early. This time, I was careful not to step in the river outside my tent, but I was quite unpleasantly surprised to find that what was a river yesterday, was a very steep descent today. I slid for what seemed to be about ten feet, before hitting the ground with my bottom. As I stood up, I rubbed it in pain.

“This stupid friggin’ island!” I yelled, out of frustration. I knew what this meant: it meant that the landscape had changed again. I took off my satchel and threw it on the ground. “I give up! I want to go home! I can’t deal with this!” I shouted at the sky. I picked up my satchel and put it back on. I turned towards a tree that I had landed near and kicked it. Then I started towards the dock where the boat would receive my message.

After a while of searching, I found the dock, and it was in a completely different spot than the day before and the day before that. For the first time, I saw the boat coming my way. I sat on the dock and watched as the sun rose and the boat grew larger and larger. Finally, the boat arrived.

“Ello, sir! I’m here for your note. Do ya have one for me today?”

“I do,” I said, as I handed him my letter. “Sorry that I missed you yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about it, mate,” the happy man said.

“What is your name?” I asked as he was the only person I’d be seeing for the next few days.

“Henry, sir!” he responded immediately. I was confused as to why he was so happy. I did not like happy people. I knew they were faking it for most of the time to keep their job.

“Well, I need to get back to my job,” I said out loud, then mumbled, “for the third friggin time.”

“It was nice meeting you! Have a great day, and I’ll see you tomorrow. Here’s a sandwich I brought for you,” he saluted as he handed me a sandwich wrapped in plastic. This made me realize how hungry I was. I thanked the man and waved goodbye as his boat turned around and left. I watched his boat until I could no longer see it as I ate my sandwich. I walked around the entire island once more and decided to give up. I had three days left, and I was not going to waste them trying to do the impossible. The last three days, I sketched peculiar things that I found interesting as I wandered the island. I discovered flowers that I had never seen before, gorgeous rocks. And even small, mystical-looking critters. I wrote a letter on the fourth day, and it was the last letter I wrote until my return.

“Good morning,

I have discovered that this island is impossible to map. I will be spending the next few days exploring the different landscapes. This island is impossible to map because it changes every night. I know it sounds impossible, but if you would like to see it, you will have to come and stay to observe it for yourself. I will not explain much further, and do what you must with my paycheck, but this place will not be mapped!"

The next morning, I handed Henry the note in exchange for a sandwich and told him that I wouldn't have any more notes for him.

"Don't ya think I haven't noticed that I have to bring my boat to a new spot every day? I know this place is nuts! I've just been too scared to look through it on my own," Henry revealed.

"Well, I'm going to explore it for two more days, if you'd like to join me."

After that, Henry and I wandered the island together. He was a peculiar man; we were almost opposites. He saw the good in everything, while I was annoyed by everything. He found it amazing that the place would change every night. He questioned its science and its geography, meanwhile, I just wanted to go home. On the last day, we had to search for Henry's boat, and when we found it, he took me back to the small airport where I had arrived.

"Say, Henry, what do you want to name this place?"

"How about, La Isla Magica?"

"La Isla Magica it is. Keep on checking the news for me, okay?"

"You got it!"

I cringed at his optimism. The entire time we wandered together, he never said a single negative word. However, I admired his positivity, but I was glad I wasn't like that.

When I returned to my hometown, I visited the building which had the office where I was hired. As soon as the receptionist woman saw my face, her eyes widened, and she called someone on the telephone. I knew that someone was coming down to meet me, so I waited for whoever it was. It was the man I spoke to in the office the first time. He was glaring at me, and I was quite literally terrified- of him and his forty pockets.

"My office. Now," the man commanded. I followed. We sat down. "What the hell were you doing?! We sent you to map the island, not to hear your morals about nature!"

"If you had gone there yourself, you would know why it physically cannot be mapped, sir."

"Cut the crap! We were relying on you. We are *not* paying you a single penny, you know that, right? You didn't do your job!"

"Send someone else there, and you'll know what I mean," I replied, calmly. I knew it wasn't this poor, foolish pocket man's fault. He wanted a job done and it wasn't. I couldn't blame him.

"I will! Now you get out of my office."

"Consider me gone, sir," I stood up, and as I walked out the door I said, "You'll see".

Sure enough, within the next few months, the newspaper mentioned a new island called La Isla Magica. The company made an enormous profit from the island as it became a tourist attraction. Now, there are hotels there and tour guides. I think that is hilarious because the tour guides don't even know what they're touring. I'm glad that Henry told the new person they sent to the island his idea for the name because I never had the chance to tell anybody.

A Quick Trip

by Antonia Moreno

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

I got off the bus from the middle school with my backpack in one hand and a paper case used for art in the other. My bags weigh at least 200 pounds all together, and I grunted under the weight. I walked on the side of the gravel road, staying close to the tall bush wall that covered the fence. Between the cars and the bush, I felt claustrophobic, but I quickly walked out before I could panic, slipping through the small gateway next to the dance building. I kept on walking a few paces until I reached the end of the wall of the building where there was a small sidewalk, with open land around it that turned to the left towards the open entrance of the high school. I faced a semi-circle bench that wrapped around a shorter wall. Behind it was a similar semi-circle elevated floor. My soccer bag was on the floor next to my sister's volleyball bag where I had left them that morning.

I dropped on the bench, exhausted, and took a small break. I had been carrying my backpack and case the whole day around the whole school. I hated my design class. I had to lug around a light, yet impractical large paper portfolio around. All of my designs and sketches and rulers were in the portfolio, and I needed to finish a project by the following week. It was a stressful and fast-paced class. I took a sip of water from my water bottle and dropped my backpack and portfolio behind the bench on the floor next to my soccer bags. I then grabbed my soccer bags and headed towards the girls' locker room. I went down a long hallway and turned to the left. There was a door labeled Girl's Locker Room and I ducked in. Walking to my regular space, the benches in the middle of all of the lockers, I placed my soccer bag in my locker and sat on the floor.

My phone buzzed. My dad texted me reminding me to get ahead on my homework before practice so that I wouldn't have as much homework to do at home. I waved it off since I didn't have to do much, just a few pages of math and my design sketch. I heard the bang of the locker room door, and I looked up. Facing me with a creepy stare was my friend, Charlotte. I flinched.

"God, why do you always have to do that?" I asked.

"Haha, it is funny seeing you angry," she said.

She threw her bag down on the floor, carelessly. Charlotte was an... interesting person. She was cousins with one of my best friends, so we got to know each other over the years. Yet, she was very rude, and usually talked back to the coaches whenever they gave her feedback on her drills. She was also careless, which could've been due to the lack of attention her parents gave her. She was older than me by a year, but she was still on the lowest level of her grade. Charlotte didn't try in school because she always made-up excuses to get out of assignments. Her laptop was out of battery so she couldn't turn it in on time, she wasn't aware of the assignment, etc. I hated her attitude, and my parents and sister warned me about her. But due to the fact that I hung out with her most of the time, she had grown on me.

"I'm starvingggg" Charlotte groaned.

"Why don't you get something from the vending machine?" I asked.

"They're all cleared out," She stated.

Suddenly, one of my teammates, Evelyn barged in and yelled, "CHAR THE FOODS HERE!"

Charlotte jumped up and ran to meet Evelyn. Evelyn showed her phone which said that her UberEats had arrived at the school.

"What?!" I exclaimed, "You got Chick-Fil-A??"

"Yeah, it's because I didn't have lunch today and my parents let me," Evelyn said.

"We're sharing," Charlotte declared.

"Aw, no fair, can you please share some Evie?" I asked.

"Fine but you guys have to come with me to pick it up at the front of the school," she said.

We agreed, but before we could pick up the food, we had to change into our soccer clothes, which included a dark green shirt and white shorts. I braided my hair quickly so it would be out of my face for soccer and grabbed my thin headband to keep fly-aways away from my face. We ran outside the locker room and headed to the front of the school. Running always helped me release stress. Whenever I feel stressed or anxious from the amount of homework I have, I always go outside to run or do some drills with a soccer ball. It makes me feel, I do not know, calmer. As we got to the front, Evie called the lady who carried her UberEats. She appeared and handed

her the food. We thanked her and headed to an empty table to explore the goods. She handed us a red box with three chicken strips, and Char and I took one.

"Thank you so much; you are such a life saver," Charlotte said.

"Thank God you saved us," I said. "All of the vending machines are cleared out."

"Ugh those people are so annoying, and why can they not refill?" Charlotte said, making a face of disgust.

It was those types of comments that I hated. She would always complain about the smallest things. She would complain about practice, the vending machines, and school. And the worst part was that she would always rant about it to me. I hated it because it really did affect me; it made me more negative towards school and feedback in practice.

"Ok, let's go back to the locker room," Char said.

As we walked back, I wondered if anyone else noticed that Charlotte wasn't a good person. Her personality and attitude were horrible towards any other adult, and she would talk bad about her friends behind her back. To me. I felt tempted to tell the other girls about everything she said about them, but I did not want to cause drama that would split the team apart.

"Oh my God, I just had the greatest idea!" Charlotte said, "We should walk to Starbucks!"

"I have so much homework to do so I cannot go," Evie said, sadly.

"Oh, V, can you please go with me?" Charlotte asked, pleadingly.

"Um, I do not know. Is it not super dangerous?" I pointed out.

"No, of course not. I've walked with Tracy before," she said.

"But it's pretty far," I stated. "And you have to cross a bridge, right? I am pretty sure I do not want to die today," I said.

"Do not worry. It is super safe. I promise," Char said.

"Oh, if you guys are going, can you guys pick up my order?" Evie asked.

Then, the locker room door opened, and Tracy came in with her uniform on, saying, "Wait, you guys are walking to Starbucks?"

"Yea," Charlotte said.

"Can I order something, and you guys pick it up?" Tracy asked.

"Sure," Charlotte agreed.

I was reluctant to go. Something in my head was nagging me, but I was not sure what it was. However, Charlotte reassured me that we would be safe right? Tracy had walked with Charlotte before. But wasn't it a small sidewalk? Super close to the road? I did not know what it was, but I certainly did not want Charlotte to walk alone. And was it not close to practice time? Practice started at five-thirty, and it was currently four-thirty now....

"Um, it is close to practice time..." I pointed out.

"Oh, do not worry, it only takes about twenty minutes walking there and back," Charlotte said.

And then I found myself on a short, dangerous adventure just for coffee. I agreed to go as long as we would be back in time for practice. I was nervous yet, somehow happy that I had the chance to do something for my friends. We headed out of the gate to the school and onto the sidewalk.

"This is going to be so much fun," Charlotte said.

"Are you sure this is safe?" I said, nervously.

"Of course, and plus, my mom let me," she said. "At my old school she would have never. The streets were usually home to homeless people, and it was pretty dangerous."

"Oh."

"Do not worry, my mom would not have let me if she did not know for sure if it was safe or not," she said.

We walked down the street and reached a curb, then turned right and headed on a curve towards the bridge.

"What if a crocodile comes and eats us?" I said, anxiously. "Or what if we get kidnapped? Or what if—".

Charlotte cut me off, "It is ok, just do not think about it too much."

We crossed the bridge, and there was a tall wall of grass and weeds on our right and most of the weeds were leaning against us, so we shuffled a bit to the right. Now, we were VERY close to the edge of the road. I could feel the wind of the cars, whizzing past us every now and then.

"Charlotte, I am really scared," I said.

"It is ok," Charlotte said, distracted.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

"Nothing, do not worry about it," she dismissed.

“What is it?!” I half-yelled.

I looked behind us and to my horror, I saw two men, an unnoticeable distance away, tall and muscular looking at us with determined expressions. I was terrified. I knew right then and there we were going to get kidnapped. This was it. Who would have ever thought that walking to Starbucks would be my end? I lost it. I grabbed Charlotte’s hand and ran as fast as I could to the plaza where the Starbucks shop lay. Our advantage was that we had a good head start and we lost them in the maze of people there.

“OH MY GOD,” I panted. We were both gasping for air. “This was such a stupid idea,” I said.

“It will all be worth it once we get a nice refreshing strawberry acai,” Charlotte said calmly.

“Are you insane?!” I yelled. “We almost got kidnapped and you are thinking about getting a drink?!”

I was so mad and could not comprehend how this *imbecile* could be so calm about our horrible experience. I fumed in anger, yet I kept calm. I also had not realized that in this entire time, my phone was buzzing with notifications from my family group chat. My parents, apparently, found out that I had snuck out of school and did not tell anyone. My sister was furious because I had apparently walked past her while Charlotte and I were going to leave the school. My mom was so disappointed in me. How I could have possibly let Charlotte rope me into almost risking my life. We walked in and ordered our drinks which unfortunately seemed to have run out of strawberry acai altogether. So, we just ordered a different refresher lemonade and walked out. As we walked out of the Starbucks with the bag of drinks and food, we headed back to the school.

“I am never doing this again,” I said.

“Why not? It was so exhilarating,” Charlotte said.

I looked at her dead in the eye with an expression full of anger, shock, and disbelief.

“Are you mentally okay?” I said calmly trying not to let my bottle full of emotions burst.

“What?” she said, innocently.

My eye twitched. I could not believe this girl believed that after that near-death experience that it was ‘*exhilarating*’. Something must have happened with this girls’ childhood. Either her parents did not raise her right or she was genuinely insane.

“Are you not terrified at what could happen to us now?!” I screamed. “Those guys could have kidnapped us or raped us or even worse?! And you have the audacity to say, ‘Oh it was *exhilarating*?!’”

Charlotte stared at me. She looked like a fish with her mouth gaping open like that.

“Come on Veronica, it was not *that* bad,” she said, “and we escaped so all’s well that ends well, right?” she continued to take a sip of her drink.

I thought that this girl was insane. I cannot believe that had said that. She thought that our almost-kidnapping was a normal everyday occurrence that had happened to her with Tracy.

As we reached the school, I received a phone call from my mom.

“Hello?”

“I cannot believe you. I am so disappointed that you did this. You could have been hurt or worse. I thought you were better than this and I honestly thought that you would have had some sort of conscience that could have told you that this was a dangerous thing to do. We will talk when you get home.” Then she hung up.

I almost burst into tears right then and there. I felt horrible that I had put myself in a dangerous position. I immediately sent a huge apology text to the group chat. Charlotte looked at me with a face of concern.

“Was that your mom?” she asked.

“Yea, she is really mad about me leaving the school,” I told her.

“Oh my God, if I had known that your mom would have gotten mad, I would have not asked you to come!” she exclaimed.

I highly doubted that. I had known Charlotte for many years, since we were toddlers, and knew that she would have begged me to come with her. She probably would have dragged me along anyway. But this was not Charlotte’s fault. It was mine. I was the one who made the decision to go with Charlotte. She did not decide for me. I did. And I needed to own up to that. I never realized how dangerous and cruel the world could be. I think my near-kidnapping experience opened my eyes and has now made me more conscious of my decisions. Especially into picking my friends right. I distanced myself from Charlotte a lot after that. I also distanced myself from other girls on my team who were like Charlotte. I received a bad vibe from them. My respect for most of them went downhill except for my two best friends who I knew were not mean or conceited or would do anything that would put my life or anyone’s life in danger. I would not go to the locker room after school anymore. I would just climb the steps to the second-floor balcony and do my homework there.

I found it to be a great help that I had all of that time to do my work. It was peaceful and not filled with distractions like Charlotte to keep me from doing anything. Whenever I was doing work in the locker room, she would always ask me to go to the vending machines with her or turn in her borrowed laptop to the library. It would always waste my time and I never realized exactly how much time I had been wasting until the day that my life had changed. All because of a “quick trip” to Starbucks.

One Small Thing

by Milla Naumovich

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The year was 2318. The major superpowers of the Earth were destroyed and most of the population was destroyed too. The people left were either dead or trying to find someplace to stay. A decade ago, World War III started and raged on for four years. The end of the world started when Russia and Germany got into a major conflict, and soon other countries like Japan, North Korea, and England got involved. The last time the planet had seen a nuclear explosion was on August 6th, 1945, when Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed near the end of World War II.

The whole world was in a nuclear winter. North America and Europe did not exist anymore. South America was in ruins and there were no people left there. The only country with enough people to note is Australia. The country was lucky during the war. They were not seen as a threat, so were not hit by too many bombs. But they were not fully unharmed. The radiation drifted to affect the whole world. The bombs did not kill many people, but the radiation killed billions of people. The people that were left were ridden with radiation poisoning, hunger, and sickness.

During the war, not that it matters now that the world is dead, all of the countries participating had their military wiped out, so immediately after countries with smaller militaries started to take over. Until the radiation hit.

The only animals that survived were small ones. Scorpions were small enough to hide in holes and they had shells that protected them from the radiation. Small animals like rabbits survived for a couple reasons. They were small enough to hide and protect themselves, and they are herbivores. All big animals died out because they lost their food sources or just died from the radiation. When the small animals were hiding or were dead, the big animals had nothing to eat so they died from hunger.

The war was fought for two years without nuclear weaponry, but eventually it had to happen. Russia bombed New York City with non-nuclear bombs, and the United States responded with atomic bombs. After that all rules and regulations went to the wind. Countries did not care about war crimes or ethics, because it did not matter as long as they won, right? Wrong. Two years later the world was in a nuclear winter with almost no people left.

The rabbit slowly turned over the fire. The veteran and girl were sitting in silence thinking about how far they had come and how far they still had to go.

“Are you going to have the feet or the legs?” the little girl asked.

The veteran answered with a grunt and the girl was left to decide for herself.

Everything was silent except for the crackle of the fire and the sound of the veteran snoring. There used to be the sound of the breeze hitting leaves and the rustle of footsteps in sand, but there was silence. In the world and in their minds. The girl had a family once. Before the war. She had a mom, a dad, and a younger brother. She often thought about how it could have been her, but she covers it with a mask of bubbiness. The veteran also had a family. He had a wife and a daughter who loved him dearly. There was no one left after the bombings.

Morning came and they began their long trek to the ocean. They walked in silence. Neither of them talked much. As they walked, they were haunted by past memories. Darkness, death, and destruction, though the girl could not seem to remember faces, only vague shapes in the back of her mind. The one thing she still saw vividly was red. Blood as her family irradiated around her. The sky as it lit up with flames. She would have given anything to forget that.

When walking in the deserted land, they had to be careful. Though there were not many things alive that could hurt them, they still had to watch out. Sometimes scorpions could climb out of their hiding spots in the sand and sting people's ankles. Those were the problems in the world they lived in. Not politics or big bombs anymore. Small things like open cuts and scorpions, and they were all the difference between life and death.

As they kept walking, the girl tried to make conversation, as she could not stand being left to her own thoughts.

"Isn't the weather today amazing!" she said sarcastically. Every time she hoped for a reaction. Anything. Just an acknowledgement that she existed, but he never did.

He only responded with, "Hmph."

Sometimes she hated him. He never wanted her company, never even talked to her, yet she loved him. He had been the only human she had interacted with in years. He acted like he hated her and would not talk to her, but she loved him like a father. And he loved her like a daughter, but she learned it too late. Over the months they had known each other they had not talked, but they had grown closer. The girl knew he preferred rabbit over bugs, and the veteran knew that she loved him, but he was too afraid to tell her. He lost a daughter once; he would not let himself love someone like that ever again.

"We are almost to the water. Start gathering wood," the veteran said. That was the first time he had said a full sentence since they left for the water four days ago. The girl was grateful, but she knew that when he talked, he was overly stressed. They had a map that was not damaged in the bombing, though the islands that they needed to reach were cut off. The veteran said he knew where they were, but the girl was skeptical. As they walked, they saw pieces of metal and wood from broken buildings and automobiles. They were risking everything by using the pieces because most of the pieces were rotting or rusted. This meant that the structural integrity could be nonexistent in the material and what they were making could collapse.

The girl's arms were completely full by the time they reached the beach, while the veteran was holding one piece of scorched bark. She was used to doing everything, so she began putting the pieces together. Ever since they met, the veteran had been slowly becoming sadder and slower. She had not heard much of his story, only that he lost a daughter and a wife.

They, as in she, used a makeshift hammer made out of a large stone and a thick stick to slowly build their boat. While the girl did this, the veteran was making a fire. He learned basic skills in the army, so he did what he was good at. It gave him bad flashbacks, but he was willing to do whatever it took to keep her alive, even if it meant sacrificing himself, not that he cared much about that anyways. He fell asleep by the fire as she kept working. The rhythmic beat of the hammer hitting the wood lulling him into the darkness. She resented him more and more each time he did something like that, but she went over and put her coat over him anyways, which left her without one in the cold breeze. She hammered into the late hours of the night until eventually her exhaustion got the best of her, and she fell asleep hunched over the side of the unfinished boat.

The next morning, right before dawn, the girl woke up with a sharp pain in her back. She was too tired to lay down, so she suffered the consequences. She did not mind, though, because it was nice to feel something other than sadness sometimes. The pain slowly subsided as she got up and walked over to the veteran.

"Time to wake up. We have to get moving," she said as she gently nudged him.

"I'm up. Shush," the veteran whispered as he drifted back to sleep.

The girl let it go that time and went back to working on the boat. She beat the hammer into the makeshift nails and wood as the sun rose over the dunes and started falling. Only then did the veteran wake up and started helping around. He put out the fire and started dragging the boat to the edge of the water. It was already the late afternoon, and the veteran knew it might be dangerous to row into the open water at night. Neither of them was a scientist; they did not know if the animals underwater were affected from radiation. They might have been horrible creatures that ate anything they could find, or they could be dead. Who knew, maybe life underwater was thriving with the absence of overfishing and poaching. Anyways, he decided to leave and row through the night so they could get to safety sooner. He did not care if he made the journey or not, but he had to make sure she did.

She got in the front, and he got in the back with the wooden paddles she made. He pushed them out, but did not start rowing, so she grabbed the paddles and left.

She said, "It's okay, I can row." Though really, she felt neglected. She rowed and rowed until the moon was at the top of the sky. The veteran was asleep. The only time she could find peace was in the middle of the night. That was part of the reason she was okay with helping him so much. She used to learn about the constellations with her dad. While most were not visible because of light pollution, she remembered tracing over Orion and the Big Dipper with her finger as she and her father sat on their patio looking up at the night sky.

Sometimes because of all the storms, there was nothing to be seen, but ever since the bombs the sky became clearer. In the first few days the sky was not visible at all, just like an air pollution crisis she read about in her history books. But slowly, very slowly, the constellations started appearing at night. Her dad was an astronomer. He was always looking up. He wanted to create a colony in space where people could live happily without the burdens of climate change or political warfare. The plan was fully organized and about to start when the bombs hit. Her father died first from head trauma. At first, she was filled with grief. She hated everyone and everything, but after that she only felt regret. She wished she shared more time with him and her mom. When she looked at the stars and saw Orion, she thought how lucky her dad was. He died first, did not have to watch the rest of her family die, did not have to live with the fact that he was the last. He died from the first small attack on her country, just like Orion being killed by a scorpion. Just one small thing.

She looked up at the constellations and saw new ones. She did not recognize them, but she was comforted by the sight of stars. Maybe after all of the destruction is cleared in a couple hundred years or a couple million, life can start again. Maybe they can do better for the world than humans.

The paddles were getting past the point of calluses, her fingers were rubbing raw, but she never woke the veteran. At about two A.M. she felt a shake in the boat. The veteran woke up with a start.

"What was that?" he asked the girl.

She responded, "I have no idea. It felt big though." They looked under the boat, and there was a giant fish. Or a whale, she did not know. It was right under their boat, but neither of them was scared. If anything, they were excited; well, the girl was. She looked where it came from and there was another smaller one, but it had a fin coming out of the water. She looked around and panicked.

"The fin is going to hit the boat!" Their boat was not stable enough to withstand the fin hitting it. Especially not with all the weight on it. The veteran knew this and hesitated. When it finally came to it, he realized he did not want to die. His daughter would have wanted him to live on, but he did not know if he could. He lost his wife in the third wave of bombs. Though Australia was safer than other places, it definitely was not safe. Waves of bombs kept coming. The first couple were not nuclear, but then the fighting escalated. He hid in his family bunker. He had run from the war at the first sign of atomic bombs. He would either die or be killed for committing war crimes if he had not run. He felt, but he would never regret saving his daughter's life, even if it only lasted for a little while.

The fin kept approaching the boat and he just sat there. He was conflicted, but eventually he decided. He jumped off the boat and swam towards the fin. He grabbed his hunting knife out of his boot, and with its rusted handle dragged it across the fin. The animal quickly changed its intent. It lifted its huge tail out of the water and smacked down. The girl was safe because the boat rode the waves, but the veteran was sucked under. She regretted never making him finish his meals. Never letting him sleep even longer than she let him. Never making him exercise. He went under the wave and did not come up. She waited and waited. After the animals passed, she still waited. She waited and looked at the stars until the stars faded. It became bright blue with a tint of orange. She hadn't realized how far she drifted.

As she sat, she thought. This time not about the far past, but about her journey with the veteran. She realized how many small things he did. He always gave her his portion of the food when she was really hungry. He killed the animals for food, and he always made the fire. She thought he hated her, but he was just reserved. He could not bear the thought of losing another daughter, so he did not show it, but she realized he loved her.

As she drifted along, she lost her way. The boat got moved by a current as she was thinking, so now she did not know where to go. The veteran always knew the way and had the map, and she never asked because she trusted him, but now she was lost. She started rowing frantically, but in doing so she wasted even more of her strength. She only had two weeks' worth of rations and she was all alone. She rowed through the days and stared up at the sky in the nights. Slowly, over time, she started hearing his voice. She imagined having a full conversation with him. Talking about how their life would be at the safe colony and how she could have finally gone to school, and he could have lived without fear.

"I will be able to learn about the war. I can learn how to stop problems, but most of all I can learn about the stars," she said to the veteran she thought was sitting behind her.

"Yes, you can, and you will," he answered. His voice was different, colder, but she did not notice.

Soon she began to hear her dad's voice coming from the night sky.

"Do you see that? That's Orion, remember? You were a toddler, but you loved that story," her dad's voice drifted down to her from the sky.

“Dad? I’m coming for you. I will find you—I swear,” she said as she rowed, but she kept rowing in circles, slowly going mad, and she never got closer to the stars.

Washed Away

by Chase Nuell

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

“Don’t worry, I’ll get the bill, I know you’re quite short on funds,” said Thomas, a wealthy 23-year-old entrepreneur. He was dressed in a black, button-down shirt, and matte black pants with a striped pattern along the sides. He had a black blazer that said, “Look at me, I’m rich!” which the whole restaurant could see. He had slick hair that screamed, “Well kept!” He wore classy shoes which shined in the dim-lit steakhouse, and white socks which contrasted the rest of his sumptuous attire. There was no doubt he was well off; he was treated like a luminary by all of the staff.



MAYA WELLE | Grade 8

They were seated at a square table in the middle of the main dining area. Covering the table was a clean, white tablecloth. “It’s ok to be poor,” Thomas smirked as he grabbed the bill along with his wallet. He pulled one of his many credit cards out from within his beige, magnetic wallet and inserted it into the credit card holder nonchalantly. “Shut up, just shut up!” Eric yelled at his former good friend. “Screw you, I’m done!” Eric threw down his napkin and threw his coat over his shoulder before marching to his Nissan and returning to his 700 square foot apartment.

Eric decided to go to sleep seeing as he would have to wake up in the early hours of the morning to meet with his fellow crew members.

Ring... Ring... Eric’s iPhone alarm jolted him awake and sent him running down the hall to the parking lot where he started up his car and raced to the 100-foot fishing boat moored at the dock on the bay. He helped prep the ship, and they were off to the heart of the North Sea in the height of tuna season. Amidst a particularly rough patch of water, a wave came over the port side and listed the ship to starboard. Eric, who was stationed starboard aft, was swiftly ejected overboard.

The waves hurled the fresh scent of the salty blue sea outward into the never-ending beyond. The wind roared as the waves tackled Eric and pulled him downward instantaneously, deeper and deeper within the depths of the rough Atlantic. The young 24-year-old opened his eyes. It was as if an angered wasp had pierced them. The stinging jolted him to his senses and realized the dire situation he was in; his animal instinct to survive kicked in. His thoughts screamed to him, *Kick dammit, just kick!* His feet twitched twice, before swinging into muscle memory from his childhood swim instructor. *Kick!* He continued the self-motivation to no avail, *just once more, please, please, please, please.* The kicking ceased and the final descent commenced. Eric had lost control of his body; it was his body that drifted aimlessly until it met its final resting place, the sandy bottom of the abyss. Eric’s body was pushed around endlessly, encapsulated by the Atlantic’s inhabitants, and the cold, thunderous claps of the sea far above him.

Four days later, Thomas found out. He sobbed endlessly as he stood whispering above Eric’s closed coffin. “Why,” he ruminated, “did I have to be so rude? I should have apologized.” He stared at the oakwood box set up neatly in the middle of the venue. “I was such a horrible friend.”

Then unexpectedly, Thomas felt a warm hand on his shoulder. “You will never be able to change the past,” a new voice started. “Remember, the only thing that you truly have control over are your own choices.” Thomas cleared his eyes and looked to his left to see a small, elderly woman no less than 70. “I am his mother.”

The Hidden Treasure

by Ashley Ortiz

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

It was a cold and cloudy day in the Amazon Rainforest and two childhood best friends were on their way to find their long-awaited treasure. Jim and John were traveling downstream to the start of their lengthy journey on a boat which has seen more adventures than either of them could have ever dreamed of. Surrounded by a dark, dense, green forest populated by strange species of animals, heading deeper into the forest with no end in sight, they discussed their plans for their easy hunt.

"Jim, how much longer until we can get off this thing?" asked John, with the exhaustion of traveling on the makeshift raft that Jim called a boat.

"Have patience John, once we find the treasure we will be able to afford whatever boat you want, but for now just be glad we even have one," Jim said as he smoothly stirred the boat.

Jim and John were just fifteen minutes away from arriving at their long-awaited destination.

"Jim, according to the map once we get to the beginning of the site we have to go straight until we reach the three pyramids, from there turn West until we see the tree houses, then go North to find a well-shaped like a star. The treasure will be buried at the bottom," John said as he twisted and turned that map to make sure he didn't miss any important details.

"Okay don't worry John; it can't be that difficult," stated Jim.

Finally, Jim and John arrived at the starting site for their excursion. They grabbed all of their belongings and supplies which consisted of backpacks, water bottles, flashlights, and some snacks. Jim confidently led the way to the three pyramids as John followed behind. As they headed deeper into the dense forest, they realized that finding the different landmarks was going to be a bit harder than they initially thought. The cloudy day and the never-ending fog didn't seem to help their situation either. Nonetheless, Jim spotted the pointy white tips of the pyramids, igniting hope in him.

"The pyramids are right there!" exclaimed Jim, "I told you this was going to be easy."

"Don't get too excited, we still have a while to go Jim," replied John.

From the pyramids the two men took a sharp right, not knowing what lay ahead of them or if they were headed in the correct direction. They just hoped that by following the map and being aware of their surroundings they would make it to the treasure.

"John, maybe we should take a break, my knees are starting to hurt from all of this walking," Jim said as he tiredly leaned against a tree.

"Oh wow... so Mr. 'This is so easy' is tired and wants a break," John replied mockingly.

"Be quiet John, you wouldn't be here right now if it wasn't for my navigation skills," Jim said, aggravated as he took out his ham and cheese sandwich and sat on an old log.

"All right, but don't come hollering at me when the sun sets, and we can't see anything because of wasted time."

John took a seat next to Jim on the aged log and started eating his trail mix containing cashews, dried fruit, chocolate chips, granola, and pretzels. The scorching sun shone right above the two men as they slowly ate their meals dripping in sweat. The sun setting felt like a distant threat as they were blinded by the sun beams. They heard a distant growl that questioned their sanity. Their minds got flooded with questions that threaten their sense of safety - Did that noise come from an animal? Is it after us? How far is it? Should we put away the food?

"What was that?!", exclaimed John.

"I don't know but it doesn't sound friendly," replied Jim.

"Maybe it's the dang food that you are eating," said John, irritated. "Did you even think about bringing ham to the rainforest? We could have been dead by now with that sandwich of yours!"

"I think we have bigger problems right now, other than if my sandwich has two slices of ham," responded Jim with frustration. "Did you consider bringing any weapons with you?"

"No Jim, I wasn't thinking of becoming someone's next meal."

As the two men wrapped up their snacks a much closer growl came from the forest, startling them enough to pack their stuff and flee. The terrain was very difficult to navigate, with little thought in mind, they rushed further into the forest only concerned about sticking together. The trees seemed to be reaching toward them as their branches stuck out. Different species of insects and birds populated the forest with a subtle hum disrupted by them gasping as they sprinted. Jim came to a halt. His knees finally gave out.

"I can't feel my knees!" shouted Jim. "Do you think the growling creature is still out for us?"

"There is no way after what we ran that any animal could even be near."

Drops of water fell on John's face.

"What is that?" asked John, "something just fell on my face."

As Jim and John simultaneously looked up, they saw a tree house hidden between the thick branches of a Brazil-Nut Tree.

"We did it!" exclaimed John. "We somehow ended up at the tree houses."

"I can't believe we are here after sprinting aimlessly."

Jim and John took out their map to make sure that they were headed in the right direction. They took a brief rest and continued to go West towards the treasure. They slowly strolled because Jim could barely walk, and they were both severely out of breath.

"Do you think we are close?" asked Jim, "My knees are killing me."

"According to the map, we should be right about here." "It says that the well should be between two pillars."

"I think I see one of them," stated Jim. "It's to the left of the kapok tree."

"Oh yea, and the other one is right there!" exclaimed John.

They hurriedly walked to see if the well was between the two pillars just like the map stated. As they walked up to the site, they saw the star shaped well covered in vines and moss.

"I can't believe this place is real and that we made it in one piece," stated John.

"I told you John, we had nothing to worry about, we would make it," replied Jim. "Now it's time for the fun part, digging in the well filled with dirt and plants to find the treasure."

Jim rolled up his sleeves and started digging through the dirt with his bare hands. John watched Jim with a disgusted look, while standing a few feet away. Jim grabbed handfuls of dirt and threw it onto the ground until he finally discovered a hard object buried under. He hastily threw all the dirt aside and pulled out a large, shiny gold block.

"Wow," said John with admiration to the beautiful, carefully carved block of gold.

The block was very shiny with carvings of the solar system intricately carved throughout.

"This is it," said Jim. "We really did it; we found the hidden treasure!"

"I can't agree that I thought this was going to be easy, but somehow we made it and found the treasure," said John.

Suddenly, a loud growl burst out of the forest and startled Jim and John.

"What was that noise?!" exclaimed John.

"I don't know, but it will be worse if you panic, just stay calm," replied Jim.

A large seven-foot jaguar appeared and launched itself at Jim, only slightly missing.

"Jim, Jim!" John panicked, "are you okay?"

"It didn't get me luckily, but I don't know what to do with the treasure." "I'm scared to lose it."

"Looks like you don't have much time to think. The jaguar is eyeing us down," said John. "Jim come, let's hide behind this tree until we can run and get out of this death trap."

They hid behind a big Brazilian nut tree until finally being able to run away in a hurry.

"Wow Jim, I didn't know you could run this fast!" exclaimed John mockingly.

"Yeah, and I didn't know you could be any more annoying," Jim snapped back.

As they were running Jim tripped on an uplifted root from a large tree and dropped the treasure, sending it flying in front of him.

"Ow!" exclaimed Jim. "My ankle really hurts; I think I hurt it."

"Oh great, and I thought this day couldn't get any more chaotic."

John hurriedly went to help Jim up and they hid behind some bushes while Jim assessed his ankle injury.

"I don't think it's sprained or twisted. I just put all my weight on my ankle as I fell. Wait, where is the treasure?!" asked Jim with concern.

"Oh no! It must have fallen out of your hand as you fell."

"We have to go back and find it. That's our only hope of succeeding in this world," said Jim.

"The jaguar is still back there; just be glad that we are alive right now for goodness' sake. Stop worrying so much about the treasure because when you get eaten by that wild animal trying to find it, there will be no use for having all the treasure in the world," said John, aggravated at Jim's obsession over the treasure.

"You don't understand. This can change our lives, John. We will no longer have to go back to our smelly, old dungeon of a room. Just think about it, we can live independently."

"What will all of that be used for when you become the jaguar's next meal and have no life to use the treasure for. Trust me Jim, it's not worth it. Imagine how sad your family will be if you never came back from your expedition."

Finally, after a lot of convincing, Jim realized that the treasure would be nice to have, but there would be no point for it if he died trying to retrieve it. He thought about his family and close friends and how it would affect them. He realized that the real treasure was his life and how vulnerable and precious it is. The treasure was all of his close friends and family that loved him dearly and his best friend John that had never left his side. He realized that the treasure could completely change his life, but what life was there to change if he died and left everyone grieving.

"You know what John, you are right. I don't need the treasure; the most important thing that I have is my life and I'm grateful to be alive and with you on this expedition. Thank you for always having my back and supporting me. Thank you for helping me make this realization that I've always been blind to see."

"Of course, you will always be my best friend Jim, I've learned so much from you throughout my life. Now let's get out of here so we don't end up as the jaguar's next meal," said John.

"Sounds like a plan," said Jim with a renewed spirit.

John helped Jim get up with his injured ankle and walked toward the river to get back on the boat and finally go home to the real treasure.

Cave Diving

by Erik Perez-Garcia

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

"Honey, I'm home! Wow, dinner smells delicious." The aroma of onions, garlic, and chicken created a cozy atmosphere.

"...stupid ocean...why...dumb friends..."

"Nothing bad is going to happen. I'm going to be with Bob!" He startled her, knowing right away what she was muttering about, but she wasn't convinced; nothing would keep her from being scared and angry about this trip.

"Oh, hey honey," she struggled to pronounce.

Recently that year, her brother had gotten so badly injured cave diving in the ocean that he broke his spine and lost mobility from his neck down. "You remember what happened to my brother, don't you?" She exclaimed nervously while slicing onions. He thought, *She's so mad she didn't even realize she's butchering the onions and vegetables*. Nervously attempting to make Evan's favorite food, chicken and rice, in hopes she could convince him not to go on this dangerous endeavor, she continued massacring the onions. The ding from Evan's phone jolted them both. When he glanced down, he noticed the date: the anniversary of her brother's disaster.

"Yo, is your wife still mad? It won't be the same without you," Bob texted.

"She's still mad but she'll come around," he texted with confidence but deep down wondered if he was making a mistake.

Bob had been his best friend since third grade, he knew everything about him, and held his trust with utmost respect.

Evan went upstairs. As he took off his captain's uniform, he thought, *Why does she worry so much? I'm around the ocean all day; I know it like the back of my hand*. Even so the sweat built on his forehead as he visualized how the conversation would go over dinner trying to convince his wife.

He peeked downstairs and saw the nervous look on her face and her eyes red from crying about her brother. The red in her eyes stood out like a buoy in the ocean. Evan felt bad but he also wanted to go with his friends to have fun since he spends so much time working and having to fix boats for extra money. *I'm going to go with or without her permission*, he decided.

He planned to slip out without her noticing him early the next morning. He ate his dinner listening to her ramble on, "It's so dangerous...I can't believe after Jose's fatal accident ...What if you get injured?" Tactically, he didn't even respond, he just rolled his eyes sarcastically. They went to bed, and he heard her murmuring in her sleep, "Please don't go." He laid there contemplating whether he made the wrong decision. After a bad night's rest, he woke up and his wife had gone downstairs. While walking downstairs he still felt the minty taste in his breath. He saw his wife making breakfast and coffee. She seemed very rested even though she kept sleep-talking the whole night. After eating, he nervously snuck out the window and got into his car, sweat dripped down onto his phone.

He yelled, "Hi Bob!"

"Are you ready for an adventure?" Evan helped prep the boat for take-off. When they finally got it into the water, Bob's friend Greg showed up.

Evan exclaimed nervously, "I thought only us two were going."

Bob said, "The more the merrier."

He looked like a simple guy, blonde hair, blue eyes, and yet somehow, a little bit intoxicated. Evan started to get anxious. At one point he thought, *Maybe my wife's right*. He decided to go anyway. The person Bob invited brought a cooler filled with beer and vodka. He shrugged it off thinking that his friend would be there for him and not drink with Greg. To his horror, as they departed the dock, he heard a *ccccshhhh* and looked over to see Bob and Greg had popped open beers. The sweat in his palms and the butterflies flapping around in his stomach made the trip all the more difficult. He decided to keep driving the boat out to the dive spot at the cave.

The red cheeks and clumsiness screamed drunkenness. They stumbled to the front of the boat to drop the anchor but struggled to even pick it up.

"Do you need help?"

"No, we'll be fine," Greg slurred.

He accepted this answer but thought, *These two are going to go over the side with this anchor*. Greg threw the anchor into the water, and it grabbed onto the bottom, but in the meantime, he scratched the front of the entire boat.

"Ok we're anchored now but Greg just destroyed your deck dude?"

"Yeah, maybe bringing drinks wasn't such a great idea."

Greg changed the subject, "Are you guys ready to cave dive?"

"Shouldn't you sober up a little bit and drink some water?" Evan asked.

"It's fine I feel sober already."

Bob replied, "You guys can go; I feel sick."

As Bob started vomiting over the side of the boat, they decided to go without him. They got their gear on and flopped into the water. Before long they found themselves in a small cave opening, nearly completely dark if not for the bioluminescent light. They could barely squeeze through the rocks but kept on going deeper and deeper past many fish and crabs that had probably lived there for years. The fish were mostly small, black stripes, with a yellow body. They were mesmerized by the sea life until they got lost and snapped back to reality. Trying to escape, Greg got frantic and started quickly flailing around. Evan trying to get him to calm down kept saying relax it's okay. Greg hit his mouthpiece on a rock. He instantly passed out due to the pressure under water. Evan could only think of what his wife said, "Please don't go." As he thought of his wife, he realized that a shark had swum in from the front of the cave and followed them in. The shark patrolled Greg's body, like a cop at a prison. Evan didn't know whether to try to get past the shark or leave and save himself. He knew that Greg shouldn't have been drinking and it was his own fault that he got his oxygen tank knocked off. He stares at his oxygen tank realizing he only had 5 minutes left of air, the minimum amount to make it out of the cave.

Holding his wife's warm embrace at Greg's funeral he knew he made the right decision.

Warp

by Julian Prescott

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

"What defines gravity," Jeremy inquired about his class.

The whole class shot their hands in the air. Jeremy called on a student in the back of the class.

"Gravity is the pulling force," the student answered.

Jeremy shot back, "wrong!" "Gravity," Jeremy explained, "is the warping of both space, and time."

"Riiinnnggg," the bell rang loudly.

The class left with haste, leaving Jeremy alone in the class. Jeremy did not realize the students had left, because he was taken back to L17-X43051-J72-X73 by the ringing of the bell. It made the same sounds as the loud firing of the Dyson Swarm Collective-refractory Laser. He was in a stupor towards the bright light focused over the lab table for that class's Oxidium-Exohydrut Reactullian experiment. It reminded him of the bright light of the great laser, which he, along with his fellow Relactoids, had come to adapt his eyes to.

Just as he was in this memory, a Gloriado, or G-Forlando announced himself, "Soldier!" Soldier was the informal term for Relactoids used only by those in the Merorian Forces.

"Cornall," Jeremy exclaimed, leaving his state of stupor. Cornall, commander, and General were the three terms that stemmed from the armies of L17-X43050-J97-E3, Earth, naming Gloridados.

Forlando was Jeremy's commander during the great war between the Irunamin and Berenthionis solar powers. The two powers, the two most powerful societies occupying a solar system, had been at war for 13 years, this was caused by the Irunamin outermost planet orbiting through a lightspeed path the Berenthionis were building. Only six years ago, it finally came to an end, after both sides realized the damage that it caused.

The two men greeted each other, and after a moment of silence, "You didn't just come here to catch up, did you?" Jeremy asked.

"No," was the general's response, "come with me."

After a call to his wife and two children, and their approval and encouragement, he was on his way.

Jeremy found himself at a large diamond-shaped table, located in a well-lit, wooden, and white room with many screens lining the walls. They all contained images and data on one central subject, a black hole. Just then, Jeremy recognized the other people sitting at the table. There was the president of his nation, Irunamin. Occupying the other seats were other important government officials, military leaders, and some of the nation's top scientists. Jeremy quickly introduced himself accordingly to all of those at the table.

"There is a serious problem facing us," the general explained, "and this table is full of all of the individuals capable and needed to stop it."

"Everyone," the president interjected, "even some extra, not entirely necessary."

The general promptly responded, "I was given the opportunity of picking one person that I saw fit for this role." The general continued, "You were the best scientist and soldier I have ever known under my command."

"That is subjective," the president stated.

"Regardless," Jeremy responded, "I am honored, and promise not to disappoint."

Just then, a tall man in a blue blazer, and black pants entered.

"Mr. R," The president welcomed the man with a firm handshake.

"Hello," The man held his hand out to Jeremy, "my name is Richard, and I would personally like to welcome you to this fine board."

"It is a pleasure," Jeremy shook his hand tightly and nervously, "I work as a professor at one of the schools established thanks to your funding program."

"Educating the future," Richard stated, "a very honorable line of work, you make this great nation what it is."

"Now that introductions are out of the way," the president announced, "shall we begin?"

"As is apparent by the subject of the many display screens in this room," the president began, "there is a stellar black hole that had previously orbited a young, lone, red dwarf."

One of the lead scientists of the nation's two seats left of the president continued, "completely consumed the star, and is now set on a course to consume our star, YD-L17-X43051-J72 in the next 2 years since it is currently 68,567912 XLS of distance from our star."

"Have all factors been taken into account?" questioned Jeremy.

"The only factor to take into account is the distance," replied the scientist, "we have all verified each other's distance calculations."

"But there are still the factors of how long ago the consumption of this star occurred, and consequently, the closeness of the star is based on this delay of light," Jeremy explained.

"We never thought of anything like that," the lead scientist exclaimed.

"You additionally need to account for the speed the black hole gained upon its gain of mass in the form of the consumption of the star, and the trajectory of our star, and solar system, and its speed," Jeremy added.

"None of this ever came to our attention," the scientist replied. "We will need ROCBs to complete these new calculations. That same moment, Jeremy grabbed a worn notepad that was ripped to be half of its original size from his pocket. He grabbed a tiny, dull pencil, that if sharpened one more time, would be nothing more than an eraser from his other pocket.

After a little under a minute of pure silence, without a single movement of a muscle save Jeremy writing on his notepad, Jeremy calmly set the pad onto the table along with his pencil.

"All calculations have been completed," Jeremy stated, "and they have been taken into account with your observations."

Richard, of whom had remained silent throughout this whole ordeal, finally questioned, "How did you do that?"

"Simple," Jeremy replied, "I know the speed and trajectory of our star, and the speed to mass ratio, and simply used that and your data on the black hole to precisely identify the time it will take until consumption."

"How do you know all of this? It would have taken us ROCBs to calculate this," the lead scientist asked in awe.

"It is in the curriculum that I teach all of my students," Jeremy stated. "They all could tell you the same thing; I just know it by heart after teaching it for all of these years."

The president asked, "So how long do we have?"

"All things considered," Jeremy started, "three xoins."

The entire room turned to a unanimous state of anxiety and fear save for Jeremy and the general.

"Your calculations have to be wrong," one of the scientists exclaimed, "we have observed it in our known position by our telescope, which is incredibly accurate." The rest of the room was in agreement with this to calm themselves down.

Jeremy calmly requested the members of the room to follow him outside; they all followed suit. Jeremy assessed the night sky for a moment before taking out his zPhone and taking a photo. Jeremy then opened the edit option on the phone and selected the digital pen tool.

"Please circle the point in the sky where you have aimed your telescope," Jeremy requested of the scientists. They did so, making a point to the far right of the screen.

"What do you see in that circle?" Jeremy inquired of the scientists.

"Nothing," one of the scientists replied.

The head scientist continued on this point, "You need the telescope to observe it." Jeremy then proceeded to draw a small circle around a very small orange circle cut in the middle by an orange line.

"My camera is not amazing," Jeremy stated, "but it's not an Adroit camera so it will do." He zoomed in on the circle that he marked. There was seen, slightly pixelated, the black hole, observable by its photon ring. The state of anxiety and fear once again came over the group. "You need to stop looking through a lens and see the universe through your own eyes.

The president broke the silence, "So how can we stop it?"

After a barrage of ideas from the scientists, Jeremy made a remark, "the black hole is impossible to redirect because nothing can push it away; it will simply be consumed, even light. Nothing can pull it because nothing has a greater gravitational force than a black hole. Also, no amount of sheer force, even our most powerful bombs, can destroy it. They will simply make it larger and more unstoppable. And antimatter will simply combine with the black hole as well."

"Is there any way to stop it," asked the president.

"Redirection is impossible," answered Jeremy, "so we will need to destroy it."

"And how might we do that," inquired the lead scientist.

"There are few definite ways to destroy it," Jeremy stated, "the first of which is time. Over time it will unfold itself. But we do not have time," Jeremy continued, "so the only other option is overfeeding. If we continually feed the black hole with matter, it will increase in mass, but not as greatly in volume; thus, the black hole will become 'full,' and will simply repel any matter that it would otherwise consume, and it would simply avoid our star, and never consume anything again," Jeremy finished.

The general asked, "how much matter would be needed?"

"Well, the red dwarf and other objects it has consumed already filled most of the space," Jeremy concluded, "so based on our data and my mass calculations, a little over sixteen H sized planets." The president nearly screamed, claiming the task impossible.

The general chimed in, "It's not impossible. I was secretly assigned by our previously elected government to manage inter-system bases," the general stated.

"How come I was never told about this?" the president exclaimed.

"It was never to be known unless in an emergency," the general explained. "We have many military outposts in other solar systems," the general continued. "We also have alliances with many of the neighboring solar systems. All we require is resources," the general concluded.

Richard finally stated, "I believe that Jeremy should manage the scientific aspects of this plan, and help G-Forlando, of whom should become the main military officer of this operation, manage this mission." Richard continued, "since all of my factories and resources are all located in this solar system, I will provide all of the necessary funding and resources for this mission. Otherwise, good luck, and let's get going."

Over the course of the next three xoins, through the solar group, asteroid belts were stripped of all orbitals. All dwarf and uninhabitable planets either too close or too far from their stars were taken. All rogue planets easily accessible, and all uninhabitable planets too difficult to terraform are all moved through the hyper-speed railways. These resources traveled at about $\frac{3}{4}$ the speed of light, twice as fast as the speed of the black hole's movement. All of this machinery to gather and transport the matter was powered by the energy provided by the R. Corp Dyson Swarm. All of this matter was then fed directly to the black hole.

By the time the black hole entered the Irunamin system, it had been nearly overfed. Its size slightly altered the orbit of several planets in the system by pushing them away, until it finally reached the YD-L17-X43051-J72 star.

The whole system watched from every planet as a brilliant show of light appeared in the sky in the form of part of the star's surface being sucked into the black hole in small quantities. It looked like a solar flare.

From the closest orbiting planet to the star shot the final form of mass, an entire moon of that planet, at hyper speed. After two minutes delay, half of the object was sucked in, the rest, rejected. The solar mass returned to the star in a brilliant impact, sending a shockwave that rattled the surrounding masses. While there was immense damage to the system, it still remained intact. The overfeeding was complete, and the black hole, very slowly, moved away.

Throughout the system, on all inhabited celestial bodies, was heard the cry of celebration. All of the major hyperspeed launchers on each celestial body launched all of the contributed items by the people of the system to the black hole. Most of the larger objects launched were repelled, but some of the smaller items were sucked in.

As the black hole slowly began to leave the system, Jeremy once again felt the warm embrace of his loving family.

"I have missed you so much," Jeremy hugged them, "I want you to see something."

After Jeremy explained everything, they followed him, along with the members of the meeting board, to several ships.

"Where are we going," Jeremy's youngest asked him.

Jeremy simply responded, "A marvel."

The board and Jeremy's family boarded the first ship, and Jeremy alongside the most influential members of the board, entered the second. They departed the hyperspeed launch station headed for the black hole.

As they approached, they saw the blinding glow that had now developed in the photon rings. All people aboard the ships adored the light.

"The rings are said to contain images of the entire universe over the entirety of time, from the light that it has captured," stated one of the younger scientists.

All adored the lights, all except Jeremy; they reminded him of the firing of the war laser. He pictured himself with blaster in hand and pushed the firing button.

Little did he realize, he was on the control ship of the two traveling. His pressing of the imaginary button converted to his unconscious activation of communication and control of the other ship. The command input propelled the ship towards the black hole. Everyone aboard enjoyed the closer view.

On the following ship, the entry of the head ship covered some of the light, allowing Jeremy to regain consciousness.

Just then, the foremost ship began to orbit the black hole violently. Jeremy tried to control it remotely but knew that there was no hope.

A moment later, the ship crossed the horizon line, or the point of no return. The black hole remained completely unchanged, but Jeremy, forever altered. The feeling of joy and celebration suddenly died, and victory, unsure.

Richard put his arm on Jeremy's shoulder, "I'm so sorry." Jeremy could not speak, only cry.

Several ROCBs later, Jeremy was sitting alone in his house, still overcoming his grief. He hears a knock on the door and opens it. Richard entered.

"Jeremy," Richard began.

He was cut off, unable to complete his sentence, "No money will help me."

"I'm not here with money," Richard stated.

"Then why are you here?"

"I am here with hope," Richard remarked, and silence follows.

After a moment, "Hope?"

"If you are interested," Richard began, "you'll quit your grieving, and do something to change the thing you grieve for." After a moment's hesitation, Jeremy arose from his seat on the couch, and followed Richard.

"I have done my research," Richard stated, "and am aware that all matter that enters a black hole, is not completely destroyed."

"Correct, and?"

"Is it also correct that there is a theoretical method to completely destroy a black hole, other than time?"

"Theoretically, yes."

"What would be necessary?"

"I know that my guess was wrong," Jeremy responded, "I'll need all available data on this, and all other black holes: photos, sounds, all eaten matter, everything you've got."

"Good to have you back," Winston replied.

In the same meeting room, the board reconvenes. Yet most of the seats remain unfilled. Nevertheless, a new objective.

Provided with all the necessary data, Jeremy announced, "This plan is not guaranteed to work, but we all need hope." Jeremy continued, "overfeeding must be truly complete. Thankfully, most of our work has been done for us, the black hole is filled with planets, and my family," Jeremy began to tear up, but collected himself. "This black hole spins, as was seen by the ship orbiting it before being consumed," Jeremy stated. "To overfeed to the point of implosion, we will require an equal distribution of mass, small mass, into the black hole, which could not be fully absorbed if all in one," Jeremy claimed.

"Then we have a plan," Richard nearly screamed, "I will provide funding; General, you may provide transportation of the matter, and we'll blow this thing up!"

The matter was easy to collect, calculated at the size of a large asteroid with a significant gravitational pull. The asteroid was sent to Richard's processing factories, where it was separated into microfibers.

"This ROCB, 1.723K NC, in Kazakus, Cordion, in the Irunamin, YD-L17-X43051-J72 system, Jeremy Statiner will give the command to send a grain dwarf planet to bring forth the demise of the black hole that has plagued us. He does it for family, and for humanity!" The general announces. The lever is pulled.

For twenty-five minutes, nothing. The matter took time to arrive, and the resulting light took slightly shorter. The entire system sat anxiously in anticipation.

Finally, there was a light in the sky. Then, the entire sky went bright. Clouds provided some cover, but the explosion is over fifty times brighter than YD-L17-X43051-J72 in the sky.

After several minutes wait, the light died down. Nothing was left of the once system-destroying force to shear power.

"One xoin ago, lay rest the the black hole dubbed Raquzmir; and today, we stand by the singularity, which made Raquzmir." sounded the general's speech. The Irunamin space fleet was at the calculated location of the singularity. It was concealed in a sphere of Kloranhaniun, which contained the mysterious properties of the

singularity. Recently thereafter, the general was elected to become the president of Old Irunamin, or nowadays, Raquzmir. I was given the honor of heading the study of the singularity, and worked to unlock it, despite the many wars fought over the singularity. Unfortunately, the man of whom made this entire journey possible, Mr. R, perished while attempting to harness the power of the singularity physically interacting with it in nothing but a protective suit. He is likely suffering in eternal pain. You all have heard this history in far greater detail in your schools. I would simply like to remind you of our past, and the journey taken to be here, where we are today. We now, 20 REOSFPKCs from the day of Raquzmir's discovery, have teleportation, near immortality, and recreation of matter unlocked by the singularity. I am offered this wonderful award today for all of my innovations. Yet, the real reward was my greatest discovery, my family with me, once again. Thank you." Jeremy accepted his award and embraced his loving family.

This is the story of Raquzmir (YD), of my past. I was sent here by the raw power of the singularity, to this young, new universe. I did do my research and know that the photon rings of black holes contain images of the whole universe. Yet I never could have learned the true *Universal* power of the singularity. I write this book to contain all of my knowledge, for which, the singularity has granted me much. I have learned everything that happened, and will happen, I know what happens next...

Thus, as I wait until the time is right for me and this universe to shine, I write this book containing all of my knowledge:

WARP

The Blink

by Isabel Prusky

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Gartweg 12, 3 B.B, 14:08 AM: Alarms began to blare frighteningly loud in every house. These were alerts to tell everyone to turn on their radios. The air was hot and sticky. Everyone had been inside all day, waiting for any information on what had been causing this heatwave.

"I know you all are waiting to hear an update on this weather, but I am unable to provide any information right now. Instead, I must inform you all of a different topic. The people of our nation have become increasingly more secretive and dishonest towards the government. Hitherto, we have been implementing new laws to try and create a better society where our citizens obey the law and are able to comply with the set social standards. But those have failed. Your lack of ambition to collaborate is disheartening and disappointing. So, we have called engineers and scientists from across the nation to create chips that will be applied to the back of everyone over eighteen's neck in the next one to three years. These will collect data about our citizens' everyday lives to allow the government to ensure a civil, happy society. Do not be alarmed by this protocol, the chips are completely harmless. More information will be given as the process progresses," announced the President of Albanor.

Whispers spread across the streets. There has never been any trust between the government and the people. Now that the government would be collecting data, without anyone knowing what they would be looking for, everyone was wary. This seemed to be the worst news they could possibly receive.

Dargenok 23, 1 B.B, 6:27 AM: Patient 263 struggled to open his eyes as the fluorescent lights shone in his eyes. The beep of the heart rate monitor rang loudly in his ear, breaking him out of his daze. He lifted his arm to rub his eyes to get them used to the light.

"Where am I?" He questioned, unsure if anyone was even in the room.

A few days ago, Patient 263 had been on his way back from work when a car crashed into him on the intersection at high speeds. There had been damage to the entire left side of his body, including three broken ribs, multiple fractures all over his arms, and a severe concussion.

"You're in the Creci Medical Center," a nurse responded. "You've been unconscious for two days."

As Patient 263 began to regain consciousness, he saw a tall, slim, young woman with shiny auburn hair and a stern, astute look on her face. One could assume, by the way she held herself so upright and how tight her bun was, that she certainly was not to be messed with. As she approached him, the click clack of her heels boomed in his head.

“What type of nurse wears heels?” he thought. He brushed it aside, as he had not been to the hospital in years and wasn’t very sure who she was. He had an unimaginably painful migraine, clearly not being helped by the flickering lights and the hullabaloo caused by the busy upstairs floors in the hospital. As he looked around, he began to notice how run down the hospital was. The walls had patches of paint ripped off; there were stains on the floors, and dust on the rim of his bed, as if the hospital had never been cleaned. Albanor had never been a wealthy country; he was not surprised at the uncleanliness of the room and the lack of supplies.

“Now hush and go back to sleep. Your body has been through a lot, and you must get a proper amount of rest to recover,” demanded the stern nurse.

Patient 263 could not keep his eyes off of her. Her skin glowed in the bright lights, and her deep gray eyes seemed to pierce through whatever she looked at.

“You must,” Patient 263 stuttered, “tell me your name”. The nurse scoffed and walked over to his bed. She grabbed a mask and slowly put it over his face.

“Count down from 100. 100, 99, 98, 97... good, you got it,” She encouraged convincingly, with a conniving smirk on her face.

Dargenok 23, 1 B.B, 28:34 PM: Patient 263 woke up with a possibly larger migraine, but now he was able to open his eyes fully. The lights were now turned off, and his surroundings were pitch black. He was not very sure where he was, neither could he remember what day it was, or why he was there. He looked around, but nobody was in sight. He crept out of bed when he heard his stomach rumble. He hadn’t eaten in days. As he tiptoed into the hall, he noticed a sign: “CRECI MEDICAL CENTER”. This was the new name of the hospital that had been bought out a few years ago. He continued cautiously towards a room with a blinking light shining through the crack of the door. The room was labeled “CHIP EXPERIMENTS”.

“Release them,” demanded a man with a deep voice.

“But Dr. Lergis, these prototypes aren’t ready yet! We don’t know what they can do,” replied a softer voice.

“Well then; that is why it is called an experiment. When I count to three, release them,” insisted Dr. Lergis with a firmer, stubborn tone.

Patient 263’s curiosity got the best of him, and he opened the door with a creak, just enough to be able to see who was talking. The softer voice belonged to an auburn-haired woman. Suddenly, he remembered what had happened to him and the earlier events of the day. He felt he had been there for a lot longer than two days. Patient 263 stuck his head through the door at the sound of the loud flutter of robot bugs.

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The bugs had attached to several patient’s necks, and all sorts of mutations began to occur. These chips, or robot bugs, not only collected data from the patient, but they were manipulating genetic data as well. “Clearly the data collection was a cover-up for something much darker,” he thought as he saw a man whose arm was slowly disintegrating and reforming. Dr. Lergis turned around, and Patient 263 ducked and once again closed the door.

“Nurse, make sure all the patients are in bed,” Dr. Lergis whispered.

Dargenok 24, 1 B.B, 7:02 AM: The pounding headache had once again returned this morning. He struggled to wake up until he saw the Nurse. The only thing different this morning is that he remembers the past events. Now he would know for sure if the Nurse was lying to him.

“Where am I?” Patient 263 repeated from the day before.

And just like expected, she repeated “You’re in Creci Medical Center. You’ve been unconscious for two days,” as she made her way over to the anesthesia mask.

There it was! Two days, just like yesterday. He had been living in a loop. But he had no choice but to give in to the anesthesia. He did not wake up until the next morning, and the same thing happened. This followed through for a few more days until Patient 263 grew anxious. Soon it would be his turn to be part of those experiments if he didn’t act quickly.

Dargenok 28, 1 B.B, 6:47 AM: Before the Nurse was able to slip on the anesthesia mask that morning, Patient 263 had snuck a large book under his back to make it uncomfortable to sleep. This way, he would regain consciousness in the night and be able to conduct more research on the robot bugs.

Dargenok 29, 1 B.B, 3:12 AM: The hospital was quiet, the only noise being the heavy breathing of patients and the beeps of heart monitoring machines. Patient 263 again quietly got out of bed and crept into the room labeled “CHIP EXPERIMENTS ” now unoccupied. There were multiple sheets of data spread out on a desk. [*Patient 205: died successfully; took too long. Patient 168: Patient’s mind shut down; patient had to be manually put down.*] A sudden realization hit him. These had nothing to do with gathering data. The robot bugs were killing

machines. He tried to open a drawer, and sirens began to blare. He heard fast-paced footsteps above him and raced back to his room, somehow evading the security. He knew now what he needed to do.

Dargenok 29, 1 B.B, 6:47 AM: The following day, Patient 263 snuck the book under his back once again. This time, he would stop the release of the robot bugs.

Dargenok 28, 1 B.B, 29:43 AM: Patient 263 woke up, he rolled over to see the time, and found a sticky note the nurse made as a reminder to herself. It read, "Last dose of anesthesia to all patients,". If this was the last day, that meant the robot bugs would be released today. At this realization, he sprung out of bed, and swung open the door, not caring how much noise he was making. Patient 263 ran into a room labeled "CONTROL CENTER," He looked around frantically until his eyes froze on a countdown. "Time until release: 13:42," His eyes shifted to a huge red button labeled "Stop Release," Checking to see that nobody was watching him, he slid over to the red button and pushed it without hesitation. He waited, but instead of the immediate results he had been expecting, he saw the button had required a password. One that he did not know. He began to open shelves helplessly, until he found a list of passwords. He began to input the combinations, making his way down the list, but none of them were working.

"Put your hands up!" a security guard yelled, backed up by around a dozen of the medical staff, who he now realized were actually members of the government. It was over. He slowly released the sheet of passwords and put his hands in the air. He trembled as the timer ticked down. 3... 2... 1. The loud flutter was heard all over the country as a tear escaped Patient 263's eye. A robot bug attached to the back of his neck, and he withered away. He was gone in less than a second.

It was very rare in one's life that one could say that one had heard absolutely nothing—complete silence. But that is the only way this moment could be described. As the citizens of Albanor began to fade away right in front of their eyes, the governmentals could only feel regret. *They* had done this. "Why did they feel this way?" Stacy thought. "This was supposed to be their moment of celebration. The plan... it had worked! The government was now in complete control. They were now able to create a new society, with citizens that would mindlessly obey every command, withholding the government's power. In this power-hungry daze, they had failed to realize the most important thing. The removal of adults meant they would never see their family or friends again. It meant leaving millions of children without family, shelter, or a proper education. They had known nothing was ever going to be the same. But not like this".

A man who had been ready to pop open a champagne bottle placed it on the floor along with a handful of glasses.

"What have we done?" Dr. Lergis broke the silence. Their selfish ways had blocked out the sense of humility and civilization.

The Uprising of the Robots

by Alexander Ramey

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

LEON MCDOWELL | Grade 6



It all started on a cold day in December. The year was 2000. Jetson Libow was a young boy of the age thirteen that lived in New York City. He had dirty blond hair, blue eyes and was one of the most intelligent kids at his school. His father was a well-known inventor who was famous around the world for his marvelous inventions. He had black hair though turning into white, a fragile build, and had always been passionate about creating concepts that nobody else could ever even remotely think about creating. He was known to have one of the most brilliant minds around.

Jetson did not get to see his father much since he was always working on his inventions in the attic. Jetson was always afraid of the attic because he always thought of it as a cold and dark place that possessed so much of the unknown. However, Jetson had always been curious from a young age about his father's work. Plus he was much older now.

The next night, Jetson heard a faint ringing noise coming from the attic directly above his minimalistic room. It was very late at night; therefore, everybody, in his house was asleep. Jetson leaped out of his bed to examine the attic.

"What could be causing that noise up there?" Jetson silently questioned himself.

Jetson then proceeded to climb up the ladder, lifted up the rickety trapdoor and entered the eerie attic. Lights of all sorts of machines flashed and flickered which would momentarily brighten up the room. Yet, one machine grasped his attention. This was the machine that caused the faint noise. It felt as if the machine was calling his name.

The machine was much different than the others and it seemed that it was still being worked on by his father. The machine had a saddle, two different levers with one being at the front and the other at the back, and large metal spheres circling around it. Jetson was very intrigued by the complication of the machine, thus deciding to hop on the saddle and engage with the machine. Subsequently, Jetson pulled the front lever wondering what would happen.

By virtue of the pulled lever, the machine started to blare at an earsplitting frequency while spinning at a high velocity. Jetson felt glued to the saddle and started to become sick. Jetson was unable to cry for help due to his fear. It felt as though every second was an hour. Jetson began to feel dizzy yet recognized the face of his father, seeming to be sprinting towards him in slow motion.

"Will I be okay, — dad?" stuttered Jetson.

He could not remember or identify what his father had cautioned him about, yet it seemed as if he had told him that everything was going to be alright. His father's face was now fading away. His home was beginning to disintegrate into nothingness. He had no doubt that this machine was no regular machine. It was a time machine.

Years were passing by in less than a second. It seemed as if the sun were a ball being passed around side to side that leaped joyously across. There was always a constant change in night and day which started to blind him. He could see large buildings being built up and being taken down. Jetson not only wanted to stop but needed to stop. He was much too deep in futurity so he concluded to stop even though he was aware of the risks that could occur if he stopped at the wrong time. Jetson snapped the front lever all of the way back which subsequently sent the time machine into a harsh halt sending Jetson flying out of his seat landing on a patch of dirt.

Jetson was very much weakened by the experience, a very unpleasant experience, and as a result, Jetson became passed out for the better part of an hour. Afterwards, Jetson was awoken by 861. 861 was an Elistic which is a rare species that has evolved from the human race. Jetson was very startled by 861 since she was very different from the people that he is used to seeing back home.

“Um — what are you and where am I?” Jetson declared.

“Hi, I am 861, I am an Elistic which means that I am one fourth robot and three fourth human. Elistics have evolved from the human race, and we have integrated into robots. This is the year 600,000 AD. I am only a partial robot which is why I am sympathetic unlike the other robots,” explained 861.

Jetson was extremely shocked by the current date and his surroundings.

“What has happened to New York City? Why does it look so run down and how come there are so many robots protesting on the streets?” Jetson remarked bewildered.

“So, you see, this was once an active city with humans all around. However, a group of robots were gifted superhuman intelligence in an experiment gone wrong in a laboratory and are now threatening a rebellion if they are not treated the same as humans. It is our mission to prevent them from causing harm to the city, yet the robots are too powerful,” announced 861.

The area around them looked nothing like New York City. There were no tall skyscrapers, honking cars, or angry folks wandering around. He saw a few tall buildings but there were mostly small edifices scattered around. It seemed like an abandoned city which was being controlled by a group of robots. Most people were cowering inside their houses. Robots were all over the streets in protest.

The robots were numerous, with several patrolling on each rooftop holding up a flag. The flag was red, white, and blue similar to the American flag; however in the center of the flag there was an illustration of a human seeming to be living with a robot. There was no doubt in his mind that the robots are seeking to be at peace with humans and they just want to be treated equally.

“Why would the scientists not be able to hack the programs of the robots and disable their extreme intelligence?” suggested Jetson.

“I wish it were that easy. However, the robots that were gifted the intelligence have already thought of that; subsequently deciding on killing each one of the scientists that may be able to do that. Nobody else works in that department and this shows that the robots mean what they are saying and will resort to violence if they do not receive what they want,” worried 861.

Jetson had always shown excellence in computer programming since he had been taught by his father. Therefore, he came to the conclusion that he could be the one that could do this mission.

“Take cover, we are under attack!” yelled 861.

Jetson did not reply. He had no time. They both rushed to seek shelter inside a dilapidated building. Immediately after, a rain of bullets began to crash down on the rooftop.

“What is happening? You have not told me that it is this dangerous!” exclaimed Jetson.

“I am sorry. These robots have been attacking our city for a while which is why it is looking so beat up. They will not stop this until they receive equal rights. They are rebelling against us” declared 861.

Jetson decided that he had done enough exploring and would want to go back to his home. Therefore, he sent his condolences and set on making it back to the time machine quickly. When he reached the destination, the time machine was nowhere to be found. Jetson was sure that he was at the right location because he recognized the buildings around it yet his searching was limited due to the constant surveillance of the robots. His best option was to stay put until he discovered further evidence.

He decided to find 861 to walk around with her in the city to further explore. In the center of the city, he discovered a crowd of robots chanting “equality for machines”. Banners were shown all around the cityplace about why robots must receive the same rights as humans or else they will eliminate each and every human. Jetson felt lost in such a horrible world and began to pray for a miracle.

Suddenly, a group of tanks and helicopters started to arrive at the scene and commenced an attack against the robots. It was true that humans had not yet given up on this battle. Jetson and 861 sought refuge once more under a roof where they could have a good view of the fight. It seemed as if his prayer had been answered.

“It seems that we are still fighting. Could it be possible that we can overtake them?” commented Jetson.

“I do not know. The robots are just too powerful, plus they have the same intelligence as you and I have,” replied 861.

The battle was very long yet the humans were defeated. The robots possessed many tactics that were simply unheard of in war which helped them defeat the humans. It looked very dark for humans with the

overpowering strength of robots. It seemed as though the last option for humans was to let the robots have the same rights. However, Jetson did not let that happen. Although he was smaller and weaker than the robots, he was more intelligent in many different ways.

“Where is the laboratory? I believe that I can help in this war,” instructed Jetson.

“Follow me!” gulped 861.

Jetson followed 861 into a one-story building far away from the madness which seemed to be under the radar. The building felt rejected as if it were not entered for a very long time. There were vines growing from the outer walls. There were cracked windows and an unpleasant smell. They both walked into a tiny room with a lot of machinery all around. Jetson recognizes most of the machinery and the controls because of what his father had taught him.

Jetson distinguished which controls were used to accidentally transmit human intelligence to the group of robots. Jetson was then able to enter the programming system of the robots and defuse them. Immediately after, Jetson and 861 started to hear loud thumping sounds continuously dropping on the earth. They sprinted outside to see what was causing the noises. They saw the robots on the streets seeming to be disconnected without moving, falling down in their place. All of the humans sprinted out of their homes and jumped joyously about the victory. Jetson ran towards the people to celebrate the victory with them; however, in the corner of his eye he spotted the time machine.

He said his goodbyes to 861 and those whom he met on his journey and rushed to the time machine. Jetson never really missed his family hitherto this exploration; however, he was able to realize just how valuable family was from being separated from them for such an extended time.

He jumped on the saddle, pulled the back lever all the way down and imagined what his family must be thinking when they did not see him in his bed this morning. He couldn’t wait to be back home.

“I never expected to travel into the future using a time machine to defeat a group of rebellious and intelligent robots on a Tuesday school night,” Jetson chuckled to himself.

Jetson Libow was able to prevent the AI takeover and changed the course of history to preserve mankind while demonstrating that the power of one can overpower the power of many, especially with a good friend.

The Golden Prince

by Joao Ribeiro

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

A large man with dark, blood-stained clothes and a face covering entered my office. He spoke in a rough voice, “It is done, Midas.”

“Good.” I responded. “I will reward you generously, and from now on, I don’t know you.” I gave him an envelope stuffed with gold Dramachas and watched him leave, hoping that I had bought his silence.

The sound of melancholic music echoed across the grandiose walls of the chapel. To many, this resonated sadness and loss; however, for me, it was music to my ears. I had waited for what had seemed like eons. Finally, the old geezer found his grave. It was time for me to take what was mine. His rule, although mildly successful, had been far too lenient and idle. He had been generous with taxes and hadn't even expanded our territory much since my grandfather’s reign. He had no right to be called a Cretan King.

With all the “condolences” from nobles, speeches, and ceremonies, I was becoming anxious. I wanted to skip to the important part: The will. I was the crowned prince, the primary inheritor to the kingdom of Crete, but I was still stressing about flaws in my plan. The old man had definitely been onto my intentions, and I knew very well that he favored my brother, Auld, for the crown anyways. If something went wrong with my plan, another funeral would be inevitable. Killing two heirs to the same kingdom might raise too much suspicion. I quickly brushed that thought aside and reminded myself that the king could not make the second heir the inheritor, because it would be an outrage to the kingdom. This fact settled my doubts for the time being.

When the time came to read the fate of the kingdom, reporters were flocking outside the room in which my brother, our mother, and I were sitting. The room was luxuriously decorated like the rest of the castle. Inside we sat with a royal butler who was to read the will. He began: "By the will of the late King Gordias, the palace, furniture, and the royal ship will go to Queen Cybele... His gold will be distributed between the princes...And the crown will be given to..." *This is it!* "...Platina?" My mother was the first to react, "This is ridiculous! The third princess's name has no place in the will!" My younger brother seemed puzzled, but I knew the story. The third heir, Princess Platina used to be a normal royal-just like my brother, however our mother forced her into an engagement with a neighboring kingdom's prince. She didn't agree to this marriage and left with no other option, she ran, leaving her position as a princess. Regardless, I needed to know why my father had put her name in the will.

Looking for answers (and maybe help) I approached my brother. Despite his lack of knowledge of this subject, I knew he wasn't a complete fool. In order to gain his trust, I told him that Platina was our sister that had run away. After a bit of nagging and some manipulation, I got him on board. And with that, we had begun our search for clues.

We began by splitting up and scouring the castle for clues. I went to my father's office first while Auld went to the royal archives. When I walked into my father's office, I was surprised. In contrast to the neat, orderly room I was expecting, it was messy, scattered with documents and relics. Maybe that geezer was not so simple. I scanned from document to document, finding many irrelevant things and even some more interesting secrets, but, alas, no will was found. When I was almost done with wasting my time, I found something that, at the time, I didn't know would change my life forever. At first, all I saw was a peculiar gold ring, laying on a gold pedestal within a glass case. This grand casing for the ring led me to believe that it was important to the old man, probably a valuable relic. Carefully, I opened the case and glared at the open, shining gold ring laying on an equally pure gold pedestal. I couldn't resist, the ring seemed to be drawing me in. My hand kept reaching closer and closer, until finally, I touched the ring. Spontaneously, a few things happened; the ring glowed with a magical aura, equally gold, and very painful tendrils crawled up my arm, and the ring began to float. While the ring seemed to be glowing brighter by the minute, I was still dealing with tremendous pain, as if I had touched Zeus's own thunderbolt. After I had recuperated a bit, the ring floated down, into my right ring finger, and began going back to the form of a normal, gold ring. I was in shock, "*What just happened??*" I had never seen such a display of godlike power. It scared me; I tried to remove the ring to no avail. It was glued to my hand with the very silk of Arachne.

Trying to wipe off my panicked sweat, I grabbed one of my father's handkerchiefs with my right hand. To my astonishment, the second the handkerchief happened to touch the ring, those same golden tendrils that had once covered my arm filled the handkerchief until it was solid, 24k gold. The sight of the shining family crest, glistening on the handkerchief was convincing enough to never show this power to anyone again.

Later on, after searching a few more locations, my brother had finally found something, a file formally titled: "The Will of Late King Gordias". The other will was a fake! But who would have made the fake and replaced it, and why?

Before I let my thoughts get ahead of the moment, my brother and I opened the file. Going through the irrelevant legal documents, we found it, the section titled: Royal Inheritance. When I came to open it, my brother seemed unusually worried. However, I brushed it off as him being worried about potentially not being the heir.

In the peak of my glory, I opened the page, fully expecting to see my name written in my favorite, shiny gold. Instead, to my horror, I saw the dreaded words, "**The crown, along with the position of king of Crete will be passed to: Prince Auld.**" I sat there, in total disbelief at what I had read. I kept staring at the words, hoping they would change just as magically as my ring had.

Noting my unusually disoriented appearance, I quickly tried to play it off to no avail. Auld had been looking at the paper from behind my shoulder all along and he knew. He looked just as afraid and surprised as I was. But some innate feeling told me that this was for completely different reasons.

Acting swiftly, I bolted for the door and locked it. The room we were in resembled a basement with one exit/entrance that I had recently blocked off. My brother was scared. I began my interrogation with a much more sinister voice,

"So, little Au, what mess have we gotten into this time. Tell me, what do you know about that fake will?"

"Ok, Ok I'm sorry, honestly, I didn't want the crown and I - I didn't want you to become king either. That left Platina. I've told you everything, so please leave me in peace!"

"You know, Platina can't take the throne- never mind. You know Au, I forgive you, you can take the throne."

“Really?” “Of course, little Au, you are my brother. Now, give me a fist bump for old time’s sake.”
With that I raised my right hand and so did he. Immediately, Auld went from my brother, to a treasured, gold statue.

Little Loved One

by Anabella Rodriguez

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Arguing again was Eno and Kyoko. They were notorious for their constant bickering over anything and everything. It wasn’t unusual for the neighbors to hear their nonsense but on this day, there was a new sound. The sound of alarms. Eno and Kyoko immediately froze as their ears were flooded with the noise. Their other and much younger neighbor, Aiko, began to cry. They were meant to be babysitting her together and instead they were arguing over her. They ran over to their parents in an attempt to figure out what the source of the sirens was. The entire building was filled with confusion and panic. They had finally gained sight of their parents through the crowd and ran to them. Instead of comforting words they receive strict instructions.

“Listen, you see there?” Kyoko’s mom pointed to a small door. “I need you two to go through and get to safety, okay?”

The children were visibly confused, scared, and lost but there was no time for questions. Kyoko’s mother scavenged for something in a bag she was carrying and handed her a paper.

“The most important thing is to keep Aiko safe. Nothing can happen to her. Now go!” she said to them, pushing them to go through the door on this mysterious path.

They all rushed to the door and exited without hesitation. The three hid behind a bush though not exactly sure what they were hiding from. Kyoko unfolded the paper from her mother and revealed a map of some sort. Eno, holding Aiko, looks over Kyoko’s shoulder to see the map as well. It had some drawings such as their apartment building, the downtown, and a forest they had never seen before. It also included a red line representing what they assumed to be the path they must follow.

“I didn’t know there was a forest here,” Eno said curiously.

“Me neither,” Kyoko spoke though seemed suspicious of it. “It says we have to get there for ‘safety’ so maybe that’s why it’s unknown.”

“How does that make sense?”

“Because then no one can find us.” Kyoko didn’t seem to understand his confusion.

“Then how would anyone know about it?” Eno tried explaining to her.

“They aren’t meant to that’s why it would be safe,” she told him.

This led to an entire argument between the two. Since they were both distracted, Aiko had the freedom to do as she pleased. She began crawling around and putting random things she found in her mouth. She soon wandered out of their sight, possibly not realizing she couldn’t protect herself from whatever dangers lurked in the area. Soon after the two agreed to disagree.

“Whatever. At least I’m a better babysitter than you, right Aiko?” Kyoko asked the baby expecting to have her statement supported. She was only greeted with silence.

“Look at what you’ve done; she’s gone!” Eno said nervously.

The two began searching for Aiko while trying to be as discreet as possible. They had no idea what the dangers their parents warned them of actually were and did not want to find out. They searched for Aiko for a while before they found her. They didn’t just find her though; they had found a dog as well. It looked like a golden retriever of some sort. Aiko was sitting next to it playing with its tail. The dog seemed to have a good temper and didn’t do anything to harm little Aiko. Kyoko walked closer and examined the dog as Eno picked up Aiko. The dog began walking away seemingly looking for something as Kyoko followed. They all followed the dog though they were straying from the path the map had set for them. The dog eventually, after a lot of walking, led them to a stash of food. Eno and Kyoko seemed shocked. Neither of them had seen anyone around the town at all which they found incredibly suspicious. Kyoko split the food evenly between the three and their newfound companion, the unnamed dog.

“So, are we going to keep it then?” Eno asked Kyoko.

“It helped us, so we might as well,” she explained to him and for once the two had nothing to argue about. They continued on their path with the dog. Eno, Kyoko, Aiko, and Dog wandered aimlessly about the town while trying to remain hidden.

During the group’s wandering they began to learn the many dangers of the world they never knew about before. The most common sighting was the drones. These drones were not only sentient but also corrupt. The drones once were things that helped around the town and in the past a rare thing to see. Now in this torn down, empty the drones were everywhere. They learned that the drones were no longer helpful the hard way when Aiko walked up to one and almost got attacked by it.

They followed the path for hours and made much progress. At least they hoped they made much progress as they did not actually know the forest they were trying to find.

They were now on track and finally had a slight sense of where they were going. The four of them walked for a while before needing to take a break. Kyoko and Dog searched for food and water for the rest while Eno and Aiko sat behind some bushes. While Kyoko and Dog were looking for sustenance Kyoko seemed to have some sort of bad feeling. She did not know what was causing it. Not much had gone wrong at all during the journey, but even then, she couldn’t shake this feeling of some sort of danger.

Dog sniffed around but for not too long before finding some mysterious round fruit that smelled surprisingly very sweet. Dog ate one and was unaffected which led Kyoko to believe it would be safe enough for humans to eat as well. Kyoko brought back as many of these little unknown fruits she could hold. They all began eating the little fruits and resting. Kyoko’s strange feeling of danger arose again, but this time there was a reason. In the near distance Kyoko spotted a drone and it was coming nearer and nearer to them. The drone was headed straight for Aiko at full speed. Before anyone could react, Dog jumped in front of the drone to protect Aiko.

“Doggy!” Aiko exclaimed. All three of them were frozen in shock. Eno stood up and investigated the scene. He moved the broken drone and looked underneath to find Dog. Dog was... dead? Inside of Dog was only wires, metal, and port that held a chip with the word “AIKO” on it.

“I don’t understand,” Kyoko said sounding very puzzled. “Dog was never a real dog?”

“Dog was a robot, but he never even tried hurt us like the rest did,” Eno spoke sounding just as confused she was.

“I thought all the technology was evil now. I’m so confused.” She seemed to have trouble understanding everything happening.

“Well, this one wasn’t. It broke itself just to save Aiko. Speaking of her,” Eno said as he gently pulled out the chip with her name on it.

“What is that?” Kyoko queried.

“I have no clue,” Eno told her.

“It must be important. Hold on to that,” Kyoko commanded him. Instead of arguing with her he simply nodded. The two decided to not discuss further and to just keep following the path the map set or them. Kyoko picked up Aiko and they kept walking in silence, all of them too stunned to speak after what just happened. Aiko seemed the saddest about the loss of Dog. While they were walking, she would occasionally ask where he was.

“Where is the doggy?” she asked and seemed quite distressed. Every time she asked, she got no closer to an answer and no closer to the truth. She asked over and over yet there was no response from either of the two older ones. Aiko had grown attached to Dog and both of them knew that. Neither of them wanted to be the one to tell her what happened or where he went.

Without Dog, Kyoko had much more trouble scavenging food for everyone. Dog always helped with his good sniffing and hunting skills. The breaks they took were also much quieter but the two had started fighting much less than they had before. Dog had some way of putting everyone at peace and even after he was no longer their travel companion the two were still at peace with each other. It was as though Dog had taught them a lesson, and they listened, and they learned. Now with them not fighting as much they also traveled much quicker now that they were not fighting over everything all the time. Soon they had arrived at a forest. A sight they had not seen in years. After walking in the forest for a bit they found a house that looked like the one depicted on the map.

As they entered the house, the first thing they saw was a machine with a sign that instructed the reader to insert the chip inside.

“Oh, wait I have that,” Eno said as he pulled it out of his pocket and placed it in the slot of the machine carefully. Nothing seemed to happen.

“I guess that was not the right chip thing?” Kyoko said seeming a bit annoyed they travelled so far for it not to work.

“Maybe it just needs a minute.” Eno tried to convince her to be patient.

After a few minutes the machine made a noise and hologram of Dog popped up. It was not like Dog was before though, because he now spoke on this. Dog was alive once again! Aiko was overjoyed to have her best friend return even if not physically. Dog’s hologram spoke to them explaining what was happening and what to continue doing to stay safe so they could see their parents again. They continued to live there following these rules. Every day they hoped one day it would go back to normal but for now everything was okay.

Ayden Feig: The Best Enemy

by Devon Roy

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

“He’s here! At *this* school!”

“I still can’t believe it.”

“Our basketball team will be *unstoppable!*”

Stanton Margolis continued to hear murmurs from his peers as he walked through the hall. But instead of being amazed like everyone else, he was fuming with rage. *Basketball tryouts couldn’t be at a worse time*, he thought.

“Stan!” yelled Trent Sitzler, his best friend.

“What?” replied Stanton.

“Go say hi to Ayden! I’m sure he’d like to talk to the reigning captain of the basketball team.” Stanton didn’t respond. Trent continued, “Stan, what’s going on? We’ve known each other since kindergarten, just tell me!”

“He’s his own person!” Stanton exclaimed. “I get that he’s Ethan Feig’s son, but why, on the very day of basketball tryouts, does he decide to show up, huh?”

“So that’s what this is about? Come on Stan, don’t let him intimidate you, it’s not like you won’t make the starting five.”

The bell rang. Trent and Stanton said goodbye to each other and headed to class. And funny enough, the first-person Stanton saw in class was none other than Ayden Feig. Stanton looked at him in disgust, thinking that he was the person trying to take his spot as Riverdale Middle’s starting point guard.

“Okay class, settle down, settle down. Yes, please sit,” said Mrs. Gruzka. Once everyone sat, she continued, “As you might have seen in the halls, we have a new student, so can we please give him a warm welcome?”

No way, thought Stanton.

“Alright, to start off the semester we will be doing a group project about Elements on the Periodic Table. And no need for you to pick your own partners, I have already chosen them!” Mrs. Gruzka continued. “Tyler and David, *Ayden and Stanton*, Harry and Logan...”

“What!” yelled Stanton, “are you serious Mrs. Gruzka? I don’t want to be partners with *him!*” he pointed at Ayden.

“Well, I was assuming since you were captain of the basketball team you two could build some chemistry.”

How could she possibly *think* that this was a good idea? If anything, they were competing *against* each other, not working together! Things could not possibly get worse. But somehow, they did. Ayden Feig was walking to his table. What made it worse was that Stanton wasn’t the best student, so he did not want to be distracted by Ethan Feig’s “attention seeking,” and “perfect,” son.

“I didn’t know you were captain of the basketball team! I’m Ayden, nice to meet you.”

Ayden held out his hand. Stanton rejected it.

"Hey, whatever you're trying to do, quit it. Are you trying to make me look bad or something?" Stanton said in a harsh tone.

"N-no not at all. If there's anything I can do-"

"Stop! Don't even bother lying to me. We'll settle this on the court."

Stanton argued with Ayden the whole class. In addition, the project was an absolute disaster. Stanton tried to be the leader but did not have good enough information. Ayden tried to help but Stanton would not let him. Yes, he did feel a *little* bad for treating Ayden poorly, but he deserved it, thinking that he could take his spot as captain and get away with it. The rest of the school day felt interminable. All Stanton wanted to do was prove to Ayden who was boss at tryouts. Finally, it was time, but when he got to the court, something seemed amiss.

"Coach, where's Ayden?" Stanton asked.

"I don't know, he's supposed to be here," replied Coach.

At this point Stanton was irascible. Was Ayden really that confident to be captain to not show up? And there he was, Ayden Feig walking onto the court with his dark brown eyes, slim body, and black hair. Still in his school uniform. And here's what really angered Stanton; instead of walking to Coach, he sat on the bleachers, like he was going to watch tryouts.

"Everyone, on the baseline! Quick, hustle!" Coach said. When everyone was settled, he told the team, "We are going to start off right in the action and do some one vs. one's. Make sure to give it all you have and show us coaches your skill. First up we have Stanton and Trent."

Stanton could see Trent smile. "Don't embarrass me too much, Cap; I want to make the team too."

For the first time that day, Stanton laughed out loud. "Ya' gotta earn it," he said.

To sum up the game, Stanton beat Trent 7-0 and did not miss a single shot. After the game, Stanton asked, "Coach, can I get some water?"

"Yeah, you definitely earned it," replied the coach.

As he was drinking from the water fountain, he heard the gym door open. It was Ayden.

"So why aren't you out there, huh? You're that confident?" said Stanton angrily.

"I was, but I don't think I'm good enough. The reason I came to talk to you was for some advice, because other than my dad, you're the best basketball player I've ever seen," explained Ayden.

Stanton was shocked, but still wasn't giving in. "So why don't you ask your dad for advice?"

You could see Ayden holding back tears. "I wish I could, but he's always on the road, and when he's at home, he shames me for how bad I play. He tells me that I'm a disgrace."

Many emotions filled through Stanton's mind, and he felt terrible for how he treated Ayden earlier. "I'm so sorry," he said, "how about you suit up, and you can be my 2v2 partner. I'm sure Trent won't mind."

"You're joking, right?" asked Ayden, his face now lit up with excitement.

"Not at all."

Ayden sprinted to the locker room to go and change. When he got back, it was his and Stanton's turn to play. The game started off with Ayden air-balling, and everyone laughed at him for it. His confidence went way down, and Stanton noticed it. "Put more arc on your shot," he said, "you're shooting line drives."

"O-okay," Ayden replied nervously.

After many made shots by Stanton, the score was 6-5. Stanton and Ayden were losing, but a three pointer would give them a win. Before the final play, Stanton made up his mind and gave Ayden a tap on the shoulder. "Shoot it."

"But you've been-"

"Don't think. Shoot it."

The play began. The other team expected Stanton to look like he was driving in for a layup, but then step back and shoot a three. Because of this, their opponents contested him more, leaving Ayden wide open in the corner. Ayden got the ball, and with no hesitation, took the shot. *Swish!* Game over. After tryouts, the coach announced who made the team. Stanton made it and was later voted captain for the second year in a row. Sadly, Ayden didn't make the cut. Although he was devastated, what he was really worried about was what his dad would think of him. Of course, Ethan was not happy, but Stanton continued to help Ayden with his basketball skills. However, they still had to do that science project for Mrs. Gruzka's class. So, a few days later, after playing some basketball, they went to Ayden's house. Even though Stanton and Ayden had been getting close, Stanton had still not met the man, the myth, the legend, Ethan Feig.

"Wow, I can't believe I was just fifteen for fifteen from the free throw line, thanks a lot Stan," said Ayden as they walked together to his house.

"Yeah, you're getting a lot better," replied Stanton, "you still have to work on your touch though, floaters are one of the best things to master."

Then, Stanton and Ayden got to the house and knocked on the door. Ethan opened it, and Stanton was struck aghast.

"Hey, Dad, this is Stanton, you know, the kid I told you about," Ayden told his father.

"So you've been teaching my son some skills, huh?" asked Ethan, "he sure needs it."

"I model my game after you, sir," said Stanton, still amazed, "it's an honor to meet you."

"Oh, please, call me Ethan," he said kindly. "Now you two do what you have to do. Have fun."

Ayden and Stanton, proceeded to walk to Ayden's room, and as they started to begin their project, Stanton got a glimpse at Ayden's report card from his old school.

"Wow, you got straight A's!" exclaimed Stanton.

"Er- yeah."

"Well, let's get a good grade on this project, because I have a C+ in science right now."

That day was when Ayden and Stanton's friendship sort of clicked. Even more than him and Trent. Stanton had nothing against Trent, and still made time to hang out with him, but the difference was Ayden helped build Stanton to become a better person. While Ayden became a better basketball player, Stanton became a better student. They ended up getting an "A" on their science project the next day. They used their strong suits to help each other become well-rounded people, and it worked. As Stanton walked down the hall the next day at school, the murmurs from his peers were still about Ayden. This time, unlike the first day, they were making fun of him, and about how poorly he played at tryouts.

"At least he was brave enough to go there," Stanton told one of the people trash talking Ayden, "unlike you. I can't believe you have the audacity to talk badly about someone who I bet is ten times better than you."

"Whatever you say, Captain Stanton," the kid mocked.

Stanton smirked and walked away. It was funny; on his first day at school, Ayden Feig was Stanton Margolis' arch enemy and thought he would stand in his way of being captain of the basketball team. Now, he had just stood up for Ayden and was one of his best friends.

The Power of the Past

by Daan Rutten

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The room was dark, and the only pieces of furniture present were a table with a light on top of it, and two black chairs on either side of the table. In the back wall, there was a mirror, and the man in the suit knew that people were standing on the other side, observing him, sitting there. The man had no idea how long he had been sitting there, staring at the ceiling. It could have been minutes; it could have been hours. But that thought was broken up when the door opened, which was blended in the wall.

"Hello," said the newly entered man, who the suspect guessed was the interrogator. "I will ask a few questions, and if you tell the truth, we will take good care of you. If not..."

"That's enough," said the suspect, "I will tell you the truth because I have nothing to hide." Even though the suspect was nervous, he knew what he was going to say.

"Well then," said the interrogator, "Tell me your story."

"First of all, it isn't just a story; it is fact, no matter how hard it is to believe. Second, I will not tolerate any interruptions. I don't care what you are accusing me of, but I have my rights. I am tired, and I want to get this over with." Said the suspect.

"That's okay," said the interrogator. "I will stay quiet, but sometimes questions will be asked." He took a block note out of his pocket and took a pen out of his other.

The suspect finally started his story, *"It all started when me and my fellow scientists started our work on our very own time machine! This isn't public, and we don't even have a patent, but we didn't want the press and the whole world to find out, because we wanted the world to be protected from that harm. It's already hectic enough with the wars going on."*

"When we finally finished the machine, we brought it to an abandoned island, so there wouldn't be any unnecessary human contact. The time machine is a huge ball shaped object. To use it, it's quite simple. You simply have to type in the wanted time and then the outer layer of the ball starts spinning at extreme speed. Then the ball finally stops."

"We followed those instructions and when we came out, we were in the past... at least we hoped. We agreed to not bring any guns or any type of weaponry, in this year 1423, 600 years into the past. We didn't want to disrupt anything with modern technology. I'm very happy that I brought my gun with me anyways, I sneaked it to this year for emergency use only. At that time, I didn't know it, but I would need it later. We scanned out in a wide circle, the nine of us, until I suddenly fell down. Then it all went black."

"When I woke up, I looked around. I was in a dark hole, and all alone. But what was most remarkable was that this hole didn't seem natural. It seemed manmade. This was visible because there were leaves covering the hole before I fell, and the hole was almost perfectly vertical and symmetrical. Then I started climbing."

"I almost instantly fell down because the rocks were rough and sharp. They pierced my skin, and I started bleeding. Then I did a thing in stupor. I started calling out for people, yelling words like 'HELP!' and 'I'M HERE!'"

"These actions were dubious, especially because I had just discovered that this trap was man made. There was as much chance that I was calling danger towards me as that I was calling a savior. But anything was better than my hunger, which was eating me from the inside."

"I then heard footsteps five meters above me. I suddenly stopped yelling, and fear consumed me. I looked around to see where to hide, but there was nowhere to go. I looked up and saw a projectile flying towards me. The next thing I knew, everything went dark again."

"When I woke up, everything was hurting. I was being dragged by two chains, and my shoes were now deformed into ragged pieces. There were two big strong men who were dragging me. I was too tired to struggle."

"After what felt like hours, something finally changed. We now went downhill, and it was dark. It also stunk like sweat and poop. When we finally stopped after all the tunnels and pathways, we were in a huge room, full of different types of minerals. I could hear the sound of several pickaxes hitting stone in the distance."

"In the middle of the room there was a bald man in a suit of armor. The only part of armor that was missing was the helmet. Right under his flat nose, there was a black mustache, and under his grim mouth there was a big black beard. On his hip there was an extremely long sword that looked like it could kill me in an instant. When I looked to my right I puked."

"There were my fellow scientists, my fellow workers, laying there, dead. That's when the man in the middle finally spoke to me. 'Where did you come from! How did you come here! Why did you come here!' His intimidating voice seemed to penetrate me, and his eyes looked straight into my soul. I didn't hesitate to comply."

"At this time, I was already sobbing. I explained my entire story, from the time machine to the hole to the arrival in this place. Obviously, he didn't believe me. He then took his sword out of his scabbard, and walked towards me, about to execute me. 'You're one of the spies, aren't you,' he yelled. I knew he didn't believe me."

"They didn't have me chained or my hands cuffed in any way, because they didn't see any weapons on me, and there were multiple men with weapons around me. Then I grabbed my gun and shot the two people behind me, who were guarding me. They were dead before they hit the floor. I instantly ran, and I was careful with my bullets. I knew that there were only six left. I ran as fast as I could, but I could still hear people, so close that I could hear their breath."

"Luckily, they were in armor, which made it harder for them to run. Eventually I was far enough to look back. I couldn't see the followers anymore. I slowed down to a speed walk. When I finally got out to the light, I sat down. I realized that I had no clue where my time machine was. I couldn't ask my fellow scientists for help because they were dead. That's when it really hit me that the people that I had worked with in the past were all gone, dead, on an island that was supposed to be abandoned and in a medieval time."

"Suddenly I heard a ruffling sound in the background. It kept getting louder and louder. And that's when it struck me. There were horses coming! I ran in a random direction and kept running, in the knowledge that I was being hunted."

"Then I ran into something. It was an old man that looked very strong. He grabbed my arm. He was very strong compared to how old he looked. 'Follow me!' he said. He then sprinted away, with a bow and arrow around his shoulder. I hastily ran after him."

"I followed him, and he was already far away. He then slowed down to my pace. We kept running until we found a cave. We ran into the cave and finally stopped. I fell on my knees, extremely tired, but he wasn't even panting. He looked stressed."

"Are you Albert Newton?" he asked. I looked at him in shock. How did he know my name!?"

"Yes, I am." I was trembling with fear. 'How do you know my name!?"

"I am Hans Newton, your son."

"I'm going to stop you right there," said the interrogator. "So, what you're saying is that you went to the past, got kidnapped, escaped, met your son who is three years old, and this is your explanation for the disappearance of eight people!?"

"I honestly do not care if you believe me," said the man, now known as Albert. "This is the truth, and nothing else, and I'm going to tell you my story, if you believe me or not."

When the interrogator didn't respond, Albert went on.

"We have a lot to talk about," Hans told me. He gave me a big piece of cooked mutton. 'Stole it from the marshal's kitchen,' Hans said. When I looked at him in confusion he explained, 'He's the bald-headed knight with the mustache, and he's the leader out here.'"

"We then talked for hours, and he explained to me his whole story about how he got here. In summary, he found the remains of my work on the time machine and put it together. He went alone, and upon landing in this time, the machine broke. Luckily, he had trained before for years with a bow and arrow, and he had brought it with him. When I looked at Hans's twelve arrows, I saw that they were all blood-stained."

"I don't know why I instantly believed him at that time, but my intuition told me to trust the man who said that he was my son. He refused to explain why I wasn't there to help him, and that is what scared me the most. When he finished his story, his eyes suddenly opened wide. He asked, 'Can you describe to me where the time machine is?'"

"So, I did. I went to the smallest detail and explained things from the open plain to the big tree in the middle. Until he suddenly stopped me, with an ecstatic expression in his eyes. 'I know exactly where your time machine is!'"

"We ran for a long time again, until we finally came to the field. I saw the time machine, and I was about to step onto the field, when Hans stopped me. When I looked, I saw four men, trying to figure out what the time machine was. Around the four men, there were almost 20 other men, sleeping. I realized that using my gun would be stupid, so I turned to Hans."

"I want you to sneak to the time machine and put in the time, and I'll deal with the rest," he said. I was confused, but I complied when I saw the harsh seriousness in the eyes of my son. 'Wait on my signal.'"

"The signal came faster than I expected, when I saw an arrow fly into one of the men that was the farthest away from the other three. Quickly after, I saw a second arrow fly, and the second man fell to the floor. The other two saw what was happening and woke the others up. They all ran towards the place where the arrows were coming from, but they fell one after another. They then stopped because they realized that they were suffering too many losses. They made a barricade of shields and came towards Hans in a crouched manner. They were now decently far from the time machine."

"I sneaked behind them and ran into the time machine. The men didn't see, because they were too busy worrying where the next arrow was going to come from. I put in the date I wanted and waited. A thought crossed my mind. It would be so easy to leave right now, to safety, but I stayed. I waited and waited, and every second seemed to take eternities, when I suddenly saw Hans running towards me. The men were right behind him, and I shot all of my rounds at them. They slowed down, confused where these magical powers were coming from, and how the people around them were falling to the floor. They didn't see the bullets. Hans was almost at the time machine when everything went wrong."

"A spear was thrown from the group of the remaining men, and it pierced Hans's leg. He fell to the floor, and seconds later he was swallowed up by the group. I looked in fear, and moments later they were running towards me, leaving his carcass on the floor. I closed the extremely strong glass door and set the machine to launch. One of the men was brave enough to try to find a way in, but he was flung away by the intense speed that the ball was spinning at. Moments later I was home, one day later than the day that I left. I

walked out of the machine, but then I saw something that shocked me. There was a crack in the glass, where a spear was sticking out. Seconds later the time machine was blown to pieces. I then took the boat back to the mainland, where the police were waiting to arrest me. You know the rest.”

The interrogator let out a sigh. “Do you have any way to prove this to me?” Albert held up his deformed shoes. “That proves nothing, you could’ve as well deformed it for the story you just told. Are there any remains of the time machine, or any records of the scientists talking about them going on this trip.”

Albert replied, “No, the time machine is nothing but ash now, and the exploration was top secret. Even their families have no clue.”

Without saying a word, the interrogator left the room. He shut the door with a bang and left a confused and scared Albert in the room. Moments later, multiple men ran into the room, cuffed him, and hit him with a baton. Then everything went black.

When Albert woke up, he looked around. The room was all white, and he was in a white gown. His hands were tied to his chest, and he could barely move them. When Albert realized where he was, he started to laugh hysterically. He had ended up in a mental asylum.

Wipeout

by Elisa Senior
Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

Vicky and Mia went down the elevator ready to start the day in Machu Picchu with their class. Today, they were going to explore the land, although Vicky was not excited. Mia on the other hand, was eager to go, ready with her camera.

“I can’t believe the school is making us go to these boring places. I wanna do something fun, like skydiving!” exclaimed Vicky.

“Are you out of your mind? We are in Machu Picchu; this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Just behave and we’ll do something fun in the hotel room,” explained Mia.

The girls were not so thrilled with the tour guide they got, Ms. Binney. She was reportedly the most hated teacher in the school. She was mean and very strict according to the two girls. Although Mia was ecstatic, Ms. Binney lowered her excitement levels tremendously.

“Ladies in the back, quiet down! You know what, come here, I want a word with you two!” yelled Ms. Binney.

Vicky and Mia shrugged at each other and walked off to the side. After Ms. Binney yelled at them for so long; the girls finally rejoined their day groups.

Vicky whined, “Great, the trip just keeps getting better. I told you that this trip would suck.”

“Just give it a chance. But you’re right, Ms. Binney is a real pain in the neck, we’ll probably get in trouble 3 more times today. Let’s just shut up and pay attention, I don’t want them calling my mom,” replied Mia.

“You know what? Let’s sneak off, find something cool, at least more entertaining than this stupid tour,” said Vicky.

“Hah, good one! I would never in a million years do that, especially in a foreign country. Vicky, you need to stop with these crazy thoughts, let’s just try and behave,” exclaimed Mia.

Before Mia knew it, Vicky grabbed her hand, and they were off running away from their group. Vicky dragged Mia around the grounds trying to find somewhere cool to explore.

“Vicky, stop! Are you crazy, we’re in so much trouble already! Oh my god...my mom’s gonna kill me!” reached Mia.

“Mia, chill out! Look, there’s an Inca house there...it looks abandoned. Let’s go inside!”

“Ugh whatever, were already this far.” said Mia, not very convinced.

The girls sneakily made their way to the house where there was nobody around. The Inca house was clearly abandoned; it showed that the rangers did not take care of that specific house.

“Oh my god,” the two girls repeated.

They were astonished at the site of the clutter ahead of them. Vicky quickly closed the wooden door behind them. The only thing seen ahead was a laboratory-looking arrangement with bottles and mixers.

"This is so cool! Let's see what we can do!" exclaimed Vicky.

"Uh, maybe we should see what everything is first," shrugged Mia.

Before she knew it, Vicky was already mixing everything she saw into a bottle. Suddenly, the potion started foaming, getting bigger and bigger, until the glass shattered. The girls shrieked in fear.

"What's going on?" the girls asked, stepping back.

The potion got bigger and bigger until it abruptly exploded. There was a huge cloud of purplish gray looking smoke. The two girls slowly rose, with a confused look on their faces.

"Woah," whispered Mia.

"Woah...COOL!" said Vicky.

"Cool? We could have died or something! Oh my god, we have to fix this right now. Let's go," said Mia, rushing to fix things.

"Whatever," replied Vicky.

Mia and Vicky finally finished cleaning up the mess which seemed much smaller than they thought. Then, the two walked outside where it was surprisingly empty.

"There's nobody here, huh," thought Vicky.

"Yeah... whatever, let's just find our group," replied Mia.

They looked everywhere but the site was completely empty. Mia went panicking, while Vicky tried to calm her down. They decided to retrace their steps and landed back in the house.

"There's nobody, nobody here!" said Mia.

"No, really? Duh! Look there's a note! See, I told you we would find something." said Vicky

"Okay, quick, read it!" hurried Mia.

The note read:

Dear Girls,

Congratulations on making everyone disappear. And no, I don't just mean here, but in the entire world.

Now, if you would like to restore humanity, scream YES. After that, another note will appear with a riddle, every time you solve a riddle you will get one step closer to bringing everyone back. If you fail 3 or more times, you will be stuck in this dystopia...forever. Good luck!

"Oh no, we have to get them back, quick scream!" said Mia.

"YES!!!" the girls yelled as loud as they could.

Suddenly, a paper fell from what seemed air. It read:

Riddle 1: What month of the year has 28 days?

"This is so easy, February, duh!" exclaimed Vicky.

"Vicky no! It's every month; they all have at least 28 days!" complained Mia.

Suddenly, the sky rumbled, and another note fell. It read:

INCORRECT: Uh oh! Only two more tries, or else...

"Oh no, that's not good... listen, we have to discuss before we say the answer out loud, I don't wanna be stuck here forever!" said Mia.

"I'm so sorry Mia, I didn't mean to. I promise," said Vicky.

"Whatever, it's fine," said Mia, "we just have to wait for the next riddle," she continued.

After a few minutes, they began getting more riddles which involved them moving around the whole park. The girls were happy they still had a chance to get home.

"Ok, we have 2 wrong, we have to get this one right," said Mia.

Vicky, not paying attention replied, "Yeah yeah, what do you think Ms. Binney is talking about now? Probably yelling at other kids."

What the girls didn't know was that the tour had paused, and they were eating lunch. Their other friend, Maria, was getting in trouble by Ms. Binney. Back in the empty world, where Vicky and Mia were, their fifth riddle appeared, saying:

*Hello again,
This is your final riddle, and it counts for everything. You cannot get this one wrong unless you would like to stay here forever. A hint, it is at the edge of the mountain.*

Riddle 5: What is most important to you?

"Oh god," said Mia with her voice choking up.

"Well, we better get to climbing, come on!" replied Vicky.

The two set on a hiking trip, determined to leave that world. After about thirty minutes, they had reached the top. It was foggy and gray. All there was, was a mirror and two headsets. There was also a note indicating for them to put on the headsets and just watch. It was a story. One of their lives without each other. It showed how life would be without their best friends. Once it was done, the girls took their headsets off, Mia tearing up

"I'm so glad weird best friends," said Mia.

"Me too," replied Vicky, "now let's solve this and leave this place!"

Quickly, the clouds turned black, and it started to get cold. Then rain began to pour and thunder louder than ever.

"Vicky, I'm scared, let's hurry up!" whined Mia.

The thunder roared and the ground shook with it.

"I don't know the answer, what do we do?" said Vicky.

The mirror broke, split in half. The two girls looked at the mirror standing in front of it. Suddenly, Mia's face lit up as if she knew the answer.

"I think I know it, but I can't get it wrong!" yelled Mia.

The thunder roared as if it wanted to swallow up the girls.

"Just say it! At Least we'll always have each other," Vicky said, in a hopeful manner.

Mia screamed, "Ok, I think the answer is...friendship, each other!"

Quickly, the day became clear. Sunny and happy in a way. The two girls looked confused. Another note dropped reading:

Congratulations, you have won! Head back to the original Inca house to find what you need to get back to your own world. Good luck!

"Oh my God, we did it!" exclaimed both girls.

The girls ran back down the mountain and didn't stop until they made it to the house. They found a new set of chemicals.

"Ok, let's think about this. We don't want to mess it up," said Mia.

Before she knew it, Vicky was already mixing a bunch of things together. Suddenly there was another purple explosion. The girls slowly woke up with banging on the door. Mia opened it with her glasses upside down to see Ms. Binney, looking down at her with her ears trailing out smoke.

"GIRLS! Where have you guys been? You ditched the whole tour; you guys are in real trouble. Tell your parents they'll be hearing from me!" yelled Ms. Binney practically dragging the girls out.

Surprisingly, everything was back to normal, the house like earlier, Ms. Binney angry, and life was back to normal! Mia and Vicky glanced at each other, with a big smile on their face.

The Mission

by Alexander Tziavragos

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The engine of the Mercedes AMG GT revved and quickly sped off, leaving tire marks on the Miami street. Pressed for time, Leonardo ran a red light- “Daddy! Why did you do that, isn’t that illegal?”

“Sweetie, you can’t get another late, you already have too many. Anyway, how did you do on that science test the other day?”

“I did alright. I got 78 percent.”

“78 percent!” Leo exclaimed, “In my household a 78 percent is not alright! I need you to study more so that you can do better in your classes. Alright? Promise me?”

“Promise,” she said sarcastically. They pulled in front of the school, tires screeching due to the sudden stop. “Bye Daddy!”

“Bye Veronica, love you!” he said.

Watching his daughter walk to her class, Leonardo felt a sudden vibration then heard ringing in his back pocket. He checked and saw that he was getting an anonymous call. He answered the unexpected call with an idea in the back of his mind who it might be. “Hello? Who is it?”

“You know who this is,” a masked voice said. “Top of Exoskeleton Tower, 20 minutes. Oh, and don’t be late.” Leonardo knew who was calling him, *an old friend*. Understanding the urgency, Leo sped off to the skyscraper realizing he was short of time.

Five minutes, five minutes was all it took to race across Miami. Approaching the superstructure, Leonardo double parked in front of the building. With the click of his sports car, he locked the car and entered the lobby of the structure, heading straight for the elevator not conversing with anyone. He selected the sixty-second floor. Alone in the elevator, the awkward silence left him wondering the purpose of this meeting. His recent exit from the agency left a hole, a hole lacking an efficient agent. This meeting most likely had to do with refilling that hole, even if only temporarily.

A loud ding followed the opening of the elevator doors. He reached the top floor. Beyond the elevator doors were five official looking people, people of whom Leonardo was very familiar. “Hello Mr. Jones, it’s been a while,” said a man in an all-black suit.

“Yes, it has, Angus,” Leo replied.

“How many years has it been since the incident in Moscow? Twelve? Fourteen?” Angus said. “Anyway, on topic, seventeen hours ago, there was a Russian bomb attempt with a new dangerous type of nuke. They dropped a warhead so powerful that just one bomb could instantly vaporize everyone on the Eastern half of the United States and some parts of Mexico. The device was called the Konavinsky after its creator. The Russians attempted to release the nuke over Miami, though they made a mistake and completely missed. The Russians made a set off timer in case something like this were to happen. The bomb was 50 miles off the coast of South Beach, three thousand meters deep. Your mission is to go to the depths of the Atlantic and disarm the warhead. Oh, I forgot to mention, the device goes off in 3 hours. We need you. The whole country needs you. You’re the only one who can do it. That’s why we called you back,” Angus said.

“Why send a human? Can’t you just send a robot to disarm and retrieve the thing?”

“Trust me, that was our initial thought, though the connection will not reach from that range,” Angus explained. In a rush, Angus stopped all of the talking and showed Leonardo his gear. “Here you have the Subnautica-Suit, only 3 produced in the world able to withstand any amount of pressure. You will have 2 hours of oxygen; use your time wisely. The outer shell of the suit can withstand any attack, though if hit in the right spots, can be penetrated. This is not ideal because in the area to which you are headed there are many sharks. I am sure you are not happy to hear that due to your phobia.”

“No, I’m not,” Leonardo angrily answered, “You know I don’t do well around sharks. Remember Haiti?”

“Yes, I remember Haiti,” Angus replied, “Luckily you will have special pressurized blasters on each of your wrists, designed especially for underwater combat.”

“Better than nothing,” said Leo with slight relief.

"Now you must head off to the boat. We don't have much time before the device explodes!"

Thirty minutes later, now fifty miles off the coast of South Beach, Leonardo was ready for his operation. All of his equipment was on him, ready for use. He took a couple steps forward to the water elevator. He was lowered into the cold salty waters of the Atlantic. His body was fully submerged as many different colored, small fish swarmed the glass elevator, reminding Leonardo that he was in a whole new and strange blue world.

After a couple meters of suspenseful travel, the elevator stopped propelling Leonardo to his designated depth and location. Leaving the elevator behind, Leonardo was in the open endless seeming waters. He began his long and treacherous journey to the bottom of the ocean. The deeper and deeper he swam, the darker and darker the waters became. His only source of light was a small, glistening stream of sunlight coming from the surface. As he swam deeper, the amount of life lessened and took on a different grotesque and scary appearance.

His depth now at two thousand meters, Leonardo glanced in the distance and noticed a large cluster of crimson glowing light. Leonardo verified with his team, via a small microphone resting below his chin, whether the light he witnessed was safe. "Mako to Serpent, there is a clump of bright red light in front of me and it appears to be moving, Mako over."

"Serpent to Mako," his team answered, the sound being received from a headset built-in his suit, "that cluster is a bloom of a species of deep-sea jellyfish called the abyssal comb jelly. They light up by way of their special genes that produce photoproteins. It is completely safe to move past them; their sting cannot affect your suit, Serpent over."

"Mako to Serpent, roger that." Leonardo swam past the vibrant creatures and cleared his own path by pushing them to the side.

Once past the jellyfish, Leonardo saw more red, similar to the red jellyfish, but this time it was a red blinking message on his suit visor which read: *Connection Lost Too Distant From Base!* Leonardo was now alone in his own thoughts with no guidance. He was left to find the location of the device on his own using only his instincts.

Swimming downwards in the pitch-black waters, Leonardo suddenly thumped his head on the Atlantic floor, creating a thick cloud of sand and dirt. He then turned on his flashlight above the visor of his suit. Once the cloud of dirt cleared, he saw a lime green light a football field away. The light flickered. *That, that must be it, it has to be*, thought Leonardo filled with hope. As he advanced toward the green light, another red alert appeared on his visor: *30 Minutes of Air Left*. He began to move with urgent intent and held his breath in thirty-second increments to conserve oxygen. Leonardo's body began to shake. Even though he was under water, nervous sweat billowed off of his forehead. He was in front of the bomb. Leo glanced at the bomb's timer that read *10:01, 10:00, 9:59*. He examined the apparatus. It was the size of his own body. He felt around the bomb, every movement he made cautiously. Leo accidentally pressed a button that opened up a computer screen that read: *ВВЕДИТЕ ПАРОЛЬ ДЛЯ СНЯТИЯ С ОХРАНЫ* (the Russian words for: ENTER PASSWORD TO DISARM). Leonardo tried to think of a possible password. All he knew was the name of the bomb and who made it, which was the same word: "KONAVINSKY." With shaking hands, he typed the bomb's name in Russian. For a brief moment, he hesitated, his right hand frozen over the ENTER button. Then he confidently pressed the enter key. The machine loaded. Suddenly, Leonardo saw **something rapid** move at the corner of his eye, **something big**. He turned to discover a massive shark twice his size speed at him like a raging torpedo with teeth. As the shark charged closer, Leonardo closed his eyes in horror to brace for impact. Leonardo then opened his eyes and time stood still. All seemed to move in slow motion. Thoughts of Leonardo's daughter flooded his mind. He wondered if he would ever see her smiling face again. He wondered what would happen to her and the rest of America if he were the shark's next meal. Miraculously, the shark did not want Leonardo. It shot right over Leo and clamped onto a large iridescent squid only inches from Leonardo's head.

Leo immediately glanced back at the screen. His password was incorrect. The screen read: *ОСТАЛАСЬ ОДНА ПОПЫТКА (ONE ATTEMPT LEFT* in Russian). He thought back to his daughter. He promised himself that if he made it out of this situation in one piece, he would spend as much time with his daughter as possible. She needed him, but he had no idea what the password could be. He had no choice but to take a guess. Was it the word "boom" in Russian (бум)? He had to try it. His hands shook as he began to type it in and just as he was about to press ENTER, his eye caught an engraving on the sleeve of his suit. It said: *Password: PUTIN*. "YES!" he thought, "Thank God!" P-U-T-I-N, ENTER! The bomb was defused!

Leonardo confirmed his oxygen levels. He had only *10 minutes* of oxygen left. It would take him 20 minutes to resurface. However, a diver propulsion vehicle was strapped to his oxygen tank. With little time to

spare, Leonardo firmly held on to his equipment, exhaled deeply, and then pressed a green button that launched him to the surface.

Light glistened as he cut through the cool water. Leonardo approached the boat right in line with the current. The colorful fish wished their goodbyes to Leonardo as he climbed into the water elevator and was lifted out of the sea in glory. He was greeted by his team with great applause. His mission was once again a great success. However, looking at his watch, he had somewhere else he needed to be.

His brakes screeched as his Mercedes AMG slid into the school yard. There she was waiting with her backpack. A smile shot across her face as he approached. "Hi Dad. You won't believe my day," she said as she opened the car door.

"You won't believe mine!" Leonardo said with a smug grin.

Tangled in Terror

by Matthias von der Goltz

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

MILLA NAUMOVICH | Grade 8



It was the year 3021 AD, in Angellis 3, Suriname. The panel of chemicals was staring right at the pupils of Dr. Mordecai. He had been tasked with making chemically altered insects for the use of meat, as common mammals like cows and chickens had been extinct for ten years. People had been eating roots, vegetables, and beans. They had gotten tired of these foods, so Dr. Mordecai, a renowned chemical engineer, was tasked with making meat-like insects. Thoughts ran through Dr. Mordecai's mind. He knew that some fats, citric acid, and nitrogen compounds may induce the flavor of meat that so many had forgotten before. Potassium and phosphorus would grow crickets, until they are the size of a book. He looked at the crickets beside him. They had changed color over the last couple of years by adjusting to their new diet. In fact, everything had changed. Dr. Mordecai remembered the old buildings and museums of the past. Some foods like kale and lettuce lost their green, due to the purge of them over the last couple of years.

Dr. Dismal walked up behind Dr. Mordecai and laid his hand upon him.

Dr. Mordecai exclaimed, "Don't! You know I dislike talking with even my good friends during work, and right now, I am thinking! Everything is in my hands. These crickets must supply the whole Earth with juicy, tasty meat."

"You are clearly stressed," replied Dr. Dismal. "Why don't we go out and eat some corn and beans, after you inject those crickets with those chemicals of yours?"

Dr. Mordecai gave a sigh and agreed. He started to inject the crickets each with a mixture of potassium, phosphorus, fat, citric acid, and nitrogen compounds. It was about five ml for each. Then, Dr. Mordecai left them in their enclosure and left to eat with Dr. Dismal, accidentally leaving the enclosure of his pet tarantula, Arachne, unlocked.

Dr. Mordecai came back in dismay. Arachne's enclosure was broken open, and dry corpses of big crickets were laid on the ground. The juices had been sucked out of them. Arachne was nowhere to be seen. The horrible reality came to him! Arachne had eaten all of the crickets; therefore, it had ingested all of the chemicals. Dr. Mordecai was in a daze for a moment. The lights ahead of him were turned off.

"Hello? Where are you guys? Maria, Tomas, Daan, Chris? Where are you?" asked Dr. Mordecai.

He slowly walked towards the light switch and flipped it. His reality was destroyed. All of his fellow lab members were on the floor, dead, dry as sand. There too were traces of silk all over the room. Dismal ran out of

the door screaming. Dr. Mordecai was on his knees and had palpitations. After his sorrow was gone, he went to investigate the bodies of his peers. They had two big puncture holes, seemingly left by the spider. Using his knowledge of tarantulas, he suspected that the tarantula must have first eaten the crickets, then grown large, and then sucked the life out of his poor labmates. Dr. Dismal came back with a couple of police officers.

Dr. Dismal exclaimed, "Look! Over there! My poor labmates! That vile tarantula juiced their insides and drank it all up!"

The police investigated the scene. After extensive testing of the bodies, it was determined that the tarantula truly ate the crickets as there were traces of citric acids in the wounds. They went back to the police station and reported their findings to Sheriff Kai. Dr. Mordecai did not hear anything else for the next day or so. One Saturday morning, Dr. Mordecai awoke to the sound of a telephone ringing at six in the morning.

Dr. Mordecai exclaimed, "Agh, that stupid phone! I have had enough with my whole research team being dead." He answered the phone and was woken up from his sleepiness by a harsh voice on the phone.

The man yelled, "Sheriff Kai is dead! It's all your fault. Hereby, I, Officer Nathan, am recruiting you as our researcher during the investigation. You must come as soon as you can!"

Dr. Mordecai's face became polluted with annoyance. He drove his ELOP 450 car to the local police station which was surrounded by jungle. Dr. Mordecai realized how hard it would be to catch this tarantula, as the whole country of Suriname was densely covered with jungles. He walked into the police station and was met with an acidic smell. He walked into the room where the lifeless body of the sheriff was lying. The putrid smell was even stronger than before.

"Get to work Mordecai, you must examine the body and figure out where the spider has gone before it's too late and our town is run over by an act of god!" exclaimed Officer Nathan.

Dr. Mordecai grunted and started examining the body. The puncture holes were bigger this time, spreading across the chest of the poor sheriff. His head had been completely engulfed in silk, as if Arachne had suffocated him. The same citric acid from before was there, but in higher amounts.

"Arachne must have gone into the jungle and eaten tons of fruit" murmured Dr. Mordecai.

"What did you say? I can't hear you!" exclaimed Officer Nathan.

"Oh, it was nothing," said Dr. Mordecai

Dr. Mordecai continued on with his examination of the body. He saw a knife on the floor, and liquid on the floor, but thought nothing of it. A few hours later, Dr. Mordecai heard his E45, a radio, and heard the mayor talking.

"Attention citizens of Angellis 3! Don't fret! There is a mutated tarantula on the loose. Unfortunately, we haven't found it yet. So, I command you citizens to lock your doors and eat those canned cilantro cans that are lying behind those shelves. We wouldn't want your lives to be wasted! Who will work then?" exclaimed Mayor Silva.

Dr. Mordecai then heard a booming laughter, and the crackling sound of the E45 turning off. Dr. Mordecai sighed and went to sleep. There wasn't any news for about three days. Most people believed that the tarantula was gone and went to other parts of the country.

On Tuesday, Dr. Mordecai woke up yet again but with a different sound. He heard crunching of bones, screaming, and a low growl. Dr. Mordecai dismissed it as a dream and went back to sleep. In the morning, there was a ringing noise somewhere in his house. He picked up the phone and another booming voice woke him up.

"Mordecai!" exclaimed Officer Nathan, "A body has been found lying on the street. We need you to examine this horror lying before us and give us leads!"

Dr. Mordecai realized that the sounds he had heard was Arachne eating the poor man. Dr. Mordecai only needed to run to the scene as the body was discovered a few meters from his house. Dr. Mordecai gasped as he saw the body of a man. It was barely recognizable. Only a shriveled lower torso was left. The fangs were so big that they essentially vaporized the upper body out of existence. There were some limbs around, wrapped to the brim with silk. But what really shook him to his bone was the name tag on the lower torso, or what was left of it.

"Dr. Gonzalez Dismal," said Dr. Mordecai out loud.

"That poor old soul; he should have listened to Silva's orders," responded Officer Nathan.

Filled with remorse, Dr. Mordecai took a test for citric acid on the body. There were large amounts around the body. He noticed again a strange liquid trail on the floor. Suddenly, rumbling and the sound of concrete smashing came from the other end of town. Dr. Mordecai then connected the dots. Sheriff Kai had stabbed Arachne, which left a trail of blood. The tarantula went to the rainforest, and ate tons of animals and fruits, which

prompted it to grow bigger. The wound of the tarantula still hadn't closed when Arachne killed the poor man. The blood trail clearly then led to Arachne's location at that moment.

Dr. Mordecai yelled, "Everyone, get more officers, the tarantula is right up ahead! Follow me!"

Dr. Mordecai ran, following the trail, until it stopped. To his right, the courthouse of Mayor Silva was rumbling, and there were screams of terror. Dr. Mordecai, along with police dispatch, ran up the stairs to kill the elemental. They entered the room of Mayor Silva, and a horrific sight was set upon them. The sight of a tarantula, the size of a small bus eating the flailing body of Mayor Silva. It was too late.

A policeman yelled, "Fire!", and all of the officers shot their weapons.

Somehow, the tarantula jumped out of the window before a single shot even rang out. Dr. Mordecai ran down the stairs, outside, where lay his dying Arachne. Its abdomen was ruptured, and it could barely move. Dr. Mordecai took out the syringe of sulfuric acid he conveniently always took around with him, for protection, and injected the elemental with the lethal solution. With this, he pledged to never mess with nature again, even if it could benefit the world.

Far From the Tree

by Maya Welle

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

A scolding, screeching, voice reverberated around the room. The feeling that struck me was indescribable.

My mother, clearly filled with disappointment, looked at me hopelessly and said, "Charlie, it's the end of the school year. All I ask of you is to improve your eating habits and raise your grades, just a little bit. It crushes my heart to watch you throw your life away."

I looked at her, fought the urge to roll my eyes, and said, "I'll try, Mom, but it feels unachievable."

She sighed and said no more, kissed my forehead, and walked away. I picked up my bag next to the front door and walked out trying to forget what happened. I walked for what felt like hours, yet my watch disagreed with me. I then laid my eyes upon my worst enemy. I looked at it with disgust. With a sigh, I entered Crestwood Heights Academy.

Ms. Honey greeted me with a confused expression. She whispered, "Charlie, I need you to focus on today's lesson. There will be a very important quiz coming up soon and I can't stand seeing you fall behind."

I managed to say, "I'll do my best."

I walked towards my desk, sat down, and stared at the clock which glared back at me, slowing down its ticks out of spite.

The room grew quiet as Ms. Honey introduced the new lesson. It took me less than a second to look outside at the window and see the golden glow of the sun which danced across the soccer field.

An agitated tone grabbed my attention and Ms. Honey exclaimed, "Charlie, I will not be repeating myself, you had better pay attention to what I'm saying."

I nodded desperately and forced my eyes to look at the black board. I glanced back at the clock, it almost seemed as though it winked at me, stopping the ticks completely.

Miraculously, lunch time came, and the rest of the students hollered out with hunger and dashed towards the lunchroom. I, still slumped in my chair, packed my things slowly and walked out of the room and headed for the golden field. The smell of fresh grass tickled my nose, and a slight smile grew on my face. I ran for what seemed like minutes and I then suddenly heard an obnoxious ring, announcing its authority to dismiss all students. I didn't want to leave. Wishing I never heard the bell, I darted towards the back of the field where a peculiar object rested in front of me.

I thought to myself, *since when does this school have such beautiful trees, especially apple trees?* Another agonizing ring echoed throughout the school forced me to realize that I had to face my doom. Right when I was ready to turn away from the tree, a bright red apple caught my attention. It had a certain mysterious appeal to it. I carefully walked towards it. Impulsively, I picked it from the tree. The sun made the red look so vivid I could not resist. I took a bite out of the apple and surprisingly it was quite tasty. I typically didn't eat fruit, but this one tasted

different. With the apple in my hand I sprinted towards my bag, slung it across my back, and continued to eat the apple as I walked back to class.

Feeling happier, I reached for the door handle of my house, taking another bite of the juicy apple. I entered the house and took off my shoes only to see my mom in complete shock while staring at me.

With an open jaw she said, "Charlie, I'm so proud of you."

She said nothing more and left the room leaving me with a bewildered look. I quickly forgot all about it when I remembered I had a quiz the next morning. As I was opening my bag, a majestic glow fell upon my face. I looked up and saw the golden sun sinking into the floor outside the living room window. I was drawn to it like a magnet and walked towards it mesmerized by its beauty. Once I opened the door and smelt the scent of fresh cut grass my memory was wiped of everything. After what felt like mere minutes, the sun was buried under the ground. A deep blue encompassed the sky; stars began to dance all round it.

A voice yelled, "Charlie, dinner is ready!"

I got up and walked into the house leaving the starry sky behind me.

The same monotonous routine came again, and I found myself face to face once more with my adversary. I walked the halls of the school, letting time fly by before the bell rang for the first class.

I then suddenly heard a calm voice say, "Hey Daniel, did you study for the quiz?"

A student replied, "Of course I did."

I stopped immediately, having the sensation of being shot. I had completely forgotten about the quiz, and I felt a cloud of anxiety hover over me. The sounds of children laughing echoed through the halls as I stood in the middle wishing I could turn invisible. A ring of doom screeched in my ear as all the students scurried into the classrooms. I, still completely numb, stood in the center of the hallway. I somehow was able to drag my feet across the floor while everything in my head told me to turn the other way and leave school. Once I reached the jail-like classroom, I gave two pathetic knocks on the door, hoping no one would answer.

Ms. Honey approached the door, held it wide open and said, "You're late, take a seat, the quiz is about to begin."

I slowly walked over to my desk and dreadfully sat down.

Ms. Honey spoke swiftly saying, "You will have thirty minutes to complete the quiz, keep your eyes on your paper, you may begin."

The moment she finished speaking it was as though the rest of the students were eager to start the quiz and I heard the scribbling of their pencils all around me. I shut my eyes and was too scared to even look at the quiz. I knew I would eventually have to face my fate. I carefully opened my eyes, and I couldn't believe what I saw before me. It was like I was reading an answer key. I snatched my pencil from my desk and began to write all the answers down almost as if it was done mechanically. By the ten-minute mark I stood up absolutely dumbfounded and walked over to Ms. Honey's desk and handed her the paper.

She glanced at me with a skeptical look and whispered, "Have you finished the quiz?"

I gulped and said softly, "Yes, I have. Is there something wrong with my test?"

She looked at me, baffled, then at the test and back at me with wide eyes as if she had won the lottery.

She said, "There is absolutely nothing wrong with your test, I'm very proud of you."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I strode back towards my desk with a smile that was so wide it hurt my face.

Once recess began, I bolted towards the soccer field ready to scream of happiness. Though when I reached the vibrant green grass, I thought of something I couldn't answer. I thought, *how did I know all the answers on the quiz? It's impossible, I didn't even study.* While I was pondering for the answer, I saw the same apple tree glimmering from the sunlight, making a patch of the grass a pink hue from the bright, enchanting, red apples. I suddenly walked over to the tree almost as if I was hypnotized by it. I plucked another apple looking at its bewitching beauty. I took a bite out of it, tasting its sweet skin. I looked back up at the tree and counted how many apples were left. I counted in my head pointing my finger at each apple. *One, two, three....* I chuckled once I finished counting the apples. *I thought, what a coincidence, there are seven days of school left and seven apples. I can eat one every day.* That's when I gasped at my abnormal discovery. I then realized that the apples had a mystical charm to it. *That's it,* I thought to myself, *this has to be the reason why I can understand my assignments.* I became ecstatic realizing I could use this to my advantage and get spectacular grades to make my mom proud. I almost began to skip or dance around the tree but realizing that was foolish I collected my thoughts and just stared at the supernatural tree.

Once more, the same repetitive routine came again, but this time something changed. The air smelt differently; the pearly clouds didn't drop a single watery crystal along the pavement. The green on the trees around me almost blinded me as I walked past it. Everything seemed flawless until I arrived at the big white gates, ready to trap me in the jail cell rooms. It almost felt like a ghost flew through my body as the leaves whirled around my feet. My foot stepped over the crack on the floor, I now was standing in a graveyard. I didn't see a soul and it almost felt as though the air was dead, lingering with the odor of dirt. I continued forward, turning my head around every second like an owl. Class was about to begin, and I then remembered I needed to go to the apple tree to consume my eldritch apple. I, surrounded by zombie looking people, happily strode towards the unknown tree. The smell of fresh grass was invisible. The color of the grass almost seemed gray, with no life left in it. I paid no mind to it, making my eyes focus on the transparent tree. I gasped, bolted towards the stump which was cleanly cut. Millions of questions convoluted my brain. I had the urge to cry, letting the tears fall on the stump, hoping it would grow magically back, but there would still be no change. Not a red apple was in sight, and the colors that gave life to the trees looked drained. Only a tall, gray silhouette remained. A murky gray crept its way above the silhouettes. I stared at the other trees that were near, with dying hope a covered apple might be growing on it, but the tree shrugged its shoulders, turning its back on me.

Covered with a depressed, murky cloud around me, I walked to class hearing the rain crash down on the roof. I looked at the jail cell almost with a willingness to be handcuffed as I disturbingly knocked on the door. A student with a grimace upon his face opened the door and immediately sat back down letting his melt into the pages of a book. I, distressingly, walked over to my teacher's desk. The blood red sphere sitting in her hand scowled back at me, as my jaw widened.

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