



Farmington Community Library

Teen Creative Writing Competition

2023



Friends



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Foreword

The Farmington Community Library created the Teen Creative Writing Competition in 1999 at the urging of Ray Okonski and our Young Adult Advisory Board. They felt that we needed to acknowledge the output of creative endeavors, as well as the reading, studying, and practice that the Library has traditionally encouraged. This year's competition has brought forth an incredible array of artistic talent from the young people in our community. With the help of our judges, we have chosen the best of the many wonderful submissions received. Because the nature of a competition involves a few winners from among many participants, we could not acknowledge all the beautiful writing that it was our pleasure to read. It is our hope that these people, and the people whose works you will soon read, will continue to brighten the world with their creative fire.

For many years of the TCWC, we have suggested, but never required, that authors consider the year's Summer Reading theme when creating their entries. This year, we did not suggest a theme, but of the 70 entries we received, many - and most of the winning submissions - were explorations of grief or loss to some degree. It has been an honor to read every one.

Jennie Willard, Teen Services Supervisor
Rebecca Brown, Teen Services Librarian

Farmington Community Library wishes to thank the following:

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Our deepest gratitude goes to Suzanne Sloat and Ray Okonski, who have sponsored and supported the Teen Creative Writing Competition since its beginning in 1999.

Criteria for Judging:

Judges reviewed entries based on the following criteria:

- Originality
- Grammatical correctness and spelling
- Organization
- Word choice
- Imagery

Please Note

The creative writing in this brochure represents the views and opinions of the original authors and not of the Farmington Community Library.

Poetry

Ages 11-14

Poetry, 11-14 – First Place

Divorce

by Cecilia Lindman

I was originally prompted to write this poem in my 9th grade English class. The assignment was to write a “double-edged sword” poem, a poem with a topic that could be considered both positive and negative. I chose a topic that I had personal experience with, something I had both happy and sad memories tied to. I really just wrote it with the idea in mind that the divorce of a child’s parents can impact someone in many different ways. I wanted to highlight just how tricky it can be to navigate life when it seems that everything you know has been separated into two completely different worlds.

Divorce is double Christmas,
consecutive twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth,
piles of presents beneath both trees,
neighborhoods apart.
Divorce is double parents,
two moms, two dads,
twice the love,
twice the drama.
Divorce is a game of “would you rather,”
carefully teetering on the line between
mom
or dad.
Divorce is a blanket fresh from the dryer,
a warm bed,
a place full of love,
no matter which house you’re at.
Divorce is a partition,
the place between two countries,
each place home-y,
but neither *home*.
Divorce is a prison break,
a miraculous feat,
the breaking free of a woman from an abusive man.
Divorce is a cage,
a trap between happy and sad,
mom and dad.
Divorce is a bike ride down Leelane,
clothes packed and hanging in drawstring bags,
an adventure on our way to dad’s house.
Divorce is a hot summer day,
sunshine warming your back,
but burning your nose
if you’re not careful.
Divorce is a crack in the wall
never quite sealed,
cold air still seeping through in wintertime.

Divorce is like a whole new kind
of poetry,
having to choose exactly the right words to say
depending on the day,
depending on the house,
depending on the parent.

Poetry, 11-14 – Second Place

Good Dreams

by Zainab Ali

The core concept behind “Good Dreams” is using a fictional world as a coping mechanism. The idea of leaving reality and immersing yourself in a life where everything that had been missing was satisfied draws a lot of people, which is understandable. Dreams serve for this purpose exactly. My many dreams of scenarios in which life simply appeared “better” served as my inspiration for writing this poem. Whether it’s reuniting with a loved one or visiting a place where warm memories were once held, people may view these as nice dreams- But, to me, the good parts of these alternate lives are lost the moment you come face to face with reality.

A fantasy life to do as you please
Perhaps an old friend you couldn't let go
Or a pet that made you whole
When it comes down to it
At the end of the day
Every single time you wake
It all just fades away
All the things we see
Or briefly dream of
Could truly just be me
But it's all make-believe
No matter how you feel while you are asleep
All the pain that dies and fills you with relief
It will never heal your grief or what it may seem
Because there is no such thing as a good dream

Poetry, 11-14 – Third Place

An Ode to Trina Low

by Melina Peratsakis

A poem inspired by the novel Queen of the Tiles by Hanna Alkaf.

This is an ode to Trina Low
Who made everyone around her say “Whoa”

She was the self proclaimed Queen of the Tiles
She was all smiles with tiles in piles

She walked with confidence
And asserted her dominance

She was definitely the Scrabble Queen
She was always meant to be seen

She had a certain candor to her
Her skills clearly weren’t amateur

Why did she have to die?
When she did, there was a huge outcry

Her death seemed suspicious
So her friends were ambitious

They knew something was wrong
So they sleuthed all week long

That’s what dedicated friends are for
They’re with you even just at the store

Trina had so many paths in life she could trace
If it had not been for Death’s cold embrace

Poetry, 11-14 – Honorable Mention

Stolen State

by Jennah Peratsakis

I wrote this poem because of the genocide on the Palestinians for 3/4 of a century. It all started in 1948, when Israel was created. As David Bengurion was founding Israel, over 88,000 Israeli soldiers raided and destroyed 531 Palestinian towns while they massacred 15,000 indigenous Palestinians and displaced and just under 1,000,000 Palestinian people. Would you believe that the world continues to watch as the Israeli government and the Israeli Defense Force continues to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian culture and colonize their land? No self respecting person, in my opinion, would sit back and let this happen without doing or saying a thing. Many people battle this occupation in many different ways. Darin Sallam, the director of the movie Farha, used film to educate people. Some others go to protests or conventions. For me, it's poetry. I didn't enter to win this competition. I entered to educate the people who read the poem so I could make a difference and so one day Palestine would be free.

Good job, Israel!
Hitler would be proud
Did you think you could silence us
We'll be every bit if not more loud
We will always stand up for Palestine
And what it means to us
If you think your evil plot will go on
Then you are wronger than wrong
Red, green, black, and white show signs of resistance in, out, and through
The Palestine so beloved to every Christian, Muslim and Jew
Your cruel and inhumane regime will never capture the minds of all
Indigenous Palestinians oppressed, big, small, and tall
With your bombs, tanks, and guns you play like you're strong
But in my heart I know killing innocent children in Gaza is wrong
And so do many others than me
So you will surely see
The apartheid state of Israel will surely fall
by the will of God
and by the will of all

Fiction

Ages 11-14

Fiction, 11-14 – First Place

Every Beautiful Thing

by Elena Recinto

I was inspired to write "Every Beautiful Thing" because of music and media I enjoy. Also, because I have seen, both personally and outwardly, how grief can affect a person's life, and what it takes to move past it.

Autumn in the town of Rosewood was as beautiful as a baby's first laugh. Every year, God's paintbrush dyed the mercurial leaves an alluring orange, with pleasing tints of red and brown. The clear sky's cool blue contrasted the warm colors of the trees, and the children living in the town would frequently look up and spin themselves around until the world was a dizzying blend of swirling colors.

On a cool October day, Ky Chen and his friends did just that, but when Ky could finally open his eyes without the world turning on its axis, he told his friends he'd meet them back at the house. As the sun set, he turned his attention to the red oak tree that stood in the center of the forest surrounding Rosewood, and he climbed to the very top. He laughed, marveling at how small the houses and sidewalks look from his view. Ky's father always told him to never go past where his feet could touch, but here he was – seven feet above the fallen leaves and the straw-colored grass.

The six year old loved feeling on top of the world. Sitting on a flimsy branch, he felt he was invincible, like nothing else mattered but the chilly wind sending goosebumps up his arm and the hard surface of the bark he gripped. Could he touch the stars from up here? Ky looked up at the sky, which had quickly turned black, white lights dotting space. They were so close, all he had to do was reach...

SNAP! A single sound that decided a child's fate. Ky was not afraid, he was flying! He watched as the world around him blurred and made clashes of color. He saw the houses enlarge and the grass get close enough to touch. As he fell, he thought one thing: the world around him was a beautiful place.

Adelaide Miller found Ky Chen on the ground, a smile on his lifeless face. She gasped, eyes wide with fear, her stomach churning with sickness. She set a shaking hand on his pulse, and felt nothing but flesh and bone. Her dog, who had made a beeline for the forest on their night walk, let out a loud howl, and Adelaide reached into her purse for a dog treat and her phone.

"911, what's your emergency?" a woman's voice said.

Adelaide kept her eyes on the child, as if he would somehow wake from the dead. In Rosewood, everyone knew everyone, and even though she had just moved here a year ago, after graduating college, she knew how funny and kind Ky was. Just a month ago he had sold her popcorn for his Boy Scout Troop, he couldn't be dead! This body in front of her was not his, she could not fathom it.

"T-there's a dead body, in Rosewood. Near, near South Haven?" Adelaide's words came out breathlessly, and she wasn't sure if they had come out of her mouth at all.

"We will be right there," the dispatcher promised, Adelaide mouthing an "Okay," before the phone fell out of her hands and hit the ground, for she saw the small mole on the side of the boy's cheek. She remembered noticing it when saw him for the first time, and the brown dot she thought had been dirt didn't come out when he jumped into the community pool. The body in front of her was Ky Chen, and though it pained her to admit

it, it was true.

There was one person left to call.

When Omar Chen's son had begged for a sleepover, Omar was reluctant to agree. He loved his son so much he wished he could shelter him from the cruel world forever. He worried each day that his son would have a hard time at school, or worse, that Ky wouldn't come home. Omar never let his son stay over at someone's house for more than two hours, always mumbling an excuse when parents asked if Ky could stay for dinner.

Yet, Omar saw the want in his son's eyes, and though he wanted Ky to be safe, he wanted him to be happy just as much. As Ky's face exploded in a grin when Omar finally said yes to a sleepover, Omar felt a smile tugging at his own lips.

He turned on the TV, but the horrors of the nightly news (kidnappings and shootings) made his throat tighten, so he immediately clicked the off switch on the remote. Maybe the sleepover was a bad idea, he thought, and a thunderstorm of worry clouded his head. He reached for his phone to call the mother whose house Ky was sleeping over. He didn't know her very well, just that she had just moved to Connecticut from Texas, and Ky and her son had become fast friends.

"Hello?" drawled Claire Vincent.

Omar paused before speaking. It was only eight o'clock, and he had only dropped Ky off at six thirty at night. He didn't want to seem like a helicopter parent, but he was so consumed with the thought that Ky could be in an unsafe situation. "Hi, Claire. I'm sorry to bother you, I was just wondering if Ky is okay?"

A yawn was the response, before she cleared her throat. "He should be." Her words were like butter, each one melting into the next. Omar had the feeling that she had a few drinks.

"The four of 'em just came in from playing outside," she continued.

Four boys? But when Omar dropped Ky off, he had counted four, plus his son, making a total of five.

His heart was like a hammer pounding against a nail, getting faster and faster.

He was about to say more, but a call from Adelaide, the college grad who had just moved in.

When he picked up, he broke into a million pieces.

Omar believed his family was the most beautiful thing in the world. But, in the nine months his wife was pregnant, everything was beautiful to him. The car rides with John Lennon blasting on the radio, the wind in his face, even traffic was beautiful to him, for he had the chance to stare at his beautiful wife before turning his attention back to the road.

But, car rides stopped being beautiful when a drunk driver missed a stop sign and hit Omar's wife, who was driving to the grocery store, craving chocolate. Miraculously, the baby inside of her survived, but she did not.

Autumn stopped being beautiful to Omar because every time he stepped on a leaf, he was reminded of the bone crushing sound they made under his feet as he ran to the hospital, which was five miles away from his house.

When Ky was placed into his arms, he was complimented on how beautiful the newborn was. But Omar did not look into the baby's eyes, for they reminded him too much of his wife's.

Four months after the accident, he opened the window of his second story bedroom where a baby now slept, "Double Fantasy" by John Lennon playing on his record player. He

looked down at the ground through the window, wondering what it would be like to fall. He imagined seeing his beloved wife again, and did not want to feel the pain of her passing anymore. He positioned himself on the ledge of the window, closing his eyes. In just a few seconds, his suffering would be over, and he would be with his wife once again.

From his bedroom, he heard John Lennon's voice, and something else. A baby's laugh. Omar turned, and saw his child, face wide and stretched into a smile, an innocent laugh escaping his lips.

It was the most beautiful thing Omar had heard in a long time.

Tears ran down his face as he could not believe he would have let this beautiful baby grow up without someone who loved him. He ran right into the room, singing along with the music as he rocked his baby in his arms.

"The monsters gone, he's on the run, and your daddy's here," his heart felt full with love and endearment and a promise to never let anything happen to the one beautiful thing there was left on this earth.

"Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful boy."

Omar did not speak at the funeral. He could barely make himself get out of bed to attend, let alone put on his black suit. He was so overwhelmed with sadness, he had not left the house in two weeks, when he got the news. His hair was matted, eyes puffy from no sleep and hours of crying. Omar knew he looked a mess, but nothing really mattered anymore. Not when the most vibrant thing in his life had left, making autumn a drab gray.

People made speeches and people cried, and a box was lifted and put into the ground. Omar sat there unfeeling, he had felt so much emotion over the past year, he couldn't fathom feeling anything else.

He watched his neighbors and friends give him hugs and solemn words. He must have said something, maybe a thank you, but everything was a blur. As he got up to leave, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Mr. Chen?" It was a little boy, someone Omar had seen before. He racked his memory, but he came up empty.

"Yeah. That's me," he said, turning his back to the child and making his way back to his house.

"I just wanted to say - well, I'm really sorry," he said, and it was evident he was holding back tears.

"Yup," Omar said, wanting to get back to his house, where he could continue to grieve.

"We wanted to wait for Ky, but he told us to go back to the house, so we did," he whined, as his mouth quivered, tears pooling from his eyes. "I should have known he would climb up there."

Omar glared at the child, who could have prevented his son's death, whose carelessness caused him so much hurt.

"He really loved every beautiful thing, so it would make sense he would want to see how beautiful the world was from so high," he stated.

The father of the deceased looked at the boy condescendingly. "Every beautiful thing?" What beautiful things were there in this horrible world full of disease and crime and death?

"Yeah...he used to think everything was beautiful. Remember?" the boy asked. "He loved the beautiful sunsets over the trees in fall, the beautiful buildings that had so much to offer inside of them, the beautiful way the coins hit the water when he threw them in..."

Omar reminisced over the day when he had taken Ky to the park and let him throw a coin in the water. He remembered the *plop!* of the coin being thrown and the surprise

on Ky's face. Yet, Omar was too worried about Ky falling in to be paying attention to the "beauty" of the fountain. When he thought about it, the way the water splashed into the pool and droplets ricocheted out of the water was quite lovely.

He gazed at the boy in front of him, snot running down his face, who cared so much about his friend, and wanted to make things right. *That* was beautiful. Omar kneeled down to the boy's level and gave him a tight hug, for he had helped him see the beauty in the world when it felt so machiavellian.

Omar left the funeral like he had breathed a sigh of relief. He was still hurt, the pain would never truly leave him, but he felt like a phoenix rising from the ashes, born anew. On his walk home, he saw the bookstore Ky used to always run into and remembered the fresh smell of the paper and how words on the pages could create the most gorgeous prose.

Stopping in front of the very tree his son had climbed just two weeks prior, he placed his hand on the bark which had been touched by many, including his own son. He watched as the autumn leaves he used to look scornfully upon now floated to the ground daintily.

The man was told he had perfect vision - but why now was he truly seeing how wonderful the world could be?

Omar Chen looked up and spun himself around, the trees and sky and nature creating blinding colors.

The world is a beautiful place.

Fiction, 11-14 – Second Place

The Story of Mush the Mushroom

by Nolan Sattler

Stories that start off fun and happy but turn serious and dark are some of my favorite stories to read and write. So, I decided to create a story that touches upon a subject that is probably the most serious topic of all: Nuclear War. I'm not sure why or how I got the idea of a mushroom man teaching people about the catastrophic effects of nuclear war. Honestly, it sounds pretty stupid. But I tried the concept and it seemed to work. (In some crazy, weird way.) I am very happy that I won this contest. It means a lot!

There once was a mushroom named Mush. Mush lived in a mushroom house in a mushroom town in a mushroom world. He was unlike most mushrooms that we know, however. He could talk. He could walk and do things. HE was also human sized. In fact, in this story, all the mushrooms could walk, talk, do things, and were human sized. Mush lived with his wife (named Rooma) and his two kids. (Named Mush Jr. and Toad) Every day for Mush was the same. He would wake up, say hello to his wife and kids, work in the dirt farms, eat some dirt for dinner, and do it all again. It was the life that mush had always known, and never questioned that anything was different about it. Until one day.

Mush was working in the dirt fields one early Saturday morning, (yes, mushrooms do use the days of the week) when Mush found something weird, buried underneath the soil. To mush, it looked like a weird combination of strange metal. But in reality, it was a bicycle. As soon as Mush fully dug it up, he got a strange vision. A vision of himself riding the thing, but not as a mushroom. As a long, gangly creature with skin. A human. (Mush didn't know it was a human, never seeing one in his life) repulsed but intrigued, he kept on digging and found more artifacts and had more visions. He found a metal rim on a board (a basketball hoop) and saw the weird version of himself throwing an orange thing into it. He found a porcelain round thing (a toilet) and saw himself scrubbing it. The last thing he found was a glass box with interesting components in it, (a phone) and saw himself tapping and scrolling on it. Confused and bewildered, he took his new finds home to see what his wife knew about them.

"I have no clue." Rooma said to her husband.

"Not even the rim on the board?" Asked Mush, desperately.

"Nope. But you could try to send the glass box to The Maker downtown. He might find a way to fix the components." Suggested Rooma.

"Great idea!" exclaimed Mush. "I'll go now!"

So he did. It took half a day to go downtown, but when he showed The Maker the glass box, The Maker took on the project for free.

"This is incredible!" he said. "It's so complex, I finally have a challenge! It'll be working by next week."

But next week came and went. Mush didn't get an answer until three months later. Mush went back downtown to find the maker tired and stressed.

"You fixed it!" said Mush.

"Y-yeah. I did." Said The Maker shakily. "Now p-please, j-just take it off of my hands."

"Why?" asked Mush. "Is it bad?"

"N-no." answered The Maker "It's n-not bad. The information inside is. Read at your own r-risk."

With that, The Maker collapsed. Mush called for help. The rescue unit took The Maker and ran some tests on him before taking him to the hospital. They said that he was fine

physically, and would be okay, but that the maker had gone insane mentally. Sacred, Mush took the glass box home and shut it away in his safe. For months he tried to ignore it, the thing that had drove The Maker into Madness. But it became too much. Mush had to know, even if it meant losing his sanity.

Mush grabbed the phone and tapped a button. The glass box was on. This is what mush learned:

The glass box was called a phone, the porcelain tub was a toilet, the rim on a board was a basketball hoop, and the metal thing was a bicycle. A long time ago, there was an age of creatures called humans, which were gangly creatures with skin. Humans had created these inventions. But years ago, there had been a war. It was referred to as The Final War. Weapons called Nuclear Bombs had been dropped, and the world was in ruin. Everything was bad. But then it got worse. The humans began to transform. They were rapidly evolving and changing due to the radioactivity of the bombs. They were evolving into mushrooms. There were videos of this happening. (Mush assumed this was what drove the Maker insane.) Becoming more mushroom and less human. The last article was about some millionaires taking something called a "rocket to "mars". That was it. That was all that was left.

Mush was at a loss for words. He used to be a human? It sounded crazy. But it also sounded true. Mush couldn't even comprehend why a species would do that to each other. Drop nuclear bombs on members of their own species? That is terrible. Mush hated some of his neighbors, but not for a second would he think to drop weapons of mass destruction on them. Mush couldn't believe it. He stayed in his house for weeks, depressed. But one day he realized that he shouldn't stay here sad about what happened. The mushrooms haven't wared with each other yet, but it could happen if the mushrooms didn't learn from the past. So, Mush quit his job as a dirt farmer (with his wife's approval first) and went around the mushroom world, teaching about what ha happened and how to prevent it. Some bad things had happened in the past, but if they didn't learn form them, they'd just happen again.

Fiction, 11-14 – Third Place

Waves of Time

by Samiha Punjala

I was inspired to write “Waves Of Time” because I love exploring new places. I went to Silver Lake in June, and we rented a boat to explore the waves. When I saw the waves, I couldn’t help but notice the differences in them. Some were calming, and some splashed me with tons of water, kind of like ups and downs in life. This inspired the connection between the waves and phases of life.

It was in front of her eyes. Once she took a glance, she knew she had to get closer. It was full of life, even though in one glance not everything was captured. It stretched out into the unknown. Each step taken into the burning hot grains invited her closer and closer. The grains clashed with the cool, crashing breeze that came along with the freezing water. With every step, a burning, tingling sensation came to her feet. She picked up some gritty sand pieces along her feet, but they eventually all left when she took a step into the mesmerizing hues of the blue present. The water pulled her in. The horizon was painted with all sorts of colors, and those exact colors were reflected right onto the salty water. Overhead, seagulls flew aimlessly while below waves moved along the pace of water. A wave moved to her feet, and as it left, the wave took the sand surrounding her feet. With every wave, a rush of cool air brushed her hair. Sweat was dripping down her face, but the cool air gave her a refreshing relief. She could stare into the waves for hours and hours.

Every wave was different; one was tall and mighty, crashing down sandcastles made nearby. The big waves took her by storm. They redirected her in ways she never would have expected. They allowed her to move to new places, and see different views. Even if she didn’t necessarily love the placement, she waited patiently for a wave to take her somewhere better. Some were tiny, barely touching her toes and giving her a light wash. She glimpsed at the foam that covered her toes. Some waves peaked near her now-soaked jean shorts, and some just made her socks wet. After every wave, however, there was a treasure to be found on the beach. A beautifully-colored seashell, or a flat rock. One by one, she picked them off the sand and used the next wave to rinse the sand off.

She noticed something similar and beautiful about every wave: no matter what wave crashed into her, it passed. And it always left a treasure. What was so beautiful about this phenomenon was that it applied to anything in life. Whatever comes, good or bad, will always leave. Everything was meant to be. She took a last look at the enchanting beach, swiveled around, and took her steps up the sandy hill. Step by step, she crashed her feet into the dusty sand. The heat came to her persistently. Every step took her just a little closer. She knew the beach all too well. She wouldn’t need a break. Once she got up, she took one last glance. She always knew there was something quite remarkable and magical about the beach.

Fiction, 11-14 – Honorable Mention

The Souls of the Uncrossed

by Ren Liles

The idea for this story came to me in the car one day while I was driving with my parents. I was staring out the window, and my brain randomly put this idea together. I'm not even sure what triggered my brain to create such a random idea, but I'm glad it did. I think a part of it was because of one of my favorite games called Spiritfarer. You play as a girl named Stella who cares for spirits on her boat before releasing them into the afterlife. That game has made me cry multiple times; it's very meaningful.

The actual story I wrote is something I'm proud of because I struggle with fitting my ideas onto a limited amount of pages. I'm proud of how I was able to leave the reader with questions, while still having them understand the general plot. At least I'm pretty sure that's how they feel because that was the feedback I got from my friends and family after sending it to them. This was also the first writing contest I've entered, and I'm so glad I received a reward.

It's a beautiful day to be alive, Celeste thought, Mostly alive, I suppose.

Celeste Flannery is as dead as an alive person could be. Not in a figurative or metaphorical way, but in a literal way. He is the only human who died, only to get roped into the border between life and death.

He is an undead raven head in his early twenties. His style is very dark and he's almost never seen without his signature trench coat that's as dark as ink. The only bright part of his look is his gleaming purple eyes.

He was sitting in his apartment, scrolling through Netflix on his television. He was deathly bored.

Next to the couch he was sitting on was a brown, simplistic nightstand. It began to shake, catching his attention.

He stood up and went closer to it. Placing his hand onto it, he uttered the words, "Wandering soul... You may use me as a host."

Celeste felt a rush as the spirit left the nightstand and entered him. He threw his head back because of the strange feeling. He still wasn't used to it.

The spirit in question then appeared in front of Celeste. It was a brunette girl, who looked around Celeste's age, possibly younger, and she wore a floral spring dress. Her hair was gorgeous and coily; it laid just on her shoulders.

"Thank you for letting me possess you for now... You see, I have a request," she said.

"I figured," he answered.

"A friend recommended you to me," she continued, "Is it true you help spirits who are unsatisfied?"

Celeste nodded, "Yes. What do you need?"

She looked down, "W-Well... Firstly, I suppose I should tell you my name. I'm Claire, and I died because of a car accident."

"My condolences."

Claire giggled, "Being dead actually isn't all that bad!"

"I see."

"But, anyway... My sister, April, is still alive. She practically raised me because Mom passed from cancer, and Dad had to work a lot to keep us alive. She was always there for me! She was even in the car with me when it happened."

"She sounds wonderful. What are you unsatisfied about?" Celeste questioned.

This caused Claire to choke up a bit. She continued, "Well, you see, April has real bad anxiety, a-and... I dunno if I fully expressed how much I loved her."

"She's a big overthinker, unfortunately, so I don't want her to think I died not loving her, you know? She also uses her spiritual beliefs as a way to comfort her mind, so I thought we'd send her a message and tell her how I really appreciate her," Claire explained.

Celeste put his hands on his hips. He was thinking about how to go about this.

"So, uh, can you help me?" she politely asked.

"I can," he answered, "Although, it'll cost you."

"Wh-What?!"

He chuckled, "Kidding. Let me grab a *Caprisun*, then we'll head out and plan this more."

Celeste and Claire were walking through the halls of the apartment building.

"Does your sister associate certain symbols with spirits? Perhaps was there a flower that reminded her of you?" Celeste asked Claire.

"Uhm... No, not really. Whenever she sees fireflies she thinks of Mom and I, but that's all I can think of," Claire said.

Celeste thought for a moment. April believes in spiritual signs, but doesn't have many signs she associates with loved ones.

He thought of possibly letting Claire speak through him to April's face, but that could come off as weird.

He kept thinking about what to do, when finally, it came to him.

"Is April passionate about dreams? If we sent a message through her dream, would she take it seriously and remember it?" Celeste asked.

"Oh, yes! We would always talk about our dreams and what sort of meanings would be associated with them. Our Mom went to college for psychology, and before she passed, she'd share a bunch of fun stuff like that. That's perfect," Claire smiles.

Celeste cracked a smile, "Let's do it then. When does she normally sleep?"

"She's always asleep by 11."

"Sweet. We've got ourselves a plan, my friend," Celeste said.

"Yay! I'm glad that I- Wait a moment. How will you concoct a dream for her? Do you have superpowers or something?!" Claire exclaimed.

Celeste shrugged, "Eh... kind of. Something happened after I... I..."

Celeste stopped in his tracks and held his hands to his head.

"Celeste? Are you okay?" she asked. She watched Celeste as he seemingly shriveled up from pain.

"It hurts... Anytime I try to remember on my own it hurts..." he groaned.

"Remember what?"

"Anything before I became undead. I only remember up until Sophomore year of high school because I got other spirits to help me remember."

Claire came over and hugged Celeste. "I'm so sorry... Is there anything I can do?"

"Right now, no... It's okay. We should focus on what's important right now," he quickly answered, leaving Claire's embrace.

Eventually, they exited the apartment building and started in the direction where Claire told Celeste to go.

Claire and Celeste arrived at April and her dad's residence. There was a red SUV in the driveway; it was presumably their father's car.

The actual estate was very average looking. It was a pastel yellow, one-story home. As Celeste came closer to the house and onto the porch, he saw a single door and it was white. Next to the door was a simple mailbox attached to the house; it read "487." He looked along the railing of the porch, and went over to a porch swing. It was pastel green, with pillows that were more of a forest green.

Celeste turned his attention back to the door. He looked at Claire; she gave him a nod.

Claire entered Celeste and took over part of his soul. Celeste phased through the entrance, only for Claire to take over and led Celeste to April's bedroom.

Celeste entered and Claire left Celeste's soul. She went over to her sister and reached her arm out. She gently grazed her dear sister's arm, before having to turn away with tears in her eyes.

Celeste went over to April, on the opposite side of where Claire was, and loomed over her. She looked so peaceful. He placed a gentle hand onto her forehead. He looked up at Claire and reached out to her from across the bed. Claire took his hand and held it tightly.

Celeste began the process. He closed his eyes and could feel the connection and love between Claire and April weaving through his body.

He began transporting Claire's message into April's dream.

April! April, hi! It's, uhm, Claire, as you can probably tell. I know it's been some time since we've talked, but I never got a chance to tell you how much I love you. Our family has been through so much, and you've been so strong and brave through it all. Dad really appreciates how much you helped me, I hope you realize. We both care a lot about you. I can't particularly speak for him, but I care, like, a lot a lot a lot!! You made my life better. I want to feel your warm embrace again... but I know you have to keep living. You're doing good for this world, so keep going. I'll always love you; please never forget that.

With the last few words, Claire let go of Celeste. He opened his eyes and saw both of the sisters crying. He went to Claire's side of the bed and gave her a hug. She cried for a good amount of minutes.

As her breathing calmed, Celeste asked if she was good to go. Claire nodded, knowing if she stayed she'd never want to leave.

They left the home that night, only to return the next morning as the sun started to come up.

Celeste and Claire sat on the roof of the same home from last night, watching the sunrise.

"Hey, Celeste," Claire suddenly said, "Is there anything I can do for you? You've helped me a lot in such a short time span, so, ya know, it's only natural for me to repay you."

Celeste turned to Claire with a soft expression. "I do actually have something in mind," he stated, "Could you search for more about my past? Junior and Senior year are coming to me now that I've helped you, but I thought I'd ask you to go find some documents, or anything, that could help me remember."

Claire nodded, "Yes, of course. Where did you go to school?"

"South Cedar High School," he replied.

"Okay, I'll begin my search after the sunrise, then report back to you," she smiled.

The two went on to watch the rest of the golden sunrise. Eventually, Celeste returned to his apartment. Claire stayed at the home for a bit and saw April writing her dream down and later telling their father.

It was a successful job for the undead raven head once again.

Poetry

Ages 15-19

Poetry, 15-19 – First Place

Pluviophile

by Pranitha Raguram

Have you ever sat around in a corner looking at nature and felt like the rain or the wind came to give some love just for you, right at that moment when you needed it? I have experienced nature heal me in more ways than one. It used to rain on my birthday every year and whenever I needed some comfort. Looking at the rain calms me down, makes me feel loved and locks me up in the moment. I have always felt like I had a connection with rain. So, as a person who is a hopeless romantic and nature lover, I wrote "pluviophile" as a letter to the rain.

The world turned dark for you to light on me
The leaves of the trees fluttered along with my heart
The sun that shone bright
dimmed its light
And clouds turned gray,
for you and I could have a moment to stay.

The wind whispered your arrival and the earth
signaled me with my favorite smell... yours
The world was full of noise
and I hushed it out to hear your voice.
With a comfortable blanket, a warm drink and our music
I waited.

And there you came. You made me feel like I am the only one
The queen or your love.
You kept me comfy in my aloneness,
loved me through my sadness,
held me in your loveliness and all I could ever do is feel...
this happiness of your existence.

The way you fill me with your presence
laugh and cry and dance together in our own essence
Oh, how you keep me waiting all the time
How you kiss me with your warmth
and I cherish you with my heart.

Ahh, I am in love... with you
I am a pluviophile
The lover of rain
Loving you with my heart and feeling you with my soul

And this is our story, with flowers and chocolates
Of our very own.

Poetry, 15-19 – Second Place

I am a Boat

by Mari Koon

I wrote "I am a Boat" as a personal reflection project of how others' perceptions left me feeling trapped, feeling like an object that could be mindlessly labeled. I wanted to be able to convey to others the heaviness of gender dysphoria as something that was easily translatable to others, while leaving room for interpretation for the readers' struggles.

I am a boat

I am a boat in the way when people see me they call me 'she'

I am a boat in the way that I yearn to be free

seeing all that the world has for me

I am a boat in the way that people view me as delicate, gliding gently on smooth waters

But in fact I am a mighty ship, blowing through the toughest of winds

I sail through uncharted territory, collecting every scrape and scar as a reminder of my past

I am a boat in the way that a cruise ships have people stay with for a while for a while

They see all that I have to offer before returning to the places that they know

The places *they* call home

What about me?

My body is not where I want to be, my body is not my home

I want to be free to see everything the world has for me, but I can't so for now

I am a boat

Poetry, 15–19 – Third Place

summer fruits

by Layla Bouguettaya

I wrote this poem after enjoying some particularly spectacular Michigan cherries one morning. "summer fruits" is an ode to the simple pleasures of enjoying in-season produce and picking fresh fruit with loved ones. For me, "summer fruits" evokes memories of picking mulberries with my mother and sister. We always manage to find overlooked and neglected trees laden with berries in parks and on neighbor's lawns.

fruit ripens, syrupy sweet
in the summer sun
in deep reds, the purples almost black
they call us, and it feels sinful
to ignore

and when we pick them?
they fall eagerly into our palms
bidding farewell to their stems
only us and the birds realize
the bounty upon us
so war ensues

each bite is a bomb exploding
not only is the juice saccharine
it is dark, intoxicating

the fruit does not leave our lips
without a telltale stain
reprimanding us cheekily for our greed
so to this we submit
gladly wearing joy on our faces

Poetry, 15–19 – Honorable Mention

Mourning Dove

by Arya Karki

“Mourning Dove” is about wistfully reflecting on childhood. Whenever I visit the house I lived in when I was little, I remember what a wonderland it used to be. I find myself wondering whether it was the world that changed, or myself. This poem mourns the loss of one’s childhood, all while celebrating the beauty of a child’s innocent perspective.

i don’t recall the first time i heard your song
it was always there in my memory
not in the foreground, but there nonetheless
intertwined with echoes of youth

of warm summer days
of hoses and sprinklers
of velvety plants whose names i never knew
of running across the street
without looking twice

of rose-tinted lemonade
of strawberry-picking
of the large crooked tree
with purple-red leaves
i’d someday be able to climb

you’d sing to me
i’d sing to you
but who you were
i never knew

i’d clamber up the tree
always stopping halfway up
but if i reached the top, i knew
i could see the whole world
and maybe i’d see you

i heard you from there
and though the meaning of your song was beyond me
i always echoed back

the weather changed, and people moved
the wind turned colder
trees were bare and smooth
without a branch to climb upon

i looked up toward their crowns
clawing desperately at the sky
and there i heard your song again
and this time wondered why

your gentle coo, which i returned
sounded almost like a cry

mourning dove, mourning dove
one day i learned your name
and one day i returned back home
but things were not the same

a question weighed down on my mind
as i stood in my old sanctuary
what was it that changed?

had the yard grown less grand?
had my memories grown too grand?
or had i simply grown?

the ragged grass, the jagged tree
that once had seemed so tall
now rose hardly higher than my head
delicate and small

its little branches couldn't hold me now
they'd snap and fall, i knew
but i no longer needed to climb it
to see the very same view

and i could not see the world, after all
but from there, i saw you

and this time i cried first

Fiction

Ages 15-19

Fiction, 15–19 – First Place

The Last Words of Dr. Charles Fletcher

by Zak Burns

For “The Last Words of Dr. Charles Fletcher,” I drew a lot of inspiration from the various works and style of H.P. Lovecraft, a writer from the early twentieth century who is considered to be the father of the cosmic horror genre, as I had been reading a lot of his work when I started writing this story. At first I was actually writing a completely different story for this contest when a flash of inspiration hit me and I, just like my doomed protagonist, wrote late into the night a first draft of this story. While Lovecraft’s works are influential to the modern horror genre, and he himself an impressive writer in his own right, his stories are infused with the racism and prejudices that were so common in his time. This blatant racism makes his writing hard to read at times, and was one aspect of his writing style that I completely avoided in my own writing, as it is not difficult to write cosmic horror without any sort of racism. In my story, I tried to focus more on themes of existentialism and dread that are backbones of the genre. In the words of H.P. Lovecraft, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

This night grows dark and the shadows of my candles grow long over these pages that I am writing, but I cannot yet bring myself to snuff out the flames and submit myself to the deep release of sleep, for not only do I fear what sleep will bring, but I fear that if I do not recount my tale, every bit and piece no matter how horrifying, the world shall never be warned of the great terror I have encountered. And though it is naught but a feeling, I cannot shake the worry that tonight is my last chance to do so.

My story starts as so many others do – with a call from an old friend. Jacklyn Ramirez and I were fellows from university, and though we went our separate ways after college – her to the mountains of Tibet and I back to the factories of New England (you may decide who drew the better lot in life!), we always stayed in touch, and she even stayed at my family’s home for several holidays when she was unable to return to her own.

And so it was no great surprise when she called me one rainy afternoon. I had been in my office facing the docks, looking through mineral samples that the company had provided me, when the phone rang. I now wish I had written down that fateful conversation, but how was I to know what events that one call would put in motion? But even my memory in my graying years can still hold on to some details. Jacklyn asked me if I could do her a favor – she was coming back into town, and was there by any chance a spare room at my house for her to spend a few nights before going on her way, back to her hometown of Arkham? Well of course I agreed, for I had not seen my friend in some time – nigh on half a decade at that point.

It was the 17th of August, a Monday, when she arrived, her taxi blowing in as if by a storm, nearly a week after she had first called. My wife and I made her welcome, portering her luggage to our daughter’s old bedroom. Now that our children had all grown up and moved out, we had no reason to keep their rooms empty. We ate together, and as we all sat in the living room enjoying a cup of after-dinner coffee, Jacklyn announced she had something to share with us. She procured from one of her many suitcases an object, wrapped well in a dark green linen so as to not damage it during travel. She explained to us that it was a statue she had excavated from one of her most recent expeditions into the Tibetan mountains. She had brought it with her to share with some of her colleagues and friends before sending it off to a rich collector

or a museum in New York. My wife and I congratulated her, before inquiring after the make of the statue. While I was always greatly interested in ancient artifacts, for some reason this one particularly had grasped my attention. Before even knowing what it looked like under the linen (for it was wrapped heavily enough to obscure even the most general of features), I felt a burning desire in my chest to look upon the statue.

"I must tell you," Jacklyn had warned us before giving in to our requests, "This is unlike any sculpture you have ever seen, ancient or otherwise. I believe it to be a relic of great power, and the locals of the area in which I found it seemed to believe that it was an object of pure evil. Are you certain you still wish to see it?"

If only we had heeded her then. If only my wife and I had refused, claiming tiredness or necessity of working early the next morning. But instead we insisted, assuring Jacklyn that we could handle whatever strange artwork that she had brought to show us. As Jacklyn peeled back the fabric, we leaned in, the shadows of my living room seeming to deepen as the lights from the various candles grew eerily faint. She uncovered the strangest, most awe-inducing statue I have ever laid eyes on. Even now, words fail to accurately describe this artifact. It was some sort of caricature, two feet in length, made of completely smooth, black stone. Obsidian perhaps, but I have never known obsidian to seep light into itself as this material did. The features of the statue still elude me, but I would not be amiss to say that it was a combination of man, bat, and snake. Bony wings stretched from the back of it, yet the proportions of the wings, nay, the proportions of the whole statue, were so wrong that my eyes could not rest on any one part for too long without feeling a sense of dread.

Jacklyn told us how she had come across it while exploring an abandoned monastery. She went on for quite some time recalling the strange murals she had found in that monastery, tentacles of shadow stretching out of a sea of blackness, as well as silhouettes of creatures and men that decorated the walls of every room. Stranger still, that the monastery could not be found on any map of that region, and though it was only a short walk from the village in which she was staying, the locals claimed that they had never heard of it. Indeed, after that first expedition into the ruins, Jacklyn could not find her way back to the monastery. But throughout her storytelling, I could scarcely tear my eyes away from the relic, much as it pained them to linger on it. Something about it drew in my attention as much as it drew in the light around it.

Oddly, to this fact, and to her strange stories, I barely paid any mind once she put the relic away, thoughts of them disappearing as the three of us spent several more hours that night reminiscing and regaling one another with tales of our lives. It wasn't until we had bid each other good night and my wife and I had fallen asleep that the horror of the artifact truly fell upon me. Looking back, it seems to me that the dream I had that night was what truly began this road of madness I have since walked. In my dream, I found myself floating in an unfathomable abyss of pure darkness, eons stretching before me in all directions. Above me lurked a horror that I can scarcely recall, let alone write down, without convulsing from fear. It was the creature that the statue represented, and yet saying the statue and the creature are one and the same is like comparing a factory-made blue dye to the color of the sky - the two things may be the same in name, but incomparable in any other respect. Miles long this creature of nightmare seemed to stretch, its wings spanning reality itself. I suddenly wondered if this is how ants felt looking up at us humans. The thought stayed not long in my head, for the strange words that issued from the creature's mouthless face rendered comprehensive thought impossible. Its eyes - oh God, how many eyes! - regarded me, yet there was no malice or hatred lurking within. Only indifference, the cold detachment of a higher being gazing at something insignificant - like a human gazing down at an ant on the sidewalk, wondering whether he should crush it under heel or simply walk around. I felt a burning in my chest, the same burning I had felt before Jacklyn had unveiled that accursed statue. I woke with a start, clutching my chest. My nightclothes were sticky with sweat, though my wife slept soundly next to me. The sky was dark outside, and I was

reminded again of that vast chasm of space from my dream. The burning in my chest only worsened, directing me, pulling me toward Jacklyn's suitcase, clouding my mind until a red haze had settled over my vision and I could think of only one thing - to get that statue in my hands.

I did not have to go far. The living room, where Jacklyn had kept the suitcase with the statue, lay just below my bedroom, and as I walked down the stairs, an awful odor caught me full in the face. The living room was dark, shadows creeping along the walls like many-legged insects. I lit a candle, the dim glow illuminating the ghastly scene before me. The suitcase that had previously held the statue was now a pile of black sludge, hissing and bubbling, corroding the carpet. The acrid stench had grown so strong that my eyes had begun to water, and I fear I would have passed out had I not covered my mouth and nose with my shirt collar.

But that did not matter to me, for the statue was within my sight - and within my grasp. I was careful to not touch the black sludge that dripped off of it (could that have been the remains of the linens that had wrapped it before?), and as I held the statue, feeling its strange, unearthly angles and designs, my vision went dark as murmurings filled my ears, whispers of the same tongue that I had heard in my dream - unintelligible, yet wholly terrifying. Those whispers are the last thing I remember before waking up the next morning from deep, blessedly dreamless sleep. No one in my household could explain the horrid stench or the puddle of black sludge, or where Jacklyn's suitcase went, though the statue was unharmed. I still went into work that next day, troubled as I was by the last night's events, and once I was in my office I received another call from Jacklyn, informing me that she would be cutting her visit short, as she was leaving for her home in Arkham a day early. I asked if she could manage a stop by my office so I could give her a proper goodbye. She agreed, and when she came by, I was on the docks talking to one of the foremen of the factory. As we made our goodbyes I inquired once again about the statue, as thoughts of it had taken up most of my waking mind. She informed me that she already had a buyer lined up in Arkham, a collector of antiquities by the name of John Whateley. Though she did not have the statue with her, at the mere mention of the artifact, the water around us suddenly bubbled and boiled, releasing wafts of steam and that same horrible stench into the surrounding area, and turned as black as the sludge the suitcase had been reduced to the night before. All I could do was stare, as much in horror as in fascination, as a dark shape suddenly made its way toward the surface of the water. It was large, larger than any seal or shark or even the occasional sperm whale that makes its way near the docks. I felt a burning in my chest, the same burning that the relic induced. The shape got closer and closer until at last we could see its eyes - its many, horrible eyes - peering up at us from underneath the boiling waters. And just when I thought it was about to surface, about to inflict the world with the madness of its very essence, the madness that makes that creature what it is - whatever it is - the bubbling and steaming stopped. And as the water returned to its normal blue, the thing disappeared back under the waves, back to whatever nether world it had appeared from.

Jacklyn left soon after, as shaken as I was, and I went home early, for I could not stop the paranoia that creature induced in me. I have not been back to my dock-side office in nearly a month, for I cannot be near those waters without receiving mind-shattering visions, visions of that creature rising from the deep and spreading its wings of dark infinity across the skies of New York. I am afflicted with the same dream every night since I first saw the statue, that fathomless expanse, and that creature above me. Every night it comes a little bit closer, and every night I am closer to hearing and understanding what its mouths truly speak. And every night I wake up in a cold sweat, sometimes screaming. I have not left the house in weeks, for I fear that every squawk of a bird is a word of that creature's foul tongue, and every drop of rain is a beat of its wings. The parts

of New York that I used to love so – its many peoples, all different and unique, each with their own wonderful ways and customs, the way the buildings stood tall above all as if declaring themselves the true rulers of the city – were all tinged with the darkness of the creature. The people now seem to cast me with a suspicious eye, as if they know what hell plays through my mind each night – as if they are condemning me for it. The buildings now loom above me, closing in around me, blocking out the sky, stretching in a way that seems infinite, that makes my mind spin as soon as I step out of my house. My wife does not fully understand what has been ailing me, and how can I explain? So instead I have simply been telling her that I feel ill, locking myself in my study and refusing any treatment. My skin has grown pale and my hair wild, but what should I care? This being that stalks my dreams is far greater than any one mortal life ever shall be – and yet I still had nothing to call it.

Until last night. My dream was of a particular horror – while over the last weeks I had been drawn closer and closer to this creature, last night I found myself right in front of what I supposed was its face. Its eyes shifted and drifted across its body as if they were not connected, and yet they all blinked in terrifying unison. I could not see any mouth, human or otherwise, and yet the sounds that emitted from the creature were louder and clearer than ever before. From the discord I heard a single word – HAAR-VHYR. As soon as it was uttered, I felt my mind throb as it tried to process and make sense of the unholy syllables. I was thrown through the black abyss of my dream, the word alone carrying enough power to tear me apart. I felt my body dissolve into this dark nothingness until only a thought of me remained, that thought still trying to understand what this creature had said. Even as I write it now, I can only suspect that it is the creature's name. That night I woke up screaming and covered in blood – my own, as I soon found out my ears had begun bleeding from the inside. I could not fall back to sleep that night, my mind throbbing from that single word – Haar-Vhyr – so intensely that I found sleep impossible.

And now here I am, writing late into the night what all has transpired. I am sitting facing my window, and though the night is dark, it is clear, so I may see, perhaps for the last time, the city I have called home for my fifty years of life. If anything happens to me, I need to die assured that whomever reads this knows the power and madness that the creature Haar-Vhyr –

There was a sound outside my window. Was that just the wind? I can see something coming toward my window. Something with wings. Something large, unknowably so, and – OH GOD! OH GOD ABOVE HELP ME NOW! HOW LARGE IS MY NIGHTMARE, THAT GHASTLY VISAGE WITH SO MANY EYES! THE EYES! THE EY–

Journal found in the home of Dr. Charles Fletcher, 523 Bleecker Street, September 12, 1932, in a large puddle of unidentified black substance. Dr. Fletcher was never seen again.

Fiction, 15–19 – Second Place

Sandcastles

by Alana Roseman

When I'm looking for inspiration for stories, I occasionally scroll through famous inspirational quotes, and one that stood out to me was: "The wound is the place where the light enters you." – Rumi. From this quote, my short story "Sandcastles" was born. Michael is a teenager nearing adulthood, and before going to college, he visits the beach over the summer. Right from the beginning of the story, it's evident that Michael is uncomfortable at the beach because it was the place where his younger sister drowned, making it an "open wound" for him. He doesn't anticipate anything from this beach trip, but a little girl named Lucy, whose name literally means "as of light," approaches him and becomes a vessel of healing and new beginnings for him in a place that originally held a lot of trauma for him. I also wanted this story to explore unlikely friendships and the power of kindness. Michael and Lucy are complete opposites, but despite Michael's gloomy presence, Lucy approaches him without judgment. Eventually, they form a strong sibling-like bond, and through her simple acts of kindness and playful charm, Lucy helps Michael reawaken the joy he thought he had lost forever.

It was the summer of 2008, and my last taste of freedom before the carefree days of my childhood would inevitably shift into the many responsibilities, pressures, and disheartening realities of adulthood. I had just graduated high school, and while my classmates embraced their final summer together, I was traveling alone back to my childhood haven, the beach.

After years away, Grandpa called, expressing his desire to see me before I left for college. And so, there I was, behind the wheel of my car, minutes away from his beach house. I was finally close enough to see the beach, but it felt like a barren stretch of coastline. Its once vibrant aura muted by a melancholic haze, as the crashing waves carried whispers of forgotten laughter and the sand mourned the absence of tiny footprints. Despite the urge to turn back, Grandpa's gaze met mine as I passed his house, and my heart softened.

"Michael!" He embraced me in a tight hug. "I haven't seen you in years! How are ya, bud?"

"Okay, I guess," I answered plainly.

"Well, don't just stand there. Come in, you must be starving." Grandpa pulled me into his cozy home, where a plate of lobster awaited. "Son, I dove to the depths of the ocean and slaved over a hot stove for hours just to get you the best lobster I could." I gave him a look of skepticism, and he laughed, "Alright, you caught me. You can thank the restaurant down the street for that." He then asked me different questions about my life, but I didn't know what to say. For the past few years, I had been going through the motions, mainly focusing on school. I finished high school with a perfect GPA, and I was on my way to a great university to study finance, and that was all there was. We finished our food, and Grandpa took his hat and two flowers from the vase in the middle of the table. "I'm going to the cemetery. I like to visit your grandma every Sunday. Do you want to come?"

I hesitated. "No, that's okay."

"Are you sure? I thought you'd wanna—"

"I'm just tired. It was a long drive, you know? I think I'll call it a day."

He frowned. "That's okay. The bed's ready in the guest room." I took my bags and

turned to the stairs, but with his hand on the knob, Grandpa asked, "Are you alright, son?"

I gave him the same response I gave to everyone else: a grin paired with "Yeah, I'm fine."

That night, I was restless, so with a box of tools and seashells in hand, I headed to the shore to create a sandcastle that looked like it came out of a storybook. Spending summers in Grandpa's small town, there wasn't much to do, and everything became tedious after a while, but building sandcastles with my little sister, Mia, never did.

I knelt on the sand, the familiar texture slipping through my fingers, and I expected to feel a sense of satisfaction or nostalgia, but it was just... emptiness. I sat down with a heavy sigh. I pressed my palms against the cool sand, molding and leaving behind a trail of tiny ridges and valleys. In the middle of the process, I realized I didn't even know what I was building: it was simply a bunch of tiny structures trying to make sense of each other. When we were kids, I was technical, but Mia had the imagination, and without her there to offer a challenge, it feels incomplete, but I pressed on. When I was done with the structures, it was time to add more detail, and I couldn't help but glance over my shoulder, half expecting her to run toward me with her long brown hair blowing in the wind, but the beach remained still and empty, and I turned to my box of seashells.

I selected one, and carefully placed it on top of one of the structures. However, the structure crumbled under the weight of the shell, fueling frustration within me. In anger, my clenched fists fell on the remaining structures, and the careful craftsmanship was reduced to ruins. "Stupid! Stupid!" I told myself, kicking up sand from beneath my feet. "If I would've built it with sturdier sand or never even put the seashell there in the first place..." I groaned as I fell back to the ground, burying my head in my knees.

"Hey!" A tiny voice called out. I turned to see a little girl in a white dress with long blond hair and ocean-blue eyes. "Why did you destroy your castles? They looked so cool!"

I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. "Huh? Were you watching me?"

She nodded. "I couldn't sleep, and I saw you building. What's your name?" I reluctantly answered, and she introduced herself as ten-year-old Lucy Angelo. "Where are you from? How long have you been building sandcastles? It looks so professional! You startled me when you yelled. Why did you yell? And—"

"Michael! Where are you?" I heard Grandpa call. Thank God.

"That's my grandpa. I've got to go."

"Wait! You didn't even answer my questions, and I want you to teach me how to build sandcastles."

"It's late. Go home, and don't talk to strangers. Didn't your parents teach you 'Stranger, danger'?"

"Fine. I'll go if you promise to teach me how to build a sandcastle." I didn't say anything. "I won't leave until you say yes," she sang teasingly with crossed arms and a smirk on her face.

I agreed, just wanting to go to bed. She merrily skipped away. "That was so... random," I remarked.

The next day, I walked to Grandpa's 'Surf Shack' by the coast. As I entered, the familiar scents of sunscreen, sea salt, and freshly brewed coffee greeted me. I was one of the two workers helping Grandpa run the shop for the summer, and today, he asked me to teach surfing lessons to the 10-13-year-olds. I told Grandpa I wasn't good at surfing, but he insisted. "Besides," he added. "You're gonna get some help from Amanda. You remember her, right?"

As if on cue, Amanda came in, and she hadn't changed a bit. She towered above most girls, and her tall frame was complemented by shiny, bouncy brown curls that fell down her back. Her caramel skin glowed under the sun and her golden eyes sparkled with excitement as they fell on mine. "Michael?!"

"Surprise!" Grandpa said with a chuckle. "You and Michael are going to be teaching

surfing lessons together. The kids are outside on the shore with their surfboards.” Amanda and I made our way to the beach. Amanda said, “I missed you. I thought you’d never come back.”

“I didn’t want to, but you know Grandpa. You can’t say no to him.”

She stared at me with wide eyes, and I glanced back at her, puzzled. “Oh sorry.” Her eyes darted to the ground. “Why did it take you so long to come back?” I gave her a look that said *You know why*, and she immediately understood. We remained silent. When we made it to the shore, I saw the silhouettes of four kids sitting and their surfboards in front of them, peacefully looking at the ocean. Amanda ran up to them. “Are we ready for some surfing?” They cheered, and she looked over at me. “Come on, Michael. Introduce yourself.”

I came over, hands in my pockets. “Hey kids, my name is—”

One of them gasped. “It’s you!” I then felt two tiny arms wrap around my legs, and I looked down to see two familiar eyes staring up at me. *Not her again*, I couldn’t help but think to myself. Amanda and the other kids looked at us with confusion, and I was about to explain, but Lucy beat me to it. “We met on the beach last night, and we became *best friends*.”

“Well, since you two are *best friends*...” I violently shook my head, knowing what she would suggest. “...Why don’t we divide and conquer? Michael can teach Lucy and Sean, and I’ll teach the others.”

“Yay!” Lucy cheered, pulling me to the ocean.

“Wait.” I pulled her back. “I think we should start with the basics...on land.”

“But your grandpa already warmed us up,” Sean clarified. “And we’re not beginners.”

“I’m a little rusty at this, so let’s start with balance training,” I said, ignoring them and demonstrating the correct stance. “Distribute your weight evenly and engage your core. Got it?” With obvious irritation, Sean and Lucy hopped onto their surfboards. We practiced drills, but it was clear they were getting restless. Lucy kept disrupting the exercises, doing handstands on the board and pretending it was a spaceship. “Do you need to do that?” I mumbled as she hopped on Sean’s surfboard, making him fall in the sand.

Annoyed, Sean complained, “Can we just go surfing already? I’m not sure how much more of this ‘balance training’ I can take.”

I sighed in defeat. “Fine.” With no delay, they both eagerly sprinted to the waves, joining the others. At the end of the class, we all went to get ice cream. The other kids’ parents came to pick them up, and Amanda had to get home for dinner, so it was just Lucy and me. “Where are your parents? I need to tell them about your disruptive behavior today.”

I don’t think she heard me because she asked, “When are you going to teach me to build sand castles?”

I was caught off guard by her question. I completely forgot about that. “I don’t know how to teach it. I just do it,” I mumbled.

“That’s alright. I’m a visual learner anyway. All you have to do is build a sandcastle, and I’ll watch.” Before I had time to react, she pulled me back to the beach and sat down on the sand in front of me. I scooped up a handful of wet sand and carefully shaped it into the base of the sandcastle, pressing it down firmly to create a sturdy foundation. I looked up to see Lucy staring in awe, even though I hadn’t even really started yet. “Could you make it a big castle?” she asked, her arms stretched wide. “Like the one at Disney World?”

“That’s a big request. Are you going to pay me for it?” I joked with a playful grin.

“I make good cookies,” she replied. I couldn’t help but laugh a little. She dramatically gasped. “Did I just make you laugh, Michael? I never thought I’d see Mr. Grumpypants laugh.”

“Oh, come on. I’m not that bad.”

“You were so serious during class time. You couldn’t even let me have a little

fun." She paused. "Is it that hard to have a little fun and smile?" I couldn't answer that. It seemed I had to smile simply for the sake of others, carefully creating an outward appearance of happiness that seemed genuine, but behind closed doors, I carried the weight of the unspoken sadness inside me. Lucy stood up. "I have an idea. Be right back." And she was off. I continued to build, and a few minutes later, she came back with a few dolls. "You can be the king, and I'll be the princess," she explained, handing me a doll.

"I don't play with dolls."

"Well, you made the castle. You might as well put it to good use." She carefully positioned her doll next to the castle and began to narrate, "Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess named..."

This kind of thing eventually became our daily routine. Reluctantly, I found myself warming up to Lucy's infectious enthusiasm and playful charm. With each passing day, I found myself gradually lowering the walls I had built, and with her around, I temporarily forgot about everything else because it was just Lucy and I enjoying life. It was a familiar feeling.

With the high tide of the water partnered with a gentle, refreshing breeze, it was the perfect day for surfing. At sunset, we paddled out into the open water on our surfboards. It was late, so we had the beach to ourselves. The waves rose and fell beneath us, and with each ride, I was reminded of the joy I felt when surfing. By the end of class, everyone was exhausted, except Lucy. "Michael! Michael! Look at me!" she exclaimed as she did tricks on her board.

"You can stay with her, right Michael?" Amanda asked. "I need to send the kids off to their parents."

I nodded, and they left. I sat down on the sand, admiring Lucy's skills. I hated to admit it, but even though she was only ten, she was way better than I ever was. I turned to my bag. "You should get out now, Lucy," I told her, searching for a bottle of water. She didn't say anything. I turned back to the ocean to see her surfboard alone on the water. My heart dropped into my stomach when I saw her struggling in the water. She was being carried away by the waves. Without a second thought, I dove into the sea, adrenaline surging through my body. The waves tossed me like a ragdoll, but I fought against them, desperately reaching out for her. I'd seen this film before, and I didn't like the ending: Two kids playing in the ocean at night, one turned away for a split second only to see the other floating away screaming for help, and he rushed to save her, but... *No*, I thought to myself. *I can't let her slip away like I did with Mia.* With every ounce of strength I had left, I finally reached her, wrapping my arms around her tiny frame, and we clung to each other tightly. We battled against the force of the ocean, inching towards the shore, and finally, we stumbled to the sandy beach. I held Lucy close, and as I looked into her innocent, wide eyes, tears welled up in mine as the memories of the past came rushing back.

"Thanks for saving me," she whispered, her voice trembling. I gave in to the overwhelming emotion, and tears started to fall on my face. *Get a hold of yourself*, I couldn't help but think. *I'm practically a grown man but crying like a little girl.* I was embarrassed and ashamed, and I knew that Lucy didn't understand why I was crying, but she hugged me. It was not a pity hug, but one that felt safe. It was a feeling that I couldn't comprehend, but it was like she was slowly breaking the chains of depression, guilt, and self-hatred that bound me for years. Her hug was a voice that whispered to me in reassurance, telling me that everything was going to be okay.

She let go, and I told her everything. I explained how Mia was a miracle baby who was born after my mom had two miscarriages, and she was the prize of the family and was protected by everyone. She was my best friend and everyone around us knew that just by looking at us. "Everything was perfect until the night we snuck out to the beach while Grandpa was asleep. We'd done it a thousand times before, but this time..." My voice

lowered, "She drowned, and I couldn't save her, and I'll never forget the next day when Mom and Dad came. They came through the door, and when they realized Mia wasn't by my side, Mom broke down on the floor, crying and screaming." I took a long pause. "It's all my fault."

"It's not your fault." She stopped, choosing her words carefully. "You loved your sister, and I know she knew that. You can't decide what happens to you, but you can decide how to react. And you're my friend, Michael. I don't want you to be sad." I looked up at her, and with a wide grin, she said, "I want you to be happy."

The next day, with some flowers and Lucy by my side, I decided to visit Mia's grave. As I stood before my sister's grave, I felt a mix of emotions: sadness, guilt, and a small bit of relief. I spoke to her as if she could hear me, pouring out my heart and apologizing. Tears streamed down my face, but it felt like a release where the weights were finally lifted off my shoulders. "I'll always remember you, Mia," I finished. "But I think I'm ready to move forward." I looked at Lucy, and she quietly asked me if I was okay. "Yeah, I'm okay," I answered genuinely. "Better than okay."

It was the summer of 2008, the summer when a little girl named Lucy unknowingly saved my life.

Fiction, 15–19 – Third Place

Valley

by Sanjana Datla

My inspiration for “Valley” came from wanting to write a flash fiction story about a single moment, examining the small differences that make people unique. I have been reading the works of Amor Towles and Marjane Satrapi, who write about the loss of hope, squandered potential, and euphoric recall, both real and fictitious, and their books inspired me to write about similar themes. I was also inspired by news of women like Dina Ali Lasloom who fought to escape their intolerant homes, as well as stories of poverty and strife under the surface in big, glamorous cities. Thank you to the FCL & the librarians for making this contest possible year after year!

The Dubai skyline runs like a mountain range across the Arabian desert. The skyscraper peaks mingle with the clouds, while the valleys are remnants of a time before this city found its métier: sweet, silver oil. The valleys will soon be removed, replaced by vast, looming towers, and the skyline will become level, like some glittering mesa in the golden desert. But right now, in the early spring of 1994, as the oil money has just begun to flow, they remain, sunken like notches in the horizon. In one such valley, two people sit in silence in a dark cafe, listening to the piercing sound of sirens.

When Adan Youssef was born, in a small apartment in the northeast corner of Dubai, the city was seeing the first drops of oil sputter out of the dusty ground. In those days, the people of Dubai drank hope like milk. When Adan’s grandmother saw the child for the first time, she gently took his hand against her own and flattened his palm. Examining the lines on his pink skin, she smiled gently and said, *this boy will become a man with great wealth*. This was 1979, and in those halcyon days, anything seemed possible.

Adan looked at those curving creases in his palm now, as he ran his hand under the warm water from the sink at his workstation. He let the blood run off of his skin and mix with the murky water. In just a year of working at the butcher shop, those prophetic folds in his hands had been stained crimson, perhaps permanently.

As he dried his hands, he yelled to the afternoon manager, the owner’s cousin. “Khaleed, I’m leaving for the day!”

Khaleed pulled back the curtain that divided the two sides of the store and peered into the back room. He acknowledged Adan by throwing an envelope at his chest. “This week’s pay,” he said gruffly, and pulled back into the other room. The envelope was so thin Adan could see the light through it when he held it up to the flickering ceiling lamp.

As Adan walked through the valley neighborhood of Tabaraz, he strained his neck to look up. Tabaraz was a very small valley, just a couple miles across, so the towers on either side loomed over the entire place, covering the sky. In Tabaraz, the blinking red light at the top of the Al Khaleej tower was the sun, and the lights in the windows of the skyscrapers were the stars. Just past the market, near the edge of the valley, stood a small strip mall. Of the dozen stores here, only one was still in business: a small, dimly lit cafe called Kup Shay. Adan pushed the door open and stepped into the dilapidated, one-room eatery. Sitting on a cherry-red bar stool, looking pensively into her mug, swiveling slowly in her chair, was a thin woman with dark eyebrows and a strong chin.

Adan stepped forward slowly and his jaw clenched. “Farah,” he said hoarsely. “If you

leave now, you can be home by nightfall.”
But she did not respond, so he pulled out the bag.

Farah Al-Sakkat was born in a bathtub made from solid gold. Today, she bathed in plain porcelain. The sharp, citrusy smell of the soap met her nose and she sank lower into the frothy water. Every day began this way, scrubbing her skin diligently, trying to remove the imprint of her scratchy, yellowed mattress and papery sheets. She had very little left, but she clutched onto her dignity with every ounce of herself.

When the truth first came, that her father’s investments in the mining industry were gone, Farah was not surprised. The mine investments were useless, and she had known that years ago. But no one in this godforsaken city would listen to a woman, and so she had waited pathetically, watching the market for when her family would lose everything. And it happened in the summer of 1993, when her grizzly father walked, defeated, through the heavy oak doors of their apartment in the sky. She had decided then to leave Dubai, leave Arabia, and find a home in a new place, where she could live without the burden of womanhood and poverty and a riches-to-rags story. That summer, she met Adan Youssef.

She’d heard of Adan only once before– from an old schoolmate who wanted to marry a French girl against his family’s wishes. Adan was a cobbler, a counterfeiter, and a maker of identities. He helped people go to new places. And so she met him, on an oppressively hot Friday night, at the Kup Shay cafe in Tabaraz, and asked him to help her escape.

Adan was initially skeptical. A prominent Emirati businessman’s daughter was not his usual customer, and she was bad for business. No one wanted to get fake passports from a man linked to the richest family in Dubai. And yet he went to his apartment that night and carefully printed her picture and bound it into a small book: a nearly-real passport, for Farah, who could not get one without her father’s permission.

Adan could not remember now why he did it– maybe because Farah was beautiful, and glittering, and reminded him of the princesses his sisters used to dress up as. Maybe it was because her husky voice reminded him of his mother’s, or because her life, from riches to nothing, reminded him of his, which had begun with so much hope and now had so little. Maybe it was because he was hungry and the money was too good to refuse.

And so, Adan had met Farah at the Kup Shay, given her the passport and visa, and wished her good luck. At the Dubai Airport, she had made it so far that she was already praising Adan fervently in her mind. Walking down the sky bridge, she could taste freedom in the air, when she heard the loud thumping of heavy boots behind her. She stood still, staring longingly at the narrow rectangular door at the end of the hall, and wiped a tear from her cheek as she waited for the gate agents to catch up with her.

Farah stood in her father’s drab office in the Dubai police headquarters. He had received a job there, as a favor from an old friend, as a colonel. Low rank, lower qualifications, and barely any respect from his colleagues. But here was something that could change that.

“Farah,” he thundered, in a voice that seemed out of place at his small, plain desk. “Do you still want to leave for Europe?”

Last year, her father had been furious when she tried to leave Dubai. Now, something had changed.

“Yes,” she said simply, waiting for the inevitable caveat in his offer.

“Then, my dear, there is only one thing you must do,” he said, smiling wide. “You must lead me to the place where you got that fake passport last year. You must help me arrest

that man. I will have made the arrest of Dubai's biggest passport counterfeiter, and you will fly to Germany that very day."

Farah stood absolutely still. On one hand, Adan deserved to go to jail, for he had broken the law. He assumed risk when he entered that line of work. On the other hand, it was wrong, and her father was playing her like a puppet, getting her to do his dirty work.

But in the end, there was only one answer, because once she had tasted a breath of freedom, there was nothing she wouldn't do to taste it all.

The next day, Farah swung open the door at Kup Shay and planted herself at the counter. When Adan arrived, he recognized her and shook his head before she could get even a word out.

"I don't do repeats, my friend," he said, clucking his tongue. "If you couldn't get out the first time, there's nothing I can do for you."

His flippancy had angered Farah, and she raised her voice. "I need to try again. This is the only way I can live."

He chuckled. "How many women live in Dubai? They all share in your struggles. But I cannot possibly make them all passports, now can I? Go home, Farah, and try to find a different way out."

Farah's eyes pooled with tears, and she made some guttural sounds as she leaned against the counter to catch her breath. She was desperate, and the tears came willingly. Adan averted his eyes.

"We are of different births, Adan, I know that," she breathed. "I was born on a mountain and you are from a valley. But you must know what it is like to be trapped, completely, in a life that you cannot stand, with your life in the hands of a man?"

Adan's life had never been in the hands of another man. It had been in the hands of fate, which had dealt blow after crushing blow, and left him in a bloody butcher shop. Where there was hope, there was now dread, for whatever threat would come next.

Adan and Farah spoke quietly about their losses- of being young and having nothing, of dreaming every night of a different life and waking up no different from the day before.

And by the end, when Adan looked at Farah, he did not see her willowy figure or striking lips. He saw her raw cuts and dried lips and red eyes, and he saw himself in her.

The fact is, anyone could have seen themselves in Farah at that second because everyone has lost something that they thought they would have forever. And in that moment, anyone would have made the promise that Adan made.

He put his hand over hers and laid a hand gently on her cheek. "I'll get you another passport, Farah. I'll give you another chance to flee."

Adan didn't ask, and Farah did not offer to make a promise in return.

Farah sat at the counter at Kup Shay and tried to concentrate on her plan. Her mind drifted to life before the money was gone. She remembered how it felt like flying to ride the fast elevator at the Al-Khaleej Tower and the magic of seeing all of Dubai at her feet when she stood at the window in her bedroom. She took a deep breath and braced herself. Several minutes later, Adan walked through the door.

"Farah," he said quietly. "If you leave now, you can be home by nightfall."

He was offering her a way out, but when she said nothing, he approached her slowly and pulled out a worn blue bag from his pocket. Farah almost reached out and handed the bag back to him, almost leaned over and told him to run, as far as he could, before her father drove into the cracked parking lot and tied Adan into handcuffs. But then, she

thought of her freedom once more, and so she grasped the bag, pried it open, and pulled out the passport.

"Thank you, Adan," she whispered, tears pooling.

"You'll get out now, Farah," Adan said, a burgeoning smile emerging on his lips. "You're going to be so, wonderfully, free."

Farah looked intently at Adan. His gaunt face and almond-shaped eyes were so inviting, so trusting. She laid a hand over his, and they both sat in silence. Then, in a flash, the piercing sound of sirens began. Flashes of crimson and azure illuminated the dim cafe, and as Farah looked at Adan, she could see the colors reflecting briefly lighting his dark eyes.

Adan's face contorted from confusion to fear to anger and finally, his eyes landed on Farah.

"Are they here for me?" he breathed, cocking his head backwards. "Farah, what is the point of this?"

"My father will let me leave the country if I help him arrest you," Farah responded quietly, squinting at the dangling ceiling light, which shook as the police cars pulled into the parking lot.

"And so," Adan pleaded. "You are giving me up? For the rest of my life, I will be in prison, do you understand what you're doing?"

Farah looked back down at Adan and saw tears trailing down his face. "I have a mother, Farah. I counterfeit to feed her. Have you ever had to wonder whether your mother was starving?" His voice rose steadily until it reached fever pitch and he slammed his hands against the table and roared.

Farah's father walked in, with men on either side of him. Adan looked once more at Farah, and raised his eyebrows, inviting Farah to a last move. She remained still, and Adan was shoved from his seat onto the ground and as he lay there, tasting the vinyl flooring and dust and remains of spilled chai and labneh, he turned slightly and glanced up, to see Farah's father place a real, crisp passport in Farah's hands with a ticket to Germany.

"Good work," he said gruffly.

Farah nodded once and moved past him. When she reached the door, she paused, one hand on the handle. Adan thought she might look back, to see him once more, but she pushed through and walked into the hazy evening light.

Fate was a cruel mistress.

Fiction, 15–19 – Honorable Mention

The Murder of Victor Doyle

by Arya Karki

This story was actually based on a murder mystery game I wrote for my friends. I really enjoyed initially creating the characters, but seeing my friends bring them to life was the best part of it. In this short retelling of the tale, I took inspiration from my friends and the personalities they brought to my characters. Despite its dark themes, I tried to bring in a more lighthearted and humorous tone in order to reflect the fun we had when playing the game.

Despite the forecasted rain, there wasn't a cloud in the sky on the night that Victor Doyle was found dead in the garden of his newly-purchased Victorian home. Perhaps it would have come as a relief to him that his housewarming party would not, in fact, have to end early, had he been alive to appreciate it.

It was Winona Green, his fiancée, who first discovered the body. Her horrified scream pierced the silence of the still night air. By this time, it was perhaps 10 or 11 p.m., though the 5 guests who remained in the house were far too preoccupied to check their watches. All of them came running outside to see the man, who had been lively and talkative just moments before, lying lifeless on the ground.

As someone who was rather unpopular with the general public, it's possible that hosting an open-house party was not an ideal decision on the behalf of Mr. Doyle. Thus, considering the condition of his body and the presence of the second-story balcony above the scene of the crime, the guests quickly deduced that this was, in fact, a murder. In the midst of these 5 individuals stood a killer, and a heavy dread hung in the air. The trees seemed to lean in closer with anticipation, and the cicadas buzzed louder as fear welled up in the hearts of the guests.

Marjorie Linwood, the old woman from across the street, was the first to speak. "I knew this was coming." Her voice was almost a whisper at first, but gradually rose with a crescendo of urgency. "I warned you all, didn't I? They don't want him here. The spirits. They don't want any of us here. This house is better off left alone, but we've angered them! We shouldn't be so shocked to see a man dead tonight, but rather to see only one man dead!"

The others had quickly learned to dismiss the woman, who was clearly a bit off her rocker. Her jangling bracelets and crystal pendants, coupled with the scent of incense and tea that followed her around made it easy to write her off as a superstitious old bat. The only person who shared her near-obsessive belief in ghosts was Osiris D. Elysium, who was next to speak. Nobody knew if that was his real name, but it was all that he offered.

"Perhaps she's onto something." Osiris commented. "I used to run ghost tours out of this house, you know. Before Victor bought it from the landlord. *Spectral Sights* was my company. Here, take my card! We might even be up and running again soon. You know, another ghost couldn't hurt the business! Not that I would have done this. No, no. But what's fascinating about this is that Victor's death tonight so closely resembles the death of Arthur Bellingham."

"Bellingham?" asked Harold Abbott, an old man of nearly 90. He seemed rather on edge. At his age, a night like this was certainly bad for his nerves. Whitney, who was his daughter as well as the fifth and final guest, rested a hand on his shoulder to calm him.

"Yes, Arthur Bellingham!" continued Osiris. "You're lucky I'm here tonight. I know all about the history of this house – you're essentially getting a free tour!" At this, the others exchanged suspicious glances. Perhaps now was not the best time to be promoting a

business. But Osiris went on. "Arthur was the last man who lived here. He inherited it from a distant relative. The house had belonged to the Bellinghams for a long time, you see. One night, he found a mysterious painting in the attic. It was an early work of Philip Whitock, who I'm sure you know went on to be wildly famous. The painting depicted some of the Bellingham ancestors, and despite many offers, Arthur adamantly refused to sell it. Only days later, he was found at this very spot...dead in the garden, having fallen from the balcony. Some say that a frustrated art collector did it, while others believe it was a ghost. There was a strange quality to that painting, they say, almost as if the figures' eyes were alive. I'm afraid I can't confirm that myself, though, as the painting disappeared on the same night that Arthur died, and it's never been seen since. Legend has it that the painting is still somewhere in this house, awaiting its next victim."

"Wow..." began Whitney. "That sounds—"

"Like a load of nonsense?" Winona cut her off. Her eyes glinted with frustration. "Obviously, someone killed him for the painting. I don't believe in any of these ghost stories. People are greedy. They act only out of self-interest, and it's awful, but that's just the way things are. I should know. My fiancée, Victor, was no saint." Despite seeing the distraught look on Marjorie's face, Winona continued. "And no, I don't care if I speak ill of the dead. It's what he deserves. Victor was a con artist, you know. Made a living off of tricking innocent people, scamming them for their money. He tricked me, too. He said he had an honest job. He said he loved me, wanted to marry me, wanted to be with me forever! And look how that turned out. One day, he up and left me. No note, no explanation, nothing. I had to track him down to get here. Turns out, he'd run into trouble with the law, and like the coward he was, he decided to flee. Started a brand new life here in this little town, but I know for a fact he could never break his old ways. If that painting ever existed, I'd bet anything that he would find it and figure out some way to profit off of it. That's all he ever cared about. Profit."

By this time, Winona was fuming, looking about ready to burst at the seams. This earned her a couple of worried looks from the others. She certainly wasn't fond of the man, now dead in front of them. Osiris shuffled a step away from her.

"Let's all calm down now, okay?" said Whitney. "Glenbury is a good town full of good people. I should know – I'm the mayor! How about we all take a minute to breathe—"

"You've been awfully quiet, haven't you, Whitney? And just as I bring up self-interest, that's when you pipe up." Winona retorted. "Keeping up appearances certainly is important for you, given your political office. I wouldn't put it past Victor to make some sort of deal with you. Or your father."

Whitney looked shocked. "Are you accusing my father? For goodness' sake, look at him! Could you imagine him climbing up the stairs? Taking part in a *physical struggle*?" Harold Abbott did, in fact, look very frail. Whitney spun around, pointing at the others. "Why don't you look at the rest of this room? The crazy ex-girlfriend, the ghost-obsessed neighbor, and the man who directly profits off of murder stories in this house! If you ask me, my father and I are the least suspicious people here."

"I never even met Victor Doyle before tonight." Harold chimed in. With this, Marjorie snapped her head around to face him.

"Liar!" she cried out in her shaky voice. "I saw you here last week. I stopped you on the road, warned you not to enter this cursed house, and you went in anyway! To speak with Victor!"

Harold swallowed and looked away. "Right, I...forgot. I came to say hello to our newcomer. My memory these days, it's all...foggy."

"Well," Marjorie continued. "Mine certainly isn't. 50 years ago. It was 50 years ago, nearly this exact day, when I witnessed Arthur Bellingham's murder! I saw him fall! I saw him dead in this garden! And there wasn't another soul in the house by the time I got here. It was the ghosts. The ghosts that haunt this place. They told me to keep people out. I tried

to keep Victor out. It's no wonder he's dead now. They didn't want him here. They didn't..." Her voice trailed off into a soft but incoherent muttering.

"Why don't we look upstairs?" Osiris suggested suddenly. "I know this place like the back of my hand. I'd know if something were off." The others agreed, though Harold stayed at the bottom of the steps. He couldn't make it up.

The balcony was connected to Victor's own bedroom, which had not been open to the public during the party. Now, though, the guests entered without hesitation, and there was a collective gasp at what they saw inside. Much of the room appeared to be in construction, which came as a great disappointment to Osiris, who very much respected the antique and historical charm of the house. However, the thing that really shocked them was the large hole hacked in the wall...and the painting that lay beside it.

Osiris was the first one to it, but as he went to investigate, he found an old-looking note lying on top of it. It read:

"To whom it may concern,

My name is Arthur Bellingham. I'm afraid I don't have much time left, so this is my last hope. This is a painting of my ancestors, created by Philip Whitlock. Despite its value, I do not wish for it to be sold. It is my will that this painting would be passed down to the next of my family, in hopes that they will remember our history. If I don't make it out of this alive, it was Harold Abbott who did it."

Shock and fear gripped the hearts of each guest in the room as they all turned to face Harold at the bottom of the stairs. He appeared to know what they had discovered, and seemed to be on the verge of tears. As he spoke, he choked on his words.

"I'm sorry!" the old man cried. "There's not a day in my life that I'm not sorry! Arthur Bellingham was my friend. 50 years ago, he was my friend. I don't know why I did it. I saw that painting, and I knew I had to have it. I had to. I tried to buy it from him, but he refused. And I killed him for it. I pushed my friend off the balcony for that wretched, cursed thing, and after all that, it disappeared! Victor found it when he moved here, and he tried to blackmail me. That's why I met with him last week. He said that if I didn't pay him, he'd reveal my crimes. So yes, I killed Arthur. But I didn't kill Victor, I swear! In fact," he pulled a massive wad of cash from his pocket, "I came here tonight to pay him back. I had no intention of killing the man. What I did to Arthur...it haunts me. I never want to think about it again, and I would never repeat it! You have to believe me, I wouldn't."

"I don't believe you." Winona sneered, making her way down the stairs to him. "Once a killer, always a killer. Like I said, people don't change their ways. Make any excuses you like about your health. I know you did it. Marjorie is nearly as old as you, and she climbed up those stairs easily! Just admit it, old man. You're going to prison anyway, after what we all learned tonight."

"She's right," Osiris said. "I don't know how you did it exactly, but you must have killed Victor. You had plenty of reasons to. I'm calling the police." But just as he began to dial 911 on his phone, Whitney interrupted.

"It was me!" She sobbed. The others turned around to face her, having nearly forgotten she was there. "It was me," she repeated again, more quietly. "I knew about the blackmail. I saw what it was doing to my father. And I was afraid. I was afraid of what this would do to my reputation. It's hard enough being mayor *without* a family history of murder. Every day is a fight just to get people to like you. I got scared, and I...I pushed him. Please believe me. It wasn't my dad. I can't bear to see him blamed for a crime he didn't commit. He's sorry enough. You can call the police, and take me to prison, but please, leave him out of it. He doesn't have much time left anyway. And he's harmless now. It's been 50 years, you have to understand. If we hide the letter, nobody has to know about it."

"You know, we don't really have to tell anyone...anything." Winona answered after a pause. "Victor had it coming. Considering the fact that we all had reason to kill him, I

can't say any of us are totally innocent. And if I'm being completely honest, I came here to do the very same thing you did, Whitney. You just beat me to it."

"I must say..." Osiris added, "If this gets written off as another ghost murder, it wouldn't be bad for business..."

"And with nobody living in this house, the ghosts would finally be appeased!" said Marjorie.

And so, none of the crimes that happened in that house were ever solved. It was almost as if a ghost really had killed Victor, as well as Arthur 50 years before him. In fact, when the party guests investigated the painting closer, they noticed a new face in it which Harold swore was not there the last time he saw it. It bore a striking resemblance to Victor Doyle...but no one else would ever know, because they sealed it back up in the walls of the house that night, never to be seen again.



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