



2019 Winning Entries Patten Free Library Teen Writing Contest

Short Fiction: First Prize

Grades 10-12 (tie):

Emma Beauregard for "Levono"

Nina Powers for "We Grew Up"

Grades 7-9:

No prize recommended

Levono

"Doctor? Doctor! I've got a wriggly one!"

"Did you strap them in?"

"Yes, sir."

The Doctor, wearing white from head to toe, walked over to his assistant. She, also in all white, was hovering over one of the silver tables spread across the room. Despite the leather straps holding her down, Patient 2078 was twisting, clearly in anguish.

"Hm. Any idea what's going on?" The Doctor was checking the woman's diagnostics calmly, showing no sign of worry.

"Not yet, sir." The assistant looked more confused than concerned as she watched the Doctor work.

"Plug her into the Crip. I want to know exactly what she's thinking."

The assistant knelt down and pulled a wire from underneath the table Patient 2078 was on. At the end of the wire was a small screen, currently black. On the other end of the wire was a sort of collar, with pins sticking into the middle. The assistant

wrapped the collar around the patient's neck, then pulled the straps as tight as she could. The patient continued to squirm.

"Turning the Crip on now." The assistant fiddled with the small screen and it flashed to life, showing another world from the view of Patient 2078. "Sir, it appears she's having an argument."

"With who?"

"Patient 5903. Her significant other in the simulation."

"Keep an eye on her. I'm going to check on Patient 5903. Call me over if anything changes."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

"I don't understand why you're doing this to yourself!"

Lee was yelling at me, again. I shifted my weight onto my left foot and prepared my argument, but before I opened my mouth a sharp pain flashed through my skull. It was gone in a second and forgotten about in less.

"And I don't understand why it's any of your business. Besides, there's nothing wrong with it!" I shouted back at him, only feeling a slight pang of guilt at his hurt expression.

"I'm your boyfriend, *ma chérie!* I don't want you to hurt yourself or go too far-". His damned French accent was beginning to get on my nerves.

"Why are you like this? You're always telling me what to do and when to do it! Seriously! You stay in New York for one semester and all of a sudden my life becomes yours!"

"*Ma belle*, you know that's not true! I just want you to be safe. *Je t'aime beaucoup!*" Lee had started to beg with me, but I was done. We had been dating for three months and he was just so clingy.

"No! You don't love me and I don't love you! It's all fake and you know it!" He froze. I could tell I wounded him. Good. It will make this easier.

"But... I thought we were happy together..." His sad eyes were beginning to fill with tears. My head was starting to get fuzzy. I had to make this quick.

"Look. We were never going to work out. Sorry if you were blind to the fact," a giddy feeling rose up in me and I laughed. "I can't deal with you anymore! You're too

high maintenance. Get out of my apartment. Or should I say, *mon appartement*," I tried and failed at a French accent but I could only laugh. He closed his eyes and a tear slipped out. He then turned around and walked out the door. Good riddance.

I turned on my radio and music started blaring. I laughed and sang along to the silly pop music. Love is dead, why would they still write songs about it? Suddenly a pang of guilt shot through me and I remembered a man with beautiful blue/green eyes, dark hair, and a French accent. What was his name again? The guilt suddenly washed away along with the man's image. I could only focus on the pleasant rush going through me. I laughed, giddy and happy once again. I started dancing around the room until I bumped into a wall. A burst of pain shot up my arm. I flinched and examined the crook of my arm. I didn't find a large gash as I had expected. Instead there were a few puncture marks, some older than others. I frowned. Somehow I knew that was wrong. Before I could figure out what was off, I passed out.

* * *

Patient 2078 suddenly relaxed, her body going limp. The assistant looked at the screen which had gone all black.

"Doctor? Doctor!" The assistant called out, confusion written on her face.

The Doctor strode over from where he was hovered over Patient 5903. His expression was blank until he stopped in front of Patient 2078, when it suddenly became curious.

"How interesting. Is she still alive?" He asked this in a monotone voice, showing no emotion.

The nurse picked up the girl's arm and felt for a pulse. After a few seconds she nodded.

"Hm. She must have passed out again. How much did she inject herself with this time?" The Doctor checked the girl's arm and found a slightly red mark, nothing that broke the skin though.

"It looked a few milliliters more than usual, but nothing dangerous," the assistant watched the Doctor work for a minute before asking, "What was Patient 5903's reaction?"

"He went to his car, crying. Once he was inside he started sobbing and punching his steering wheel. His knuckles became slightly red, but that was just his brain working."

"I see." The assistant looked down then looked back up. "Do you think they realize? That they're in a simulation? That they're nothing more than a number in our system?"

The Doctor finished swabbing Patient 2078 then handed the data to his assistant.

"No. It's impossible. They've been in this simulation since they were brought to this facility as a toddler. They are nothing but our subjects, merely data," The Doctor wrote something down on his clipboard then looked up. "Bring this to the lab, and then write a report. I expect it to be edited when you hand it in to me. I'll be in here, observing the patients. You can turn Patient 2078's crib off now." The Doctor turned around and started walking around, occasionally writing something down. The assistant watched him for a few seconds then left the room with the skin and blood samples he had collected.

* * *

Flashes of memories swarmed through my head. I saw a woman who looked like me singing as I lay in a crib. Then I saw her crying as a strange man yelled and threw different objects at her. Images flashed through my mind. A stuffed tiger, a beautiful Christmas tree, bottles of alcohol strewn across the floor. Each memory barely lasted a second but they kept coming. Then it slowed down and focused on just one.

I was about three years old. I don't know how I knew this but I did. A woman was silently crying as strange people dressed in all white talked to a man. They were the same man and woman as in my previous dreams. The woman, who must have been my mother, was holding me in her arms and rocking me, trying to hum a soothing melody but her quiet sobs cut through the peaceful chant.

The man seemed to be arguing with the people in white, and he was getting angry. I felt myself begin to cry. I knew what happened when the man got angry. My mother hushed me and I buried my face into her neck, but I could still hear them talking.

"You know she is worth far more than that! I don't care what you gave the other parents, you will give us more than what you're offering!" This was the mean man. I don't know how, but I could tell he wasn't my father.

"Sir. There is a set budget for this project. Plus it would be unfair to give you more than what the others got-"

"I don't care!"

"Babe, please. Why don't we just take the money and-"

"Shut up! It's your fault we're here in the first place!" The mean man turned towards my mother and stormed over to her. I looked up and saw his hand racing towards us then-

- - -

I woke with a start. Whatever I had been dreaming about disappeared from my mind. As soon as I opened my eyes, my head started pounding. I groaned and sat up. Why was I on the floor? *Oh God, not again.* I checked my arm and sure enough a bright red dot was there. I stood up and walked up to the counter, finding the needle and throwing it away. I could feel the tears coming.

“Lee?” I walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge. “Lee, are you awake?” I listened for his response but didn’t get one. Where was he? I grabbed some eggs from the fridge and began to scramble them. *I’m sure he’ll be back soon. Probably just went to the store for something.*

I sat down at the counter and was about to eat when the events of yesterday all came back to me. *Oh no, no, no, no, no! Not Lee! How could I do this again?* I laid my head in my arms and the sobs finally escaped my body. *Why do I always do this? What is wrong with me? Why can’t I just be a normal girl with a normal relationship for once in my pathetic life!*

I stood up and raced into my bedroom. Sure enough, all of Lee’s clothes and personal items were gone. He must have come back while I was passed out. I ran back into the living room and picked up my phone, dialing his number. It went straight to voicemail.

“No!” I screamed and threw the remote at the wall. It just crashed to the ground without making a dent. I screamed again but it turned into helpless sobs.

He never did anything bad to me. Why did I have to push him away? Why do I always push people away? I have no self-control, no good qualities at all!

My sobs became strangled as the urge to inject myself with as many painkillers as possible overcame my senses. I stood up and stumbled into the bathroom, tears still streaming down my face. *Why can’t I just control myself? Why?!* I reached into the cabinet and rummaged around, finally finding what I needed. Still sobbing, I stabbed the needle into the crook of my arm.

I waited, expecting the relief to wash over me any minute, but nothing came. Instead, all my negative emotions were amplified tenfold. I screamed in frustration then swiped my hand through the cabinet, sending the bottles and bandaids flying through the air and across the floor. I stormed out of the bathroom and into the living room, throwing everything I could get my hands on. Books, pillows, cushions. I even flipped the couch.

Suddenly my anger turned to exhaustion and I collapsed on the floor, curling into a fetal position. I lay there silently for a long time, tears streaming down my face.

Dark thoughts flit through my mind and I sank deeper and deeper into the pool of darkness expanding in my chest. This had happened before, but never to this extent.

Finally, after hours, I slowly stood up. Feeling like I was dragging a large weight behind me, I trudged into the kitchen. My eyes were half lidded and partly swollen shut from crying but I still managed to walk up to the counter. I was looking for a cup when my eyes caught something silver shining from the corner. I walked over to the set of steak knives and picked one up.

No one will miss you. In fact, the world will be better off without you. Your family abandoned you, all your ex-boyfriends hate you, all your friends separated themselves. You're alone.

"You're alone," I whispered, the tears beginning to fall again. I brought the knife to my wrist and slid it over where all the veins were. Blood gushed out of the wound and I stared in fascination. Then I did the same thing to the other wrist.

I dropped the knife and it hit the ground, but I didn't hear anything. My vision was getting blurry and I felt myself sway. I hit the ground hard and the last thing I saw was red before I blacked out.

- - -

"That is enough, sir!" I heard the man in white yell at the mean man. The man dropped his hand and I felt my mother relax slightly. I shoved my face back into her neck and sobbed.

"You have no authority over me! Mind your own business!" The mean man was very mad, I could sense it. "Now, give us the money we deserve and you can take the brat!"

"We do not need your child, sir-"

"It's not mine," the mean man growled. I could feel my mother tense.

"We do not need her. There are plenty of parents and orphanages willing to give us a child for our experiment. The amount of money we are offering is more than fair, so you can take it or you can leave."

It was quiet for a moment, and then I heard the mean man mumble something. I felt my mother gasp and she held onto me tightly, crying hard.

"That's what I thought," the man in white sounded triumphant, but I couldn't figure out why. A pang of fear washed over me, but my mother would protect me from anything. I knew she would. "Take the child and inject her."

I heard my mom wail as I was suddenly pulled from her arms. I started screaming. I kicked and punched at whatever I could hit, but to no avail. I felt a needle go into my arm, the

first of many. As I faded from consciousness I heard my mother crying and the mean man yelling at her. I thought she would protect me...

* * *

My eyes jerked open. Why wasn't I dead? There was too much blood, I know there was, so how am I still alive. Or was this the afterlife?

I tried looking around but I realized my head was being held down by something. All I could see was the white ceiling high above my head, covered with fluorescent lights. I tried moving the rest of my body but that was also being held down with some sort of strap. I started squirming, struggling against the bindings but to no avail. They weren't coming loose. I didn't realise I was crying until I felt the tears dribble down my face. I started screaming and yelling for help, but I couldn't turn my head to see if people were coming.

"Doctor! Doctor! Come quick!" I heard a woman's voice yelling and my hopes were raised. Maybe I was at a hospital. But that still didn't make sense. They couldn't have replaced all that blood, could they?

"What is it? Did something happen?" This voice was male. The doctor?

"Patient 2078, sir. She's awake! Out of the simulation!" I heard a startled gasp and then hurried footsteps coming closer and closer to where I was laying. Simulation? What were they talking about?

Two faces loomed over my head. The man was older, maybe in his fifties while the woman appeared to be in her thirties. They were both wearing completely white outfits.

"Impossible. Impossible!" The man was clearly confused with his eyebrows scrunched and his mouth agape. The woman was looking at the man, expecting him to say something. "What happened, 2078? What happened? How did you wake up?"

I realized he was addressing me, but what he was saying didn't make any sense. He was a doctor, right? Didn't he save my life? And why was he addressing me by that number?

"I... I don't understand... Didn't you save me?" I stuttered, confused.

"Save you from what? What happened?" The Doctor was shaking my shoulders now, and pressing me into what I thought was a bed. It wasn't. It was a hard metal sheet which felt very uncomfortable on my back, especially with him pushing me into it.

"I... I slit my wrists... didn't you heal me?" I looked up at The Doctor who was staring at me in fascination. Then, the corner of his lips raised into an eerie smile and a wave of unsettlement overcame me.

"Where am I? Who- who are you people?"

The Doctor looked at his assistant and she gave him a cruel smile, almost excited. The Doctor focused his cold smile on me and I shivered. I could tell something was about to happen. Something that would end in pain and misery for me.

"Welcome to the Levono research facility, Patient 2078."

Emma Beauregard
Morse High School
Grade 10

We Grew Up

August 2007

The rungs of the monkey bars boil underneath our palms. Heat rises up from the pavement of the playground; it's on our skin, making our clothes feel sticky and our hair cling to our foreheads. My hand stings with callouses and as I swing down from the final bar, wiping the dirt and grime on my jeans, I glance over at our mothers, sipping lukewarm diet cokes underneath the shade of the oak tree. "What do you think they're talking about?" I ask Grace as she brushes woodchips off of the back of her legs.

"Probably us," she says, squinting at them. We can see them from across the empty playground, and even though I can't really hear them I know exactly what they're saying, repeating the same worries about us starting kindergarten, us making friends. They always use words like assimilate but even though I don't know what that means, I know I'll be fine. I have Grace, and I have nothing to worry about.

"Probably," I say. I turn back to her. The playground behind us is empty, and we have free reign over the whole thing, from the tip of the sandbox in one corner to the edge of the jungle gym in the other. We're like princesses, with the world of the playground at our fingertips. "Do you want to go swing?"

"Sure." She grins at me with her gap-toothed grin. She's just lost her first tooth, and she bragged to me about it for hours. We sprint, our sketchers flashing their vibrant red light and woodchips spitting up underneath our heels. I can hear the low murmur of conversation between our mothers and even though I know they're talking about us, I don't care. The world is simple to me and time seems infinite and the world moves and changes around us.

September 2009

"Don't worry," Grace says with a crooked toothed smile. Her mom said that she might need braces someday, or else they'll be crooked forever. She cried about it to me over my home phone, and even though I had to hang up because my mom made me sit down for dinner, I listened to her for as long as I could. She thinks they'll make her ugly, but I told her she'll look great. I told her that all the fifth graders have them, and they're the coolest people I know. It seemed to help, at least for now. "I'm just down the hallway. And we'll have lunch together. And recess. Don't forget about recess."

“Are you sure?” I ask, rubbing the strap of my bright pink backpack. I had seen it at Target and begged my mom for it, instead of the boring blue one from last year. It’s my favorite thing in the world.

“Yeah.” She glances down the hallway, where one of her new friends is waving at her to come. I can see the ears of her Hello Kitty backpack poking up above her shoulders even from far away and suddenly, I don’t like my bright pink backpack as much as I thought I did. “We can still have playdates and stuff.” Her new friend yells her name and she nods.

“Yeah, totally,” I say. The red light on my sketcher flickers sadly as I take a step closer to her. Grace asked her mom to buy her Nike sneakers with a bright pink swoosh and neon laces this year. She said that’s what all the cool kids are wearing in fifth grade. Her sister is in fifth grade, and I think she’s the coolest person in the world. Except for Grace, of course. “We’ll still be friends, right?”

“Of course,” she says, turning down the hallway. “Best friends forever.” Her hair swings around behind her, and her feet hit the ground hard. If she still had her sketchers, they would have proudly lit up red. I watch her greet her friend with the Hello Kitty backpack with a bright smile, and I’m left standing in the hallway with her final promise echoing in my head.

December 2014

Lockers slam around me as I cram B+ essays and smelly gym clothes into my backpack. The hallway is abuzz with conversations about the break, conversations about presents and food and parties. I know exactly what I’ll be doing over the break. I’ll catch up on tv shows, maybe watch Christmas movies with my mom as tree lights twinkle, twisted around evergreen needles. But the sense of wonder I once felt—the one I felt at the prospect of Santa bringing the bunny I always wanted, or what was underneath the shiny wrapped boxes—withered with age.

I hear a familiar voice and Grace rounds the corner, her face glowing as she talks to two of her friends. Her smile is tight-lipped, but I catch a glimpse of her new braces when she talks. She hates them, and I can tell. She thinks they make her ugly, and no matter how many times I told her she would never be ugly, she hasn’t smiled her same wide smile since she got them. She adjusts her Abercrombie and Fitch shirt as she walks, the white logo stitched onto the chest standing out proudly against the lime green fabric. When we were younger we browsed the website for hours as night marched. We talked about how we’d dress when we were older, cool as the models on the website. I wish I knew what it felt like, to have grown into the cool clothes I had

always wanted when I was younger. I wish I could dress like Grace but my mom says it's a waste of money, and that really cool kids impress people with their brain. I want to believe her, but I can't.

"Yeah, it's gonna be so awesome," Grace says, grinning to one of her friends. "My mom and my dad are going to a movie, so we're going to have, like, three hours alone. Do you want to order Domino's?" I lose the thread of the conversation as they disappear into the crowd, their words lost in the sea of chatter and the sound of slamming lockers. I watch them go, backpacks swinging low and ponytails pulled so tightly on their head that their scalps look compressed. I wonder when Grace got so much cooler than I am. I wonder when she stopped calling my home phone to talk about celebrity crushes, and why she didn't invite me to her holiday party. I would have felt out of place, amid conversations about people I don't know and movies I haven't seen because my mom still doesn't let me watch anything rated R. But still, it would have been nice to have been invited.

March 2017

I don't miss Grace. At least, I don't think I do. I divide my time between my friends from theater and my job at this tiny burger place downtown, where I take orders until my voice goes and put half-effort into mopping the bathroom stalls. She has other friends, too. They're all gorgeous, and I can't see myself next to her anymore. The connection that we once shared, the one made over having the same favorite Disney Junior show and having matching pairs of light-up sketchers is gone, replaced with a sort of friendly tension every time we see each other. It's not often, but sometimes she'll come into the burger place where I work with her friends by her side and laughter in the air. When I take her order she'll give me that same tight-lipped smile that hides the braces she's embarrassed she still has to wear. She gives that smile to everyone, and when she orders she uses this voice that's just a bit higher than the one she uses with the girls at her table, one that screams acquaintance rather than friend. It's a voice of pity, that I'm stuck there wearing a lime green shirt that says Betty's Burgers and More! and highlights all the wrong places while she sits there, talking and laughing with her friends as the sunset paints the sky outside.

I tell myself it doesn't matter to me, that my friends are just as cool as hers. It isn't true, no matter how many times I tell myself that it is, but I've gotten good at pretending. I tell myself that I'm content with my smaller circle, with a job that leaves my feet aching and my clothes smelling of grease once I'm done. I tell myself that I don't miss her, that I'm content without her. And sometimes I really do believe it, that

there isn't some tiny moment from our friendship that's keeping me from letting go of it completely. At least, I think I do.

June 2020

I like the way the balloon glitters in the light. In the store, they look so fake but here, they're like pieces of floating gold, all for me. The chatter of the party surrounds me, but in the corner, sipping on a diet coke with condensation clinging to the aluminum can like teardrops, I am alone. Alone at a party thrown for me, with my name on the cake and my face on a five-foot poster that I told my mom I didn't want. The shimmering golden balloons keep me company as I sit in the corner, watching as the guests blur into a distorted haze of tanned skin and blue jeans. It feels like a fever dream. I watch the party from afar as if it's a tv show and I am a viewer on a plastic chair in the corner. I think I like it, but I can't really tell.

Some of my friends are across the room, eating chips and talking loudly about something that happened that Thursday during a class I'm not in. I would go over and join them but for some reason, I'm happier here in my corner with the condensation of the can dripping onto my finger. I'll lose contact with most of them as time goes on and we grow into people completely unrecognizable from who we are now. I wonder if we were ever friends in the first place, or if they were just people to fill my time with, brought together simply by the circumstances of our situation.

Grace is here, too. She's standing in the middle, the waves of people parting around her as she sips something that I think is fruit punch. I let my mom put together the guestlist for my own graduation party as I zoned out, nodding along to the names she suggested. That's how Grace and her parents ended up on the list, I think. They must have been a passing suggestion that I had just nodded along to, and not given a second thought.

She's just standing there, in the middle of everything, looking just as lost as I am. Her hair looks like silk in the light, her face quiet and pensive. She's more gorgeous than I'll ever be, even just standing there. I feel some sort of emotion surge through my body, something like a mixture of jealousy and pride and regret. She sees me looking, and my face burns. But she doesn't look confused, or upset. Instead, she cuts through the crowd and pulls up a plastic chair next to me with a small smile. The legs scrape against the floor in an obnoxious grating sound that is almost swallowed up by the noise of the party. I can still hear it, though.

"Hey," she says, taking another sip of her punch. It stains her lips bright red as if she's wearing the garish lipstick that we used to swatch across our arms in the CVS as

our parents bought a soda for the road. I wonder if she's talking to me because she wants to, or because she's just bored. Probably both. "Nice party."

"Thanks." The conversation is dry, something that would occur between two acquaintances rather than two friends. That is our relationship at this point, though, so I shouldn't be surprised. She looks down into her drink, running her thumb across the plastic of the cup. This never would have happened before, the lapses in conversation and the silence that leaves me feeling like I'm doing something wrong. I wonder what this party would be like if we had never lost touch; if I had been in her second-grade class, or if she had invited me to her Christmas party when we were 12, or if I had been at the table of the burger place instead of the one taking her order.

"So," she says, flipping her hair over her shoulder and giving me a wide smile. Her teeth are straight and perfect; she smiles a lot more since she got her braces off, and now it's all I see when I spot her in the hallway, or sitting in one of her classes. She's beautiful and she knows it. "How's it been going? It's been a while." I don't think either of us knows how long "a while" really is. It's been years, probably, since we've exchanged more than a couple of words at a time.

"Good," I say, nodding. There's a lump in my throat. This isn't how our friendship was supposed to go. We were supposed to go to each other's birthday parties, have our first boyfriends together, get ready for our first school dance together. We were never supposed to grow apart. Or, maybe, this is exactly how it was supposed to go, and I've just been living in an idealistic world concerning the "perfect best friend" for far too long. "How are you?" I hate myself for asking that. It's the most mundane question I could ask. It's the question you ask your old kindergarten teacher when you see her at the grocery store or the great aunt that you only see once a year at Thanksgiving. Not the person who you thought you would be friends with forever.

"I'm doing really well," she says, flashing me that same shining white smile from before. It looks like it hurts her cheeks. She takes a sip of her punch, her eyes darting from the food displayed proudly on the table to the balloons that bump into one another as they try to spell out congratulations to the array of neighbors and family that my mother summoned from the deepest depths of her contact list. "It's so weird to think that we're graduating in, like, a couple of days though," she says. "Like, it seems like a week ago when we were playing on the playground together and asking what kindergarten was going to be like. I kinda miss it." I agree with part of it. I liked the swings the most and I spent my summers on burning plastic, kicking my legs so high up into the air I felt like I was flying. But I don't agree with the first part of the sentence. It feels like forever ago since we were just kids. It feels like forever ago since we were friends.

"Yeah, those were good times," I say. She stares into her drink, her brow furrowed as if all of it's coming back at once, the feeling of the burning hot metal underneath our bodies and that of a woodchip that had wedged itself in between our heel and our shoe. "What happened to them? I used to think they were going to last forever." She shrugs, smiling at me. This isn't the toothy, cheek-hurting smile from before. This one is more genuine, real rather than forced to maintain the guise of politeness. This one doesn't look like it hurts.

"I don't know," she says. "We grew up." She says it as if it's gospel. As if it explains the entire course of our friendship. Maybe it does, but I wish it didn't. I wish I could find this deep explanation for why we grew apart the way that we did, why we ended up completely different people than who we thought we'd be when we were younger. But maybe Grace is right, and it's just a normal part of growing up. I don't think I like it very much. "Anyway, you wanna grab some food?" she asks as if she didn't just drop a bomb that made me rethink everything I've ever thought about growing up. "Your mom got good snacks. She never used to buy name brand chips." She's been buying name brand chips for years, ever since she got her promotion, but I'm not going to tell Grace that.

"Nah, I'm good." I hold up my can of diet coke, giving her a small smile that hurts my cheeks. "I've got my soda."

"Ok. But we have to catch up later, 'kay?"

"Yeah, definitely." I know we won't, but she smiles at me like she really thinks she will. She says it in the same tone she used on the first day of second grade when she assured me that we would still be best friends forever. I remember that voice clearly and I wonder if, back then, she really thought we'd be friends forever. I did, anyway. Before I realized that chance coincidences and life get in the way of even relationships with the best intentions.

Soon she's disappeared back into the crowd; with one smooth wave of her silky hair she was swallowed up and I'm left sitting next to an empty chair that wasn't there before Grace dragged it over. I take a sip of my diet coke as I listen to the chatter that seems to merge into one voice. It's gone flat now, but I keep drinking anyway. The plastic chair is comfortable, and I sit still as I watch the world move and change around me.

Short Fiction, Honorable Mention

Grades 10-12: Nina Ryan, "I Can't Hear You"

Grades 7-9: Natalie Emmerson, "It's Okay to Feel"

Zoe Brush, "Prophetess: A Tale from the Future"

I Can't Hear You

Prologue: Inspired by and written to "Liar" by Camila Cabello

If I can't hear you, there's a good chance I don't need to anyways. The world is a loud place. That's true, and I have no reason to lie about it. Even if it's slightly quieter to me, that doesn't mean the background noise doesn't exist. It's just in a different form.

My life has a soundtrack, and I pity those who don't. I think, I talk, I sing, I play, I move to music. It runs my entire world. When I write, my fingers move as if the keyboard were a piano. The beat is the same, and the tempo never fails to be set correctly no matter which item it is applied to.

I have insecurities, but they are all solved by the same method. I have friends, and they all recognize my addiction. I get lost, but always find my way back through the same Spotify account and pair of earbuds.

Siempre estoy cansado, pero está bien. Todos siempre están cansados. Don't mind the Spanish, it probably has something to do with what I'm listening to. I'm not sure where this is going, there are so many options. I could create a false identity to live out my story, or I could fess up and let you all address the fact that hello, yes, it's me.

"One" by Metallica

I can't think. I can't eat or sleep. I am stuck in a state of complete and utter confusion. My phone buzzes, and I lift it out of my pocket to check. A notification lights up the screen: From Leo. My breath catches in the back of my throat and I shove it back into the jacket, not even bothering to open the message. I can't deal with that right now. I really want to, but it's impossible to bring myself to type anything back.

So instead of confronting my feelings, I decide to open Spotify instead. I've never had something so worth the money, ten dollars a month for the best antidote to anything. Music. It consumes my life, and even if I wanted to, I don't know how I would subsist off of silence. Bringing up my liked songs, I click on "One", by Metallica. I close my eyes and lay down on the floor of my room, letting the beat resonate inside my head.

"Instagram" by Dimitri Vegas

Every morning I wake up in the same bed, the same room, same house. Every morning I open my eyes to see clearly, move my hands and feet to roll out of slumber. Every morning I listen intently for the sound my feet make as they hit the floor, and every morning I miss it.

My carpeted hallway is silent as I make my way to the bathroom, shutting the door with a quiet but audible click. The socks I'm wearing scuff the tile, but I don't hear the noise. After my shower I dry my face, blinking several times to clear the water from my vision.

Breathing deeply, I brace as the ringing starts almost immediately in my ears. I shut the door to my room, opening a dresser drawer and pulling out jeans. I get dressed quickly and kneel beside my bed to open my hearing aid defibrillator, scooping out the two earpieces and fixing them into my ears. I grab a sweatshirt off the floor and head down the stairs. I stop to unplug my phone from where it's charging and unwrap my earbuds, tucking them into my pocket as I prepare my soundtrack for the day.

Setting an empty plate in the dishwasher, I don my backpack and start to walk my driveway to where the bus stops. Pulling out my phone, I tap play on "Instagram" by Dimitri Vegas, giving reggaeton a chance to shake me out of my stupor.

As I near the bus, my phone buzzes. From Leo. Frick. I forgot I ended up talking to him last night. I pull it out and open Snapchat, sending an awkward selfie before climbing onto the bus and continuing down the aisle to my secluded seat at least four rows behind anyone else. I unravel my earbuds and proceed to turn my music up to insane levels to compensate for the background noise in my head.

Closing the battery doors, I hear the tones that signify them turning on and close my eyes. It always makes me a bit dizzy to hear that ringing in my head.

The bus is loud, the vehicle itself making its way down the street, rocking the seats. I sit back and dig a case out of my bag. Taking out my hearing aids, I click the battery doors open and set them in the case. My earbuds are tangled as I pull them out of my pocket, and I unravel them before opening Spotify.

Every morning I have about fifteen minutes of boredom on this vehicle. I use this time to freak out about upcoming tests, social events, or simply to endure a quiet mental breakdown.

This morning I open my phone to several new messages. Leo: "I'm having conflicting feelings." I type back: "About what?" Three little dots appear on the screen, showing me that he's responding. "Callie."

I inhale sharply. Leo dated Callie a few years ago and it didn't work out at all. The fact that he was considering returning to her was enough for me to defer to our mutual friend Oliver for advice. I open his contact and describe the situation as fast as I could before getting back to Leo.

Oliver replies almost immediately. "You're not gonna like this, but this is my advice." I sigh. Of course I'm not going to like it. "Fine. Go ahead." The three dots appear again. "You have to ask Leo out ASAP." I frown. "Why?" I don't see his reasoning. "Bc Callie isn't good for him." That was true. Callie had only hurt Leo and I could see why Oliver was worried. "I really like him tho, I don't wanna blow my chances." I click send, nervous as to how he would reply. "There's still a chance he won't reject u. And ur better for him than Callie." Everything he's saying makes sense, I'm just too scared to comprehend it.

The bus pulls up to the school and I stuff my phone into my pocket. Stepping down onto the asphalt I feel a drop of rain land on my shoulder and quicken my walk towards the doors. Once inside, I pull my phone back out and open Snapchat. I click on Leo's last message.

My fingers are poised over the screen but I can't bring myself to reply. So instead of giving him advice, I ask for some of my own. "Oliver." I breathe slowly and hit send on another snap to the only person I'm really trusting right now.

My feet speed up as I climb the stairs from the lobby onto the first floor. Continuing down the hallway, I enter the cafeteria.

"Trampoline" by SHAED & ZAYN

Mila is sitting at a table with Eduardo, Lily, and Leo. I pause in the doorway, I don't really want to keep walking. I don't really want to see Leo right now, let alone make small talk and pretend that everything is fine and I'm just tired. I'm sick of pretending that consoling him about Callie doesn't hurt me.

I just want to run back to the bus and back to my fifteen minutes of boredom. I wasn't even that bored, it was just quiet. But before I can flee to my locker or literally anywhere else Mila spots me and waves me over to the group.

"Valeria!" I breathe in deeply and walk over to the table, not making eye contact with Leo until he calls me out. "Valeria, what's your opinion on the whole Callie thing?" My heart skips a beat completely and I answer with a brusque three words. "I don't know." He frowns. "I mean, I don't either really." I nod and tap Mila. "Do you want to go to the band room?"

Mila and I walk down the hall to the band room storage closet and push open the door. She grabs her clarinet from amongst the instruments and I proceed to the

keyboard. Plugging it in, I push back the key cover and click the power button. I sigh, positioning my hands to begin playing "Trampoline" by SHAED & ZAYN before I remember I have no idea how.

Mila starts playing the piano in the corner of the room and I join her, closing up the keyboard until later in the day. Sitting with her on the bench, I gaze around at the empty chairs and music stands, contemplating how I can skip lunch and return here.

"I'm Still Standing" by Elton John / "Cherry Pie" by Warrant

By third period I'm about done with the day. I feel as if I want to run straight through those double doors and just clock in a few miles before practice in order to stifle my insanity. But instead of doing that, I'm sitting at a piano in the band room, plunking out a half-hearted melody to Elton John's "I'm Still Standing".

The bell rings and I am forced to leave the only place in the school I enjoy time in to brave the bottle-neck hallways of the first floor. Weaving in and out of the student traffic that fills the corridors, I adjust my earbuds and hit play.

Walking down the hall with music playing in your ears makes you feel ten times cooler than walking in silence. That's why when I travel around the school, I always make sure to have my cords untangled and Spotify open.

"Cherry Pie" by Warrant is playing on my phone, and if anyone knew I would probably be scoffed at. No one figures that the numbers I'm mouthing are counting in the vocals, and that the hand hitting my leg is actually tapping out the bassline.

During lunch I'm back at the piano, playing riffs of any sort haphazardly an octave too low. My sandwich is in my backpack in the corner, forgotten as I begin to give vocal accompaniment to my mediocre playing.

Another bell announces my departure from the keyboard as the crowds shuffle out of their rooms. I'd much rather not go to math class and just stay in my musical bubble, but I pack up and leave anyway as the next class enters the room.

"Too Good at Goodbyes" by Sam Smith

I enter the band room, dejected. After the conversations I had with Oliver and Leo last night, I can't imagine seeing Leo in person this morning. Oliver was nowhere to be found earlier, I spent my whole arrival searching for him, to no avail.

Sitting down in a chair next to Emma, I sigh. She immediately picks up on my mood. "Come on Valeria." I frown. "What?" "We're going to wash out my mouthpiece and you're going to tell me why you look sad." I thought about blowing it off, but I had nothing better to do.

Following Emma out of the room and into the hallway, she stops me at the water fountain. "Okay, what's up?" I look at her in silence for a moment, thinking about how to phrase what I wanted to say. "Leo and Callie are in this class." She nods and I continue. "I'm going to be here with both of them for almost an hour and I don't think I can do it again."

Emma and I walk back to the band room in silence. Settling into our seats, she pats me on the back and picks up her saxophone. I can barely sing, let alone on tempo. My diction is long gone, my key is off, and I have no depth. By the second song I'm leaning my head on Emma's shoulder and shutting my eyes, attempting to tune out the class.

"Qué Pena" by Maluma & J Balvin

I am exhausted. I sat in band for fifty-five minutes watching Callie act like she was in a very close relationship with Leo, and Leo being unsure of himself. What are you supposed to do when a girl is hardcore hitting on you but you aren't sure how you feel?

Now I walk through the halls with my earbuds blasting Spanish words and my mind going a million miles per hour. The next song pops up and J Balvin and Maluma's voices fill my head. The world is so quiet without a score.

After falling asleep during Health, Spanish, and English, I finally drag myself into the locker room. Dropping my bag on the floor, I grab a change of clothes out of my locker. I change quickly and throw my hair up. It'll fall down within the next five minutes anyways. Mila enters along with the rest of our team and we head down to the fields.

I remove my phone from my pocket and clear all of the open apps, including Spotify, now playing "Qué Pena". Mila taps me. "We have our distance run today." I groan. "I don't have the paperwork for that." She shrugs. "Me neither, I don't think anyone does." We continue to walk in silence until we reach the track.

Setting our bags on the sidelines, we begin our mile warm-up. "Mila, I'm so tired." She sighs. "Me too, man." I watch my feet intently as we run. "Yea, but I can't stop thinking about Leo." Mila frowns. "I know, it sucks for everyone." The breeze picks up. "No one wants him back with Callie. No one thinks it's a good idea after last time." She nods slowly. "What exactly happened?" I purse my lips and continue. "She messed him up, I mean, she wasn't the only person, but she was the main reason. Dumped him and didn't talk to him for a while either, part of why he says he's taking a break from dating." Mila looks at me. "Bad timing for you, huh?" I nod.

"Good As Hell" by Lizzo

After practice I'm exhausted, not only physically but mentally. My phone goes off and I check to find a snap from Noah. I don't understand other people and definitely not him. Noah is a junior, and confident that I'm interested in him. I would love to rebuff his questions with who I'm actually into, but instead I send a photo of my cat back and lay down on my bedroom floor.

Sticking my earbuds in, I scroll through my playlists to find Lizzo. If anyone can sing confidence into me maybe she can. I hit play on "Good As Hell" and close my eyes. The music runs from my ears to my toes and fingers, extending every extremity. My heartbeat takes on the tempo of the song and I begin to mouth the words.

A notification from Leo lights up my phone. He's watching The Office with his cat, I breathe deeply and drop the phone beside me. Raising my arms over my head and inhaling, I let the breathe slide out and press my eyes shut forcefully, telling myself not one tear will fall for him.

"Life on Mars" by David Bowie

I lean against the window of the bus and shiver. I got almost no sleep, ate no breakfast, and am just as lost as last night. Between Noah and Leo, I'm very confused. Holding my face in my hands, my phone buzzes. From Mila. Glancing down at the screen briefly, I ignore the notification. Another ringtone shakes me out of my stupor as a I finally pick up the phone. From Oliver.

I pause "Life on Mars" and open the snaps one by one. Mila, Oliver, Leo, Emma, Lily, and Noah were all saying good morning in their own way. Scrolling through the photos I realize Noah and Leo could decide whatever they wanted.

It doesn't matter, I've got Mila and Oliver that I'm looking out for. If I lose myself, then I lose them too, and I can't bring myself to risk it. So with these new thoughts in my mind, I pull popcorn out of my bag and eat something for the first time since last night.

Resting my head back on the window, I respond to each and every one of the snaps before closing my eyes and resuming my music. And now if anyone asks, I can't hear them.

Nina Ryan
Morse High School, Grade 10

It's Okay to Feel

Emil looked over his shoulder with that easy grin of his, we're sitting in our usual seats at the back of the classroom. We go to an all-male school private school in Burbank CA, It's highly regarded not only for its impressive academic programs but also for its soccer academy. Colleges from all over the county give graduates from the Burbank Institute free rides.

Our parents like to joke that we were twins in another life. Ever since we were born we have been inseparable, we've always done everything together and that includes playing soccer. We started playing for our first team, the F.C. Courage when we were three. We went up through many different levels of teams together and are currently playing with the U19 national team, which is impressive because we're only 16. Now, we are getting the chance to further our dreams of playing professional football in Europe. I should be overjoyed, I mean, I get to play in EUROPE! I get to be near the greatest players of all time! But the closer we get to leaving the more nervous I'm becoming and when I see Emil's familiar grin, the one that means both trouble and fun, I want to cry.

Now I know it doesn't make sense, but see, for the first time in our lives, Emil and I will be playing against each other. We will no longer be on the same team, we will both have to find a new brotherhood. The problem is, I don't want to. It's as simple as that, the thought of playing without him, of having to form another group, scares me out of my mind. Not that I would ever admit that to anybody, of course. One of the many things dad has taught me is that no matter what happens, no matter what the challenge in front of you is, you get up and face it like a man. No fears, no tears, only the determination to succeed. This is the reason why, for the first time in my life, I can't tell my brother how I feel. No matter how badly I want to, because that's not what a man does.

We leave on Saturday, which is three days from now. When we get to Europe I will be playing for Chelsea, Emil for Paris Saint Germain. I signed for Chelsea first so of course I thought Emil would follow my lead and sign for Chelsea or at least another team in the premier league, but then he got an offer from Paris. PSG is his favorite team, he is literally in love with them, almost as in love as I am with Chelsea. Now I understand he loves them, *almost* as much as I love Chelsea but we have a pact, we have each other's backs, we're supposed to be together, and now we're not. Thinking about it though, I doubt I ever would have signed for PSG. Had I known he wouldn't go to Chelsea, I probably would have tried to propose a compromise though, like Dortmund.

It's too late now, and the worst part is that he doesn't seem to care. He's super excited to leave and it's all he can talk about.

"You ready bro?" he whispered, "we're finally going to do it!"

Today is our last day of school before we leave and there's only a minute until the bell rings.

I smile weakly, "Yeah, can't wait," it's half-hearted though and he can tell, it doesn't help that he's wearing a Neymar jersey, MY favorite player, who happens to play in Paris, even though it's common knowledge he hates it.



"What are you doing on Friday," I asked as I did tap ups with a ball.

"I don't know yet, I'm thinking about going to the DQ or something, just to celebrate our last day in the U.S."

I stopped juggling surprised, Emil is not someone who normally indulges in things like ice cream, he's always too focused on his training.

"Huh, I think I'm just gonna stay at home and watch the Barca game, I want to see Antoine Griezmann play in the center forward role."

"You do you man", he said, "You can join us if you want though, then we could go over to my place to watch the game."

"Into Madrid territory?" I laughed, "no way man, what about going to the pub, neutral zone."

"Sure," he laughed, "that way there will be an audience when you looose."

Ducking to avoid the ball, I pinged at his head. We ran after it laughing.



Barca won the game in stoppage time with Messi scoring an incredible free kick to finish it. I made fun of Emil the whole car ride home but it was good natured. You

can't dish it out if you can't take it and I would have been receiving much worse had Real won. Thinking about it now gives me a pang in my stomach that I try my best to push away, but even still I can feel my eyes start to prickle. It just won't be the same without him. Although I suppose it could be worse, at least we'll both be in Europe and we'll still be able to talk to each other.



I'm bouncing slightly in my seat and looking out the window of the plane, all my worries from the past few weeks forgotten, at least for the moment. "We're doing it, we're actually doing it!" I exclaim looking at Emil my eyes shining.

"I know bro, I know," his reply tense but his eyes dancing with a quiet joy. He doesn't have to explain how he's feeling, I understand and the feeling is mutual. We're both lost for words.

We sit through the safety video for Qatar airways and all the preflight commentary before holding on as the plane takes off. Takeoff is my favorite part of flying, that and landing. Once we're in the air I take out my headphones and queue up the new Star Wars movie, Emil does the same next to me except I think he's watching Frozen. He's kind of a dork. For the next two hours, I get lost in the world of the Jedi and the republic and it settles my nerves. After the movie, I decide to try and sleep because when we get to England it will be morning so I won't get another opportunity until the end of that day.

When I wake up again it's dark on the plane, most people are asleep, some are watching movies, I'm not sure quite what woke me up but for some reason, I can't fall back asleep. Emil starts snoring next to me so obviously it's just me. I sit there for a couple minutes before we hit a spot of turbulence. The seatbelt light comes on so I shake Emil awake and tell him to strap in. The turbulence gets progressively worse until the plane is shaking pretty badly. I look at Emil, he looks shaken up too.

"Don't look at me man, I don't know what's going on," he said. I nod, not saying anything. It continues for a few more minutes though and other people start waking up.

"Please stay seated and remain calm everyone," the captain's voice blares suddenly from the speakers above our seats, "We seem to be experiencing some technical problems and may have to make an emergency landing but there is nothing to worry about, I repeat please stay calm."

I feel a rising sense of horror in my stomach but I don't say anything, I look at the map and it shows us just above Great Britain. Just then near our window, a loud bang makes everyone jump, then the plane takes a great lurch and starts what seems to be a free fall. I grab Emil's arm wanting to say something but remember what dad told me, No fears, no tears, just face it like a man, so I just hold on. Outside our window, I think I see a large object and try to identify it but I can't make out what it is through the darkness and rain, Emil who is slightly closer because he's on the inside, tries to see as well but he can't either. Everything goes dark, no one knows what's happening, then something happens and my head crashes into the seat in front of me.



Images are flashing through my head but they don't make any sense. Red lights, cold, wet, voices, pain. A thick fog, none of it is registering.

I see a face, "Hold on mate, hold on." It disappears, then nothing.

A face swims above me, everything is white, my mom's face, there are tears glistening on her face, I try to reach out, tell her I'm alright, I can't move. She swims out of focus and it goes dark again.

This time when I open my eyes I am fully conscious, I'm in a bed, dry, with white sheets, not my bed. I'm propped up on pillows and my leg is raised in a weird sling of some sort, it has some huge cast on it. My arm is also in a sling and it too is in a cast. As I sit there and take in my surroundings I slowly start to get the feeling in the rest of my body back.

I almost wish I hadn't, everything hurts and I'm sore all over, I can't really feel my leg so I assume I must be on painkillers. I'm still processing where I am, why am I in a hospital, why am I so beat up, what happened? I should be at Chelsea by now, what happened on the plane? The plane.

It starts to come back, just flashes of it. The plane taking off, Star Wars, the turbulence, Emil. Oh shit, Emil, where is he? I try to move my head but it causes spots to dance before my eyes and causes me to cry out in pain, I stop waiting for the pain to recede. I sit back, trying to think, it's still coming back, slowly but surely. I remember the announcement, an emergency landing.

Oh, an emergency landing. I realize what happened, their emergency landing must not have been very successful because I'm sitting here, in this room, hooked up to beeping machines with a broken body and a messed up head.

Just then the door opened and a doctor entered the room, he's middle-aged with a balding spot on the top of his head. He comes over to the bed muttering to himself, before he stops, surprised when he sees me awake.

"Jacob, you're awake!" He said, "We didn't expect you for at least another day."

"Where am I, what happened?" I managed to croak, "And where's Emil?"

"You are currently in hospital in North London, the plane you and your friend were on crashed right after you crossed over English soil, luckily you were over land and emergency vehicles were able to reach you in time to transport you to a medical facility. You've been in a sort of coma for the past three days and we weren't sure you were going to make it." He explained although I noticed he didn't say anything about Emil.

"Your parents are also here, they've been anxiously awaiting your awakening." He seemed to see the question in my eyes and sighed, "Your friend was injured even more severely than you, he too is currently in a coma and we're not sure if he is going to make it. We certainly don't expect him to wake up anytime soon."



Three days after I woke up I'm still in a state of shock. How could this have happened? My life is falling apart in front of my eyes and there's nothing I can do about it. I've been through a roller coaster of emotions over the past few days. Shock because of the event. Pain because of all the injuries I sustained. Relief because the doctors say I will still be able to play and Chelsea will still accept me if I manage to work my way back to game fitness. But the strongest emotion and one that hurts the most is regret. Regret for what I didn't say, what I wanted to say when the plane went down, regret that I wasn't able to express my feelings. Now regret that I am still not able to cry for my friend because that's not what a man does.

The more I think about it though, the less I care and eventually I get fed up repeating the rules to myself, "I am afraid," I whisper, softly at first, then louder, until I'm speaking the words. "I am afraid, I'm scared of what happened, I'm scared of the

amount of work I'm going to have to do, I'm scared of being in Europe alone, and I'm scared for Emil. I don't want to do this without him, I don't think I can."

As I'm saying this tears are streaming down my face but it feels good, I needed to get it out. It takes me a good 20 minutes to stop crying but it feels like a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders. On top of the relief I feel admitting my fear I realize that it's okay to cry, it's okay to be afraid, it's just part of life and hiding the feelings, suppressing them isn't going to help, it doesn't make you cool. It takes courage to admit you're afraid, and it takes strength to do something about it. For the first time since waking up, I feel grounded, I have a plan. I'm going to train, I'm going to get back to the level I was at and then I will surpass it, both for myself and for Emil.

Natalie Emmerson
Morse High School, Grade 9

Prophetess: A Tale from the Future

It is 2035 when the girl steps onto the escalator and begins her descent into the subway station. She swipes her MetroCard and walks toward the crowded platform where she finds herself standing next to an old woman. The woman won't stop staring at her. She looks bedraggled, but strangely familiar. The girl ignores her and pulls her phone out of her pocket to feign distraction. She can feel the woman's eyes on her face, and when she steals a glance at her, she can't help but think that the woman, despite her age, looks exactly like her.

The girl breathes a sigh of relief as her train pulls up. She pushes her way to the front of the platform and steps onto the train, eager to escape this strange situation. To her dismay, the old woman follows her. The crowds fill the space between them, and the train ride passes uneventfully. When the girl reaches her stop, she gets off the train and walks with the purposeful gait of a person who grew up in the city. As she is climbing the stairs, the old woman suddenly appears beside her.

"Hello," she says, "I have waited so long to find you." She places her hand heavily on the girl's arm. The woman's expression captivates the girl because she is sure that she has seen her exact face before, but she knows she has never seen this woman. The girl tries to turn away, but she finds that she cannot move her head. Her vision blurs and everything is spinning. When the spinning finally stops there is no-one

but the old woman in the station, and the air feels almost too heavy to breath. The year is 2115, but the girl doesn't know that.

"Who are you?" the girl asks. The old woman laughs.

"Only the same person as you." The girl walks faster to try to get away from the woman. When she reaches the top of the stairs and steps out into the street everything is strange and unfamiliar.

She looks up at the sky and sees dark, angry clouds hanging above the tops of desolate, crumbling buildings. The once shining, bright city, is a dark, and toxic ghost town. The wind is harsh, and it blows pieces of plastic and debris down the street. There is not a single person in sight.

The girl is frozen in shock. The old woman breaks the silence by saying, "Horrible isn't it. You'll get to go back soon. I just have to show you, before it is too late."

"What's going on? Did you bring me here?" The girl asks. "I don't understand. This can't be real."

"Yes, you could say I brought you here. This is simply what your reality will be in 80 years. But it doesn't have to be. You can change it. That is why you are here."

"Did you do this?" The girl gestures to the city.

The woman sighs, "I played my part, but decades of ignorance, greed, and brainwashing did this. I was only another pawn, too wrapped up in my life to see past the thin veil created by the mass media. I brought you here to show you, because you still have a chance to make a difference. You can change this reality."

"This doesn't make any sense! Why me?" The girl exclaims.

"Why not you?" The woman asks, "You're a fighter. Trust me, I know you." She chuckles.

"I don't even know what caused this or if this is even real! This isn't my fault! Please just leave me alone and send me back to the normal world!" the girl cries.

"I know you are confused, but our time is running out. The hurricane is moving in and this is my last chance to make a difference. Please, just trust me." The old woman says, and she begins to walk down the street toward Battery Park. The girl has no choice but to follow, because the old woman is her only way back to the world that she knows. The girl is surprised that she has to struggle to keep up with the old woman.

"Where are you going?" the girl asks. The old woman doesn't answer.

A minute later the girl finally sees a person. They are wearing an oxygen mask, hooked to a tank on their back, and they look exhausted and frail. As she walks closer, she sees that they are bent over the seemingly lifeless body of a child. The girl gasps in horror and the old woman takes her hand, and leads her away. As they walk farther, the girl starts to notice more and more water on the ground. They walk until the water is up to their knees, and still, the old woman doesn't stop. The gusts of wind become more severe and they whip the girl's hair all around her face.

"Please," she begs, "Just let me go back home."

"We're almost there," the woman replies. The wind roars in the girl's ears as she tries desperately to convince herself that this is a dream. After a couple more minutes of trudging past disintegrating buildings and piles of garbage floating down the street, the girl sees a forty foot concrete wall rising out of the water. There is a small ladder up the wall, and the woman begins to climb. Her steps are careful and slow. The girl follows her up the ladder and when she reaches the top, she sees the old woman standing on a narrow ledge staring out at the water. The girl joins her.

"They built this wall to keep the water out," the old woman says. "They assured us that this would be the solution, that this wall of concrete could save our city, but nothing can stop the water." She chuckles sadly. By this time the wind has become so strong that the girl can barely hear the old woman. Although the girl keeps telling herself to take deep breaths, she can feel her fear building up and threatening to explode.

"We need to leave," the girl says. "It's not safe here."

The woman ignores her, and asks, "Can you see the Statue of Liberty?" The girl looks out into the dark river and is surprised that she can't see anything.

"No," she replies, puzzled.

"It's there," the woman tells her. "Look closely. You can just see the top of her torch rising out of the river. The water swallowed our liberty, but it was gone long before the water rose above her face."

"When I was your age I thought everything was going to be OK. The climate movement of the early 2000s had passed, and politicians and leaders had convinced us that there was nothing to be worried about. They put Greta Thunberg in jail, and the media just ignored the catastrophe that was growing steadily worse. When the fires in California got bad enough, they blamed it on poorly managed forests and told everyone in California that they had to permanently evacuate. The same happened in Florida, and then even here, in New York, as more and more land went underwater. The

hurricanes became so frequent and intense, that not having power became the new normal." As if on cue, the wind starts to blow so hard that the girl almost falls off the wall.

"I was a teacher," the woman continues, "but when enough kids moved away, they had to shut down the schools. I was 58 when I lost my job. The economy collapsed and everyone who was well off ran away from the mess, and everyone who couldn't afford to leave was left to die." A tear rolls down the old woman's cheek and the girl listens in silence. The old woman turns and looks the girl dead in the eyes.

"This is a climate emergency. This crisis is the highest stake of your life. Don't try to tell me it's too late." She pauses for a moment. "Catastrophe is still pending." She continues to stare at the girl and the girl stares back. When the woman finally turns her head she has a peaceful expression on her face.

She tells the girl, "This hurricane is going to kill me, but I will not have died in vain. You will change the course of history, and I guess, so will I. We are the same person. We have just lived at different times." Suddenly the rain starts to fall in heavy, suffocating sheets. A cloud seems to devour them. The wind howls. A huge gust knocks the old woman off the wall. The girl sees her body falling toward the water before everything goes black, and all she can hear is the deafening sound of the hurricane.

When the girl opens her eyes again, she is standing on the stairs in the subway station. The year is once again, 2035, and she knows what she needs to do.

Zoe Brush
Morse High School, Grade 9

Memoir, First Place

Grades 10-12:

Kayleigh Duggan for "Dancing Through Life"

Abby Durgin for "Hair"

Grades 7-9:

Olivia Winn for "The Bigelow Wilderness"

Dancing Through Life

The lights hit at just the right angle, vivid hues of yellows and pinks paint a picture of emotions through graceful swipes of the arms, quick extensions of the legs, and an unspoken poetry of the body. I'm in a state of control. I am becoming someone whom I have always wanted to be. Telling a story, and depicting life, no longer as myself but as a separate entity.

I do not have to worry about the problems of my home life. My adopted siblings are not creating a cloud of disruption. The three A.M diapers that I will have to change do not appear in my mind. I am completely consumed in my own world. Emerged into the non-verbal speech and ability of my body – the ability to hold a passe en pointe, the number of pirouettes I can fit into an eight-count, and how straight my legs will be in my saut de chat. I am not focused on the bruised feet and broken toenails, but rather on how my body emits a new language as I move. I am becoming someone who can feel the music like it's a shot of liquid adrenaline, pulsing and causing a reaction of movement through the body.

Dancing would not have been in my future if not for the multiple scholarships I have received. Through these scholarships, I have been able to dance at prestigious studios, get discounts on pointe shoes, and learn to advocate for myself not only as a dancer but as a person. It has opened my view to society and has gifted me with opportunities such as acting and directing, allowing me to throw myself into the arts and the meaning behind it.

But as soon as the curtains close, when the applause comes to an end, and the sweaty costume is peeled off my skin, I will have to face my reality. The reality of waking up to the primal cry of an underweight child, a baby seeking milk at four in the morning. The fear of waking my father, the monstrous bear sleeping in his cave, for whom even the slightest noise breaks him from his trance. Without his trance, he wreaks chaos on everyone and everything that gets in his way. Little to no care for the

miscellaneous thrown freely throughout the room, no bullseye insight. In my life off the stage, I am like a switch, rapidly flipping on and off, changing personalities, applying the studious personality in order to be up to par at my own school setting.

But then the bell rings, the activities come to an end and I go home. I watch foster children so my mother can get more than an hour's sleep before she goes to work at night. I find the determination for high achievement in my academics in spite of my family's lack of interest in education. I gain the confidence to stand up to the Department of Health and Human Services and beg them not to let my drug-addicted sister keep the children that she continues to hurt.

Through dancing, I have found a sense of therapeutic discovery, that silent action drawing me into a deeper meaning of myself and others. Dancing has inspired me to delve into a more meaningful level of myself, putting less attention on the physical movement and more attention on the art form. Connecting me not just to dance but the universality of humanity, and allowing me to connect emotionally, inspire, and understand people through the action. I cannot imagine a future without the art form. Either as a major or as an extracurricular activity, because when I am dancing all of the weight and stress of life can be pushed aside. I can focus on the present, and enjoy the gasps from the audience as my partner and I nail the *Dirty Dancing* lift.

Kayleigh Duggan
Morse High School, Grade 12

Hair

Golden locks of hair. Handfuls of the stuff, dancing with the dust motes, twirling lazily towards the ground. Strangely I don't remember the day I lost it all. I don't remember if I shaved it or just let it fall out on its own. I simply remember that at some point it was gone. Every last strand was gone.

I quickly became proficient at explaining what had happened to me. Teaching people how to pronounce "Alopecia Areata" and "autoimmune disease", and experiencing their surprise at the capability of a 7-year-old to say such words, soon became tiresome. Most of the time I would explain by saying "my body is just confused so it started attacking itself." Then, a pre-emptive correction of the assumption most people made: "No, I don't have cancer." The relief that flitted through their eyes was painfully easy to see; the moment of thank God, she's OK. But I didn't feel OK. I should

have been grateful for my health, it could have been so many worse things. But there I was, a child who had gone from having beautiful, long locks to an ugly bald head in just a few months. I wasn't in the mood to be grateful.

The worst part was the not knowing. Not knowing why, not knowing how to make my hair grow back, not knowing if it ever would. Despite months of research, visits to countless doctors and spiritual healers, multiple dietary changes, and seemingly endless treatments and medicines, there had been no improvement. It made me so angry that we had worked so hard and made no progress at all. The ugly truth that bad things often happen to people who don't deserve them simply didn't make sense to a 7-year-old. I would bury my head in my mom's chest and cry and cry and cry, lamenting how unfair my situation was. I imagine it broke her heart. My many fits of tears and rage during that time are not something I am exactly proud of, but I know that the ferocity behind them is what carried me through. Thankfully that spirit also gave me the strength to go out into the world and squeeze some joy out of life, hair or not.

My hair eventually did grow back, a little over a year after the initial loss. Dark and curly, a slightly confusing but delightfully surprising contrast from the way it was before. But I still carry the scars from that time close to my heart and my head. I take a few extra seconds whenever I put my hair up to cover the small bald patches that remain near the nape of my neck. The not knowing still haunts me, for I am painfully aware of the fact that Alopecia Areata can be a recurring affliction. It could intrude upon my life once more in the blink of an eye.

As scared and self-conscious as I might often be, I choose to regard these physical and emotional scars as reminders. Reminders to count my blessings, my curls, my friends and family, and everything that helps me through each day. Reminders to make the most of what I have now, before tomorrow gets the chance to wreck it. Reminders that perspective means everything; that at the end of the day, hair is just hair and pain is just pain. The ability to accept misfortune, learn from it, and move forward is one of the greatest gifts I have ever received. Every failed test, lost field hockey game, and painfully ended friendship is followed immediately by a mental okay, that sucked. What's next?

If I could go back in time and find some way to stop what happened to me from ever taking place, I wouldn't. Despite the pain, hopelessness, and self-consciousness that it caused, I am so grateful to Alopecia. It toughened me, it led me to appreciate all that I have, and it has shaped me into the incredible person I am today. I have no doubt it will continue to influence me for years to come. I am constantly reminded that if a scared 7-year-old girl going through an incredibly dark time could march out of the

house ready to conquer the world without a hair on her head and find joy in every day, there is very little that can stop me from finding fulfillment in this world. I simply must remember that there will be setbacks. Lots and lots of setbacks. But a period of hardship is a period of growth, and the woman who emerges will be stronger, more refined, and more beautiful.

Abby Durgin

Morse High School, Grade 12

The Bigelow Wilderness

The sunrise painted the sky with a flurry of pastel colors as it pushed its way through the thick mountainside forest and over the pointed tops of the deciduous trees casting long, lacelike shadows onto the surface of the hazel pond water. The sky shifted from a midnight black, with a sprinkling of glowing white stars, to the baby blue of the day. My oatmeal was practically overflowing with brown sugar and coated in the chocolate syrup from my early morning wake-up cocoa. I pushed a spoonful of sweet mush into my mouth and watched as fish flew from the water and into the autumn air, their shining scales enchanting in the streams of morning light. It was a perfect moment amongst the incredible chaos of the last few days.

This adventure had started on Tuesday as we said our goodbyes to our other friends at school and arranged our packs in the back of our van. We were on our way to the Bigelows. Maeve's 80s music blared from the speakers, sending waves of noise running through the rowdy van and into the ears of all inside it. I sat in the front seat listening and thinking about the days ahead.

After arriving at our trailhead, we sat in a clearing for a lunch of wraps and veggies and talked about our pet peeves like the noise of someone rubbing a balloon or the texture of hummus. Kat, our teacher, mentioned that she hates wiggly teeth and the sound that they make and, of course, right after that, we burst into stories of all the times we lost a tooth in an unusual way. I bit into my sandwich and laughed as an endless number of stories melted my fears away. I felt ready for the first day's hike. We got our packs and poles from where we had left them by the side of the van and made our way to the forest opening that would take us to the first of three campsites and put us onto the famous Appalachian Trail. The weight of my pack tried to pull me to the ground. It didn't help that my legs were still asleep from the long ride, and my back began to bend as the group patterned down the winding, hilly path.

We finally arrived in camp with our pained shoulders and weary legs dragging across the ground like snails slowly sliding to their destinations. We were instructed to keep our packs on until we found where we were going to set up camp, but I couldn't take the pain any longer. I unbuckled my pack and pushed the straps down my shoulder and into my hands. I was ready to just sit for the rest of my life. After we dropped our bags in our campsite for the night and had some time to catch our breath and drink water, Kat and Hannah lead us to a stream where the water crew would collect water for our bottles, cooking, and cleaning. The stream was fairly clear and running at a good speed. It would be easy to find places to get the water we needed.

We talked about the day and planned for the next as we ate around some leaves and a lamp we used as a pretend fire. That night we stayed up until at least eleven playing cards and laughing, as the mix of being tired from hiking and being tired from staying up turned into deliriousness. Eventually, we slept.

Day Two

I was the first one in my tent to wake up. The sunlight came in red stretches, as it pushed its way past the trees and in the side of my tent. I could hear Kat's voice calling us to get up and out of the comfort of our warm tents and into the freezing morning air outside.

Once breakfast was ready, we walked down to some huge boulders, where I perched myself above the ground and ate. Hannah told us about how the mountain we were sitting on was almost a ski resort. I thought about how different this place would be if they had gone through with that plan and wondered, "If this were a ski resort, where would we be right now?" What would that have meant for the AT trail? We swept the campsite for anything left behind before walking back to the trail and starting on our way. The first quarter mile wasn't that hard. The trail stayed fairly straight and the inclines were almost nothing. I felt ready for the day ahead as we quickly approached the start of the Bigelow Mountains. Little did I know what was ahead of me.

On the first incline, my legs felt as though they were going to snap as my feet hit the earth so hard, I thought I was going to crack the ground for miles. My shoulders had huge, painful dents in them from where the straps of my backpack relentlessly rubbed against me, and my lungs seemed to have turned to steel, making it hard for me to breathe.

It took a lot of my effort to push out the words to ask for a break. We stopped at a small, flattish area between that incline and the next. I caught my breath and let my lungs expand once again. I put my head on my legs and let my pack lay on my back for some time before we climbed once again. My pack wanted to pull me down the mountain to the flat, safe ground.

We continued to hike until we reached the top of the little hill on the side of the mountain and were at a lookout over the pond and our campsite for the night. The tall trees seemed like only dots from here. The sky extended for miles, only blocked by the mountains that surrounded us.

Day Three

Kat called for us to get up at 4:30 the next morning. Once our breakfast oatmeal was ready, we walked back down to the pond and ate. The moon reflected off the water as the sun appeared on the horizon, lighting the sky with a white glow. The stars melted into the sky, one by one. I was ready once again to hike this twisted, agonizing trail.

The first mile or so was nothing. A small incline and then flats for most of the rest of the way. As we hiked, we talked and did riddles until our lungs hurt from all our giggles. It was a really good start.

That didn't last for long. Soon we were going up the side of the mountain, with the sun beating down on us. Sweat trickled down the side of my face and on my palms, making my hands slip on my poles. My lungs started to close once again and my legs felt like I was dragging them along, but the view from the top was stunning. The mountains surrounded us in every direction, like a green and blue gate, protecting us from the rest of the world. I stared at Sugarloaf, a mountain that only last night seemed to tower over everything. Now it was shorter than us, sitting below us like a skyscraper seen from the top of the Empire State Building, still very tall, but nothing compared to us.

We climbed over mostly rock as we dashed up the side of the next peak. I clung to any branch I could grab to steady my pack and keep me from falling backwards onto the rest of the group. I pushed past the alpine zone and onto the summit, where we stopped to eat lunch and journal about the trip.

It felt so good to rest. I wrote a poem in my journal about the little red leaves surrounding me as I laid back to watch the sky and stare down at the water. It was still burning hot as I wrote in my notebook, and I tried to think about the trip and what had happened so far.

The hike down wasn't as hard. My knees hurt and the temperature was toasty, but besides that, it wasn't a hard downhill. On the way we played, "Theona comes up with a quote for a crazy situation." We came up with bizarre scenarios and then Theona had to come up with a quote for them. They ranged from getting lost at sea to seeing a famous person in Wal-mart. We did this all the way to camp and came up with so many things it made my mind hurt.

That night, we ate dinner on a platform looking over all of the camp, as the sun set quickly behind us. We talked and ate and watched as the sun disappeared. Before we knew it, the sun was gone and all of the world that we could see was lit by headlamps.

That night was probably the best night. We talked and laughed for what felt like hours. We quietly played cards in our tent and talked about how much we missed everyone and what all the good things were about everyone in our class. It was heartwarming and calming to talk about the good things we appreciate about everyone.

Day Four

When Kat woke us up that morning, I was ready to go. After some time, I got to lead the group. I pushed the group forward, so we made it closer and closer back to our van with every step. When we arrived, it was a welcome sight, telling me that I had made it all the way across the Bigelows. I was overwhelmed with relief at the sight of it. After four days of hiking, I dropped my bag for the last time. I felt like I was walking on air, as I straightened my back and legs. The feeling of the sun through my shirt, no longer blocked by my heavy, blue pack made me ecstatic. I was free.

As I ran to the nearby pond, I could feel the air. It carried the smell of water, drifting off the pond like the smell of pie floating in the air. It was clear and relaxing, but also giving us a warning about just how cold the water we were about to dive into would really be.

The pond was large, running for miles. It was lined with trees of all kinds, somewhat protecting the water from the cold air that still floated around from the early morning. The water was blue, not the same blue as the ocean, but still an incredible blue that welcomed us into its freezing depths.

We ran in to our waists, the water surrounding us as we splashed and bobbed in the water. My legs felt like they were going to turn blue, but I never thought about

running for the sandy shore. I was too thrilled by the feeling of water around me after my long trip to do anything other than play. My muscles relaxed as I spun with joy. Soon, others joined and we bobbed up and down, soaking our hair with the incredible pond water. We played until we couldn't stand the water even a second more and then we ran for the shore.

These memories still make me smile, and I'm thankful to have lived four days in the Bigelow Wilderness.

Olivia Winn
Chewonki Elementary School, Grade 8

Memoir, Honorable Mention

Grades 10-12:

Lorelei Pryor for "The Innkeeper's Daughter"

Grades 7-9 (tie):

Sophia Kovacs for "The Defeat of the Playmobil Palace"

Jane Ouellette for "Finding the Red Panda"

Arianna Baker for "The Dog"

The Innkeeper's Daughter

We always leave the front door of my house unlocked. No, we aren't unconcerned with personal safety. We own a bed & breakfast. Guests come in at all hours of the day, from across the world. I have always loved interacting with those staying with us. At an early age, I would check the guests into their rooms. Even before that, at the young age of five or six, I would sneak into the guests' dining room and plop myself down onto one of the old ladder back chairs. With my feet dangling from the chair I would happily chatter to different people each day for as long as they would talk to me. As I got older and lost my childhood extrovertism, I stopped talking to guests. Instead, I would attempt to quickly sneak a peek at the guests chatting and laughing with my hostess mother.

As the years passed, I again became more outgoing. Popping my head into the dining room to say hello to the various people from God knows where. I asked questions such as: "What made you come to Maine?" or "Where are you guys from?"

Often they were visiting to see the beautiful Maine coast or on a business trip. If they were French-speaking guests I would say “Parlez vous français?” and attempt to speak to them with my three, going on four, years of broken high school French. It’s always a surprise who is sitting at the breakfast table in the morning. A big family from Luxemburg, a Scottish woman and her Cuban husband, or maybe even a group of five Japanese businessmen who were shocked I had been a short term exchange student in Aomori, Japan. I love that everyone at the table always has their own unique life and experiences to share.

I started to feel like a story collector, as I grew up and collected the different experiences from the guest lives. There was an older couple who owned an Alpaca farm and came back every year to visit us, who taught me how to spin wool. A shoe designer who often saw his shoes on people’s feet in public places. A German mother and her 5 children. I realized almost everyone who has passed through my family’s small three-room bed & breakfast has impacted me and shared a piece of their story. And in a way, I had shared parts of my story with them.

Guests would ask me questions about myself, as much as I asked them questions. If they found out how much I loved art I would show them my sketchbook full of animal and plant drawings, and talk about my experience with hand screen printing those drawings on t-shirts. Occasionally, guests would see me in my cross country jersey as I peeked my head in to say hello before I left for an early Saturday morning race, and ask where the best place to run in Bath was. Sometimes, they would ask me what I wanted to do with my life, and when I say “I want to be a veterinarian” occasionally there is a big-animal vet at the table ready to share her James Herriot-like stories with me. Every guest is a fleeting moment into different lives, briefly connected by the breakfast table.

I will always like sitting at the breakfast table, maybe sipping steamy tea while guests chatter and fawn over my mother’s delicious breakfast food. My family’s charismatic greyhound occasionally poking his pointy snout into the dining room to see if guests would give him leftovers. I found it amazing how people from across the United States, even the world, can share their lives and connect to people who are from different backgrounds and lifestyles. After all, we are all just people living our lives, and we all have a story to tell. I too, am embarking on my story.

Lorelei Pryor
Morse High School, Grade 12

The Defeat of the Playmobil Palace

I roll onto my back and look up at my glow-in-the-dark stars stuck onto my ceiling. It is 6:30 am but I've been up since 6:00. Only half an hour 'till I can get up out of bed to go check on Belle I think. She told me yesterday that I can't wake her up until 7:00, but I don't think that's fair. It's Not totally my fault, I think, I'm just too eager. I turn my head to my clock. 7:03 shines big and bright, lighting up my face. I spring out of bed and grab my fuzzy bathrobe, and my even fuzzier slippers that look like bear paws. Making sure I don't wake up mom and dad, I creep across the hall and into Isabel's room. Trying not to make it too obvious I'm there, I stand over her sleeping body trying to control my excitement. Her eyes blink a few times and then she looks up at me.

"Oh hi baby", she says groggily.

"Hi Belley, once you're up, do you want to start a new game of playmobiles, after breakfast, or I guess we could play house, or do a craft." I say, trying not to sound too giddy.

"Go down stairs and turn on *Arthur*. I'll make us some breakfast and watch with you for a little bit. After that we can decide what you want to play."

Following her instructions, I march down the stairs, plop down on the green couch, and snatched the remote. I change the channel, because who wants to watch an old lady on Maine Public making a quilt, when you can watch Arthur, Buster, Molly, and Francine on PBS kids? A big grin spreads across my face when I see my favorite episode pop onto the slightly pixelated screen. In this episode, Arthur rips his pants on a tree branch during recess. Isabel walks into the TV room right when Arthur's pants get caught and rip. We both giggle, along with all of the characters in the scene. She moves back towards the kitchen and puts a pan over the stove. I hear the eggshell crack open, and pause the show. I skip to the kitchen and hop up onto the counter next to her.

"How'd you sleep?" I question with my stomach growling.

"I slept very well, until a little gremlin wandered into my room to awaken me."

She laughs. I smile and watch her flip my egg, awaiting the day I'll be able to do it myself. Once the egg whites are completely opaque, she slides in onto my favorite orange and red plate, and I slide two pieces of white bread into the toaster. As soon as

they pop, I butter one and go back to my seat on the counter. I puncture the egg with a corner of my plain golden brown toast and watch the yellow goo slip out. As Isabel finishes making her own egg I wander back to the couch and become immersed in Arthur's story once again.

After breakfast and some more TV, Isabel and I climb the stairs and make our way into the playroom. I pull down the huge box full of possibilities (and playmobiles) with my arms quivering. I set the box down and reach up for the building blocks. Isabel scooches next to me and we begin to build the foundation for our soon to be mansion. We build until we run out of blocks, then we pick out the characters we want for the day from the jumbled up box filled with tiny plastic people, cars, food, and more.

"This is Penelope," I say holding up a plastic figurine with a pink princess dress on, "She has the biggest room in the house and tends to the dogs and cats."

Isabel holds up a boy with a sparkly flower on the back of his shirt. "I am naming this one Jerimiah, he and Penelope are twins."

Just like that, we've jumped into an alternate universe, alongside Jerimiah and Penelope. I imagine how beautiful their rooms must be, and how soft the cats are. I watch as Isabel pushes the plastic boy around on a miniature red bike, as I make Penelope pick carrots from the garden.

I jump out of this perfect world when I have the urge to go downstairs and get some apple slices. Isabel trails down the stairs behind me, knowing I'm not allowed to handle a sharp knife by myself yet. As I enter the kitchen I see my fluffy white poodle gallop towards the second floor, but think nothing of it. I hop back on the counter and watch Isabel chop up some pink lady apples for us to share. All of a sudden I hear a big crash coming from upstairs, and turn towards Belle.

"Don't worry" she says, "I think it's just Oliver."

"I'll go double check just to make sure nothing bad happened," I say confidently. I run up the stairs on all fours, to make sure I reach my destination as fast as possible. I run into my room first, then I jog through Isabel's room and into the playroom. All of a sudden my feet feel like they're cemented to the ground, I can't move, all I can do is look. The blocks that once built our magical world full of possibilities, is now scattered across the floor in pieces. In the middle of it all, a smiling pooch stands with his tail wagging a mile an hour. My head sags and I think about everything that could've

happened, and everything that we missed out on. It seems like the whole day is over before it even began. I slowly stomp back down the stairs and break the news to Isabel. She doesn't seem nearly as shocked and upset as I am.

"It's ok, dude," she said reassuringly, "Just think about what we can create next". My eyes light up, and my brain starts spinning, "I guess maybe we can build an even bigger house, or maybe start something totally different."

"I guess we'll just have to see," Isabel says grinning.

I spend the rest of the day with my head cluttered with ideas for tomorrow. I can't wait to see what will happen next.

As we sit at the kitchen table eating out perfectly crisp apples, I think about what Isabel said. I remember that nothing can last forever, that you have to learn to let go. Instead of moping, and being sad about it, I begin to get excited for what comes next, in the magical world of playmobils.

Sophia Kovacs
Morse High School, Grade 9

Finding the Red Panda

As I hurriedly walked down the street in the rain, the only thing I could think of was the moment I could stop walking. We were on our eighth grade trip in D.C., and we had already been to the Pentagon, the African American History Museum, and the Natural History Museum. Next was the zoo, which I had been waiting for the whole trip. The zoo had red pandas, which had been my number one obsession for almost a year now. I adored them, and today I would get to see my first! But first, we had a long walk from the metro, in the rain. It had been hot and humid all day, and the rain hadn't helped. I had blisters on both my feet, and I was so tired. All I wanted to do was sit down, even if it meant I couldn't see a red panda. When we finally arrived I sat down on the steps.

"What about the red pandas?" Natalie asked.

"I'll go see them later."

"But we don't have much time! This is your only chance!"

"Fine," I relented.

I got up, and we started down the path. It had stopped raining, and it looked like the sun could come out soon. There was a sign that said "Asia Trail," so we went that way. But all there was down that path were a few sloth bears. We turned around and kept going on the main path. We passed several elephants, but no red pandas. Then, just as I was thinking that I was too tired to bother, we came upon a promising-looking enclosure. The path curved around the top, and we could look down in. It was a small enclosure, with lots of trees and vegetation. In the trees there were bridges and hanging platforms. I looked more closely. There was one platform which had two sides that sloped together into a roof to form a triangle shape and there, curled up into a little crimson ball of fur, was a beautiful red panda. It was asleep, facing away from us. Down below there was a path on the other side of the habitat that was level with the bottom of the enclosure, and I ran off on our path hoping to get down to the other. Now that I could see the red panda, my goal was right in front of me; it didn't matter that I was tired. I could see what I couldn't earlier - it would have been foolish to give up on this rare opportunity.

A short way down the path another one branched off towards the red panda habitat. I slowed down, and Natalie caught up to me. We followed the path through a mini canyon with glassed off animal burrows, which all appeared to be empty. The path began to open up, and there was a sign shaped like a red panda. We went around the bend, and there it was! We were now below the habitat and on the other side, and I could see the red panda's gorgeous face. As I watched, it rolled over and started waking up. I was so happy -- I felt like I could stay there forever. I was so glad I had gotten to see a real red panda. In the end I persevered and accomplished my goal, even when I thought I couldn't.

Jane Ouellette
Morse High School, Grade 9

The Dog

There was something about his eyes, they looked empty and as if he was begging for someone to save him. A few years ago I was in the car with my mother. As usual, I was looking out the window listening to whatever pop song that was on the radio. Then my mother began telling me that a neighbor contacted her about a Newfoundland dog being sold on craigslist. The price listed was very low considering the dog's breed.

His name was Fritz and he was around seven years old. A photo was attached to the listing, a big black dog chained up outside. It was easy to tell just by the photo that he was in very rough shape. At the time, we had two younger Newfoundland dogs and two old Spaniels. We wanted to rescue this big old dog, but we already had four other dogs to love and take care of. I talked with my mom about it. Of course I wanted him, but we didn't know if we could. Soon my mom talked to my dad and sister. My parents came to the conclusion that we would go get him, then find him a good home. Even though they said we wouldn't keep him, I knew we probably would. My parents love dogs very much and wouldn't be able to part with him later on. That day my parents spoke to his owner and arranged for us to drive up to the seller's house to pick up Fritz.

In the days leading up to getting him I was constantly thinking about those haunted eyes and desperate look. All I wanted to do was save him and love him. Finally it was time to go get him. We had to drive a few hours up North, the entire time I was just thinking about him. We arrived at a small run down house littered with trash. My dad knocked on the door and a man greeted us. We went inside and sat at a table where the man's girlfriend was also sitting smoking a cigarette. The house was dirty and small. The man went into another room and got Fritz. He ran to us wagging his tail and smelling us. He was very friendly and excited. After talking about price and such we paid the couple and left with our new dog. He was in even rougher shape than we thought. He was matted and had very long nails. We noticed bald spots on his back from where a knot got so bad it pulled out the hair. When we got to our house we decided to have him stay in my room away from the other dogs. It was late and we didn't want to overwhelm Fritz. I remember sitting on the floor with this big old dog who just wanted a loving family. He laid on the floor with his big front paws crossed. I pet him and soon broke into tears. Burying my face into his fur I thought about everything he probably went through.

From the day we got Fritz he has been my best friend. Later on the girlfriend of the man we got Fritz from confessed some troubling things. The man was addicted to drugs and would leave Fritz outside on a chain for long periods of time without any food or water. He had a bad temperament and would hit Fritz. Learning all of this made my heart break. Fritz had such a difficult life full of mistreatment, but he still trusted us. He never gave up on people despite all he went through. I learned so much from him and this experience. I learned that even the worst things will pass. I learned how important it is not to give up. If he had given up he could be dead. If he let all of the things he went through break him we might not have been able to give him such a great life. In a way I think we should all be as resilient and unbreakable as Fritz. He is

overall just a wonderful and loving dog. I am so glad to say that we gave him a new life with us. A life where he is always fed and has water. Where he will be loved unconditionally and even gets to sleep in my bed with me. He is my best friend and we have an incredible, special bond.

Arianna Baker

Morse High School, Grade 9