SCSC Writing Contest Anthology 2021–22

SCSC Writing Contest Anthology 2021–22

South Central Service Cooperative

SOUTH CENTRAL SERVICE COOPERATIVE
NORTH MANKATO

SCSC Writing Contest Anthology 2021–22 Copyright © by Original Authors. All Rights Reserved.

Contents

Introduction 1

Disclaimer 3

Dedication v

Title Page vii

Poetry

A Hope Bird 11
By Grace Barie

For Raw Inspiration: Seasons 13
By Brielle Brown

Cursed by Thin Air 15
By Stella Elaine Bublitz

Day in the Sun 17
By Ella A. Haggerty

Chasing Hope 19
By Madeline Heuss

Hope! 21
By Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi

Hope It Fits 23
By Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi

I need you, Hope 25
By Jaxson Kolstad

Hope is . . . 27
By Ella Krocek

Blooms of Peace: A Haiku 29
By Megan Lawver

The Peace of Bacon 31
By Megan Lawver

Winter and Summer: A Sonnet 33
By Megan Lawver

Hospital Visit 35
By Katrin Loften

Sunny Days 37
By Katrin Loften
Hope 39
By Marty McBroom
Dream and Hope 41
By Amati Ishimo Migisha
Hope Haiku 43
By Amati Ishimo Migisha
I Hope You Can Imagine 45
By Freya Peterson
Lost Hope? A Haiku 47
By Freya Peterson
The Keys to Patience: A Haiku 49
By Freya Peterson
Oh My Love 51
By Chloe Smith
True Hope 53
By Isla Stock
Cast List 55
By Carly Wenninger
Crumbling 57
By Carly Wenninger
Sleepover Fun 59
By Carly Wenninger

Fiction

Help, Please 63
By Grace Barie
A Stuffed Empire 65
By Joseph Biederman
Red Boy 67
By Thomas Biederman
Joshua and Spike 69
By Brendan Brookens
Breaking the Ice Dating Advice 71
By Brielle Brown
No What-Ifs 73
By Brielle Brown

The Trail Ahead 77
By Elizabeth Castor
A Family for Spike 79
By Ian Covarrubias
The Castle Princess 81
By Zariah DeBerry
This Garden Feels Like Home 83
By Caitlin Fuhr
Glory’'s Adventure 87
Jayla is Loved 89
By Jack Gatton
In a Pickle 91
By Brennan Gerstbauer
The Rock has Been Beaten 95
By Oak Greyson
The Shelter 97
By Briea Jaeger
The Eternal Treasure! 99
By Rishabh Jain
A New Home for Me 101
By Parker Jenson
Shining Stars 103
By Isabella Jentz
The Adventures of Zayla and Zac 105
By Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi
Whose Happy Place? Mine 109
By Jaxson Kolstad
As Long as You are Found 111
By Hailey Leach
The Time Had Come 113
By Sebastian Leon Lorenzo
Some Hard Work and Hope 115
By Amati Ishimo Migisha
The Fighting Sisters 119
By Vicki Nielsen
Hope for a New Day 123
By Eris Owen
Pompeii 125
By Madelyn Rose Phillips

The Box of Time 129
By Leila Pratt
Her Name is Faith 131
By Abbigail Renaux
Bindi 133
By Nityan Sharma
Searching For Hope 137
By Rohan Sharma
Hope 141
By Addie Stenzel
Finding Hope 147
By Caleb Stibbe
Falling Ashes 149
By Kiana Waasdorp
The Last Summer 151
By Sophia Williams
Paid in Full 155
By Sophia Williams

Nonfiction

Hope for Teachers 159
By Chloe Brown
There is a Light at the End of the Tunnel 161
By Rishabh Jain
Dreaming to Become an Artist 163
By Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi
Hope is Why 165
By Jaxson Kolstad
Let's Hope We Can End Racism One Day 167
By Amna Syeda
I Hope World War III Never Happens 169
By Fatima Seyda

About the Authors 171

The SCSC Writing Contest provides students with an opportunity to express themselves through fiction, non-fiction and/or poetry. This contest was established to encourage the love of language and writing for all students and as a way to recognize the talented young writers in south central Minnesota. SCSC partners with Minnesota State University, Mankato on this project. Students in grades K–12 attending public, private or homeschools are eligible to enter. Up to three pieces per category and submissions in multiple categories are welcome.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the sponsors. Some of the works may not be appropriate for a younger reading audience.

Dedication

Thank you to all those who worked with the SCSC Writing Contest and this anthology:

To the staff at South Central Service Cooperative who promoted the contest, gathered and catalogued submissions, served as judges and provided feedback to students, and designed the anthology layout.

To the students and staff at Minnesota State University, Mankato education department who served as judges and provided feedback to students on their writing submissions.

To the teachers, parents, friends and relatives who encouraged students to express themselves through writing.

Finally, to the students who shared their work for this year's contest. We are most grateful.

This activity is made possible in part by a grant from the Prairie Lakes Regional Arts Council from funds appropriated by the Minnesota State Legislature from its general fund.

For more information, visit www.mnscsc.org/writing-contest

Title Page

SCSC Writing Contest 2021–22

Theme: Hope

Poetry

Poetry:

Arrangement of words in an artistic and purposeful manner that expresses the writer's thoughts and/or feelings about a subject of their choice using style and rhythm (ex: sonnets, haiku, free verse).

A Hope Bird

By Grace Barie

Hope is like a bird
It flutters around spreading its sweet song
If it comes near you, don’t be afraid
For it brings the hope of your dreams
What you will become.

It will stay for awhile
Spreading its sweet song
Making you hopeful
And if it does go away
Just know it will come back to visit one day.

For Raw Inspiration: Seasons

By Brielle Brown

Winter
It's the taste of hot cocoa and peppermint sticks
The sight of sparkling snow and glittering Christmas lights
It's your family gathered around a Christmas tree, opening presents
It's the feeling of love.

Spring
It's the smell of mud and rain
The sound of birds chirping after a long winter
It's flowing Easter dresses and brightly colored candies
It's the feeling of hope.

Summer
It's the smell of lake water and bug spray
It's the taste of hot dogs and ice cream
It's sunshine-filled days at the beach and deer drives
It's the feeling of pure joy.

Fall
It's the smell of tractors and dusty gravel roads
It's the sight of a newly harvested field
It's Casey's donuts and pumpkin patches
It's the feeling of fellowship.

Cursed by Thin Air

By Stella Elaine Bublitz

It's been years now, hiding from thin air
Yet despite the masks we wear, it's still there
Despite the deaths, and waves of tears
The vaccines, the precautions, it's been years
I yearn for the day we can walk without fear
Of this curse in thin air
Though the hospitals may overflow
And the death toll may grow and grow
My younger sister, I do declare
Has never had a school year without the curse of air
"Next year," they say
But sadly, it won't go away
"Be careful," they say. "You could catch it."
But how do you catch thin air?
And now I hope, we're almost done
And it will leave as it has come
And then we can have the freedom we've been denied
This curse upon humankind
This COVID-19 that's been so trying
Goodbye to the curse of thin air.

Day in the Sun

By Ella A. Haggerty

Outside the sun is bright
Birds out in sight.
The light bright as the sun
I'm ready to have some fun.
You don't have to worry
I can get some glory.
But all we need is hope
So keep on pulling that rope.

We got this in the bag
Let's go capture the flag.
The sand is as light as a snowflake
Don't worry it's not fake.
You can feel the cold brisk breeze
But you won't freeze.
But all we need is hope
So keep on telling that joke.

We had fun in the sun
But now I think we're done.
It's already noon
So I'll see you soon.
Remember all we need is hope
So don't go down that slippery slope.

Chasing Hope

By Madeline Heuss

Born of the wrong home
A moth crawls out with a moan
Looking at the darkness that surrounds
There is a spark of light at a hill's crown
As the moth rises into the air
A shriek behind raises his hair,
The demons of the night
Chase him, ready to strike,
As the moth pushes on
All thoughts gone,
Replaced by the shrieks behind
His only thought is to reach the light,
The light looms
As the moth is running from his doom,
A shrieking wisp
Clips his wing's tip
The moth loses his height,
With all his might
He rises over the hill
The shrieks are killed,
Collapsing on the grass
The night begins to pass
The moth begins to transform
And a new species is born
As the butterfly dances in the light
He can never forget the moth's fight.

Hope!

By Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi

Hope can be anywhere
It can be right here or even there
It can be any size
Big or small, short or tall; you realize!

Hope It Fits

By Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi

Having good
Omen is
Perfect for
Everyone

I need you, Hope

By Jaxson Kolstad

I have been walking for years,
Trying to find the missing piece,
When will I find it?
How long will this take,
I'm tired of living the same day,
Over and over and over again,
The fog in my eyes is taking over,
Why can't I see any more?
Why can't I see the things I need?
When will I be saved?
Saved from this horror,
Time is as still as can be,
I hope my days are filled with love,
I want my heart to heal,
I think I need hope here,
When will they save me?
Hope …
Hope I'm ready to be saved,
Saved from this hell,
Please my heart is pleading,
I'll promise I'll get better,
I just want to feel again.

Hope is . . .

By Ella Krocek

Hope is like losing your voice.
It hurts like when you lose your hope.
One day you have it, the next day you don't.
And one day it will come back.

To me
hope is like glass
it's fragile, but
can be recycled
and turned into
something even
stronger than
before

Hope is like a compass.
It can lead to unknown places to go,
but sometimes you gotta take the chance
And see where it takes you.

Blooms of Peace: A Haiku

By Megan Lawver

Sunflower of hope
Blooms against the Ukraine sky
Dreams of peace once more

The Peace of Bacon

By Megan Lawver

There is no peace in our house today
Bacon is cooking in the microwave
The tail on the back of the black dog wags
Eyes longing, mouth drooling, hoping for just a taste
Greasy goodness in his sights
His constant whine is making me crazy
His hope is a piece of bacon, my hope is peace and quiet
In the end we both win as I give in

Winter and Summer: A Sonnet

By Megan Lawver

In winter everything looks so bare
The brown lifeless trees and the icy snow
The gray snowy clouds hanging in the air
And hearing the cold wintery wind blow
Yet every year without fail I have hope
I have hope that the green grass will come back
That somehow all the animals will cope
And the world will smell of blooming lilac
I know that too much hope is bad for you
Sometimes people are too optimistic
I have faith the sky will soon become blue
But I can’t stay all realistic
I have hope that summer will come to me
And I will be reading under a tree

Hospital Visit

By Katrin Loften

I hoped for my friend,
Hoping for it to be fine,
But pain would soon come.

Sunny Days

By Katrin Loften

As the sun shone onto me,
I felt a sense of despair, creeping onto my back.
A glimmer of hope remained, still pushing to the light,
As I fell deeper into my pit of sorrow.

Hope

By Marty McBroom

Hope has no limits,
Hope doesn’t judge,
Hope is a blessing,
That won’t hold a grudge.

Hope is the light,
At the end of the tunnel,
That everyone feels,
When they’re stuck in a bubble.

A bubble of defeat,
A bubble of despair,
A bubble of anguish,
When life isn’t fair.

When everything is against you,
And all you want to do is mope,
You know it will all be alright,
Because there is Hope.

Dream and Hope

By Amati Ishimo Migisha

Hope is a dream
At first it might not seem
That your dream will be
But if you work hard enough
Your dream will be
True!

Hope Haiku

By Amati Ishimo Migisha

Hope is when you want
Something to be true or hope
Something could happen.

I Hope You Can Imagine

By Freya Peterson

"*I love art and I hope everyone can draw, and draw from their heart.*"

What you might see is a pencil or paper
But art is a thing not out of the blue
It is something not even a maker could choose
It's a sky
An ocean
Or even a shoe
It is a beautiful mirror looking at you
Whatever you do
Try to make anew
Art is a gift or a talent
Just get out your pallet
And draw
Not a scribble or anything boring
Do some exploring and find what's adoring
And draw
But don't just draw a tree
Draw a bee by the tree
Don't just draw a log
Draw a frog on the log
Imagine what you can do with your hands
Or whatever you need
Drawing is a good deed
No matter how good you are
Just be a star
And draw
Draw the earth
Draw a house
I don't even care if you draw your pet mouse
Use what you've got
And show them on the spot
That you have an aptitude
And draw
Draw something unexplainable
Something unpredictable
Something out of the imaginary
Maybe a fairy
Or something hairy
Draw what's uncommon

Maybe some Ramen
Let the people be surprised
And always be advised
Make your drawing special
Make it original
And draw
Not gnaw
Draw

Lost Hope? A Haiku

By Freya Peterson

Watching Covid leave
Packing its bags angrily
Renewed hope for Earth

The Keys to Patience: A Haiku

By Freya Peterson

Minutes of staring
Blankly at beautiful keys
Music waits from heart

Oh My Love

By Chloe Smith

Oh my love,
How long it has been
Since I last saw you.
Since I last left you.

As I am the wind, I am unbound,
Free to go wherever I please,
Never in one place for too long.

But so too are you the Earth,
Steady and resolute,
A constant unchanged by time.

No matter how long I am gone
You are always there,
Awaiting my return.

I do hope I haven't left you waiting too long.
In fact, all I can do is hope.

Hope that, when we next meet,
You will still be waiting.

That you will hold me tightly in your arms,
As if you intend to never let go.

That when I look into your eyes,
They will still hold all your love for me.

That we'll be okay.

True Hope

By Isla Stock

Hope is to dream,
Hope is to desire,
Hope makes a pathway to walk on.

Hope holds love,
and fear too.

Hope can heal a wounded soul.
It can also tear through,
leaving a gaping hole.

Having hope contains faith,
faith in another day,
another time.

Hope is too much to carry,
you drop some,
you lose some,
and when you reach your destiny,
you'll have much hope,
hope you'll always have,
and just like that,
that is the meaning of true hope.

Cast List

By Carly Wenninger

My heart is palpitating,
The cast list is awaiting.
I did amazing in my audition,
I can see my future life in a vision.
The stage lights gleaming.
And the whole crowd screaming.
Roses thrown left and right,
That will be a sight.
It's my turn to look,
To see if I'm in the book.
But get put into a wamble,
"*Ensemble*."

Crumbling

By Carly Wenninger

You get my hopes up for nothing,
I should have known you were bluffing.
My hope is crumbling under my feet,
I thought my mind was concrete?
Instead made of glass,
You cut my heart like overgrown grass.

Sleepover Fun

By Carly Wenninger

Oh, how I hopelessly hope,
My friends are having a sleepover
I wonder if I'll get invited? Nope.
I try to ask if I can come over,
But they just blow me over.
I want to get used to this feeling,
But my friends' attitudes are revealing.

Fiction

Fiction (Imaginary/Fantasy):

Stories that describe imaginary events and people that entertain the reader with realistic details, involving characters who experience a conflict (ex: historical fiction, realistic fiction, fantasy, science fiction, mystery).

Help, Please

By Grace Barie

I woke up and rolled over, hungry as always. My stomach grumbled as if to confirm this. My big sister, Jules, is beside me, her auburn hair floating down around like cascades of vines. She is crying, the big drops pour into her lap. When she sees that I have woken she stops.

"Why are you crying?" I ask.

"Just hungry," she replies but I know there is something else.

"Should I get bread then?" I state, to leave her alone for a bit.

"Sure," she says.

I go down to Quickie Mart. Thankfully Mr. Rodgers is talking to a customer. I grab our loaf of bread and even grab a PBJ mix. I know Jules will get mad at me for taking more than we need but protein will help the hungry feeling.

As I put them in my bag the snake inside me churns. I turn and find the least expensive item. A small notebook. It is 25 cents. It is my sister's unspoken rule to at least buy something. I figure I can give it to Jules. I pay for the book and when I get outside I feel guilty as always, so much that the snake is ingrown in my ribs. I call out softly to myself. I know we can't pay but one day I hope to walk in and have a decent conversation with Mr. Rodgers before turning and paying for a donut. This hope flutters around me.

I should probably explain my life. It is me and my sister, Jules. We are what you may call homeless, but hope keeps us going. Hope for a future as a teacher. Hope for a house and a reliable family. My mom died when I was three and Jules was six. My dad turned to coke and later died of an OD. As we had no family left, at age eight I became homeless, stealing for meals and living on the floor of an abandoned store. I have lived this way for four years.

We are getting ready for school. Jules is making sandwiches. She really let me have it for the PBJ but I am happy for it. She puts it in a bag and we leave, my books clutched in my hands as there is no money for school supplies or a backpack. As I reach school, I take in the familiar sight of the brown square building and the rusty swings and slide. I hear the sound of kids. As usual I am instructed not to talk about where we live in the fear we will go to foster care and be split up. I hope this never happens, but I still hope for a family. The one time I brought it up Jules got so mad she scared me and told me we have each other. She was also drunk. She claimed she wasn't, but I know she was. She doesn't drink much. It is usually to cope with Daddy's death. Even though he was a crackhead he was still our Dad. The hope dies when I think of Daddy. We had a house, then he made money growing plants. He never said what they were, but I know he was a dealer.

At lunch I sit with a group of girls. I don't talk much but it is nice to not sit alone. Jessy offers me a carrot stick and a milk which I gladly take. I know it isn't charity, she is just nice. Jules still frowns upon it calling it charity and 'we don't need none' she utters. Jessy is a Hispanic girl that only speaks Spanish but who I can talk to through the translator app on her phone. After lunch I pack up and head to recess. The one time I can let loose. I do this through soccer. It is my way of coping. I pour my anger and hatred into it. My team wins and I score all our goals. When I finish, hope has filled me again. Hope I can play college soccer, maybe even get a scholarship.

I stay after school to finish a test. When I finish Mrs. Monty, a short, stout, Black lady with more spite than need-be tells me she can take me home. The snake rises from its short slumber.

“No, no, I can walk,” I contradict.

“No I insist, it is pouring,” she remarks.

For the first time all afternoon I look outside. It is raining hard. It will not be a fun time walking home. Then I realized that I called our beat-up store home. The snake dies down and I reply “okay” inside. I just hope I can trust her.

We use her pink umbrella to get to her car. It is a small white car with rust starting to form. I inform her where to turn. When we are upon it, I realize how beat up “home” is. Instead of stopping there I have her drop me off a few blocks into town.

“You can’t live here, it is a nail salon,’’ she says. The snake wakes up.

“I will just walk from here,” I stammer.

“Okay,” she states suspiciously. “Just make sure that your parents come tomorrow for a discussion about your poor academic levels,” she replies. The snake wraps around me and stops my breathing. I only did bad because Jules had come back high and I was scared she would be like Daddy.

“They can’t, they- they are busy,” I stammer. She can sense the lie. The snake reaches my heart.

“How ‘bout I drive you to your real home and speak to your parents,” she accuses.

“Fine,” I say knowing I lost the battle. We don’t talk on our way to the store. When I show her where I live she mutters, “Baby, baby girl you have a lot to explain.”

Jules is on the floor reading our only book.

“Work done already?” I ask.

“Yup,” she states. Then she spots my teacher and says to me, “Who is she?”

Mrs. Monty speaks up. “Where are your parents and why do you live here?”

Jules realizes we lost, I can tell by her face. The hope comes again and I am overjoyed.

Jules speaks. “We are homeless orphans. Our parents are dead. We have been living like this for four years.”

The whole time my teacher has been quiet but now she speaks, “Would you like help?” At the same time I say ‘yes’ Jules says ‘no’, the hope goes away.

“Well, either I take you in as I have always wanted kids or I report you and you will be split up,” she says.

My sister asks, “Can me and my sister at least talk it out?”

Sure, that would be great,” she says.

We go outside and as soon as we get there Jules bursts, “Why the heck did you get some lady involved, we were fine.”

Unusually I say, “No, we need help, we live in the hood, you get drunk, and there is no one for me to turn to. I need a family.”

“Fine,” she madly states. “But if we get split up it is your fault.”

“Awesome,” I say and the snake is replaced by a dove. The dove flutters around me, filling me with hope. Hope for a new life. A new family. A hope for the future of opportunity.

A Stuffed Empire

By Joseph Biederman

Once upon a time, in a house not so far away, stuffed animals lived and ruled on a small island kingdom called Toy Room Rug. Things were peaceful and the populous was happy and joyous! But all would not be well much longer. For you see, in another far-off stuffed animal kingdom called Boy's Club- No Girl's Allowed, there lived a greedy king who ruled a crowded kingdom. Even though he had many riches, and the people of his kingdom were happy, the subjects knew that the king wanted more land and riches.

Now cardboard in these times was rare and could only be found in a dense magical cardboard forest called Craft Room Woods. No material the animals had discovered before could compare to the strength of the cardboard, and since the greedy king discovered and took all the cardboard in the forest, he now had the toughest stuffed animal army in the world! The greedy king now had everything he could ever want, but still he pushed onward. Destroying and annihilating every kingdom in his path until there was only one left.

The greedy king set his eyes on the final kingdom, Toy Room Rug. The greedy king sent out his army to attack using a war fleet of one hundred cardboard vessels. Little did he know that the island would not go down without a fight! On the cold morning of Stuffuary 16th, the one hundred cardboard ship fleet met with the island kingdoms one hundred fifty paper ship fleet!

The S.S. Nin was the first paper ship to attack. A paper cannonball sored through the air and struck a cardboard ship. This attempt and pretty much all the others were futile as the cardboard could not be penetrated. Sadly, through the first and second days the cardboard fleet lost only three ships, but the paper fleet lost 80! Things did not stop there however, they only escalated! Over the next two days, five more cardboard ships were sunk and thirty more paper ships were lost.

As the subjects of Toy Room Rug were losing faith, the remaining forty ships regrouped and were preparing to go on a final strike of doom when news arrived, bringing a renewed shred of hope that spread throughout the ships. A new invention had been discovered and it was time to strike back! The next morning ten paper merchant ships arrived, carrying five hundred stuffiters of drool taken from the giant human den in the Cave of the Baby Cradle at a very late time of night. The gunnery crews then learned what to do with the drool.

Later that day the cardboard ships, who were completely unaware of the remaining forty ships' secret weapons, came into view of the island kingdom. Suddenly, SPLABOOM! A cardboard ship, which was already heavily damaged, erupted as the secret weapon, a giant drool ball, struck and tore apart the ship! The battle lasted one more day, as the cardboard could not take the moisture and weakened until the ships broke apart. As the news of victory spread across Toy Room Rug and the other kingdoms, hope spread that others too would not have to live under the greedy king's rule. The end.

Red Boy

By Thomas Biederman

Hello, my name is Joey and do I have a story for you. Since I was young, I have loved science and superheroes. In my parent's mansion, I have a secret lab where I have been working on my own superhero suit. My Red Panda inspired suit is made of metal and gives me the ability to fly, have super strength, and see long distances.

One night as I was working in my lab, a story came on the news, "Runaway train driven by a mysterious figure heading for Meland!" This was my opportunity to make my debut. So, I got my armor and hummed my theme song:

Do dun dun
Red Boy flies faster than a train
He's stronger than an ox
Whenever you're in trouble
Just say his name and he will be there in a double.

As I reached the scene, I flew over the rear train car and suddenly my rocket pack was hit by two fireworks. I started to nosedive towards the passenger cars. I took off my rocket pack and used it to break through a window as I fell from the sky. I backflipped over my jet pack and landed on a seat. As the other passengers all stared at me, I told them not to touch my rocket pack and started running towards the train engines.

As I climbed up onto the roof of the tender, a firework hit right in front of my feet and a fire started in the exhaust vent. I knew things were about to get even harrier, so I decoupled the passenger cars. As I turned around I saw another firework coming towards me, I caught a glimpse of the villain and my database told me he was Snow Leopardo. As the firework was a foot away, I grabbed it and turned it back toward the engine. The firework hit the cab door breaking the lock.

I ran to the engine, jumped in, and began to battle Snow Leopardo. Suddenly out of the corner of my eye, I saw an emergency drive-wheel lock. It was my only hope to stop the train. I threw my bamboo boomerang striking the button, locking the wheels, knocking Snow Leopardo to the floor. As I caught the boomerang, I turned and pulled out my bamboo bark rope and tied up Snow Leopardo leaving him to be found by the police.

To escape being seen, I ran from the train but I guess the news cameras on the scene saw me. They made a light that they now use to call me and gave me the name Red Panda Boy or Red Boy for short. Now I bring hope to the community and look forward to the many adventures to come.

Joshua and Spike

By Brendan Brookens

I thought being playful and fun would make my owners happy, but I guess my energy and my playfulness was too much. Yesterday, my owners took me to the animal shelter. I was thinking, “What did I do wrong? I just wanted to play around with my owners and show my love to them, but I guess they could not handle my playful personality.”

So, I was taken to the animal shelter. I did not like being at the shelter because I loved and missed my owners. I think they took me to the shelter because they did not love me. At least I was fed food and given water.

One day I was sleeping in my cage and then some children and adults came and played with me and held me and petted me. I was hoping they would adopt me but they did not. Then someone else came.

“Oh look, Tracy! A gray tabby kitten. I’ve always wanted one just like this.”

The woman picked me up and held me so I felt secure. I liked being held in her arms. I was hoping they would be nice and give me a home. They adopted me and I felt so happy. After I was adopted these people took me to their car.

Then I thought to myself, “Oh no! I hope that I am not left behind some place. I hope I am taken to this their home.”

Then I was taken to a new house. I thought this person was going to take good care of me but then I needed help. My owners, Tom and Tracy, said, “You’re a sweet kitty, aren’t you?”

Tom said, “I thought he was a really nice cat. His name is Joshua. I liked that.”

Tom and his wife Tracy were very kind. Tracy picked me up and said to me, “Let’s show you around the house.”

I wonder where I am going to sleep. I wonder where I will find my food and water. It turned out I would have food and water in their kitchen and sleep on the couch in the living room. I loved sleeping on their couch. I was so thankful that I could because I would not be able to sleep happily at the home if I had to sleep on the floor.

Tom introduced me to their dog, Spike. He was a big dog and seemed mean and I felt like I was going to be attacked and felt that there was only one way out. I didn’t like him at all at first but then my owners Tom and Tracy trained Spike to be better with cats. Then Spike and I became friends after he was better trained.

Spike said, “I remember you from the shelter.”

I replied, “I didn’t get to play with the dogs very much. I do like dogs who are nice to me.” Then we played in the backyard instead of in the front yard because there was fence to keep us safe. Our owners took caution of Spike and I because they cared about us.

Suddenly, an orange fox who was lost wandered into the backyard. I ran through the cat door leaving Spike behind and he barked to warn the owners about the fox. Tom and Tracy went to see what Spike was barking at. They found out that Spike was barking at the visiting animal and they did everything they could to scare off the fox.

Tom yelled, “Get out of here!”

Tracy grabbed a bucket of water and tossed it toward the fox. Spike kept trying to scare it out of the yard with his barking. I was feeling scared, but when I watched my owners and Spike work together to protect me I felt very safe and loved. The fox ran back toward the woods and Tom picked me up and

scratched me on the back of my ears. Tracy made sure Spike didn’t have any marks on him from the fox, but he was just fine.

I realized that my owners felt thankful for me and they loved me. I realized that Spike also would protect me and that he would be my new best friend. Now, I think Tom and Tracy should build the fence a little taller, but I will always feel safe in their home.

Breaking the Ice Dating Advice

By Brielle Brown

To all young people hoping to go on a date,

You must first consider who you want to go on the date with. Are they as nice as your own mother, or as mean as that old grouchy sixty-year-old guy who wears only a plaid green bathrobe and consumes only dark coffee that lives next door? If your date-to-be has the personality of the latter in my list, you may have to consider reconsidering. Now, if your date is nice, ask yourself this: Would your mother approve of your dating them? If she wouldn't, date 'em anyway! You are a teen, right? You were born to disobey.

Now, you must consider, where are you going to take your date? How much ambiance is there going to be? Is it a casual date to McDonald's, or a classy date to Paris? You can't get it wrong, or it's over. You wanted to marry that cute girl, Kelli? Pfft. You wanted to date that stud of a man named Mitchell over there? Not happening! Not if you can't get this right, that is.

So don't believe what your parents told you about love. Ever. It's a lie! Love will not endure, not at an early stage like your own! Imagine your parents' marriage as a beautiful flower, unable to be destroyed. Now imagine your date as a small little blossom, poking out of the dirt for a first shy little glimpse of the sunshine of love. Then, imagine you are the boy and you decide to wear AXE body spray to impress the girl. All girls hate it, by the way, including your date. Or, you're the girl and you decide to wear just a bit too much Enchantment perfume. Bam! That tiny little blossom of love has been choked to death by the weeds of embarrassment.

So, long story short, don't mess it up! But then again, maybe you shouldn't be trusting my judgment. I've never been on a date.

No What-Ifs

By Brielle Brown

"I need new contacts." My words are not asking, they are demanding.

"Please?" My mother says. I roll my eyes and continue to stare at the Chromebook. "Brielle."

"What?" I snap, angrily.

I'm not saying please. Three-year-olds refuse to say please and get scolded for it, not thirteen-year-olds. "I don't need to say please! Just order them for me! Thank you!" My mother glares at me.

"Brielle, I have had a hard day. Please, don't upset me!" By now my two sisters, Chloe and Keirsten, have looked up from the computer screen. I turn around and glare at them too.

"Oh, come on Brielle. Don't blame them for your bad manners," my mom says.

"Yeah, Brielle. Don't!" Chloe, who is 10, laughs at her incredibly smart (cough, dumb, cough) comment. Keirsten, who is nearly nine, laughs as well. I stand up, ask my mom what time it is.

"There is a clock right there, Brielle." I look at the time, anger roaring in my ears. Four o' clock. I can go now. Good riddance. I walk out the door of my mom's classroom. "I love you!" She calls.

"I don't," I call back. Then I walk out.

I walk down the stairs, out the door, to my friend Sophia. "Hey!" I say, putting on a smile. She doesn't even have time to respond before I walk straight across the road, toward her house, toward the sleepover I've been waiting weeks for.

I don't even see the car. It happens so fast, a flash of black, Sophia's screams for help. Why am I on the ground? Is that blood on my hand? What just happened? Sophia is on her knees, pleading with me to stay with her. Huh? I'm right there with her! I hear distant sirens. I start to close my eyes, because my chest hurts so bad, maybe if I just go to sleep… Then the world goes black.

The sun is on my face, the birds are chirping. Is that a loon I hear? I hear waves too. I hear a whimper. No, it can't be. My eyes fly open, and I gasp. "Sadie!" I scream, full of joy. It feels like I haven't seen my beloved dog for years. But how can that be? Sadie, my German Shorthair Pointer, is my best friend. Not my animal best friend, my all-time best friend. That will never change.

The reason dogs, particularly this dog, are my favorite animal is because they will stand by your side until the end. They are loyal. And they have a capacity for love and forgiveness that humans don't possess. Humans will never possess the kind of love that dogs do. The kind of love that never ceases, never falters. I don't worship dogs as gods, but I see God's character in dogs. I see His love, His redemption, His gentleness. I see God's character in Sadie's beautiful brown eyes. I always have had a passion for those eyes, those big brown eyes that say it loud and clear, I love you, please love me back. And who couldn't love that dog? No one. She is my best friend, my family.

And where am I? The Cabin! Oh, the joy! The Cabin, capital C, because this place is just that important. My absolute favorite place on Earth, because six words: Up North. Water. Bonding with Family. I jump up, give my sweet dog a kiss, and run to the house, tear open the door, and call my family's names. No one answers, though. Maybe they ran to town for something. It's not like them, though. I trot back down to the lake, frolic in the water a bit. My silly dog won't go in the water though because Sadie hates water.

I dive under the water, take a deep breath. Wait, what? I take another deep breath, fly out of the water. Breathing… Under the water… I scream. I look toward Sadie, but she's already fading away. "No! Sadie, please! Sadie, don't leave me!" She's gone. And now, I watch in horror as the Cabin disappears around

me. But as the lake of the woods setting fades, a girl appears. She has dark hair, the color of a midnight sky, eyes that are blue, but unnervingly pale, like the color of ice. She wears a simple long white dress.

"Where am I? What did you do to my dog? My cabin? Where is my family?"

The girl smiles at me kindly, and says, "Your family is possible. Your paradise is limited to the impossible. The things that in real life could never happen."

"Possible?" I ask, questioningly. It occurs to me that it's the middle of February. In Minnesota. How was I just swimming in eighty degree weather? And my dog… I sob in despair. I remember that Sadie passed away over a year ago. My being with my dog, at the cabin, is purely impossible. But I'm possible. Right? I remember the car. "I'm dead, aren't I?" I ask. I begin to cry, deep, heart-wrenching sobs. The last words I said to my mother were, "I don't." As in, "I don't love you."

I look up, and see the girl has her hand perched on a single green button. "Say the word. Say it, and you'll go to paradise. Never will you ever have to leave," she says.

"But … is this heaven? Where are my other passed-away relatives?"

The girl hesitates. "Well, this isn't heaven. You are in the In-Between. Yes, Brielle, you believed in Jesus Christ, believed He was your Savior, and you weren't wrong, but you won't be going to heaven."

Well. That's just lovely.

She rushes to amend her mistake. "No, no, no. I mean… The cabin, your dog… It only ever happens once every thousand years. Sometimes it happens even less. But you and five other people in history have been very … unique. To the point where you have died, but if you are able to resist the temptation of paradise, you can go back to Earth. Back to life. Your cabin, your dog, that is your mind's version of paradise. Of course, the paradise you have dreamed up is nice, but nothing compared to heaven.

Still, it's paradise based on your human life and the things that went on within it. That place you were just at is paradise to you. But it's a figment of your imagination. So now you are in what is called In-Between. You are caught between heaven and Earth. Brielle Brown, God is giving you an opportunity. You ended life with what I would call a lot of What-Ifs. Of course, once you get to heaven, it won't matter how you ended life. You'll be in paradise. God's paradise, which is a trillion times better than your own. But … what if you hadn't yelled at your mother? What if you hadn't snapped at your sisters? What if you hadn't walked into the road? It probably would have happened anyway if you ask me, 'cause you're an idiot, but …"

Ouch.

"My point is," she continues, "no regrets, in the end. No What-Ifs. So, will you go to heaven? Your beloved dog, and other deceased whom you loved. Or, you can go back, fix the mistakes, live life with new eyes. The hole to Earth is there."

I turn, see a small, twirling hole appear in the void where the girl and I have been standing in. I turn again, see my dog. Tears pour down my cheeks. I want to play with her so badly again. Pet her. Love her. That would be possible if I went to heaven. And other people too, I would be able to see them too. But what would happen to my family and friends on Earth? My mom, dad, sisters, others. Would my death crush some of them? My mom said once that her biggest fear would be losing one of her children. That she wouldn't survive it. Can I really do that to her?

I look at my dog once more. "I love you, Sadie, so much. I'll see you again someday. In heaven." She wags her stubby tail and dog-smiles at me, and I know she understands. While I'm choosing Earth over her, I still love her more than anything, and will miss her so much, and look forward to seeing her again in heaven. Of course she understands. She's a dog, after all. With that, give her one last kiss, take a leaping jump into the hole, and plummet back to Earth.

When I come to, I'm lying on the futon in my mom's classroom. "Mom! Chloe! Keirsten!" I screech. They all jump. I look at the time, four o'clock. I jump up, hug my sisters, hug my mom. "I'm so sorry," I say. "So, so sorry."

“It’s okay. Are you okay? I didn’t really expect such a sudden apology,” my mom says. I laugh as I run to the window, just in time to see a black car drive by. Sophia waits outside expectantly. I grab my stuff.

“Bye Mom! I love you!” I bound down the stairs, out the door. I have seen things no thirteen-year-old has ever seen. My life has changed, for the better. Maybe life will be hard sometimes. Maybe people will be difficult. Maybe I’ll be difficult. It doesn’t matter. No regrets in the end. I want to live like there’s no what-ifs.

The Trail Ahead

By Elizabeth Castor

Vera stepped onto the platform, she breathed in fresh air. Montana, she thought with a dreamy sigh. The air had the scent of lilacs and a cool summer breeze. She looked around. A young man who looked to be about a few years older strolled up to her.

"Are you Miss Holdings?" the mysterious man asked in a deep, gruff voice.

"I am she," Vera said, holding her head a little higher.

He took off his hat and brushed it off before speaking again. "I am Oscer White, I'll be driving you out to the settlement tomorrow."

The settlement is where Vera's Aunt Cindy and Uncle Rowin lived. They had bought the land and started a small, thriving, community. She had loved to come there as a young girl, but after her parents' death they stopped coming.

His voice cut through her thoughts. "For now Miss, you will be staying at the boarding house here."

Vera collapsed on her bed; she was tired, dirty and starving. Even though she was on a train for three days, she was ready to sleep for a week. As she cleaned up, her mind raced through the happy memories at the settlement. She knew most of her happy memories were made there, rather than in New York. Everything she had hoped was soon going to be a reality, just not in the way she planned.

As they drove up to the house Vera could see her aunt rush out the door. When they pulled in, her Uncle Rowen and a tall man were strolling towards the house to greet them. Vera felt a knot in her stomach as she watched them approach. Oscer looked over at her and squeezed her hand, giving her a small smile.

When they arrived, Oscer walked around the wagon to help her down, but the tall man beat him to it. He put his arms around her waist and placed her delicately on the ground like she was fine china. They stood there for what felt like forever. She searched his eyes, they were gray, with a hint of blue. There seemed to be a grim look in his eyes but his face had a broad smile on it.

As he let go, she hoped this was the man she was looking for. Just then a tall woman with honey blonde hair ran out of the house into the mystery man's arms, the man looked at her, almost pleading for her. Vera was stunned she didn't know the man but felt a strong connection to him. Her aunt walked up next to her, hugged her and led her into the house.

At dinner she found out who the man and woman were. They were Tobias Hayes and Margaret Timber. Tobias was courting Margaret. Vera was quiet for most of dinner, and after she quickly rushed out the door for fresh air. Vera leaned against the side of the wall. She barely knew the man but felt drawn to him. Her hopes were crushed so quickly. Soon after, Tobias came out of the room. The moment he closed the door he sighed a sigh of relief. Finally he noticed her, and he felt just as drawn to her as she did to him. When their eyes met she knew this was the man for her.

A Family for Spike

By Ian Covarrubias

The dog's name is Spike and he has friends at the park. He doesn't like cats. He barked at the cats and porcupines. In South Dakota he found a porcupine and he ran into the porcupine and got stuck by a few quills. He cried and tried to pull them out. The people from the vet clinic removed the quills and placed him in the shelter in South Dakota. He stayed there for ten days for his owner to come for him. There were so many other animals there that Spike was placed in the Humane Society shelter in Fairmont, Minnesota.

Spike noticed that there were cats at the shelter. He was not happy. Every time there's a new cat he barks to the cats to get out of there. Spike growled at them to let them know that he doesn't like them. He chased them whenever he could.

Billy, the stinky cat at the shelter, didn't like Spike at all. When Spike smelled Billy he told him, "You need to take a shower."

"Ok I will do that," Billy answered, but he never did.

Billy smelled like poop today. Billy didn't like the smell of poop on him. The humans wanted him to take a shower, but he didn't want to. The humans grabbed Billy and washed him, which made Spike happy.

"Billy, you don't smell like poop anymore. You smell like flowers."

A boy named Landon saw Spike the dog on the Facebook site to adopt dogs. He showed his brother, Bob the picture. They wanted Spike to be the dog for their family. Bob, the older brother, saw Spike on Facebook. He ran to his parents' room to show them the picture of Spike.

Bob said. "Can we get a dog?"

His dad said, "If we can train him first then we can get the dog."

They all got in the car and drove to Fairmont to see him. They drove a long way to see Spike. When they went there, Spike was happy to see the family. He had hoped and waited just a short time to be adopted but he was excited.

The family filled out the forms for the dog. They were approved and they took him home. Then Bob and his dad went to the store to buy a leash, toys, food and a bed. Spike went into the house to lie on the couch. Bob got home from shopping with Dad and hugged his new dog. The kids were excited to play with Spike. The dog was excited too.

Dad drove them to the park and they played frisbee all afternoon. Dad joined in to the play too. He took out a ball and decided to play catch with Spike.

"Spike, give me the ball," Dad said. Spike dropped the ball.

Landon's brother, Bob, came over to play too. "I want to play," he said.

Dad said, "Sure, you can join us."

They ran around in the park until Mom called and said, "It's supper time and you need to come home."

Bob helped pick up the dog toys and got into the car. Spike jumped in too. When they all got home Mom had the food on the table. At supper they all talked about how happy they were with the new dog. Having Spike in their family was happy for them all. Spike had a family of his own and he was happy too.

The Castle Princess

By Zariah DeBerry

Once upon a time in a far off land there was a prospering kingdom ruled by a benevolent king and his wife. The kingdom was a beautiful place and everyone was happy. Well, not everyone. There was a witch, an ancient witch named Bagwilda to be more specific.

Bagwilda lived in the darkest forest of the kingdom, aptly named The Dark Forest. She had been living in this land for one hundred years and did not approve of the king's rule. You see, before the king's family took power the kingdom had been ruled by Bagwilda's equally as evil brother named Drakeovich.

She was his advisor and they relished tormenting their citizens together. But then one day the king's grandfather stormed their castle with his rebel army and managed to defeat them. Her brother was slain, Bagwilda was banished to The Dark Forest, and the king's grandfather took the throne.

Bagwilda wanted things to go back to the way they had been before, dark and miserable, so Bagwilda concocted a plan. She would kill the king's bloodline and take power again for herself when the king became old and weak. So, under the cover of night Bagwilda snuck into the king's castle.

Just a year prior the king had a baby girl. He named her Lyra and the people of the kingdom adored their little princess. Bagwilda hated children, especially babies, and she harbored a special hatred for the little princess who had done nothing to her except be born.

First Bagwilda, using invisibility and silence spells on herself, snuck into the king's chambers and cursed his wife. She would no longer be able to have children due to the curse. Then she went to the nursery and with a wicked gleam in her eyes stole the little princess from her cradle and escaped under the cover of the nighttime's darkness.

Later, deep in The Dark Forest, Bagwilda used her magic to construct a small castle. She furnished the castle with everything a human would need to survive and be entertained. She then placed enchantments on the kitchen objects so that they would never run out of food or clean water. Lastly, she created an elfin servant and gave the little princess to her. She named the elf Asherah and instructed her to raise the child and never let her leave the castle. The elf nodded and swore she would do so to the best of her ability as the witch was her creator and she had to obey her commands.

After situating the elf and baby in the castle, Bagwilda used her magic to remove all the doors and first floor windows, just to make it that much harder for the princess to escape if she ever became rebellious. Rebelliousness does run in her family after all. The princess's great grandfather's rebelliousness had cost Bagwilda her brother and her kingdom. She did not want the little princess to spoil her revenge with the same rebellious nature.

Meanwhile the king and queen had realized that their precious little one had been stolen away from them in the dead of night. The kingdom began searching far and wide for the princess. They even searched The Dark Forest for her, but they didn't find her because Bagwilda had hidden the castle with a powerful concealment spell. Years passed, nineteen of them to be exact, but the lost princess was never found. And every year on her day of birth her parents send out search parties to continue looking for their daughter. They never stop looking for their little girl, and they never stop hoping that they would find her.

Meanwhile in her castle, young Lyra grew up blissfully unaware of her family and their history or royal heritage. While Lyra grew Asherah taught her many things: how to read, write, bake, sew, dance

and sing. But Lyra's favorite activity was playing music with one of the several instruments in the castle. Her favorites being the harp and the violin.

Lyra grew into a beautiful young woman inheriting her father's ebony hair color and her mother's jade colored eyes. Asherah had told her that she had adopted Lyra after her real family abandoned her in the forest, literally leaving her to the wolves. And even though she loved Asherah greatly, Lyra was still lonely.

She had read every book in the castle ten times over and longed for the same adventures and the same large groups of friends and families as the heroes in her books had. She hoped beyond all hopes that one day Asherah would let her leave the castle and see the world. She often daydreamed about what it would be like out there. Whenever Asherah would ask her what she was thinking, Lyra would reply with, "I'm hoping to see the world." Asherah would shake her head and tell her she couldn't leave the castle because the world is too dangerous and cruel. But those sentiments never dulled Lyra's hopes.

Lyra knew that if she stopped hoping for adventure and freedom that it would never happen. So Lyra never gave up. She promised herself that she would keep on hoping until she reached old age.

And Lyra did keep up that sentiment. She kept hoping and one day her hopes were answered. A young traveler named Eric and his sister Isabell from outside the kingdom managed to stumble upon Lyra and Asherah in their castle. Now it's up to fate to see what happens next, to see if Lyra will get the adventure and the large social circle that she craves.

This Garden Feels Like Home

By Caitlin Fuhr

I never much thought of myself as an optimistic person, but something about sitting in that garden made everything seem possible. The dandelions whispered happy thoughts and the sunflowers danced of joy. Even the grass seemed to be swaying to the unknown beat that only existed in the garden. A constant ray of sunshine seemed to always loom over the garden. Winter never existed in that garden, only summer. When your toe touches that first blade of grass a certain euphoria washed over your body, drenching you in hope and happiness.

All good things must come to an end though. At the end of the day, I have to leave the garden, leave the happiness and must be left with the darkness. When I leave the garden I emerge into a forest, forever full of weeds and unkempt. I don't live an unprivileged life, only a distant one. My parents pay the bills and I'm truly grateful for that, but they seem to miss the most important aspect of parenting: being there. Every morning I wake up to my mother rushing out the door in her work clothing and my father following shortly after. They run a small business together. The only downside to them running their own business is how time consuming it is.

When I come home from school they are both sitting at the dining room table going through documents. I set my backpack on the same hook after school every day and every day my mother halfheartedly asks the same question.

"Did you have a good day at school?" All of this is said without even lifting her head.

Every day I give the same monotone response, "As good as any other."

That's the most dialogue that's carried out in this house. The rest of the night consists of my mother and father going into their room to watch television and leave the rest of the world behind until eight o'clock when they go to sleep and the cycle starts all over again. Their cycle always stays the same and they never seem to be able to break it.

Every once in a while, when I peer over and look into my mother's eyes, I swear I can see gears turning and wires of all colors. My mother and father even have the same dinner they eat every night as they work, chicken breast, rice and steamed broccoli. All their meals stay the same, they can't even differ from their cycle a little bit.

Sometimes I hate them for it, other times I appreciate the similarity. Every day is the same, it changes rarely. The only changes that do occur are a simple doctor's appointment. My hatred remains stronger than my appreciation. I hear about families doing all kinds of activities together. I only dream of doing what they do. The one that sounds the most exciting is going to a waterpark. The splash of water against your face as you splash down the slide or even the sensation of swimming, the water rinsing over your frame, cleansing you of all the pains throughout the day.

The cycle is restarting; I'm made aware of this by the sun, waking me up. I'm upset with my parents for keeping the same cycle as though they were robots, but the truth is I keep the same cycle. I just don't admit it. I think it is different from my parents because I'm forced to have the same cycle and there is nothing I can do to change it. The truth is, I chose not to change my cycle. There is safety in doing the same thing every day.

It is like a sanctuary from the storm that is life, but what good does it do to stay sheltered at all times? No one on the coasts that get ruined by hurricanes keep their windows boarded up all year in preparation. In the plains no one stays locked in their basement in preparation for tornadoes. Living your life in constant fear may feel safe, but it prevents you from experiencing real world experiences. No matter

how much you try to hide from the world, the storms will still find you. When you cower all your life the storms tend to knock you off your axis even more. You still experience the storm, but not the experiences that make it all worthwhile. This is why I've decided to start living my life to the fullest despite what my parents do. I am not my parents and never will be.

Instead of getting dressed in my usual sweatshirt and leggings I change it up. Today I decided to wear a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt. It's a small act to break a small part of my cycle, but it still is a crack in it. A small crack can lead to the whole thing shattering. My life is like a Jenga tower and this small act of defiance is like taking a piece from the Jenga tower. A few more blocks knock out of the tower and it crumbles; the cycle is broken. When my cycle shatters the garden will grow out of its designated area. The hope I feel in that garden will spread through my veins as though it has been injected.

After my day at school, I head straight for the garden instead of straight home. Usually the only days I spend in the garden are on weekends. This is another crack embedded into the glass. Another rip in the seam, waiting to unravel the rest. The prospect of my cycle being broken already lights me up with hope for a better tomorrow.

The garden appears even more beautiful today, in the glow of the sun, but I must say I do prefer the luminescent moon. I happen to be allowed out some nights to visit the garden, but only on nights when I feel I need a little help to remain joyful. The moon casts a certain light onto the garden that adds an aspect. Everything appears prettier in a silver light, warmer. Not like the sun shining a bright yellow light. The sun always tries to remind everyone that it can burn you with a simple touch, a lethal touch. The sun makes everything look distant, stern. The moon on the other hand makes everything look warmer. It's not as harsh as the sun, it's the kind of light you want to befriend. The sun today shines differently today. I think it looks as though it's opening up its arms offering to give anyone who steps into it a hug. A tight, motherly embrace. The kind I wish to get from my robotic mother. I don't think it's entirely her fault. She really does think she is doing the right thing.

I set my bookbag onto the grass just beside the rest of the garden. Slowly I unzip the backpack to reveal all of its contents. I slip one hand inside of my bag to retrieve a book, a mystery one. A sort of whodunit novel. I delight in reading in the garden, murder mysteries are my favorite. Trying to figure out who the murderer is before it is revealed is perhaps my favorite part. I can never actually guess correctly, though I still like to try. It is my belief there is no greater cowardice than giving up. Trying is the easiest thing to do and if you give up that step then can you really do anything?

With my book I take a few steps deeper into the garden and settle down besides the lilies. Such a beautiful flower they are and even a pretty name. I could imagine falling asleep right in this spot, the grass against my back is quite comfortable. To my right are the lilies in their perfect rows, waiting to be danced on by bees. On my right are sunflowers with their obnoxious colors, showing off how tall and beautiful they are while waving in the wind. I lay down on my back when reading in the garden. The lilies beside me are hanging over me. They are a beautiful blue color. The sky almost matches them in color, but somehow the similarity makes them stand out more. The sunflowers also drape over me. They both cast a shadow over me, blocking the sun from burning me with its touch.

I leave the sanctuary of the garden to go back to my house and crumble the cycle tomorrow. My parents however have no interest in breaking their cycle so of course when I walk in the door I get the same question.

"How was your day?" my mom questions me without lifting her head. I can see her eyes scanning whatever is on the paper she is glaring at. It must not be something good based off the slight twitch in her eyebrow and the way she is breathing slighter heavier.

"Can we please skip the pleasantries?" I angrily grunted. Over the years this question has felt less like my mother genuinely wondering and more like when you see your boss out in public and can't just ignore them. You have to be polite and go up to them, start some boring conversation about how they

are and how their kids are doing. When the truth is that you don't really care at all you just want to leave and continue what you were doing.

"Honey, what do you mean?" my mother finally looks up from those documents that are so important to her. She finally looks me in the eyes as I speak. Her eyebrows knit together, showing her genuine confusion at why I'm mad.

"What do I mean?! Mother, we do the same thing every day. You and dad don't even change the meals you eat everyday–," my mother cuts me off in the middle of my rant.

She attempts to explain, "Your father and I assumed you liked the familiarity, our schedules are just so busy–" This time I cut her off during her explanation. I'm so tired of this and all of these excuses.

"You are too busy for your own child! I get if you are busy, but you decided to bring me into this world so you might as well act like I'm actually here. The only time I talk to you is when you ask how my day was. You know how ridiculous that is? I don't only deserve better, but so do you. You cannot tell me you are completely content living like this." I take a deep breath and slowly exhale. I can feel a certain weight lifted off my shoulders at my feelings dump right now.

My mother takes a long sigh and drops her head, "I had no idea you felt this way, I'm so sorry. We will work to change this for you. You do deserve better."

I can feel my cycle shattering.

Crack!

Ding!

Crack!

My Jenga tower is falling, my cycle has been shattered. A new life is promised to me. New opportunities will be mine. I can be spontaneous without feeling a crushing weight in my lungs. The first thing I want to do with this new sense of freedom and hope is to go and hug my mom. I run up to my mom and crush her in my enclosed arms.

My mother brushes my hair back and softly whispers into my ear, "Oh sweetie, I am so sorry. I love you."

And there is the phrase I've always wanted to hear. Three words, eight letters, hundreds of feelings tied to it. For the first time the phrase doesn't sound like it is being spoken by a robot, incapable of feeling, but by my loving mom who makes me breakfast and sends me off to school.

"I want to show you something." I pull back from my mom and grab her hand to start leading her to the one place that I feel like I need to be. The place that first gave me hope, a sense of freedom and the place I want to celebrate always being able to feel hope.

My dad follows after my mom and me as we walk out to the garden. When we arrive, I first walk my mother over to my favorite spot, right next to the lilies and sunflowers.

"I wanted to show you the garden, but specifically this spot right here." I gaze at my mother as she grins at the lilies. We have both sat down on the grass, so she is peering upwards towards the lilies. My dad comes walking around and sits down next to us.

My mom tells me while still looking at the lilies, "My middle name is Lilly. I always hated it, but I think you are giving me a new sort of love for it. Showing me these beautiful flowers and the fact that this is your favorite spot throughout this entire lovely garden. This right here, next to the lilies is your favorite spot."

To keep the conversation going I chime in, "This is the spot I first felt a sense of hope for a happier, better life and now I have achieved that, this garden will always stay with me, in my heart and in my soul. It is the first that allowed me to feel hope and joy." I lay down onto my back. My mom and dad follow my movement, my mom on the right, closest to the lilies and my dad on the left next to the sunflowers.

I can feel a slight breeze, combing through my face. I can smell the aroma of the flowers. I feel serene right here right now, more so than ever. There is an emotion coursing through my veins. Hopefulness,

stronger than ever before. Not like the hope I have felt, but the new sense of hope I will feel from now on. What a lovely feeling this is, hope.

Glory"s Adventure

I used to wake up in the morning next to my favorite humans, Max and Maria. It was nice and warm, peaceful and quiet. Now, I wake up in a shelter in a cage on the cold dusty ground. In the cage next to me is my best friend, Glacier. We would eat lunch together. Then we would play outside and run and jump. It was so fun to play outside. Then we would go back inside to get a treat. After that, we would go to sleep. Sometimes the days were the same, but this day went all wrong.

I woke up as normal, but I did not see my friend Glacier. I hoped he didn't get killed but he maybe he got adopted by a good family. I watched the shelter workers take down Glacier's sign and I realized that he was adopted. I felt lonely and sad. My good friend was gone, and I was alone without a friend.

A couple days went by. I was so lonely. More days went by, but then two people and a kid came in to look at dogs. They stopped right in front of my cage. I was scared at first, but they looked nice. Then the dog catcher opened the door and put a leash on me. I was taken outside and the kid was walking me. Then I thought to myself, "Maybe I can find my friend Glacier."

I just ran as fast as I could. The kid fell and he started crying. I felt bad for him, but I needed to find my friend. I was running as fast as I could from them but the two people and the dog catcher were getting closer to me. I kept running and I escaped from them. I needed to find a place to stay at for the night. But first I needed to find some food.

I was walking down the sidewalk and I saw my friend Glacier in a car! The car was going fast so I needed to run really fast to catch up to him. I ran and ran and then the car stopped at a house. The person and Glacier got out. I walked up to the house and went to the back to see if they were outside. I couldn't get in, but I saw some wood piled against the fence. I got up on the wood and jumped over and then I saw my friend. I missed him so much.

We were so happy to see each other that we ran and jumped around. Just then the person came out and said, "Is this your friend? I guess we have room for two dogs in this house."

This was the best news! We all went down to the animal shelter and I was officially adopted too. I got to go home and I got some food. Then Glacier and I went outside to play. We ran and jumped like the good times. My adventures led me to my new home I had hoped for.

Jayla is Loved

By Jack Gatton

The sweet Mastiff overheard her owner say, “Where are we gonna take Jayla to?” She was hoping that they would take her to the park.

“What are these boxes for?” Jayla thought.

We were getting a new house. The owner of the dog was loading the truck with all the boxes. The owners and Jayla were leaving for the new house and Jayla was feeling excited. The owners drove a short distance and stopped at the animal shelter.

“Is this our new home? This doesn’t look like a home,” Jayla thought.

The owners walked Jayla inside the animal shelter. Jayla was sad and confused why she was at the animal shelter.

“What am I doing here? Take me back home with you!” Jayla shouted.

The worker at the animal shelter took Jayla back into the kennel. Jayla had her own kennel for two weeks to make sure she was trained so she didn’t hurt the other dogs. Every other day the workers at the animal shelter let Jayla out to play with another dog. Jayla and the other dog said their names so they would know each other. This dog’s name was Frappe. He was a German Shepard. Jayla was hiding from Frappe when she went outside to play. After Frappe got tired and was laying down, Jayla started to feel safe and started to play with him.

Jayla and the other dog started to be friends with each other. Jayla and her new friend were both set in the same kennel. Jayla and Frappe told each other where they came from. They got to go outside to play with each other in the warm weather. When the dogs were outside playing with each other the workers were cleaning their kennel. When the dogs came in, they ate some food and got a drink of their water.

A few days later the dogs were playing rough. When it was raining outside the workers let all the dogs outside to play for a little while. Jayla was not used to being out with all the dogs. She got scared because there were a lot of dogs. Jayla found the little doghouse in the corner so she went inside the dog house while the other dogs were running around. Jayla heard a storm hit and the building fell down. The roof fell in and the wind and rain came inside. There were several dogs inside yet, so Jayla went back inside to help all the other dogs get out of the building that fell down.

“Follow me. Let’s go find somewhere warm to stay!”

All of the dogs were running to follow her. Jayla found a store with a door open a little crack so she took all of the dogs in the store.

“Look at what I see. Do you guys see what I see? I found a lot of treats!”

The dogs jumped up on all of the shelves to get the treats on the top shelf. After the dogs ate all of the treats they got full and found the dog beds in the pet area so they pulled them off the shelves and lay in them.

The next day when the workers came in to open up their store the dogs were laying on the cash registers. The workers from the store took the dogs back to the animal shelter. When the dogs got back, the workers at the animal shelter were fixing the roof at their building. The workers did not know where all the dogs were until they came back.

The workers set the dogs in the cage outside while they were fixing the building. When the building was all fixed and the workers were putting the dogs inside, a group of people in their car drove by the animal shelter and turned around because they saw Jayla and liked that dog.

Karen and Edwin wanted to adopt Jayla. They went into the office and had to do paperwork. Jayla met her family and followed them to their car. After Jayla got to her new family's place she noticed that she was back in her old house. This time the new owners had kids. Jayla was so happy that she got to play with the kids.

Her new owners had a swimming pool for their kids. After the kids were in the swimming pool, Jayla ran and jumped into the swimming pool. Karen and Edwin went to the store to get treats for Jayla. Before the kids went to bed they fed Jayla her treats. Jayla was licking the treats off the kid's hands.

The next day their neighbors adopted a new dog too and Jayla got to meet the neighbor's new dog. Jayla noticed that their neighbor's new dog was her friend from the shelter. The owner's kid forgot to shut the window at night so when they were all sleeping, Jayla snuck outside to go see her friend, Frappe.

When the owners woke up in the morning they were worried about where Jayla was. Jayla came inside with her friend.

"Where were you at Jayla?" Tracy asked.

"I went to the neighbor's house to play," I wanted to tell her.

"How did you get out of the house?"

"The window was open so I went through it."

Karen helped Jayla back home and she held her close and said, "Don't sneak out! We love you and don't want to lose you."

When Karen and Edwin got done cooking lunch, Jayla followed everybody in the line to get food. When nobody was in front of Jayla she jumped on the stove and made the pan fall on the floor so she could eat the food with her family. Her new owners didn't even get mad at her. They just cleaned up the mess. They loved her no matter what.

Edwin took Jayla to the dog park and Jayla was happy because she got to go play at the dog park. When Jayla was done playing at the dog park she was muddy because she tore the grass up. Jayla was also dripping wet because it started to rain when she was playing in the mud. Edwin was glad that he drove his truck to the dog park so he could put Jayla in the tailgate, but he also wasn't mad that she got muddy. He loved her no matter what.

When Edwin got Jayla home, he had to give her a bath to get clean. Jayla did not like baths. Karen and Edwin were struggling to get her in the bathtub. Jayla had hope that when somebody loved her, she would feel safe and be comfortable and she did. Jayla relaxed and let her new owners give her a bath.

Jayla loved her new family. She loved her new house. Edwin and Karen loved their new animal too and no matter what Jayla did that caused trouble, they loved her no matter what. What more can anyone hope for.

In a Pickle

By Brennan Gerstbauer

Maybe a little darker black in the corners, or some red in the chest plate. Oh yeah, some stormtroopers in the background. I looked at my picture of Darth Vader. Before I could even edit the details, the bell rang. Ugh. Reading with Mr. Jon. I remembered the time the doctor told me I had dyslexia. Not a happy day. I'd rather swallow a dozen thumb tacks than read or write.

"How much longer till it's over?" I complained. I'd rather stay here in the commons than even do school. Sixth grade was hard. I guess I would just have to accept that.

After a long, painful walk to reading (did I mention that I hated school?), savoring every last bit of it, I dragged myself into Mr. Jon's classroom of pure torture. "Why do I even do school? I'm not learning anything," were my last thoughts before Mr. Jon clapped his hands and said, "Okay kids! Clear off your desks and meet in the back with your 'Talk to an Apple' books and a pencil!"

What a stupid book name. I know to "not judge a book by its cover" or "all books should be treated equally" but with a title like "Mustard in Your Pants" (our previous book), I think my point has been made. After everyone had gotten to the back, we started our life-draining routine. We reviewed our answers from yesterday, and since I never did them, I could just copy off of Max's paper. Hey, last year, Mrs. Becky let us do it.

Then Mr. Jon said the most dreadful words, "Jonathan, why don't you start us off?"

"Because I have dyslexia," was what I wanted to say. Why did I decide to sit to the left of Mr. Jon? That's where he always starts asking for readers.

"Uh, Jonathan?" Mr. Jon asked.

"Oh, right," I said, doing a lousy job hiding my disbelief. Time for a little fun. "Page 60?" I asked, trying to stall.

"Yeah," Mr. Jon said with an unreadable face.

Well I guess I should try. "Kristine l-looked ar-arou-around the room. Time to start the pan. I mean, plan. Se-she qui-quietly snuck iton-into Mr. Perpep-Pepper's dek-desk", I said. How could anyone read letters that move? "She pikc-picked up the pesrement?"

"Peppermint," Mr. Jon assisted.

"Peppermint cady-candy. Iricon-ironic, thought Kristine," I read. Whew. Short page. Thank goodness.

After a long period in reading, we have writing. Whoever made up this schedule has got to be messing with me. As more and more kids filed into Ms. Stephans' classroom, she assigned us to proofread each other's papers. She thinks it's good to learn to proofread too. I was assigned to correct Matt's paper. Great. I couldn't wait to get scolded for messiness or spelling or grammar.

"Okay, let's do this," I told Matt. He handed me his paper and I handed him mine.

"Um, 'protect' is spelled with a 'c' not a 'k'," Matt said matter-of -factly.

"Well, 'carried' is spelled with a 'ch' not a 'c'," I threw back at him.

"No, it's not," Matt said skeptically. Of course, I knew he would be right, but I looked it up on an iPad. It's spelled c-a-r-r-i-e-d, not c-h-a-r-r-i-e-d. It's these little things that make me hate school.

At Writing, Ms. Stephans assigned us a six-page report on a big accomplishment in our lives. Maybe mine will be me finding out that I hate school. Even on the weekend I can't enjoy myself because I dread Monday. The only thing I like about school is leaving. At least tomorrow I don't have school.

“Hey Jonathan,” someone said. I’ll have to ignore whoever it is. “Hey Jonathan, I’m speaking to you,” the voice says. A hand landed on my shoulder. I looked up. Bennet, the school bully, looked down at me.

“Yes,” I threw back at him.

“What was your problem at reading?” he taunted. Time to show him what I’ve got.

“Sorry, l don’t have time to argue right now. I’ve got an assignment due on Monday. I really don’t have time,” I said.

“You can do that later. What was your problem at reading?” he asked. I looked up. His face was all flushed.

“Well, I don’t know the cause of my dyslexic function. Maybe you could ask a scientist?” I said. His face became even more flushed. I could see more and more students crowding around us in the hallway. “Kid (it seemed to have an effect on people to call them ‘kid’), I really have to get to facts class,” I said.

“Okay then. I’ll shove your puny little face in there,” he said. Just as he gave a punch, I ducked and kicked him in the back. It wasn’t much of a help. As he turned around, he slipped and fell into the wall. The crowd cheered and I ran, trying not to get caught. I ran right into Mr. Dickens, the principal.

“Meet me in the office after school, Jonathan Hackson,” he boomed.

As I walked into the office after school, Mr. Dickens was glaring straight at me. “Let’s talk about what happened in the hallway, “he said, still glaring, as he stroked his beard. “So, you attacked a student–”

“No, he was making fun of me, he tried to punch me, I used a tactic of self-defense, and he fell, and I didn’t want teachers to think it was me,” I interrupted.

“No, he was taunting me,” a burly figure who was patiently sitting next to me said.

“No, I didn’t,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Yes, you did,” Bennet said.

I couldn’t keep in my anger any longer. I jumped on Bennet, and we wrestled. Before we got too far, Mr. Dickens stopped us.

“Jonathan, detention now. Bennet, watch it,” Mr. Dickens said calmly.

After a long dreadful hour in detention, Dad picked me up. As I leaped into the vehicle Dad said, “Just so you know, Jonathan, I’m not going to punish you, but can you tell me why you did that?”

I told him my side of the story, and he actually believed me, unlike the principal.

“Okay, I’m just glad you happily go to school and are always hopeful the next day will go well,” he said proudly.

“Hopeful? Wow. Thanks a lot Dad,” I said as we pulled into our dull, gray driveway.

I unpacked my backpack and a load of dread fell on me as I pulled out the writing assignment. “There goes my weekend,” I thought. I hadn’t even started it in study hall. I could imagine hours of staring out the window thinking of one accomplishment I had done in my life.

“Well, the paper isn’t going to do itself, so you better start it now!” someone said. I whirled around, and there was Dad, looking cheerful and carrying a colossal load of laundry downstairs.

“Fine. I guess he’s right,” I thought to myself. If I hold it off until tomorrow, I’ll decide to do it on Sunday, and I’ll be too lazy to do it then. And then I’ll get an even lower grade than I have right now. If that’s even possible.

I went upstairs to my room and thought of important stuff in my life. Maybe in third grade when I won second place in a Pinewood Derby contest for design. Or the time I won third place on Mario Kart Rainbow Road track. Or when I got my first “F” as a grade in school. Oh, I’ve got it. My drawings. I’ve actually gotten one of my sketches on the Google search page. A long undisturbed day will do it. Well, I better get to it.

On Monday, I was ready. I breezed right through Reading (I made sure I sat farther away from Mr. Jon’s normal starting spot) and turned in my assignment. The rest of the day went by pretty well. Bennet

didn't try to mop the floor with my face. No run in with Mr. Dickens or anything like that. I must've gotten off easy today.

On Tuesday at Writing, Mrs. Stephans called me back. Was there something wrong with it? Had I turned in the wrong assignment? Mrs. Stephans opened her mouth and began to speak.

"Jonathan Hackson, what is this? Never have any of your teachers ever seen anything like this from you," she said. "You must have had a lot of hope and courage to complete it. You probably put lots of productivity and effort into this. Being an optimist and looking hopefully towards the future is very beneficial and good. Hope is a very powerful word, you know."

Well, I guess she's right. Hope can mean running towards the goal and being optimistic about it. Wait, even about school?

"Yes, Jonathan, yes," I said to myself.

The Rock has Been Beaten

By Oak Greyson

They walk into the palace, walking slowly and surely over the newly polished floor. The package in their arms is precious and must be protected at all costs. They bow before the monarch, who stands, and walks down the steps to them.

"Is this it? What we have been hoping for?" the Sovereign whispers.

"Yes, your royalness."

The Sovereign nods and turns towards the nearest door. Their cape swishes behind them and Oakley knows the Sovereign is hiding a smile from the guards. The Sovereign leads them to the solar room, dismissing the guards at the door.

The guards simply nod, standing outside the closed doors.

The Sovereign has Oakley sit. They go to the door and say, "Help," perfectly monotone, simply to test if the guards are listening. When the doors don't open, the monarch sits down beside Oakley.

"You have the teapot of ceaselessness?"

"Yes, Sovereign."

"I appreciate your care, but we need not attend to titles now."

Oakley nods. "Open it then, Malik."

Malik unties the string wrapping the package, their hands shaking. They tear off the paper and tug off the lid. Once off, Malik can only stare at the object inside. After several moments, they pick it up and admire it from all angles. They are so pleased that they lean over and kiss Oakley.

"This is what our kingdom needs to finally be free from The Mountain."

"No longer will our people be separated by gender."

"The Great Tea River will separate us from The Mountain and then we will rejoice."

Oakley takes the teapot from Malik. "First we must have a distraction."

Malik nods. "We must announce our courtship to the people."

The people are overjoyed when they hear the news and the kingdom becomes a flurry of activity in the days following. The first thing Malik does is get Oakley anything they desire, including clothes more decadent than their own. Malik has never seen Oakley happier, but they suspect it has nothing to do with the clothes. On the third day of celebration, Oakley suggests they create the river. They say that the people wouldn't notice if The Mountain sent a flood, and that The Mountain wouldn't notice if half the kingdom came to see it. Malik suggests that they say they are praising The Mountain if it does notice.

They both give up their usual style of clothing to be able to sneak out of the palace unnoticed. There are a few guards that would stop them if they knew what they were going to do. Malik deems the clothes river-creating worthy and they leave by the back door of the kitchen. Oakley suggest a servant be dressed in Malik's clothes and sit on the throne so that the guards wouldn't come with them. Malik has been to The Mountain many times, usually to ask it to stop flooding the kingdom, or to ask for lenience. They know the exact place to stop so that The Mountain is not disturbed.

Oakley has been close to the Sovereign for many years and has overhead countless people tell them that the separation is hurting them. Oakley knows that no one disputes the chosen genders, but the separation of genders. People of different genders are separated by walls and are not allowed to speak to one another. The Mountain banishes those that disobey. Oakley has questioned themselves why The

Mountain would treat everyone this way it if loved them like it says it does. But no one has ever questioned Malik. Everyone knows The Mountain is all powerful and cannot be stopped.

At least it couldn't be until now. Now they have the teapot of ceaselessness. No one had ever possessed it before. Malik told Oakley about it several times. They didn't know how they had found it. They would ask later. But now Malik's kingdom would return to a time when The Mountain could do no more than speak to everyone. The walls would be broken down and the banished would be able to return.

Oakley trudged ahead, holding Malik's hand tightly in the cold.

"The Mountain suspects nothing," Malik said, looking up at it.

"We should still hurry," Oakley shivers. "The servant will be recognized eventually."

Malik takes out the teapot. "Ready?"

"Ready."

"Release this land to those that care for it," they chant together. "Take the power from the unworthy and give it to the masses. No more will The Mountain bend the people to its whims."

Hot tea gushes out of the teapot, causing Oakley to pull their hand back, cradling it in their arms. Malik curses the pot for hurting their beloved, but upon examining it finds no injury.

"Are you okay?"

"I believe so."

Malik cradles their hand anyways and looks up when Oakley points with their other hand.

"It's working," Malik smiles. "It's working."

Within seconds, a river is raging between them and The Mountain. They go back to the palace and make another announcement.

"We have exciting news!" Malik shouts.

The crowds are silent.

"We are free from The Mountain! The walls will be taken down and the banished may return."

A cry of joy is heard from the people.

"There will be a week of rejoicing! Be happy and go where you like."

For many days people come to the palace intending to thank Malik for their new freedom and having to thank Oakley too. Some come with gifts, Malik insisting that most of them go to Oakley.

For many days The Mountain is silent. On the last day of celebration, it begins to rumble and quake. The celebration stops and the kingdom is silent. After the celebration it begins spewing lava and ash, but the river made by the ceaseless teapot protects them. The kingdom is still silent. It is silent until Malik and Oakley speak before the people saying they have nothing to fear.

The people spend their days together, intermingling and learning new things from groups they haven't been allowed to speak to their entire lives. The people are happy, and Malik and Oakley know this. They can't help smiling every time their eyes meet. They watch their kingdom prosper and each think of the other as the best monarch the kingdom has ever had.

The Shelter

By Briea Jaeger

A long time ago a wild dog got rescued and brought to an animal shelter. They named it Ryder. He learned basic dog skills like sit, fetch and roll over. But he had one dream, to be adopted. So, he just laid there hoping to be adopted. But he couldn't wait any longer hoping someone would want to adopt him there. So, he ran away.

But outside the shelter there was a forest. He didn't know where to go! In the forest he found a fox. But the fox was mean and growled at him, so he ran! Then he met a squirrel. But this time he was prepared, so he leaped at the squirrel but the squirrel simply said, "I am not here to hurt you. I heard you needed help."

"Oh, thank you! I am very lost."

Ryder and the squirrel traveled to the town. But the squirrel said, "I cannot go any further." So, Ryder went to look for someone to adopt him.

As he was walking, he almost got ran over by a car! Luckily a little girl found him lying on the curb. She picked him up and walked to the vet. He was all good, so she brought him home. And they lived together forever. The End.

The Eternal Treasure!

By Rishabh Jain

Reseto got out of bed excitedly that morning. It was his rour (/ru*er/) day! On a dragon's rour day, they make a wish. Each dragon had their rour day at 10 years old. A dragon's wish is a one-time decision; once made, it could not be changed.

Reseto's mother, Celistelia (/celi*steel*ia/), called him down. "Reseto! Come down for breakfast! You don't want to be hungry when you make your wish!"

"Coming, Mom!"

Reseto was a tall, energetic forest and neon green dragon with sapphire scales ringing his neck and flaming orange-red wings. As Reseto walked down the crumbling, polished stone steps of his house, his stomach churned with worry. What if I make a bad wish? he thought. But his worry churned down when he saw what Celistelia had made for him. It was cooked lamb with sprinkled cheese, Reseto's favorite!

"What did you think, I would give you broccoli on your wishing day? Enjoy."

"Thanks," Reseto croaked out, as he was already digging in.

His 12-year-old brother, Rohaneto (/roha*eato/), threw a corn chip at him. "Excited for your big day, little bro?"

His 8-year-old brother, Nitcomb, squealed excitedly, "You are so cool, big brother!"

"Yep!" Reseto patted his little brother on the head before leaving for his ceremony.

He left his house and stepped onto the busy streets of Conaliaze (/con*al*liazes/), the capital of the district of Conxinlize (/con*ine*lize/). In Dragonese, Conaliaze meant "God's paradise," while Conxinlize meant "Hero's home." They both lived up to their names.

As Reseto walked into the Domain of the Elders, he saw Conxinlize's leader, Director Waterveil. He sat on a polished quartz stand high above the rest of the Council of Elders. They quickly ran through the basic procedures. Then they got to the wish.

"Reseto Darkbane," Director Waterveil said. "What is your wish?"

Reseto thought for a moment before saying, "I seek for the Eternal Treasure."

There! He had done it! Reseto only felt pure joy in the moment. A week later, Reseto set off to find the Eternal Treasure. Many had gone in search of it, but had returned empty handed, barely hanging on.

Reseto reached the Eternal Mountain, where the treasure was said to be. He was quickly lost in the maze inside the mountain. "I need this treasure," he declared. "It's the only way to pay off Cyclone's debts."

Cyclone was Reseto's father, who had gotten into a rather sticky situation with the Bank of Dragon's. I need this treasure, he thought. For Mom. For Dad. For Nitcomb. For Rohaneto. For all of us.

Suddenly, regal music played from the speakers. Bright lights flashed. "Congratulations!" said an old dragon's voice. "You have unlocked the Eternal Treasure – only those with true hope can unlock it."

Reseto looked inside the treasure chest. He saw rubies, diamonds and gold – more than enough to pay off Cyclone's debts! And I did use one of the true treasures, he thought. Hope!

A New Home for Me

By Parker Jenson

Hi. My name is Jayla. I am a Mastiff. I come from a beautiful family and I don't know why my owners surrendered me. I was so loyal to my owner. My owner told me we were going for a car ride. Then my owner parked his car and led me into this building. After that I never saw my owner again.

After I arrived, I met a few dogs. I met a Pit Bull named Glory. We talked about how we were surrendered. Glory did not know how she was surrendered either. She talked about how she came from Florida.

I said, "That is a long way from here."

Glory replied, "Yes, it was a boring car ride."

"I love car rides. How was it boring?" I asked.

Glory replied, "I was in that same car for so many hours it got boring."

I went back to my kennel for the night. When I woke up I sat in my kennel for a long time until the caretaker came and let us outside to run and play. I came back in because we had some visitors. Someone picked me to play with. I was so happy and hopeful. I thought I was going to find a new home, but they left me.

The next day someone brought me to their home. There were more dogs there and a cat. I hate cats because they scratch you and bite you, so I chased that cat around the house. It was fun until I got yelled at. I met the dogs there. Diesel was one I talked to the most.

I asked, "What is this place?"

Diesel replied, "It is a family where they take care of you for a few months and then send you back to the place where we all don't like."

I said, "I don't want to get sent back there. I hate it there locked up in a kennel for most of the day and I have barely any time to run free."

Diesel said, "This is a foster home. A lot of dogs come and go and sometimes few cats like that one come here too."

I said, "I hate cats! They are so mean to us dogs."

Diesel answered, "I agree. Do you want to go chase that cat again?" Diesel and I chased the cat around the house.

The owner of Diesel was gone so we didn't get yelled at the whole day we played. After a month of me staying there, the owner of Diesel sent me to back the place I hate. I was so sad. I missed my friend there.

The same thing happened at the shelter. A dog told me this place was a shelter. I already knew the shelter was for dogs that didn't get cared for by owners so the dogs and cats came here to the shelter. This kennel was getting boring. Then someone came to play with me. I was so excited! I was hopping around and smiling and hoping that this man would take me home with him. The last time someone played me with I was left behind and I don't want that to happen again.

"Which dog did you want to take for a walk?" the shelter man asked. "I like Jayla. She's big, but she has a great personality."

The shelter man called him Jared and I tried to remember his kind face and name. I wanted him to adopt me, but after our walk this new friend left and I was sad again.

Then someone else came the next day and the next day and this repeated day after day until I lost all

hope of finding a family. Then, Jared came back! I was so happy. He reached into my kennel, held onto my collar, brought me out and hooked me up to a leash. He was taking me out of this place and into his truck. He drove me to his house. I went inside and saw some toys laying on a bed. I didn't see any other dog, but I did find a home again. Jared had a big backyard and I was so happy.

It has been three years since I got adopted. I go fishing with Jared a lot. We go for walks around the town. He brings me to the dog park sometimes and we play catch. He can throw a ball pretty far. After a full day I go onto the couch and lay next to Jared. I'm at home now.

Shining Stars

By Isabella Jentz

I look up at the stars, and they look down at me. I feel the grass sway in the warm night wind as my dad sits close to me pointing to the sky. He has always been so interested in stars; sometimes he would bring me to a hillside on a clear night and he would show me how to connect them to make shapes. When I was younger, he would tell me facts about the stars I wouldn't understand but I just like being with him. Ever since Mom died, Dad's been quiet, I always want to be near him to let him know that he still has family left.

One morning when I got up for school my dad had a surprise for me. I went downstairs and there was a box with thin blue wrapping paper silently sitting on the table. I was quite shocked to hear that it was for me since my eleventh birthday was still three months away. I walk up to the table and sit down. My eyes are wide open as I stare at the box sitting in front of me. Still shocked I peel away the wrapping paper reveling a small brown box, it seemed it had been opened already. My finger traces the open crack in the box, I then slowly open the sides to reveal a small constellation necklace sitting in the center. I look up at my dad with a big smile on my face.

"You got me one, you actually got me one!" I say as I hold the necklace close to my chest.

"Of course, I got you one Nova. You've been begging me to get you one for weeks, and right when I scraped up enough money to get you one, I couldn't wait until your birthday to show you."

I jump down from the chair and give him a big hug and ask him to help me put it on before I go. He does and I stare at it for a few more seconds before slipping on my shoes and heading out the door.

On my way to school I look up at the clouds making shapes out of them then I try to run away from my shadow to pass the time. When I arrive, I slouch down in my chair and feel my necklace. For some strange reason it gave me comfort.

On my way home I jump over the cracks in the sidewalk thinking of what we could have for dinner. If my dad would let me choose, I would pick ice cream. When I walked into my house a scent of roasted beef filled my nose. I drop my backpack and instantly run over and sit down at the table. My plate gets set down in front of me, and I start eating it like some sort of wild animal. When I'm done, I put my plate in the sink and rush upstairs. With my backpack hanging off my left shoulder, I arrive in my room and close the door behind me. I set my backpack down against my desk and run over to my widow, my nose presses against the glass as I stare out into space. What a beautiful night, I hold my necklace in my hand and once again the feeling of comfort washes over me.

Eight years later I sit at my desk reading a boring book about Christopher Columbus. I don't even understand why people like history class. But I was close to finishing my standard education then I would be able to move on to the real college business, astronomy. You get to learn about the moon, planets, the sun, but best of all stars! My dream has always been able to be close to the stars, not just by seeing them but by actually being in space with them.

I finally finish my boring book and shove it into my backpack with barely any room to spare. After struggling to zip up my bag I walk over to my bed and lie down just to rest my eyes, but sleep creeped up on me.

I wake up to an alarm blaring in my ear. Next time don't fall asleep with your phone next to your face. I jump out of bed and run down the stairs to find my dad waiting for me at the table. Today was a big day for me because tomorrow I'll be starting Astronomy. There was a piece of toast waiting for me on the table. I smile and gladly take the toast. While munching on my breakfast I race across my house to

find all my school supplies. Once I had found everything, I jam my feet into my shoes and run out the door.

Today seemed to go by very slowly. When I got home, I was exhausted so I jumped into bed to read but sleep struck again. I wake up to not as loud as an alarm, but still in a rush. I don't bother eating anything or even saying hi to my dad on my way out. I sprint to my college campus and struggle to find my new class.

Once I arrive, I was the last one there. I slouch down in my chair sweating and breathing heavily. Within two to three weeks of Astronomy I could see why my older friends quit this class, it was hard. By now my grades were slowly but surely going down; this class was probably the most stressful thing I've ever been through. I can barely memorize the names of comets and with planets in the mix!

When I get home, I slouch in my desk chair and rest my head on my desk. I then fall asleep hoping for the best tomorrow. The next day my neck aches with every move, maybe I should stick to the bed.

Weeks pass with my grade in Astronomy getting lower and lower. Should I just quit? About three months later the big exam was coming up. Now it was just two days away and I still barely understand, and I'm scared I won't pass.

In a snap the final exams are getting passed out. I feel as though I might puke, but at least that would get me out of the exam. Half of the questions I guessed or didn't even know how to answer. When I get home, I run up to my room to lie down knowing that I'm not going to pass.

When the letter came, I was right, I failed. My dad tried to calm me down but instead I ran upstairs and slammed my bedroom door. I then grabbed my shoe and threw it across the room, it flew under my bed and hit something. When I went to see what it was my eyes widened it was a small brown box and when I opened it my necklace laid inside.

When I felt it, I felt calm and safe, the same feeling as I felt before. A year later I went back to restart Astronomy and it turns out I was smarter than I thought, because when I got my new letter back, I passed! I was so happy that I started to cry. I grabbed my dad and hugged him tightly. I then ran up to my room and sat in my desk chair with disbelief. Then I start spinning around in circles and laugh.

About two years later I feel rumbling in my chest, my eyes are shut tightly, I feel lighter every second, a door opens and I step out. I take a deep breath and open my eyes; my dream had come true. I stand at the tip of the moon, shining stars surrounding me. The end.

The Adventures of Zayla and Zac

By Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi

Book 1: Hope, Zayla's side of the story

My bad luck started when our mom disappeared on Zac's and my seventh birthday. The police searched for her for at least two months without any trace before finally giving up and declaring her dead. We would have had a funeral for her but as I said her body was not found. My father shook his head in despair when we got the news. Zac ran to his room and locked the door. The news was the hardest for me to take because I loved my mother so much that I dared to hope that she was still alive. But now six years have passed, and no news nor sign has come.

A few hours after I was supposed to be asleep, I heard the floorboards creak as if someone tried to sneak past my room but before I could get up and see who it was, I fell asleep. It felt like I had only slept for a second when Zac woke me up and shoved a paper in my face and said, "Zayla you should read this. Dad left this morning and I think he left this note for us to read."

I quickly scanned the paper and gasped. On the paper our dad had written that he left to search for our mom because he couldn't bear to be lonely for much longer. Since he thinks he won't be back for a while, he wrote that we should go to our next-door neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Sirili's house.

After I finished reading I handed the paper back to Zac who tucked it into his jeans pocket and I asked, "Well, should we bring something with us?"

Zac answered with sarcasm, "No. We should leave our stuff behind so people can rob our house." But after that he said, ''Of course we should bring our stuff. What do you think?"

"That's what I was thinking too," I said. While talking about all that, I was thinking about dad and hoped he was okay.

After spending a few weeks at their house, Mrs. Sirili came to us sniffling and said, "My sister died from cancer and her husband committed suicide ten years before, so my poor niece is coming to live with us. Oh, and her name is April, April Wheeler. She should be here by tomorrow, so give her a warm welcome."

April came early the next morning, and I sped to the door to answer it. When I opened the door, standing outside was a girl, who I guessed was April. She had long curly red hair, vivid blue eyes, and a splash of freckles across her nose and cheeks. She was neither short nor tall. Then she waved and with a smile she said, "Hello! I'm April and I come to live here." Then she asked, "Are aunt and uncle home?"

I answered, "Yeah, but they're asleep. By the way, I'm Zayla SoLeo and I hope we can be friends." April and I shared a smile as I beckoned her into the house. Since it was still early, I told April, "Why don't we go to my room and talk or watch something?"

April replied, "Watching something would be fine," as we tiptoed upstairs.

When we got to the room, I turned on the TV. The only thing on was news, so I was about to turn it off when something made me stop and listen. I heard the reporter say that Josh SoLeo was assassinated. I hoped so much that my father would be safe, so the news shocked me. I turned off the TV and turned my head so April couldn't see me crying, but somehow April knew and hugged me saying quietly, "So Josh SoLeo is your father, and I also heard what happened to your mom."

"Yes, she disappeared on my seventh birthday," I said after I stopped crying.

Suddenly, April blurted out, "Why don't we try to find your mom?"

I replied, "No! That's a good idea, but that's how my dad got killed."

“Oh, but we can still try to find her,” she said.

I sighed and said, “Let’s go to bed.” When I fell asleep, I had the strangest dream (if it was even a dream).

It started in a dark corridor. In the middle of the room was a woman with chains on her hands and feet. It was too dark to see what she looked like. It also looked like shadowy men were jumping around her. Then I heard someone clearing their throat. I jumped and turned around. Behind me was an old man.

The man said, “My name is Thomas Jones, call me Tom though.” He started coughing wildly and then continued, “This is not a dream. I called your spirits here to explain what’s happening to your family. Your mother wanted to explain in due time but didn’t have a chance.”

“Woah woah woah, back up, how do you know my mom?” I asked.

Tom answered, “I was her teacher, but that’s not the point. The point is that your parents are in great danger, and they hope that you and Zac are safe as much as you hope they are. Okay, now let me tell you what you need to do. Zac’s and your birthday is in four days, and that’s when your parents are deemed to be killed by the shadow King.”

I asked suspiciously, “What’s so scary about shadows?”

Tom replied, “Oh! You should be scared of them; they like to take control of people’s bodies and destroy their souls. You should be afraid of the person who turned these men into power thirsty shadows. We call him the devourer.”

I said, “Wait, I have another question. Who is the ‘we’?”

Tom answered, “The people with unique abilities used for greater good or shortened down to AUFG. I’m one of them. You, April and Zac plus some others might be too, soon. You do know that you need April too?”

“Yes but what are our abilities?” I wondered.

“You will find out in due time. But we don’t have enough time now to talk. I’ll see you soon, Zayla, I hope,” he said as his voice grew fainter and fainter.

When I got up, the first thing I realized was that the woman that I saw was my mom, and that wasn’t a dream. I nearly shrieked in delight but instead I started packing. It was noon when I woke up, and I had missed breakfast, that’s why April had already left the room. I hurried downstairs and on the kitchen table was a plate of food was left for me. I quickly ate the food and went to find April and Zac. I found them in the living room playing video games.

I stepped in front of the television and Zac complained, “Aww man, why did you have to interrupt? I was beating April!”

April frowned and said, “As far as I am concerned, I am winning, not you!”

Then I said, “Anyway, stop playing and pay attention.” They stopped and listened as I told them about my encounter with Tom.

Zac said something first, “So, wait, let me get this straight; you believe some guy in your dream said mom and dad are alive? How is that possible?” Zac had also seen the news report.

“It wasn’t just any dream!” I shouted.

April however believed me and said, “So we have to save your parents before your birthday which I must mention is in three and a half days while figuring out our abilities. So let’s save them as soon as possible.”

Zac sighed and said, “Oh well, we better try. So we need to pack some things like money.” As April and I hurried about to gather the things he added, “Food, knives, matches, clothes, …”

When we were finished with packing our stuff, we decided to borrow some money from Mr. and Mrs. Sirili to buy train tickets to Chicago. Since Zac had a similar dream, that gave us a clue of where to go when we were ready. We left to the train station and we managed to get aboard without any of the officers being suspicious about kids traveling without supervision. I sat down and looked through the

window as the landscape seemed to fly by. I fell into a peaceful sleep but then the train stopped abruptly, and I hit my head on the seat in front of me.

As people screamed, “We’re falling!” I woke April up. She said we had to do something to save them. I nodded, then I closed my eyes, and concentrated, which is hard when you’re falling, but I managed. Then an idea popped into my head. It was symbols. I didn’t know if they would work but I had no choice.

I did the symbols and as soon as I did them, the train stopped falling and started to fly back onto the track. I was excited and stopped concentrating, but the train started to fall again. April did something I wouldn’t have expected. Ok, let me explain first, there were vines nearby and she shouted while pointing to them, “Save us.”

It worked and soon we were back on the track. Zac came and said, “Not fair, you found out what abilities you have. April has nature magic and Zayla can levitate things.”

I said, “I’d prefer to just call it magic, and just like Tom said, you’ll get your abilities in due time.” Then we got to the station and we quickly hurried away.

The next day we explored Chicago with only three more days before our birthday. We decided to split up and search. We would meet up at the hotel we stayed at the night before. I went south, and the city was beautiful as people went along with their businesses. The day went by fast, and we went back to the hotel without finding our parents. Only two more days remained. April told us her dream and said, “On your birthday, they plan to kill your parents at noon.” The dinner was good and we planned to wake up at dawn the next day, but we couldn’t find any clue.

“We have only a few hours, let’s make the most of our time,” I said. As we were walking, we saw a place that we hadn’t seen before and we went to check it out. When we got there, the shadowy men that I saw in my dream popped out of hiding and attacked us. I was caught off guard, so one of them got me. I’m sure you’d rather have them not touch you; their touch was so cold. Then the shadowy man who had caught me started swinging me and we disappeared to a cliff where he threw me.

My thoughts were, I hope Zac and April can save mom and dad, as I fell to my certain death. Then I thought about what would be written on my tombstone: “Zayla SoLeo died on her birthday, age 14.” At least I thought I would die.

Find out what happens next in Book 2 with Zac’s side of the story.

Whose Happy Place? Mine

By Jaxson Kolstad

A happy place is a place you can go to and instantly feel relaxed, you'll feel like a bag of air. My happy place is a calming sensation that instantly can make me feel better, sweep all my problems away with the brisk smell of the air. A happy place can be anything you want it to be, it could be a room full of comfort. A room that has all your memories and the only place that can supply you with the feeling of you being whisked away into happiness, slipping away into the feeling you haven't felt in so long.

How can you feel so happy just by being in this small space? The space of infinity, it's an endless place for sheer happiness. Will you choose to find your happy place? You can finally feel the emotion you have been lacking, serotonin is exactly what you need. Everyone is covered with the sorrow of living. Not thinking about how things can get better. Being trapped in your head can stop you from doing what you love. From feeling what you love. No matter what it is, everyone can find their happy place. It could be your bedroom, your old playroom, the outdoors, anywhere, the possibilities are endless.

My happy place is a place I don't visit often. I forget it exists when I get stuck in my thoughts. It's a place that makes me feel like me once in a while, it reminds me that I'm actually human and living. I finally feel like I'm floating, I feel like anything is possible. Nothing can stop me from being me, I've only felt this way in my dreams but it's better than not feeling it at all.

I like to think of a happy place as a thought and not a place, anything can be your happy place. It could be an old memory, a stuffed animal you have had since being in the comfort of your crib. Anything can be a happy place, doesn't even have to be a place at all. My happy place is the comfort of my dreams, I only see it in my dreams. It's a nice comforting place, filled with all the things that make my problems disappear. Just by entering the dream, I feel like a cloud, a beautiful cloud that everyone imagines is a different picture. It could be a picture of a dragon about to eat an apple or a horse with six legs instead of four.

My happy place is here, writing down everything I feel, things that I like. Writing is a place where I feel happy because it can explain what I'm feeling when my voice doesn't work. I feel comfort in the writing world, I can create anything and everything. It doesn't matter what people think or if they like it, if you like it that's all that's important. The comfort of writing helps me express myself in a way I could never imagine. This is my happy place. This is where my life lies.

As Long as You are Found

By Hailey Leach

"Ooof! Watchout! You almost stepped on me and I was having the best nap," I growled.

"Well, you shouldn't be sleeping in the doorway, Haymitch," Peeta scolded.

"Yeah, Peeta, I know, but I was so comfortable. Hey, have you seen Finnick?" I asked.

"No. Haven't seen him for a while. Actually, I haven't seen anyone for a while?" Peeta mumbled.

I sighed, "Yeah, now that you mention it, this is pretty weird. We should go look for Finnick."

"I know! I have been looking, but I can't find him anywhere. What should we do?'' Peeta wailed.

"We should look for the humans first." I roared, "I saw the human a moment ago and he went that way with a big box!''

Peeta and I went and found our human. He was at the door to the outside. Then faster than I could move, I was in a small space and swaying. I was so confused and scared. I meowed and hissed and was smacked around in this strange box. Then it stopped.

Where was I? What was this, and what should I do? I was so scared! The door opened and I shrank back to the end of the box. A human's hand reached into the box and pulled me out and then I was put in a strange cage.

During the next few weeks my brothers, Peeta, Finnick and I were in this strange new place. We didn't know what to do. Peeta was always scared. His bright orange eyes were always filled with fear, betrayal and sadness as his black silhouette curled into a ball in the corner of his cage. And Finnick's gray mood reflected in his gray eyes and fur as he scowled in loathing and rage at anyone he saw. Me, I was a mess. The betrayal and my need for love was sewed together like the white and pale orange of my fur. The other animals here said we wouldn't stay together and either we would stay here in this cage of if we were cute and lucky enough, we might be adopted. Could we even hope?

Three sweet kittens also came in yesterday and already left today with a loving family. Who knows how long we'll be here!

I asked, "Hey Finnick, how is Peeta? Did he eat today?"

"No, he didn't. He's just been laying there," my brother shared.

"You know I can hear you guys, right? We are in a small space and practically on each other's tails," Peeta answered.

"I know, but I just worry about you." I was the oldest of my brothers and I felt responsible for them, even in this sad place.

"I know, but I can take care of myself," little Peeta responded.

SMACK!

"Are you ok? That fall didn't look so good."

"I think so but I don't feel so good and I feel a little sick," Finnick mumbled.

A few days later we all got really sick, and strange scary people came in and poked and moved us around. We slowly got better little by little, day by day.

"Guys, look! There are people coming!" I shouted. "And they look really nice!"

"Yay! They look kind," Peeta replied.

"They look good," Finnick mumbled as he longingly looked at the people.

We watched them walk around and look at the others and walk past us. Then a man, woman and little boy and girl walked right up to us. Then the little boy and girl put their hands toward our little home and

said they loved us and wanted to bring all three of us home. The man and woman left the room and I got scared. When they came back, they said they could bring us home.

“Ooof! Watch out you almost stepped on me,” I growled.

“Well you shouldn’t be sleeping in the door way,” Peeta sighed.

“Shhh. You are going to wake up the people,” Finnick smiled.

The Time Had Come

By Sebastian Leon Lorenzo

My name is Glory. I am a pit bull of almost three years. I was born behind bars in an enclosure of about four square meters. We were five brothers, but our owner took the others and put them in a black bag two days after arriving in the world. I don't know where he took them, but they never came back. I stayed with Mom because the owner's son thought I was pretty, and they kept me. I remember how Mom called my brothers and looked for them in the corners of the streets, day and night until she gave up.

I was together with Mom for about two months in that place. The owner was very strict with us. He didn't let us go outside. If we did, he mistreated us and did not give us food for days. One day I was alone because Mom went out for food because the owner didn't give us food. When I woke up I felt a strong pain in my gut.

When Mom returned, she knew I was dying. She pulled me into her lap to calm me down. When the owner heard that I was crying because my stomach hurt a lot, he came outside. He grabbed me and threw me against the wall. I started to cry more and more, and Mom barked, asking him to leave me there with her.

Days later the man arrived with a black bag in hand. I already knew what was going to happen because I remember when he took my brothers when they were first born. I was very scared because I saw his angry face and he looked into my eyes. I started to run but there was no way out and I couldn't escape. I kept myself in a corner. He grabbed me and started mistreating me again. He put me in the black bag. I couldn't breathe anymore.

He took me in a car and after a long time in the bag, I fainted. When I woke up my head hurt a lot and I didn't know where I was because it was a ravine full of garbage. In the ravine there were many animals. I was very sad.

Suddenly, through a tear in the bag, I saw people around me, but I couldn't get out. I started crying. Minutes later a man arrived with two dogs.

"Everything okay?" he asked me. He started to calm me down. "Where is your mom? Why are you here? Who left you here?" he asked.

I wanted him to understand me. "I had a house but my owner was very bad and he made me disappear here. I have no idea where I am now."

The man was a very good person. He took me to the vet. They took care of me and they gave me food. They checked me if to see if I had any diseases. I had parvovirus for not having been vaccinated on time.

They finally vaccinated me and took me to an animal shelter where I made many friends. We played with people. They visited us, played with us, and even sometimes they took us for a walk. I was very happy because I could breathe the fresh air. I spent more than a month in the shelter. No one wanted to adopt me because I was sick. People who came only adopted the healthy puppies. I was very sad because no one wanted to give me a home, but I knew my vaccine would help me recover soon and began to hope for a family of my own.

One day the moment came when a couple came to the shelter to visit me. I was feeling great that day and I was completely recovered. They started to play with me. I think they liked me, but then they left. I started to think that they surely had a plan because they really enjoyed playing with me and yes, the next day they arrived with some papers. I knew they were coming for me. I only heard a little, but they were mentioning my name. Then they arrived at my room where I was playing with my friend.

The nice couple took me to their house. I was very excited because finally I was going to be with a family. The time had come. The time to know my home, that place where I will be safe for the rest of my life, where I will have an air conditioned bedroom, where I will have room to run, where they give me the best food that I have had in my life, but especially, where they will respect and love me. And now I am happy with my family where I feel safe all the time.

Some Hard Work and Hope

By Amati Ishimo Migisha

I'm David, but most people call me Dave. I always wanted to be an artist. But I know it will take a lot of hard work. Middle school starts in a week, and I'm looking forward to that.

"David! Go to sleep!" my mom yelled from outside the door.

I responded by saying, "Okay!" Then I went to sleep.

One week quickly passed by, and before I knew it, it was the first day of school.

"Wake up David!" Mom said.

I got out of bed really slowly, I picked out my clothes, then I went to the bathroom to take a shower. About six minutes later I was completely ready. Then I went downstairs.

When I got to the bottom step, my mom said, "David, you look so grown up!"

Then my dad said, "David come on, or you'll be late." I rushed over to the car. "You ready?" Dad asked.

"I think so," I said.

"Then let's go," my dad said as the car started to back up. Then we were on the road.

My first class was homeroom. When I walked in, a woman with black hair and greenish blue eyes approached me. "And who might you be?" she asked.

"David Williams ma'am. But most people call me Dave," I answered.

"I'm Ms. Brandon. Please find your seat."

I went over to an empty seat and sat down. I looked to see who was sitting next to me. It was a black haired boy who was taking a little nap. I sighed and pulled out my sketchbook. My mom had gotten a new job, so we had to move away. We have just been living here for a couple of weeks, so I was the new student. This is how the first few minutes of my day went.

I was relieved when it was lunch time. But I did not know who to sit with because I didn't know a lot of people there. I found an empty table to sit at that was in the corner of the cafeteria. Then I heard someone say, "Hey, are you new here?" I looked up and it was the black haired boy from my class.

"Yeah!" I said.

"I'm Carson," he said while sitting down.

"I'm David, but you can call me Dave," I said. "So how long have you been here?" I continued.

He responded to my question by saying, "I've been here since kindergarten." Then another person came to the table. He had blond hair and blue eyes. "Hi Carson, hi … wait, what's your name?" he asked.

"David, but he prefers to be called Dave," Carson replied.

"Oh well, nice to meet you, Dave. I'm Leo." Then he sat down and we all started eating.

"Mom! Dad! I'm home!" I said.

"How did it go?" asked my dad.

"Went well," I said. "I even made some friends. I'll tell you more about it at dinner. Right now I just want to go to sleep."

Two months later …

"Attention class!" I looked up from my sketchbook. "We will be having a lot of things coming up!" said Ms. Brandon. "There will be a science fair, the state carnival, and our field trip." I was about to go

back to drawing in my sketchbook, but what Ms. Brandon said next caught my attention. “Oh! There will also be an art contest. The winner of the contest will get a free trip to the Art Museum in Paris.”

I’d heard about the Art Museum before, and I always wanted to go. But I knew my parents would never let me. I did not know if I should enter the contest or not, but this was my only chance! My seventh sense told me this time could be different.

When I got home I started to brainstorm what I should draw. I had nothing in mind, so I went upstairs to ask my dad for help. I told him about the contest.

“Sorry son, I don’t know what you should draw,” Dad said. As I was about to walk out of the door he said, “You’ll think of something.”

When I got to my room I sat down and started to think some more. It took me three days to dig into my little brain before I could figure out what to draw. I checked other art works from the school library and searched on the internet too. “Now I know what to draw,” I said to myself. I started drafting my artwork.

My first try was horrible! “Do I quit?” I thought. “No, Dave! You can make it!” I said to myself. I used all my out of school free time to get the best drawing and win the contest. I was not satisfied with my work enough until I felt some kind of an invisible and magical hand pushing my hand as I worked on my final creation.

Three months later …

The day of the contest was today. A week earlier we had to send in our artwork, and now the judges were here. My heart was beating like crazy. I hoped I would win. I bolted straight up when one of the judges grabbed the microphone and said, “And the grand prize winner of the art contest is …” The auditorium went silent. “… David Williams!” I was so happy I felt that I was going to cry. “David, please come up and receive your prize.” That was one of the proudest moments in my life.

A month later …

I was so nervous. In a couple of minutes I was supposed to go on a plane to the art museum. Carson and Leo were helping me pack my bags.

“I think you’re ready,” Carson said.

“Yeah,” said Leo. “Oh, our rides are here,” said Leo while looking out the window. “

Good luck!” Carson said as he walked out of the door.

“Thanks!” I said. When they left. I went downstairs.

“You ready?” Dad asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then let’s go!”

“Bye David!” Mom said.

“Bye Mom!”

When we got to the airport my dad asked me, “Do you want me to go with you to your plane?”

“No,’’ I said. “I’ll go by myself.”

As I was going to go my dad said to me, “Son, I’m very proud of you. Good luck out there!” Then he said, “You better run or you will miss your flight.” I ran.

“Whoa! This place is so cool!” I said.

After a two day flight I finally arrived. Then I heard someone behind me say, “You finally arrived!” I turned around and saw a guy with long brown hair. “Oh, sorry I forgot to introduce myself,” he said. “I’m Matt.”

I said, “I’m David but I go by Dave.”

Then Matt said, “Come on, follow me. I know everywhere in Paris.”

He led me to the museum. When I stepped inside I stared in awe at the paintings and tapestries. With

some of my money, I bought some souvenirs. I bought a miniature tapestry for my mom and a new camera for my dad. (I broke his old one.)

"Can I see one of your drawings?" Matt asked me. I handed him a few. "Whoa! These are good!" he exclaimed. "Hey, we need a co-artist for our new series. I thought you might be interested."

I said, "Ok! But first I need to ask my parents."

"Well here's my number," Matt said while handing me a small piece of paper.

"O-oh thanks!" I said.

After another two day flight, I was home. When I opened the door my parents were waiting for me in the doorway. I could tell they wanted to know how the trip went. So I told them how I had a wonderful trip.

Four years later …

"Mom," I said. "I'm going to work on the new character's design!"

"Ok!" Mom said. I went to my car then drove away to my office. I think I learned something: Nothing is impossible. All it takes is some hard work and hope.

The Fighting Sisters

By Vicki Nielsen

One Monday afternoon Paislee and Delanee were at their house getting ready for the day, Paislee was brushing her hair with Delanee's hairbrush. Then Delanee was about to brush her hair when she noticed Paislee was using her hairbrush.

"Hey, stop using my hairbrush, you used it yesterday!" Delanee yelled.

"Stop being a brat every day, I need to brush my hair," Paislee screamed.

Their mom walked in telling them to stop fighting about a hairbrush and she would buy another one for them. "Apologize right now!" Mom furiously yelled. After the fight they went in the car to go to Walmart.

"I wish we could get along, we never do, it's all Delanees fault," Paislee sighed. After they got out of the car they went inside Walmart.

"Paislee and I never get along, I wish we could," Delanee quietly said. Once they walked in the store their mom got a shopping cart.

"Mom, can you get me a hairbrush? Paislee stole mine!" Delanee yelled.

"Delanee, can we just share the hairbrush?" Paislee requested.

"That's a good idea Paislee!" Mom answered. "It would be cheaper instead of buying a new one!" Mom happily spoke.

"I don't want to share," Delanee mumbled.

"Why not, it's a good idea?" Paislee questioned.

"Mom, we better hurry before we are late to church!" Delanee said in a worried tone. After Delanee reminded her mom they left the store without buying anything.

"We have no time, we are going to miss church," Mom said rushing and sounding worried

"Mom, I want to learn more about Jesus, it's fun to learn!" Paislee smiled.

"Paislee once we get there do you want to play with me and Nayvee?" Delanee asked.

"I am not feeling too well, I don't really want to play with you guys," Paislee sadly said.

"Paislee, why are you being a brat to me? This is what I am telling you mom, she always gives me attitude," Delanee madly told her mom.

"Delanee she just isn't feeling well. I want you guys to stop fighting," Mom angrily yelled. Once Paislee and Delanee arrived at church they walked in the room and saw Nayvee.

"Hi Nayvee, what are you doing with Lilee?" Delanee asked.

"I want to play with her later this week, I am sorry though for not telling you," Nayvee said quietly.

"You are always with her, just give her a break," Mom said out loud.

"Why? I am only with her on Sunday," Delanee questioned her mom.

"Let's leave Nayvee alone, Delanee," Paislee whispered. Once they walked into their classroom they sat down quietly.

"Welcome back students, let's learn more about Jesus and the gospel," Mrs. Callie smiled. After they learned about Jesus and the gospel they prayed.

"I hope me and Delanee stop fighting and become nice sisters to each other," Paislee prayed.

"I hope me and Paislee stop fighting so we have a happy family," Delanee also prayed. "Because we never get along."

After they got done with church they headed to the car. “Delanee, I am sorry for being rude all the time,” Paislee sighed.

“Paislee, I am also sorry for being rude,” Delanee also sighed.

“Girls, thank you for apologizing to each other,” Mom said happily as she smiled.

Once they got home they decided to eat dinner. “Girls, what would you guys like to eat for dinner?” Mom asked.

“I’d like some steak with green beans. Maybe a milkshake too!” Delanee answered.

“I don’t really care, all I just want is a chocolate milkshake,” Paislee laughed.

“Ok I will make steak with green beans. And of course your milkshakes,” Mom spoke.

After mom made the dinner they came to the dinner table to eat. “Girls, what did you do today at church?” Mom asked.

“We did the normal things today. But we got a new pastor!” Delanee answered.

“Wow, what is her name? I know a lot of new pastors!” Mom asked while chewing her food.

“Her name is Mrs. Callie! She is really nice to us!” Paislee spoke while chewing her food.

“I am the one who hired Mrs. Callie. I hired her because she is a really sweet person. We had a really good time talking to her,” Mom said.

After they get done eating their dinner they decide to go to a park. “Mom, can we go to the school park?” Paislee asked nicely.

“Mom, I also want to go there too!” Delanee said, looking at mom.

“Ok I guess we will go to the school park. Just all I am going to say is behave!” Mom answered.

Once they arrived at the school park they went straight to the swings. Paislee and Delanee start going really high up in the air! “Ah! This is getting really scary Paislee, how are you not scared?” Delanee screamed.

“Because I am not going really high as you on the swings,” Paislee answered.

Once they got in the car to go home they decided to drive around the lake. “Mom, me and Paislee are getting along with each other. So can we maybe go to the movie theater or somewhere else like an ice cream shop?” Delanee questioned.

“Sure honey as long as you guys get along. I don’t want any fighting or you guys will be in trouble!” Mom answered.

“I promise that I will try not to fight with Paislee,” Delanee promised.

“Fine but what movie do you want to watch?” Mom said.

“Let’s go to Sing Two! I have watched the trailers and it looks like the movie is like the best movie ever!” Paislee asked with puppy eyes.

“That sounds like a good move Paislee! Everyone is talking about the movie so I think we should watch it!” Delanee answered.

“It’s up to you guys, I never had good movie types back then I was into rock and roll music,” Mom answered while pulling into the parking lot. Once they found a parking spot they got out of the car and walked into the movie theater.

“Oh no I forgot my purse in the car. Delanee, could you get it for me?” Mom said quickly because she was worried.

“No mom, I want to go get your purse. Delanee shouldn’t get it. She picked the park!” Paislee stomped off towards the door.

“Paislee you are starting a fight. Do you want to go home?” Mom exhaustedly asked.

“No, I don’t want to go home but why does Delanee get to get the purse?” Paislee whined.

“Honey you picked the movie now knock it off!” Mom madly spoke. Once they were done fighting they just noticed someone stole their car.

“Delanee it is all because of you. You should have let me get mom’s purse!” Paislee screamed madly. They told the employee and the employee asked for the license plate.

“I think it was EGG 1234. I have a picture so let me look at it,” Mom said while pulling out her phone.

“Yep, the license plate is EGG 1234,” Mom panicked while looking at the license plate. “I will be calling the police!”

“Paislee why would you fight with me you just make family fights,” Delanee yelled. “You never do chores at home, I do your chores.”

“Delanee, why did I do the dishes last night?” Paislee rolled her eyes while looking outside. “Hey and I never do chores in front of you, I only do chores when I am not busy.” Paislee said, “And when was this made into chores?” Paislee questioned.

“Paislee I never said it was about chores,” Delanee answered.

“Um you kind of did. I was just minding my own business then you come towards me and you are saying I don’t do my own chores,” Paislee answered back. “Delanee let me talk to mom without you getting in my business. Mom, can we just walk home? I am not waiting here for five hours for the police,” Paislee asked.

“Honey you are in seventh grade, you should know to wait for the police. I learned that in kindergarten,” Mom replied. Once the mom got in contact with the police they noticed the car was not stolen.

“Ma’am the car is not stolen, it is in the parking lot right over here,” the police officer spoke. “Your car is in lot B.”

“Ok girls once we get home you guys are going to sleep,” Mom said. “There will not be any fighting or else Delanee you will not have your friend over tomorrow. Also, Delanee it’s not cool to fight and say your sister does not do any chores. Stop acting like a five year old, you are in fourth grade,” Mom aggressively spoke while opening the car door.

“Ok Mom,” Delanee replied while looking out the car door.

“Mom, are we going to church tomorrow?” Paislee questioned.

“Yes you guys will be going to church tomorrow, I will drop you guys off. There will be no fights at all or you will be grounded for a long time,” Mom seriously said.

Once they get done with the car ride back home they pull into the driveway. “Finally now you guys are going to bed,” Mom said.

“I call sleeping on the top bunk!” Delanee screamed.

“Hey, I called it this morning you little brat I am getting the top bunk!” Paislee screamed back.

“No you aren’t, I called it,” Delanee screamed while opening the car door.

“Girls stop fighting. Paislee will get the top,” Mom madly spoke.

Once they got in the house they started fighting again. “Paislee is a brat,” Delanee said.

“No,” Paislee screamed.

“Liar!”Delanee screamed.

“Girls stop before you go to summer school,” Mom madly screamed. “Also go to bed. Good night.” Mom rolled her eyes. Once they got to their room, they prayed then went to sleep.

The next morning mom said, “Girls time to go to church!” Mom continued, “It’s seven in the morning.”

“Ok Mom, I am gonna get ready,” Paislee said while taking her covers off.

“Delanee time to wake up!” Mom happily said.

“Ok mom, I am going to put my uniform on,” Delanee said.

Once they were ready they left for church. “Today you guys have Mrs. Cora. She is one of my favorite people they hired. Trust me you will like her,” Mom said.

Once they walk into church they find Mrs. Cora's classroom. "Hi girls, how are you today? Have you heard about your trip to…" Mrs. Cora said.

"STOP MRS. CORA!" Mom screamed.

"What do you mean?" Paislee said.

"Never mind I was talking to Laura and Carlos," Mrs. Cora said. "By the way girls, today is about hope and other stuff we will go over but the main lesson is hope!" Mrs. Cora said while walking up to the stage.

Once they got done with learning about hope they had to practice how to give someone hope. Paislee and Delanee picked each other as partners. Then their mom picked them up.

"Girls, it's going to be a busy day at work. I am going to be gone for a while," Mom said.

"Ok just drop us off home and once you get back from work get me fast food," Paislee tiredly said.

Once they arrived home Paislee went back to bed right away because of how tired she was. Then Delanee thought it was a good idea to make Paislee her favorite milkshake of all time. "Hmm, I think I should pretend to make a YouTube video," Delanee said. "This is how I make my sister her all-time favorite milkshake!"

Once Delanee finished making the milkshake she woke Paislee. Paislee was really happy about this. Once their mom came home they got a surprise. "Hey girls, I got a wonderful surprise for you!" Mom said. "I wasn't at work, I was at the airport buying tickets to Disney World!" Mom said happily.

"When are we going?" Paislee and Delanee questioned.

"Tomorrow," Mom said. "Let's go to bed now."

When they woke up the next morning they left to get to the airport that leads straight to the amusement park airport. "Mom, how long is the flight?" Paislee asked.

"About 30–40 minutes," Mom said.

"Ok," Paislee said.

Once they land in Disney World they go straight to the hotel room to unpack. "When do we get to go on the rides?" Delanee asked.

"Whenever we are done unpacking," Mom said.

"Ok mom," Delanee said. Once they got done with unpacking they started to leave the hotel room.

"Wait mom, we forgot the Mickey mouse ears!" Paislee ran back to the hotel room.

"Ok, go get them. The door is unlocked because I haven't locked it," Mom said. Once they get everything they need they leave for the rides.

"Mom, let's go see Mickey mouse!" Paislee said.

"Next let's get food!" Delanee said.

"Wait mom, how long are we here for?" Paislee asked.

"I think 14 days," Mom said.

"We can go on every ride, Delanee!" Paislee said.

"And a bunch of rollercoasters!" Delanee said.

"I am not going on the roller coaster with you guys!" Mom said.

"Why not mom?" Delanee said.

"Because I am terrified of them!" Mom said.

"Have you ever been on one?" Paislee asked.

"Nope, let's go try it I guess," Mom said.

"Welp, let's go and have fun!" Paislee and Delanee ran through the parking lot yelling.

Hope for a New Day

By Eris Owen

Hi, I'm Brodie. I like to play and jump and go for walks but, my owner didn't want to and every time I asked, he got mad and yelled and hit me. Shhhhh, he doesn't like it when it's loud, so I have to be quiet.

Brodie's owner came into the room and started to yell and freak out on Brodie. "Why you gotta be so loud you dumb dog? I swear I should put you down. You're worthless you mutt!" he yelled to Brodie. He put Brodie outside in the cold and left him out there all night.

I thought to myself, "I can't stay here anymore. He is so mean I never get to sleep inside and he hits and yells at me all the time. I must break free."

SNAP, the lead broke and Brodie started to run away from the house. He ran toward the woods at the end of the road.

"I'm so tired. I need to rest. I'll just sleep here for tonight." Brodie fell asleep in the woods. There was another animal sleeping there that Brodie didn't know about. Brodie awoke to a wild fox fighting and biting him.

"HEY why would you bite me? That was rude and I don't like it," I said.

"Because you are in my bed and in my home. Why are you here anyways?" the wild fox snarled.

"Because I ran away from my home and I got tired and this looked like a good spot to sleep, but I'll go if you want. I'll find somewhere to go," I said.

"No, stay for tonight. I understand where you're coming from. I ran away from home too," said the fox.

"Oh okay, thank you!" I said.

"It's no problem. I've been in the same place as you," the fox said.

Brodie fell asleep again and the fox cuddled up with Brodie and fell asleep too. The fox woke up and went to go get some food while Brodie was still sleeping. Brodie heard a person walking towards him and he got scared and he didn't know what to do so he just laid there hoping no one would see him, but with his luck the person had seen him.

He took him to the animal shelter. Brodie was mad because he thought that the fox left him there just so that would happen to him. "I can't believe he would do that to me! I thought we were friends," Brodie said to himself.

Then another man came to the back of the truck and he had the wild fox with him. The man put the fox in a crate, and he put him in the back with Brodie. Brodie was so confused and couldn't figure out what was going on.

"Brodie, don't be scared. I'll get us out of here. Just be calm," the fox said.

"I'm not scared and it's you that needs to calm down. You're not going to be able to get us out of here," Brodie said calmly.

The fox felt hurt from what Brodie said to him and they didn't talk the rest of the ride to the shelter. Brodie felt alone again. He also felt hurt and sad. When they arrived at the shelter the fox said he was sorry.

"Brodie I'm sorry," the fox said.

"It's okay, Fox. Do you even know where we are going or what's going on?" Brodie asked.

"You don't know where we are going or what's going on?" Fox asked.

"No, I don't, so can you please tell me?!" Brodie yelled.

“Well, we are going to the animal shelter. We are going to live there until someone wants to take us home but no one wants a fox so this will be my home for life, but you’ll get a home right away. Everyone wants a puppy,” the fox said sadly.

“Don’t think that way. Have hope! You’ll find a home. I bet you’ll find one before I do,” Brodie said.

The man walked to the back of the truck and grabbed the fox and Brodie from the back and he took them inside the shelter. The people in the shelter gave Brodie a bath and they also took him to the vet.

Two weeks later he found out that the fox got taken to a new home and Brodie was so happy for him. Brodie was finally ready to find his new home and by the next week Brodie found a person he really liked. That same day he was taken to his new home. He was so happy.

“Oh wow! This is great. I can’t believe this is my new home. I get to sleep inside. Like, wow! She is great!” Brodie said when he got to her house.

Pompeii

By Madelyn Rose Phillips

Nefeli slipped out of the bath and climbed into her peplos. She raised the straps to her shoulders and connected the clasps. She then waved to her servant Cybele that it was safe to come in. “Any word from my father on Achilles?” Nefeli asked her.

“No. I assume, my lady, that Sir Achilles is getting ready to see you though.” Cybele knew that she should not speak until spoken to, but Nefeli was more wavering on the rules of how to treat those higher than you.

“You don’t have to wait until I allow you to speak, you know,” Nefeli said. Cybele nodded. She was Jewish, but other than that Nefeli knew nothing more of her or her family. She liked Cybele, but she would never say anything about her past. Nefeli’s father was Greek, but he enlisted in the Roman army and worked his way up to senator. Her family was very wealthy and they were vacationing in Pompeii for the summer season. Their domus flaunted wealth, showing off marble statues of the gods and marble pillars.

Nefeli tied a golden girdle around her waist and rubbed perfumes and oils on her skin. Cybele braided her silky dark brown hair intricately and oiled her nails. She then put a golden circlet on her head, and to top it off, she laced up her leather sandals. Next, she put necklaces and a singular golden arm band on; then she put in golden earrings with the shape of the moon that dangled from them.

Nefeli sent a quick prayer to Athena, the goddess of wisdom, that Achilles would keel over or not want to marry her. Achilles was a fat, greasy Roman who only wanted Nefeli for her beauty. He cared nothing for her kindness or feelings. He offered a large gift and Nefeli’s father accepted it. Achilles had first laid eyes on her when they were moving in to their new domus in Pompeii. He sent a servant saying that he would give a large gift if he could have Nefeli by the end of the month Quintillis. That night she had laid in her bed crying. She didn’t want to get married to a fat pig; she hoped to marry someone who loved her for who she is, not for what she looked like.

Now she had accepted her fate and fought back the tears as Cybele pinned up the last braid. “Cybele, how did you come to my main home, Rome?” Nefeli asked her.

Cybele looked startled. “Pardon me, but it is not a question my master should be asking me.”

Nefeli waved dismissively. “Never mind that, I just want to know.”

Cybele took a deep breath, “I was taken from my home, Capernaum. The Pharisees didn’t like that my family followed Christ so they sent us out to slavery,” her lip quivered for a moment and her arms dropped. “I was separated from my family; I think they are working at Emperor Titus’ palace as servants.”

Nefeli gasped.

“I think,” Cybele continued, her eyes shining, “That they are treated well.”

Nefeli shook her head in disbelief.

“And,” Cybele said quickly, “I am very grateful that you and the others in this household take good care of me.” Nefeli turned around and wrapped her arms around her. Cybele went limp and started to sob.

“I can’t begin to understand what you’ve gone through, but I promise that you will have a seat at my table and I will do everything in my power to make sure you are treated well,” Nefeli murmured softly.

“This is nice,” Cybele whispered and broke away. “Thank you, my lady, but I can’t…’’ She was cut off by a messenger who came to the door and bowed.

“Very beautiful again, my lady,” Nefeli noticed he wasn’t looking at her but at Cybele. She smiled inside a little at the thought that maybe Cybele could find happiness. Cybele blushed a little at his comment. He now averted his eyes to Nefeli, “Sir Achilles is waiting at his terrace with your father. He expects you to come immediately.” He stopped at the pained expression on Nefeli’s face. “I’m sorry those are just the words he said and…”

Nefeli cut him off, “It is okay, Quintus. I understand, it’s not you it’s just…something.” Nefeli looked at the ground. “Tell him I will come shortly.” She turned to Cybele, “Will you tell the stable boy to saddle my horse, Diana?’’

Cybele nodded, “Right away M’lady.”

She hurried out the threshold and Nefeli turned to Quintus and smiled a bit. “So, I see you like Cybele.”

He was flabbergasted, “Well, she is very pretty and, and she um…”

Nefeli raised a hand to silence him. “It’s quite alright, but if you do marry her just make sure you treat her right.”

He nodded vigorously. “I will.”

Nefeli waved her hand. “You may go.” He nodded and rushed off.

Cybele appeared again after a few minutes, “Diana is ready, M’lady.”

Nefeli followed her out the door and to the gate. Her horse was white with blotches of black. Beside Diana was a pony carefully chosen for Cybele to ride. Nefeli climbed on top, sat sideways and grabbed the reins of the horse. Cybele did the same; the gates opened and they went out to the busy streets of Pompeii.

Achilles was not the actual hero, nothing close to him, not even a bit. When they arrived, Achilles was waddling down his stairs with the loose skin under his neck wagging like a puppy tail. He opened his arms and held his hand out to help Nefeli off her horse, but then there was a shout from his domus and he turned to it. Nefeli lost her balance and fell off her horse. Achilles looked at her disapprovingly and frowned. “Don’t get your dress soiled; you must be presentable to my household. I don’t want a dirty wife.”

Cybele came and helped her up; she frowned in his direction as his was back turned. Nefeli brushed off her peplos and walked to the entrance with Achilles on her arm. His arm was very sweaty and the sweat showed on his face as he walked up the steps to the threshold of his house. The big ivory doors swung open and they walked into the courtyard. There were peacocks running around with their colorful feathers fanned out. Nefeli had to admit that the courtyard was very beautiful. There were statues of the gods who were unclothed, there was a giant fountain in the middle with butterflies of different hues fluttering around. There was a large glass dome that stretched over the courtyard in an attempt to keep all the animals in. Right in the center was a statue of the actual Achilles. She lingered over it thinking about how much of a difference there was between the two Achilles.

“You like my statue of Achilles? I thought that it would be good to have a statue of someone I was named after.” He chortled a little and his belly shook. She slipped her arm out from his and smoothed her peplos.

She turned towards him, “You are famous for your collection of big cats, right? Why don’t you show me your most ferocious one.” He blanched a little; Nefeli liked watching the short pig squirm.

“A..are you sure you want to see our f..fiercest?”

Nefeli nodded, “I am quite sure. Unless your fiercest is too mighty for Achilles.”

He squirmed a bit more, “Of course not, I shall take you right away.” He scurried to the left side of the courtyard and they walked down some steps. They came into a lavish room with Cybele following

behind them. She kept her distance because it was rude to intrude on a soon-to-be-married couple, especially if you were a lowly servant. In the center of the room was a handsome young man with golden curls playing with lion cubs as if they were pet puppies. He threw a ball and then the cubs ran towards the ball and he hid behind the sofa. After the cubs retrieved the ball, they looked around the room for him. One of them climbed on top of the sofa, then fell off the back into the servants arms. He emerged from behind the couch and lay on the pillows. All the cubs pounced on him and he started to giggle.

"Aristides!" Achilles bellowed, "My future wife is here and you must give her a proper greeting; I ought to have you whipped!" Aristides looked up, startled.

He stood up and bowed, "My apologies…" he trailed off.

"Nefeli." She replied.

"Ah yes, Nefeli. Forgive me for forgetting your name." His voice was smooth like honey. "Nefeli, would like to see Apollo, our fiercest," Achilles said coldly.

Aristides nodded vigorously, "Of course, right this way madam." He led her down a hallway and they stopped at the end. On the left was a cell with a powerful looking lion. His muscles in his shoulders rippled as he paced. His large velvety paws were silent as they hit the cold stone floor. His fiery mane shook with the slight breeze that came through the cracks in the tiny window. He turned towards then and growled softly at the sight of Achilles.

Aristides unlocked the cell door. Achilles hid behind Nefeli and started to tremble. Nefeli pushed him away as Aristides quickly slipped inside. Apollo the lion looked at him challengingly. Aristides kept his eyes locked on Apollo and he beckoned Nefeli into the cell. She cracked open the door and then slipped through. She looked at Apollo and he returned her gaze. He ran towards her and knocked her off her feet. He started to lick her face and she laughed boisterously. Aristides stood over her and helped her up. She brushed off her clothes and ran her fingers through Apollo's soft silky mane.

"I've never seen him act like that towards someone. He must like you. Maybe my master will let you keep him."

Achilles nodded vigorously. "Yes, yes, please do take him."

Nefeli nodded thoughtfully.

"Oh!" Aristides exclaimed, "If you are to own him you ought to know how to ride him." He turned to Achilles, "May I teach this lovely lady how to ride a lion?''

Achilles waved his hands. "Please do, go right now if you must. But I command you to be back by dark, as dinner will be waiting." Aristides nodded enthusiastically. Nefeli beckoned Apollo to come. They walked back up the stairs and into the lavish room. They walked up the other set of stairs and into the courtyard. Aristides waved her to the gate and they walked outside of the courtyard. At last they stopped at the gate of Achilles house.

Aristides turned towards her, "Now we are going to ride him to the back of the house where that offers a clear area where we can train."

Nefeli nodded slowly. "I will ride in front to guide him; I mean, after all you have no idea how to ride a lion." He then hopped on the lion and extended a hand to her. She took it, then climbed on Apollo too, while wrapping her arms tightly around his abdomen.

Aristides bounded off and he was right – riding a lion was hard. Apollo's muscles were constantly moving in order to move fast. And all Nefeli had to hold on to was Aristides. But what a rush! She could feel the wind in her face; it felt like she was flying.

They neared the back of the household and Apollo slowed down with caution. When they got to the back, Aristides hopped off and extended his hand to help her off. Now you might be thinking, aren't humans taller than lions? Well, to answer your question, Apollo was massive and was larger than most lions.

Nefeli appreciated that he helped her and didn't leave her to fall. She brushed off her clothes and smoothed her hair, and that's when Mount Vesuvius exploded.

After the mountain exploded Nefeli panicked and she ran to Aristides. They hopped on Apollo and rode back into town. They found Cybele who was attempting to escape Pompeii on a horse. Achilles perished, and Nefeli never had to marry him. They all escaped Pompeii. Sadly, Nefeli's mother and father perished and after some years they went back and found Nefeli's inheritance. Nefeli married Aristides and they had two children. Cybele stayed with them and helped raise the children. She married the young messenger and they had a house filled with four children. Cybele and Quintus lived in a house on Nefeli's estate grounds. Nefeli instructed Apollo be sent back to Africa where he ate wildebeest to his heart's content. The End.

The Box of Time

By Leila Pratt

My sisters were arguing. *Again*. I laid my brother down in his crib and gave my sisters a death stare. “Watch him, please, and get over yourselves. I’m taking a quick walk. I’ll be right back. Please, just handle this for a minute,” I pleaded as I opened the back door.

I stepped outside and breathed in the cool Alaskan air. The wind howled in the treetops, but I didn’t mind. I headed over to a different path than I usually took. As I was walking, a glimpse of something that was lighter brown than the dark trees caught my eye. It was sitting by the roots of a ginormous oak, half hidden under shrubbery. I reached down and tugged, falling back with a small box in my hands.

The box must have been a half a foot wide by eight inches long. It had a faded gold buckle on the front, and rusty hinges on the back. The box seemed sturdy, it looked handmade but was decaying. There was a name carved into the front in large, beautifully scripted letters, and another carved on the bottom in small print. With the old-style writing it was hard to tell what the front name said. I thought I made out the first name Eve but couldn’t tell her last name. The bottom clearly said Lou Smith, in block print that looked less skilled and slightly more modern. It was definitely added after Eve’s carving.

I sat up and grabbed the buckle to open the box. As I looked at the decomposing wood, I decided it would be better to wait. I needed to know what was inside, but it wasn’t going to happen here. I started down the trail towards home. I’d look at it there.

I found this box, hidden under some shrubs while I was taking a walk outside. The day was clear and nobody was around, so I wasn’t sure who’s it could be. But when I looked at it closer, I made out a name. Eve Powell, in a fancy script that made me wonder how a person could carve that into a box.

The box was old, definitely older than my 16 years, although that wasn’t saying much. This box was falling apart and had obviously been touched only by nature for a long while.

“LOU SMITH! Why are you in the woods?” It was my mother’s voice, calling from our nearby home.

Oh no, I thought to myself. The bears. Just yesterday they got into the compost and as of now they are unusually active, lurking around every corner. I couldn’t just leave the box, so I grabbed it and ran home.

When I got to my room and opened the box carefully, I realized what it was.

Later that day I quickly returned the box to its hiding place, after getting permission from my mother. My name was somewhat sloppily carved on the outside and a few memories with a journal entry sat on the inside in a crisp white envelope. They were set neatly next to the life stories of another. I planned to go get the box when it’s not dangerous to be outside anymore, to add more and reread Eve’s interesting life story.

I regret hiding it every day. The next day, February 2, 1952, a fire burned my house to the ground and we moved to Canada.

I never saw the time capsule again.

When I finally got home, I set the box on my desk. I took the buckle in my hand and shifted it back and forth. I slowly pried the box open. I peered inside as the top swung open.

The sun shone into the bedroom I stayed in with my two younger sisters. It was hardly the crack of dawn, and thus I did not expect them to be up. As for me, I wasn't feeling too well and needed to walk.

Three nights ago, as I struggled to fall asleep with my sisters thrashing around, I came up with an idea. An idea that could inspire another person to follow their dreams, as I was about to follow mine. This idea would be created with the intent of instilling hope in the hearts of the people in the future. It was finally a way I could share my story.

I was going to use my jewelry box to hold the memories. I would hide it outside along a trail somewhere around my home. Perhaps in the garden or by a tree. Somewhere that it would be concealed and yet able to be found.

I grabbed the box and the envelope of my stories. I let myself outside. It was chilly, and the cold air nipped at my cheeks as I walked. I picked a spot a ways out to hide the capsule. Now I felt ready to leave and discover my own path. I hoped my family would understand.

I took a step back. It was a time capsule. Inside the capsule there were two envelopes. The first envelope, with a yellowish-tint, said 1902 – Eve. I was slightly scared to touch it. The other envelope said 1952 – Lou. My heart skipped a beat at that. The year now was 2022. Inside was a note she seemed to have written to herself. It was full of questions about Eve's letter and story.

In the rest of Lou's envelope there were drawings. She must have been a young artist. They were beautiful, creative designs on little scraps of anything—cardboard, newspaper and even old fabric.

Working up the courage, I sat down and opened Eve's envelope. Inside were the memories of a person who reminded me of myself. She had lived in a very different time but understood things I couldn't seem to say to anyone. She had gone on adventures and had run away to find love. Her life hadn't been perfect, but she'd kept a record of things so that in another world, someone else could know that she had once lived and appreciate her life.

Inspired by her story and blessed with a newfound sense of peace and belonging, I did what Eve and Lou had done before me; added a letter and carefully placed the box back in the woods. The only outward sign it had been discovered was the addition of a third name carved on its exterior.

Her Name is Faith

By Abbigail Renaux

A mom was sitting in her daughter's room and her daughter asked for a story so she picked one named, "Her name is Faith." She read…

Once upon a time there was a 5-year-old girl who had dreams to marry a handsome guy and open a bakery when she turns 20. She lived in a big city and her parents weren't nice, but she was best friends with her Grandma Rose. By the time she reached 16 and got her license, she went to her grandma's every day after school. One day she went to her grandma's house and knocked on the door

"Grandma I'm here," said Faith. No answer. "Grandma?" She opened the door and walked in and on the kitchen table was a note that said:

> Go to the place that used to be the old Soup kitchen.
> – Love, Grandma.

So, she hopped in her car and drove to the old soup kitchen and when she walked in, she saw all her family members. "SURPRISE!" everyone shouted.

"Omg, what's going on?"

"We all saved up to buy you this so you can have your bakery," explained Grandma Rose.

"Omg thank you guys so much!" said Faith. They celebrated and the next day Faith gets to work.

She shops online for decorations and furniture. After hours and hours of spending almost 200 bucks she went downstairs to tell her parents about everything she bought.

"Mom, Dad guess what I did."

"I don't care," said her dad.

"If it's about that stupid bakery of yours I don't want to hear it," said her mom.

All heartbroken Faith ran and grabbed her car keys and drove to her grandma's. When she got there, she knocked on the door.

"Hello? Sweety? What's Wrong?"

"Mom and dad were being mean to me and called my bakery stupid," cried Faith.

"Come in, I have something to tell you." They went in and sat down at the table. "Okay so ever since I found out everything about what your parents were doing to you I got a court order to be your legal guardian but I haven't given your parents that form cause I thought they would stop."

"Grandma why have you never told me this before?"

"I don't know, maybe cause I'm a little afraid of your parents, but I want you to move in here with me, I have plenty of room for you. So what do you say?"

"I would love to, Grandma."

"So why don't you take this to your parents and go pack your things and we can get you settled."

"Okay." They hugged and she went back to her mom's house and handed them the paper and packed all her things and moved into her grandma's house.

A few years later and she is still living in her grandma's house, the bakery is ready to be opened and her grandma even helps bake at the bakery.

"Wow Grandma, come look there is a line down the block full of people waiting to come in."

"I'm so proud of you sweetie"

“I couldn’t have done it without you.” They hug and Faith walks over to the door.

“Ready Grandma?”

“Ready.” She opens door.

“Before I let you guys in, I have an announcement to make,” explains Faith. “No matter how life goes or who says your hopes and dreams aren’t worth it, find that one person that encourages you ‘cause you will always get support and love from that person.” Everyone claps and Faith looks at her grandma and mouths “I love you.”

“Welcome to Hopes and Dreams bakery. Come on in!” welcomes Faith. After the room is packed with a whole bunch of people, she sees her parents. “Mom, Dad…”

“Okay, listen I get that we were mean to you,” says her mom.

“Look, you guys crushed my hopes and dreams,” says Faith.

“What your mom is trying to say we want you to come back home,” says her dad.

“No, you guys were never loving or caring as parents but Grandma Rose was and still is, so either you guys can get something to eat or drink or get out.”

“Fine, I’ll get the cheesecake and a coffee,” says her mom.

“Same,” says her dad.

“Sure,” says Faith. She grabs their food and drinks and gives them to the waiter and her grandma walks up.

“Never in a million years have I seen someone stand up to your parents like that,” says Grandma Rose.

“Thanks Grandma.”

“No problem sweetie.”

“Even if she never gets a handsome husband,” says Faith’s mom, “She did accomplish her hopes and dreams.” The end.

Bindi

By Nityan Sharma

The street outside my house had quietened down. It was 7:30 p.m. I made myself comfortable in a little spot just outside my house. I was deeply engrossed in my thoughts when I felt something cozying to me. Dart! It must be a squirrel or something and brushed it away. It scampered away but soon I heard whimpering and saw a small white paw placed on my thigh. I saw the cutest little puppy, with light brown eyes, and a dark tan spot on its forehead!

I tried to shoo it away, but it kept on moving towards me and kept on putting his front left paw on my thigh again and again. I looked closely; his leg was swollen. I hollered for my elder sister. She was the healer in the family. She could heal anything I brought home. She healed two little birds that were hurt, a bird with a broken wing and a squirrel that was attacked by an eagle. For me she was the best animal doctor and charged no money!

She came running and soon my cousins followed her. My cousin, Sanjay, who is older than us, took out his cell phone and started recording it with his irritating commentary. “Dear fellows, here is another animal being rescued, by the saint of wounded animals. This is his fifth rescue and helping him is nurse Reema who always does his dirty work and recording all this is ace photographer Sanjay.’’

We all examined the puppy carefully. It whimpered whenever we touched its leg. My sister brought some milk which he lapped hungrily. She said that he could not be left alone. She swathed his leg. All this while it was licking my hand and he climbed into my lap. I instantly connected with this hapless being. We could not take it home. It was a stray dog, sick with unknown history. Bringing pets inside the house was an absolute taboo.

My house is very small. It is in a densely populated neighborhood. We are eight people packed in this house sharing space with each other. It is a bare minimum living, but we are really happy and have great fun. There are eight people in my house, my grandparents, my parents, my elder sister and two cousins who have come here to stay with us for some time. To cut the whole story short the puppy would not be welcomed at our home.

We packed him in the card box and kept him on the table near the door. Early in the morning when my grandmother opened the door to go out, I heard her screaming. We all ran out. The puppy had managed to come out of the box and was lying near the door. My grandmother was once bitten by a dog and she is mortally scared of them. No dog is allowed in or around our house! There is barely enough space for people, let alone pets!

The moment it saw me it hobbled towards me. She screamed at me not to touch it. My grandfather reasoned out in his soothing baritone voice that it was just a puppy. And there was my cousin recording a video of the whole chaos. Well, I was allowed to keep it till the time its leg healed and then it would be sent away.

Later that day, I accompanied my mom to the overcrowded animal shelter, and showed them the puppy. We knew the veterinary doctor. A very close friend had worked with him earlier. After the treatment the puppy became alright. We named it Bindi!

My grandmother used to go for a walk, in the morning and evening, he would follow her. But she never interacted with Bindi. Sanjay made another video! The other children also loved him and when they would dance he would dance with them. He would dance standing on his hind legs. Soon he was the darling of everyone. He was especially good when we played with a ball. He would retrieve the ball

from places we could not reach. We called him the best retriever! You can come home and see all the videos brother Sanjay has made!

One evening we were busy playing. My friend Aryan hit and the ball fell into the fenced yard. We hollered for Bindi to fetch it. He crawled under the fence and brought it out. Everybody clapped for him. Every time we called for him he seemed to be a bit more lethargic. We joked that he had become lazy. I thought he was feeling neglected and decided to play more with him. In the evening all of us decided to have a small party. We played the music and started dancing. Everyone was having a blast and I looked for Bindi. He tried to get up but gave up after some time. I was intrigued. I talked about him with the family. My grandmother told me that he was not eating properly and rarely accompanied her. It must be the heat as summer was rather high this year. He looked tired all the time.

At night I was sitting at my favorite place, Bindi was lying near me – listless and unenthusiastic. I felt bad for neglecting him. I started stroking him. He seemed to like it and licked my hand and put his head in my lap. I pulled him towards me and he yelped. He started touching my thigh with his left paw again and again. I thought he might have hurt himself again. I examined him and felt a lump in his joint. He yelped again. His joint was swollen. I am really worried now.

The next day I accompanied my mother to the vet! I shared his symptoms with him. He examined him thoroughly. He rang up his friend and fixed the appointment for the next day. I asked him what the matter was. He said that they would conduct some tests to find out. He had been kind enough to provide the required vaccines for Bindi at little or no cost! A long time ago, my father had helped him when he was in need and he never forgot the favor.

The next day we reached the clinic. He welcomed us with a wide grin. He patted Bindi affectionately and Bindi licked his hand. After conducting the tests and examining him thoroughly he moved towards me and said, “Son, why don’t you take him out and give some treats from the bowl outside.” I saw him talking to my mother who seemed to be shocked by the revelation. She came out and signaled to me to follow her. I was puzzled. I asked what the matter was. She tried to tell me but her voice choked.

At last we were home and the moment grandma asked her what was wrong with Bindi she burst into tears. All of us gathered around her. With great difficulty she could tell us that the doctor had suggested putting Bindi to sleep. A stunned silence fell like a pall of gloom. I was so bewildered! She said that the doctor was sure that the dog had cancer. Of course, further testing could be done to find out, but they were very expensive and then surgery, radiation and maybe chemotherapy and then rehabilitation would be very expensive.

Cancer means no hope. Darkness gathered in the room but nobody got up to switch on the light. We didn’t speak a word. Nobody moved from their places. We seemed to be carved from stones. Then we heard the cheerful whistling of brother Sanjay and Bindi limped to meet him. “What happened to the electricity?” And the dam of our sorrow broke and we all started wailing. When he found out about the cancer he also became very sad. No one felt like having dinner that night.

Around midnight I heard Sanjay asking mom if the dog could survive after the treatment. “Yes, the doctor said so.” I could hear her crying. There was a lot of tossing and turning in the room. How could one sleep when you know that someone amongst us would be put to death? Around 3 a.m. I woke up and saw Sanjay doing something on his cell phone. I asked him what he was doing. He shushed me and told me to go to sleep. The clouds of gloom overshadowed everyone the next day. Bindi seemed to understand the sorrow whenever someone would come home to see him, he would get up and lick their hand.

Days were passing with everybody going about their lives quietly. It seemed nobody wanted to talk about Bindi. I spent most of my time with him. Even grandma who never touched him before would often stroke his head. My friends would come to give me company. They would bring Bindi’s favorite treats but he hardly touched them.

After ten days, I heard Sanjay's whistling again. Bindi perked up. Sanjay came with balloons and a huge cake. He was in a festive mood. I resented it very much. He said, "Hey you forgot, today is Bindi's birthday! A year ago today he came to us. So let's celebrate! Tomorrow you will take him to the hospital!"

I was aghast, how could he be so insensitive? I blurted out, "How can I take him to his final sleep?"

"Well brother, nobody has the time. We all are working. You have holidays. The treatment is going to take a long time. And Bindi loves you!"

All the tears I was holding back all these days came out and I sobbed uncontrollably, "But we don't have the money."

Sanjay told us the whole story. When he came to know about Bindi's plight, he was heartbroken, frustrated and helpless. He felt there was no hope for this adorable bundle of joy. He started thinking if it had happened to one of us then what would we have done? Would we recommend the same to them? The family would chip in, we would sell our assets, we would work extra hard to earn more money. Then he shared his concerns with grandma, she thought for some time and removed her golden chain and asked him to get the test done to confirm the diagnoses. He was really astonished because grandma had never removed this chain ever. It was given to her when she was born by her grandma. It was a small ray of hope. This was her contribution, an old woman's will to do the right thing.

The next day he visited the doctor and asked him if there was any hope of his survival. He assured him that there is an excellent chance as the dog is young and the cancer seems to have been caught early. He shared his idea to generate money. The doctor promised that he would not charge anything for his services and would try to get a discount on the treatment from the hospital. He then opened a YouTube account and uploaded all the videos of Bindi. He appealed for donations for his treatment and gave the number of the veterinary hospital. People donated generously and the good doctor informed us that Bindi's treatment could start from tomorrow.

The whole house echoed, "Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to Bindi!"

Somebody shouted, "Dance!" Bindi seemed to have caught the mood and perked up. He tried to dance on his hind legs. There was laughter and joy and hope was dancing everywhere.

Well, the treatment was difficult, surgery, radiation and chemo. Sometimes Bindi looked cheerful, sometimes lethargic and sometimes tired. Finally the treatment came to an end. Bindi has completely recovered. He is gaining his strength back and has started going for a walk with grandma.

Life is good. I learned a lesson. Never give up hope. Where there is hope, you will find a way!

Searching For Hope

By Rohan Sharma

"Everything that is done in this world is done by hope." – Martin Luther

This quote was up on my wall, so every day I woke up I would see it and remind myself that whatever the predicament, there was always a way out. I worked at a private school – Littlerock Academy, as a high school math teacher. On the weekends I volunteered at an orphanage with Abigail Hallows, my aunt. I suppose I had a soft spot for orphans, myself being one. Sadly, my father had lost his life in Iraq, and my mother had been fatally diagnosed with lung cancer. However, I think I did a pretty good job of overcoming these problems, if I do say so myself. Really, all my aunt did at the orphanage was manage food and donations, then babysit the toddlers, but since I was already a teacher, I got to help the "big kids" with their schooling. I always used to think of my aunt and I as a tag team. She would keep the little ones occupied, while I would take care of teaching duties for the day. I liked this schedule because my job continued after it was officially over.

It had always been my aunt and I against the world. The students in my class were amazing. There was Alex, who aspired to become a doctor, and Bridget, who wanted to become an engineer, and then there was Ian. His parents had been missing in action for four years in Afghanistan and had since been declared legally dead. He still believed they were alive, but there was no evidence, and so he was sent here. I felt bad for him. He didn't deserve to be here, but then again, no one here did. It wasn't their fault, but fate apparently had other plans for them. Their only respite was Friday. I would wake up in the morning, change, make myself a cup of coffee and an English muffin, and drive to Littlerock Academy. There I would watch TV for 30 minutes, until school started. After the day ended, I prepared for the next day, then picked up my aunt from her apartment and headed to the state orphanage to let the fun begin.

You see, the people running the facility didn't need all of the funds that were given to us. (Even though I did suspect that some of the money got "lost" before it made it to us). So, the directors paid us, and let the remaining 60% go to the kids to see what they would do. I always watched them and thought that they would probably have more control on what to do with money, since they did not have all the advantages of other kids. For example, last week they used it to buy a coffee maker for us, and then saved the rest of it. Oh, and there wasn't any "school" either on Fridays. So that may be a part of it for the students.

Anyway, when I pulled up near my aunt's house and honked my horn, a very strange thing happened. She didn't come out. Usually my aunt is ready, smiling and waiting outside, unless she was out for a walk or a doctor's appointment or something like that. Yes, that must be it. She simply had something to do and forgot to tell me about it. There was no other option. I headed down to the orphanage and it was great! They had thrown a splendid party and I returned home rather pleased.

I awoke the next day uneasy. My phone call to my aunt went to her voicemail as I headed to the orphanage. I asked around but no one had seen my aunt. I headed for the door, when a fellow teacher bumped into me around the corner. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Maddie," he started, "But ah, could you hand me my glasses?"

"Of course." I handed them to him and started to collect my things off the ground. I quickly realized that I didn't have my phone. I looked around for the professor.

"Mr. Brett!" I called. He turned around.

"Yes?" I think I dropped my phone, do you have it?"

"No, but I can help you look." After a couple of minutes of searching, I remembered I'd left it at my house.

After telling him that, I decided to ask him one more question. "Have you seen Ms. Hallows lately?"

He shook his head. "No, but I did see Andy leave earlier today – he seemed rather perplexed."

"Hmm. Thanks anyway." He nodded and left.

Andy was the director's name, and he wouldn't leave unless it was an emergency. As soon as I got home, I checked my phone. Out of charge. Dang it. I had a snack until my phone exploded with alerts. I almost spilled my grape juice. I scrolled through them and that's when my life shattered. There were seven missed phone calls from Andy, five from the hospital, and three "Family Emergency" alerts.

"Oh, No! No! No! No! No!" I rushed back to the car and drove straight to the hospital. Even before I got there, I knew what had happened. I had no patience for the person at the front desk. A small, still sane part of my brain told me that the person there was not responsible for anything as I demanded to see my aunt. Eventually I calmed down enough to verify that I was a family member, and not an ax-wielding psychopath. I rushed to the room, and Andy came outside to greet me. His eyes widened.

"Maddie, you're here! I am so…."

I interrupted him and went straight into the room. What I found there broke me. An unconscious Abigail Hallows, hooked up to a heart monitor.

Two days. That's how long I waited by her bedside. Andy left after the first couple of hours, I didn't blame him. The only food and drink I got were from staff members kind enough to get me something from the cafe. I wasn't religious, but I found myself praying to every god and patron saint I could think of. The doctor told me that she had a blood disorder, and had been treated as a child, but apparently that hadn't been enough. It had returned in full fury.

Thankfully, the academy understood and gave me three weeks' leave. I asked one of my friends to bring my laptop, toothbrush and clothes from home to the hospital. There was no way I was leaving until a definitive plan of action was reached. I intended to utilize all of my leave in finding anything, and I mean anything, that would help her. It couldn't happen again, not like this. I can't say I had the same feeling when my parents died, but I was nine at the time. Abigail was the last pillar that I had which was holding up my life. The nurses were friendly and got me coffee from time to time.

The doctor eventually told me that my aunt had a rare genetic blood disorder known as Detrosis. Ninety percent of my waking time was spent looking for anything on the internet that could help. I emailed doctors, friends, support groups and research committees. I even posted it on social media, no matter if it was a long shot. I knew the medical staff were being kind to me and offered hope, but the disease was fatal. There was no known treatment, far less a cure.

I didn't stop. I really couldn't. I owed her far too much. After my parents died, she had been the one to take me in, give me an education, and was essentially my entire family. Without her, I would be in a much different place right now. I closed my laptop and cradled my head in my hands. My mind went back to when I was 10. This was about eight months after I lost my mother, and I was losing touch with reality. I began to feel vengeful. Why me? I railed at the world. This was unreal. I couldn't have lost both my parents in the space of just two years. I wasn't supposed to lose them until I was well into my seventies. Fate had other plans.

From the outside, I was just your average fourth grader. From the inside, I was in a desolate nuclear wasteland. I started to imagine what life would be like if my father and mother were still here. My therapist said these conversations would help me. Instead, they made me miss them so much more. I started to see them everywhere. If I was at school, my mom would pick me up, instead of Abby. If I was doing my homework, my father would help me, not Abby. I started to think everyone was my enemy. I wouldn't trust my teachers. I wouldn't trust my friends. I certainly didn't trust my aunt. Once, she had

to leave for a nearby city for a couple of hours. I said I could take care of myself and make the right choices. The truth was that I wasn't going with her because I had unfinished business.

After she left, I got out her bottle of sleeping pills, and started the assault on my body. Just then, however, the phone rang. I just stared at it for a couple of minutes, I mean, of all of the ludicrous things that could have happened, the phone rang. I picked it up. "Hallows residence, who is this?" It was Abby.

"Hello Maddie, just checking up on things there, Is everything alright?" I was bewildered.

"Umm-yes, everything's fine." I was planning to finish the call quickly, then end it. But soon, we were talking and laughing about how things were and how school was and her job. Just before the phone call ended, I could've sworn I heard a hint of relief in her voice. After the phone call, I couldn't imagine what I had been about to do. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be here right now.

And yet, when she needed me most, I was not there for her.

A week passed. The prognosis became grimmer every hour. Hope was running out. I was plumbing the depths of despair when a nurse that I had come to know as Katelyn burst into the hospital room, grinning from ear to ear.

"Maddie! check this out!" She waved her phone around in my face. As soon as I got her to stop, I looked at what she had. Apparently, there was an herb in eastern Afghanistan that dramatically slowed down the progression for blood cancers. However, it was not available in the United States. At an emergency care conference, with her oncologist, I pleaded for her to undergo this experimental therapy but her medical team was understandably reluctant.

Her doctor gave her a week to live at maximum. So, this could be the miracle I'd been hoping for. But it seemed too good to be true. And in my experience, if it sounded too good to be true, it usually was. Besides, who would go all that way just for an herb? Risking their lives, just for a plant? No one. Absolutely no one. Katelyn realized that, and quickly tried to salvage the situation.

"We could try and see if anyone grows them here?" We both knew it was hopeless. I went back to the orphanage on Friday to lift my spirits, really just take my mind off things. I flew through the day, and I did notice something. Ian was really happy about something. I waved him over after class.

"Hello, Ms. Hallows!" I raised an eyebrow.

"You're pumped about something."

"Yes Ma'am." I waited. "They found my parents!"

"What? They did! Seriously?"

"Yep! They're arriving today evening!"

I was astounded. I'd come here to get my mind off of things, and, well, it certainly worked!

"Ian!" I called.

"Yes?"

"Did your old house sell yet?"

"No, why?"

"Let's prepare it for them!"

He looked at me. "How will we get there?"

"I'll take you there. Come on, Let's go!"

We got as many people as possible there and set everyone to different jobs around the house. Before leaving the orphanage, I had asked Andy to tell Ian's parents that he wasn't there, but he would be home in a couple of hours, and to go back home. That would be such an awesome surprise! And it was!

It was then that I realized that Ian's parents had heard of Abby's predicament in Afghanistan and had acquired the herb there before flying back! The surprise party had worked both ways. My joy knew no bounds and I raced back to the hospital with this potentially life-saving remedy.

Two days later, I was flabbergasted. My hopes were dashed. All her hair had fallen out. Her skin was parchment-like. She was nothing but a skeleton. Assured death within two days. I was speechless. I

couldn't believe it. What I had thought was a cure, had turned out to be venom. The end was nigh. She was to be death's bride, and I, the flower girl. I left the hospital and that night, had a good cry about what could never be.

I started preparing her last rites, and when I went to be there at her side when she left this world, I couldn't find her in her hospital bed. My heart sank. I had betrayed her one last time. I was inconsolable and burst into tears. Just then, I felt a familiar touch on my shoulders and heard a hoarse but unforgettable voice whisper my name. She was back from the dead. She was still a shadow of her previous self, but she was smiling and walking, which was infinitely better than yesterday. I was so surprised.

When I asked her about how she pulled through, she just said, "I was given a choice. Spend the rest of eternity wherever I wanted to be or be with you." She smiled. "I chose the better option!"

Hope

By Addie Stenzel

In the morning on a sunny day in Jacksonville, Florida a girl named Eloise is sitting at the table thinking about what her first day at her new school in fifth grade is going to be like.

"Mom?" Eloise asked.

"Yes Eloise?" Eloise's mom answered while flipping the French toast.

"What is this school going to be like without Sophie?" Eloise asked her mom while looking at her new backpack and at the empty living room. Sophie was Eloise's best friend since the first day of preschool. They had to say goodbye last year because Eloise's mom had found a better job in Florida.

Eloise's mom looked at her like she had said something weird. "It's not going to be that bad you know." Eloise's mom continued, "You might make some new friends! You just need to have hope and believe in yourself and then maybe, just maybe you'll make some friends!" Eloise's mom said while giving Eloise her favorite plate with the French toast on it and smiling.

"But I liked Sophie as my friend and what if there aren't any nice people at this school?" Eloise said nervously, "And I definitely do NOT want to be the only person sitting on the school bench at recess!" Eloise said with a sigh.

"Don't worry 'bout it too much ok? Just try to talk with some people and see if they could be good friends," Eloise's mom said with a smile. They were quiet for a second, and then Eloise's mom shouted, "Ok Eloise it's time to get ready to go to your first day at your new school!" while grabbing Eloise's backpack.

"Ok…" Eloise said with a moan. "But I have to get my introduction paper so that my new teacher won't get mad at me," Eloise said with little excitement.

"Oh c'mon, it's not like she'll be really mean." Eloise's mom continued, "Stop thinking it will be the end of the world."

They headed out the door with Eloise's new baby sister. Her new baby sister was about three months old and she was getting bigger and bigger every day. Her name is Grace. Eloise thought that Grace was getting all the attention and Eloise was getting really bored because her mom and dad weren't paying attention to her as much anymore.

"Is it gonna be a long drive to get to school?" Eloise asked politely.

"Not as long as it used to be but it's still gonna be a bit of a drive from here," her mom answered.

"Ok, what were you talking about with my teacher the other day?" Eloise asked while buckling her seatbelt.

"Oh, we were just talking about how you were going to get a buddy to show you around the school and help you get used to all of the things at the school, my guess is that they will probably sit with you at lunch and talk with you at recess," her mom answered, smiling at Eloise through the mirror in the car.

Eloise thought about that for a second. "I don't think I want to have someone be right next to me for the whole day." Eloise thought. "What if it's a boy! That would be really embarrassing around other people and what if my mom saw me with him! Now THAT would be embarrassing!" Eloise thought really hard about that. Now she was getting even more nervous!

When they got to the school Eloise saw the school through the car window, that the school was SO BIG! She wondered if the lunchroom was almost half the size of the building and if everyone in the school had to go to lunch at the same exact time.

“We’re here!” Eloise’s mom shouted. Eloise sighed as if she were about to do the worst thing she had ever done. “Oh honey, I can walk you in if you want?” Eloise’s mom said softly.

“No, no, no! That would be really embarrassing for me to be walking in with …” Eloise stopped for a second then continued, “Fine. You can walk me in, but this is the ONLY time you get to walk me in! The only reason I’m letting you do this is because then you can tell my teacher that I don’t want my buddy to be a boy I don’t need them to do EVERYTHING with me all day,” Eloise shouted while opening the car door.

“Ok but just know that I’m not forcing you to let me take you in,” Eloise’s mom explained.

“I know, I know. I just really want you to tell the teacher all of that,” Eloise said with an antsy voice while getting out of the car.

Eloise was really anxious about whether or not her buddy was going to be a boy. She also wondered if the teacher had already chosen a person and gave them lots of information about Eloise such as her birthday, middle name, last name, where she used to live, and so much more! Besides thinking of that, she was also thinking about the friend she left behind in Minnesota, Sophie. Just thinking about her name made her feel weird. She couldn’t stop wondering if Sophie had made a new best friend. “Don’t try to worry so much, Eloise,” she told herself over and over again.

“Welp, you ready to go in?” her mom asked nicely.

“We’ll go with, kind of ready,” Eloise answered softly.

“Well, we could just go in a little later if you want, school starts in about ten or so minutes,” Eloise’s mom said while looking Eloise in the eye and then back at the school.

“Oh, that’s a little while from now,” Eloise said like she was totally fine. “Since there is so much time until it starts do you think we could go and get something at the gas station right over there?”

“Well, there is some time, so I think we could squeeze in a little gas station break!” Eloise got a blue raspberry slushy and, of course her mom got decaf coffee, and her baby sister just got a little container of baby food, yuck!

After they were done at the gas station they went inside the school. Eloise’s mom and teacher, Mrs. Golden started talking about what Eloise had told her mom in the car. As they were talking she heard Mrs. Golden say, “Oh, well that’s perfect because I already chose a girl to be her buddy, everyone in the class helped decide who it would be and everyone thought that it should be a girl!” That’s just what Eloise wanted to hear.

Eloise still wondered who her buddy was going to be. I bet that whoever it is, they’re probably going to be really nice. When her mom and Mrs. Golden were talking, the school bell rang, “Time for school,” Eloise thought.

“Well Ms. Eloise why don’t we get to class, follow me I’ll even show you your buddy!” Mrs. Golden happily exclaimed.

“Bye, mom!” Eloise said with a sigh.

“Bye, Eloise!” her mom said back.

“Why don’t I show you your locker while we are still out of the classroom,” Mrs. Golden added.

“Ok that’s fine with me. I just have one question,” Eloise began. “Is my buddy going to be doing everything with me?” Eloise asked politely.

“Oh well that’s going to be up to you, you can just tell your buddy when you need some time with someone else or just by yourself,” Mrs. Golden explained.

Then Eloise remembered about the introduction paper, so after Mrs. Golden showed her the locker that she was going to have all year long. She unzipped her backpack and got her folder with so much glitter on it and opened the folder to find that her paper was not in there! Eloise stopped for a second and then started rummaging through her backpack but at the same time she was hoping that she didn’t forget

it in the car or at home. She eventually found it in her other folder with a palm tree on it. Palm trees were her favorite type of tree, or you could say they were her favorite plant.

Just as she opened her folder, she saw that someone was trying to open their locker, but it looked like the locker was stuck. Eloise was really good at opening lockers at her old school so she thought about whether she should try to help the girl trying to open her locker or not. She also noticed that her name was Lilly because there was a magnet on her locker with her name on it.

Eloise took a deep breath and then she started talking, “Try kicking it, it always works for me,” Eloise told Lilly.

“Oh, thanks,” Lilly said while kicking it.

Eloise saw that it worked and said, “Works every time!”

“Wow I should probably keep that tip, by the way, are you the new girl?” Lilly asked.

“Yeah, the name’s Eloise,” Eloise said, putting her hand out expecting her to shake it.

“I’m Lilly. Your new buddy,” Lilly said, shaking Eloise’s hand.

“We should probably get to class, the bell rang a couple minutes ago,” Eloise added while looking around trying to find the classroom.

“Yeah,” Lilly agreed. “Oh, and the classroom is this way, follow me,” Lilly explained.

“Ok, let’s go,” Eloise said excitedly.

Eloise was not expecting for this kind of girl to be her buddy; she also was wondering if Lilly already knew everything about her. She thought about what her mom said about having hope, “I think I am having some hope on this whole new school thing,” Eloise thought. But she still thought about Sophie.

“Well, do you have anything that you’re interested in besides palm trees?” Lilly asked.

“Number one, yes and number two, how did you even know that I like palm trees?” Eloise wondered.

“Well, I did see your folder with a palm tree on it and your mom told Mrs. Golden, who told me,” Lilly answered while leading the way to the classroom.

“Oh, I guess that makes sense,” Eloise added.

“I think this whole chat is good and all, but I really think we should get going to class!” Lilly quickly explained.

“Yeah, otherwise we will be in really bad trouble,” Eloise agreed.

The day went by fast and then in what felt like only 30 minutes, it was recess! Eloise only had to struggle sitting alone on the bench for 20 minutes because Lilly had to stay late in the classroom because she needed to catch up on something. Eloise did not know what Lilly was catching up on, but it didn’t really matter to her.

After ten minutes Lilly came out for recess. She saw that Eloise was just sitting on the bench, so she went over to Eloise to talk and maybe play on the playground with her for a little while.

“Why are you just sitting there, on the bench?” Lilly asked.

“Oh, I was just waiting for you to come back out,” Eloise answered in a ‘not so sure’ way.

“But you didn’t even know when I was going to come out for recess? What if I didn’t even get to come outside at all?” Lilly wondered.

“Well, to be honest I am really bad at making friends and I don’t really want to play so much right now,” Eloise answered with a sigh.

“Don’t worry about it, besides almost all of us struggled to make friends at first, So you’re not the only person who struggles at making friends,” Lilly said in a kind way.

The rest of the day went well and just like that, Eloise was laying in her bed, just about to go to sleep. The next day was similar, but the only difference was that Eloise got to invite Lilly and her family over for dinner. For dinner they had turkey that Eloise’s dad cooked in their new oven. Eloise got to know lots more about Lilly. That night they tried to convince their parents to let them have a sleepover. Their

parents said yes, but they were going to have the sleepover on the weekend instead of that night, which Eloise understood because they just met yesterday.

The next day Eloise was really excited for school. Her mom even wondered if there was going to be a party or something at school because Eloise was never this excited for school.

“Mom?” Eloise asked.

“Yes, Eloise?” her mom answered.

“When does school start again?” Eloise wondered.

“Oh yeah, school. Umm. . . I think it starts at 8:10,” her mom answered.

“Oh, so we still have enough time to finish breakfast,” Eloise added.

“Yes, we might even have enough time to stop at the gas station right next to school,” Eloise’s mom said happily.

“Yay, I think I want to get a blue raspberry slushie again!” Eloise said excitedly.

The next day, Eloise was walking very confidently into school when she saw someone standing, looking straight at her. At first Eloise was really confused.

“Uhh. . .hello?” Eloise said, really confused.

“Hi, Eloise,” the girl said. “I’d like to see you at recess, meet me by the tree behind the playground,” she said with a hair flip.

“Umm. . .how do you know my name?” Eloise thought about what she just said and realized that the teacher probably told everyone in the class, which means that she was probably in her class.

“Well, the teacher told the whole class, obviously!” the girl teased.

“Well, ok I guess I’ll see you at recess?” Eloise said, trying to go through the door.

“Umm, not so fast. Just to be clear, you absolutely can NOT bring Lilly!” The girl said while holding the door so Eloise couldn’t get in.

“Uhh, sure I guess?” Eloise said, still trying to get through the door. The girl finally let her go through. After that happened, Eloise immediately told Lilly. Lilly told Eloise that the girl she talked to was one of the biggest school bullies and that Eloise should stay away from her. After hearing that, Eloise was really nervous and wondered what all the girl was going to do at recess.

“I just have one question, is she in our class?” Eloise asked, seeming like ‘yes’ was going to be the obvious answer.

“Well of course she is in our class, how do you suppose that she knows your name?” Lilly explained.

“That’s true, I guess I’m still pretty tired,” Eloise added.

The day was not really going by fast but it was already recess time when Eloise was done with her math sheet.

“Should I go and meet her behind the tree, Lilly?” Eloise asked, knowing that Lilly was going to say ‘no’.

“Who? Isabella?” Lilly asked.

“Oh, that’s her name?” Eloise continued, “Well, should I?” Eloise asked really confused why Lilly didn’t answer right away.

“Well obviously not, why would you even ask, you know that I’m going to say ‘no’. Unless you’re going to take me with you, then I’m not going to let you go,” Lilly answered with that look your mom gives when she gets mad at you mixed with a confused face.

“Well, Isabella told me that you can’t come with me when we meet up,” Eloise added.

“Fine. If you really want to go and let her bully you then just be my guest and go,” Lilly warned.

“Ok, I’ll go behind the tree and then I will meet back up with you in the middle of the black top,” Eloise said with a smile.

“Ok, but if anything happens, just tell me and I’ll try to help you tell someone,” Lilly agreed.

"'K see you in the middle of the parking lot," Eloise said getting ready to go outside. Isabella greeted Eloise when she got behind the tree. Eloise looked at Isabella, nervously.

"So, why did you want me to meet up back here, with you?" Eloise wondered, starting a whole conversation.

"You don't think that we are going to do anything good do ya?" Isabella giggled, glancing at her two 'friends' behind her. Then continued, "Because if so, you are way off track on this!"

"Wait what?!" Eloise shouted, starting to back up from Isabella.

"Well, we were wondering if you would like us to push you down the hill that none of us are supposed to go down?" Isabella asked with an evil laugh.

"Well obviously not!" Eloise answered, starting to run. Isabella was starting to follow Eloise but she couldn't keep up. Eloise really needed to stop and catch her breath, but she knew that one stop for a breath was one big push down the hill.

Eloise got to a teacher and then tried to tell the teacher what all was going on to her but then, Isabella came right up beside her and said, "Don't listen to her! She was trying to go down the hill and I was trying to tell her that she can't go down the hill and I had to chase her all the way over here so that I could tell you!" She said this in a very convincing way, that she literally convinced the teacher.

"Eloise! I know that you are new to this school, but we do NOT accept that!" The teacher continued, "I mean, just listen to Isabella! She has been here long enough to know that we are not supposed to go down that hill!" The teacher yelled right into Eloise's face.

Lilly had just noticed that Eloise was getting yelled at and she also saw Isabella smirking right at Eloise's face. Lilly knew that something like this was going to happen to Eloise, she knew that Isabella was no good at all!

"Hey? What's going on over here?" Lilly asked, running over to see what happened.

"Oh Lilly! You were supposed to play with Eloise and make sure she does not do anything wrong! We already talked about this!" The teacher yelled at Lilly.

"I promise, I did not do anything that Isabella just said!" Eloise cried out.

"ELOISE THAT'S ENOUGH!" The teacher yelled back at her. "That is something we don't tolerate at this school!" The teacher said, looking at Isabella, with a smirk, and Eloise, with a tear dripping down her cheek.

"But. . . I promise, I did not do anything!" Eloise said with another tear, dripping down her face.

"ELOISE! Go sit down on the bench, I have heard enough from you!" The teacher directed, pointing at the bench. Eloise started running towards the bench, sobbing while Lilly was still looking at them in shock.

"Ugh. What a cry baby," Isabella added in a sassy way.

"Hey! Don't call her that!" Lilly shouted at Isabella.

"Whatever. Like YOU'RE going to do anything about it," Isabella said, flipping her hair and walking away.

Lilly thought for a moment, "I think I can do something about it!" Lilly thought in a positive way. Wait, how am I going to do that and what am I going to do? Lilly thought. I'll….hmm….maybe….I'll take a video of her bullying Eloise and I will also record her lying to the teacher! Lilly thought, like she was a superhero or something.

After recess Lilly told Eloise her plan, so the next day at recess Eloise went over to Isabella to purposely get bullied so that Lilly could take the video of her doing it. Of course, Eloise felt hurt when Isabella bullied her but she still knew that Lilly was going to help her get through this and hopefully Isabella would learn her lesson and never do anything like this again.

"Did you get the video, Lilly?" Eloise asked.

“Of course, I will show Mrs. Golden after school. By the way, make sure to tell your mom what was happening to you and Isabella so that she also knows what is happening at school,” Lilly added.

“Ok, I’ll make sure to do that,” Eloise said with a smile on her face.

When Eloise got home she told her mom what was happening and she also told her that she and Lilly made a plan to tell the teacher and then show the video that they had made with Isabella bullying Eloise.

“Are you 100 percent sure that you don’t need me to tell the teacher with you?” Eloise’s mom asked her.

“I am sure. Me and Lilly already have that down, Lilly was going to tell the teacher at the end of the day,” Eloise said, while setting the table.

Eloise and Lilly had figured it all out. Isabella had to sit with the teacher during recess for about three days and then eventually she apologized. When the school year was over, Eloise’s mom said that they were going to take a trip up north somewhere. Eloise got all perked up when she heard that and she also had asked her mom if she could bring someone with her, and her mom said, yes. Eloise knew who to bring with her and she also was very excited to see both of her friends meet each other. Once they got there, Eloise introduced the girls to each other, and just like that, they were all best friends.

Finding Hope

By Caleb Stibbe

Hello, my name is Kailey. Kailey the cat. I used to have the perfect life but the past few weeks it has not gone too well for me. My owner, Sara, lost her job after the company she worked at went bankrupt. She lost everything. After that her husband left her and she had to move to a homeless shelter. The homeless shelter did not allow pets of any kind, so she had to give me up and that is how I ended up here at the shelter.

At the shelter I met Max, a calico cat, and he became my closest friend. Max said to me, “Well at least you had a home. I never had that chance.”

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“I was born on the street and raised on the street. I wish it stayed that way but this person wearing a blue uniform found me and took me here.”

“That sounds horrible. I could never imagine living in those filthy streets and eating trash.” I was listening to my good friend, Max, as he shared his sad story.

“Hey, it was not as bad as I made it sound. I got by.”

Max looked sad and I knew I might have hurt his feelings. “Sorry for offending you but that just doesn’t sound like the life I would want for myself.”

He answered, “Apology accepted. Earlier you asked if you were going to die. Why did you ask that?”

“This isn’t one of those animal shelters where if you don’t get adopted within a certain time frame you will get put down?” I asked.

“Oh, you must not have gotten the memo. This is not a kill shelter. You can stay as long as you need to if you don’t cause trouble,” my friend Maxed shared.

“So I don’t have to die?” I replied.

“No, you don’t,” my good friend Max said.

“Oh thank heaven!” I shouted. “So now what do we do?”

“Don’t worry. Someone will find you cute and will adopt you,” Max assured me.

“When might that be?” I replied.

“I don’t have any idea. I have been here for over three years,’’ my friend Max said.

“Three years?! I’m going to be here forever!” I shouted.

“Don’t worry,” Max said. “The people at the shelter will take care of you. They have been very good to me. They feed you, bathe you and play with you.”

“Well, I guess that is not so bad,” I replied.

Then out of nowhere, this lady came into the room and picked both of us up and took us into a different room. She lowered us into a bathtub with nice warm water. It felt good on my fur.

My friend Max purred from across the bathtub, “See this place is not so bad.”

After our baths, we were taken to the playground area in the back of the shelter. It had a racetrack for us to run on and a scratching post for Max and me to scratch and climb on. We started running on the racetrack but then out of nowhere these women came and took us inside.

Max said, “They’re here to take us to a room and play with some humans who volunteer at the shelter.”

There were three of them and they seemed nice. They played with us and gave us toys. It was fun. Later in the day Max explained that maybe one of the volunteers might adopt us but he said not to get my hopes too high.

The day finally came when many people came to the shelter to look around for a pet to adopt.

“Like I said, don’t get your hopes up too high,” my friend Max said. “We would need to look very cute for us to have a chance.”

I told him to have hope and to stay vigilant for people that may want to adopt us. He just gave me a very disappointed look and said, “You just don’t understand, do you?”

I was hurt by his words, but I did not want to make him even more mad than he already was. Then this person came in. It was a woman with brown hair wearing a green vest and orange sweatpants. At first I did not know who this woman was but when she came closer I realized who it was. It was my old owner, Sara.

She looked way better than she did when she gave me up. Max and I could see the smile on her face when she saw us. She played with us, cuddled with us and took us outside to play with the scratching post. After that she said that she was going to take both of us back with her to her new home. I was so happy to see joy on Max’s face for what looked like the first time in years.

He said, “I can’t believe it! After so long I’m finally going to have a family!”

I purred and replied, “I’m so happy for you.”

After getting all the paperwork taken care of, Sara took Max and me to the new place where she lived. The place was nice. Max was happy with his new home. I was just glad to have a new life outside the shelter back with Sara and my new friend, Max. We were both going to be together, and we were both going to have a real home again with a loving owner.

“Should we go for a walk in the backyard?” Max asked.

I smiled and walked alongside him. Finding our way through a hard life takes hope. We were so glad that we found hope that day.

Falling Ashes

By Kiana Waasdorp

Faith ran through the wood, her small claws gliding easily over the dried dirt. She turned her small, lean head. Cyrus chased her, his sharp claws leaving creases in the hardened soil. Plants whistled in the gentle breeze. His eyes were shining with determination, though his body was slowing.

"Bet you can't catch me!" she shouted.

He grumbled something to himself, watching in despair as shadows blended into her dark, shimmering speckled scales. Her claws skidded to a stop as she turned her body, her wings majestically flowing. He'd stopped too and was smiling at her while she snuggled in the mossy undergrowth. The sun was setting quickly, revealing sparkling stars like snow. Faith gasped.

"You look beautiful," she breathed. The golden rays were reflecting off his blue-and-green scales, making him shimmer like an emerald. Without a second thought, she bounced out into the sunlight, watching as the last bits of golden light flickered like flames on her purple-and-indigo speckled scales.

"Like flames and falling ashes," said Apollo in his odd accent. His warm green eyes met Faith's bright blue ones. Daisy bounded up behind him, flinging her small white-and-yellow wings around her friends best she could. Cyrus giggled, grabbing her right wing, yanking it, and making her tumble over into the silver starlight.

"Hey!" she protested, leaping on his back. Leaning all her weight on his neck, she made Cyrus topple over. He yelped and while lying on the ground, shoved her off with his feet. Apollo leapt at Faith, knocking her over. She squeaked and they all laughed.

"We should probably head back," Cyrus mumbled. Apollo nodded, but Faith wanted to stay out in the starlight a bit longer. With a sigh, Cyrus agreed.

Faith climbed up high into a tree, with Cyrus and Apollo talking on the lower branches. Daisy had made a makeshift hammock, and being the youngest, was asleep in moments. She glanced into the cool night air, taking deep breathes. Faith gagged as a sharp scent filled her nose and lungs.

Smoke. Somewhere there was a fire. She whipped around, nearly falling off, and stared in horror in the direction of the village as smoke poured out. Bright golden light and flames followed.

"Fire!" she screeched. Daisy woke up with a start while Cyrus and Apollo immediately scaled the thick trunk to look.

"No!" Apollo shouted. He flew off, almost snapping the branch from his heavy take-off, and bolted towards the village. Daisy followed without a second thought, but Faith dove off the edge to run through the forest.

"Where are you going?!" Cyrus shouted. She didn't answer, Faith just kept running. Gentle sprinkling rain started pelting her face, splashing droplets of water in her snout and eyes. As she neared the village, Faith noticed hundreds of dragons pouring out into the sky, all fleeing. She flew into the air, moonlight reflecting off her purple scales. She seemed to be glowing silver.

"Follow me!" Faith screeched, Cyrus at her side. Without hesitation or even questions they followed, watching closely at her intercut way of weaving through trees, trying their hardest to replicate it.

Faith flew them into a nearby field while Cyrus went back to direct them. It was now pouring rain and cold, sharp winds cut through leaves. The fire had gone out, according to Daisy and Apollo. They'd made it back safely, but both were clearly shaken.

The group found a place in the soft mud and wet, sloppy grass to sleep, while other dragons piled on

top of each other to keep warm in the pouring rain. Faith sighed, terror filling her mind as she drifted into sleep. Her last thought before losing consciousness was “Is the kingdom destroyed?”

Faith woke up to Cyrus’s sharp claws shaking her dark, speckled wings. The sun was barely rising, while most dragons were still asleep.

“I’m up,” she grumbled. Daisy giggled.

“We’re going to go see what’s left of the kingdom. Want to come?”

The truth was, Faith really didn’t want to come. She sighed and nodded, though a twisting knot of dread in her stomach brought back all her terrified thoughts from the night before. The group set off, landing in a soft patch of moss in the forest.

“Woah!” Daisy gasped, spreading her small wings. Faith looked down and noticed herself along with the other dragonets glowing like gems. Daisy had basically turned to gold, while Faith shimmered like a sapphire. Apollo flared his shining teal wings, replicating Daisy, watching as he and Cyrus glowed like emeralds. The dragonets admired each other for a moment before continuing their journey.

“Guys, we’re almost there!” Daisy said as Apollo and Cyrus stopped. A hint of terror squeaked in her voice. They pushed on and finally came to the tangled entrance. The small flowers and vines were scorched around the edges. As Faith walked through the entrance, she gasped.

The entire village looked like it’d been inlaid with silver. The ashes had all frozen, creating extra durability and shined gorgeously.

“The rain must’ve made the ash mush, and the wind froze it in place,” Apollo said matter-of-factly. As the dragonets explored, they found thick layers of ash covering the kingdom. A thought hit Faith, and she felt a small flicker of hope in her chest. She was safe. Her friends were safe. Her kingdom was safe. Everything will be okay.

Extra Info: When Faith and Cyrus grew up, they had two dragonets named Ash, who is a boy, and Aster, who is a girl. Ashes are a sign of hope and love. Aster flowers along with daisies and represent hope. Europeans consider gems as a symbol of hope, which is why the dragonets glow like gems during the sunrise. As for Daisy, who is said to look like gold, yellow is a symbol of happiness, hope and more.

The Last Summer

By Sophia Williams

I always remember the last Thursday in May as hands-down the best day of every year. It was the last day of school. Beginning the day after Labor Day every year, I started looking forward to that special day in May.

In hindsight, I didn't like school because I was bullied. No one saw it, of course, and none of my teachers or peers stood up for me. I sat alone every day at lunch, rotting in my own self-inflicted silence.

But, on that blessed May 28, the final bell rang, meaning I wouldn't have to enter the school for three whole months. Tendrils of freedom intertwined with the summer breeze and carried me home.

Every summer, the day after school got out, my parents drove me to my grandparents' house in Lone Oak, Tennessee. Who knew what they did when I was gone, but who cared? I was at the place I belonged for the entire summer. A place where no one would call me a fat teacher's pet, or a girl.

My name is Courtney, after my grandfather, Franklin Courtney Walter. I was bullied for having a so-called girls' name. But I don't mind anymore because my grandfather was such a good man.

I remember one summer with him in particular like it was yesterday. On May 29, we hopped in our brand new sports car and took off. I felt like I was sitting in a pot filled with boiling bathwater the whole way there. I couldn't sit still. I could barely sit at all! I was so excited to see my grandparents! Sure, I would be there until Labor Day, but you could never get started too early! Not in my book, at least.

In typical little boy fashion, I sat, alert like a watchdog, staring out the window. I acknowledged every tree and every open field. It was a lot warmer than your average May. I was perspiring profusely, even though the windows were down. Granted, I was insanely excited.

"Easy there, Grasshopper!" my father remarked on multiple occasions. I heard him, of course, but I didn't pay attention.

Starting at about 1 p.m., I tracked our route meticulously. I knew Mom and Dad had driven this road many times, but I didn't want any delays. Eventually, my frenzied state must have used up the last of my energy because I fell asleep. I jolted awake hours later with the honk of a truck. It wasn't your average Ford truck, it was a semi. There were a lot of semis wandering around Lone Oak. I looked to the road sign directly to the right and I felt my stomach give a little flutter. Lone Oak: 38 miles.

Traveling at our rate, hypothetically 60 miles per hour, we would reach Lone Oak in 38 minutes. I tracked us diligently, with renewed energy, until finally, I saw the sign that said, Welcome to Lone Oak!

I was so incredibly exhilarated about the official beginning of the summer. I unbuckled my seatbelt a good block and a half away from their bright white little house. As soon as the car was parked, I began pulling violently on the door's lock.

"Courtney Drew Walter," scolded my mother. "You'd think we were taking you to Disney World or something!"

I didn't even like Disney. Honestly, I'd be pretty depressed if we turned up there. My ten-year-old self took this as a wake-up call to get more excited. "Lemme out! Lemme out! Lemme out!" I continued to struggle with the door. When at last it unlocked, I darted out of there faster than lightning. My legs were both asleep and my feet were tingling painfully, but I didn't care. With every step, feeling returned to them, and the familiar feeling of cement underfoot greeted me.

The heat was stifling. It was about four o'clock and the sun was still right above us. It cast a thick, hazy golden light similar to that of late August. Cicadas were already singing their melancholy song in the trees above us. Ants marched dutifully underfoot, and at last, I reached the door.

I knocked, a special combination of long and short knocks, to signal that I was there. Grandpa and Grandma had been waiting for me. They had watched me run up their driveway. The door opened and I saw my tall, lanky, white-haired grandmother and my short, stout, cross-looking grandfather.

For a second, I felt like I shouldn't be there. I wanted to run. I felt like an impostor. But that all faded away when I was enveloped in their tight embraces. I was sweating bullets solely from the dash up the driveway, but at that point, I wanted nothing less.

My grandmother took my shoulders in her hands and pushed me away from her to eye me up and down. "My goodness, you've grown, Courtney!" she remarked, mock-disbelief etched into her voice. "You're just about catching up to Grandpa and me, huh?"

This was her ritual. Every single time she laid her eyes on me, she'd say I'd grown. In reality, I was short and pudgy like Grandpa, but I still giggled every time.

My parents spent the first two weeks of summer at my grandparents' house with me; then, finally, they left. Don't get me wrong, I love them and all, but I wanted my grandparents to myself for the summer.

Every morning, my grandpa would head to the back booth in the local cafe to meet with some of his friends. They would talk and laugh and have a good old time. On Fridays, I would get to go with him. I would use water to slick my hair back so I looked like Ronald Wesson, one of my grandpa's friends. He would jokingly thank me for showing up to "keep the discussion PG."

I loved Ron. He always joked around with me and acted like I was one of his old buddies. He passed away before the summer ended.

On the days I didn't go to the cafe, I stayed home with Grandma. We baked together, we read books, we watered the garden, we canned, we played card games, we did everything! By the time Grandpa got home, usually around 10 o'clock, we would joke that we had already done a "whole days' worth of doings."

Sunday mornings we'd get up with the rooster's crow and tidy ourselves up for church. The church was just down the road from us. Back home I was Presbyterian, but in Tennessee, I was Baptist. I loved the preacher dearly. Michael Watson was his name. That man got me to believe in God hard-core. He could write and he could preach something fierce. His intricately crafted sermons made me an adequate young man.

As much as I loved all of that – the car ride there, the Friday mornings with Grandpa, other mornings with Grandma, the sermons – my favorite part was by far the drives.

Grandpa Frank would take me out on drives every so often. Grandma Louise would always get so upset when we left because she knew full well Grandpa couldn't drive. He would run a stop sign and just chuckle as an apology. He took corners way too fast, and oftentimes I prayed to make it back home in one piece. Alas, I always did. He would wink at me and state, "Courtney boy, you gotta live while you're a'living."

This specific summer was one of the hottest on record. Temperatures sashayed lazily into the upper nineties and above by early June, and they dwelled there for the duration of the summer.

I remember one hot day in particular. It was 9 a.m. and Grandpa was already back from the cafe. It was too hot for him and his buddies there with the stoves going and all. It was 95 degrees by 10 a.m. and 104 by noon. The heat was stifling and I honest-to-God thought that I'd perish of oxygen deprivation before I made it through the night.

Grandma Louise was inside making a salad out of withered greens from her garden. Grandpa and I were outside, slumped down in whatever shade we could find at noon on any given summer day.

"Say, Courtney," he asked brusquely, his eyes twinkling merrily, "whaddya say we take this here car out for a spin?"

The car was a '54 Mustang, blood red and nearly in mint condition. I nodded vigorously and we took off. I hung my head out the window, the mix of hot air and the car's speed making me nauseous. Still,

though, the little bit of breeze felt insanely refreshing, stifling as it was. We drove haughtily along all of the small town's residential streets. I flashed a cheeky smile at Valerie Jane Maddison, who was slumped limply under an apple tree. I hoped an apple would come down and conk her on the head. Maybe she'd have some sense that way, I thought. That nasty devil must've been planting seeds in my head again.

Through the humidity, thunder clapped and lightning flashed fleetingly above us. Nourishing rain poured down. The whole town must have been outside getting drenched. Grandpa sped us home at warp speed and, what do you know, Grandma Louise was waiting for us.

"Frank Walter!" she barked. "What do you think you're doing, driving Courtney around in the rain! He could have gotten sick, not to mention killed!" She shook me by my shoulders before asking, "Talk some sense into that grandfather of yours next time, you hear me?"

I nodded innocently, knowing darn well I wouldn't. That was the end of August. Soon, Labor Day would come and I was to return home to school, bullies, and our Presbyterian church. Even to this day, I remember that summer vividly as the best of my life. That was the last summer my grandparents spent on this Earth and they chose to spend it with me. I would redo my whole life, all the bad parts included, just to see them again. A summer just hasn't been a summer since they've been gone.

When I was young, I married a woman named Patricia and that never worked out. When I was older, I remarried and Penny and I had a son, Joshua. Now Joshua has a little girl, Drew Hope Walter. Since Penny is gone, Joshua decided to send Drew to stay with me for the summer. I'm ready for her.

I want to give her the same childhood I had. I'll take her to meet my friends, drive her around in my putsy old convertible, do everything I did so many years ago. I waited for her on my doorstep all day long. I opened the door, and before I could say anything, she started talking. She's like her dad that way.

"Hi, Grandpa! I'm so excited to spend the summer here! Lone Oaks is such a quaint town, isn't it?"

She reminds me of… *me*.

Paid in Full

By Sophia Williams

A sense of doom filled the city. Everyone was uneasy, though they didn't know why. They all had a gut feeling, a strange intuition that something was going to happen. But nobody knew what.

A crowd had gathered in the old, beaten street, staring up at the sky, which was dimming rapidly and becoming a strange brown color. Clouds began to consume the light and, at last, a hazy, golden sunbeam was all that was left. And even that disappeared.

Hopeful farmers gathered together in the streets and prayed for rain to assist the harvest. Housewives busied themselves in their homes, baking bread with the few ingredients they still had. But not even mundane tasks like this could pry their minds from the tension growing among them.

The city was eerily quiet. No children were heard frolicking in the streets. You couldn't hear men shouting to each other outside. No housewives spoke through windows to each other.

The entire city was gathered in the main courtyard, kneeling on the dusty cobblestone streets, praying passionately for rain. Lightning struck menacingly, setting many things on fire. Rain taunted them but never came. Wind whipped fiercely throughout the city.

Farmers could no longer provide food for their livestock, who were dying of malnutrition. People were running out of wine, meat and other food to eat. They had very limited amounts of anything to make bread with. Poor families were slowly starving to death. Children were becoming sick due to dehydration or consuming filthy water. And to add to all of this, the terrible feeling and gray skies lasted for days. And on the sixth day of uneasiness and despair, the citizens, who were still praying diligently, heard a sound.

Metal and the footsteps of thousands of men. The army was approaching to finally commit their hostile takeover and potential mass homicide. They planned to set up camp amid the city to drive the citizens into a state of constant fear.

Children had been playing silently by the sea and when they saw the great army approaching, they ran home fearfully. Families crowded into their minuscule homes, terrified.

The army dwelled among the people for four days. During those four days, the sky darkened even more. Darker than the night sky. Darker than anything anyone knew. People starved to death and became sick and dehydrated due to a lack of food and water. No citizen dared to set foot outside of their homes.

At the end of those four days, news spread from the seaside. The citizens who lived nearest the sea saw the boat approaching. They opened their windows and spoke quietly to the citizens beside them. News spread like wildfire. The citizens, starved and dehydrated, stepped outside, wary of attack, yet still desperate. Children, no longer any fraction of themselves, idled tamely and lethargically behind the adults. A bell rang in the city, echoing against the silence. The boat, as soon as it neared the shore, stopped and three men jumped out.

The only child who had any part of himself left was teenage Bartholemew. He wove in and out of the crowd with remarkable speed for the circumstances.

The army noticed that the citizens of the city were losing their fear. They planned an attack. The three men jumped out of the boat and began speaking to the citizens in their native tongue. "We come from Jerusalem, the City of God. Hallelujah! Sing great praises unto the Lord, the Rock of our Salvation. He was crucified and after three days, rose again from the dead! Your sins are forgiven! Your debt is no longer!" The citizens fell on their knees in front of the men.

“Please!” shouted Bartholomew. “You know the Lord. Ask him to bring us rain.”

The shortest of the three men held his hands out as if preparing to embrace the mass of people. “Children of the Heavenly Father! Bow your heads and pray! Rain will come! Your famine shall cease! Just believe, O City. Believe!”

The people bowed their heads devotedly for the shortest fraction of a second, and rain came, drenching everything.

Women and children raised their faces to the now somehow bright, crying, and swallowed as much water as they could. Then, when they could drink no more, they stood and danced. Farmers raised their praises along with the women, children, and the three men from afar. When the people had been dancing for some time, they became famished.

The prophets told them to go to the seas with a net to catch fish. The citizens did as they were told and returned to their city with nets full of fish. Everyone ate and was satisfied. Still, the rain fell, nourishing everything and everyone it touched. The people elevated their praise.

The moment the prophets left, the people ran on to the city nearest them to share the good news. “Your sins are forgiven! Your debts have been paid in full!”

And this time, as the cities danced together, they ran off in separate directions to evangelize to the surrounding cities and kingdoms.

Nonfiction

Non-Fiction (True/Factual):

Personal narrative: A true story that describes a real event or experiences in the author's life.

Information: Factual writing to convey knowledge of a topic and research findings.

Essay/Opinion: A feeling or thought you have about a subject or topic, supported by research.

Hope for Teachers

By Chloe Brown

Dear President Joe Biden,

Hi. My name is Chloe. I am 10 years old. I am in fourth grade. I was wondering if you can raise the pay for teachers. I think you should raise their pay because if we didn't have teachers, we would have no clue how to do stuff. I would not know how to write this letter to you. People would not have jobs to get paid. I think teachers should have one of the highest paid jobs.

I'm not just doing this because my mom and dad are teachers. I'm doing this because everyone deserves it. That goes for every teacher. Elementary, middle school, high school and college. But that is what I think. I think their pay should be raised. I am sorry if I hurt your feelings in this letter. I don't think I have hurt your feelings.

How are you? I hope you are doing good. I am doing good. In math in school we are learning line plots. I also play basketball. I am really tall, that's why. Our last basketball game was last Saturday, the 19th.

In my basketball tournaments we got medals for third place, third place again and second place. We only play in tournaments.

Chloe

P.S. Please write back.

There is a Light at the End of the Tunnel

By Rishabh Jain

Hope is a feeling of intense plea, the true desire for something to happen. Hope is a prayer! It's proven in all religions, that we hope God will keep us safe. Hope can be used anywhere and everywhere. It is a universal prayer.

Hope can really describe my ongoing 2021–2022 VEX IQ robotics season. My first qualifier was in Kimball, Minnesota. As our team made way through first round, I felt extremely excited. The tournament was really competitive. Unfortunately, our tournament rounds did not go well. We did not score well. If we were better, we could have won the qualifier and gone to State, but we did not. It seemed that everything was lost. Later our coach told us that there was another opportunity to go to the state tournament. State invited the top 50 teams, we ranked 32nd and so, we got invited. Our wish had come true! But there was still more to hope for and a lot of hard work to do.

As we went to our first match at the state level, I felt elated. Energy fizzed like soda inside me. Ding-ding! The buzzer signaled us to begin the round. I fumbled with the keys on my controller to drive the robot in the right direction. I scooped two balls in my feeder and then lined the robot with the basket. The basket was our main target – the very key to how our robot functioned. I pressed the button to launch and oops… the balls missed the basket and landed in the low goal which gave us four points. A ring-a-ling indicated we had to switch drivers. I handed the controller to my teammate who was the best driver on our team. Nine out of ten times he launched the balls in the basket. We ended up only scoring 27 points with our alliance team. We were very upset with our low score. As a team we discussed how we could do better. We hoped for the best in the next round.

It was time for our next round. The timer started and I was trying to put the balls in the basket. I was able to put in one ball. The remote was then passed to my partner, our best player. He put three balls in the basket. Time was up and "Voila!" we scored 66 points together with our alliance team. That score moved us from rank 32 to rank 3 and made us eligible to participate in the elimination round.

In the elimination round we had to beat a score of 62 points. We had a lot of mixed feelings at this point. It was our turn and yippee, we made a commendable score of 78 points. We basked in our glory. Now we had to wait to see if we qualified for the world competition. Two more teams had to play and had to beat our score. They did well and scored 80 points. At this point we were not sure if we qualified for the world tournament. After so much hard work and with hope in our minds we waited for the announcement. Our team won second place in the state tournament and the most awaited news, "We received our invite to participate in the world tournament in Dallas, Texas."

Our coach informed us that we were the first elementary team in the robotics history of Mankato, Minnesota to qualify for the world competition. All of us felt exhilarated at the end of the day and started planning our trip to Texas.

However, a day later we were informed of some unpleasant news. Due to policy related issues, Coach told us that we could not proceed to the next competition. I felt extremely distraught and sad. My emotions were wrecked because of this policy. But we did not lose hope. Our parents decided to talk to the CEO to see if any amendments could be made to the policy. We all hoped that we could go. The feeling of hope, a prayer, a wish and a twist of fate! The final result was on our side. We were allowed to attend Worlds. Yes! Hope had come our way. We have begun preparing for our next journey and hopefully we will shine there too.

My narrative has described hope in the best possible way. Hope is always the last chance. Celebrate hope, my dear friends!

Dreaming to Become an Artist

By Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi

Have you ever dreamed about accomplishing something and seeing yourself on the right track as you get into it? That is what happened and is still happening to me. My name is Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi. I am going to tell you how I got into art.

It started in second grade close to the end of the year. In art class, I was sitting next to my best friend Maya. She was really good at art and had classes with a professional artist every once in a while. I was not good at art then, but I wanted and hoped to be better at it and maybe get better than Maya.

I forgot my goal until the summer when my brother Amati encouraged me. Ever since then I started practicing. I didn't know how to get an art teacher, so I taught myself. When I was satisfied with my art creations, I started showing my family and they complimented me. Their compliments built my confidence in my art. On the first day of third grade, I was pretty sure I had gotten better than Maya, so I drew a picture and showed it to my class. Everyone liked my drawing, even Maya.

To conclude, my story first started when I was hoping I could become a better artist, and in the end, I partly achieved my dream since I still have a long way to go. Fortunately, by practicing and keeping my confidence and high expectations, I can tell my big hopes are to come!

Hope is Why

By Jaxson Kolstad

How's the weather? it must be nice, if I could feel it. The bunches of clouds making characters we haven't even heard of. The nice green grass on our feet as we run along the lines of the old willow tree. It has always been there for us, whenever we fought you could find the other at the tree, swinging in the tire swing that's now barely hanging on. The hammock that fits two but now is an old rag swinging in the wind. The tree has been there for years waiting for a speck of hope to last longer for you.

The misty color in your eyes is shaped like the clouds above. Why? Why must you leave? It's been so lonely without you. I miss the days that we ran in the forest above. Sat by the lake, playing in the sand and waiting for tiny little fish to come and bite our toes. We would always walk down the creak of the lake in our jean shorts, holding them extra high so they didn't get wet the deeper we went.

I wish on the stars for you to be back, each and every shooting star has been wished on countless times. Hoping and waiting for the day you come back. I hate this feeling now; you always made all my pain go away. I can't stand you being gone. I want my old self back.

Let's Hope We Can End Racism One Day

By Amna Syeda

I hope racism can end because I think people should be free and have equal rights. I also hope racism can end so everyone is treated fairly, and people will treat people of color the same way as white people.

The history is full of stories of racism and discrimination faced by people of color. The Tuskegee Study is one big example. Also, Martin Luther King, Jr. experienced a segregated world and stood up for the rights of people of color. He went to jail for speaking the truth and standing up for equality.

People of color are treated unfairly. They are unable to access standard healthcare, education and safe living. Racism has negative effects on a person's mental and physical health. Those who experience racism are under constant stress and cannot function properly. Due to this reason, they cannot contribute to the society. So, it is important to end racism so people can grow and help society. There is hope that racism will end if everybody can work to end racism.

Let's hope for racism to end one day so everyone can just be free and fulfill their dreams. Let's hope for standard healthcare for everyone. Let's hope for good education for everyone. Let's hope for safe living for everyone. Let's hope for a world free from hate, anger and discrimination. Let's hope for happiness, peace and prosperity.

I Hope World War III Never Happens

By Fatima Seyda

I hope that World War III will never happen. In Ukraine, the Russian army is attacking people including children and babies with fireballs, and guns from helicopters and airplanes. A lot of people have died in Ukraine from what's happening. This may begin a war. A lot of people are moving from Ukraine because there is danger.

Countries that are sharing the border with Ukraine are helping the people of Ukraine. They have food stands there where you don't have to pay. People are very scared of danger and are hiding. It is tricky because there are not many hiding places.

People have scratches on their faces because a ship has fallen. Children are scared. Many children have lost their parents. Their homes are destroyed. They don't have any safe place to go. If this war does not end, then it will spread to the whole world. The whole world will be destroyed. And we will have no place to live. If we don't do something, then all of us will die.

About the Authors

Grace Barie is in seventh grade. Her favorite subject is language arts. Grace is active in band, basketball, track and field, and piano. She enjoys doing art and reading books.

Joseph Biederman is in seventh grade. He plays the trumpet and piano and is a Boy Scout. Joseph enjoys reading, writing stories and comic books, and spending time with his family. His pastime of building and battling cardboard ships and planes inspired him to write “A Stuffed Empire.”

Thomas Biederman is in fifth grade. He plays percussion and piano and is a Boy Scout. Thomas enjoys writing stories and comics, building with LEGOs and cardboard, and spending time with his family. His love of superheroes and red pandas inspired him to write “Red Boy.”

Brendan Brookens is an eighth grader at Fairmont High School. He likes to spend time with his family and his pet dog, Shark. Brendan enjoys playing video games and his favorite class is Phy Ed.

Brielle Brown enjoys reading, dogs, drawing cartoon characters, baking, and sitting by a fire with a cup of tea and a good book. She is active in volleyball, softball, speech and drama during the school year and loves to swim, ski and fish in the summer. An interesting fact about Brielle is that she will travel to Washington D.C. in May to participate in the Scripps National Spelling Bee!

Chloe Brown enjoys spending time outside, being active in sports, riding her bike and playing games. She also likes to come up with creative activities to do with her little sister, Keirsten, and write cards to her friends. Chloe has a serious sweet tooth, too. An interesting fact about her is that she is the tallest fourth grader we know and has almost passed up both of her grandmas!

Stella Elaine Bublitz is a fifth grader from Saint Peter Schools. Born in Minneapolis, she moved when she was seven. Very talkative and social, COVID hit Stella like a lightning bolt, shaking her and her world. “Cursed by Thin Air” was a way for her to vent her feelings. Sadly, just a couple weeks later, Omicron hit. Luckily, St. Peter rebounded and the district is now out of masks, the wished for ending in her poem.

Elizabeth Castor is a lover of dogs.

Ian J Covarrubias is a ninth grader at Fairmont High School. He likes to play soccer and is on the spring league team. Ian likes to play video games and his favorite game is Fortnite. He also likes spending time with his friends.

Zariah DeBerry loves to read and write and wants to be an author when she grows up. Being legally blind has not held her back from her love of books. Zariah looks forward to the writing conference every year!

Caitlin Fuhr is 13 years old. She loves basketball, spending time with her friends and relaxing at home. Caitlin enjoys her studies and likes spending time at school.

Marcus Gamboa is a freshman at Fairmont Jr./Sr. High School. In his free time he likes to go outside and play football with friends. Marcus also enjoys building LEGOs and playing Xbox. His favorite movies are the Star Wars series. Marcus often spends time with his family.

Jack Gatton is in ninth grade at Fairmont High School. He enjoys playing with his cat, watching TV and playing video games when he has free time. Jack likes to be outside when it's nice out. He works part-time at a restaurant and owns his own snow removal and lawn care business.

Brennan Gerstbauer is a fourth grader at Saint Peter Lutheran School. He plays soccer and loves to read. Brennan has a passion for LEGOs, including watching reviews of LEGO sets.

Oak Greyson has loved writing since a young age. He also really likes Star Trek which has inspired many of his stories.

Ella A. Haggerty is 13-years-old and is a seventh grader at Dakota Meadows Middle School. She likes band, sports and after-school activities. Ella also likes to take care of her pets and birds.

Maddie Heuss hopes to pursue a writing career and an art career.

Ora Anna Ihimbazwe Kirezi was born in Rwanda which is located in East Africa. She used to go to Rosa Parks Elementary School, but now attends Kennedy Elementary School. Ora Anna likes to read novels, write stories, draw and paint. On March 9, 2022, she and her brother, Amati went to the SCSC Young Writers and Artists Conference. They are very happy the scoring panel enjoyed reading their SCSC Writing Contest stories.

Amati Ishimo Migisha was born in central East Africa. He has two siblings: an older sister and a younger brother. During his free time, Amati likes writing comics and stories. He went to Rosa Parks Elementary, but now goes to Kennedy Elementary. Amati became interested in writing at the age of six.

Briea Jaeger is nine years old and in third grade. She is one of four siblings. Briea enjoys reading, writing, playing in her fort, jumping on the trampoline, playing softball and basketball, and bike rides. She lives on a farm and often helps with chores. Briea has always been quite creative and was inspired to write after attending the SCSC Young Writers & Artists Conference. What's really impressive about her is her drive and motivation. Briea did all this on her own, without help, while her parents were at work!

Rishabh Jain is an energetic young boy. He enjoys reading books, watching TV and making movies. Rishabh participates in a lot of outdoor activities such as soccer, skiing and ice skating. In the future he aspires to be an author in creative writing.

Parker Jenson is an eighth grade student at Fairmont High School. He enjoys playing and watching football and is on a billiards pool league. Parker likes to go fishing, camping and do wood carving. He is an advocate for rescuing dogs and he owns a rescue dog named Titus.

Isabella Jentz is in fifth grade. She likes writing in her free time, mostly action, adventure, fiction or survival stories. Isabella mostly prefers to read graphic novels or quick-read chapter books. She likes to dance, write, draw, listen to loud music and has a daily routine of going outside. Isabella's favorite subjects in school are English, health and art. She would like to become an author as her career.

Jaxson Kolstad is a transgender writer. He is really interested in expressing himself with writing and as well as painting and drawing. Jaxson has always loved trying new things and thus has many hobbies like knitting, reading, roller blading, fantasy games and everything in between.

Ella Krocak is 10 years old and a lover of all four-legged animals. She is an old soul with a huge heart who is always quick to help those around her, especially her three siblings. Ella can often be found spending time with her favorite horse Dixie or snuggled up with a good book.

Megan Lawver is in ninth grade at Lake Crystal Wellcome Memorial Secondary. She enjoys writing, reading, making art and playing with her dog Koda.

Hailey Leach is a twelfth grade student from Fairmont Junior Senior High School. She enjoys reading books and listening to music. Hailey loves any form of art and animals. She works part-time in food service in an assisted living facility.

Sebastian Leon Lorenzo is a senior at Fairmont Jr/Sr High School. He really likes to hang out with his friends. During the summer Sebastian enjoys walking, running, swimming and he used to play soccer. He is a hard worker, managing school and a full-time job.

Katrin Loften enjoys drawing, art, reading, writing, and spending time with friends and family

Marty McBroom is in eighth grade at St. Wenceslaus Catholic School in New Prague. He enjoys playing basketball and baseball.

Vicki Nielsen is adventurous kid. She loves to travel and learn new things about Minnesota and other states. Also, Vicki is a middle child. She is growing up learning how to be both a little and big sister.

Eris Owen is a ninth grader and loves to hang out with their friends. They also based their story on a part of their life at home. Eris loves animals and loves their baby sister.

Freya Peterson is 10 years old. She is a fourth-grader at St. Peter North Elementary School. Freya loves reading, writing, art, skiing and playing piano. She draws a lot whenever she has time. Freya speaks two languages, English and Chinese. She has three pets: a cat, a fish and a hamster. Freya dreams of being a doctor, an artist and an entrepreneur someday.

Madelyn Rose Phillips is a beautiful young lady who loves to read, write and play music. She excels in academics and has a fondness for her brother, Isaac, and dog, Daisy.

Leila Pratt is a seventh grade student at Dakota Meadows Middle School. She stays busy year round with soccer, gymnastics, track, and playing piano and oboe. Leila enjoys reading, writing, and spending time with friends and family.

Abbigail Renaux is an eighth grade student at Alden-Conger High School. She has always loved writing stories and showing her work to people. Abbi loves to put her thoughts and imagination on paper.

Nityan Sharma A curious kid; always up to something!; Reading, writing, drawing, math and cooking; Jumping, running, soccer that’s his thing!; A good friend, an affectionate brother; Like him there is no other!

Rohan Sharma is a 12-year-old who loves to read and enjoys writing short stories. He likes to devise little science experiments to prove his imaginative theories!!

Chloe Smith is a senior in high school. This is the first writing contest she's participated in. Chloe has always had a very creative mind, and has found writing to be the easiest way to express that creativity.

Addie Stenzel lives with her dad, mom and three sisters. She started playing hockey this year and loves it. Addie wants to be a scientist when she grows up.

Caleb Stibbe is a ninth grader at Fairmont Junior Senior High School. He enjoys watching YouTube and hanging out with his mom. Caleb also likes hanging out with his friends. His favorite classes are gym and social skills.

Isla Stock is 10 years old and lives in Lonsdale, Minnesota with her parents, sister and two little brothers. She likes to write, dance, run and paint. Isla also likes to hang out with her family and friends.

Amna Syeda is a fourth grader at Highland Elementary school in Edina. She is passionate about restorative justice and loves writing about ways to make the world inclusive and welcoming for everyone. Amna's hobbies are swimming, baking, karate and writing. She loves to meet new people and visit new places.

Fatima Syeda is a first grader at Highland Elementary school in Edina. She loves gymnastics and swimming. Fatima is passionate about spreading peace in the world and writes about friendship, harmony and happiness. Her hobbies are reading, writing, baking and making crafts. Fatima loves to hike and explore new places.

Kiana Waasdorp is a fifth-grader at Saint Peter Middle School. She enjoys reading fiction books, drawing, rollerblading, four-wheeling, and hanging out with friends and family. Some of her favorite books series are The Hunger Games, Wings of Fire, Warriors and Fablehaven.

Carly Wenninger enjoys writing poems and going antique shopping.

Sophia Williams loves to create. She is a composer and a musician who enjoys writing stories and music. Sophia also enjoys dancing and taking art classes.