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Excelsior's Bookshelf

 Includes original stories, poems, and essays from your very own classmates!

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Please note: Student names are presented in accordance with parent permission.

Make sure to keep an eye out for our mascot; Professor Inky!

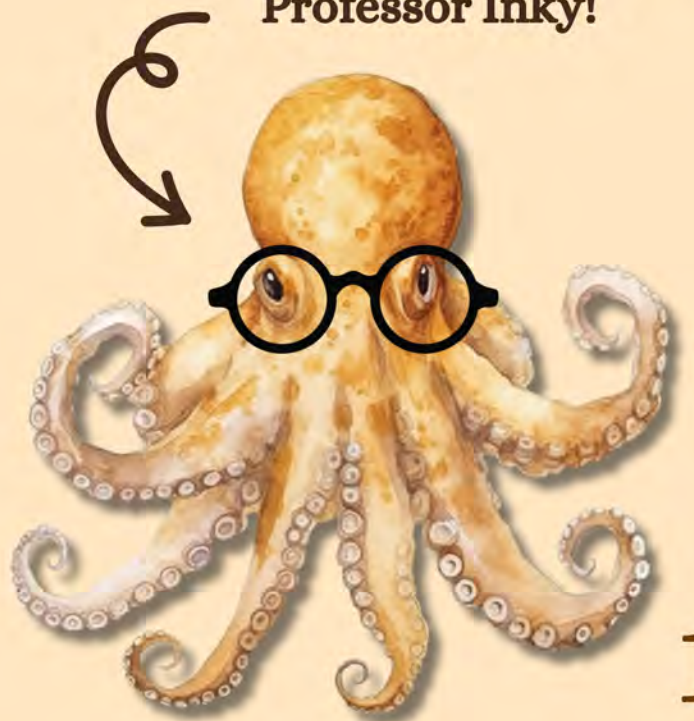


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Please note:

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While we strive to share quality, family-friendly, God-honoring writing, some themes might not be appropriate for all ages. Parents should determine what is appropriate for their own families.

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A photograph of a library with tall bookshelves filled with books. The scene is dimly lit, with warm, glowing lights hanging from the ceiling, creating a cozy atmosphere. The text is overlaid on the image.

“You can make
anything by

WRITING.”



- C. S. Lewis

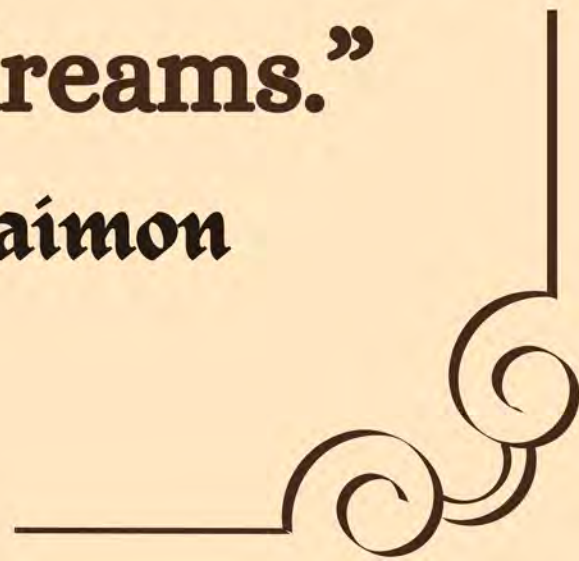


Short Stories



**“Short Stories are tiny
windows into other
worlds and other minds
and other dreams.”**

• Neil Gaimon



Inside the Dawning

Grace J.

I have always noticed the little things: slight changes in tone, the way someone's eyes shift and flicker nervously, the cool autumn breezes whisking away the last remnant of summer. So when my parents began shooting each other worried looks, bills started to pile up on my father's desk, and hushed conversations floated from the kitchen, it wasn't too hard to realize something was wrong. A couple days after I began to notice these things, my parents called me down to the kitchen.

"Kyrie (Kai-rē)," my father began, and sent another worried glance at mom. "We wanted to tell you first, before your siblings, because you're the oldest and hopefully you can help them come to terms with this. I don't know how to say this... I got offered a job. It pays really well, but—"

The nervous feeling that had been clutching at my gut fell away, and my excitement burst out of my mouth in words. I cried, "Why are you both looking so anxious? That's amazing!" A new, better paying job for dad? Maybe they could finally stop worrying about bills all the time!

My father sighed. "It's not that simple, Ky." Then I remembered the "but," and the sickened feeling crawled back around my heart, squeezing it tightly.



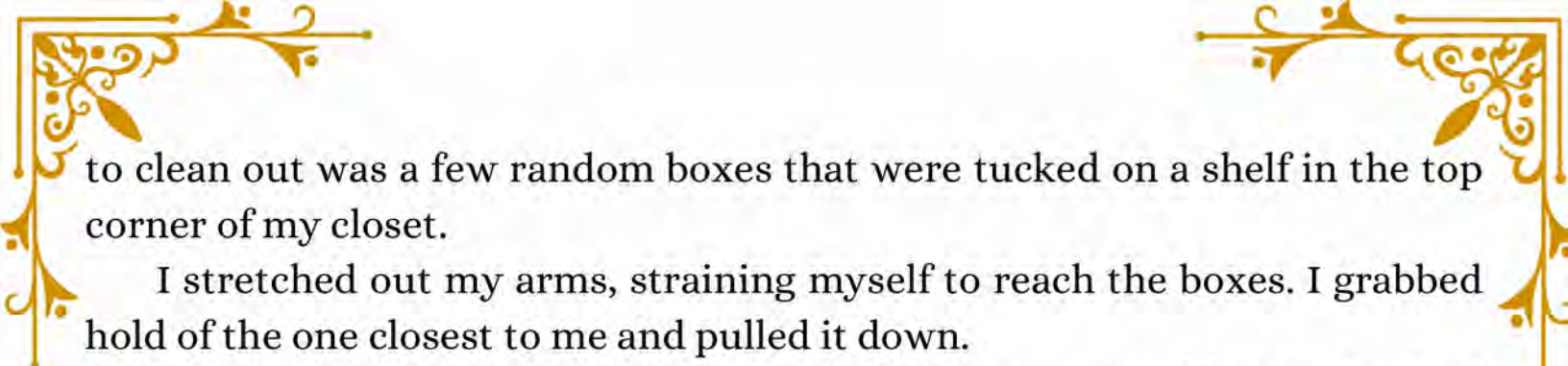
The "but" of the situation was the fact that we had to move halfway across the country to some no-name city in the least exciting state in America. We were moving to Ashland, Nebraska.



I didn't want to leave my home of Astoria, Oregon. It was the only place I'd ever lived and it was where all my friends were. By moving to Nebraska, I'd be abandoning the little shred of a life that I had managed to build for myself.

But I didn't really have a choice as I begrudgingly packed up the last remnants of my stuff.

My walls had been stripped of all my posters, the clothes in my closet had been neatly folded and set in piles waiting to be put into boxes, and the sheets from my bed had been packed up days ago. The only thing I had left



to clean out was a few random boxes that were tucked on a shelf in the top corner of my closet.

I stretched out my arms, straining myself to reach the boxes. I grabbed hold of the one closest to me and pulled it down.

I was about to carelessly toss it onto the mountain of boxes that had been gathered up by my door, when I saw a few messily scrawled words written on the top of the box in black sharpie: “Ky’s Future Best Seller.”

Curiously, I plopped down onto the floor, setting the box down in front of me. Now that I was paying attention, I could hear something sliding around inside. I crossed my legs and reached out, pulling the lid off the box.

Inside sat three old, yet pristine books, with beautiful designs lacing around the covers. Memories came flooding back to me as I remembered my long-crushed dream of becoming an author and my first novel, quickly followed by two others. I never published them but I had begged my parents to let me print them, just so I could hold the series in my hands and prove that what I had done was real.

A joyful smile grew large on my face as I relived the happy memories. I picked up the book on top, swiping off a thin layer of dust that had settled on the cover.

I called my series *The Dawning*. There are three books in my series: *The Dawning of Rebellion*, *The Dawning of Betrayal*, and *The Dawning of Hope*.

My finger gently traced the glossy black outline of “Rebellion” on the cover of *The Dawning of Rebellion*. I sighed with resignation and pulled the cover open. I was surprised not to find a title page, or publication details on the first page. I mentally slapped myself; I hadn’t published it, of course there wouldn’t be publication details. Instead, the first page skipped directly to the beginning of the story.

I tucked myself into a corner and began to read. I wrote the first book of *The Dawning* when I was only 12 years old. Nearly 7 years had passed and I couldn’t even remember the main characters’ names, so as I read it wasn’t too hard to forget that I had written this. I was sucked into my own story, entranced by my younger self’s talent.



The Dawning of Rebellion tells the story of a 15-year-old boy named Aubrey Drestoin, who unknowingly strikes a rebellion after standing up against a corrupt government and a cruel prince. He flees his kingdom when a mysterious fire starts in his home and a government soldier nearly kills him as he tries to find his family in the flames. He is forced to abandon his family and defend himself against the soldier. He joins a small group of rebels that had been inspired by his public display of defiance, and were convinced that with his help, they could recruit enough people to overthrow the Royals. Over the next three days, I obsessively tore through the books, addicted to the rush of adrenaline that I got every time I flipped a page.

Throughout the next two books, Aubrey is tormented by betrayal, hopelessness, and the loss of nearly everyone he loves. In the end, he saves the day and the war ends, but unlike many other soldiers, he isn't left with anyone to go back home to. By now, he is nearly 18, so he simply fakes a smile and does what he needs to do to continue protecting his kingdom.



By the time I had finished the three books, my family had finished packing, and moving day had arrived. I helped my dad move the last of our boxes into the back of our minivan and then settled myself in my seat.

I sighed and pulled out my phone, throwing on a fake smile to snap a picture. I then posted it on Instagram, with a caption saying, "It's moving day!!!! I can't wait to see my new home!"

I dropped my smile and popped my earbuds in, trying to drown out my thoughts along with the rest of the world. My two younger siblings got in, sitting in the middle row, followed by my parents in the front. I closed my eyes and listened to my music, letting the lyrics fly me away to another world.

A tired feeling settled over me and since I didn't have any reason to stay awake, I allowed the feeling to drag me into sleep.



The crooked tree branches reached for me, tugging at my arms, pulling me back.

I screamed and cried for help but the branches had wrapped themselves around my legs and my mouth, muffling my pleas. They had tugged me off my feet. They were now dragging me through the forest.

My tears streamed down my face, mixing with my sweat. I grappled with the branches and tried to get them to release me, but their grip was strong and fighting them only made them squeeze tighter. Roots had sprung out of the ground and were now assisting the branches, wrapping themselves around my wrist and throat and holding me as still as they could get me.

Yet, with every ounce of myself that I used to fight my assailants, the roots and branches tightened. It wasn't too bad at my ankles or my wrists, but the roots tangled around my throat and chest were slowly squeezing the air out of my lungs, making my whole body burn with a desperate need for the one resource we never worried about running out of: air.

I was surrounded by it, yet it was useless as long as I couldn't allow it to enter my system and fill my lungs.

Black spots danced across my vision, and the last bubble of air in my lungs popped, when all of a sudden, a scream erupted from my lips and I shot up, gasping for air. I squeezed my eyes shut, sweat dripping down my brow as I greedily sucked in lung full, after lung full of oxygen. I leaned my head back, and a bright light shone through my eyelids. I pried my eyes open, raising my hand to shield them.

A scalding breeze attacked my already blazing skin, and I lowered my head, scanning my surroundings.

My heart threatened to stop beating as the shock of where I was set in, or more specifically the fact that I had absolutely no idea where I was.

I raised myself to my feet, taking a step back and running into a stone wall. I stood at the edge of a huge courtyard, surrounded on all sides by towering castle spires. In the middle of the courtyard stood a ginormous tree. Its canopy stretched for yards in every direction.

My breathing grew tenuous and tears filled my eyes as I frantically spun around, looking for my family.

“Um, hello!” said a squeaky voice from behind me. I spun around and stared at a young boy in shock, certain that there was no one there only a few seconds ago.

“Ho-how’d you do that?” I asked nervously.

He laughed and reached out, pressing one of the stones in the wall. A section of it sank back and slowly collapsed to the right.

The boy took a step in and without looking back, said, “Come with me, please.”

I scrambled after him, not having any better ideas. “Wait, wait! Please, where am I? Who are you?” The boy ignored me and kept walking. I demanded, “Answer me! Where is my family?” I stopped following and told myself I wouldn't move until he answered my questions.

He sighed and turned around. “I'm not allowed to tell you, but I'm taking you to someone who will, so come on.” He waved his hand dismissively and started walking again.

“No!” I shouted, “Answer me now!”

“Why do you have to make this so difficult?” He reached down to his waist and pressed a button.

“What does that do?” I asked.

The boy glared at me. “You ask way too many questions.”

“Just answer—”

A large gloved hand clamped over my mouth and pulled me backwards. My eyes grew wide with fear, and I silently pleaded with the boy to do something as he nonchalantly crossed his arms and shrugged.

A sickly sweet smell filled my nose and I realized whoever had grabbed me was holding a white towel in his free hand. He raised it to my face. I squeezed my eyes shut knowing there was nothing I could do. He shoved the rag over my nose, pulled something over my head, and then the world went black.



My eyes flickered open but my vision was immediately stifled by the burlap sack that had been placed over my head. A few stray rays of light poked through the bag, sparkling in my vision. I lifted my head and then

threw it in nearly every direction in an attempt to get the bag off. All I actually accomplished was alerting my kidnappers that I was awake and possibly insane. I was sitting in what felt to be a plain wooden chair, my hands tied behind me, and my ankles knotted to the legs. The rope that my kidnappers had used to tie me up was itchy and dug into my skin. I heard the shuffling sound of footsteps and muffled whispers, followed by someone saying, "Get that hood off of her. I want to see the face of the person who ruined my life." The voice was so cold and precise that it sent a chill down my spine, and the words he spoke did not help ease my nerves.

Ruined his life? How could I have ruined his life? And what could I possibly have done to him to deserve being kidnapped and tied up?

There it was again: the sound of footsteps. Someone walked up to me and pulled off my hood. My vision was flooded with white light, momentarily blinding me. My eyes quickly adjusted and I glanced around the room at all the unfamiliar, cold faces.

My gaze landed on an oddly familiar and unearthly handsome boy standing at the front of the small group. He had snow white hair and striking silver eyes with tendrils of icy-blue streaking through his iris. He was average height for a boy of his age but because of the way he stared down at you as if you were an ant, he seemed much taller.

My mind stretched, searching through the catalog of people I've met. How could I forget someone like him?

And then I saw it: a small pale scar tracing his right cheek bone. My heart slowed and I stared at it in pure disbelief.

This boy, this...this near adult, matched the near exact description of Prince Kyrien (Kai-rē-en), the main Antagonist in *The Dawning*. (yes, I did name him after myself. I was 12, don't judge). The white hair, silver-blue eyes, and that scar...

But that was impossible: he wasn't real. I made him up. I looked him up and down trying to shake the crazy thoughts I was having. I summoned every ounce of courage that I had and stared at the boy right in his beautiful eyes.

“Who are you?”

His eyes narrowed and for a moment, he seemed to be trying to read my mind, or maybe he was just studying my features. Then he spoke, “You really don’t recognize me?” His voice slithered out his mouth like a snake, and then wrapped itself around my ear, making me shiver.

“Kyrien?” I said in a voice so quiet, it might not even be classified as a whisper.

An evil grin erupted on his face and he took a step closer. I lowered my head, for some reason ashamed. He reached out and grabbed my chin, leveling our eyes. “I’m glad you didn’t forget me.”

I somehow managed to find my voice, so I decided to ask my questions. “How am I here? In fact, where am I? Where is my family? Why did you bring me here?”

Kyrien raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you finished?”

I huffed but nodded.

“I found some old rusty spell, but it did the trick, so who am I to complain? You’re in my winter escape, because if you don’t remember, my actual castle was taken over by rebels. Your family is perfectly fine, they are right where you left them. And I brought you here so you can fix my ending.”

“Fix your ending? What do you—?” I was cut off by the sound of shattering glass and shouting coming from somewhere above us.

The prince muttered something under his breath and turned to his soldiers. “Go figure out what that was!” They all nodded and ran up the stone stairs, armor clanking.

He paced around the room, seemingly forgetting that I was there, until multiple minutes later, a soldier ran down the stairs.

“It’s the rebels, sir!” he shouted.

Kyrien spun around and stomped up to me. “No! I will not let them take any more from me! Make it stop! You created this story, you can change it, too. Make them leave!”

“I-I—“ Before I could say anything else, the doors at the top of the stairs flew open and a storm of men ran into the room. A striking young man with unruly strawberry blonde hair, a beautiful smile, and his trademark dimples led the group.

My mind was still reeling but the face was unmistakable. “Aubrey!” I gasped.

He turned to me, and his grin grew. “Hello! You must be the author I’ve heard so much about!” I cocked my eyebrow curiously but didn’t ask.

Aubrey started moving towards me, pulling out a knife from his belt to cut my ropes, but before he could reach me, Kyrien cut between us, his sword drawn and his eyes blazing.

“Kyrien!” Aubrey said. There was still a smile on his face but something angry burned inside his eyes. “How have you been?! I haven’t seen you in ages!”

Kyrien snarled and lunged toward Aubrey, sword extended.

He raised his dagger in a defensive movement, blocking the prince’s sword.

They went back and forth a few more times, but in the end, Kyrien knew it was pointless—he was surrounded by rebel soldiers.

He sighed and lowered his sword in defeat. Aubrey and about ten others raised their weapon and pointed it at him.

“Drop your weapon,” Aubrey said, his smile having finally fallen from his face.

The prince did as he was told and raised his hands above his head.

Aubrey waved at his soldiers. “Take care of him.” Then he walked toward me, dagger still drawn. First he bent down and cut the ropes around my ankles, then he walked around to my back and cut the rope tying my wrists.

I shook off the rope and sighed. “Thank you, those ropes were killing my wrists.” I raised my arms and showed him the nasty red abrasions to prove it.

“Yes, yes, you're welcome, but we best be getting out of here. It may seem as if we have won but we are in Kyrien’s palace, which is filled with soldiers,

and there are only about fifteen of us, we've only gotten this far because we had the element of surprise." He grabbed my wrist, making me flinch, and began pulling me towards the stairs. One of the men had tied up Kyrien and shoved him against the wall. "Leave him, he isn't who we came for," shouted Aubrey. The men all followed their leader and we stormed up the stairs. At least twenty of the prince's soldiers were rushing towards us.

Aubrey and I retreated to the back of the group, letting the fully-armored and trained men do the fighting. One of Aubrey's men turned around and shouted, "Sir, take the girl and get out of here. We can't hold them off for very long!"

"I'm not leaving you, sergeant!" Aubrey yelled back at him, pushing me behind him and drawing out his sword.

One of Kyrien's soldiers broke through the line of men and came at us, sword raised.

Aubrey parried his attack, and then hit him on the head with the butt of his sword. The soldier slumped and fell to the ground.

The sergeant who had spoken to us before turned around once more and in a much more urgent tone yelled, "Aubrey, please, if you don't leave now you'll get yourself killed and the girl captured!"

Aubrey opened his mouth, looking like he wanted to argue, but then he closed it and nodded.

He turned to me and whispered in my ear, "Come on, we need to go." Before I could respond, he started running towards a small, wooden door hidden in the shadows. I chased after him and together we ducked into the passage.

"What is this place?" I whispered, nervously glancing around the dark, narrow hallway.

"It's the servants' passage. If we follow this path then we should end up at a door that leads right outside. It's how we got in undetected."

I nodded, way too tired to ask more questions, and followed him.

After multiple silent minutes of walking we burst through a plain wooden door into the dark night. I sucked it in, thankful for the coolness that the night had brought.

The chilly air felt amazing on my flushed cheeks and raw wrists.

I turned to face Aubrey, who was relishing the night air just as much as I was. He glanced at me and smiled. "I never thought you'd be so young."

"What do you mean? I'm just as old as you are."

"Well, I just expected someone older." He gestured around us and then continued, "You created all of this and what? You're 18? 19 tops!"

"18³/₄ technically," I said, glaring at him. "But it's been awhile since I created your story."

Aubrey stilled, his eyes locking with mine. "How long?"

I lowered my head, and my cheeks flushed a bright red from embarrassment. "I was 12 when I first started writing."

"Huh." His eyes wandered and he seemed to just be staring into the sky aimlessly. "I never asked your name," he said.

"It's Kyrie."

He shot around, and stared at me, a weird grin plastered on his face. "Did you name Kyrien after yourself?"

My blush grew deeper. "Of course not...that would have been dumb."

He burst out laughing. "You totally did! Oh my goodness, Ari will get a kick out of this!" All of a sudden, his smile fell. "She would have."

Ari was one of the people who first recruited him into the rebellion. Throughout the books they had gotten increasingly close, and by the beginning of the third book they had even confessed romantic interest in each other.

Kyrien killed her after his army was defeated during the final battle, as a last act of revenge.

"Aubrey, I'm really sorry."

He looked up, his eyes pleading. "Kyrie, I just met you, but you created me. You know how much I needed her, how much pain I've been in since she died. Please, bring her back, write her back into the story or change the story so she never dies in the first place." He grasped my arm, pulling me closer to him and locking gazes with me. "I can't live without her." I took a step back, cursing my younger self for being so cruel to my characters.

Before I could answer, a dark figure burst through the servants' entrance.

At first I thought it might have been the sergeant or another soldier who had escaped the enemy's blades, but then a glint of white, and Kyrien stepped out of the shadows.

He lunged at me, pulling me to the ground and pinning my arms to the dirt. Aubrey grabbed him and dragged him off me, but Kyrien would not go so easily. He spun around and punched Aubrey square in the nose.

Blood trickled down his face but he hardly showed any reaction to the blow and rushed at the prince, slamming him into a tree.

He raised his fist, ready to replicate the blow Kyrien inflicted upon him. "Stop it," Kyrien burst. "Stop it. Aubrey, listen to me. I know we are enemies but if you ever want to see your lover again you need to listen to me."

Aubrey paused, staring at him, fist still raised but ears ready to listen. Kyrien released a small sigh. "She's going to disappear. The spell that I used said it would only make her stay in our world for five hours tops. It's already been more than 4½ hours. Once the spell runs out of time and she's sent back home, that's it, no one's story gets fixed."

Before either of them could say anything else, I blurted, "I can't!" Aubrey dropped Kyrien and spun around, jaw slack. "I don't know how."

"But—" Aubrey started. "Can't you just write more?" "I don't know! It isn't like I've ever tried! I...maybe I co—" Before I could finish my sentence a wave of dizziness descended upon me and I stumbled forward. Kyrien caught me, but the second I had steadied myself, I shoved him off.

I looked down at my hands and screamed. My whole body had turned slightly translucent. "What's happening to me!?"

Aubrey ran to me, and Kyrien coughed, drawing my attention towards him. "The spell is dissipating. You're going home."

A mix of joy and fear erupted inside of me. I looked back down at myself and I had only become more translucent. The thought of disappearing made me light-headed. "I...I need to sit down."

Aubrey reached for me and led me over to a tree stump. I slumped over and watched as my body slowly disappeared.

Kyrien took a couple steps towards me, his arms crossed. "I—can you just

try and give me a happy ending? If you ever find out how, let me redeem myself, please. I...I don't want to die as the villain."

I tried to respond, to promise him that I would try, but found I could no longer speak, so instead, I simply nodded.

My vision started to fade and an aggressive feeling of panic came over me. I gasped and both Kyrien and Aubrey reached out to me. A sickening feeling came over me as their hands passed through my body.

Aubrey glanced at his hands, and then knelt down in front of me. "I don't want to ask again, because I know what you said, but please, if you ever find a way to save her, I'm begging you." I nodded but as I looked down at myself, I wasn't even sure if he would have been able to see me any more.



I closed my eyes and sighed, allowing a peaceful darkness to rush over me. When I opened them again, I was sitting in my family's minivan, headphones blaring. I fearfully glanced down at my body and released a sigh of relief when I saw I was completely opaque. I grabbed my phone off the chair next to me and glanced at the time. 4:27 p.m: exactly 5 hours since we left our house.

My youngest brother, Darek, turned around and looked at me, pulling out an earbud. "Look! Sleeping Beauty has finally woken! How was your nap?" He smirked in a brotherly sort of way.

"It was refreshing," I said snidely, as a small smile tugged at my lips. I turned my phone on and opened Google Docs. I created a new document and then stared at my screen for a long moment, trying to decide a name. I made up my mind and began to type: "The Dawning of Second Chances."



THE END

The Jewels of Vito

Avalon Grace

“Tell me the story again, Papa,” the little girl begged.

The two were on their small fishing boat that sat like a ball on a glass table. The sea was still, so that the stars decorated the vast reflection like crystals in a cave. The little girl, Aneria, peered over the edge and marveled at her reflection. She had curly blonde hair that hung around her head like a halo. Her gaping smile set against little pale lips pleased her every time she smiled.

Aneria glanced at her father again, her two eyes glimmering like emeralds, “Please?”

“You’ve heard that story at least a hundred times, my little jewel. Why must you hear it again?” A friendly, gruff man asked as he rolled up his sleeves.

“Because that’s my favorite story. Pretty please?”

The man laughed through his blonde scruffy beard and said, “All right then.” He lit a nearby lantern and soon the bow was basking in light.

“A long time ago, long before Vito got its name, a young man rode into town with a special fishing net. His skin was as dark as earth, and they said his eyes blazed with such an intensity you couldn’t help but listen to him. We were captivated by his words, so the townsfolk followed the man out to the fish port. The man stood boldly on the dock, the wind toying with his long black hair, and cast out his net.

The crowd fell silent as he skillfully guided the ropes through the waters. The silence was so thick you could cut it with a knife! He tried to take it out of the choppy waves, but it was too heavy. In the end it took three strong men to heave it onto the dock. Before the townsfolk’s eyes was not a pile of stinky fish, but a mountain of sparkling jewels.”

“What type of jewels?” Aneria interrupted.

Her father laughed. “Clusters of diamonds, piles of amethysts, and heaps of emeralds. Each jewel was more intricate and elaborate than the last. The townsfolk were amazed and spent time listening to him. He brought stories from all over Vito, tales of how he got the net, tales of the mountain beasts, and about all of the other towns. He was captivating and our people put all of their trust in him. One day the man and his crew went out to fish for more jewels. But suddenly, a ravaging storm capsized the boat, like a bug in the wind! No one ever saw the man, or the net ever again. Eventually the leaders of our town squandered the last of the wealth. We plunged into poverty, and you know the rest.” The man smiled and pulled his daughter into his arms.

Aneria glanced around the rickety boat that they used to bring in fish. She thought of her happy mother, clothed in rags. She thought of the plain soup that they ate every day. The little girl looked up at her father and sighed, “Papa, do you wish we had the magical net so that we could have better things?”

The father kissed his daughter lightly on the head. “God has blessed me with a wife, a home, food, friends, and a beautiful daughter with hair the color of gold. I also have my salvation, the assurance of our heavenly Father’s love.”

Aneria snuggled into her father’s embrace. “But wouldn’t it be nice to have diamonds? Or real gold?”

The man glanced up at the brilliant stars, “No, I have all the treasure in the world.”

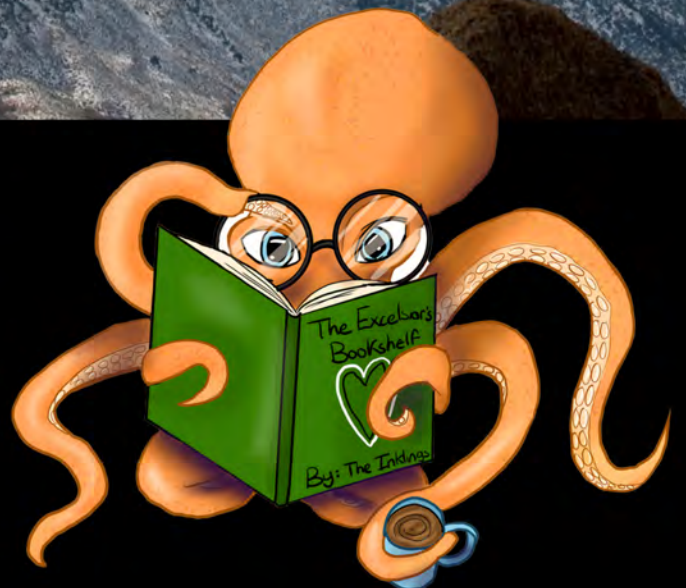


THE END

“Today a Reader
tomorrow a...

Leader”

- Margret Fuller



The New Juliet

Jadyn Davis

Content warning:
This modernized reimagining of Juliet is recommended for our older students who are familiar with *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Some themes may not be appropriate for younger students.

It's been six months since I promised Jesse my hand, but he hasn't requested it yet.

Tonight, he'd invited me back to the site of our first date: a park on the outskirts of town.

We embraced on a rickety old bridge, waiting for the sunset to conclude our evening. Jesse disentangled my arms from around his neck slowly and tenderly, leaning back slightly so he could meet my eyes, and I couldn't help hoping that perhaps the time had come.

"I brought you here for a reason, darling. I—" He abruptly cut off, breaking his gaze to very intently examine his shoes. "I wanted to make this perfect but I'm chickening out."

My heart began to beat faster, my mind jumping to that singular thing. "Are you trying to propose?" I breathed.

"No." He pronounced the monosyllable quickly and definitively, his eyes snapping up once again. "I mean—ugh, I'm messing this entire thing up, aren't I?"

I waited, inwardly overflowing with impatience and curiosity.

“Forget it. I had planned all sorts of things to say and I can’t remember a single one of them now.” Jesse dipped his hand into his hip pocket and fished out a simple, miniature velvet black box. “Here.”

I accepted it with quivering hands and gingerly removed the top. Nestled inside was a gold ring, but it lacked the signature protruding diamond of an engagement ring. Instead, it featured a petite infinity symbol, inset with sparkling miniature diamonds that glimmered dimly in the fading light.

“A promise ring,” I murmured.

After a wordless nod, he realized something needed to be said. “Vivian, you know I’d gladly replace it with an engagement ring, but not yet. Aside from the fact that you haven’t even finished high school, I don’t have a job. I can’t afford it.”

“It doesn’t matter, it’s still your ring.” I slipped it on my left ring finger, earning a shy smile from him.

The sunset reached its climax, rejoicing along with me. The river flowing beneath the bridge inherited its rosiness, and shadows danced amid the glow on the water’s rippling surface. Veined by gold, clouds winged across the horizon. In the chill of the evening, Jesse’s body heat warmed me to the core.

Minutes later, birds twittered their final goodnights as it faded.

Jesse intertwined his fingers with mine and led me by the hand until the tree-lined path opened into a grassy field lit by the afterglow. “Race you to the car,” he challenged, his amber eyes twinkling playfully. Without waiting for a response, he launched forward into a sprint.

“Not fair! You’ve got longer legs!” I called, but nonetheless, I tore after him.

My sandals slapped the soft grass and the skirt of my summer dress swished against my bare thighs as I ran.

I arrived to the triumphant honk of his mom’s car. He was waiting for me in the driver’s seat when I ducked inside, a smug grin plastered on his face.

“Only the millionth time I beat you... when are you planning to admit I’m faster?” he teased, sticking his tongue out at me.

“You’re a child,” I retorted. “Cute, but a child.”

“Why, thank you!”

I playfully crossed my arms and glared at him.

“You’re adorable when you’re mad,” he said, and leaned over to plant a kiss on my drawn lips before I had a chance to protest.

“Are you trying to bribe me with a kiss?”

“Maybe.” With a wink, he shifted the car into gear and pulled out of the parking lot. Soon, he said, “Baby, can you turn the radio on before I fall asleep, please? Thank you.”

Within minutes, I was singing along and he was glancing at me every once in a while with a soft smile until I got self-conscious.

What?”

“He shook his head slowly. “Nothing,” he said, but he still wore the smile.

I shrugged and resumed my singing, until I saw the deer.

“Jesse! Watch out!”

He automatically swerved, thrusting the car into the guard rail and down an incline.

Straight into a tree, as if it wasn’t already bad enough.



Where’s Jesse?

This was my immediate thought once I awoke. I wasn’t sure how much time had elapsed since we’d crashed. I soon realized he was right beside me, still buckled into the driver’s seat.

His head lolled lifelessly against his shoulder, his clothes were littered with shards of glass from the shattered windshield, as were mine. Blood seeped steadily from a wound on his forehead, trickling over his eyelid and staining his pale face red, before leaking onto his hoodie.

I leaned over, gently patting his face and praying he would wake up. “Jesse? Jesse, wake up. Please, wake up, baby.”

911.

I located my phone, which, miracle of miracles, wasn't smashed, and punched the numbers in.

“911, where is your emergency?”

It wasn't long before I heard the sirens, and an ambulance careened around the curve, its red and white lights strobing the hillside. Paramedics poured out of it once it had stopped, jogging towards our crash site. It wasn't until one of them jerked my door open that I realized I had never even unbuckled, much less gotten out.

“Miss, are you injured?”

“No. No, it's not me, it's my boyfriend. Please, help my boyfriend,” I pleaded.

The paramedic's tone was even and steady. “Miss, stay calm. He'll receive medical attention, but I was assigned to check on you.”

“I'm fine. Forget about me. Help him, please.”

“We'll be taking both of you to the hospital.”

“How bad is he?”

The paramedic hesitated. “It's too early to tell. Please, Miss, come with me.”

I had no sooner stepped out of the car when I collapsed to my knees. The paramedic caught me.

“You're still in shock, Miss. Please, take it easy.”

I rode with Jesse to the hospital, but his eyelids never even fluttered. Not when I squeezed his limp hand, nor when I brushed a strand of his dark hair away so I could plant a gentle kiss on his forehead.

At the hospital, we were separated for individual examinations, to which I raised protests, but the nurse insisted.

I was soon informed that besides a few easily-treatable scrapes, I had a minor concussion. The doctor advised rest, but I was not required to stay at the hospital.

Jesse's condition remained unchanged overnight.

I slept until two o'clock the next day, at which point, without even taking a shower or bothering to remedy my zombie-like appearance, I begged my mom to drive me to the hospital.

On the way, I bought a bouquet of lavender. His favorite.

I was allowed a short visit.

The nurses had removed his hoodie and jeans and replaced them with a stark-white hospital gown in which his lean frame swam. The monitor beeped steadily in the background. I clasped his hand and squeezed it, noticing how vivid the pulsing purple veins crisscrossing his arms and hands were against the deathly paleness of his skin. The ugly gash on his forehead was now only a thin, discolored line, the skin knit together with tiny, intricate white stitches.

I set the vase of lavender on his bedside table, planted a kiss on his still, unresponsive lips, and left.



The evening brought a phone call, which my mom answered. After the greeting, she covered the speaker with her hand to hiss, "It's the hospital."

I waited impatiently. I watched as her face fell. She hung up.

"Vivian..."

"No," I murmured. "No. No, please, no."

"Honey, I'm sorry," she said, tears in her voice. "Jesse passed away."

She reached to hug me, but I fled upstairs and collapsed on my bed, sobbing into the pillow. My thoughts weren't coherent, I just felt as if I'd been on the receiving end of a gut punch. Actually, a stab seemed more appropriate right then. I wished he could hold me and whisper sweet nothings into my ear until my tears dried.

I cried myself into merciful sleep, too exhausted to continue.

The sunshiny morning brought instinctive hope and excitement for a new day that was instantly and brutally crushed when reality settled like a brick.

The first thing I saw once I turned over was his portrait on my bedside table.

I clapped my hand over my mouth as the sobs resumed, with no solid frame to grip onto, no shoulder to cry into, no soft words to comfort me.

He was gone.

I overturned the picture. All I saw in his smiling face was the contrast from the lifeless, pale one I had witnessed just yesterday morning. He couldn't be gone, not yet. We had all our plans of marriage and children and growing old to fulfill.

I never told him I loved him. This realization almost choked me with regret.

Sudden nausea overcame me. I rushed to the bathroom and dunked my head into the toilet bowl and began to vomit. Afterwards, I dragged myself to the faucet to rinse the bitter taste from my mouth.

The promise ring lay waiting on the sink.

"No." My voice was hardly audible. "Jesse..."

I bit my lip to hold back the tears, until I noticed a droplet of blood and forced myself to release.

But the pain took my focus away for a moment.

I forced myself to try and eat breakfast. It was my favorite: chocolate chip pancakes, but the first bite tasted bland and unappetizing. I went through the repetitive motions of chewing and then tried to swallow it but it caught in my throat. I didn't bother trying to eat anything more.

The rest of the day seemed to drag on endlessly, to an unrealistic length that caused me to lapse into numbness. If only this was just a dream, a cruel nightmare. If only I could wake to find him here. Not like he was on the hospital bed, but normal. The Jesse I knew and loved.

The numbness was worse than crying. I wanted to feel...something. Right now it felt as if I was viewing the world through the eyes of someone else and I was only a distant, insignificant part of my own body, except for the persistent tight aching in my chest.

Before, I could never understand what drove people to self-harm, but now I did. I understood perfectly.

I pinched myself and proceeded to feel cowardly. That wasn't self-harm, that was only a silly little pinch. It only caused me to sink deeper into numbness.

I gave my arm a gentle slap.

Again. Harder this time.

Again. Harder.

He's gone.

As hard as I could manage, I slapped myself, leaving my skin red and tender.

He's...gone.

I collapsed in a heap on the floor, my hair sprawling like a golden crown encircling my head, no less enveloped in numbness.

As night fell, reality sunk deeper and deeper, as if a knife was being thrust deeper and deeper inside me, slicing my insides. I hadn't spoken once all day.

"Goodbye, Mom," I said in a distant monotone as I left to go...somewhere. My worn and tired brain hadn't processed the fact that she was gone and had been for hours.

The car was gone. I took the bike.

It was nearing sunset, but I didn't think to turn on the flashing lights on my bike.

In some distant corner of my mind, I realized exactly where I was headed: the crash site. I wasn't sure why.

First, I saw the mangled guard rail. Then, the matted grass where the car had compressed it. Then, a few remaining shards of glass.

And the dent in the tree.

The tree had hardly been affected. It stood firm and unconcerned, with no notion of the life it had taken.

Jesse's life.

I remounted my bike, but not to return home. Instead, I returned to the bridge, just as the sun was setting.

Streaks of scarlet slit the sky, creating sharp, angled shadows in their wake. In my childhood, I fantasized that the gold along the horizon created a portal each night into heaven for all who could step inside it, but tonight it seemed not a portal but instead a barred gate that refused to release the one I missed so deeply, the one it had engulfed far too early.

Instead of promising joy, it offered only heartbreak. There was no joy left for me, not even in the things I used to find beautiful.

They were only conditionally beautiful. And my singular condition was gone.

Forever.

I climbed atop the rail of the bridge, dangling my feet over the ebony torrent below. Mist rose from the water's surface like Sirens, enticing me to take one more step. Silhouetted birds crouched in the spindly, black arms of the trees, taunting me with their calls.

Why am I still afraid of dying when life hurts so? I'm such a coward.

I lowered myself so I was seated on the outer edge of the bridge, so the splinters were pricking my thighs through the thin material of my leggings. The rail was no longer blocking me.

I miss him...

I let go.

The chilly spring water slapped my body as I made contact, stinging my skin and shocking me into immobility. My limp figure sunk beneath the surface, and murky water flooded my mouth, overwhelming my taste buds. I attempted to spit it out but all I got was more water.

Water that clogged my throat so I couldn't breathe.

Water that would drown me.

All the hurt that had pushed me to this point disappeared the moment I realized I was dying. The moment I realized what it felt like to be drowning. And I realized Jesse never would've wanted this for me.

I activated my muscles, pressing myself upwards until I broke the surface. I watched half-consciously as the river swept me along, draining my strength.

A tree branch was hanging over the river.

I flailed for it, and grasped onto thin air.

Once more.

My left hand managed to catch the rough bark, and I proceeded to grip it with my right hand as well. My arms were weak from holding me above water, but I used what little strength I still possessed to inch my way towards the shore.

The river fought me, swirling about my legs, attempting to suck me into its depths once again, but I continued.

Eventually, I collapsed onto the shore, the skin of my palms peeling and bloody from the bark. I hadn't noticed the pain at first, but now the sting reminded me that I was alive.

And Jesse wasn't.

My sudden tears contributed to the rivulets of water that dribbled down my face.

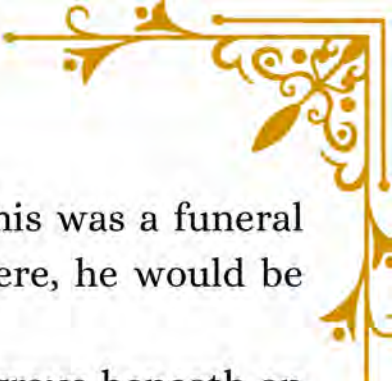
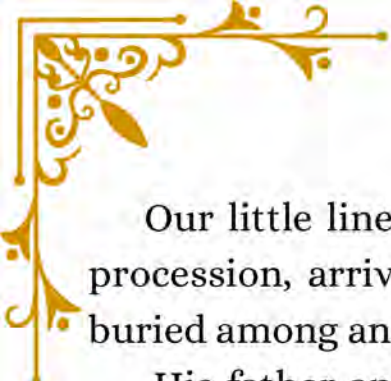
An hour later, I arrived at the doorstep of my house, sopping wet, my clothes and hair steadily dripping river water onto the doormat, and yet as soon as my mom saw me, she enveloped me in a tight hug.

"You're safe, thank God."



The day of Jesse's funeral had arrived, and we were following the vehicle that carried his casket.

His ring shone on my finger, a speck of color amidst my black attire.



Our little line of cars, with four-ways activated, signaling this was a funeral procession, arrived at a quaint cemetery ten minutes later. Here, he would be buried among ancestors he either never knew or never liked.

His father and brothers carried the coffin to a freshly dug grave beneath an oak tree. He was dressed in the only formal clothes he owned, the ones he refused to wear unless there was a wedding or a funeral. I wonder if he ever imagined he'd wear them to his own funeral.

Multiple voices droned on, verses from one of his favorite passages were read, then came the eulogy, and afterwards, his mother nudged me, asking if I'd like to say a few words.

I knew she expected me to, in fact, I had expected myself to, but in the moment, I realized it was impossible to express the most important things in sufficient words.

I declined.

Amidst a closing hymn, I watched as his casket was lowered into the ground, removed from view forever.



Two months later, I returned. It was June 8th: what would've been our two year anniversary. Only one and a half years away from when we had hoped and planned to get married.

His gravestone had been erected: a simple granite affair. Beneath his name and years living, it read:

“Beloved son and brother.”

I had loved him more than all of them, yet in the objective eyes of those who, generations later, may read his gravestone, I never existed in his life. All I had was a promise ring. One that he would never replace with an engagement ring like he had hoped to.

I never got to call him my husband, not even my fiancé.

All I had was a promise ring, a promise that could never be fulfilled.

I wiggled it off of my finger and cradled it for a moment in the palm of my hand.

The infinity symbol no longer provoked a pang of regretful irony for me. Instead, it represented the love he held for me when he was alive. A love strong enough to carry me through.

A love that endures beyond death.

I left a bouquet of lavender and the promise ring nestled into the mound of dirt, just beneath the headstone.

The diamonds lining the infinity symbol twinkled in the sunlight.



THE END

The Trials of Quickly Falling Grace J.

Dancing across the sea of people, my gaze searched every face, traced every detail. Silently observing everyone around me, yet going unnoticed myself.

I froze.

My mouth dropped open slightly.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I could hear my own heart pounding.

My gaze was locked on a boy who looked maybe a year older than me.

He sat only a few feet away from me, and I scolded myself for not noticing him sooner.

My breath caught as the orange glow of the flames flickered across the boy's skin. He turned his head and locked eyes with me, his mouth twitching with the hints of a smile.

Today was the day.

Finally, someone would notice me.

A blistering June wind danced between us and the boy's unruly gold curls fell in front of his eyes, his shining green eyes. He laughed, swiping his hair out of his face as he stared up at the radiant stars.

"The stars are beautiful tonight." he said just loud enough for me to hear, his voice floating through the air like a gentle song.

The sound of his voice sent a fiery blush flooding my cheeks. "Ya, they are."

Warm bubbles erupted inside my stomach, and I opened my mouth to say something else, just so the boy wouldn't leave. Just so I could hear his voice one more time. The bubbles quickly popped when, before a conversation could spark, he turned away and began speaking with someone else.

I sighed, This is how it always went — eye contact and a small smile, that's all it would take for my heart to tip over and fill to the brim with emotions.

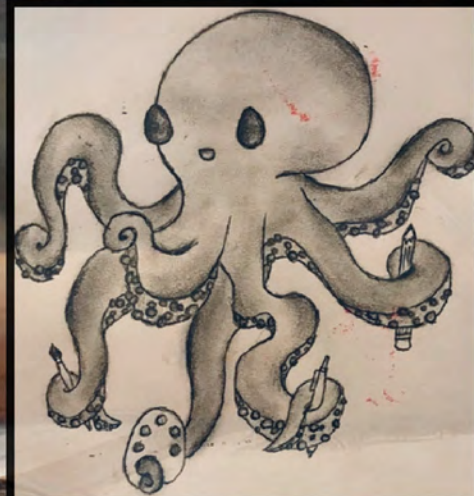
I sighed, This is how it always went.

I would give my heart away in a moment to a boy I had never even met.
And every day, my heart would break more and more because he didn't
even know my name.



THE END

“Writing is
the painting
of the voice.”
-Voltaire



Guilty?

Cosette McKeen

Part One

Marvin rubbed his eyes groggily. His father was shaking him to consciousness. “Marvin! Son, wake up!” Marvin turned over to the wall and groaned. “Aw, Pop, can’t I wait half an hour?”

“No, son! The Queen’s banquet is this evening, and we have much preparation. I promised Chef Louis you would help him until 8!”

Marvin yawned and stretched, delaying his duties as long as possible. Once he was sure his father had left the room, he bounced out of bed and dressed quickly. He could hardly wait to ask Chef Louis about the murder in 1276.

Nobody had ever been able to solve the age-old mystery, and Marvin was determined to solve it. Chef Louis’ great grandfather was a child at the time of the murder, and information had been secretly passed down from generation to generation.

Marvin shoveled spoonfuls of porridge into his mouth before kissing his mother goodbye. Then he ran out into the castle courtyard. The Irish sun shone cheerily on the eighteen-year-old boy, foretelling a bright, clear day. The cobblestones held firmly as Marvin’s leather shoes stepped in rhythm to the song he was humming.

Marvin paused in the middle of the courtyard, staring at his shoes; they would soon need repairing. Marvin grinned as he thought of the cobbler’s daughter Rosa, with her rosy cheeks and thick brown hair. But his grin soon fell away when Rosa’s brother came to mind. Marvin continued to walk in the direction he was sure the kitchen door was.

“Oof!” Marvin hit a body full on. He glanced up and shuddered. Alexander Pike, the royal carter, stood in front of him, scowling. “Ho there, boy! Watch where you are going!”

Marvin opened his mouth to utter an angry reply but instead, before he could stop them, surprising but true words tumbled out of his mouth.

“Do you dare to scold the King’s cupbearer’s son? Who are you anyway? Are you new here?”

Alexander Pike snapped his mouth shut, he nodded, and uttering a small word of apology, moved on his way. Marvin tried very hard to keep a straight face as he wondered if the cupbearer’s son deserved any respect. Just as he was about to open the heavy wooden door that led to the kitchen, he heard a commotion at the castle gate. He turned around, curious to see who it was, but a large hand reached out, took hold of his ear and pulled him inside.

Marvin’s hand automatically reached for his knife as he turned around. There before him was the misshapen face of Chef Louis.

“Well, boy? Your father promised you’d be here 3 minutes ago! Why all the delay, huh?” he demanded. Marvin shrugged and followed the cook down the corridor.

Once in the kitchen, Marvin was immediately set to the task of peeling potatoes. Chef Louis went to the other end, and scraped the remains of what looked like fish and eggs off a china plate. Marvin noticed he looked unusually pale this morning.

“Chef Louis?”

The very plump chef turned around from the turkey he was plucking, his red curls sticking out from underneath his hat.

“Aye, laddy?”

“Will you tell me more about the murder of 1276? I have been going through each suspect in my head since last week; Senor Vasheti, the Duke of Lancaster. . .” A high pitched scream interrupted Marvin followed by hurried footsteps on the floor above the kitchen.

Marvin cast an exhilarated look at Chef Louis, who frowned and wagged his finger at him. A few minutes later, the door was flung open and a few soldiers glanced around the kitchen till they spotted the fat cook.

“Chef Louis, you are under arrest for the poisoning of Sir Walter, and the Queen is most displeased with you,” the soldier informed the cook. Pure shock hit the chef’s face as he heard these words. Marvin thought he caught a hint of anger in his eye and grind of teeth in the chef.

Immediately, his mind went to detective mode. Guilty?

“Preposterous! You accuse me of the poisoning of Sir Walter, favorite of the Queen? Preposterous I say. Preposterous!” These last words were said with a wag of a finger and the door shut behind the guards and the fat cook. Marvin ran to the door and pressed his ear to the wood. Muffled voices and the clatter of the guards as they took Chef Louis to his cell.

“Has the doctor figured out for sure what caused Sir Walter’s death?”

“Aye. ‘E said it was p’ison. Da Queen is furious! I saw her briefly after she discovered the body. Tears a runnin’ down her cheeks, and her face as red as ketchup!”

“Have they sent for a detective?”

“Aye. One of the common folk he is. Name o’ Richard Kirk.”

Marvin’s heart leaped into his throat. Richard Kirk! Why, Marvin himself had been to his very house the week before to see him off to Scotland for several months. When the guards reached Richard’s house, there would be nobody there! But Marvin’s head had already begun to whirl. Unless . . .

* * *

Sixty seconds later saw Marvin running like the wind; into his own house, into his room to grab something, back out of his house, through the castle gate, down the bridge, and through the town until he got to Richard Kirk’s house.

He knocked on the door. No answer. He knocked again. No answer. Cautiously, he opened the door and slipped inside.

Marvin frowned as he attached the coal black wig and fake beard. It itched horribly. But this would be his only chance to solve a mystery. Forget the murder of 1276, focus on the murder of 1383! After rummaging in Richard’s closet, he found a coat and pair of boots. After slipping these on, he stood in

front of the mirror again. He hardly recognized himself. A loud commotion and knocking at the door forced him to turn around. "Richard Kirk? Open this door in the name of the King! Open!"

Stuffing a pillow inside his shirt, as he recalled Richard to be rather plump, Marvin stepped forward and opened the door. Six soldiers, all in their regular attire. Marvin knew each of them very well. They were all good friends of his!

The first soldier cleared his throat. "Richard Kirk? I am Sir Yuck, protector of the soil, defender of the dirt . . . er . . . I am getting mixed up." Sir Yuck paused, cleared his throat again, and began anew.

"You are requested by the Queen to come to the castle and solve for her a . . . rather, should I say 'drastic' murder?" Sir Yuck chuckled and turned to his comrades who were obviously trying to suppress their laughter. Marvin felt irked. Guilty?

"Murder?" replied Marvin, trying to make his voice as gruff as possible. He was now wishing he had stayed at the castle. "Fine, I'll be just a moment." And he shut the door in the guards' faces. They knocked immediately after. Marvin opened the door. Sir Eew and Sir Yum grabbed each of his arms and escorted him through the town to the castle.

Part Two

Marvin tried very hard to keep the pillow secure under his shirt and his wig firmly on his head. The guards led him through the magnificent living quarters to the King and Queen's apartments! Marvin found Queen Brianna pacing back and forth in front of the couch, but never sitting down. Her face lit up for a moment when she saw Marvin but fell again as she pointed to the body of Sir Walter. He lay on the floor in an unnatural position, his nose crunched against the floor, one eye facing Marvin, who shuddered. Remembering his manners, he bowed politely and said, "Your Majesty!" But Queen Brianna was in no mood for politeness.

“Oh fiddlesticks and nonsense. You, my dear fellow, are here to figure out who did this dreadful thing to dear Sir Walter, not to flatter those of royal blood. Set to work. Who killed Sir Walter?”

In his most gruff voice, Marvin replied, “That will take considerable evidence to be proven, my Lady.”

Marvin knelt down next to the body and studied it carefully. Pale green eyes, whiskers, white socks. Marvin pulled out his notebook.

“What was the last thing Sir Walter had to eat or drink?”

Queen Brianna bit her lip in thought. “I believe he had some canned beef, and some fresh water. I saw to it myself that he was properly fed. He can be rather picky at times.”

Marvin nodded his head. “I see.” He bent forward and rubbed under Sir Walter’s chin. “This is fish, not beef,” Marvin muttered under his breath. Standing back up, Marvin asked the Queen to sit down as he had a few questions to ask her concerning the death of Sir Walter.

“Are you very fond of Sir Walter?”

“Yes.”

“When did you find his body lying there?”

“This morning at about 7:30.”

“When did you eat breakfast?”

Queen Brianna bit her lip AGAIN. Marvin was noticing it more and more.

“I always eat at 6:00, Mr. Kirk.”

“What did you eat?”

“Every morning, I have a poached egg, a slice of toast, a cup of coffee, and a plate of salmon as only Chef Louis can make them. But I have no regard for that pig now! Anyhow, I was just raising my fork to my mouth when a guard entered and said that I was needed right away.

And so of course, I had to leave my breakfast. When I returned, my breakfast was gone. When I inquired about them, they deeply apologized, for they thought I had already eaten.”

Marvin nodded his head thoughtfully, then stood up.

“Just a few more questions, my Lady?”

“Why yes, of course!”

“When were you absent? I mean, what time was it when you got your food, were interrupted, and returned to find your place empty?”

“6:00 when I got my food, about 6:07 when I was interrupted, and I think it must have been around 6:30 when I returned.”

“How much of the day are you with Sir Walter?”

“Hmm, well, whenever I am around him, I am around him. I don’t know!”

“Do you know where your food comes from? Which field, which farmer, which carter, which tester?”

At this, Queen Brianna stood and shook her head.

Marvin replied calmly, “That will be all, Your Majesty. Until then.” After Marvin had closed the door behind him, Queen Brianna’s face turned from sweet to sour. She took a piece of paper from under her mattress and attaching it to a bird, she sent it out the window. Marvin closed the door to the Queen’s chambers softly and strode over to the closest guard.

“Excuse me sir, but where is the King?”

The guard looked down at Marvin and said, “He has been out to inspect the Duke of Rasinhog’s castle, Mr. Kirk.”

Marvin nodded and continued down the hall, fingering the tablet of poison he had found in the crack of the Queen’s couch. Suddenly, he crashed into someone coming up the stairs. As he glanced up, his wig nearly fell off with nervousness. It was Alexander Pike who was about to open his mouth in protest, but when he saw the band of high authority on his coat, he quickly shut it.

“I have just heard about the tragedy, Richard. Most unfortunate, I dare say.”

“Are you the royal carter for Chef Louis?”

Alexander looked down at Marvin and seemed to notice that his belly seemed a little square but he said nothing of it. Alexander nodded. Marvin changed his voice tone from solid to very harsh.

“You crashed into a young man in the courtyard this morning, no?”

Alexander nodded.

“What time was this?”

“About 6:20 I’d say.”

“What were you doing in the castle?”

Alexander’s face turned into an awful expression as he stared at Marvin.

“Aaaa choo!” he sneezed, before saying, “I feed the cats.”

Another sneeze. An apology.

“Sorry, Richard . . .”

“Mr. Kirk, if you please.”

“Mr. Kirk, but I am allergic to um . . . to cats!”

Marvin nodded as he slipped the poison into his pocket. Alexander’s eyes followed every movement his hand made. He swallowed nervously.

“That will be all, Mr. Pike.”

Marvin continued down the stairs, muttering to himself.

“Well, I know how Sir Walter was poisoned; but this is much more serious than I thought. After the Queen unexpectedly left, Sir Walter saw the abandoned plate of food, and ate it. But something on the plate was poisoned. Whoever poisoned Sir Walter meant to poison the Queen!”

Marvin quickened his steps and turned the corner.

Alexander Pike peeped around from behind a doorway, and quickly followed Marvin, his hands fingering a small dagger.

* * *

Marvin stepped into the courtyard. The bright Irish sun pounded hot rays upon his head, and under the wig, Marvin was very hot! He ran the back of his hand across his forehead and continued across the courtyard. He got to a large iron door and knocked on it. It was opened a crack by a guard, who opened it wide when he saw the badge upon Marvin’s coat. But he didn’t let Marvin pass.

“Name?”

“Mar-Richard Kirk.” The guard couldn’t hear him. Finally, he shouted, “Richard Kirk!”

Down the cold dark stairs Marvin descended to see the cook. A rat scurried in his path. Marvin shuddered and turned down the dark hall. He heard a muffled coughing. He turned to the right, but the sound came from the left. So, after getting lost a few times, Marvin, or Mr. Kirk as we now must call him, found the cook. Dead.

Part Three

Marvin heard a clatter and the sound of running footfalls growing fainter and fainter. The murder or murderess was trying to escape! Marvin grabbed a dim torch from off the wall and began to chase after the killer. But before he was able to leave the dead cook’s cell, an incredibly sharp pain cut through his leather boot and pierced through his skin. Marvin barely stifled a scream. He knelt down and brought the torch down to his bleeding foot. He reached down with his free hand and pulled the dagger from his foot. A tear fell down his cheek. Not because he was hurt, but because his blood wasn’t the only blood that stained the dagger’s blade. In the light of the torch, Marvin saw several tablets of poison lying on the ground.

He reached inside his pocket and brought out the tablet he had found in the Queen’s couch. They matched exactly.

“So,” Marvin muttered, “The killer of Sir Walter and Chef Louis are the same. Very interesting. Very interesting!”

Marvin wrapped the dagger in a cloth along with the tablets of poison. He grabbed another torch from off the wall since his first one had extinguished, and pattered back up the dark stairs to report the incident to the guard. On the way up the hallway, he passed a platter of food, of which its contents were considerably scattered.

“Guard! There has been another murder! Down there! Chef Louis! And I heard the murderer running away!”

The guard looked tiredly over Marvin and said, “There ain’t been nobody past me whom I don’t trust.”

Marvin’s head was whirling. He had so many clues, but his mind was so fogged, he couldn’t think. So, he sat down on a loose cobblestone, and placed his head in his hands. He started at the beginning. First: Murder of Sir Walter, favorite lap-cat of the Queen. Second: I crash into a very hurried looking Alexander Pike in the courtyard. Third: Chef Louis’ arrest. Fourth: Suspicious behavior from the guards who came to take me to the castle. Fifth: Interview of the Queen. Sixth: The Queen sends a bird out the window; I am glad I watched her for a little bit after I ‘left.’ Seventh: Very suspicious behavior from Alexander Pike. He follows me.

Eighth: I leave to interview the Chef. Ninth: I find him dead, stabbed. Tenth: The murder(ess) of both the Queen’s cat, Sir Walter, and Chef Louis are the same. The name of the villain: I don’t know.

But the gears did turn inside Marvin’s head. In fact, they ran so smoothly, he suddenly jumped to his feet. “By old Saint Raoldinhows! I know who killed Sir Walter and Chef Louis!”

* * *

Approximately twenty minutes later, Queen Brianna, Alexander Pike, Sir Yum, Sir Yuck, Sir Eew, the royal cupbearer (who was Marvin’s father) and the entire noble court was there. Who was guilty? Marvin stood in the middle of the room. To the astonishment of the court, he walked over to the Queen. Her eyes widened. Marvin pointed an accusing finger at her and said, “My Lady, you! You were meant to be the victim whose fate fell to Sir Walter instead. Somewhere between the kitchen and Sir Walter’s mouth, for it was he who ate your food, the plate of salmon, eggs, and toast was poisoned, intended for you!”

Gasps echoed through the hall as the horrified court stared at each other. Marvin cleared his throat and began.

“This morning, Sir Walter, favorite cat of Queen Brianna, was poisoned.

He ate off the plate of food intended for the Queen. Something on the plate was poisoned. While I was interviewing the Queen, I found a tablet of poison in the crack of the couch. Once I had completed the interview, I was walking down the hall, when I bumped into Alexander Pike. Under pressure, he admitted to having been the caretaker of the royal cats and that he was allergic. I left him then and went to the dungeon to question the cook. I found him dead; stabbed with a dagger. I also found a few poison tablets on the floor of the cell identical to the one I found in Her Majesty’s couch. But suddenly, I heard the sound of quickly retreating footsteps. I ran after the person, getting hurt in the process and finding a plate of what was once food. I concluded that the murderer of Queen Brianna’s cat and Chef Louis are the same. The murderer is _____?”

Answer

The lords and ladies of the court held their breath, waiting for the answer. “The murderer of Sir Walter and Chef Louis is . . . Chef Louis!”

“While the Queen was absent, Chef Louis went up to her rooms and poisoned her food,” Marvin continued. “Sir Walter ate that food and was later found dead.

When I went down to question Chef Louis, he had evidently stabbed himself. Why he killed himself, or attempted to poison the Queen, we will never know. At first, I strongly suspected Alexander Pike, but he was new to the castle that morning, and when I asked the guard if he had seen anyone run past he said “There ain’t been nobody past me whom I don’t trust.” Alexander was new, and the guard wouldn’t trust him right off the bat! He . . . I . . . uh. And that's all I have to say.”

Marvin walked up to the Queen and bowed humbly at the waist. Plop! Off flew his wig and beard. The whole court began to laugh. The royal cupbearer who was Marvin's father ran up to him and embraced him.

The Queen was so grateful to Marvin that that very day, he was proclaimed a page to Knight Fergo! One day, he himself would be a great knight too.



THE END

From Paralysis to Promise

Isabela C.

A Dramatization of Luke 5:17-25

Bright sunlight streams in through the window and onto my face, waking me. I go to sit up and stretch but my legs don't respond, and it all comes back to me; I am paralyzed. I manage to turn my back to the sun and I try to fall asleep again. The accident happened years ago, but I still remember when I could run, jump, and help around the house. I sigh and close my eyes. I want to sleep away another day of feeling useless.

I am dozing off when I hear a knock on my door. I barely utter the words "Come in", when my friends, Andrew, Judah, Phillip, Simon, and Joseph, come barging into my room, excitement and hope written on their faces.

"We found someone who can heal you!" Andrew yells. I give them a questioning look, hoping they haven't all gone mad.

"A Rabbi from Nazareth has been healing people in different villages. Word is that He is here. We must take you to Him!" Judah explains. I look in each of their faces, skeptical of this news.

"Ok," I said. Then, thinking this might be my last chance to walk again, I added enthusiastically, "Let's go!"

After breakfast, they place me on my mat, carrying the ends, and we are off. On the way, I ask, "What is the Rabbi's name?"

"His name is Jesus," says Philip.

We finally arrive at the house, and there is a very large crowd. Andrew taps a man's shoulder. "Excuse me, sir? Is this where the Rabbi is staying?"

"Yes it is," the man says roughly. "Now go away, He has no time for you."

Andrew pleads with him, "Please sir, my friend is paralyzed and needs help." The man just shoves Andrew back, and walks closer to the crowd. Andrew trips over a stray rock and falls into a mud puddle. I cry out, hoping he isn't hurt. He stands up, brushes off his tunic, and sets out to find a way through the crowd.

After three attempts, we still cannot get through the large crowd. Trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice, I say, "Come on, Andrew, maybe He doesn't have time for me."

"No," he says, "we are going to get you to the Rabbi." Andrew walks off, looking around the house. He comes running back with a sparkle in his eye. "I know how I am going to get you to Jesus."

"Come on guys, let's go to the roof." We walk around the crowd until we are at the left side of the house, where I can hear the Rabbi preaching to the people and his disciples.

Finally, we are on the roof. My friends set me down and start cutting through the roof. It crumples and leaves a large hole big enough for me to fit through. Andrew and Philip cut holes in my mat, tie ropes through the holes, and slowly but surely start lowering me down.

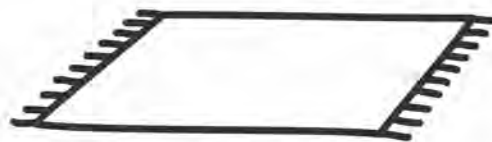
When I finally feel the hard floor under me, I look to my right and see the Rabbi. His eyes meet mine and I know that He is no ordinary Rabbi. All I see in His eyes is love, overwhelming love. It makes me want to jump into His arms, knowing I will be safe there. He breaks His gaze from mine, and I yearn to look again. He looks up to my friends on the roof, kneels, puts His hand on my shoulder, and says, "Man, your sins are forgiven." His hand on my arm brings such comfort and peace that I want to cry and pour my heart out to Him.

Pharisees and scribes start whispering urgently among themselves. I couldn't make out the words, but Jesus does. He stands up and says, "Why do you question in your hearts?"

Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." After He says this, I am confused. I don't have time to ask questions, because Jesus turns to me and says, "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." I just stare at Him. That's it? No sacrifices or good works?

I decide to trust Him. I look at my feet, and try wiggling my toes. Nothing happens. I am about to start crying. Wait! Was that movement? I try again, and my toes respond! I sit up without the trouble of useless limbs. Jesus offers His hand. I take it and He helps me to my feet. I take a small step, then look at Jesus. He envelops me in His loving, merciful gaze. I cry and laugh at the same time. I find myself in his arms amidst the cheering from my friends and the gasping of the crowd. I forget it all in His embrace.

I finally push away, call to Andrew, grab my mat, and run out into the streets with my friends. We quickly ran home, praising God. I know that I will never forget those loving eyes and that comforting hand that lifted me up from the bed of paralysis and gave me the promise of love.



THE END

God's Love Conquers All

Hannah C.

The boy stared blankly at the paper in front of him. His face glowed in the candlelight as he read what was written. Slowly, he looked up and out the window as he tried to grasp the message he had just read. There were no noises in his ear, no one busy getting ready for bed. All was still. The paper he still held in his hand contained the news he had been dreading, the news he thought would never really come, but it had come. His father had been killed during the Battle of Bunker Hill. Extreme grief rose in the boy's heart, but another feeling also rose up that had been festering for a long time now: intense bitterness and anger against the British.

His mind swirled with thoughts as he got up from his chair and went down the stairs into the kitchen. He knew that now the time had come. Everyone stricken with grief had gone to bed early, but there would be no sleep for this 16-year-old farm boy of Cambridge named David Bradford. He silently tiptoed across the kitchen into the front room and slipped out the door.

Once outside, he moved swiftly toward the barn and opened the door. The barn had a dark and damp atmosphere, unnoticed by David, who had his mind set on his mission. He moved quickly and silently about, grabbing different things he would need; his sword, cartridge pouch, canteen, knapsack, and blanket.

Over the years, he had been collecting these items for the perfect chance to escape and join the militia. The time had come. No longer could he have that hatred inside without doing something about it. Especially now with his father's death, his hatred against the British had grown into bitterness and he had to act. He quickly grabbed all his things so he wouldn't waste any time. There, he thought. Time to go. And with sword in hand, he slipped into the darkness.

Not long into David's walk towards Cambridge, his head began to swarm with thoughts. They started out as thoughts of grief.

I want Father back. I haven't seen him in months and I'm never going to see him again. Why did he have to die? I love him so much.

But then they turned to anger.

The British are the ones who did this to him. If they never came to Boston in the first place and incited the colonists to anger, my father would still be here, and he would still be alive. I wish every British soldier were dead and could feel the pain of my father's death. I wish I could kill every British soldier that ever steps foot in my country!

These thoughts continued until he was just one mile away from town when he saw a soldier dragging himself along in the distance. He looked wounded and ready to die. David started walking toward him looking to see if he could help, but then he saw the red coat. Red symbolizes the British, he thought, and the British are the ones that killed my father! Extreme hatred and anger rose in him, and without even a second thought, he grabbed his sword and started running toward the soldier. Feet thumping on the ground, voice yelling loudly, and heart pounding with hate, David had one thought and one thought only in his mind: kill this British soldier! Sword flying, he was just three feet from this soldier who by now had passed out. He raised his sword in the air ready to strike.

Then everything seemed to pass in slow motion. Things seemed to swirl all around him, and he felt lightheaded. Then, suddenly, he could hear his father's voice so clearly, "Son, always remember that bitterness will only lead you to do something you will regret, but God's love conquers all hate!"

The world seemed to stop as David put the sword down and fell to the ground weeping. His mind clear now, he remembered that conversation he had with his father so many years ago about hatred and bitterness.

He had promised his father he would show others God's love and wouldn't hate anyone anymore. "I guess I didn't fulfill my promise," he said sadly. "God I'm sorry for letting bitterness and anger take hold of my heart. Help me never ever do that again."

When he came back to his senses, he again noticed the soldier. He moved closer to him, and instead of seeing him as a British soldier, he saw him as a human being made in God's image who needed help. But as he took a closer look at the soldier, a sick feeling came over David. This soldier was not British; he was a Patriot. David remembered with sadness that Minutemen sometimes wore red coats too. With his mind filled with bitterness, he never even considered that possibility and the soldier had been so far away when he first saw him. His hatred had almost led him to kill a Patriot soldier!

Checking the man's pulse, David discovered that the soldier was still alive. Briskly picking him up, David started running toward town, stopping only once to catch his breath. He ran with all he was worth, but it felt as though his legs weren't cooperating with what he was telling them to do. Just when he felt like he couldn't go any farther, he finally arrived at the doctor.

Stepping inside the building, he gave the soldier to the doctor who quickly took him in to be examined. David decided to stay with the doctor to see what would become of the soldier.

The hours that followed were ones of extreme pain and anxiety as David contemplated what had just occurred. He couldn't believe what hatred and bitterness had led him to do. After thinking and pondering for a long time, he concluded that he had been wanting to fight against the British because of bitterness, but now he felt a loyalty to his country and a desire to fight to protect.

Just then the doctor came out from the other room and started talking to David.

"Well, it seems like he will make it. We still need a little time before we are sure," The doctor announced. "Thank God you got here when you did, otherwise, he wouldn't have made it for sure."

“ ‘Twas truly God’s grace sir,” David replied. “Thank you for treating him.”

“ ‘Twas the least I could do,” the doctor responded. “I told him about you, how you brought him in. He wants to see you.”

“Would it be all right to go in now?” David asked.

“Yes. He’s stable. Go ahead,” the doctor answered.

David got up slowly. He hardly knew what to expect. Why did this soldier want to see him?

Did he want to thank David for saving him or had the soldier seen David running toward him and yelling with a sword drawn before he passed out? He swallowed hard, and with knees shaking, he walked into the room.

Immediately, the soldier tried to sit up but was too weak to do so.

“What’s your name?” the soldier asked weakly.

“My name is David, David Bradford.”

“David Bradford!” the soldier said in wonder. “Are you in any way related to Joseph Bradford?”

“Yes, he’s my father or he was my father,” David said sadly. “He died in the battle.”

“Yes, I know. I was with him in his last breaths,” the soldier replied. “He made me promise to give something to his son, but he never gave me your name. I thought it would be impossible to find you, but by God’s grace, He led me right to you.”

Amazement, but also guilt, rushed over David. This soldier who, just hours ago David had almost killed, was with his father when his father needed him most. This soldier had something from David’s father that David never would have gotten had it not been for God’s grace. David was shocked that God used his bitterness to lead him right to the soldier who needed to find him.

“David,” the soldier asked. “Are you ok?”

“Yes,” David replied, coming out from his thoughts.

“Sorry.”

“Well, the items from your father should be right over there by my coat,” the soldier said, pointing to the corner of the room.

David quickly walked over, eager to see what his father had left for him, but then he saw the coat and his mind flashed back to that dreadful moment when he saw this coat and almost killed the soldier in the room with him now. His thoughts only lasted for a moment, though, as he spotted what looked to be a letter right by the soldier’s coat. He quickly picked it up and started reading. It read:

Dear David,

I cannot begin to express to you the joy it has been being your father. If you are reading this letter, that means that I have died in battle and that saddens me very much. Just know that I am very proud of the man that you are becoming, and I will forever love you. I want you to always remember that God will never leave you or forsake you. He will be with you in the hard times. He will guide you as you continue to become the man of God He wants you to be. David, seek Him with all your heart.

I’ve written this letter to you so you will know my great love for you, but also to tell you something that weighs heavily on my mind and something I’ve been wanting to tell you since I started this fight for freedom. One of our ancestors was named William Bradford and he was one of the passengers on the Mayflower. He fought hard for freedom of religion in England and Holland. When he came to America, he signed the Mayflower Compact which is one of the documents that have paved the way for the freedom that we are fighting for now. William Bradford was also the second governor of Plymouth Colony. He was a leader, and you can be too. I’m asking you, David, to continue the fight that I started, continue the fight for freedom. Just like our forefather William Bradford did and just like I have died doing.

To help you remember this, I am giving you my bayonet. With this I fought for freedom. Continue the fight son, continue the fight.”

**With all my love,
Father**

Looking up from his letter, David saw something silver underneath the soldier's coat. Surely enough, it was his father's bayonet. He slowly reached for it and lifted it up.

With this, David thought to himself as he looked it over, my father fought for freedom.

Tears welling in his eyes, he thanked the soldier, and gave him directions to where he lived in case the soldier needed anything.

As he walked away from the doctor, he knew what he had to do. He had to go home and apologize to his mother for running away and then ask her for her blessing to join the Continental Army. He was sure that once his mother saw the letter and bayonet that his father had given him, she would let him join the army. He looked down at his father's bayonet that he still held in his hand.

Yes father, I will continue the fight for freedom! David thought to himself. Just think, if God hadn't kept me from letting my bitterness take hold of me and I had killed that soldier, then I would never have gotten the last letter and gift from my father. Father was right. Bitterness will only lead you to do something you will regret, but God's love conquers all hate.



THE END

“A great novel,
rather than
discouraging me,
simply makes me
want

TO WRITE.”

- Madeleine L'Engle



More Than Blood

Ellie C.

Alex shifted in his dark corner on Main Street. He had been there since noon, and he was getting uncomfortable. He watched the bakery every day, and every day, the workers took their lunch break. During this lunch break, the bakery was left completely unattended. When the bakery was left unattended, Alex seized the opportunity to “borrow” some bread.

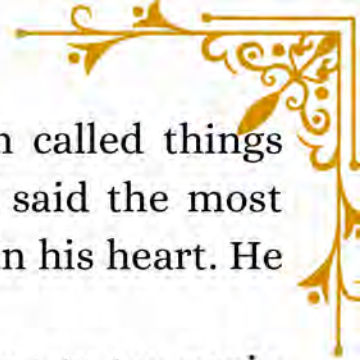
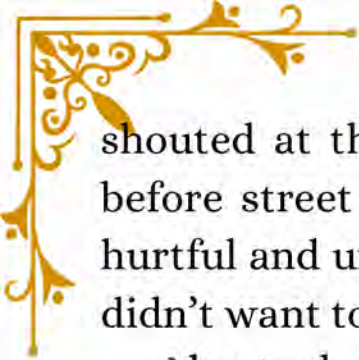
Alex did not like stealing, but he didn't really have a choice. For as long as he could remember he had lived on the street. He had to salvage his own food and live in a dirty alleyway. He was only twelve and had no parents. They had abandoned him when he was very young. Stealing from the bakery was his best option.

But today, the workers had taken their lunch break separately. Alex had waited all afternoon, and the bakery was never left unattended. Alex was very hungry; he had not eaten all day.

Twenty minutes before closing, Alex decided to take a risk. He had been getting better at stealing, but he had never tried to steal with workers and shoppers around. Today, he would give it a try.

He stopped outside the butcher shop and tried to clean his face as best he could with a bucket of water that he really hoped was clean. After trying to look as clean as possible, Alex entered the bakery. He browsed over the baked goods and bread as though he were shopping. But when he reached the basket of overcooked, cheaper breads, he began to get nervous. He didn't like stealing, but it was a “necessary evil” to survive. He only took the little bits and always took the cheap food. He was nervous. He wasn't fast enough. He got caught.

When the worker shouted at Alex, he panicked and bolted down the street, dropping the bread. Alex ran from the angry worker, running down Main Street and through the side streets, finally losing him. The worker had



shouted at the young boy during the chase. Alex had been called things before street rat, trash, a hoodlum, etc. But the baker had said the most hurtful and unrepeatable things. They really hurt Alex deep in his heart. He didn't want to do this. This is what he had to do to survive.

Alex took the scenic route back to his "den." He would have to try again tomorrow. Alex lay down in his bed and, with a heavy heart, fell into a dreamless sleep. For Alex didn't dream. He did not hope for anything. He could barely get food; how could he hope for anything better? He never expected anything from anyone. He was a street rat, and street rats didn't hope—except that Alex thought he might have a friend who knew where his mother might be.

The next day, Alex went to visit his friend. Her name was Mrs. McGregor, but everyone called her Honey because she was so sweet. She was an elderly widow who lived alone with only her cocker spaniel, Charlie, for company. Every few days, Alex would walk her dog and attend to any jobs too hard for the elderly woman. Honey was poor and losing her vision, but she loved Alex very dearly. She tried to give him any change she could spare, but he refused it. So, she knitted him warm clothes to wear. Charlie, the cocker spaniel, loved Alex, too. He would get so excited when Alex arrived because he loved walks and playing with Alex.

Today was a beautiful day, and Charlie was eager to play. Alex took Charlie to the park, and they played ball. After the walk back, Alex approached Honey about his mother.

Honey knew where Alex's mother lived.

She also knew that his mother did not care about Alex, so she was reluctant to tell Alex. She knew that deep in his heart he wanted a family. She thought of Alex as her son, but knew he had not realized there was more to family than blood. She was afraid of Alex getting hurt and she wasn't sure he was ready for the truth.

She had been pondering this for many days now. She decided Alex was getting older now and would find out one day and she was not getting any younger.

They sat down at the table and had tea and biscuits. Honey explained all she knew about his parents.

They were never married, but they were madly in love. They were barely eighteen when Alex was born. They were not ready for the responsibility that came with a child. His father had died in a crash shortly after Alex was born. After this, his mother abandoned him. He was given to his mother's cousin, Doreen. She was young and poor but had a big heart. When she heard about Alex, she agreed to take him in. She lived on her father's farm, trying to keep the farm alive. She had no other relatives willing to help her out. When Alex was four, Doreen fell ill and died. Alex was left on the streets.

Honey told Alex all of this. She told him where his mother was living now. After this, Alex was silent. He wanted to hope his mother had changed. He knew it was not likely, but he wanted to try. He thanked Honey for the info and then helped her lie down for a nap. She was feeling tired and under the weather.

After Honey had fallen asleep, Alex left a note explaining to Honey where he was going and that he would return tomorrow.

He found the house and stood at the front door, trying to work up the courage to knock.

A man in his thirties answered the door, and a young child poked his head out from behind the man.

“D-does Min-Minerva Smi-Smith live h-here?” Alex stuttered.

The man looked Alex up and down before calling out, “Minerva dear, some kid wants to see you.”

A woman's voice called back “I don't know of any kids that would be visiting. Can you come watch the baby? I'll be right there.”

The man left to do as his wife asked, leaving the door temporarily unattended, except for the little boy trying to eat his toes.

When Alex heard footsteps returning to the door, he lost his nerve and bolted. Upon finding the doorway empty, Minerva Smith shrugged it off, thinking it must have been some kind of prank.

Alex ran for a block before running out of breath and collapsing on the sidewalk, almost in tears. It was one thing to be abandoned by your own mother. It was another to find out she had started a new family and had replaced you with two sons and never looked for you. He had expected to be rejected, he was prepared for that, but not replaced.

Alex sat there in sorrow until he heard sirens. He wondered if his mother had called the police on him. He was briefly relieved to see an ambulance pass by, but then was curious to see who needed help. Alex followed the sound of the siren and was shocked to find it at Honey's house. He ran up just in time to see Honey wheeled out of the house and into the ambulance. Alex asked one of the paramedics what had happened.

The paramedic explained how a neighbor was walking past Honey's house and had discovered her unconscious on the lawn. She had immediately called an ambulance and had just returned home. The paramedic's diagnosis was heart attack.

After explaining this and assuring Alex that Honey would be fine and sent home within a few days.

As Alex was walking to Honey's house to check on Charlie the paramedic called to him, "Are you Mrs. McGregor's grandson?"

"Yes," Alex lied.

"Do you have someone to stay with while your grandmother is away?" The paramedic asked.

Alex assured the medic that he would get the dog and go to his friend's house down the street. Of course, he was lying, but the medic believed him, and the ambulance, along with Alex's only friend, drove away.

Alex stayed the night in Honey's house with Charlie because Charlie was not used to being alone. Neither one slept very much for worrying about Honey.

The next few days, Alex and Honey couldn't stop worrying about the other. Despite the medic's assurance, Alex still worried about losing Honey. He couldn't go visit without an adult and none of the nurses or doctors would tell him anything. Honey could not stop thinking about Alex going to see his mother: how he reacted, how she reacted, how he was feeling.

Honey was in the hospital for six days. She was glad to be leaving the hospital. Alex walked her home. Neither one said anything but both found comfort in the other's company.

Alex agreed to stay in the spare room until Honey was fully recovered. Honey worried about Alex; he was quieter and always seemed lost in thought. Honey knew he would talk to her when he was ready.

On Honey's last official day of recovery, he was ready. That evening, while watching the sunset on Honey's back porch, Alex told Honey everything. He told her about his visit to his mother's house. He told her how scared and worried he was about her. He told her how he realized how much he cared about her. He told her about the medic, asking him if she was his grandmother.

He told her about how good it felt to pretend for a minute that he had a family. He told her he realized that what he wants more than anything is a family and that he's not going to find that at his mother's house. Even if she took him in, it would never feel like home. He thought about going to the farm and looking for relatives in the town where Doreen was from. But he realized he cared too much about Honey to leave her. Alex told Honey that he had accepted the fact that he would never have a family, but if her offer still stood, he would move into the spare room to help take care of her.

Honey was overjoyed that Alex had decided to move in with her, but she was disappointed he still did not realize that she needed him as much as he needed her and that family is more than blood.

When they went to bed, Honey came into Alex's new room to tell him goodnight and to let Charlie in because Charlie had taken a liking to sleeping with Alex. She wanted to give a few words of wisdom to sleep on.

“I’m glad you have decided to stay and I hope you realize you always have a home with me and Charlie. And just because your mother doesn’t care does not mean nobody does. Goodnight dear, thank you for taking such good care of me.” And with these words, Honey went to bed.

Alex lay in bed with Charlie thinking about what Honey had said. He had never had a home before. Yet, he felt happy when Honey called this his home.

He thought about how Honey really was like a mother to him. And it was that night that Alex realized he did have a family. Honey was like a mother and Charlie was his best friend.

“Family doesn’t require blood, only love,” Alex told Charlie before they both fell asleep, content in each other’s company.

Alex was the happiest boy in the world that night. For he realized that he already had his heart’s deepest desire—a family.



THE END

A Servant's Heart

Avalon Grace

I let my anger leak out as I ferociously vacuumed the carpet. With each vicious stroke I felt better. I wanted to forget my ordeal, but at the same time I desired to let it manifest. I couldn't fathom why my parents didn't let me go. All of my friends were going.

Thrusting my strength into the handle, I hit the side coffee-table. I watched as several unbalanced books came crashing to the floor. Frustrated, I stomped over and hastily threw the easy reader books onto the couch. I stopped where I was, and breathed, my mixed feelings subsided. "My parents know what's best," I told myself, while trying to not resurface my feelings.

I turned off the sweeper and grabbed the brochure that started this mess. Eyes glazing over the less important information, I skipped to the part I most wanted. It read, 2023 Costa Rica Mission Trip; an experience you will never forget. Memories of the first night I read this brochure flew into my mind, like a swarm of angry bees. My best friend, Beatrix, had handed me the colorful paper proudly. Her mom was the lead guide on the trip since they had relatives down in Costa Rica.

She wanted me to go with her, and her enthusiasm sparked mine. I remembered reading the words and instantly feeling a deep desire to go. The thought of serving others for God excited me, it encouraged my servant's heart. What I discovered is that not all enthusiasm is shared the same way. My parents' approval did not come as I had hoped. Their excuse was that they didn't like the idea of me flying across the world without them, something about responsibility.

My anger turned into remorse as I tucked my chestnut brown hair behind my ear. Grasping the paper tightly, I prayed that God would help me forgive my parents. A peace settled in my heart and I smiled. A type of smile that only comes from knowing that you are loved and cherished by someone

above your situation. I rose from my seat and resumed my weekend chore. Thoughts of Beatrix and I running on a brilliant beach, serving the less fortunate, and all together having a good time kept probing my thoughts. “Rebecca,” my name quickly snapped me out of my day dream, and I glanced over at my mother. She stood in the doorway, her hair the same color as mine, smiling softly. “I can finish this job,” she insisted. The gesture I knew was her way of trying to patch things up.

I turned off the sweeper and grabbed the brochure. I gave my mother a quick kiss on the cheek as my sign of forgiveness, before I bounded up the carpeted stairs to my bedroom.

We live in a two story house. My family consists of me, my mother, my dad, and my younger brother, Caleb. I have my own room, tiny, but my own. The walls are a brilliant ocean blue, with sparkling white trim. My bed is covered by a light blue bedspread with wave-like ruffles, and decorated with three pillows that look like the beach. It’s pretty obvious that I love the ocean. My walls are neatly covered in; pictures of marine life, art projects of ocean animals, and magazine articles about sea rescues. The only thing that stands out in my room is the stack of blank postcards on my desk next to a list of Spanish words that I had been studying.

I settled myself down at my desk and tore off the plastic wrap on the Costa Rica postcards. I had ordered them online because I was too excited to wait. Now it looked like I’d never get to use them. I sorted the postcards from my favorite to my least. At the top of my list was a picture of a dazzling ocean. I pulled out a pen and started to write on it.

Dear Beatrix,

How was your flight? What does the Costa Rica landscape look like? When do you get to start serving the community? I’m not sure what I’m going to do with my summer now that I’m not there and you're not here. Trying to

understand God's purpose in this is tough, so is forgiving my parents. I'm just glad you get to go so that you can tell me all about it!

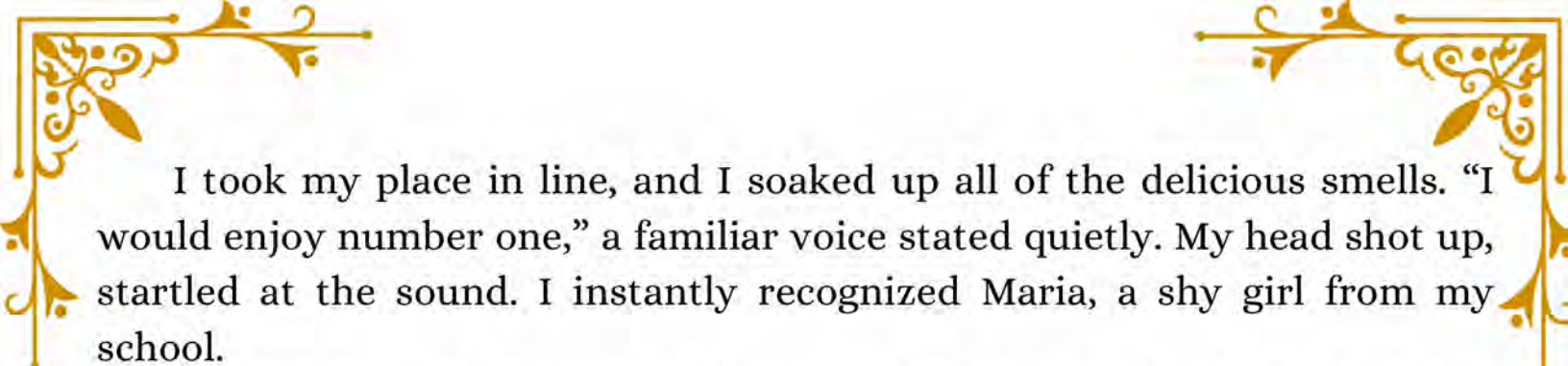
Love,
Rebecca

P.S. I know this is a Costa Rica postcard, I was too excited to wait and buy them down there. So I bought them a week before I told my parents about the trip.

I stared at my neat handwriting and felt satisfied. I quickly read the address on the brochure and copied it onto the blank area of the postcard. It felt weird doing it this way. I was supposed to be sending the postcards to my home, not to Costa Rica. I decided to send it right away, because I knew it would take awhile to reach Beatrix. I grabbed my purse, hat, and the postcard before I rushed downstairs. "Where are you going?" My mom asked me while I slipped on my jacket.

"The post office, I'm mailing a postcard to Beatrix," I paused before reaching for the rustic door handle, "Is that ok?" My mother paused her dusting and balanced herself on the side table before answering, "That's fine." A split second of worry flashed across her face but vanished before I could comprehend it.

Out in the garage, I grabbed my bike, and was off. My street is pretty calm and nicely decorated. Lush trees swayed in the summer breeze and I sat back and let it rush over me. Restaurants and stores flew past me as I peddled faster on my speedy bike. The post office was just out of town. I had lived here all my life, I knew almost everyone. Once I finished mailing my postcard, I decided to get a bite to eat. Living next to a city has its perks and one of them is a wonderful restaurant called Chick-fil-a. With a crisp five dollar bill in my jacket pocket, and a juicy chicken sandwich in mind, I skipped merrily through the bright red doors. It wasn't busy, about three other customers.



I took my place in line, and I soaked up all of the delicious smells. “I would enjoy number one,” a familiar voice stated quietly. My head shot up, startled at the sound. I instantly recognized Maria, a shy girl from my school.

I didn’t know her too well, because she mostly stayed silent in the corners. She proceeded to hand the man at the counter three, one dollar bills. “That will be three seventy-five,” he replied. I watched as the color on Maria’s face drained drastically. She fumbled for her purse and started rummaging around in it. To a passerby it would look like she dropped something inside her purse, but to an experienced victim of circumstance, I realized she knew that she did not have the money. Someone behind me mumbled something impatiently. Maria chuckled nervously, and dug more furiously in her purse.

A hot bubbly feeling rose up inside, and a wave of love flashed over me. “Here,” in one quick motion, the money was out of my pocket and on the counter. The friendly worker skipped off to go get her order. Without a word, Maria rushed over to the pick up station and left the change on the counter. “Was that the right thing to do?” I wondered nervously. Finally realizing my actions and that I didn’t have enough money for my own sandwich, I quietly stepped out of line before the worker came back.

I shut the door and listened for the sounds of my family. I wanted to discuss my encounter with my mom, so I went looking for her.

I found her in the spotless kitchen talking on the phone. Her conversation sounded important and I didn’t want to interrupt, so I trudged up to my room and flopped onto my fluffy bed. All of the feelings of the day rushed over me. Pokings and prodings of doubt filled my mind like pesky mosquitoes. Misery, and envy slithered up my throat like a snake. I was a mess. I opened my Bible and found a folded piece of paper sticking out of the binding. It was from Beatrix. At first I was confused, until I read the first sentence.

Dear Rebecca,

I knew you were disappointed that you couldn't go, so I wrote this letter before I left home and gave it to your mom. How are you? What are you doing this instant? Ha, don't answer that, you're reading my letter. :) I know this is rough for you so I wanted to remind you, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." Proverbs 3: 5-6. And if that doesn't help you, "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps." Proverbs 16: 9. I have like five other verses for you but I have to go.

Love,

Your sister in Christ!

I smiled as I read my friend's familiar handwriting. I could almost hear her voice reading it to me. I slipped it back in my Bible and pondered the verses in my head. Heaviness started to drift across me and before I knew it, I was sound asleep.

The next morning was like a jewel in the sunlight, but I was too groggy to see it. I twitched uncomfortably, and my mind felt like I had only just gone to sleep. "A broken flower pot?" I mumbled, recalling the events of my tiring dream. I remembered seeing Maria holding a broken flower pot. The pot was glued together poorly. I hoisted myself up in bed and thought deeply about the pot. Then, I crawled out of bed and slowly got dressed. I decided to shake off the dream, it didn't seem too important. I yawned loudly as I trudged down the stairs, the sunlight reflected through the windows brightly. I expected the downstairs to be pretty quiet, but my presumptions were met by my fast paced family. "Oh good you're up, I was just about to get you," My mother informed me. Before I could ask what was wrong she replied, "Go grab the water bottles in the garage. I want to bring them to the trailer park." My mind went into a ramble, "What trailer park?"

My words sputtered out in a tornado of confusion. My mother gave me a startled look, “Remember the outreach we are doing today? The one that our church has been preparing for?”

She searched my face for any sign of remembrance, “It’s today.” “Okay,” I paused, I didn’t really care, “I’ll go get the water bottles.”

My family and I had gone to the trailer park many times before, we mainly partnered up with other churches and went door to door and prayed with people. Beatrix and I had done it many times together. Sometimes we even witnessed people accept Jesus as their Savior and healings or miracles! Usually we were just observing and helping the adults behind the scenes, giggling at inside jokes and talking over things we didn’t quite understand. I was a little sad, it was the first time I had gone without her. Making me feel lonely and slightly resentful at the task at hand. I whispered, “God, I need your help to love these people today and to be useful to whatever you’re doing here.” “Which house do you want to go to?” my partner asked me. We stood in the middle of a dusty road, surrounded by second privileged houses decorated with small trinkets and plants. I told my partner that I didn’t really care what house we went to, so we were off.

Soon I felt myself fall into the motions; meet people, pray with them, move on. My mind kept drifting off into daydreams, picking up hordes of trash on Costa Rica beaches, playing with cute children, and teaching people about God.

“Whoa, look at that flower pot,” my partner exclaimed.

She snapped me out of my daydream and I realized where I was. We had arrived in front of a blue trailer. The windows were cracked and embossed with chalk drawings. The yard, or what was left of the yard, bestowed a vast amount of foliage. Surrounded by flower pots, it was plain to the eye that they were well taken care of. “What flower pot?” I asked, searching for anything that seemed out of the ordinary. “That one, on the porch!” She replied, while advancing towards the house next door. When my eyes

caught sight of the flower pot, I could feel my heartbeat quicken. It was an identical match to the one in my dream! The sides of the pots were sticking out in an odd fashion making it seem as if a two year old had dropped it and repaired it. It was a tan color, made of some type of clay, not plastic. The pot stuck out like a pig in a sheep's pen, because of its peculiar state. "Something is broken inside," the thought drifted through my mind before I could stop it. "What's broken?"

I asked, not realizing I stated it out loud. My partner turned around and stared at me, "'What?" she saw where I was staring, "Do you want to go to this house, Rebecca?"

I tried to shake off the pounding in my heart, "No, I mean-" The words got lost in my throat, I knew what I had to do, but was I too scared to do it? "Let's move on," I mumbled. I felt like my emotions had boarded a rollercoaster and was riding top speed. I stepped back, and pondered, "What if something is broken? What if those people need to hear about Jesus? Was this a sign from God?" I prayed out loud, "Spirit of fear get off me now! Jesus help me please, help me discern your will."

"I change my mind, I think God wants us to go to that house," I stated confidently. My partner turned around and smiled. Hand held an inch away from the door, it was then I felt my fear return. With a swift rap on the rotted door, I knocked it away. If God had a mission I was determined to complete it. We waited a couple seconds for the door to open. My pulse beat rapidly. The door swung open and I almost felt the air leave my lungs. Maria stared back, fingers gripping the wood tightly. Seeing Maria made the clues of my dream glow brighter. A thought popped into my mind that can only be explained by the Holy Spirit, "Does anyone in your family have a broken foot?" A fly flew past us in the boiling summer air, I felt uncomfortable but brave. I wasn't sure if the thought was a word of knowledge at the time, or just my tired mind rambling.

Maria's mouth dropped open, "My sister, she was carrying our grandmother's old flower pot and tripped," she paused, "How did you know?" "I think God told me," was my bold answer. Silence engulfed us for a couple seconds, and my amazement was sparked. My next steps would determine my obedience, "Can we pray over your sister's foot? My friend and I are with a group that goes around and helps people."

"My family is not into that religious stuff," Maria stated nervously. I continued, "That doesn't change my question, Jesus healed many non-believers just because he loved them. He went to the cross for your sister's whole healing, he loves your whole family." Maria looked up, "I'll go get my sister." Maria's sister limped onto the porch, and was followed by the rest of the family. Her foot was badly wrapped in a towel, partly because they had no money to take her to the doctor. Her visage revealed the excruciating pain, as she settled herself on the rusty lawn chair.

I ran through the same information with her, like I did with Maria. Then I closed my eyes and laid my hands shakily on her leg.

I prayed fearlessly, "In Jesus name, foot be healed." The seconds slowed before me, my doubt far away. Maria's sister stopped and held her leg. For a second, the look of pain seemed to grow, but the realization was that it wasn't pain- it was healing! She moved her foot around and exclaimed, "No pain! I feel no pain!" Tears of joy streamed down Maria and her sister's face as they both danced around the broken flower pot. The mom of the family grabbed her daughter's head in her hands and kissed her forehead. I felt like dancing myself, we laughed and I shared the Gospel again.

I told them about what Jesus did, and his motives for doing it. They listened intently, hungry for hope. By the end of our talk, my partner and I led them in a prayer of repentance. Their new faith encouraged my own, and it wasn't until I was in the car that I fully grasped what had occurred. God had given me a dream, a word of knowledge, and performed a miracle! It was a healing, a true and honest healing. A thought of dread washed over me, "If I had been in Costa Rica, I wouldn't have seen Maria's sister miraculously touched by God." I smiled, "Not today!"

I squirmed in my cold seat, heart pounding, with beads of sweat pouring down my face,

* * *

“Nervous?” Beatrix asked while chuckling to herself a bit. “Maybe, I’ve never given testimony like this before,” I replied while wringing my hands together. Maria sat down next to me, “You will do fine,” she handed us a bag, “Popcorn?” “Yes please,” Beatrix answered. Despite my friends’ encouragement I still felt nervous, it had been a month since the mission team left and it was now time for testimony night. I watched Beatrix get up along with my other friends and now it was my turn. I shuffled my papers around, organizing for no apparent reason. Our youth pastor, Grace, gave me the signal that it was almost time for me to go on. My throat tightened. “Dear Jesus, please help Rebecca give her testimony, calm her nerves, and help us to learn more about You, Amen,” Maria’s small hand grasped my shoulder as I let her prayer sink in. We dared to glance at each other and I was met with her beaming face. “Rebecca?”

I stood to my feet and made my way to the front. Hundreds of eyes looked up to me, well more like fifty teenagers.

I blinked hard to adjust to the bright lights before, I took a breath and began, “You might wonder why I’m up here since I didn’t even go on the mission’s trip to Costa Rica. Even though my feet never left the country, and in spite of my sometimes disgruntled attitude, God was able to use me for his glory. He not only changed my life but five others as well. By the end of it, I better understand the meaning of a servant’s heart,” I paused again and surveyed the faces. Maria’s bright smile, Beatrix’s support, and my parents waving to me. I wiped a glimmering tear from my cheek and continued, “I learned that with God, a servant serves wherever they are.”

THE END



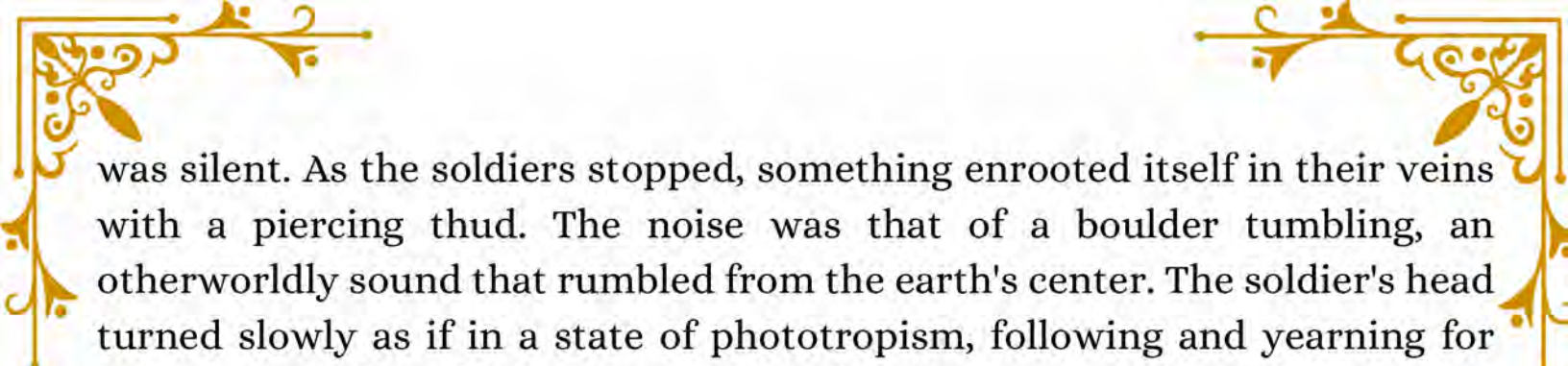
Are You My Friend or My Enemy? Caroline L.

The room captures the essence of silence. The silence that brings stillness to the never-ceasing mind, and the quietness that is so sweet and refreshing to the soul. The mind could drift far away and appreciate the beauty that creation offers. But now, the stillness is troubled. The mind no longer gathers up all its wisdom and glory. Instead, it wanders needlessly, engulfed in silence. There is no memory, no recollection, nothing to see, and nothing to hear. The recurring dream, which once belonged to the mindset of tangible reality, was now a mere image—a lifeless, still echo of the past. It echoes of what there once was and what could have been: the whisper of a comforting touch and the gentle embrace of a loving voice.

Perhaps the recollection of these things was lost in time. Just misplaced. Just forgotten. But no, it was the deceitful sincerity and misleading comfort of quietude. It showed no mercy to the crying heart, throbbing in its anguished state. Silence stole the memories, and then the helpless heart became its slave. Silence would torture the heart with memories, and the more distant they became, the stronger the desired effect: pain.

Yet if one were to enter the brilliance of peacefulness, they would be brought to the tingling comfort that a youthful soul feels at the hearth of a steady home.

I confess that I feel a great deal of discomfort thinking about it. Something in that moment was indescribable; perhaps it was those around us. Sentiment encroached upon the brain without end. The trees were a melancholy sight. Their camouflage wept in the wind like a flag, protecting their twig-like arteries. The wind failed to sweep notes into the air, yet it seemed to cry in the loudest voice that that particular void was a refusal to carry anything to where it should not be. The forest seemed as still as the infantry at that moment; they walked steadily, but a whistle cried, and all



was silent. As the soldiers stopped, something enrooted itself in their veins with a piercing thud. The noise was that of a boulder tumbling, an otherworldly sound that rumbled from the earth's center. The soldier's head turned slowly as if in a state of phototropism, following and yearning for the source of life: the flag. A quiet morning was unusual during that time. You must understand, reader, that during a war, stillness never goes unnoticed, and it is hard to resist the fidgety urge to fight it, or maybe I should say fear it as if it were an enemy.

Indeed, I witnessed many things in life, as well as on the battlefield, that taught me that these things—understanding, predictability, and a friend—are born amid nebulousness, uncertainty, and an enemy. But as I start this story, hope is yet to be born in the heart of loss.

~

A young woman, not older than twenty-four, sat quietly. The surrounding room was a dreary sight. There was a table with various items, and below it was a tin half-full, perhaps containing soup. The spoon was sitting upside-down in the can. The girl was asleep on the floor, her ear resting against a wooden chair. The faint rumble and the high-pitched whistle came from outside. She woke up, and her temple struck the chair with a dull thud. When I saw her, the entire world was behind my back. My eyes were blind, but my soul was vivid. My skin was unable to perceive, yet my heart was warm. My ear was deaf to the whistle, but my mind was awed by what lay before me. Indeed, nothing affected my senses, but I lurched forward as the brisk air collided with the internal fire. The warmth of sleep faded. The girl continued to lie silently, and I stared at her familiar face.

Distressed, she stood up, restlessly patting the cap pinned to her hair. From her shoulders hung a dark cape, and underneath was a white uniform adorned with a sanguine cross. Fidgeting failed to provide any relief. There was pain that contained helpless patience, like a lamb caught in the lion's snare, no longer struggling for freedom or life itself. Her hand rested over her right pocket. Every day of her life since that dreadful afternoon had

started in this way—with grief, suffering, and no delusion to escape from it. She became sickly pale but was determined to stand, undeterred by her trembling.

A memory stood at the door of her mind as if it were awaiting orders to enter therein. The past lingered, while the future rushed away like a current. It was all lost, just as real as a spirit is to the mortal's touch and as reticent as a wraith in the night. But the night was now over. The warmth from the sun had just begun to rest on the soft ground below, and its twisted fibers had become softer in the absence of its weighty burden. All at once, the sun shone brightly, so brightly. All at once, the room started to spin, and her cheeks flushed feverishly. She looked up—there was Silence himself.

Robust and tall, his presence was breathtaking. Death surrounded him; this is indefinable to those fortunate enough not to step onto his pathway. But who has not walked on his path? Whether by encountering deep sadness, loneliness, or something by way of the agony human nature brings on itself. Silence's appearance was magnificent, but it failed to bring a gentle sweep of quiet amazement and apprehension over one's awareness. It was not like seeing the sweeping grasslands, the tranquil lights in the gloom's azure, or the stallion leaping with all its serene beauty. Silence stood proudly with an ambivalent brilliance. Yet again, his appearance was pleasant—one might even dare to say handsome. It is miraculous that his strength, which brought agony upon such beautiful people, did not twist his image into repulsiveness.

Now, the amber collided with darkness alone, and there was no internal fire to guard it. She still stood as she did a moment ago, occasionally glancing away from the thoughts that stared at her, but she realized that looking away was no longer comforting or a means of escaping the dreadful image; instead, it was pulling her closer and closer. Everything around her, she could not see. She wore the most sorrowful and heartbroken expression. She slid her hand into her pocket and let out a gut-wrenching wail.

I leaned forward with anticipation and quickly glanced behind me. I received an assuring nod. My heart filled itself with sadness and an unexplainable feeling of hope. She limply fell to her knees on the concrete below. I cringed. I wished to dash to her side with superhuman speed and sink to my knees in her place. She refused to remove her right hand from the pocket, and draped her other hand across her feverish forehead. A question lingered amidst her inaudible sobbing: "Why?"

Silence stepped forward, as if interpreting her question as an invitation to come closer. Perhaps kneel beside her and explain the answer. He seemed to rub his hands together as the continual thuds of his pace quickened. His legs planted on the ground with absurd confidence. They were as immovable and precise as the needle of a sewing machine, stitching every detail with such care. He paused abruptly, not because he needed time to align the next stitch, but in a dumbfounded manner as if realizing he had forgotten to thread the needle. His expression was one of disgust.

I scanned the room. Something—or someone, I suppose—had entered unnoticed. This stranger supposedly walked into the room backward, determined to keep his face always hidden.

This was understandable and even considerate—merely the back of his appearance was nightmarish.

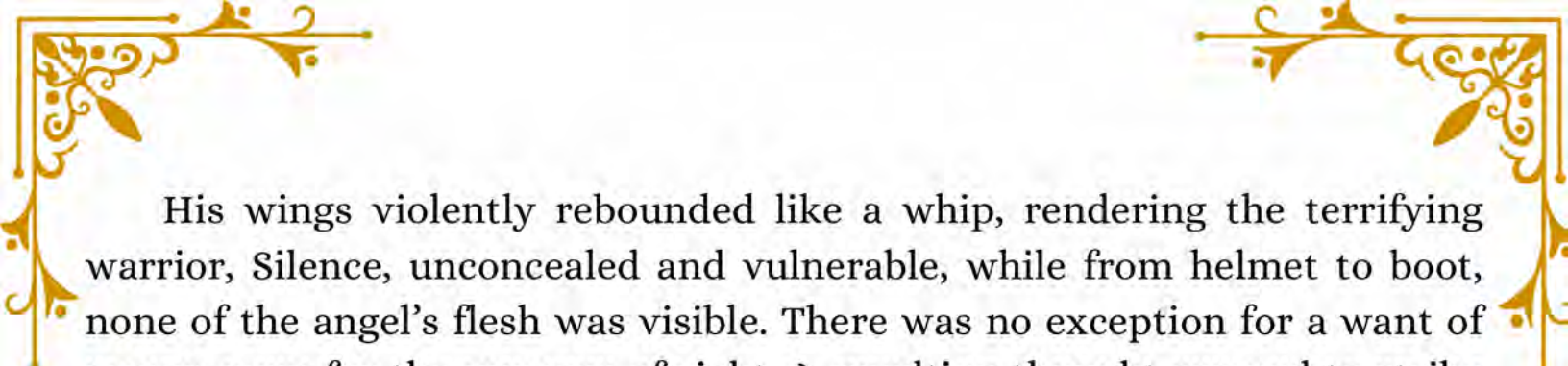
I might add that this creature faced open openly toward the girl. The act of prudence was for the sole purpose of not frightening Silence, and this very thought offended him to no end. The newcomer's dark blue cloak rippled down his back like a brook, babbling among rocks of steel and mesh. His cape was lacerated; the cut resembled a sprig or a vein as it branched off in three directions. The twigs were abundant with autumn leaves that contrasted with an ever-blue sky. A piece of starched velvet cloth stretched around his arm. This ensign encased a golden silk fabric that piled at his feet. A wing stretched before him, across his red emblem, his feet, his face, the room, and the trailing end lying on the floor around the wooden chair. The unconscious woman lay nearby on the floor.

Silence moved hesitantly, obviously wary of this newcomer. I could not see any faces, but anyone observing this scene could tell there was an air of immediate recognition from both sides, followed by intense scorn. There was even a sense of vicarious embarrassment from the winged creature. There was no movement for minutes on end.

Silence was probably contemplating whether to approach the lady or this angel. After all, it would be a shame to abandon his mission altogether. He turned his head and glanced at the girl, probably sensing, as I did, that this dreadful being was intensely watching her out of the corner of his eye. The armed angel slowly shifted its weight to one side, the resulting sound indescribably awful. The metal of his armor screeched, sparks landed on the floor, and his feathered wing brushed against the air, sounding like a multitude exhaling their last breath. The wing rested along the ceiling; the feathers arched downward like a waterfall and swirled towards the floor, a portion landing at Silence's feet. The knight's other appendage remained over by the chair.

All of this was likely incited by the shift of attention to the young woman. Perhaps if Silence had ignored her, the stranger would have gladly stood there all day, ignoring his enemy. I could now see the knight holding a spear, its pommel resting against his foot. His armor was mesmerizing: the shoulder plate was made of sequential layers of iron, each piece elaborately engraved. Silence paid no heed to the detailed helm, but the ridicule activated his abundant hatred. Civilized body language, so ingrained within him, caused his hand to lift as he said, "Go."

I am afraid that he sealed his fate with this one word. If a glance or a thought brought movement to the unmovable, one word must have unbelievable potential. Very briefly, Silence stumbled and shifted as if the earth shook. Nervousness relentlessly clung to him. The angel stood motionless, thinking or waiting for the enemy to collect himself. He deemed mere seconds an appropriate length.



His wings violently rebounded like a whip, rendering the terrifying warrior, Silence, unconcealed and vulnerable, while from helmet to boot, none of the angel's flesh was visible. There was no exception for a want of armor, even for the purpose of sight. A revolting thought seemed to strike the knightly angel, and to my horror, his head turned. The chainmail around his neck twisted and choked as if it kept snagging on something resembling a cheese grater. Blood leaked through the steel doily and drizzled around his feet. He now looked at the unconscious woman and seemed to glance at Silence.

The angel said meditatively, almost as if to himself, "Do you see this girl?"

Silence stepped closer, and with this, an impressive response grew with every second. The angel continued, "Don't you know my name?"

This question swept through the air like an asthmatic whisper.

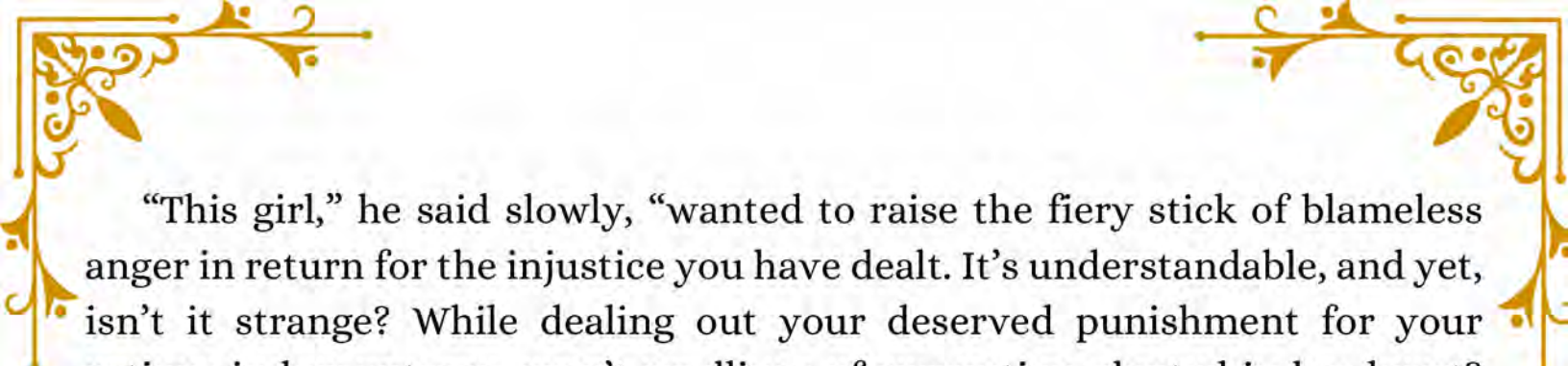
The deceitful lips replied, "No."

The angel faced the origin of the muteness that befell his ears. He did not hear the lie because he could not. He stood with an air of lost hope, even betrayed friendship, but with a renewed zest for what was to come.

The nameless creature continued in fragments and quite seriously as if he expected the listener to comprehend. Perhaps he did. "Stricken, yet unaffected... stronger." There was a pause. "Water washes away the warm blood, yet it's merely cold dew on a red rose." His voice faded into an austere tone.

In one violent sweep, Silence tackled the angel that stood before him. After several minutes, Silence's back finally crashed to the floor. It was quite a blow, but not so much as to convince him that all was lost—but he chose to accept defeat and lay motionless. Surprisingly, the angel set aside the spear instead of using it. He kneeled and grabbed his enemy by the neck.

I want to interrupt the story here to point out that the unconscious girl lay dangerously close to Silence, who noticed this. The angel bent over and stared into the dark abyss below him.



“This girl,” he said slowly, “wanted to raise the fiery stick of blameless anger in return for the injustice you have dealt. It’s understandable, and yet, isn’t it strange? While dealing out your deserved punishment for your actions in her outrage, aren’t seedlings of corruption planted in her heart? Revenge is something vulnerable, something imminent—very dangerous, you understand. It’s dangerous because it disguises itself as a hunger for the just cause—an insatiable hunger.” Silence stared wearily as the voice continued. “If revenge of such virtuous roots could mature in the soul and remain virtuous, that would be justice, my friend. Revenge is a violent and frivolous attempt at correction. Through balance and the humble heart of the law, there is justice. There is truth.”

He let go of his enemy, but everything was too quick. Silence deployed his dagger; the angel did not flinch or move. Silence recoiled the knife from the chainmail, and the crimson river cascaded. Silence smirked and rested his head back on the floor. The angel, falling onto his elbows, let out an awful murmur that reverberated through his helmet. He snatched Silence by the shoulder, and dragging him through the blood brought him closer.

“Don’t you realize that this does not belong to me?!” rang out as the angel placed his steel hand over the wound. A spark dropped from beneath the chin of his helmet and landed on the dark shroud of Silence’s shoulder. A breathless screech rang out as it caught fire. The angel stood up—almost robotically—and put it out with one stomp of his foot. It came down ruthlessly upon his enemy like a horse’s hoof.

Silence cried out and wailed, “Justice!” His pain seemed to be so immense that the word accidentally slipped. It escaped his lips unwillingly, uttered with such torment that it seemed to be almost a curse.

The angel picked up his spear, holding it over his enemy as if ready to thrust it. Looking pitifully at him, he said, "Yes, that is who I am."

The woman mumbled and woke up once again with a start. Instantly, she cried, as if living in a nightmare, "No! No! Please, I understand now!"

She looked slowly at the room and took in everything around her as if it were all unfamiliar. Tears streamed down her face. My tears followed after hers; it seemed like there was a thread that drew me closer. There was no pain—only tears of newfound hope and a refreshing sorrow that lingered.

Her sculpted hand of alabaster slowly retrieved something from her pocket. I walked around her, beginning to tremble. I don't know why, reader. I stood some distance away and looked over her shoulder.

She held a picture. It was a greyscale portrait of a young soldier, sideburns sticking out under his helmet. He was not older than twenty-five. He was not handsome, but I dare say that he must have a decent character for his portrait to end up in this lady's pocket. I returned to the other side of the room.

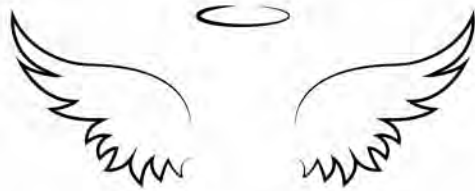
She smiled a little amid uncontrollable sobs, overwhelmed by a spirited pang. She breathed unsteadily, trying to collect herself, and began to talk to the portrait. "You told me that pain is not an enemy. I think I know now why you said that. You were warning me that if the pain of loss should come, I needed to accept it and not run away from it. How can I do that? I feel so alone!" she wailed, but drew a deep breath and shakily continued. "It will become a strength if I can accept it, and it will benefit me and not haunt me anymore. What bliss! Oh dear, what a beautiful thought!" she cried out as if everything were familiar again and like she saw an old friend.

I know that you want me to go on and live happily. I thought I couldn't! But now I understand that by following your wishes, I am pursuing your heart and loving you with all my heart. Actually, I am living for you and with you by doing this." She paused and said with much hope, "It will take time. I will go on for you. I will not let you down. Please wait for me." Here, she paused resolutely.

It was not long until someone ran into the hallway, shouting rapidly, "Someone needed in Unit 1A, please!"

Her eyes remained on the portrait, and with an "I love you," she gently laid a kiss on the piece of paper. She stood up and carefully returned the photo to its place.

Involuntarily, she bore the happiest expression as she flew out into the hallway, into the dust and chaos of the war. Indeed, she knew in her heart that I was watching—the Angel of Mercy—my precious wife. I glanced over my shoulder and received a reassuring nod from my rescuer, the Angel of Justice.



THE END

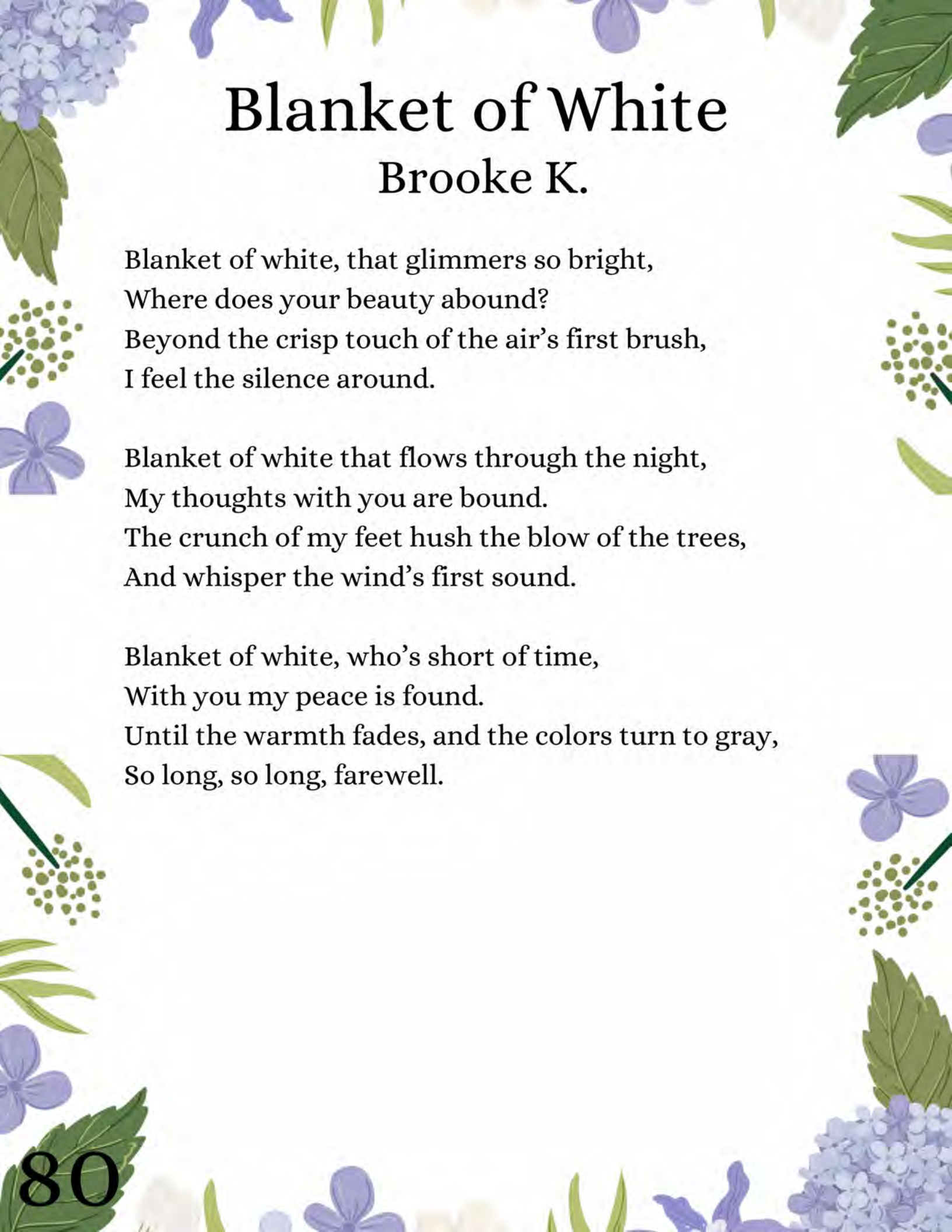
“Poetry is when an emotion has found its thoughts and the thought has found words.”

-Robert Frost



Poetry





Blanket of White

Brooke K.

Blanket of white, that glimmers so bright,
Where does your beauty abound?
Beyond the crisp touch of the air's first brush,
I feel the silence around.

Blanket of white that flows through the night,
My thoughts with you are bound.
The crunch of my feet hush the blow of the trees,
And whisper the wind's first sound.

Blanket of white, who's short of time,
With you my peace is found.
Until the warmth fades, and the colors turn to gray,
So long, so long, farewell.



Uncontent Selah D.

I should be content with the time we have,
I've given up caring that I need to be,
Living in dissatisfaction.
It feels like every second of our time to get,
Instead, I scream,
her is wasted and dripping away,
I'm worried one day I'll look and realize that I drank
most of it quickly and wasted the rest,
The worst part will be looking at the puddle that formed
because of the leaks I made,

Not that you're of any help.



Jesus

Sienna M.

Jesus died for us,
When He died He saved our sins,
Jesus died for us,
When He died He made us clean,
Jesus died for **all** of us.



Improvements Caroline R.

“It’s cooler in Pooler!”
That’s what they say.
But really it isn’t,
It’s worse every day!
There’s so much traffic
Here to annoy you.
The fast-food stores
All want to employ you.
Our ostentatious city hall
Makes the next-door library seem so small.
Know what else is really annoying?
The semi trucks they’re always deploying.
We’re voting for mayor
A few days from now.
I hope that’ll help
Improve Pooler somehow.

Words

Emi O.

Words are powerful.
They can cause a fight,
Awaken a beast,
Ruin a person's life.
They can destroy your imagination,
Break your heart,
And burn you down
Until you are nothing but a pile of ashes
Drifting on the wind.
But, You can change that.
Your words can be compassionate
Kind, generous and can make a person smile
All you have to do is try.



Tapestry

Emmary M.

My soul loves
The song of a bird at break of dawn
When the sky is
Smoky-blue and half-awake.
And my soul loves
The light of the stars at dead of night
When the trees dance
In the breeze of the shadows.
And my soul loves
Flowing water that comes from the hearts of mountains
That glitters in the morning when the world is new.
And my soul loves
The Artist who has woven a tapestry
Of mornings and waterfalls;
The Maker of trees and shadows
Who has kindled the stars.



It's Wintertime in Alaska

Ellie C.

Snow is falling,
Lights are dancing,
No bears are calling,
It's wintertime in Alaska,

Blizzards are howling,
The trees are white,
Ice lanterns are glowing,
Oh, it's such a sight,

Ice castles are built,
Hot cocoa is made,
All warm under a quilt,
It's wintertime in Alaska,

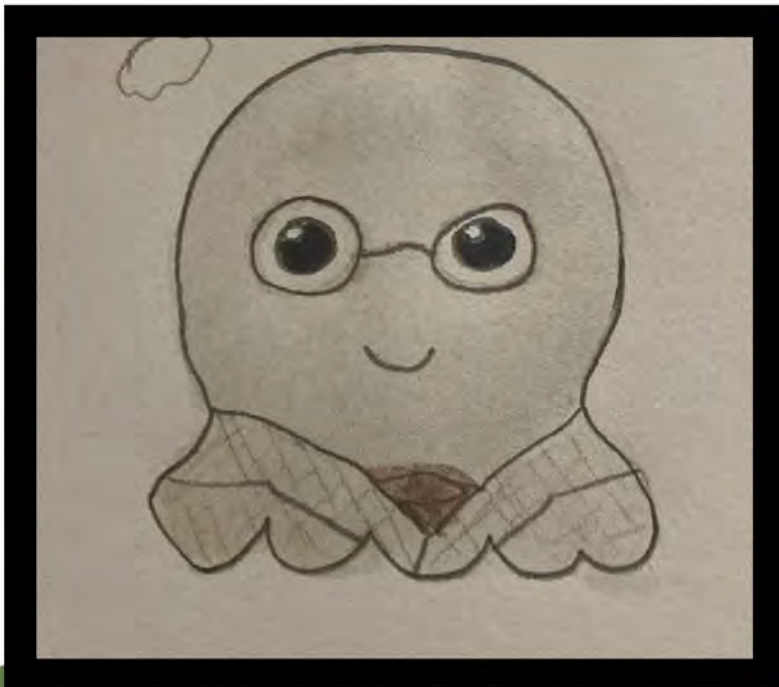
Sledding is fun,
Snowmen are too,
There is no sun,
And lakes are frozen through,

The moose are about,
Dog sleds are racing,
There's no doubt,
It's wintertime in Alaska.

Tears

Caroline L.

The moon shines fiercely,
Melting snow from the branches;
A silhouette of tears.



Inky illustrated by Emmary M.

The Sound of Silence

Grace J.

The sound of two people ignoring one another,
The sound of glaring at someone you used to call brother,

The sound of peace when you stare at the stars,
The sound of not knowing who you really are,

The sound of pain slowly breaking your heart,
The sound of trying to fix your broken parts,

The sound of being surrounded by the unknown,
The sound of being completely alone,

The sound of cruel thoughts piling up inside,
The sound of wanting your own demise,

The sound of desperately trying not to cry,
The sound of wishing they hadn't lied,

The sound of silence can not be heard,
Yet its effects on a person, easily observed,

The sound of silence,
Soft yet shrill,

The sound of silence,
Can definitely kill.



Fool

Lily C.

I am such a fool.

What good is it to love you when you love another?

Fool! Fool! Fool!

I scream in my head.

I love you. It's as true and unchanging as the sun or the moon.

This love leaves me powerless. I am entirely unable to free myself.

The hold it has on me is stronger than death.

It's a force that cannot be quenched;

I truly fear that not even death itself could hold it down.

Oh, what am I to do?

Shall I never be rescued?

Shall I never be released from this torment?

Fool, I whisper to myself.

I know well enough that I do not wish to be freed from this prison.

I would rather love you the way I do than give half my heart to another.

If loving you makes me a fool, then I suppose I am the worst fool of all.

Child of God

Avalon Grace

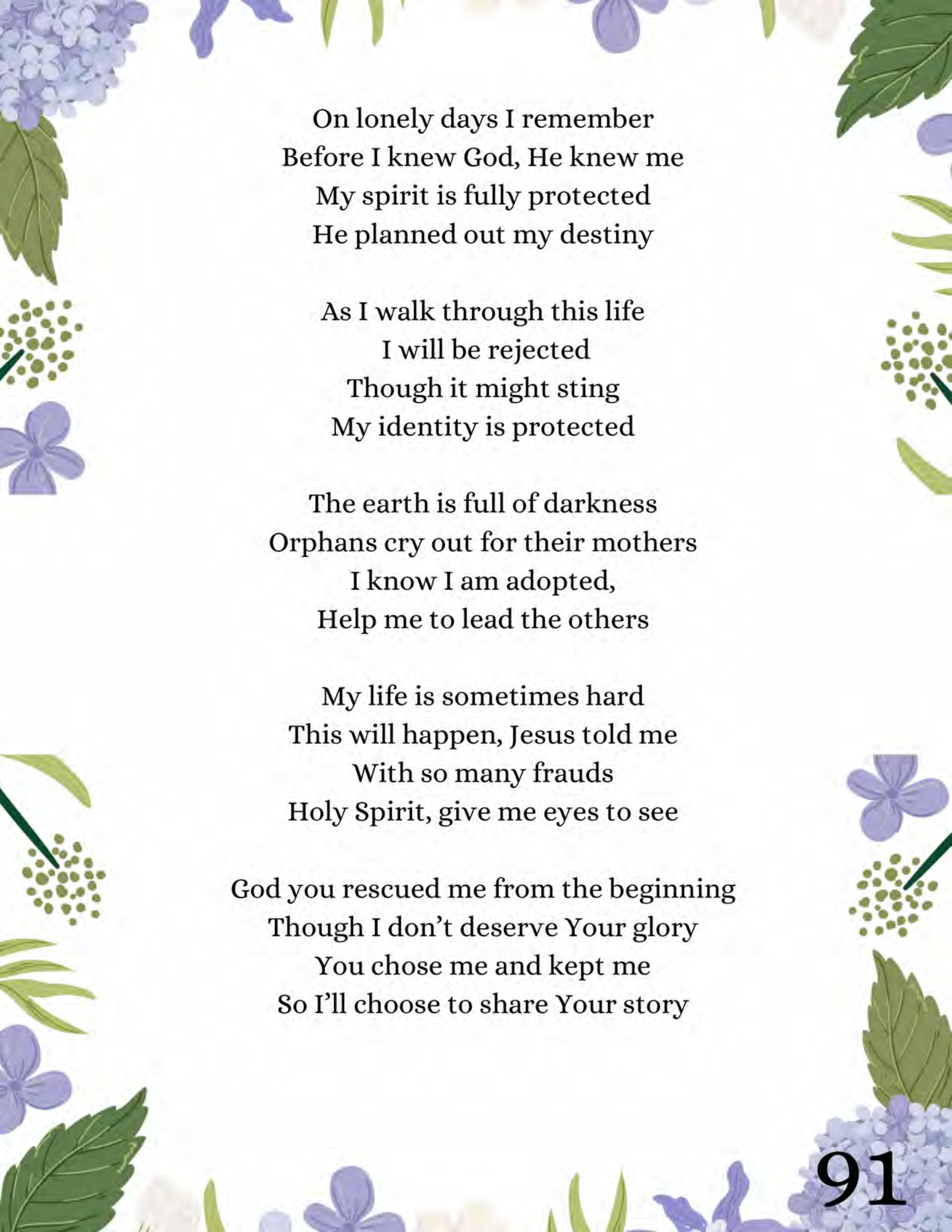
God gave us a unique scroll
Specially made for me and you
It has our life written out
We can be children of God too

Satan is very tricky
For he wants to twist our scrolls
He tries to make us believe
The evil lies that he unrolls

But God wants to help us
This is true every day
He wants to untwist our scroll
And this is what I pray

Creator of heaven and earth
I can't do this alone
I'm drowning in my sin
Please make yourself known

My eyes are finally opened
The heavy scales are lifted
Jesus, my heart is Yours
My life forever shifted



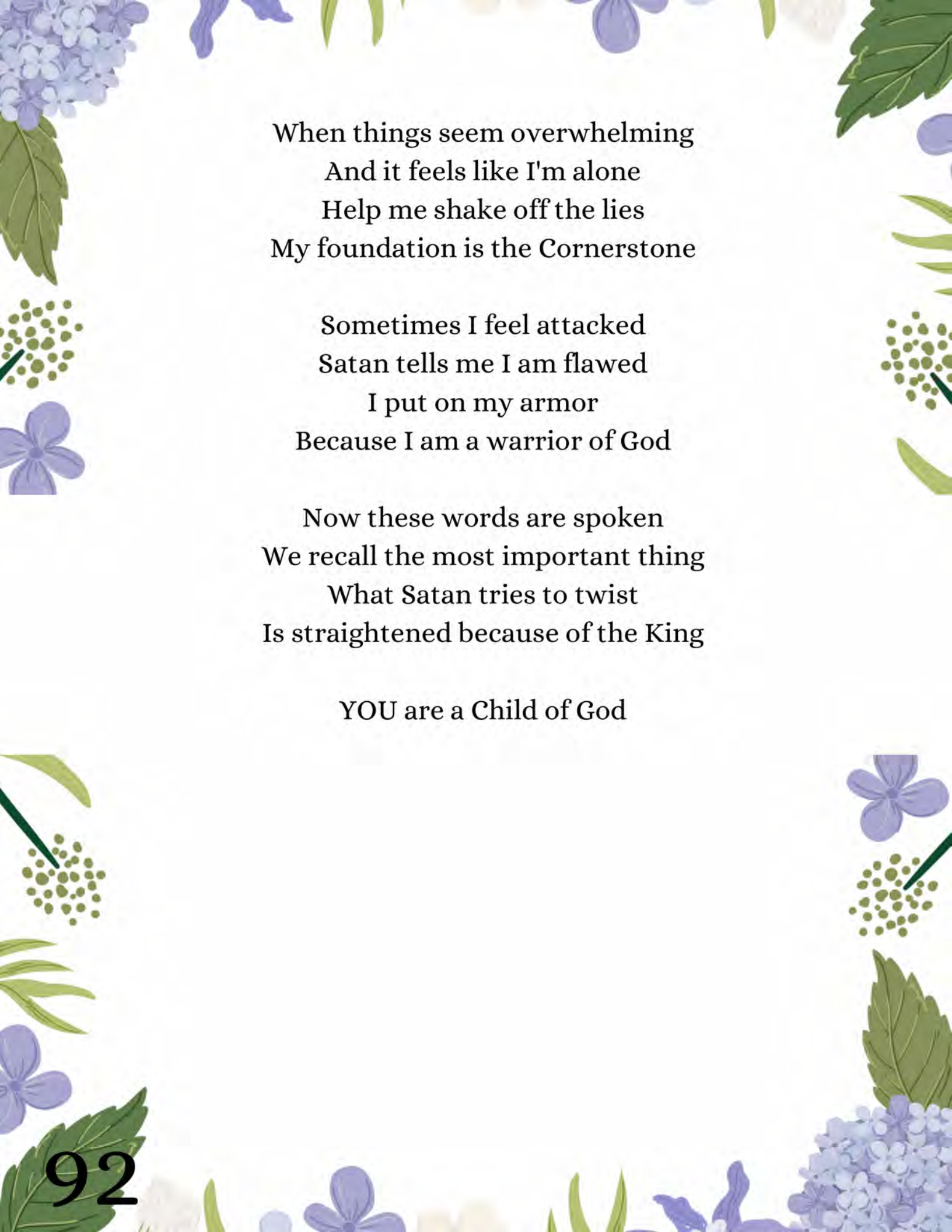
On lonely days I remember
Before I knew God, He knew me
My spirit is fully protected
He planned out my destiny

As I walk through this life
I will be rejected
Though it might sting
My identity is protected

The earth is full of darkness
Orphans cry out for their mothers
I know I am adopted,
Help me to lead the others

My life is sometimes hard
This will happen, Jesus told me
With so many frauds
Holy Spirit, give me eyes to see

God you rescued me from the beginning
Though I don't deserve Your glory
You chose me and kept me
So I'll choose to share Your story



When things seem overwhelming
And it feels like I'm alone
Help me shake off the lies
My foundation is the Cornerstone

Sometimes I feel attacked
Satan tells me I am flawed
I put on my armor
Because I am a warrior of God

Now these words are spoken
We recall the most important thing
What Satan tries to twist
Is straightened because of the King

YOU are a Child of God

Follow Him

By L. J. Fay

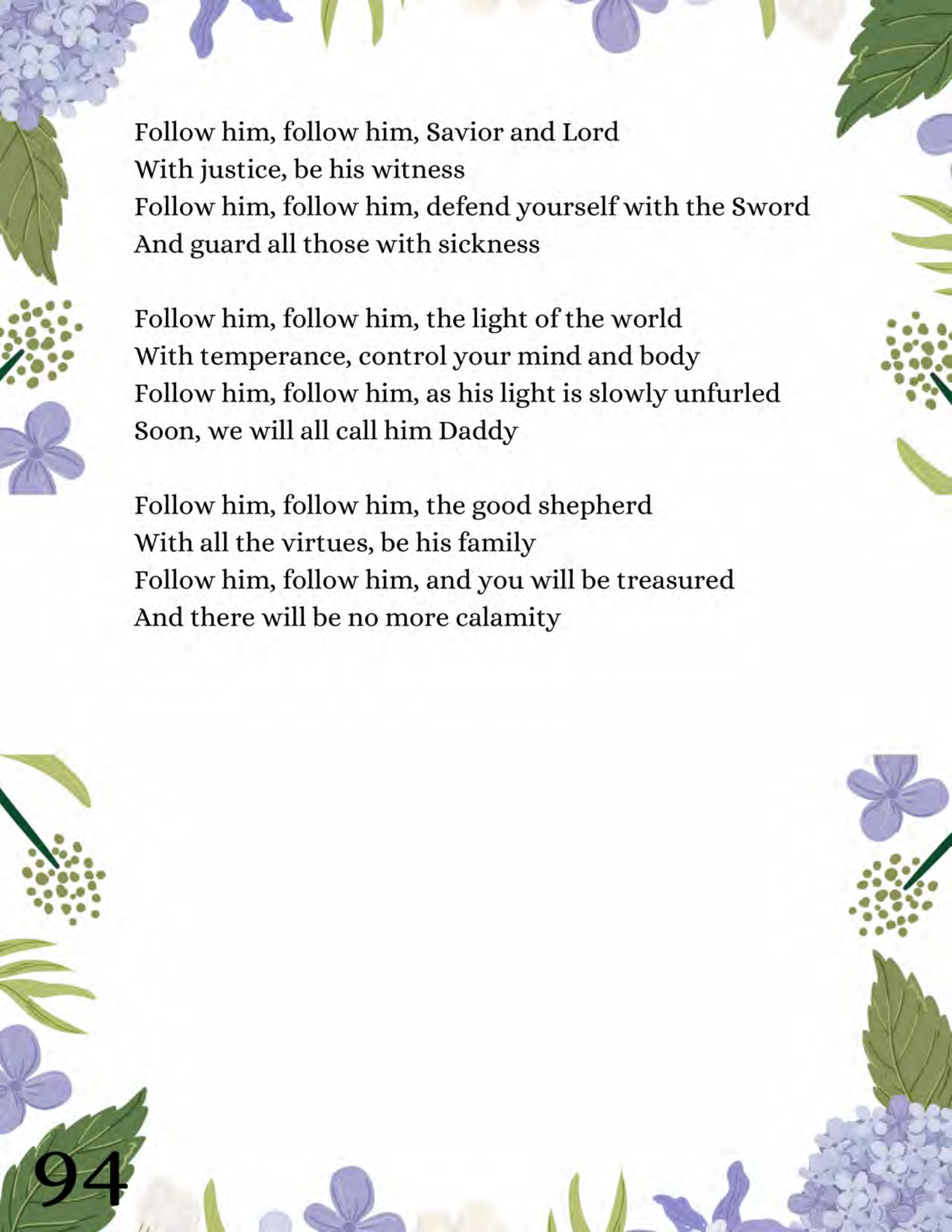
Follow Him, follow him, the king of kings
With faith, you must follow his call
Follow him, follow him, as his angel sings
Though it will be a challenge for you all

Follow him, follow him, the prince of peace
With love, you must follow his law
Follow him, follow him, come to his feast
And admire his power with awe

Follow him, follow him, the lamb of God
With hope, you must wait for his coming
Follow him, follow him, for he is not flawed
Wait for him faithfully, and he will be loving

Follow him, follow him, the lion of Judah
With fortitude, do what he asks
Follow him, follow him, and you will be strong, hallelujah
He will assign you great tasks

Follow him, follow him, the son of man
With prudence, study his way
Follow him, follow him, do what you can
And he will reward you this day



Follow him, follow him, Savior and Lord
With justice, be his witness
Follow him, follow him, defend yourself with the Sword
And guard all those with sickness

Follow him, follow him, the light of the world
With temperance, control your mind and body
Follow him, follow him, as his light is slowly unfurled
Soon, we will all call him Daddy

Follow him, follow him, the good shepherd
With all the virtues, be his family
Follow him, follow him, and you will be treasured
And there will be no more calamity



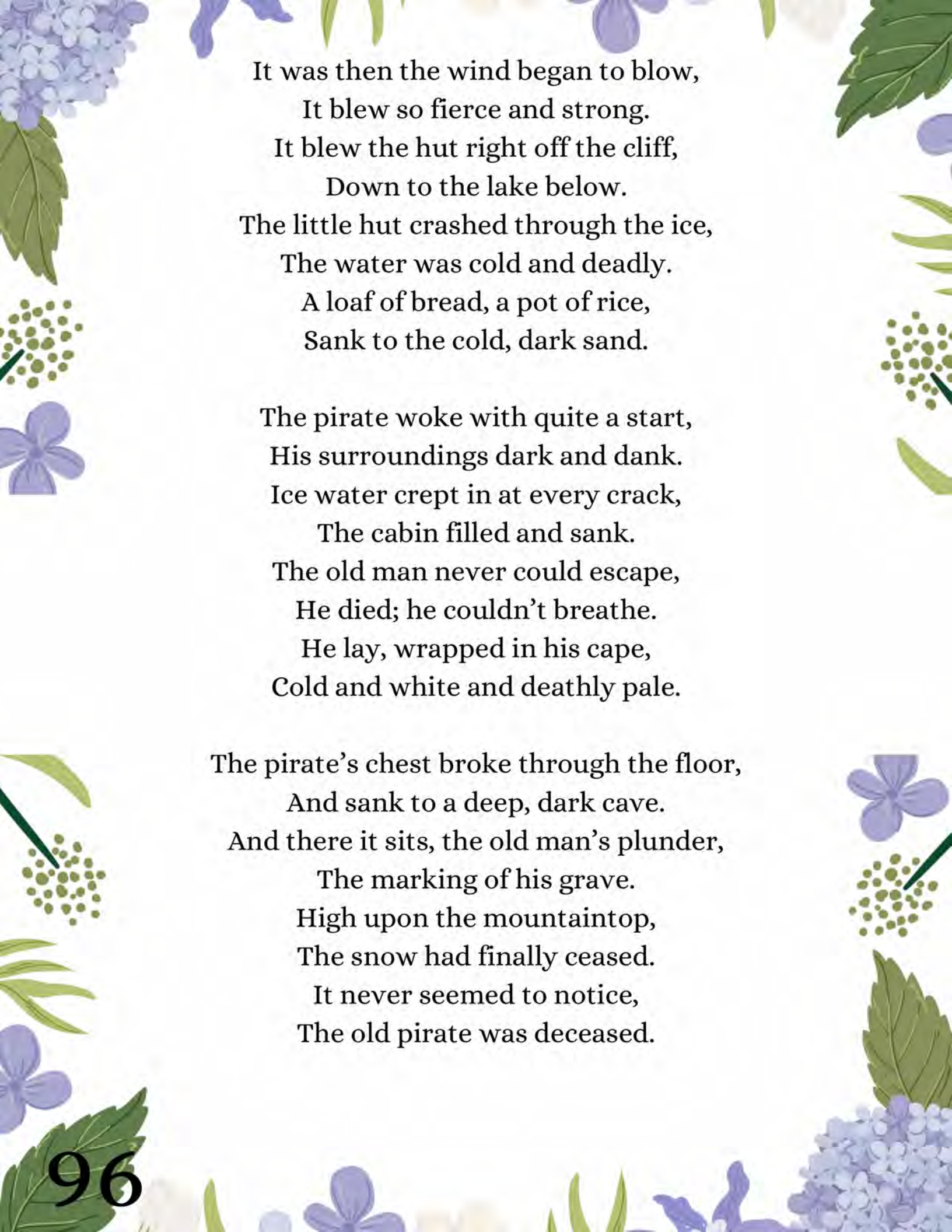
The Old Sea Chest

Cosette McKeen

High up on a mountain top,
The snow was whirling fast
In the window of his little hut,
The old man stood, aghast.
He knew this was unusual,
This blizzard so fierce and strong.
He gathered wood from the pile.
This blizzard would be long.

The old man lit the fire,
And put the kettle on.
He set some blankets on his bed,
Mumbling a song.
After he poured himself some tea,
The old man sat and rocked.
He fell into a happy sleep,
And dreamt of his days at sea.

In the corner of the cottage,
The old chest idly sat.
A padlock kept the treasure safe,
The key under the mat.
Years of pirating,
Sent many ships asunder,
But in this chest so old and dusty,
Sits a fortune of his plunder.



It was then the wind began to blow,
It blew so fierce and strong.
It blew the hut right off the cliff,
Down to the lake below.
The little hut crashed through the ice,
The water was cold and deadly.
A loaf of bread, a pot of rice,
Sank to the cold, dark sand.

The pirate woke with quite a start,
His surroundings dark and dank.
Ice water crept in at every crack,
The cabin filled and sank.
The old man never could escape,
He died; he couldn't breathe.
He lay, wrapped in his cape,
Cold and white and deathly pale.

The pirate's chest broke through the floor,
And sank to a deep, dark cave.
And there it sits, the old man's plunder,
The marking of his grave.
High upon the mountaintop,
The snow had finally ceased.
It never seemed to notice,
The old pirate was deceased.



The Lesson

Avalon Grace

All it takes is a match,
For a flickering red flame,
It's not easy to catch,
Because it already came,

Suddenly it's there,
Without a single trace,
It's starting to flare,
What a tragic chase,

It's burning and hot,
A blinding light,
We had already fought,
But it was too bright,

Before I knew it,
The forest had been burned,
The fire had quit,
And a lesson had been learned.



Girls Like You

Grace J.

Girls like you
Were born
To lead armies
And save worlds;
To tame dragons
Then thank our Lord.

Girls like you
Were given life
To shine light in the darkness
And calm the cruel fights;
To quiet wild storms
And sing children to sleep.

Girls like you
Were created
To save people like me;
To love the unlovable
And heal their broken parts;
To mend crushed spirit
And guide lost hearts.

By 30

Lily C.

What if I never move on?
What if, by 30, I still think about you?
What if I never stop comparing every other man I meet to you?
What if, by 30, you're still the one I want?
What if it never goes away? It will never go away.
My love for you is as deep as the sea,
As bright as the sun,
As timeless as the stars,
As devoted as the moon.
Do you understand how it feels?
To have all of that love inside of you and no place for it to go?
It's an oncoming storm, a wave too high.
In time, it will break.
For now, it merely leaks.
You can tell if you look for it:
The mentioning of you to my friends,
The look in my eye when I see you,
The switch of my mood when you smile,
How I remember everything about you,
And how I never look away.
What if, by 30, this love remains?
What if it spends the rest of my life slowly leaking from my
heart?
Leaking and leaking, but never running out.
What then?

Me

C.M.

The morning breeze rustled the tops of the grasses.

I run outside after finishing my classes.

I lift my head to the skies above,
And wish I could fly just like the dove.

I'm angry, I'm sad.

I'm frustrated and mad.

I let the wind rip through my hair
As I breathe in the fresh, country air.

And now with all submission,

I bow my head and pray.

I ask the Lord to help me;

My sins to take away.

He reached his hand down from the skies on high,

And lifted my head and breathed a sigh.

And now I'm happy.

I've forgiven their actions.

I run back inside

Filled with compassion.

I'm me

ESSAYS



**“The essay is a literary device
for saying almost everything
about almost anything.”**

-Aldous Huxley

An Aspiring Author

Grace J.

For years I have been intrigued by the world of literature. Some would tell you I have been spinning magical tales since I was young, and I would respond by saying that there is something about being able to create new worlds, limited only by my own imagination that has fascinated me my whole life! In my mind, being able to bring original characters and mystical creatures to life using nothing but a pen and paper is truly its own kind of magic. Creating my short stories, novels, and even occasionally poetry is how I express myself. When I am going through a hard time in my life, I always try to incorporate it into my story in hopes that maybe one day, it will make someone else feel understood.

My dreams and plans for the future often fluctuate. In the past I have wanted to be a graphic designer, photographer, baker, therapist, doctor, and even at one point, a teacher. However, the only passion and dream that has stuck with me throughout my whole entire life is wanting to be an author. I am currently in the process of writing a novel. It is not the first time I have attempted to write one, but if everything goes according to plan, it will be the first time I finish one and maybe, just maybe, I will publish it. Once upon a time, there was a little girl who loved to read. "One day, the girl with the books became the woman writing them."

Second Chances

Ruthie S.

I believe the ocean would be a woman, if she wished to walk among us. She would be beautiful, yet it would be impossible to look her in the eyes. For she cradles her children with loving arms but in her stirs a rage. An unquenchable desire to take back what belongs to her and end all of humanity's war. So she would bring ruin upon every home, and the world would belong to her, one could not dream of reigning in the ocean herself. She would plunge the world into a deep, mysterious world. A world where humans cannot survive, but her children will flourish so on she trods. Will she end it all? No, of course not. For she is a mother, and mothers gift second chances. And so she would converse with God himself and He would listen to her as she pleads with Him spare but a single family. For forty suns and forty moons she would lull their ship across the hidden world and she would not harm a single creature on board. And soon the mountains were unveiled as she returned what she had taken. The family would grow to be as numerous as the stars of the heavens and as the sand on the seashore. For she is a mother, noble and just, and mothers always give second chances.

Shmuel's Patience and Loyalty

M. A. Rice

Have you ever been inspired by someone? In the New York Times Bestseller *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne, Bruno and his family move from Bruno's childhood home in Berlin, Germany, to a peculiar, new place called "Out-With." There is a large wire fence separating Bruno's property from the thousands of huts and people on the other side. Bruno decides to explore the fence when he meets a boy, whose name is Shmuel, who lives on the other side of the fence. Their friendship will go on for over a year before Bruno's mother decides to move back to Berlin. The boys decide to have one last adventure on Shmuel's side of the fence. This adventure sadly ends with Bruno and Shmuel becoming trapped in a gas chamber and tragically dying. Throughout the novel, Shmuel's example of patience and loyalty inspires others to be the best versions of themselves.

Shmuel is exceptionally patient towards Bruno during the novel and his example makes Bruno a more patient person in turn. Shmuel is patient with Bruno even when Bruno thinks that he knows everything that is happening on the other side of the fence. Shmuel quietly tries to talk to Bruno about the sad horrors on the other side of the fence. When Shmuel tells Bruno in a subdued voice, "You don't know what it's like here...", Bruno completely changes the subject (Boyne 140). Nevertheless, Shmuel is patient with Bruno and continues to talk to him about the truth. One example of Shmuel's patience influencing Bruno is in his relationship with his sister. At the beginning of the novel, Bruno is impatient with Gretel and dislikes her. But near the end of the book, Bruno is much more patient with his sister. Bruno "...had been spending more time with Gretel lately..." because of Shmuel's patient example (Boyne 165). Shmuel's quiet patience towards Bruno helps Bruno become a more patient person.

Shmuel is an extraordinarily patient person, and he is also exceedingly loyal to his friends. Shmuel shows his loyalty by staying by Bruno even when Bruno denies their friendship in front of Lieutenant Kotler. As soon as Bruno apologizes, Shmuel faithfully “reached his hand out and held it there, waiting until Bruno did the same, and then the two boys shook hands and smiled at each other” (Boyne 175). Shmuel is such a loyal friend that the instant after Bruno apologizes, Shmuel easily forgives him. Moreover, even though Shmuel suffers all throughout the book at the hands of the Nazi soldiers, he never resents Bruno for being the son of one of these soldiers. Even though Shmuel “hate[s] [the soldiers]” and he has “seen Bruno’s father on any number of occasions” he ponders in his mind “how [Bruno’s father] could have a son who was so friendly and kind” (Boyne 195-196). Shmuel is so loyal to Bruno that he does not care how horrible Bruno’s father is. Shmuel only cares about who Bruno is and what Bruno does. Shmuel is a tremendously loyal person to the people that he loves.

Shmuel is a patient and loyal person who cares deeply for people around him. Through his example, people can learn to be better in their daily lives. John Boyne teaches readers through *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* that even in such a horrific event as the Holocaust, relationships can blossom and friends can encourage one another, even when all hope seems lost. Every person in humanity should be valued, not looked at as inferior, but looked at as God made them.

Work Cited

Boyne, John. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Ember, 2006.

The Misunderstanding of Living Forever

Ariel

Is immortality amazing? The thought of living forever may sound appealing from the outside, but what if it was not? Natalie Babbitt shines a light on the downsides of immortality that get ignored through an exciting novel called *Tuck Everlasting*. In the novel, Babbitt shows the readers that living forever is not a good idea and should not be labeled as one just because of peoples' initial thought towards it. Natalie Babbitt shows readers that immortality is not not a good idea in *Tuck Everlasting*. Babbitt shows that immortality leads to loneliness and boredom.

Because a person has infinite time on earth, all of their close friends and family will eventually die while they continue to live and watch the cycle of life play out. Babbitt shows us an example of loneliness through her character, Miles Tuck. Miles had a wife and two children, but after many years his wife realized that he was not aging so, “she finally made up her mind [he'd] sold [his] soul to the Devil. She left [him]” (Babbitt 39). After Miles lost his family, he was left alone and the Tucks decided that it was better if they did not associate with people at all.

Babbitt also shows readers that immortality causes boredom. The Tucks have so much time on their hands that they often do not know what to do. Babbitt writes that, “There had been nothing for the Tucks to do but go to bed” (Babbitt 67). Having no friends or relatives besides their immediate family, who drank from the spring, the Tucks are left with nothing to do or keep occupied with. Loneliness and boredom are only two of many downsides that are overlooked in the thought of immortality.

Work Cited

Babbitt, Natalie. *Tuck Everlasting*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997.

The Importance of the Law

Caroline L.

Attorneys, police officers, judges; many people strive throughout their daily lives in the pursuit of justice. But what exactly is justice? Do some people have the right to administer it in different ways? Fyodor Dostoyevsky addresses these questions in his book entitled *Crime and Punishment*. The author dissects the mind with deep insight into human nature. He also determines who wins in the case of the extraordinary man: sin or the just cause. Dostoyevsky illustrates how the extraordinary man theory is simply the result of human nature through irony, redemption, and the contrast between revenge and justice.

The character Raskolnikov represents a vivid piece of imagery and irony when he decides to commit murder as “a student of law” (Dostoyevsky 31). The significance of this career choice not only displays the liability of those with authority it also reflects Dostoyevsky’s desire to portray Raskolnikov as a psychologically complex person suffering from “derangement” (Dostoyevsky 177). However, the double-mindedness of Raskolnikov’s character represents the extraordinary man theory as a whole. The theory calls for those with passion for the future of humanity not to be held back by the law (Dostoyevsky 205). This sounds noble at first, but what it really means is that those with zeal for the betterment of mankind – whether industrially or morally – have a right to immoral action. This, in turn, requires them to harm members of the society in which they are striving to improve.

Secondly, Dostoyevsky highlights the path of redemption as he contrasts the Word of God to the thought process of the “extraordinary man.” In a powerful scene, a prostitute reads the story of the raising of Lazarus to Raskolnikov (Dostoyevsky 258-260). This itself is ironic, and the author carefully notes that “the murderer and the harlot ... had so strangely been

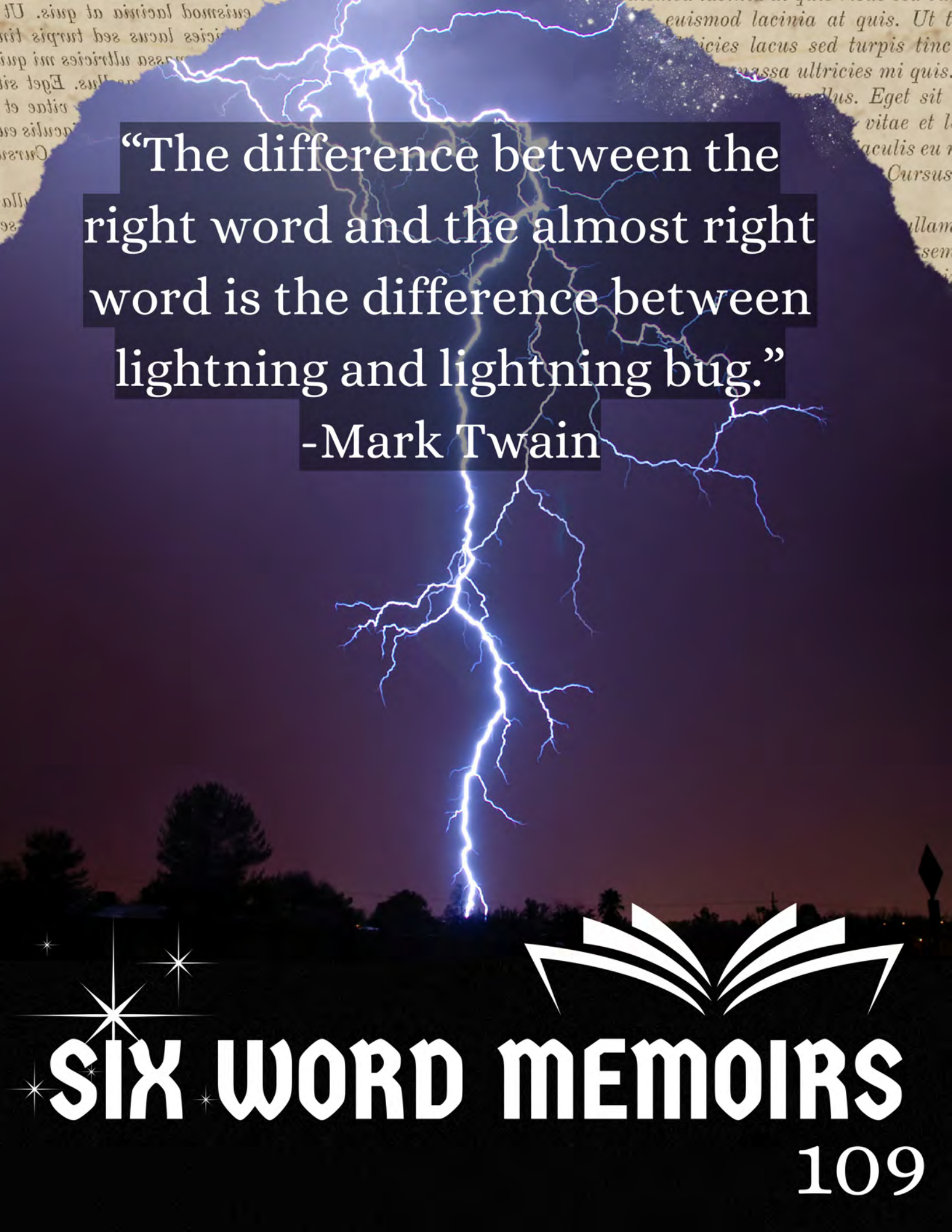
reading together the eternal book” (Dostoyevsky 261). The wording here is significant as the narrator actually refers to Raskolnikov as a “murderer.” The story of Jesus’s love was so powerful that Raskolnikov no longer thought himself an extraordinary hero and was confronted with the reality of what he really was: a killer. The author’s word choice illustrates Jesus as the pathway to redemption from all sin.

Lastly, *Crime and Punishment* illustrates how awful the pursuit of justice can become through the eyes of human nature. The extraordinary man theory asserts that “[h]e who despises most things will be a law-giver among them and he who dares most of all will be most in the right” (Dostoyevsky 328). The theory demands progress but in a way that makes it dependent on an individual ranked by good morals and daring. This becomes concerning when thinking about an individual upholding the law for all, including themselves. This is dangerous because the lines between justice and revenge can become blurred. Revenge is spite, which disguises itself as an insatiable hunger for the just cause. Justice is a weighing of wrongs according to the standard of the law. Corruption and justice can never be combined, as the extraordinary man theory requires through the boldness to commit wrong.

Dostoyevsky has incredible insight into the psychological battles that go on within the characters’ minds. Readers can learn from Raskolnikov that the pride that comes with knowledge can be very dangerous. No one has the right to commit evil or is able to defeat human nature with their own strength. Jesus is the only one who can rescue those who have strayed away from Him. Everyone should be held accountable for their mistakes. Even the most extraordinary person is not a law unto himself.

Work Cited

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated by Constance Garnett, Dover Publications, 2001.

A vertical lightning bolt strikes the ground in a dark, stormy night. The background is a dark blue and purple sky with faint, illegible text from an old document. At the bottom, there is a white icon of an open book.

“The difference between the
right word and the almost right
word is the difference between
lightning and lightning bug.”

-Mark Twain

SIX WORD MEMOIRS

109

Jesus loves you. Turn
to him. Caroline R.



You are stronger than
your haters. Ellie C.

Live is Christ, Die is Gain.
M. A. Rice

My identity is in Jesus
Christ. M. A. Rice




I am chosen, I am
predestined. M. A. Rice


Life = No Fear. Death =
No Sting. M. A. Rice



I am a citizen of
heaven. M. A. Rice



Over the clouds, in
gleaming sunlight.
Sebastian G.



On the ground, now
high above. Sebastian G.

Through the mountains,
across the river.

Sebastian G.

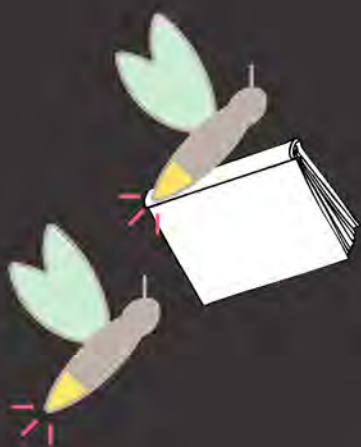
Temptation steals, but
strong discipline heals.

Sebastian G.



Wounds are deep, don't
fall back. Sebastian G.

Though I cannot see, I
feel. Sebastian G.



Exercising rocks – But
mentality is key.
Sebastian G.

Together, we made a new
memory. Grace J.

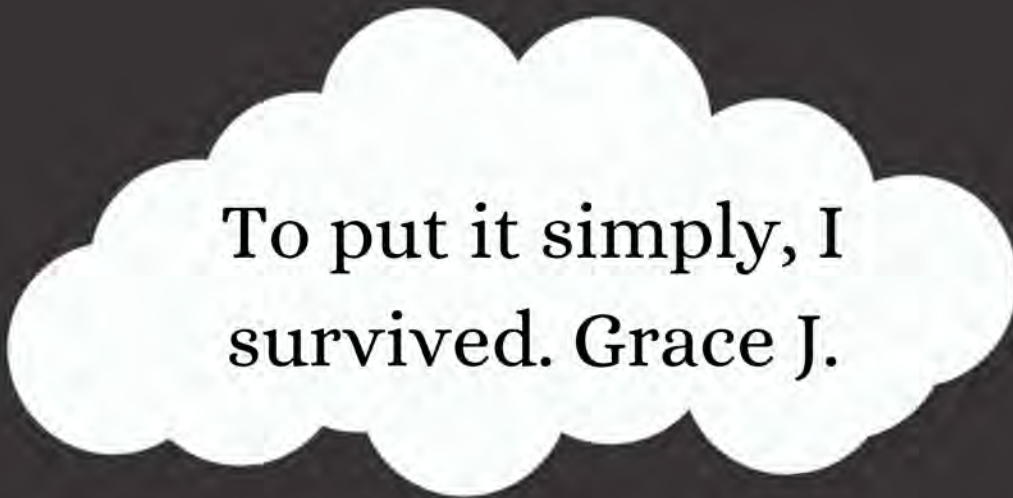
Maybe, in another
universe, you'd stay.

Grace J.

Long story short: Jesus
saved me. Grace J.

We were. And then we
weren't. Grace J.





To put it simply, I
survived. Grace J.



Tears of anger are my
battlecry. Grace J.



Dreaming of Heaven.
Waking to Hell. Grace J.

My hard heart of
stone softened.

Avalon Grace



My life story, written by
God. Avalon Grace



Praising arms
outstretched, the battle
won. Avalon Grace

Who holds life's
puzzle pieces? Jesus.

Avalon Grace



Hurricanes are life, rescue
is Jesus. Avalon Grace



THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

BY AMANDA HEUBNER



Part 1: Wrath

Far, far above a kingdom set on sprawling mountains and craggy cliffs, hovers a deep red mist. The mist, Wrath, surveys the scene. A vast village sleeps in the valley below, and a ship drifts on the rolling ocean beyond, but Wrath sets its sights on the castle, poised on a very high mountain. Wrath flies, swirling, tumbling down towards the palace. It breezes past every door, fits in every crevice, peers through each window until it spies its target; the queen, sitting at her writing desk staring fitfully out the window of the tallest tower. Triumphantly, Wrath seeps into the room.

Far below, in the depths of the castle, a man turns from where he has been watching out his window. He motions for his raven to fly up to the highest tower of the palace. The man leans heavily on his desk, as he sits in an old wooden chair. He is not as young as he once was. The man bends his old, gray head and prays.

Rubbish. The entire business is rubbish!

The queen paces the wooden floor, wringing her hands, occasionally making a large gesture at nothing and no one.

Rubbish subjects, rubbish letters, rubbish king! Awful king, who keeps entertaining the subjects' concerns and listening to their complaints!

The queen plunks down into her seat and picks up a letter from the sprawling stack. She skims the first page.

Your majesty,

We are writing because we are concerned...Chickens running loose...Food going to waste...

The queen scoffs, rolls her eyes and throws the letter back towards the desk, where it drifts slowly down onto the stack. Chickens indeed! It sounds more like the people are too chicken to deal with their own problems.

Yet her husband keeps entertaining them! He listens to their complaints for hours on end, nodding at them, smiling at them! How can anyone stand to be in a room with those pesky peasants without dying of frustration? It is beyond her. If only he would just shut them up...

But then, of course, she could shut them up....

The queen shakes her head, blinking and looks around the room. Somehow, in the time she has spent in her room, the light of the sun has turned red.

She leans against her desk's chair and looks out the window. Ah. Sunset. That explains it.

But how can that be? It was daylight just a moment earlier.

She shakes her head, brushing off the thought. She must have imagined it. She must have been in this room longer than she realizes. Anger can do that to you, she reasoned. So can frustrating, meddlesome peasants with nothing better to do than complain.

But she could end their complaints...

There is that thought again. It plagues her from time to time, creeping into her consciousness like the kitchen cat that creeps along the walls, looking for unsuspecting mice to prey on. The queen is usually able to ignore such creeping thoughts, busying herself with her work, distracting her mind from such...uncomfortable thoughts. But here it is, back again...And rather tempting, if she is going to admit it. Just think, she could end their complaining! Their bothersome nagging! Their meddlesome arguing! She could end it all in one quick action.

The queen glances at her crown, sitting tall on the pedestal by her writing desk. It had been a gift from her mother-in-law when she had first married the king. The clear diamonds were supposed to represent wisdom and purity, or in her distorted thinking, something equally unpleasant.

But now in the light of the sun, they looked rather red...

The queen shakes her head and turns back to her letters. This was nonsense. She couldn't resort to violence.

Or could she? It would be so easy. Just one, simple act, one decree, one command and all of her troubles would be gone forever, swallowed by her power and majesty.

One simple act. Peace, forever.

No. No, she won't. She can't. Not with the king watching. Not with him against her. But then again, she could take care of him too.

She could take care of them all. Everyone who had ever bothered her, belittled her and nagged her could be done away with, all in the blink of an eye, the stroke of a pen.

The queen picks up her quill and toys with it, peering at it in her hands. The red plumage stands atop the pen like a crown atop a proud queen's head.

A proud queen that could soon be her.

Somewhere, nagging in the back of her mind, the queen knows that what she is about to do is wrong. But as the sun sinks lower, anger sinks deeper into her heart, filling her with a blinding, bitter rage. She will end them. She will destroy them. And anyone who has ever opposed her will never trouble her again.

A smile slowly spreads over the queen's lips. She sinks into her chair and pulls out a clean sheet of paper. Gleefully, she puts her quill to the parchment and with large, flourishing letters, begins to write.

The queen sets down her quill, satisfied. She peers around the room, reveling in her decision. She locks her eyes on her crown, the jewels now distinctly red in the reflecting light. She steps over to the pedestal, picks up the crown and in one smooth motion places it slowly onto her head.

Wrath gathers itself up, swirling into a billowing cloud. It fills the room, sweeping up the walls to blanket the ceiling. It roils around the unseeing queen and quietly seeps into the walls. Somewhere deep inside, silent and unnoticed in the darkness, Wrath laughs.

The man looks up from his chair. The raven flies in the window and perches on the sill. It hangs its beak sadly, confirming what the man already suspected. He sighs in resignation, lowers himself heavily back into his chair and bows his head again. There is still much work to be done.

Part 2: Pride

The clouds darken over a tall, windowless castle. They grow, stretch, roil amongst themselves. One cloud parts from the rest. It condenses into a deep, dark cloud. The purple mist, Pride, flies over the land, slipping through the crevices of the stony base of the castle.

The old man rises. He watches out the window. He waits.

His raven flies in.

The man reaches out a hand. "Any news?" he asks.

The raven shakes its head.

The man sighs. "Perhaps one day. Perhaps soon. But now, we wait."

“Maid!”

The young prince folds his arms, pacing the floor. He pauses, scoffs. “Maid!” he repeats, louder this time. “Get in here!”

The maid rushes into the room, wringing her hands. “I’m sorry, your highness,” she says, bowing low. “I was attending to your father.”

The prince rolls his eyes. “You are my maid. When I call, you answer. Do you understand?”

The maid blinks at him, silent, afraid to disappoint the prince but too noble to lie. The prince raises one eyebrow. “I asked, do you understand?” He leans close. His voice is low, and his stare is dangerous.

The maid swallows. “I-I’m sorry,” she says, “but your father is the highest authority. I bow to him before you.” She shrinks back under the prince’s fierce glare. Though he is not yet a teenager, he still carries authority. The maid shivers. The prince is livid now, nearly shaking. “I am your prince!” he screams. “I am in charge! I am powerful! You must respond to me!”

“As I said sir, I-”

“Get out of here,” the prince spits.

The maid stares at him.

He wheels on her. “I said, get out. Get out, I say, get out!”

The maid picks up her skirts and runs.

The prince turns away, pounding his fist against the wall. Horrid maids, he thinks. Father should just fire the lot of them. That would teach them to respect their superiors.

“Oh!” the maid exclaims in the hall. “Your majesty.”

The prince turns, suddenly alert and upright. ‘Your majesty.’

Father.

The prince stands at attention, folding his hands behind his back. He is suddenly calm in the presence of the king. Nearly reverent, if that were an emotion such a spoiled prince could feel.

The tall, strong man nods. “Son.” He sits down, pausing before addressing his child. “I have something for you.”

The boy perks up. “You do?”

“Yes, my son,” the king says, stern and strong. “This is a very important gift, one I hope you will take very seriously.”

“Right, yes, sir,” the boy says, but he is hardly listening. His ears stopped working properly at the word gift.

The king sits down, and from inside a crate pulls out pieces of a wooden scene. Horses and small army men populate the box. A scepter, also crafted from bright sandalwood, rests next to it. “This is my gift to you. It is one fit for a prince. For a king,” he clarifies. “This will help you as you grow in power. Remember what it teaches.”

The prince does not answer, but instead reaches, transfixed, toward the diorama. He picks each piece up and turns it, fingering the detailed pieces. Each figurine has been intricately crafted. It must have taken weeks, the prince thinks. And it’s all for me.

“Thank you, father,” he whispers, awed.

The king nods. “Learn from it, my son. Remember.” Then he is gone.

The prince plays with the diorama night and day. He pretends he is the king of a vast army, and many wooden soldiers lose their lives daily. He carries the scepter, as long as his arm, big enough to wave in anger, everywhere he goes.

The young servants and the children of cooks, maids and stablehands crowd around the prince, clamoring for a turn. He turns them all away, waving his scepter. Now they watch over tables and around corners. Secretly they wish for it.

The prince knows. He smiles.

One morning a young servant enters the prince’s chambers. “Your highness,” he begins. Then he pauses. “Pardon, highness,” he begins again, stumbling around the words.

“Get on with it, servant,” the prince says lazily, waving his scepter.

The servant nods, makes a small bow, and says, “Highness, the young ones have started complaining, see--”

“What on earth could they have to complain about?” the prince asks, sitting up higher in his seat.

The servant pauses. “Yes. Well. That’s what I’m here to tell you, highness. See, they’ve been complaining that you’ve been turning them away, sir, and that you won’t let them play with or even look at your things, sir, and--”

“Well why on earth should I?” the prince explodes, rising up. “That was a gift from my father! He thought I was important enough to receive it, something you wouldn’t know a thing about.” He waves the wooden scepter to punctuate his point. “Now leave! Leave, by my father’s authority.”

The servant cowers.

“Get out!” The prince raises his scepter as if to strike.

“What is going on in here?” a deep voice booms from outside the door. Both the prince and the servant step back, and the servant bows low as the king strides into the room.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Majesty,” the servant stutters, pressing his face to the ground.

The king bends before him, waiting until the servant lifts his face. The servant is shaking, afraid. The prince smiles, a hard, malevolent smile; expectant, waiting. The king looks at the servant for a moment, holding his gaze.

Then his face breaks into a soft smile. “You may go, Jacques. You are pardoned.”

“Oh, thank you, Majesty!” the servant cries, and getting up, runs out.

The king turns to the prince, who has stepped back in shock. “Father!” he cries. “How could you?”

“How could I?” The king draws himself up until he is towering over his son, his face seeming to shine. “You are the one who is harming an innocent man. You are the one denying loyal young servants simple pleasures.”

“B-but, you gave me a gift,” the prince stammers, confused and a bit afraid. “You honored me.”

“Don’t you know?” the king asked. “Don’t you know the gift was intended to humble you? I designed it with my own hands, using skills I learned by watching the servants. I wanted to teach you the value of hard work, of simple things, of humility.”

The prince, for once, is silent.

The king sighs. “I will have to take the gift away.”

“What? No!” the prince sputters. “You can’t!”

The king fixes him with a stern stare, and the prince quiets. “I can,” he says levelly. “And I will. If you can learn to care for others, to love them, you may have your gift returned. Until then I will hold on to it. Learn and obey my son.”

The king exits.

The young prince, though not so young as he once was, sits on a throne. He is quiet, his face serene. People young and old come before him, and he listens to them, hears them. He treats them fairly, honorably. He holds a scepter in his hand.

A young servant, no longer timid, comes before them. The prince stops. Listens. Obeys.

Pride whirls through the castle, its wind sounding like furious whispering. Gathering itself into a storm, Pride disappears.

The raven flies once more into the man's window. He is already on his feet. "You have news?" It is a question, a command, a prayer.

The raven nods its head.

The man's brow knits, and he leans toward the bird. "Is it good news?"

The raven nods once more.

The man, lowering himself into a chair, sighs. "Good," he says, shaking his weary head.

He leans his head forward, resting it on his folded hands. "Carry on, dear bird. It is not over yet.

"There is still much work to be done."

Part 3: Envy

A deep blue cloud breaks off from its companions. It sweeps low over the town, scanning the village for a small cottage. It sinks through the thatched walls, bypassing the jolly baker and creeping into the highest bedroom. Envy slips into the room.

A young girl sits in the lonely window. She watches as her best friend plays with another girl their age. The girl in the window stares.

Far below, the old man stares out the window, directly towards the old cottage, even though he cannot see it from this angle. His eyes stay trained on the home, watching, ever watching.

"Daughter!" The jovial baker steps in, his smile spread as wide as his arms.

"Hi dad," she mumbles, still staring out the window.

The baker sits down. "What's wrong?"

The little girl points to the ground below. "Look," she says plaintively. "She's playing with someone else."

The baker tilts his head. "That's okay. You have me to play with!" He smiles and stands.

The girl shakes her head. "No, I think I'll stay here."

The baker frowns and slowly exits the room.

The sun has reached the highest point in the sky when the baker knocks on his daughter's door. The girl holds a blue friendship bracelet in her hands, turning it over and over. She looks up. "Come in," she calls.

The baker opens the door, his brow knit together. "How's it going?"

She stares at the bracelet. "Fine, I guess," she mumbles.

Her father sits next to her. "Still sad?"

She nods.

"She can have other friends, you know," the baker says gently. "She can still love you just the same."

The girl just shrugs.

"Do you want to come down? I made a new cookie mix. I know how much you love licking the spoon." The baker smiles, but it falls as his daughter replies.

"No, dad." She turns back to the window. "I'm fine here."

The baker opens his mouth, then closes it. "Okay." He backs out of the room. "Let me know if you change your mind."

The room has grown dim and dusky by the time the baker returns. His daughter is still staring, staring out the window.

"Sweetheart," the baker begins. Then he pauses, sighs, sits down. "You really miss her, don't you?"

The little girl nods.

The baker lets out a breath. "My love, she can have other friends and still be your friend."

The girl crosses her arms. "No!" she cries. "I want to be her only friend!"

"But look outside, my love!" The baker gestures to the window. "Your friend and her companion have gone. You have been sitting here all day, and they have moved on to other things. Don't you think it's time you do the same?"

The girl looks at him, confusion taking over her face. "Move on?"

"Yes, my love. Look around you." He gestures to the bedroom, big for such a small cottage. "You have so much. You have such a pretty room and so much space to work." He gestures to himself. "You have me!" he says with a smile. Then he picks up the blue friendship bracelet, taking it gently from his daughter's hand. "And you still have your friend. She was busy today, but she still loves you." He smiles gently at her. "As do I."

The girl looks down for a moment, then nods. “Yes,” she says, looking up. “I am loved.”

Her father smiles, relief marking the corners. “When you want to come downstairs, we can make cookies,” he says, walking to the door.

“I thought you already made them?”

“I waited for you.” He smiles at her, then slowly walks out the door.

“Dad?”

The baker turns around. “Yes, my love?”

The girl pauses, then looks up at him hopefully. “Do you think we could start baking now?”

The baker’s face breaks into a smile. “Yes, my love,” he says, laughing gently. “I think we could do that as soon as you like.”

As the two leave, a blue mist breaks away from the walls. It makes a quiet, insistent grumbling, rolling around the room. Finally, with a soft bang, Envy flies from the room.

The old man moves, for the first time in hours. He blinks. His stare breaks. The old man smiles. He nods. He sits back down, and lowers his head to his folded hands.

Part 4: Gluttony

A bright orange cloud rushes over the countryside, gaining on a speeding carriage. It swirls over the top of the vehicle before lowering itself into the walls. In a high, screeching gust, Gluttony laughs.

The old man waits patiently by the window. It seems that is all he does these days; watch, and wait. But the old man does not think of himself. He does not think of long days, or of his aching joints. Instead, he thinks of so many others, and today, of a specific man. Without taking his eyes off the window, his mouth moves in a silent prayer.

The tall, thin man steps out of his carriage into the courtyard. An oily smile spreads over his lips as he surveys the town. He walks through the streets, his head held high, his chin lifted higher as the people bow before him.

He reaches the palace's stately doors and knocks loudly. He is received with a hurried bow and is ushered in.

"I am here on behalf of my king," he announces imperiously, peering out of the corner of his eye, daring anyone to disagree with him. When no one does, he closes his eyes self-satisfactorily and waits to be addressed.

The king, of a neighboring kingdom to the diplomat, sits up straighter in his stately throne. "Your king?" he asks quietly. Then, he clears his throat and booms, "Welcome! You must have had a difficult journey."

The diplomat nods, pleased to be acknowledged.

"Well then," the king cries, "Please, come rest. Eat!"

The diplomat brightens immediately. "Did you say eat?"

"Yes!" the king cries again. "Eat!"

The diplomat pulls out his pocket watch; lavish, bronze, nearly orange in color. A gift from his king. "I suppose I have time...."

With a gleeful grin, he skips to a table teeming with food. His eyes grow wide as he scans the vast assortment. "Don't mind if I do," the diplomat says, and immediately sits down, stuffing food into his mouth.

"Do you like it?" the king asks, looking on.

The diplomat doesn't stop to address the king properly, but merely continues eating with an enthusiastic nodding of his head.

The king appears relieved. "Only the finest for a messenger from a king."

Later, the diplomat follows a dowdy servant down a corridor.

"Where are you taking me, servant?" he demands.

"To 'yer room, master."

The diplomat turns up his nose in the air, sniffing. "Down this hallway?" he asks.

The servant nods.

"Stop."

She does. "Beggin' your pardon, master?"

"I demand a better room."

"But, master--"

“ Only the finest for a messenger from a king. Isn't that what your ruler said?” The diplomat keeps his nose in the air, but looks down at the servant out of the corner of his eye, daring her to disagree.

She slowly nods. “Er, of course, master.” Slowly, she turns around and leads him back through the corridor and into an open space more brightly lit. She brings him to a pleasant room, one that the servant could only dream of inhabiting. “Here you are, master.”

The diplomat looks around, then sniffs. “I suppose it will do.” He walks over to the bed, then glares at the servant. “What is this?”

She blinks at him. “What is what, master?”

“This bedding! It's--why, it's atrocious! This color is hideous. And these sheets--ugh!” He rubs them between his fingers. “The scratchiest I have ever felt. I demand new ones.”

“But, master--”

“You dare disobey me? I demand more!” He swings his pocket watch, glaring at her menacingly.

“Yes master!” she cries, and runs out of the room.

With a satisfied smile, the diplomat rises from his bed and pulls on the opulent clothing he demanded the night before.

He walks down the streets, his head held high. At every turn, he sees something new, and he wants what he sees. Cakes, clothing, rich food, everything he wants he receives as soon as he waves his pocket watch from the king, lazily checking the time, flashing the opulence at every corner.

“More!” he demands at a small bakery.

“I'm sorry, sir, we have no more,” the owner says hesitantly.

The diplomat rises, enraged. “But I demand more!”

“We're tired of your demands,” cries someone outside. The diplomat turns to see a crowd of people waiting outside the door. They wave fists, pitchforks, wooden stirring spoons and more as they yell unintelligible things. The diplomat feels an old bit of rotten food hit his face.

“Ungrateful!” someone shouts, followed by “Stuck up!” and “Excessive!”

“Get out of town!” The crowd takes up this call together, and, followed by thrown bits of food, the diplomat hurries away.

Angry and dejected, he leaves back to his home kingdom. “How could they be so rude?” he asks indignantly.

As he nears his own king’s palace, he begins to grow worried. What will I tell the king? he thinks. What if he’s angry? What if...

What if the people were right?

When the king hears the story, he is not angry as the diplomat feared. But he is stern as he says, “You did not do as I asked.”

“How so?” the diplomat queries.

“I sent you to the neighboring kingdom so that you could help its people. You were to discuss equity and the betterment of our country. Instead, you abused your power, using it for your own selfish gain.”

The diplomat bows his head. “I’m sorry, your majesty,” he whispers.

The king smiles, and his face is not as stern as before. “I know,” he says. “And you will have the chance to work for me again. But in the meantime....” He holds out his hand. “I will take that pocket watch back. Learn to use your time for others, not for yourself.”

Furious, Gluttony pulls itself from the flimsy walls of the carriage. Making a grumbling noise, it pulls itself together and flies away.

The man smiles, lifting his head. “Good,” he says. “You have come home, my children,” he whispers, staring out the window. “Come home.”

Part 5: Greed

A misty green cloud flies over the country. It stops over the towering castle, wriggling this way and that as if it was looking for something. Apparently sensing its target, the cloud dives toward the rolling waves below, tumbling toward the surface of the water. It speeds over the sea, pulling to a stop at the mouth of a cavern on a small beach offshore. The cloud gathers itself into a mass and slowly drifts inside. In the darkness, Greed laughs.

The old man places his head in his hands. His frail body is weary from days of pacing, days of worrying over those whom he considers his children. "This will be a difficult one," he whispers to himself. "Be strong, my love," he says. "Be strong."

A pirate swings down from the boat, landing firmly on the sandy shore. A long, black coat conceals most of the pirate's figure, and a large hat casts the figure's face in shadow. The pirate looks dirty, poor, unassuming. But when the figure tips up its hat, something glints in the eyes that survey the island, taking in everything. Something seems odd about the way the figure strides across the sand, moving swifter and smoother than seems quite natural. Most of all, something is odd about the gold twisted through the long, red hair that hangs down the pirate's back. This pirate--this girl--is not as helpless as she appears.

She strides toward the opening of the cavern, her soft boots moving noiselessly across the sand. Her movements are fluid, rippling across her lithe body. She slips inside and draws up short, narrowly avoiding falling headfirst into a deep pool.

The eyes glint again as she kneels down by the water. "Gold," she whispers, reaching forward, dipping her fingers in the pool, trailing them through the water. She edges closer to the small object, a cup, and starts to pick it up.

When she brings it out of the water, she sees that the object is a bright, slightly unnatural, green. She grimaces and tosses it back into the water. "Must've been copper," she mutters to herself, then rises, edging along a winding, rocky path towards the next chamber.

As she passes through, a waterfall pummels her. She barely feels it, thinking always of the treasure that must await her on the other side of the cavern.

The pirate grabs strange divots in the wall to stay steady. She doesn't pause to look at them, pressing on through the rushing water.

She enters the chamber and gasps aloud. It is filled top to bottom with gold, sparkling like diamonds through the light of the water. Waterfalls cover every side of the cavern and pool on the floor, submerging every speck of treasure.

The pirate leaps deftly towards the largest pool, plunging her hand into the depths. She grabs hold of golden coins. A gleeful grin slips over her lips as she pulls the handful from the water....

As soon as the metal touches the air, it immediately turns green. The pirate yelps and tosses the gold back in. She squints at the water in confusion, then narrows her eyes, determined. She has come all this way. She will not turn back.

The pirate reaches for another item: a golden sword, with rubies set into the hilt. She pulls it out, and this time it stays gold for a moment before slowly turning to green. The pirate shakes her head, picking it up and swishing it around, pretending to fight an invisible foe.

To her surprise and excitement, the sword begins to turn back to gold!

She gasps aloud, then giggles giddily, a sound uncharacteristic for such a ruthless girl. She flicks the sword around once more, thrusting it in the air.

She looks down to admire where her hand grips the sword, then gasps and drops the weapon.

The sword may be gold, but her hand is green.

It feels oddly stiff, too, as she flexes it. She glares at the pool of water, then suddenly drops to the ground and starts digging through it. She pulls out object after object, reveling in the golden color.

She is so absorbed in her newfound wealth, she hardly notices that her other hand has turned green, and that the mysterious color is slowly working its way up her arm.

She grabs armfuls of the treasure and makes a break for the door, staggering as her feet suddenly grow stiff. She looks down to see her foot touching gold, her boot and the leg of her pants now eerie green.

She staggers toward the arch of the cavern, dropping half of her findings, unable to catch them as her waist grows stiff.

She manages to make it to the arch, but she sticks in the doorway, her whole body green.

She feels the odd divots again, and turns her head, the only part of her not covered in the eerie green metal.

The divots are words, spelling out a strange sentence.

Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

The pirate squints at the words as her eyes start to grow stiff. She cannot repent. She won't.

Her nose starts to harden.

She will not cave!

Her lips feel deathly cold.

With the last of her strength, the pirate opens her mouth wide and yells, "I'm sorry!"

The sound echoes around the cavern.

The waterfall slows.

The pirate can suddenly feel again, and she crumples on the floor, back in the main chamber of the cavern.

Behind her, the arch of the cavern seamlessly slides shut.

Fuming, Greed gathers the last of its misty green trails and whirls away, back over the water, rising up into the heavens with a screeching gust.

The man lets out a breath, his face relaxing for what feels like the first time in days. “Good,” he whispers. “You have done well, my child.” His eyes remain closed, his hands folded as if in prayer. “Now, if you would only know me, child. If you would only know me.”

Part 6: Lust

A thick pink cloud hovers over the horizon. It spins down toward a castle, bobbing on the breeze as if assured of some future victory. The mist finds a door in the castle, and with a noise that sounds like a bubbling laugh, slips into the room. Lust laughs.

The old man leans on the table beside him, staring intently out the window. His raven is long gone, already soaring. The man closes his eyes. “This will be a hard one,” he whispers. “But you are strong. Be strong, beloved one. Be strong.”

A young nobleman paces in the hallway, glancing nervously at the doors in front of him. The king always makes him nervous, especially on days like today. The nobleman had been awoken by a summons to the king’s presence. There had been no warning, no explanation. Just a summons. And the nobleman is very nervous.

Very nervous.

He paces the hallway, looking back and forth to make sure no one is coming. I know one way to make me feel less nervous....

It is a habit he has been trying to break. But no one will know....

Quickly, he steps across the hallway to admire the opposite wall. More particularly, to admire the paintings on it.

The king loves to honor every member of his court, and has commissioned paintings of everyone in his castle. Those of the many young noblewomen had been hung in the very hall where the nobleman is now.

He always seems to be nervous in this hallway, and looking at those paintings seems to take the nervousness away. The women are so beautiful. He wonders what it might be like to meet them someday. To talk to them, maybe even dance with them. They are so beautiful....

“My lord?”

The nobleman spins around, leaping away from the paintings. A servant stands in the formidable doorway, watching him with a look of confusion.

“The king is ready to see you now, my lord,” the servant says slowly.

“Ah, yes, thank you,” the nobleman replies, nodding, and slips into the throne room.

“I have a special job for you,” the king says, nodding in acknowledgment. “I would like you to visit every room in the castle and take note of the furniture there. I need to know what I own.”

The nobleman nods, and, bowing politely, turns to exit the room.

“Wait a moment,” the king calls out. “I need this task completed before the end of this week. Can you do that?”

“Of course, sir,” the nobleman answers immediately. “Anything for you.”

The king smiles, but it is grave. “Then go, sir,” he says, and the servant leads the nobleman out the door.

It is only the fifth room, and the nobleman is already tired. He pushes open the door to the second--no, third?--bedroom and sighs in relief when he sees a couch next to the wall.

“Let me see,” he mumbles to himself, tapping his quill against his chin as he sits on the couch. “One bed, one table, a nightstand....”

He trails off, seeing what hangs on the wall. It is a painting of a young woman, one of the many who regularly visit the palace. She is beautiful in jewels and a stunning gown. The young man stares at the painting, seemingly unable to look away. He forgets about his aching feet. All he can see is her....

“Sir?” a voice calls from outside the doorway.

The nobleman leaps to his feet, turning from the painting and clearing his throat. “Yes? What is it?” he calls, trying to sound natural.

“You’ve been in there a long time, sir,” the voice responds. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Um--” The nobleman looks longingly at the painting, then turns away, striding toward the door. “No,” he says, opening it. “I was just...I got...stuck,” he finishes lamely.

“Stuck, sir?”

“Yes. You know how these floorboards can be.” Without waiting for an answer, the nobleman hurries off.

The young man only makes it through twelve rooms the next day, and only six after that. Each day he grows more tired. Each day, for reasons he doesn't understand, he grows more afraid of the king. And each day, he finds himself drawn to the paintings to get rid of those feelings.

Servants start to question why he stays in each room so long. He takes to avoiding them. He can't seem to break his habit, and the cycle only deepens.

On the final day of the week, the nobleman sits in a room on the second floor. There are five floors, and he should be farther than he is, but he can't seem to stop himself from lingering where he shouldn't. He closes his eyes. “Help me,” he prays.

Suddenly the door opens. The nobleman jumps as the king strides into the room. He sees the nobleman and the painting and sits down on the bed. “My dear nobleman,” he says softly, “is there something you would like to tell me?”

With that, the whole story comes spilling out. The nobleman hangs his head in shame.

The king lays a hand on his arm. The nobleman dares to glance up at him. He doesn't see a look of condemnation, but instead, a gentle smile.

“Would you like someone to help you catalog the rest of the rooms?” the king asks kindly. “I can assign you a partner. Then you can talk to each other, and you won't be tempted to be distracted again.”

“You aren't angry?” the nobleman asks.

The king shakes his head. “When I was your age, I struggled too. But I made it through, and today I am married with a son. Remember that these paintings you're looking at are of real women, with minds and hearts and ambitions. Get to know these women for who they truly are, not just their looks. Make real friendships with everyone in this palace. Soon you will no longer be tempted as you are now.”

The nobleman nods slowly, even daring to smile. “Thank you, sir,” he says.

The king smiles. “Any time, my dear nobleman. Any time.”

Lust shrieks, and a piece of it breaks off, retreating from the room in a roiling cloud. It soars up into the sky and disappears without a trace.

The old man lets out a breath and lowers himself carefully into his chair. “You have won the hardest battle, my beloved. You have made the choice to resist. It will be hard. But you are strong. And I know that you will win.”

Part 7: Sloth

A yellow cloud tilts high in the air above an open practice field, searching for something. It spies its target and lazily lowers itself toward the ground. Sloth laughs.

The old man paces by a window, his arms folded. He is old, very old, and deeply weary. His feeble bones barely hold him, but still he hobbles, waiting, watching, praying. Praying for his children to come home.

“You know you want to.” The young knight’s smile is cocky as he motions toward his squire. “C’mon, let’s have a little fun!”

“No, sir,” the squire says, shaking his head as he picks up a pile of armor. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. I need to finish my duties.” He wrinkles his nose at the armor in his hand. “And if I may say so, sir, so do you.”

The knight shrugs and waves his hand. “I’ll do it later. Come on, sit down!”

The boy turns away, shaking his head firmly. “No. I need to finish my job, and then we must train. Forgive me for saying so, sir, but you haven’t practiced all week. You’re likely growing rusty.”

The young knight scoffs. “Me? Rusty? Please, I could beat you any day of the week.”

The squire sighs. “I’ll see you on the practice field.”

The knight shrugs and lays back on the yellow hay pile.

The knight wakes hours later to see the sun setting over the practice field. He yawns and slowly sits up, brushing off hay, taking his time.

The squire limps in, dirty, sweaty, and tired. He drags a practice dummy behind him.

The knight smirks. “Rough day?”

The squire sighs, setting the dummy up in the corner. "Long day," he says. "But I got good work in."

The knight snorts. "What's good about work?"

Silently, the squire walks toward the barn door. At the last moment, he turns back, and the knight is slightly surprised by the fierce look in his eyes. "Pardon me saying so, sir, but if you keep this up, I will be better than you."

"Is that a fact?" the knight replies flippantly.

The squire merely looks at him darkly. "Yes. It is." With that, he walks out.

The knight does not heed the squire's warning. For the next few weeks, he lazes on golden hay bales, eating apples and chatting with whoever walks by. The squire responds less and less, and the knight is glad to do without his nit-picking. But as he watches the knight from across the room, the squire does not look happy.

"Sparring day!" a voice cries from outside the barn.

The knight sits up, groaning at being disturbed.

"Time to test your skills! Outside, everyone, in five minutes!"

The knight rolls his eyes, but stretches and stands up from the hay. "I guess I can go show off for a little while. Maybe they'll learn a thing or two."

He ambles into the field ten minutes late. Nobody looks at him as he enters. He doesn't understand why.

"Finally!" The captain of the guard walks toward him.

The knight grins. "Waiting for me to show up?"

"How dare you disobey my direct order?"

The knight's smile falters. "I--I didn't--"

"I called you out here ten minutes ago, and now you show up, sloppy and half-asleep. If this is how you act I cannot keep you in my army."

"But I'm the best fighter here!" the knight cries. "I can beat anyone. Just let me show you."

"You can, eh?" The captain looks as if he is about to send the knight away. Then suddenly his face changes. "Alright," he says, "You may show me by fighting a member of this army. If you win, you keep your position. But if you don't...you will be relegated to squire."

The knight scoffs. "I'll win. I'm the best!"

“You were,” a voice says.

The knight turns to see the squire standing behind him, sword in hand. The knight laughs incredulously. “He’s my opponent? Please! That’s not even a challenge.”

“Is it?” The squire swings his sword, and the knight barely manages to block. His arm hadn’t moved as fast as he’d expected.

The squire swings again, and again the knight has trouble blocking. “The sword is too heavy,” he says, but inwardly he is beginning to feel nervous.

“Is the sword heavy? Or are you weaker?” The squire strikes again, and this time he knocks the sword out of the knight’s hand. The knight scrambles for it, but it is too late. The squire has him on the ground.

The captain steps forward and raises the boy’s hand. “The squire has beat the knight in battle!” he cries. “He is now knighted!”

Everyone on the practice field cheers.

The captain turns to the knight. “And you,” he says. “Because you were lazy, you lost everything you worked for. As of today, you are no longer a knight.”

Shame and remorse descend on the knight as he grasps his sword and begins to walk toward the barn.

“But...” the captain begins. The knight turns. “If you prove to me you are willing to work hard--and mind you, it will not be easy--then you may return to your position.” The knight nods. “I will do my best, captain.”

As he enters the barn, he looks at the pile of hay. For a moment, he is tempted to lay down on it. No, he thinks. This time, I do things the right way.

He kicks the hay to the side and sets to work.

With a shriek and a loud gust of wind, Sloth disappears. The sky rumbles, and for a brief moment the air stirs. Queen, prince, daughter, diplomat, pirate, nobleman and knight stare up at the pitch-black sky. Suddenly, light breaks through the clouds. A rainbow appears in the brightening sky. Every color--except for red--lights up the valley. The world is right once more.

The old man watches this display from his room in the depths of the castle. He smiles, and though to any onlooker he would appear sad, his heart is happy. Yet one single tear falls from his eye. “She made her choice,” he whispers. “They all did.”

Then he carefully lowers himself onto a chair. “My work is finished,” he breathes. He folds his hands and lowers his head. He has done what he was called to do. Now he may enter into his rest.

THE END

“The Seven Deadly Sins” by Amanda Heubner was originally published in monthly installments in *The Beacon*, Excelsior Classes’ student newspaper, and is reprinted here with permission.

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The Beacon staffers learn to uphold the highest professional and ethical standards, while working under deadline pressure in a collaborative environment to produce a newspaper that is both glorifying to God and of benefit and interest to its readers. The newspaper content is mainly news and feature articles about faculty and students taking classes at Excelsior Classes. Above all, its purpose is to uphold Godly standards as students learn the art and craft of journalism.

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**Contact: Mrs. Jamie Anderson, faculty advisor
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*Want to fill your bookshelf
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Writing Club Book Picks



The Monster in the Hollows

Review by Lily C.

The Monster in the Hollows is the third book in a fantasy-adventure series by Andrew Peterson titled *The Wingfeather Saga*. After arriving at the Green Hollows, the Wingfeather family must learn to adapt to a life of comparative safety. That safety is soon threatened as young Kalmar Wingfeather is shunned and despised by the people of the Hollows. The Wingfeathers must prove Kalmar's innocence before he is punished and condemned for a crime he did not commit. I cannot recommend this book, and the entire saga, enough. From the first chapter, I couldn't put it down. I found tears in my eyes, a smile on my face, and goosebumps on my skin again and again. The plot is intriguing, the characters are authentic, and the writing is superb.

Nevermoor: The Trials of Morrigan Crow

Review by L. J. Fay

By Jessica Townsend, *Nevermoor* is about a girl named Morrigan Crow. Morrigan is doomed to die at midnight on her eleventh birthday. But she might just have a chance to avoid her fate. A chance that is found in an odd man named Jupiter North.

I like this book because it explores Morrigan's experience of finding herself, and it is exciting and quick-paced too. I hope you will all read it, and love it as much as I did.



The Outlaws

Review by Grace J.

In this book by Jonathan Stroud, Notorious outlaw Scarlett McCain and telepathically gifted Albert Browne are roped into dangerous heists, as they struggle to escape both the authorities and Albert's dark past, including the cruel Dr. Callaway who will stop at nothing to bring Albert "home." Once Scarlett finds out who or should I say, what Albert really is, will she still stick with him? How far will Albert go to protect his friends and stay out of Dr. Callaway's clutches? Will he be able to overcome his fear of what he can do if it means saving countless lives, including his own?

Go read *The Outlaws Scarlett and Browne* to find out. This novel is hands down one of my favorite books I have ever read. As a reader who easily gets bored, this book is perfect. There is a constant air of suspense throughout every page, so even while you are reading the slower paced scenes you are still always on the edge of your seat. I have read this series around 3 times since I first discovered it nearly a year and a half ago, and it will never get old. I would suggest this novel for anyone 12 and up, because of the amount of violence and cuss words.

101 Dalmations

Review by Cosette McKeen

The Hundred and One Dalmatians by Dodie Smith is an entertaining novel filled with adventures and several bandits. After Pongo and Missus have fifteen puppies, Missus wears herself out feeding. Perdita comes to help nurture the puppies. Unexpectedly, the puppies are stolen and it's up to Pongo and Missus to find them! This is the story which the popular cartoon was based off of. I love this book because it always has a hint of humor to it. The writing is excellent and can entertain many ages.

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