

*The Writers' Slate* is published by The Writing Conference, Inc., and features some of our nation's top quality writing by students, kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The national journal is published three times a year, including one issue filled with award-winning prose and poetry. The publication is available online.

The editor invites original, creative, and expository writing by students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Book reviews of children's or young adult literature written by students are also welcome. Educators are also encouraged to submit article ideas for feature article consideration.

Deadlines are as follows:

- fall issue      June 15
- winter issue    October 15
- spring issue    January 15

Please submit all entries electronically to: [KristenWorthington@writingconference.com](mailto:KristenWorthington@writingconference.com)

Submissions should clearly indicate:

- writer's name
- city and state
- school's name
- grade level
- contact information (email address and phone number)

Due to the number of submissions, the editor will typically respond only to submissions that have been accepted for publication. Submissions will not be returned. The editor reserves the right to edit manuscripts for clarity, style, and according to space limitations.

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John H. Bushman  
Director, The Writing Conference, Inc.

# ***The Writers' Slate***

## ***Winter 2011***

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February 2011

The editors of *The Writers' Slate* once again appreciate the obvious effort you have put into the submissions we received! Your latest contributions continue to be both entertaining and insightful, and we are excited by the young talent that has found its way to us. Both your ideas and creative forms of expression have helped to make this yet another exciting edition that we're sure others will take the same pleasure that we have in reading.

We congratulate those whose work was selected for publication; however, we urge those whose entries were not chosen at this time to not be discouraged, but rather to continue writing and to submit pieces for consideration for upcoming issues. Since we receive a substantial number of entries throughout the year, the selection process is highly competitive. It is our hope that we have the opportunity to read more of your writing in the future.

Enjoy reading the 2011 winter edition!

Kristen Worthington, Editor

Heather Bedsaul, Associate Editor

*David Berger  
Englewood, NJ*



*The Moriah School  
Grade 8*

## **Competition**

Competition is everywhere, timeless and free,  
a recurring theme, an eternal decree.  
It can corrupt and aid; it is prominent and fades.  
It brings a person's potential out,  
yet blurs their perception without a doubt.  
For those who buy, the product is cheaper;  
for those who sell, the rent is steeper  
and the stress deeper.

Competition—amusement for others,  
stress from the kids, those unlucky mothers.  
The squirrels quarrel over the drey,  
and the athletes more violently play,  
that game, the game for fame.  
Those elephant seals will brawl for their mate  
as competition becomes only more innate,  
Yet without competition how could we evolve  
and solve the problems that we have solved?  
The students strive to get higher;  
their workloads then seem much lighter.  
The bright get brighter, the education is livelier.

Competition, are you a nuisance or delight?  
Do you cause peace or strife?  
You make cities prosper and knock others down;  
the winners swim, and the losers drown.  
Competition, are you friend or foe?  
The world may never know.

*Nick Waits  
Hamersville, OH*



*Hamersville Middle  
Grade 7*

## **Box of Treasures**

The old box sits in the basement,  
layers of dust from untold times.  
I have stumbled across it  
while searching for my dad's things.

Dusty inside and out,  
it contains harmonicas.  
Some are new, some are old.

The box has an illusion of humbleness,  
giving no clue to the treasures inside.

From a distance, it is just another box,  
dusty, like the background of the others.

But—up close—  
you can see the fingerprints  
of the first time I opened it.

The box is like me—  
only blending into the background  
until you open my lid.

The box is also like my parents—  
stingy with its contents  
but full of music and happiness  
when opened.

I like this box:  
five generations old,  
disregarding time,  
immortalizing the contents.

It makes me happy  
that I can make the collection grow  
for my family to see.

Old box of harmonicas.

*Sean Ahem  
Middleton, MA*



*Arlington Catholic  
High School  
Grade 12*

## **Nightcrawlers**

I swear Life  
is blindly crawling,  
open sores  
over cold, cracked concrete,  
making faint footprints,  
attempted mental mapping of the  
height—length—width—cracks--crevices  
of the walls and the floors, but never fully sure.  
Just more stumbling, reaching as if  
there would be a light switch or a door,  
just wind-swept whispers from far corners,  
and yelling in return, both parties trying to learn  
if the other is real.

But Death (the eventual stumbling over the  
edge of the room, forever falling  
unconscious—though never fully aware—  
into sense-deprived Nothingness)  
shows his facetious face  
and all is lost—except the  
delicate, desperate marks left by yearn-ful  
years of dragging through the dark.  
Or maybe silver; I'm not a chemist.  
Nothing (not even water)  
is as good a conductor  
as the space between our faces  
before they connect  
with a seismic impact,  
the distance

enough to hold  
an ocean filled with the souls  
of every home-sick lover that there floats.  
Be it only a moment,  
or the way our spirits softly sail amidst  
the ever-closing gate of our lips,  
thus begins their dark journey,  
moving toward each other despite the vacillating sea.  
I don't know how it is that:  
our breath  
can be our lighthouse,  
signaling through the mist  
somehow locking our lips  
    perfect,  
        fitting,  
            fleeting.

Such is that the magnet in my forehead  
moves to yours, dipping my head  
like a crane  
to a stream,  
flicking out eyes,  
finishing the circuit;  
new blue sparks  
of eclectic electricity  
    roll  
        me-you, you-me.

Nothing (not even water)  
is as good a conductor.

*Emily Cutler  
Birmingham, AL*



*Indian Springs School  
Grade 10*

## **Latin**

Latin is forty-cent Dr. Peppers.

It is indigo mythology posters, bent-up copies of The Aeneid,  
and gold wire glasses with thick lenses.

It is schoolboy conjugations written on the board during lunch  
like "pim, pis, pit, pimus, pitis, pants"  
and being called a "doophus issamus."

Latin is words like "aquiline" and "iota,"  
stories about street prostitutes in Vienna,  
pasta, pizza, and gelato.

It is the table in the student lounge we used to sit on while cutting class  
and big block letters spelling "SCHOLARS' BOWL IS STUPID"  
while covering Caesar's account of the Gauls.

Latin is short black hair and bracelets that jingle,  
beer, lipstick, perfume,  
and fingernails painted with stripes.

It is the passive voice and synopses.

Latin is drinking for the first time at the Toga Hop,

and rooting for the Trojans while watching Troy.

It is secretly hating Virgil

and openly hating Caesar.

Latin is your Mythology Bee trophy

and your needle-like nails in my wrist.

It is fifty different verbs that mean "to kill,"

Thracian Hyperboles,

and Neptune.

Latin is people who say, "molto bene" and watch Doctor Who.

It is a legacy thing,

with Trojans who found Rome

and legacy children:

Spanish, French, and Portuguese.

Latin is pretending to understand the subjunctive

and having a panic attack on the bus to convention.

It is excuses like "This will help raise your SAT scores;"

like, "It's a community;"

like, "It's not dead—it's immortal."

Latin is reading Ferdinand the Bull before Christmas Break

and explaining to Spanish students why you can't "say something in Latin."

It is counting the staples,

inscribing "The Half Blood Prince" in the name plate of Metamorphosis,

and trying not to laugh at the word "vagina."

Latin is ablative absolutes

and telling ourselves we aren't like Dido.

It is the doorknob in the hallway

and your hand around my wrist.

Latin is trust and hope and faith and friendship and love.

It is standing up to people who think *Romeo and Juliet* was some original idea

and repeating, "Cassandra, Cassandra, Cassandra."

It is walking through the desert for one drop of water.

Latin is when you finally stop running

and accept that there's no way out.



*Gabriel Roybal  
Greely, CO*



*East Memorial  
Grade 4*

### **Angel Dog**

When I went to sleep last night,  
I had a dream about a poodle dog.  
She was black and had angel wings.  
It was my dog, Shady, and she sparkled through the fog.

She flew down from the clouds in the sky.  
Missing her dearly, I held up my arms to catch her.  
We were happy to be together again!  
You could tell that we had missed each other.

When I woke from my dream, Shady was gone.  
I realized God has angel-dogs in heaven.  
She is smiling and watching over me.  
It gives me something to believe in!

*Dallas Fields  
Hamersville, OH*



*Hamersville Middle  
Grade 7*

## **The Future Masterpiece**

Grandpa's backyard,  
Under a tattered old tarp,  
Tangled up with weeds.

Heavy as a boat,  
Smaller than an elephant—  
Perfect size for me.

From far away, it looks just like an old car,  
But when I stare at it, it looks like a masterpiece.

Some days, I feel like that old car,  
Sitting there just rusting away and doing nothing.

An old Mustang Fast Back.

*Brooke Yorkey  
Poland, ME*



*Poland Community  
School  
Grade 6*

## **I Shine On**

Today, I am the weather.

I shine on the world,

I rain from my cloudy eyes.

When I am sad,

I grumble and thunder.

When I am mad,

I strike where I am.

Angry at the world,

I hide behind the clouds.

When I am scared ,

I celebrate with white

confetti.

Today, I am the weather.

I shine on you.

I shine on families.

I shine on the world.

I shine on.

*Hope Roush  
Hamersville, OH*



*Hamersville Middle  
Grade 7*

## **Life**

Be inspired

by a hope that changes everything.

Let your voice be heard;

Speak out for those who cannot speak.

Live justly.

Beautiful is about to happen.

Are you ready?

The end is not the end...

*Cierra Wagner  
Sandy, UT*



*Albion Middle School  
Grade 9*

## **The Winds of Change**

### **SUMMER**

The winds of summer danced through the valley.  
They sang of ripe raspberries and cold lemonade.  
They whispered of luminous stars in a black midnight  
and of the early morning dew clinging in the grass.  
The winds blew past picnic baskets filled to the brim  
and rustled leaves high in the trees.  
They kissed the cheeks of sunburned children  
and grazed the lips of daydreamers, lying down in fields.  
The winds carried the sounds of summer in their trail:  
bicycle wheels on gravel, laughter, and singing blue jays.  
If you look carefully into the wind,  
you will see the images that floated through summer:  
games of soccer played on the field,  
swimming pools filled with feverish bodies,  
and sprinklers watering more children than grass.  
As quickly as summer dances in, it dances away again,  
its smells, sights, and sounds  
melting into the coming winds of the fall.

**FALL**

The winds of fall bounded through the valley.

They hummed of falling red leaves and raspberry tea.

They buzzed of the coming school days in the August heat  
and of the early rising sun.

The winds ran past men raking leaves, women baking pies,  
and children passing a battered football behind the house.

They tore leaves from their hold in the old trees  
and chased them in circles.

They blew through the new school clothes  
and carried loose papers through the empty streets.

The winds threw the smells of fall through the valley:  
gasoline from leaf blowers, steaming Sunday dinners, and crisp apples.

It dropped the sounds of fall in the soft piles of leaves,  
old records on the phonographs, dancing feet, and the swish of long grass.

If you look carefully into the wind,

you will see fall in a glimpse:

sparkling eyes peeking out from a pile of fallen leaves,

love-struck teens dancing in the moonlight,

and school children dreaming of being free.

As suddenly as fall bounded in, it bounds away again,

its smells, sights, and sounds

giving in to the falling of winter winds.

**WINTER**

The winds of winter flew through the valley.  
They mumbled of falling snow and steamed milk.  
They meandered through frozen school yards  
and dark evenings.

They swirled around families caroling in candlelight, shoveled walks,  
and frost-bitten window panes.

They pull petals from their home on the stem  
and bury them in the silver snow.

They drove children into bundles of warm clothing  
and escorted Jack Frost from house to house.

The winds spread the smells of winter through the valley.  
They brought smells of home, wood-burning stoves, and pine.

They stomped the sounds of winter into the snow:  
the thud of snowballs hitting skin, harmonies drifting from door to door,  
and, if you listen closely, snow falling softly to the ground.

If you look carefully into the wind,  
you will see the stories of winter carried on the flakes of snow:  
mothers kissing wind-burned cheeks,  
candles burning in the window,  
and a bright star.

As swiftly as winter flew in, it flies away again,  
its smells, sights, and sounds  
giving in to the blooming spring.

**SPRING**

The winds of spring leapt into the valley.

They chattered of flowers opening wide.

They bustled through the growing grass  
and mild afternoons.

They curled around little feet jumping hopscotch,

lovers strolling in the light of the setting sun,

and new mothers holding their treasures close to their hearts.

They blew past bees, busy building new homes,  
to carry them far to the flower.

The winds spread the smells of spring into the homes of the valley:

the lilac bushes in full bloom, strawberries ripe in the fields,  
and the coming rain.

They rolled the sounds of spring down the gravel streets,

the notes of the piano drifting through the window, dancing feet,  
and fathers passing the ball to their sons.

If you look carefully into the wind,

you will see snapshots of spring:

women in new linen dresses, children with freshly-skinned knees,  
and a mother and father sharing a moment alone in the early-morning shine.

As briskly as spring leapt in, it leaps away,

its smells, sights, and sounds

giving in to the stiff breeze of summer,

forever changing.

*Jeana Yee  
Clackamas, OR*



*Clackamas High  
Grade 10*

### **Every Little Thing**

Rosa Parks  
put up a fight.  
Martin Luther King  
fought for our rights.

The Wright brothers  
let us fly free.  
Edison changed the world  
with light bulbs and electricity.

Beethoven and Mozart  
did their musical part.  
Da Vinci and Picasso  
created works of art.

Babe Ruth and Michael Jordan  
achieved astounding feats.  
Even years and years later,  
they were still the ones to beat.

But you don't have to be famous;  
you don't have to be a star.  
You can change the world  
just by being who you are.

We're all the same:  
we laugh, we cry.  
Throughout each day  
we sing, we sigh.

But what makes the difference,  
isn't whether or not we're king.  
It's what we do—  
every little thing.

You can conserve.  
You can be safe.  
You can help spread the word  
to make the world a better place.

Dig your hands into soil  
and make a little hole.  
Plant a shrub or tree  
to open another soul.

Go turn off your water.  
Go turn off the lights.  
Do a little conserving  
to make the world right.

Donate food and money.  
Help to feed the poor.  
We can end the world's poverty;  
we just have to do a little more.

A journey of a thousand miles  
begins with a single step.  
So you've got to start changing now;  
don't say "later" or "not yet".

Wake up to the world  
every single day.  
Through rain, sun, sleet, and snow,  
just think that you can make a change.

Because what counts is  
every  
little  
thing.

*Cassie Villarreal  
Wyoming, MI*



*Rogers High School  
Grade 12*

### **The Art of Lying**

#### Taste

Lying tastes like salt.  
So heavy on my tongue.  
The tears continue to fall.

#### Smell

The smell of soap.  
Because lying is such a dirty thing.  
Tainted truth and forgotten reality.

#### Sight

The look on your face  
When I tell you I'm ok.  
The reason I keep lying.

#### Sound

These people pass me by.  
I put them all on mute.  
Their sounds don't breach my thoughts.

#### Touch

No feelings at all.  
Because to allow feeling  
Would mean the end of my control.

*Chris Garbellini  
Ottawa, KS*



## **How to See a Little More**

To see a little more,  
you need only give time.  
Wake earlier,  
listen longer.  
Look beyond the window,  
the arms of comfort,  
the bars of simplicity.  
Focus not on the failures,  
nor those who provoke them.

Do not raze the silence—  
Learn from it.  
Do not scorn the dawn—  
welcome it.  
Do not flee from the rain—  
let it blanket you.

We all lie in free fall,  
Time left behind  
and death coming into view.  
With time, so precious a resource,  
to give only a little  
may open your sight to truths  
before only clouded.

Submit to patience  
and see a little more.

*Paisley Keene  
Poland, ME*



*Poland Community  
School  
Grade 6*

## NATURE'S LULLABY

As I walk on the ocean  
And let the time pass me by,  
I hear the sounds of nature's lullaby.  
There's a croak and a whoosh,  
A quack and a splash,  
As I stumble upon a blueberry patch.  
Birds chirping,  
Dogs barking,  
Friends laughing,  
And what I love the most  
Is only heard along the coast,  
Waves crashing.  
I wish I could fly  
Like the gulls in the sky

To a new land  
With even more sand.  
But then I start to think,  
It would really stink  
To be anywhere but here,  
With the birds, the moose, and the  
deer.  
I wave good-bye  
To the starry, moonlit sky.  
I know it would be vain  
Without my dearest, lovely Maine,  
Since the sounds I love the most,  
Are only heard along its coast.  
Those sounds will never leave or die,  
They are nature's lullaby.

*Aimee Horne  
Poland, ME*



*Poland Community  
School  
Grade 6*

## **The Clock Tower**

Mia walked out of her classroom. Her friend Janice walked beside her, smiling and talking her mouth off. Mia smiled back and twisted in the combination to her locker. Janice skipped away as Mia opened her locker. Inside was a note taped to the door:

*In the full moon  
at the height of night,  
you will hear a scream  
when midnight strikes twice.*

Mia ripped the note from the door and crumpled it up. She shoved it into her pocket and hurried to class.

“Look,” Mia said later to Janice in the lunchroom, “what was taped to the inside of my locker!”

Janice took the crumpled paper from Mia and looked at it for a while. “You know,” she said after a few minutes, “it could just be one of those dumb boys. Your brother Colby hangs around your locker a lot, you know.”

Mia glared over at her twin, who shrugged and gave her a wide-eyed, innocent look, although she suspected he knew what they were talking about.

“I don’t know,” Mia said when she turned back around. “It’s not like him to be mean and trick people like that. And this is definitely not his handwriting.”

Janice shrugged. “He could have gotten one of his friends to do it for him.”

That night, Mia went to bed troubled. She couldn't figure out who had taped the note inside her locker. She couldn't fall asleep thinking about it, so she pulled out her book. But instead of her bookmark, there was another note in its place:

*Do not show these notes to anyone.*

*I am watching you.*

Mia crumpled the note up and threw it across the room. It hit the wall with a soft *crack!*

“Take that!” Mia whispered into the darkness. “If you think you’re so great because you taped a note to the inside of my locker, then prove how great you are, right now!”

The note across the room burst into flames, making Mia shrink down under her covers and spent the rest of the night huddled in the farthest corner of her bed.

Mia trudged to school the next morning, tired and scared. She wondered if she should tell Janice, but decided not to. It would only scare her.

Mia zombied through most of the day, sleeping through math and English classes. At lunch, she sat next to Janice, who was nibbling her chicken. Mia took a huge bite of chicken and spat it out. It wasn't chicken inside the bread-crumbs at all. It was another note. It read:

*Through the door*

*and up the stairs*

*in the clock tower*

*you'll find a scare.*

Mia wiped the drool off the note and shoved it into her pocket. She wondered about the clock tower just as it boomed out one o'clock. The final reverberation passed through Mia as the entire seventh grade pushed to get out of the lunchroom and back to class. Janice flashed Mia a bright smile as she bounced through the crowd. Mia weakly smiled back, but Janice had already disappeared from sight.

*The  
scream  
was  
hers.*

Mia thought about the note that night. What did it mean by “scare”? Did it mean finding the thing that’s been haunting her? Did it mean confronting the thing that’s been leaving her scary notes?

Mia couldn’t stand it anymore. She slipped into her boots and jacket, then eased open the first-story window and slipped out.

Mia’s boots crunched on the gravel road. She could see the clock tower ahead in the darkness. The full-moon shone from high above. A wolf howled in the distance.

Mia tugged on the clock tower door and was surprised to find it unlocked. She walked up the stairs and into the top-most room. She slowly walked around, wondering if the whole note thing was really just a joke. Then Mia saw another note resting on the window sill. She walked over and picked it up. It chillingly said:

*Out the window  
and down below  
the twelve-foot fall  
to the rocks below.*

Mia looked out the window. The waves crashed on the rocks below, sending mist up into her face. She crumpled the note and threw it into the ocean.

Just then, she heard a horrible screaming noise to her right. Mia looked over to find the rotting corpse of a beast flying directly toward her! Right as the beast knocked her out the window, the clock tower boomed out midnight. Mia’s wristwatch beeped midnight at the same time. Mia screamed as she plummeted down onto the rocks below.

She finally understood the first note: The scream was *hers*.

*Maddy Childs  
Portland, ME*



*Poland Community  
School  
Grade 6*

## **Jail Dolls**

*Inspired by a close friend's frightening doll*

### **\*\* Introduction \*\***

Dolls closed in all around me. I collapsed onto my bed, thinking to myself, *These dolls may be able to walk, but they surely can't climb.* They began to chant and sing, "We are magic, we cast spells! We will kill you, I hear bells! We will kill you, I hear bells!"

I crawled to the headboard of the bed and waited. I closed my eyes and sat quietly listening. Sweat rolled down my forehead, and I lifted my head just enough to see a doll with long, curly brown lock pulling her way toward me. She had climbed or somehow gotten up here. Right, they're magic, I realized. The doll stood robot-like, lifted her hand, and clawed my cheek. I felt cold. I froze up. The chanting taunted me, "We will kill you; I hear bells! We will kill you; I hear bells! We will kill you; I hear bells!" I hear bells, too!

"Genevieve, honey, are you okay?"

I awoke with blurry eyes and an ice pack on my forehead. My alarm clock was ringing. So, I'm not dying. It was my alarm clock.

I rubbed my eyes and put my glasses on. I looked up and Grandmother was standing over me.

"You were burning up, dear. What happened? Are you okay?"

I stood up and walked over to my wardrobe. Once I had pulled out a sundress and brought it back to my bed, I answered, "I'm fine, Grandmother. Just...ummm...a...a...warm night. Yes, I forgot to open the window."

"Is that so?"

“Yes, Grandmother.”

“All right, dear. Just remember, it’s not proper to hesitate. You get that dress on and come downstairs so I can do your hair nice and pretty.”

**\*\* I’m Different \*\***

Mother had stolen dolls ever since I can remember. I was only one year old when I got my first doll, but I didn’t understand quite what it was—yet alone, who I was. I knew from the start something wasn’t exactly right inside Mother’s head.

As the days passed, I was turned seven, I eighteenth doll from ask her what the big these dolls because room with them every other girl in Instead, they always bears and plastic ponies also brought in metal things said they earned from

*Mother had  
stolen dolls  
ever since  
I can remember.*

getting older. The day I received my Mother. I decided to deal was with all she filled up my rather than the toys my class had. brought stuffed teddy to show everyone. They hanging on ribbons that they “cheerleading” and “soccer.”

When I would ask what cheerleading and soccer were, they would say, “A sport. Y’know, like, you stay after school and practice, and then you have a game where you play against a different team? If you win, you get one of these. Y’know—a medal?”

No, I didn’t know.

I sat in my room gazing out the window, watching rain glide down, pounding on the ground. Watching the dolls stare at me...glassy eyes...staring...locked in their case...just like me...locked in my room until Mother would unlock the door.

The window had a lock, too. I went to school and then came home and was locked in my room until school the next day. I was served dinner in my room and had a bucket in the closet, or you could call it the bathroom (but let's not get into detail!). Some nights I would hear Mother screaming a blood-curdling scream, as if she were being murdered. I would run to my bedroom door and then remember I was locked in. On those nights, I wouldn't even be able to sleep, I was so scared for Mother. In the morning, I would ask her, "What happened last night? I heard you screaming. Are you okay?"

She would answer, "They were after me. They need me gone. They know about my whole life, and now they've turned against me."

I didn't know who "they" were, but I was afraid to ask because then I knew I would be scared for my life, too. I didn't understand why Mother would act like this, and I worried about her a lot. I just knew something wasn't quite normal about her.

Anyway, when I asked my mother, "What's the big deal about dolls?" she told me, "I'll tell you when you get older."

Now I'm twelve years old, almost thirteen, and I still don't completely understand. I have thirty-five dolls now, but Mother isn't here anymore. I'm living with Grandmother, who never met me before I told the police Mother ran away, who after which then found a relative to take me in. Grandmother was the only one to step forward. She trained me to be a "proper lady," but it's just too hard. Nobody knows what Mother did to me; she locked me up with a room full of stolen dolls.

All I remember from when Mother left is a kiss on the forehead; "Good-bye"; a blur of Mother running out of the house; a slam of the door; and the tears that streamed down my face for a week or two afterward, just like the rain I saw streaming down my locked window.

After about three weeks, I had called the police. All I told them was that I woke up with nobody in the house. She was gone. I knew she was gone—forever.

When I returned from tea, the doll wasn't on my bed where I had left her. Instead, she was sitting on the top of my wardrobe. How did she get up there? It sort of scared me. She jolted her head towards me. I threw my hands over my mouth and then let out a short shriek.

"Note," she sort of sang the word. She pointed, and I followed her finger to the note lying on my bed.

**\*\* Victoria \*\***

"Huh?...Wha-?...Ummm...Huh?..."

"Oh, goodness! You're okay! Are you okay?"

Geez! She couldn't go a day without worrying about me. "Yes, Grandmother, I'm fine."

"What happened?"

It's always the same routine: "Are you okay?" "Yes, Grandmother." "What happened?" "I was thinking about Mother." "Is that so?" "Yes, Grandmother."

"Ummm...I was...thinking...about...Mother."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, Grandmother," I moaned.

"Okay, then. Oh, yes! Why was there a doll on the top of your wardrobe?"

"I...I...I was playing a game."

"All right, just be careful with those dolls. And remember: no hesitating."

Truthfully, I had passed out. I could feel it in my bones. I pass out way too easily. I stood up from the silky couch and ran to the back of the hall. I turned at my door and opened it. The doll

was back in the case. The note was gone. I searched around the room for the note that I wanted so badly.

BANG! The doll-case door flew open.

I winced. The doll with the note wasn't there anymore. I looked around the room to see where she was this time. A hand dropped on my shoulder.

"Huh!" I jumped. "Yes, Grandmo-...I think I found her!" I accidentally said the words aloud. Great...Now Grandmother's going to think I'm talking to myself.

Sure enough, I turned and saw the doll floating in the air with her eyes opened wide and her cold, porcelain hand resting on my shoulder. *You can't scream. You can't scream. Not right now!*

She pointed across the room again, this time to the window. I took a long blink, and then flashed my gaze out the window to the note. It was in the top of an old tree—the very top of the tree. How'd she get it up there? Duhh. She's magic.

"Ummm? Can you have a normal conversation with me?" Ha! Normal? A doll is talking. Very normal.

"Maybe," the doll said, slowly turning her head towards me.

"Okay. Are you magic? What is your name? What does the note say?" I overflowed the doll's small brain (or whatever she had) with questions (I'm assuming small brain = small head).

"I am Victoria. I will not tell you what the note says. I am magic—dark magic," she answered with a deep and monotonous voice.

"Can you get that note for me, Victoria?" I asked shakily.

"No. You get it!" Then she disappeared into a black swirl of fog.

**\*\* Old Oak Tree \*\***

*You get it! You get it! You get it!* The words repeated over and over in my head.

How? It's in a tree! And, besides, climbing trees is not "proper." I supposed I could sneak out of the window. Not proper, either, but if it's really that important, I guessed it would be worth getting in trouble for, even though Grandmother's pretty strict about all this "proper" crap. Oh, yea, may I also mention that "crap" isn't polite, either! It's really retarded. Oh, wait, "retarded" isn't polite either—go figure!

Well, I climbed out that window. I saw Victoria's face circling in front of mine in a ghastly way. I saw the note up in the tree and wondered, *How did Victoria get that note out of her dress and in the tree without even going outside?* Then I remembered: *She's magic!*

It was just so eerie. I regained focus on the note and confidently marched towards the tree. There was no way I could be forced to be "proper" anymore. I was climbing that tree no matter what happened, and if I got

have to talk to "proper" stuff, because I would be no more.

I got to the old oak tree, paper stuck between two reached for a large limb. I first branch and stood

***There was no way  
I could be forced  
to be "proper"  
anymore.***

caught, I was going to Grandmother about all the was fed up with it! There

stared straight up at the branches, and then pulled myself up to the planning my next move. I

grabbed for the branch, but stumbled. I found myself hanging from a small branch that could have broken whenever it wanted to. I looked down at how long the fall was—maybe about seven feet!

Then I saw Victoria again—she did it. She was standing at the bottom of the tree with a little saw, and she cut the branch off! She had noticed me glaring at her and chuckled, "Ha! Did you really think I would let you get that note so easily?"

A tear fell from my cheek. I looked back up towards the next destination on the tree. Not that far, just a small reach. Victoria was right there, though, and who knew what she would do next. Stay courageous; be strong.

I thought about it and looked up at the note. A pale face appeared in front of it. I jumped a little, but I was used to it by now.

“Hi, I’m Lauren! I’m here to help you, so don’t worry. I’m a good doll, and I can stop Victoria. Good power is always stronger than evil. Just you stay here, and I’ll go get rid of her.” This doll was pale, with blonde hair and gorgeous blue eyes. I was so relieved!

“Okay, she’s gone, but not for good. I just sent her away for a while, so we need to be quick and get that note now. I would get it for you, but I can’t touch things or they turn colorless. All of us dolls have a weakness, and mine is that I can’t touch human objects or they turn all white and colorless.”

I wasn’t quite sure of what happened to Victoria, but I didn’t have a second thought about it to give. I was a bit disoriented, hanging there from a slippery tree branch, but I pulled myself up to sit on it. I was surprised by my strength.

“Woah!” I smiled.

“I see you have found out that I have given you my powers for now,” Lauren smiled back.

“Well, I didn’t know that’s what happened! So, what would Victoria’s weakness be?” I was determined to use whatever it was against her.

“Victoria is the strongest of the evil dolls. She refuses to tell anyone her weakness, and if you ask, she slits your throat open!” The words came out of Lauren’s mouth as if she were a viper snake spitting venom. It sounded horrible, which obviously, it was. I thought it was funny how Lauren would tell me anything as if it meant nothing.

“Okay, now let’s focus on getting you that note.” Lauren flew up to my branch and motioned for me to get up. “I know what it says, but your mother told us nobody could tell you. You had to read it yourself. Your mother was a very nice person, just very, very needy. She talked to us every night.”

I got confused. “Wait...can...everyone...talk to dolls?”

Lauren made a surprised face. “Oh, no. You didn’t even know.”

**\*\* Insanity \*\***

“Okay, Lauren, what’s going on?”

I shook rapidly because I was nervous, but mostly because I was standing about fourteen feet off the ground in an old tree! Lauren flew up to the branch with the note—really close now.

“I believe you’ll get your answer in the note. You’re really close. Now, just jump and grab it!”

My eyes grew large. I’d have sworn they could have fallen right out of my skull! “Are you joking? Jump fourteen feet! Then what am I supposed to say when I break my legs and get grounded to my room for the rest of my life?!”

“Calm down. I think I might be able to help you. I have a friend that is a really good artist. Her art skills are somewhat magical.”

Lauren turned towards the house and chanted some words in what sounded like a different language. I wanted to ask what art had to do with getting out of the tree, but decided that it was no time for attitude.

I reached for the note. I stretched as far as I could. It was right there. Just...a...little...farther! My fingers brushed across the note, and I watched as it fell to the ground. I looked back down to ask Lauren for help, but she had disappeared.

I had a sudden mental breakdown and stood up. I started screaming at the top of my lungs, expecting to see Grandmother come running out of the front door. Sweat started rolling down my forehead. I could have sworn I was going to fall out of that tree and kill myself! I tried to scream even louder, hoping for someone to stop me from jumping down on purpose. Then I realized there were no screams coming out of my mouth, just hot air.

I looked down at the ground. It didn't look that far anymore. I felt like a mad man. *I must have been going insane*, I thought to myself. I shook my head in shame and got ready to jump out of the tree.

“Don't do it!” shouted Lauren.

Her artist friend was walking behind her. It was kind of scary how they moved. Even if they had come to life, they didn't walk normally, and they couldn't bend their arms or legs. It was really odd.

It was kind of scary  
how they moved.

“Hey, don't you even think about jumping,” Lauren grimaced at her friend. I could feel my face cool down and the insanity drain out of me like someone draining water out of a sink. Lauren looked back over to her friend, then at me.

“This is one of my best friends, Samantha—Sammy, for short. She has the power to draw whatever she wants, and it becomes real. She has to be cautious with her powers, though, because if she draws something that could cause a disaster, she has agreed to be lit on fire and burned to death! See, some dolls get really powerful specialties, but there come consequences if they are used too powerfully, in a bad way. Now, I was thinking that if Sammy could draw you a ladder, you would be able to get out of that tree. Is that okay with you, Genevieve?”

I tried to act calm and spoke slowly, trying not to stutter. “Well, of course. I just want that note. I don't care what it takes.”

Sammy seemed like she knew exactly what she was doing. She walked to the foot of the tree and got a pencil out of a pocket on her jumper. She then took a red velvety ribbon off her wrist and tied it in her hair. Her hair was just how I wished mine could look—long, dark brown, and curly. She shook her hand out and got it ready to draw.

She drew very sketchy lines. I sat on that branch in the tree with (what felt like) my jaw hanging down to the ground. Of course, she just kept drawing as if it was something she'd seen every day of her life. Well, she probably had, but I hadn't!

She finished the drawing and then stepped away and stared at her work. It was really strange seeing a bunch of lines just drawn in mid-air. She waved her hands in an unusual pattern and then...the color filled the ladder in quickly. I'm sure that if my jaw was on the ground already, it would be under the ground at this! It was all just so hard to take in, seeing all these dolls just do these magical things like they were nothing.

The ladder was all colored-in now and looked like a normal ladder, 3-D and everything!

“Come on, try it! It'd be just like the normal one, just made differently!”

Sammy seemed to be a really cheerful and positive person. I wouldn't think she would have any weakness, but Lauren said that every single doll had one. She seemed really powerful, like nobody could be any better than she. I felt a certain trust in Sammy, as if she could be my best friend. I had never had a best friend. I always thought everyone was too mean to be my friend, not saying I was too good for them, either. I just didn't want to take that chance of being ditched myself.

I lowered myself down onto the ladder. I expected to feel some sort of magical feeling when I touched it, but just felt normal. I climbed slowly and carefully down to the bottom. You wouldn't have a clue how strange it feels standing next to a bunch of two-foot tall, living glass-people!

I glanced at the note before I picked it up and wondered what kind of family secrets or interesting news was in there. I bent down to grab the folded piece of paper, unfolded it, and found:

*My Dear Beautiful Baby, Genevieve:*

*I'm so sorry I have to leave you like this. I love you very much, but I couldn't stay. There's a lot I need to tell you, and I don't have very much time to write this for you because I'm pretty sure the cops are searching for me quickly right now. Why would the cops be looking for me? You know all those dolls you have? Well, I need to be honest. We don't have that much money, and I really liked dolls and wanted you to have some. Some of the dolls kind of scared me, so I gave them to you. You used to stare at them and play with them for hours, and I loved seeing you so happy.*

*So, I started getting you some. Well, I went to a party while you were sleeping. It was really boring, so I decided to leave. I didn't want to go home yet and remembered that your birthday*

*was coming up, so I wanted to get you a few new dolls. I broke into this one antique shop that had the prettiest dolls I had ever seen in the front display. I wanted for you to have them, so I got in, took them, and quickly tried to run out. As I was running through the alley, though, I heard the alarms go off in the store. I started running and never looked back, heading straight home for you.*

*I expected for us to run away and go live somewhere else, but there was no time. I was going to have to leave you and go off by myself. Then I realized I had nowhere to go, so the only way to leave is to...kill myself. I'm going to the lake to do it. I'm really sorry, but I needed you to know. I didn't want to do it, but I'd rather die like this than die in an empty concrete room, with everyone standing around watching.*

*There's something else you need to know. The reason why I kept giving you more dolls wasn't all because I liked seeing you happy. I know it sounds weird, but me and you, we both have the ability to talk to dolls! There are things that almost nobody knows about dolls: If you become their enemy, they can turn you into one of them.*

*I once had a friend that was turned into a doll. She had this one really ugly doll that she always liked to torture and burn her hair off and pull off her head and stuff. One day, I was at her house, and she threw it out the window. Then, all of a sudden, there was a tear-drop in her eye, and she disappeared—just into mid-air! Then I ran away without her parents seeing me, so it would seem like we both were gone. Later that night at my house, I saw a doll lying on my bed. All of a sudden, it came to life, and it turned out that it was my friend!*

*There's a lot to explain, but there's not much time. However, I lost that doll one day and I was determined to find her again. Ever since I had a job and lived in my own house, I went around looking for this one doll, the one that held the spirit of my friend. Every time I bought a doll, I would summon the spirit in it and then see if it was her. Some dolls' spirits were good, but others were evil. I gave them to you after I was done with them, thinking that the evil ones may like you because you thought nothing of them because you didn't know any better. You were so young, and all girls love any doll.*

*It turned out that one night when you were about six, you told me you saw your dolly move and start talking. You were so scared of that doll, so we sold it the very next day. I was afraid it would come back and find us, but luckily it didn't.*

*Now, you be very careful with your ability, Genevieve. I would suggest you try and be nice to all of the dolls. They all have powers and weaknesses, so beware. Some are nice and some are not, so try and stay away from the evil ones as much as possible, and when not possible, be very nice. Some dolls aren't summoned yet. All you need to do is look at them for 20 seconds in the eye and then clap. That's it. Once they've been summoned, that can't be undone. Here are some hints about some of them for you:*

- *Victoria—evil! She will do whatever she can to ruin your life, no matter if you're nice or not. She just wants everyone to be miserable.*

- *Emily—really nice sometimes. But she can never keep a secret. She talks a lot and can be obnoxious sometimes.*
- *Alice—not really very nice. If you do one wrong thing she will freak-out at you.*
- *Lauren—extremely nice, very thoughtful, helpful, and selfless.*
- *Amber—really shy and doesn't like to talk. She's kind emotional, so I'd just stay away from her.*
- *Jake and Chris—the only boys. All the girls slobber all over them. They are twins, and they're really talented. They do these magical, musical things. It's weird.*

*There's also one more doll I want you to know about—Samantha. She was the one I was looking for. She is my childhood best friend. I want you to take extra-special care of her. She is super-nice and very artistic. She can draw whatever you want, and it becomes real. She is really smart and out-going and very loyal. You can tell her anything.*

*I really love you, Baby, and I'm sorry I have to miss your 13th birthday. I know this is a lot of really harsh information you're getting so fast, and I apologize. I hope you enjoy...it sounds weird, but I hope you enjoy the rest of your life.*

*Please always keep me in your heart and make the right decisions in life! I'll be watching over you. I love you so, so, so much!!!*

*Love,  
Mommy*

There was so much running through my head. I couldn't handle it. Why wouldn't she just go to jail? She would have gotten out eventually. And now I knew what that weird feeling around Sammy was: Sammy was my mom's best friend!

"Oh, my gosh! I should have known," I accidentally said out loud. Sammy looked over at me. I had forgotten they were still there.

"What should you have known?" Sammy questioned.

"You...you...you were my mom's best friend!" I suddenly got really excited, despite the fact I had just found out my mom had killed herself.

“Ummm...yeah...it’s a long story...” Sammy looked like she wished I didn’t know. It confused me, and I thought my mom might have left some things out. Something seemed to be missing from that letter.

**\*\* Tragedies \*\***

I gently folded and tucked the note into my dress pocket.

“Is there anything else, Sammy, which I need to know about my mother?” I asked hesitantly.

“Well, I don’t know much, but I had watched her for a while after I had been transformed into a doll, and she did start acting very differently. But I wouldn’t know why.”

I still thought Sammy was holding back something that I needed to know. I was determined to get it out of her. I

must be something else I  
something is missing  
know something.”

*I was still worried  
about being caught by  
Grandmother.*

continued to nag, “There  
haven’t been told. It’s clear  
from her story. You must

“Well, it’s awkward  
another doll...somewhere  
never noticed it, but your

saying it, but...there’s  
in your room You have  
mother didn’t give it to you.

You’ve only had it since your mother left,” Sammy said, looking very reluctant.

“You must know more! What’s so special about this doll? Can she tell me something?”

“Well, she may know more about your mother than even I do,” Sammy turned around as if trying to force herself not to give anything away. I marched inside, not knowing where to find this special doll, but convinced that I would find it.

I entered back into my room through the open window as quietly as I could. I was still worried about being caught by Grandmother. I shut the window quickly, anxious to find this hidden doll.

As the window was shutting, it squeaked very noisily, and I waited for Grandmother to come running in, but she never did.

I searched around my room and glanced at Lauren and Sammy every once in a while, as if asking for a hint, but they would just shake their heads 'no' in unison.

I walked over to the wardrobe and threw open the doors. One door hit the wall with a loud bang. Grandmother's room was on the other side of the wall. I waited...and waited. But she never came. I got a bit worried, but passed it off as nothing and continued to search.

"Okay, Sammy, where is it?"

"I'm really sorry, Genevieve, but I honestly cannot tell you!" Lauren rolled her eyes, as if to wish she wasn't a part of this.

"Any hints?"

"Okay, well, I guess I could tell you that she likes to be places where she can see everything that's going on, but that's all," Sammy rolled her glassy green eyes, as well.

I spun around a few times, looking for somewhere a doll might be able to see anything and everything. A shelf in the corner of my room caught my eye.

"Well, I suppose she could be hiding behind some of those books on the shelf up there. How about it?"

Sammy walked her funny doll-walk over to the shelf. "Umm...she's usually up there...but I don't see her. Lucy, are you up there?"

"Pssst!" I whispered to Sammy. "Is she good or bad?"

Sammy covered her mouth with her hand and answered, "Oh, I think you would like her, if she's even here to meet you. She's not all that confident in herself. So, I'd think by now you would know that all of us are spirits of people that have either died or been transformed into dolls, and

our spirits have been placed inside these glass bodies. All of our spirits are of people that could talk to dolls before.”

She continued, “The spirit inside this doll, Lucy, is of a very good person. But she doesn’t like being a doll. She’s also been through a mistake...her spirit was placed into the body of a doll that is a boy...Lucy is a girl. She usually spends her days crying up there on that shelf. There’s no way to change, nor choose, what body you go into. You just need to hope for the best.

“Also, another thing is that if you own a doll and you don’t treat it right, they can take over your body completely. But, anyway, Lucy is a really good friend of mine, and if I know her, she’s not up there. Otherwise, she would have answered me. Lauren, would you mind going to look around?” Sammy asked the other doll.

Lauren was gazing off when we looked over at her. “Oh, yeah, no problem.” Lauren walked out the door that I had accidentally left open and walked down the hall towards Grandmother’s room.

Sammy and I stayed in my room and looked around some more. It was all silent. Silent. Silent. A board creaked when I took a step. Silent. Silent. Silent. Silent.

Then, “Hey! You knock it off! Get away from her! NOW!” a familiar voice shouted from Grandmother’s room.

Sammy and I quickly ran out of the room and towards Grandmother’s. We got to the doorway and stood in shock and scared half to death.

Lauren was standing at the foot of Grandmother’s bed, somewhat hiding from whatever was next to the bed. There was a boy doll that I assumed was Lucy right next to her. Then I saw Grandmother. She was lying on the floor next to her bed, face down, with Victoria right next to her...

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## **FRIENDS FOREVER**

### *Chapter 1: The Girl*

On the fourth Saturday after school started, I decided to take my dog out for a walk. My dog—Missy is her name—is a mutt who is brown all over. Well, that is not completely true. Her paws are white with brown freckles, and her tail has a little bit of white on the very tip. She has part sheepdog in her, which shows because she runs her heart out.

*I never entered this part  
of the forest.*

One day, I took Missy down the path behind my house. It was a small trail that I liked to ride my bike on in the summertime. During the fall, it is covered with dry leaves that crunch beneath your feet. It is impossible to walk in the forest during the fall and go unnoticed because of the noise.

The forest was a pretty busy place that day. The chipmunks and squirrels were gathering nuts in order to prepare for the long winter ahead of them. The birds were passing through the woods, also trying to find a bit of food before they flew south. All of this excitement made Missy pretty hyper. Sometimes she would run ahead of me down the trail as far as the leash would allow her to go.

Soon, the path led us to a large pine-grove with hundred-year-old trees that often towered above your head, and with little foot-high saplings that you'd try not to step on. I never entered this part of the forest.

Suddenly, Missy froze in her tracks.

“What is it, girl?” I asked.

I looked into her deep brown eyes and then followed her gaze. My eyes fell on a large brown hare.

“No,” I whispered, tugging hard at the leash. “Please don’t. Don’t chase it. Please, Missy!”

I tugged at the leash again, but she had already made up her mind. She barked once, loudly and clearly, and then tore after the hare, ripping the leash out of my hand. I fell to the ground hard and blacked out.

I awoke to see that I was being carried home by my mom.

“What happened?” I asked. My voice was soft and scratchy. I felt a sudden sharp pain in the back of my head. “What happened?” I demanded again.

“Shh,” was Mom’s only reply. “Shh, shh.” She kept her voice quiet and hushed me as if I was a small child.

It was pretty dark out, almost night. When we got close enough to the house, I could see that the lights were already on. My dad opened the front door and rushed out to greet us. He didn’t say a word; he just took me in his arms and carried me inside. My mom followed silently.

The second I got placed on the couch I asked, “Where’s Missy?”

My mother pursed her lips. “You hit your head on a rock, sweetie. It was getting late, so I went out to look for you...”

“I don’t care about that!” I cried. “All that I care about now is that we know where she is. Where is Missy?!” I demanded for the third time.

My dad looked extremely upset. “Do you want some water, dear?” he gently asked.

“Why won’t you answer me?!” I was crying by now. “I want my dog! Where is my dog?!”

My mom sat down on the couch, gently held my head in her hands, and looked me in the eye. “We don’t know where she is right now, honey. We’ll look for her tomorrow morning. Right now, we need to fix up that nasty gash on your forehead, okay?” I nodded, still sobbing.

Mom worked on fixing my head, and all the while my dad stood nervously watching. He wrung his hands and every now and then asked if he should take me to the hospital. My mom would shake her head and say, “It’s not that bad. She’ll be fine.”

I cried the whole time. I cried because it hurt. I cried because I didn’t know where Missy was. I cried just to get my tears out. Pretty soon, I had cried myself to sleep.

I woke up the next morning and found that I was in my bed. The first thought that sprang into my mind was that I would go out into the woods to look for Missy. I leaped out of bed quickly, and remembering my injury, fell to my knees in pain. I groaned and then slowly climbed back under the covers.

*How long will it take for me to recover? I thought to myself. What if by the time I’m healed, Missy has wandered clear out of the state? Or the country?* I groaned aloud again.

Just then, my father walked in. “Are you okay, dear?” he asked, clearly concerned.

“Yeah, fine,” I quietly answered.

“Look, don’t worry about that dog of yours,” he said kindly. “She’s a smart one. Before you know it, she’ll run up our driveway, barking louder than you can imagine, and wagging that little stub of a tail of hers.”

I wished I could believe him. I wished I could just sit back like my parents and say, “Oh, she’ll be fine.” But I knew that even my dad knew that she could be anywhere by now.

## *Chapter 2: The Dog*

The walk in the woods started out like a normal one. I sniffed everything interesting, played with my owner a little bit, and chased things that moved. One of these things was a rabbit.

You see, we had walked into this thickly wooded area we didn't normally enter. I could smell a rodent, and pretty soon I saw it. The rabbit wasn't too hard to spot: it was quite large and a chestnut brown color. I could tell that my owner didn't want me to chase it because she began to tug on the leash and whisper my name urgently under her breath. I couldn't resist, though. I barked at the hare and dashed after it.

I chased the rabbit for a while, having a blast—that is, until it darted into a hole. The second after it disappeared, a chipmunk appeared in its place. The only problem was, the second I saw it, it saw me, too, and it darted into the hole after the rabbit. I barked in frustration, and then I started digging to see if I could reach them.

***I could smell  
a rodent  
and pretty soon  
saw it.***

Once I got tired of digging, I sat down and panted to catch my breath. That very moment, I realized that my owner wasn't with me anymore. I figured I should probably be heading home by now, so I put my nose to the ground so I could follow my scent back.

Suddenly, I felt something cool and wet on my back. I looked to the sky and saw that it had begun to rain.

At this point, I began to panic. *What do I do now?* I thought in fear. The rain steadily progressed, until I no longer could find my scent on the ground. I whimpered and then chose a direction and ran.

After I'd run for what seemed like forever, I came to a small, quiet road. It was beginning to get quite dark, and I couldn't see very well; but I saw a faint light across the street. Without knowing what else to do, I ran toward it.

After running across the road, I saw that the light was coming from a small streetlamp, which was outside of a small building. The faint aroma that drifted from the building smelled like food—good food—so I wandered hungrily through the open door.

Unexpectedly, I found myself in a warm, dimly lit room. My feet made a padding noise on the carpet.

“Hello? Is anybody there?” a deep voice called from another room. A man stepped out from behind a curtain.

I darted in front of the counter.

*Since I'm so short, maybe he won't see me over the tall counter-top!* I thought, without much hope.

“Who's there?” the man asked again. Seeing no one, he raised his voice. “Show yourself, or I'll call the police!”

Hearing the sharp tone in his voice, I whined. He walked out from behind the counter.

“What? What did you say?”

I was lying on my tummy, and I scooted nervously backward a little. It was at that moment that he saw me. His voice softened immediately.

*Still afraid,  
I bared my teeth  
and growled.*

“Oh, hey, pooch. Here, boy, here,” he said, as he held out his hand. Still afraid, I bared my teeth and growled.

“It's okay, easy does it, easy there, boy.” I didn't trust him, so I stood up and began to back away.

“It's okay; stay right there. Stay!” he said firmly.

I was used to this command, so I forced myself to stay, even though I didn't want to. The man walked behind the curtain and returned with a piece of meat. It was very long and smelled really good.

“Stay!” he repeated. Staring at the meat, I licked my lips and stayed put.

The man slowly broke off a piece with his fingers. “Sit,” he commanded. Eyeing him and the treat, I slowly sat. He carefully tossed the piece of meat in my direction. I quickly got up and easily trapped it with my paws.

“I hope you like sausage,” he said.

The meat was unlike any other I had ever tasted. It was quite salty and almost melted in my mouth. I licked my lips and hoped for another piece.

We continued in this way for a while, sometimes with him telling me to stay, sometimes to lie down, and sometimes to roll over. I obeyed every time, earning myself a bite of tasty sausage.

After the entire sausage link was eaten, he walked behind the curtain once more and returned, this time with a large stained rag. He laid it on the floor in front of me.

“Your bed,” he said kindly. Then, “get in.”

I sat there watching him and not moving.

“Get in, pup!” he repeated. I still didn’t budge.



Finally, the man sighed. “Suit yourself,” he said, as he walked behind the curtain for the night.

Once he was out of sight, I settled down on the rag and fell asleep, dreaming about the sausage.

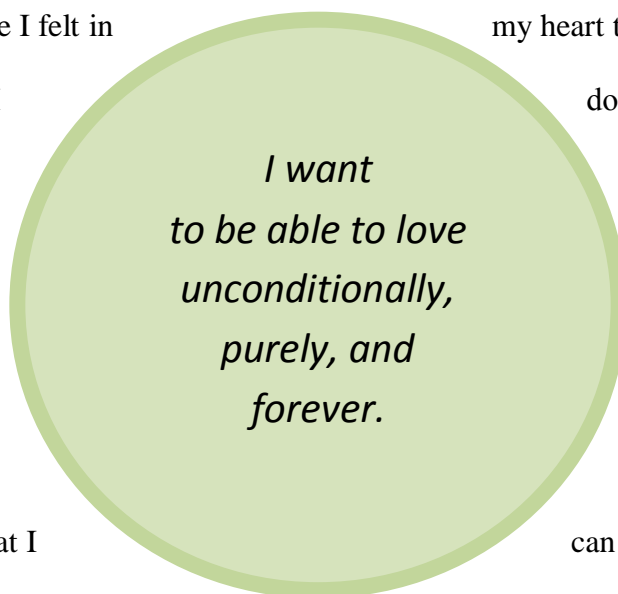
*Jenna Reynolds  
Kansas City, MO*



*Reynolds/Ham  
Homeschool  
Grade 11*

### Jamaica Mission Trip

This trip was one of the most wonderful and fulfilling experiences of my life. I had never felt a love so strong. I loved the children at the Blossom Gardens Orphanage like they were my own children. The desire I felt in my heart to change their lives was tremendous. Honestly, I don't know if what I did at that facility changed anything for the children, but I do know for sure that it changed me. It changed how I see the world and how I look at people. Those little babies, toddlers, and school children taught me something that I can never forget. They taught me to love. Now, that may sound dumb and a bit over the top, but it's true. Everyone knows to some extent how to love, but these children love so deeply and passionately. They love every single person who steps into their lives, no questions asked. That's the kind of love that I want to have. I want to be able to love unconditionally, purely, and forever. Not surprisingly, all that these kids wanted in return for their love is to be loved. That is their number one desire in life (right next to getting their pictures taken).



Something I learned very quickly there was that, no matter how many times you are told not to get too attached, it happens. The first day I would hold each child and play with him or her,

but by the end of day two, I had found “my” baby. Her name is Jessica Parchnient, and I had fallen head over heels for this baby girl. She was so sweet and loved to be held, and I was perfectly happy to be the one that did that for her. Time after time, she would fall asleep and I could have stayed in that position forever, no matter how uncomfortable I got. She has the biggest smile and the sweetest face that I have ever seen. I don’t think that I have ever loved anyone as strongly as I love her. It seems strange to fall in love in such a short time, but in all actuality, it is probably harder *not* to fall in love with at least one of them. While we were there, most days were pretty hot, but that didn’t stop the children from wanting to be held. No matter how sweaty they got, they would hold on to you forever, if they could. A lot of times you had to pry their little fingers off of your neck to even breathe comfortably.

Over the week, you’d grow to love this feeling and never want it to end. By Thursday, I had to tell myself that this would all soon be over. This sudden realization, which should have been obvious from the beginning, was so much harder to accept than I ever thought possible. Even thinking about it now causes me great distress. I guess in my mind I had started planning on staying there forever, and eventually adopting Jessica. I know that she is in a great place that will love her and take good care of her, but the children outweigh the adults by so much that there is never the chance to get as much one-on-one time with them as they would like. I have been on mission trips before, but this one struck a chord in my heart that I cannot ignore. No matter what I do, I am constantly thinking about them and wondering what they are doing, and if they are crying and not getting held.

The last day was harder than I had anticipated. When Beka gave me the signal that we only had minutes left with the children, my heart sank. I ran to the infant room and found Jessica sleeping soundly in her crib. All I could do was look at her and sob. I would touch her arms, legs,

back, and face, trying to soak up as much as I could in my limited time with her. She didn't know it, but I was going to leave her.

As much as I tried to keep her asleep, she woke up. She looked at me with her big brown eyes and with a big smile on her face. I tried to lull her back to sleep, but failed miserably. After a point, she started to make some noise. There were twelve other children in the room sleeping, and I didn't want her to wake up the others and make the nurse's job more difficult. So, using this as an excuse, I picked up the little baby, who was reaching out to me. This made things about a hundred times harder. She was now not only awake, but wrapping her chubby little hands around my neck and loving me more than I deserved. She would look at my face and see the tears streaming down, wondering what was going on. I would wipe them away and try to smile at her to let her know that everything was going to be okay. I stood there and rocked her for what would be the last time. I had to give her to one of the nurses, Mrs. Brown, for just a second, in order to meet with the supervisor of the orphanage. She thanked us for all we had done in our short time.

After that, I reentered the nursery to say my final goodbye. I told Mrs. Brown that I wouldn't hold Jessica; I would just kiss her and be on my way. I thought that this would hurt less. But as soon as I kissed her round little cheek, she turned away from Mrs. Brown and reached for me. I scooped her up into my arms and bawled like a baby. I handed her back to Mrs. Brown and heard a shrill cry. She didn't want Mrs. Brown; she wanted me! This was the hardest thing to see and hear because the look on her face was one of confusion and want. I forced myself to walk out of that room, with her at my back. She watched me leave her, and I watched her protest. I shut the door behind me and broke down. I tried to be strong, but the feelings welling up inside of me were not of strength, but of defeat. I felt like nothing I did mattered because I was leaving her

and wouldn't be there to love her everyday like I had been.

I still have flashbacks of our final moments and cry. The nurses love the children, but that will never change the fact that they will not receive as much love as they deserve. Sadly, many of these kids will move from one facility to another throughout their lifetime. Some may get adopted out quickly, and that is something that everyone loves to hear. I fear that I will never see Jessica again—but I also fear that I will. If I never see her again, then I will know that she has been brought into a loving home, where she will get the love that she desires. But if, when I go back next year, she is still at the orphanage, the few days I will get to spend with her will never be enough to give her what she deserves and longs for. The best I can do is pray for her and all of the others to have the best life they can. I pray that they will be loved and hugged and kissed and tickled as much as possible, that someone will come into their life that will take pictures of them and give them more love than they have ever known.

They deserve at least that.

I fear  
that  
I will  
never  
see  
Jessica  
again—  
but  
I also  
fear  
that  
I will.

*Kristina Zubovic  
San Diego, CA*



*Mission Bay High  
Grade 12*

## **THE FEELING OF GIVING**

Happy, shocked, surprised, excited—these are all feelings attached to accomplishment. A sense of accomplishment helps people achieve their vital goals, whether they are social, educational, or financial. It is the sense of pride and excitement that brings out my passion for community service, such as a heartbeat that feels as if it could beat out of your chest. That heartbeat is the feeling of excitement that brings out the best in a person. Passion and spirit are vital elements toward helping one achieve one's goals. It is when you're left in awe of how you were able to help.

Community service is doing just that for me. It's made me feel a sense of comfort, a sense of ease from worrying too much. This sense of passion has shown me that my volunteer service is doing something positive for my community. I am currently a Tecolote Canyon National Park and Nature Center volunteer, in addition to volunteering with my community's International Key Club organization. I did not decide to devote my time volunteering because I simply had to, either.

My reason for becoming a devoted volunteer was much simpler: I learned that every little bit counts. Every little bit can be as small as just showing up to read stories to children in hospitals, serving meals to the elderly for an hour, or even educating the public about nature and how to help preserve it. It all helps in its own way. One way to find out about service work is to try it to see what it's like; another way is to read how community service is a vital and important element

in our lives.

Sometimes, I feel comfort and a sense of belonging when volunteering. Once, a wise man told me, “Those who help the unfortunate are really helping themselves.” I have always thought about this throughout my community service partaking. My reasoning was that, when helping others overcome their financial and personal worries, I would be creating skills—such as becoming a leader in my community that others might look up to—and learning how to put others before myself.

Club and volunteering at the Nature Center caused me to realize a change in myself. I have become free and much less shy. I have become a new person, even though I was not sure what my approaching path was. I currently enjoy interacting with the families in their communities as a Club member and guiding children to unforgettable learning experiences with animals as a Nature Center Volunteer. My interest lies in the environment, an interest that officially began when I

*It is a sense  
of pride  
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community service.*

worked as a junior volunteer Saturdays at the Nature Center. It has grown in other capacities, such as informing families about animal habitats, as well as becoming a volunteer member at my local Key Club organization. I am passionate about the environment, so, for over two years, I have volunteered for hours, giving animals a voice by assisting the Center Director and Park Rangers by giving guided tours and wildlife presentations for children and visitors.

Once I saw smiles in the eyes of the families, I was hooked. I thought I could not spend

enough time talking about the spirit each community has through its writing and art from each culture. I continued my weekly visits to the center for over a year. Over that time period, I became very attached to the staff members, fellow volunteers, and the community. I looked forward to listening to each of their stories.

So, through my visits, I have learned the importance of giving, but, more importantly, I have learned the value of the human contact. The experience of knowing that those constant visits greatly contribute gives me an urge to help that makes my body tremble with excitement. These visits have given me a chance to experience and see for myself that joy and look of pure bliss that those families have on their faces. It is the same heartbeat feeling that I talked about earlier. That look of pure bliss that has somehow spread onto my face—this feeling is never going to go away. It is something that I will always treasure.

Luckily, the opportunity to serve my community has taught and is still is teaching me a valuable lesson: community service can provide a feeling of accomplishment that brings out the best in everyone. Just knowing that you are making a difference in someone's life is an everlasting feeling. Realizing that community service is something that spreads and affects not only me, but also those around me, has also been a valuable lesson that I have learned. Now, I am currently volunteering at the Nature Center and Key Club, and will also be volunteering at different associations, such as hospitals. I value myself and believe that community service is a crucial and important element for the development of a young teen. Community service is an experience I treasure. It is a gift that I get to experience and will continue to experience. It is something that I recommend others also experience, especially young teens who are interested in making a change in their lives. Community service and volunteerism is something I will continue to do throughout my life.

*Valerie Waddell  
Olathe, KS*



*Orchard Academy  
Home School  
Grade 11*

## **A Stereotype Rebel**

Whenever I first meet someone, I generally end up having the following awkward exchange with them. This event occurs practically every time I meet someone new, whether I am joining a new volleyball team or just introducing myself to a new face.

“So, where do you go to school, Valerie?”

“Actually, I don’t go to a school. I’m home-schooled.”

“Wait, you’re home-schooled? But you’re normal. Well, I mean you aren’t weird.”

“Thanks?”

This is the typical response that I get from people when I tell them that I don’t go to a public or private school. They are surprised that I am not antisocial or scared of them or really awkward in social settings. This “antisocial” stereotype is stuck on people who are home-schooled and is very negative. However, for me, homeschooling has provided an excellent foundation for developing my social skills. A strong set of social skills includes communication, coordination, cooperation, and conflict resolution.

I have observed that most people my age have a hard time communicating with an older generation. They either feel like they have nothing in to talk about, or that they have nothing in common, so they have awkward exchanges when they speak to one another. However, my experience as a homeschooler has uniquely provided me with an excellent foundation for interacting with members of other generations. I love being homeschooled. It has many up sides that people seem to overlook. My mom has homeschooled me, my older brother, and my oldest

sister for our entire lives. I have a great relationship my mom, who taught me every day (and, no, we don't have a perfect relationship, but I really enjoy the relationship that we do have and love spending time with her). Being with my mom so much has also given me a great example of the kind of mother I would like to be someday. She was extremely selfless in being patient and in teaching me every day and driving me to my various sports and activities. My parents have always taught me to pursue my goals and to never hesitate to be myself. They have always been one hundred percent behind me in everything that I have wanted to do, whether that be playing volleyball, taking voice lessons, or even getting a job. They instilled in me at a young age the

*Being with my mom so much has given me a great example of the mother I would like to be someday.*

importance of being myself, no matter what others around me are doing or thinking, a skill which plays a tremendous part in socializing with others. They taught me to reach for the sky, and when I fell down, to get right back up and keep on going to reach my goal. Being homeschooled by my parents has shown me a different perspective and appreciation for their

generation, which has helped me to socialize with older generations.

Not only have my parents helped me in socializing with older generations, but they also encouraged me to get a job in order to equip me with the tools I will need later in life to be responsible for myself. Being homeschooled has provided me with the opportunity to have a job during school hours. At work, I am socializing with co workers all the time. I have to learn to cooperate with others and figure out compromises when conflict arises. This is a great opportunity to give me a taste of what it will be like to work with others when I have a job in the future. Not only am I interacting with co-workers, but I am also interacting with managers. I am

taking direction from managers and people in authority over me all the time, and sometimes it is not easy. Bosses and managers are not always going to have the same point of view or the same idea of how things should be, but that does not mean we shouldn't try to understand and follow their directions.

Aside from managers and co-workers, I also have to deal with the people on the other side of the counter—the customers. Dealing with customers can go two ways: it can either go really well, or it can go terribly wrong. Sometimes, a large group of people will come in. You expect the worst but are, instead, pleasantly surprised; other times, not so much! People can be rude and challenging, but you have to take it with a smile on your face and help them (no matter what you think of them).

This ability has incredibly contributed to my social standing by allowing me to interact with every kind of person on a day-to-day basis. I have also developed relationships with some of the regular customers, and that has contributed to my social life, as well. Working in the food industry has given me a great appreciation for others who face the same work situation as me and have to deal with people all day long. It is greatly helpful to be meeting all sorts of people at my job in the daytime, and I would not have had that opportunity if I was not homeschooled.

Work has helped me learn about socializing with people and authority, but playing sports has really helped me to grow the most. I play volleyball and I run track for homeschool organizations. (I know what popped into your head when I just said that, and no, we are not terrible.) That is another big stereotype that is stuck on homeschooled teams: we are all terrible. Socializing is a huge part of playing any sport, but especially volleyball. Volleyball is the ultimate team sport. To have any sort of a good team, there must be good passers, good setters, good servers, good blockers, and good hitters. There cannot be just one incredible passer and

also a terrible setter and hitter because it does the team no good if it can't get the ball back over the net. This means players must trust their teammates; a perfect pass still requires trust that the setter is going to make a great set with the pass and that the hitter is going to get a great from that set. It is impossible to play volleyball by oneself. Trust and communication are essentials in playing any sport, but especially so with volleyball.

Trusting and communicating with all different kinds of teammates has been a journey and a great growing experience in socialization for me. I have had to socialize with my teammates all the time, but I have also had to interact with my coach. The volleyball coach that I have had for the last six years is an incredible coach, but does not have the strongest social skills. She always struggles with communication; when the players don't understand what she is trying to communicate, there are sometimes problems. It is incredible how much this experience has taught me about socializing—and about how *not* to communicate. It has also taught me that, whenever I have a conflict with someone, I cannot leave it alone. I have to make an effort to resolve that conflict. I have had many conflicts with my coach, and she now has great respect for me because I approached her and wanted to resolve a conflict with her. It has taught me that, without resolution, one cannot have a strong set of social skills.

Another big part of volleyball is the officials. There is no such thing as a perfect referee; they are going to make mistakes on calls just like anyone would if they were up on that ref stand. So, cooperation is huge when it comes to the officials and the calls that they make during the game. It is important to have good social skills when approaching the referees with a question about a call they made or a rule of the game.

Lastly, dealing with the crowd has taught me good social skills. We find all sorts of different crowds when we are playing different teams, but we (being a homeschooled team) do not have a

bunch of fans supporting us. Some crowds are extremely obnoxious and loud, while others are calm and quiet, but either way you have to keep strong communication with your team on the court and coordinate with them. This can be difficult when players can barely hear themselves think with all the screaming and cheering fans, but it has taught me great social skills by having to push through that. Volleyball is all about social skills and executing them on the court. If I were not homeschooled, I would be on a different team with different teammates and a different coach—and I might not have developed all the social skills that I have been taught through the experience I have had playing on a homeschooled team.

Homeschooling has equipped me with a plenitude of social skills that I wouldn't have if my parents had made the decision to put me in a public school. I have learned how to socialize with people of older generations through spending a lot of time with my parents at home. I have learned how to socialize with authorities, co workers and a great amount of customers by having a day job during school hours. I have learned how to socialize with teammates, coaches, officials, and crowds through my homeschooled volleyball team. There are a great amount of opportunities for people to be socialized, but I have been able to take advantage of a majority of those opportunities because I am homeschooled.



*Justin Bolton*  
*Peoria, AZ*



*Sandra Day O'Connor*  
*High*  
*Grade 11*

## My Natural Domain

It is a place of triumph, or a place of defeat. It is a place of comfort, or a place of awkwardness. But most of all, it is a place of peace, or a place of tension. Each and every game at Polar Ice Peoria has brought about mixed feelings, a trend that has continued for three solid years. The making of friends, as well as enemies, has further contributed to the great emotions connected to playing hockey at Polar Ice. However, it is more than just the hockey games that make this sports paradise feel like a second home; it is a combination of the entire look of the interior rink area, resonating with various sounds, the feel of the atmosphere, and the smell of the fresh ice and pure hockey.

After each and every game, I remember the scent of the clean cut ice, wafting up through my nostrils and embedding itself in my brain, to remain there permanently. Then, I discover new smells: old, sweaty gear; new pads needing to be broken in; or even jerseys sprayed with Axe to attain a tolerable odor. As the game proceeds, perspiration starts breaking down like little raindrops cascading down my face, and the smell collides with that of my new gear, spawning an awkward medley of two opposite substances. I don't mind the sweat at all, for it is the cologne of accomplishment for any hockey athlete. Occasionally, I will receive an army of snow stampeding into my face through the bars of my helmet, thus masking the previous scent with a blanket of snowy ice. These fumes have buried themselves into the depths of my mind, making it possible to think back and reminisce on each and every scent of the great game of hockey.

Before I make my way through the locker room and onto the welcoming ice (where anything can happen), I recite my pre-game prayer and find my focus, despite the all-natural nerves running rampant within me. An unspeakable adrenaline takes over, possessing me and making me yearn for the vulcanized rubber to drop. As I stretch out and prepare to take warm-up shots, my restless mind churns like thousands of cogs, each predicting different outcomes by the hundreds, all accompanied by various in-game events. Then, a strange shadow of uncertainty infiltrates the security of my abilities, until I find myself becoming schizophrenic and arguing with myself about the possible outcomes.

Eventually, I come to the conclusion that I need to do what I always do: just play. With each stride, I feel the smooth cutting of the ice beneath my feet, steel blades making incisions just small enough to propel me forward—quite an amazing idea to imagine. On one end is the net I have sworn to defend by taking on the responsibility of a goaltender; I feel the welcoming and comforting embrace as I take my position between the rusty iron pipes, proven to be a valuable ally, that have seen countless pucks violently brutalize them. In this way, I receive a strange connection with my goal, each of us residing at our own end of the ice, waiting to sacrifice anything to get in front of blistering shots, be it helmet or pad. However, any hockey setting will be enough to make a fanatic's heart flutter and jump because of the experience of being part of the inexplicable atmosphere.

As all the previous descriptions paint the essence of the Polar Ice rink, the unique sounds most familiar to hockey players are what consequently set the area apart from other such sporting facilities. From the chatter of the locker rooms to the calm conversations of parents and spectators on the bleachers that communicate with gray voices until the sight of their player sparks the emotion inside, the entire room is an assimilation of natural noises. Sometimes the

mood can be described as a relaxed and quiet exhibition, while at other times the voices of the coaches and players become commanding and desperate, as they realize the need for a couple goals, leading to a victory. However, the only symbol of regularity and order is the commanding buzzer above. The buzzer that stops play, starts play, alters it in whatever way, acting as a robotic official of the entire game. Each sharp screech of the invisible sound directs players to their respective bench like a puppet master. The human referees also hold power within their small, steel whistles, and with every exhaling breath into the mouthpiece, everything stops, followed by the blaring flood of music from the screaming speaker system overhead, fueling players and fans alike, driving them with emotion and adrenaline.

Aside from the sounds, emotions, and smells, the sight of this magical environment alone can ignite interest from anybody: the tantalizing open ice inviting all kinds of customers; the solid comfort of the bleachers reaching out to the audience; and the common advertisements littering the boards that keep every outcome realistic and connect the game and place to the outside world. All around are maroon and white walls, forever reminding everyone present of the unchanging consistency that makes up most of our lives, but encouraging excitement by hosting a hockey game within its boundaries. The giant, green scoreboard rests on the far wall mightily and dutifully records each goal, shot, period, penalty, and all other tasks that must be upheld to successfully conduct the greatest game on earth. Depending on the severity of the game, various numbers of spectators can be seen filing onto the cold, metal, yet homey, bleachers; at times, there is a maelstrom of bodies clumped together, a crowd of ants stuffed into a small parameter; but in other instances, there are only small groups of familiar faces scattered out among their chosen seats, watching their children or even grandchildren. On the ice, simple-colored red and blue lines dictate the movement of the puck, as well as the motion paths of the skaters. It is truly

a wonder how such inanimate and plain marks on ice can be so important and controlling, but that is one of the great wonders of the sport, as well as the rink.

Everything about Polar Ice Peoria is engraved into my memory: the smells of hockey, the feel of the sporting environment, the sounds of the game, and the sight of the entire rink. Each individual aspect of the area sparks an idea within me, or reignites a memory, joyous or disappointing. Despite any sign of depression, I still hold that hockey zone dear to me, through thick and thin, and I plan on revisiting it often to practice, play, and indulge myself in my natural domain.

*Ioana Grosu  
Troy, MI*



*International Academy  
East  
Grade 10*

## The Lamp

I remember seeing it for the first time and falling deeply in love. I couldn't resist wanting to touch its smooth base and brush my hand against the folded fabric of its shade. If perfection were an object, then it would be that lamp—sitting in front of me, waiting patiently for me to take it back.

The older woman who owned the shop glanced over at where I was standing and smiled. She had no teeth. I refrained from grimacing.

“Hello.”

“Do you like that, miss?” she asked.

“Oh, the lamp? It's beautiful.”

“I made the base a few days ago.”

Taken aback, I was silent. How could this creature, so human, so imperfect, make something so entrancing?

“How much does it cost?”

“That? Five hundred dollars.”

Damn. If I were to buy it, then that would mean that I would go hungry for three weeks. I didn't have the money.

I tried to keep myself from glaring at her, from prying the lamp away, out of her shaky hands. She couldn't have made it; those hands could not have shaped the smooth, wavelike surface and applied the perfect glaze. She was lying; something that made me increasingly more furious.

“Okay. Thank you.”

Every day after that, I came back to the small lamp shop so that I could see it. When others touched it, I felt the pains of a hopelessly jealous lover. To resolve that issue, I always hovered near it and scowled darkly at the passerby. Most of the time, they simply moved aside. The lamp was mine, after all.

Soon, that passion sprang into an obsession. At work, I used up all of my spare paper to draw it. At home, I lay in bed, constantly thinking about it. Every minute that was spent away from the small shop was torture for me, and I wanted—no, I *needed* to go back.

My eyes became red from lack of sleep. Even at night, I dreamt about it. In my dreams, it was huge—bigger than my apartment building. I would sit on one of the teal waves and close my eyes, basking in its ethereal light. Sometimes, I was a sailor, riding across it, going around and around until I finally woke up. Other times, I was standing on top of the lampshade, letting myself fall down as if I were a child on a slide.

I then knew that I had to do something. It had been almost a year since I had seen it in the store, and I had grown to worship it. I was no criminal, of course, but since I could not afford it, there was only one other option.

I had to break into the store and steal it.

So I did. One night during the summer, I came in through the back door—which, thankfully, was unlocked—and approached the sacred object. I picked it up, caressing it in my arms, and marveled at the way the glaze shone in the dim light. Beautiful would have been too worldly to describe that moment. Surreal, maybe.

Then I left. I ran toward my apartment building until I was out of breath, and even then I pushed myself forward. I couldn't stop. I couldn't let them catch me and take the lamp away. And when I finally did arrive, I felt so inexpressibly happy that I ignored my fatigued body.

I knew where I wanted to put it; right next to my bed, on a small mahogany nightstand. It fit perfectly, and I was overjoyed. That night, when I fell asleep, I had no dreams. Finally, I realized that I could be at peace.

A couple of lonely days passed. I didn't detest it, though... not like how I used to. Through being alone, I was able to revel in the silence, just me and the lamp. I turned it on carefully, and a bright light illuminated the small space. My awe must have been similar to that of the first man who discovered fire.

Then I was interrupted. The doorbell rang. I crossly sprang up and scuttled over to the door. When I opened it, I noticed a man standing in front of me, smiling.

"Hey. I just moved in next door. Thought I might want to... greet my neighbors."

"Oh," I said, and began to shut the door.

"Wait... What's your name?"

"Lillian."

“Cool. Mine’s Anton.”

I nodded, and once more attempted to close the door. This man was the only thing keeping me from being with my treasured lamp. I wasn’t in the mood for small talk. Apparently, though, he was. And somehow, he convinced me to go to dinner with him.

“It’ll be fun,” he promised. I scowled in response. I detested him. He had a certain youthful joy, a *joie de vivre* that I had lost. His rosy cheeks, wide jaw, and tousled blond hair almost made him seem boyish, so I hated that, too.

He was right, though. Dinner was fun. And when he invited me again the next week, I accepted, not knowing why. Maybe I saw something in him that I lacked, but which was nonetheless vital to my existence. The connection between us wasn’t instant, nor was it strong, but it was there.

When I got home, I gazed at the lamp and turned it on. It wouldn’t work. The light bulb had broken. I went to my storage closet and got a new one, then replaced it.

I tried turning on the lamp again, and somehow, the light was different. It was whiter, more intense. I hated it.

So I picked up the lamp and walked downstairs with it, to the entrance of the apartment building. It was dark outside, and it had started to rain. Since I was young, I would hold my hands out to catch the raindrops in my palms. Out of habit, I did the same thing that night—I set the lamp down, and turned my hands, palms up.

A few raindrops fell on them, and I grinned. Then, I walked back into the building, and up to my apartment.

Once there, I fell asleep almost instantly, thoughts of my dinner with Anton spinning in my mind. I didn't even realize that there was something missing from my mahogany nightstand.

The next morning, I awoke feeling at peace. The sounds of the city relaxed me, for once, and I immediately rushed out. It had rained the night before, so the ground was covered in moisture, and the cement sidewalks were a lovely dark-gray. I immediately felt compelled to look behind me, and when I did, I saw the lamp—rain-covered and dirty.

I smiled. Maybe I would visit the old lady shopkeeper later on. But at that moment, I had to head out for a date with Anton.