

FOUNTAINS 36TH EDITION

An illustration of a person with a backpack standing on a grassy hill, looking out over a valley with mountains and a winding river at sunset. The sky is filled with large, colorful clouds. The person is wearing a red jacket and dark pants. The valley below is lush with green grass and colorful trees. The mountains in the background are covered in snow. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

SEASONS

A PCC Student Publication

2025

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INTRODUCTION

When you hear the word *seasons*, you likely think of spring, summer, fall, and winter—the seasons of the year. In spring and summer, you might relax on the beach with a book in one hand and a soda in the other. In fall and winter, maybe you sit by a campfire or hide indoors to escape the snow and sludge outside. But these aren't the only seasons we experience. We all go through seasons of growth, change, and joy.

The 36th edition of *Fountains* reminds you that life is always changing. Through these stories and poems, you'll read about characters who improve themselves, face new obstacles, and remember the wonder of life. We hope this book inspires you to grow, change, and experience joy, no matter what season you find yourself in.



SENIOR EDITORS

Regina Massey

Paige Romig





SEASONS OF GROWTH

Showing God's Love

Fiction

•

The End of the World

Poem

•

Lizzy's Victory

Fiction

•

The Monster in the Mirror

Fiction

•

Curbs

Nonfiction

•

It Comes in Waves

Fiction

•

A Cat's Appreciation

Poem

SHOWING GOD'S LOVE

by Regina Massey

There are different ways to show God's love.

No. No. No.

This couldn't be true.

My youth group was packed into our church bus on the way to Macon, Georgia, for a mission trip. The plan was to join a dozen other youth groups and split into teams to minister to the city. There would be construction teams, evangelism teams, and children's ministry teams.

From the start, I knew that I belonged on a children's ministry team. I worked in the church nursery with my friends every Sunday and babysat for several families in my church.

But Pastor Luke handed me a bright orange wristband while my two best friends received blue wristbands. All the plans I had made to spend time with my friends, play with the kids, and make fun memories shattered before my eyes. Sage and Lilah would get to play with babies all day while I would get to . . . do construction . . . in the sweltering Georgia-summer heat with a bunch of sweaty, smelly guys—ugh!

"Um, Pastor Luke?" I said as he finished passing wristbands down the bus. "I'm supposed to be on the children's ministry team with Sage and Lilah."

His expression softened. "Sorry, Melody, but there wasn't enough room for all three of you in the van. We could only send two students from our church."

"But—" I began to protest but stopped myself. I knew all he would say was that God has a plan for this. God always has a reason. Well, Pastor Luke had to say that. He was a pastor, after all. I crossed my arms and sank deeper into my seat.

It was going to be a long week.

"I'm so sorry, Mel." Lilah reached across the aisle to take my hand in hers.

"Me too," said Sage who was seated beside me. "You should just come with us anyway. Tell them you lost your wristband. What are they gonna do? Kick you off the mission team?"

"They might." Lilah shot Sage a disapproving glare from behind her round glasses.

"I doubt it," Sage said with a shrug.

I groaned. "I don't even want to do this anymore."

"Don't worry, Mel," Lilah said. "I know God has a plan for this."

Easy for her to say.

The next morning, we ate breakfast in the Wesleyan College cafeteria. I had pulled my blonde hair into a high ponytail and put on an old T-shirt. I had brought old clothes thinking we might do arts and crafts with the kids. Instead, I was wearing old clothes to protect my nice ones from getting torn or splattered with paint.

At our meeting the night before, my team leader Sam had said that we would be doing yard work, reroofing a house, and repainting the exterior. I didn't see how we'd be able to get all of that done in five days.

"Mels." Sage pointed her plastic fork at me from across the table. "You look miserable. Why don't you just ask Pastor Luke to talk to your team leader? Maybe they can swap some people around."

Shoulders hunched, I pushed cold scrambled eggs around my plate with my fork. "They'll just tell me no."

"You'll do great, Mel," Lilah said. I knew she was trying to be encouraging, but I was still jealous. Everything had worked out perfectly for her and Sage. Why did I have to be the one left out?

At eight o'clock, the director announced that it was time to meet with our teams outside. My heart sank into my stomach as I threw away my paper plate and headed

SEASONS OF GROWTH

for the door. In the courtyard, I spotted the orange posterboard hanging on the brick wall.

Standing beside the posterboard were some of my teammates from last night's meeting. Sam, the team leader, was loaded down with as many supplies as he could carry. Five other guys surrounded him, all wearing work boots and carrying toolboxes and painting supplies. I saw Chase from my church group, the only familiar face on the team. He was laughing as he talked with the other guys—he seemed right at home. Then there was the only other girl on the team. She looked as lost as I felt. She held just a water bottle and her cell phone and stared at the ground.

Sam scanned down his list to make sure everyone had made it to the right group. Then we followed him to his church's van. One of the guys was assigned to drive a pickup truck containing two ladders, several coolers, painting supplies, tools, and a lawnmower. The rest of us climbed into the van. The girl and I took the front row while the guys piled into the back.

"I'm Melody," I said as I buckled my seat belt. "What's your name?"



"Kendall," she said, arms crossed. As the van rumbled down the street, she stared out the window as if she were on her way to a funeral.

"You didn't want to be on this team either, did you?" I said quietly so Sam wouldn't hear.

"No." She laughed. "I wanted to work with kids because I, like, *don't* do physical labor."

"Me neither. I'm pretty sure I'll fall off the roof if they make me get up there."

"But hey," she said, "then you're done working for the day." I burst out laughing. "You're terrible!"

"I know. I mean, at least we can suffer together, right?"

"Right," I said with a smile.

It wasn't long before Sam parked the van in front of a faded pink house. We climbed out of the van. This was a dirty little place. The lawn had grown so high, it tickled my knees. Roof shingles lay scattered on the ground. The porch was cluttered with junk. An elderly woman sat in a rocking chair, stroking a skinny gray cat.

"Hello?" she said, slowly rising to hobble toward us.

Sam rushed over to meet her. "Hello, Mrs. Golden. We're here with Grace Missions."

"Oh!" She laughed, revealing several missing teeth. "I remember now. Go right ahead, honey. I'll get out of the way. It's time for my nap anyway." She shuffled her way inside, beckoning the cat to follow her.

"All right," Sam said, clapping his hands together. "Let's get this yard cleaned up before we do any painting. Josh, Casey—you and the other guys can get the ladder and start on the roof. I'll join you in a minute." Then he turned his attention to Kendall and me. "How do you feel about mowing the lawn?"

"That's fine." I tried to sound like I wasn't dreading it. I had never used a lawnmower before, but there was no way I was climbing up on that roof.

Kendall and I watched as Sam pushed the lawnmower back toward us. He quickly explained how to use it, but when I struggled to follow directions, he started the mower and handed it off to me.

It didn't take long for my arms to start aching as I pushed the mower through the overgrown lawn. Bits of grass clung to my legs, itching my skin as I trudged along, waiting for Kendall to clear my way of obstacles. She found dog chew toys, garbage, and—to our horror—a

dead squirrel. I was glad I didn't run over *that* with the mower.

Kendall and I swapped places when we got to the backyard. When we finally finished, she and I sat on the steps of the cluttered porch and gulped down water from our bottles. Soon the guys were climbing down the ladder

But he was still smiling—I couldn't imagine why.

to join us. They gathered in a semicircle on the freshly cut grass.

Chase was sweating through his shirt and already looking sunburned. But he was still

smiling—I couldn't imagine why. He leaned his head back and doused his face with water, then shook out his wet hair and caught me looking at him. He smiled. "Having fun, Mel?"

I scowled. "A blast."

"Great job on the grass, girls," Sam said, casting his eyes over the lawn. "This place already looks so much better."

I gave a weak smile. "Thanks."

"The next step is clearing off this porch." He gestured at the mess behind us.

I turned and gaped at the old furniture, garbage, toys, and knickknacks left on the porch in huge, towering piles.

"Are you saying we have to move all this stuff?" I said.

Sam shrugged. "You're always welcome to join us on the roof."

"Nope!" Kendall answered for both of us. "Not happening. I want to live to eat my lunch. Which reminds me, when is lunch?"

Sam checked his watch and smirked. "It's only nine o'clock."

My heart sank. It had only been one hour? I couldn't believe it. And now that Kendall had mentioned food, my stomach was starting to grumble.

Our water break ended too soon. Then the guys climbed back on the roof, and Kendall and I started

hauling junk through the backyard and into the shed. Because the shed quickly filled, we had to reorganize everything to accommodate the porch clutter. We were lifting a large plastic storage container onto a stack of boxes when Kendall screamed, causing me to scream. In a frenzy, she dropped her side of the container on my toes, then stumbled backward and fell on the dusty ground.

“What happened?” I yelled, struggling to heave the container off my feet.

“I’m sorry.” She stood and brushed the dust from her clothes. “I saw a roach.”

“Gross!” I roared, shoving past her to escape the shed.

Kendall laughed and staggered after me. “Melody, you’re overreacting.”

I sputtered. “*I’m overreacting?*”

“C’mon.” She grabbed my wrist and dragged me back toward the porch. “Let’s finish so we can start painting.”

By the time we finished moving all the clutter into the shed, it was almost ten o’clock. Sam handed us some old rags and asked us to wipe the grime off the outer walls of the house. We got the smaller ladder from the back of the pickup truck and played rock-paper-scissors to decide who would have to clean the upper half of the walls.

I lost.

My legs wobbled as I climbed a few rungs up the ladder. I pressed one hand against the wall and used the other hand to scrub. After mowing the lawn and lugging furniture across the yard all morning, my arms were exhausted. I couldn’t believe I wasn’t even halfway done with the day’s work—and I still had four more days of this!



"You know what we should do?" Kendall said. I looked down to see a devious smile on her face.

"What?" I said.

"Steal Sam's keys and take the van for a joy ride."

"I heard that!" Sam shouted from the rooftop.

I grinned and went back to scrubbing the wall.

"Maybe later."

I heard rustling from above and looked up just in time to get a face full of roof shingles. I yelped and jerked away and toppled over into the grass, knocking the air out of my lungs.

"Melody, I'm so sorry!" Chase cried. I looked up to see his blond head peeking over the side of the roof. "I forgot you guys were down there. Are you okay?"

I scowled and rubbed my forehead. "I'm *fine*."

Kendall grabbed my hand and helped me up. "I'll take over ladder duty for now."

"I'll be more careful next time," Chase said.

Kendall jutted a finger at him. "There'd better not *be* a next time."

"No, I meant—never mind." Chase's head disappeared, and he got back to work.

And so did we. We cleaned the entire right side of the house and half of the back side before it was finally—*finally*—time for lunch. We unloaded the coolers from the pickup truck and gathered on the newly decluttered porch to sit in the shade. Sam opened the cooler and passed out brown paper bags, each filled with a sandwich, a bag of chips, an apple, and a cookie. Before we started eating, Sam blessed the food and prayed for Mrs. Golden's salvation.

"Sam," I said, "is it okay if I knock and ask Mrs. Golden if she wants to join us?"

"Go ahead," he said with a grin.

I got up and knocked on the door. She called out that she was coming, and the door crept open.

“Hi, Mrs. Golden.” I flashed my best smile. “We’re about to start our devotional if you want to join us.”

She gazed at the group behind me, then shook her head. “I don’t think so, dear.” She closed the door in my face.

I slowly turned toward the group, face burning with embarrassment. I couldn’t believe I’d spent all day doing chores for this lady—only to be rejected.

Back at the college that evening, I sat alone at the dinner table, waiting for Sage and Lilah, when Chase slid into the seat beside me and set a can of Dr. Pepper in front of me.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he said.

“It’s okay. And thanks for the drink.” I popped it open and took a sip.

“No problem.” He grinned, looking relieved that I’d forgiven him. “Was your day okay—other than getting attacked by shingles?”

I sighed. “It could’ve been better.”

“How?”

“If they’d put me on the same team as Sage and Lilah.”

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Oh.”

“I mean, seriously, how can you have so much fun reroofing that house? It’s so hot outside, and that lady isn’t even around to see how hard we’re working. She’s so ungrateful.”

“Well, Mrs. Golden can’t reroof or paint the house herself, and this is a way for us to show her God’s love and maybe lead her to Christ.”

I scowled. Was Chase right? Could Mrs. Golden really come to salvation without us even talking to her?

The next few days, Kendall and I painted the house beige. We took turns using the ladder, and the guys didn’t pummel us with roof shingles this time. I worked hard, and as the days crawled by, I started to lose hope that my

*She closed
the door in
my face.*

work even mattered. Mrs. Golden rarely bothered to come outside and see what we were doing for her.

Eating dinner with Sage and Lilah every night did *not* make me feel better. By Thursday, I was completely sick of hearing about the Disney movies they'd watched, the popsicle-stick birdhouses they'd made, and the water-balloon fights they'd had with the kids. I twisted my hands together in my lap and plastered on a fake smile.

"Today a kid asked me about Jesus, and I helped him accept Jesus into his heart," Lilah announced. "I can't believe God used me to do something like that."

I wished God would use me to do the same.

On Friday, I worked harder than I had any of the other days. When Kendall and I finished painting, I convinced her to help me start up the lawnmower again so we could go back over the patches we'd missed. We swept the porch and picked vines off the fence and pulled weeds that had grown in the cracks of the driveway. Sweat dripped down my face, and my back was sore, but I didn't care. I wanted Mrs. Golden to see how hard we had worked in God's name, even if she didn't see it until we were gone.

As Kendall and I picked up stray pieces of trash around the property, Mrs. Golden's car pulled into the driveway. When she got out, her eyes widened. "You got all this done in a week?"

I wanted to blurt out an invitation to our devotional, but I stopped myself when I remembered Chase's advice about showing God's love through actions. "Yes, ma'am,"

I wished that God would use me to do the same.

I said, smiling. "We're happy to help."

Kendall crushed an empty soda can in her fist and tossed it in our wheelbarrow. "If that old lady would get saved, all this work would be worth a lot more."

I smirked, thinking the exact same thing.

By lunchtime, we were all exhausted. We sat on the porch and devoured our sandwiches and snacks. I closed



my eyes and prayed for a breeze to hit my sweaty face as one of the guys opened his Bible.

Before he could start the devotional, the front door swung open, and Mrs. Golden walked out.

“Sorry to interrupt.” She smiled sheepishly. “I just wanted to invite y’all inside for some lemonade. You’ve all been working so hard.”

Several of the guys leaped to their feet. We all thanked her and funneled inside to pour ourselves some lemonade from her pitcher. As I waited in line, Mrs. Golden came over and put a wrinkled hand on my sweaty shoulder.

“I appreciate all you’ve done for me,” she said. “This is just my small way of saying thank you.”

“Thank *you*.” I poured myself a cup and took a big sip. My whole body immediately felt refreshed.

“If the offer is still on the table,” she said, “I think I *would* like to join you for your devotional today—if you have room for an old woman like me.”

Behind Mrs. Golden, Kendall gave me a double thumbs-up, and Chase gave me an I-told-you-so look. I grinned, not even caring that he’d been right all along.

THE END OF THE WORLD

by Anastasia Villagomez

*"Casting all your care upon
him; for he careth for you."
1 Peter 5:7*

You tell yourself,

It's just a lost pen,
Not the end of the world.

It's just a goodbye,
Not the end of the world.

It's just a lonely night,
Not the end of the world.

But maybe it is the end of the world.
Not a big world,
But a small one that belongs to you.

Maybe you wouldn't cry if time ends,
If the universe implodes, and the sun goes dark.
You'd be strong enough to shrug and walk it off.
You would say, "It is what it is," as the sky falls.

Maybe you wouldn't cry for the cosmic tragedies,
But you would cry for your could-have-beens.
You cry for the small losses
Because no one else notices.

SEASONS OF GROWTH

You show up, an invisible mourner
At a funeral that no one else came to.
At the grave marker, you leave one forlorn bouquet,
Blue flowers fluttering in the wind.

It is the end of the world.
Not a big world,
But a small one that belongs to you.



LIZZY'S VICTORY

by Sophia Widholm

*A preschool teacher overcomes
frustration with God's love.*

Lizzy sat with her well-worn Bible open on her lap. Her eyes scanned over a specific verse for a moment before she flipped it closed. "I should probably get going." She glanced down at her watch and drew in a sharp breath. "Whew, I've *really* got to go! Fifteen minutes to get to work." She adjusted the collar on her mustard-yellow polo with the embroidered Rise and Shine Preschool logo. She stabbed a few hairpins into her wound-up braid, then cast a glance in the mirror before snatching up her purse and dashing downstairs. "Oh . . . victory . . . in Jesus," she hummed while gathering her lunch from the refrigerator. "My Savior . . . forever."

"Something in your devotions remind you of that song?" Mama smiled, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

Lizzy laughed. "Yes, 'Overcome evil with good'—that's my verse for the day. Got to go!" And with that, she dashed out the door.

"Thank you, Lord, for a sunny day!" Lizzy exclaimed, getting into the car. A sunny day meant time outside—a needed break for both teachers and toddlers after indoor entertainment.

"I do love the toddlers, Lord," she prayed aloud as she drove. "Sure, they're a challenge, but they're a wonderful group of kids with growing minds." She looked forward to introducing the craft that Emma, her lead teacher, had prepared especially for today—making "cookies." Paint would splatter everywhere as little hands decorated

paper plates, but Lizzy didn't mind. Teaching toddlers and making messes were synonymous.

As she pulled carefully into Rise and Shine's parking lot, the sight of a little boy toddling inside holding his mother's hand made her heart sink—Robby.

He's back already? Lizzy gulped. Two years old, brilliantly blond, and a bundle of boyish energy, Robby was the only part of Lizzy's job that she dreaded. *Robby* meant toys emptied onto the floor, incident reports, and calls to his mom because *someone* had bitten another child. *I was hoping he wouldn't be back till tomorrow.* With a sigh, Lizzy climbed out of the car, swung her bag over her shoulder, and entered the atrium. Robby or no Robby, Emma needed her assistant teacher.



"Wash your hands, everybody!" Emma called, turning the water on in the sink. Little ones with hands covered in brown finger paint toddled over to her.

One of them, Annie, started crying at the mess on her hands. Lizzy hustled over to her and grasped her wrists, guiding her to the sink to avoid mess-making on the way. "It's okay, Annie," she soothed. "We're going to get all clean. Can you say *clean*?"

Behind her, Lizzy heard a terrific crash. Whirling around, she caught sight of the last bin of LEGOs cascading to the floor and Robby's determined little hands reaching for another bin.

"Robby! All done!" Lizzy rushed toward him and caught the bin before it slid off the shelf. She bent to meet Robby's eyes. "All done, Robby. We don't dump bins. Help Miss Lizzy clean up."

Robby turned his face up at her with angelic uninterest.

How dare you! Lizzy's jaw clenched. *If Rise and Shine approved time-out, you'd be in the corner every five minutes.* But she bit back the words. Instead, she resolutely handed

Robby a LEGO and held out the bin. “Put it inside, Robby.” She glanced up at the clock and groaned. *How many hours are left before Robby’s mom picks him up?*



Surrounded by ample evidence of a lunch that had just been consumed by the eight now-sleeping two-year-olds, Lizzy looked over at Emma and forced a feeble smile. “Well, I guess we’d better get to it while they’re napping.” Robby’s rowdy presence was hedging close to overcoming her “victory in Jesus” joy from that morning’s devotions.

Emma smiled back as she pulled on a couple of plastic gloves. “Let’s see how much we can get done by one thirty.”

It was one o’clock, and Robby would wake up at one thirty—precisely thirty minutes before naptime officially ended at two o’clock. *Another reason I wish Robby were still on vacation.*

Lizzy grabbed some gloves and a bucket of soapy water and bent to scrub the chairs. Bits of mashed potatoes had already crusted during the hour since she and Emma had wrangled eight cranky toddlers to bed. She rubbed her wet rag over the top, sides, and bottom of that chair before moving on to the next one.

“Days like these make me wonder if I’m cut out to be a teacher,” Lizzy whispered, laughing halfheartedly.

Emma smirked. “What! Like, you don’t just adore toddlers? All that fighting, sassing, and bin-dumping? C’mon,” she teased.

“You bet!” Lizzy said. “But I’d kind of hoped we’d have an extra day of vacation from Robby’s bad behavior.”

“Oh, he’s just practicing his independence,” Emma said. “Don’t let it bother you, Lizzy.”

Lizzy finished wiping the chairs. How could Emma defend a child’s bad behavior? She paused and glanced around the room, silently counting out of habit: *Annie, one; Lucas, two; Lula, three; Robby, four.* Just then, Robby

stirred on his mat. With a touch of dread, Lizzy glanced up at the clock. It was only one fifteen.



“No!” Robby shouted with all his might into Lizzy’s face as she knelt in front of him. He whirled around to run off again, but she caught him by his shirt.

“Yes—you—will—” Lizzy grunted through gritted teeth, pulling the two-year-old onto her lap.

He flailed. “No! No! No! No shoes!”

“Too late.” Lizzy pulled a sweaty sock over his bare toes and crammed his foot back into his gym shoe. She pushed Robby to his feet and marched him from the playground to the classroom door. “I’m taking Robby inside to change his diaper,” she called over her shoulder to Emma.

At the word *diaper*, Robby dropped to his knees in the grass, his hand still grasped by Lizzy’s, and refused to go on. With a groan, Lizzy heaved the boy up into her arms, pent-up frustration threatening to explode into anger at any moment. *Why did he have to ruin the joy I had this morning? I’m feeling overwhelmed, Lord!*

Plopping Robby’s flailing twenty-five-pound weight onto the diaper table, she pinned him down with one hand while fumbling to find his diaper bin in the cabinet below.

“Ouch!” A searing pain shot through her hand.

“Robby!” she screeched, jerking her hand away from the table to see ugly red teeth marks. “You—dreadful—child!” she hissed. “I wish I could—could—” Unable to finish her thought, Lizzy clamped her mouth shut as angry tears stung her eyes.

Emma poked her head through the doorway. “Hey, Lizzy, are you coming back? I’ve got to use the restroom.” With a glimpse of Lizzy’s face, she asked, “What happened? Are you all right?”

“Robby just—bit me,” Lizzy cast over her shoulder. She strapped him into a new diaper and set him firmly down by the sink. “Wash your hands,” she commanded. Timidly, he put his hands under the faucet. Lizzy forcibly pumped soap onto his chubby hands, rubbed them together, and rinsed them off.

“Here.” She yanked a paper towel from the dispenser. “Dry your hands. Throw it away. *In the trash*, Robby.” The little boy glanced over his shoulder at her as he pushed up the lid of the tall trashcan and dropped his crumpled paper towel inside. She grabbed his hand and pulled him back outside.

Lizzy slumped against the brick exterior of Rise and Shine Preschool, her swollen hand throbbing. *Robby’s ruined it all—my hopes for a day without incident reports, and especially my good attitude. What happened to “victory in Jesus,” Lizzy?* She watched the toddlers running back and forth, pulling each other in toy wagons, and climbing inside the playground treehouse. Robby went to join them, but not in his usual boisterous manner. Instead, he peeked over his shoulder at her before joining the fun. *He knows I’m angry with him*, Lizzy thought with a pang, beginning to regret her attitude.

“Time’s up!” Emma called, holding up her binder. “Follow Miss Emma, everybody! Let’s go get some water. Come along, friends!” She stood in front of the door to hold it open and counted the little ones as they tottered in, red-faced from the exertion in the afternoon air.

“Six, seven, eight . . .” Emma tapped them in on the teacher’s iPad. She gave Lizzy a concerned look as she entered the classroom. “I’m sorry about Robby. I’ll call his mom for you.”

“What happened to ‘victory in Jesus,’ Lizzy?”

Lizzy smiled weakly. “Thanks, Emma. That’d be great.” As she corralled the children to the table, she finally turned her thoughts to the Lord. *Father, please forgive me for losing my temper with Robby. Please show me how to*

redeem what I've lost. She winced as she reached for the bin on top of the children's cubbies. "Water, anyone? Sit down, then."

"Me! Me!" cried Lula, pounding the table.

"Yes, you . . . but what do you say?" Lizzy held back the girl's sippy cup to prompt her.

"Pweeze?" Lula rubbed her tummy and then giggled as Lizzy handed her the cup.

"Good job, Lula. Please and thank you," Lizzy reminded her.

Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. The verse from morning devotions echoed in Lizzy's mind.

"Jesus doesn't want me to be angry with you."

She hadn't envisioned how she could practice it then, but in the wake of today's toddler war, she suddenly had an idea. Lifting the last cup from the bin, she turned

it to see the name label. Robby. Unlike himself, he sat quietly at the table, waiting for his water.

"Robby." She crouched beside him and handed him his sippy cup. "Can Miss Lizzy tell you something?"

He nodded, his eyes wide over his cup as he drank.

"Come here, then." Lizzy went to the carpet and sat—"crisscross applesauce," they called it as teachers. She patted her lap, and Robby plopped down on it. His golden head brushed her chin, and she pressed her cheek against his silky, straight hair.

"Robby, do you see this?" She showed him her hand. The welt from his bite had gone down a bit but was still red and visible. He nodded and looked down. "We don't bite," she said. "You need to say 'sorry'. Okay?"

Robby nodded again.

Lizzy continued, "Robby, Miss Lizzy also needs to say 'sorry'. I got angry with you today. Would you please forgive me? Jesus doesn't want me to be angry with you. He wants me to love you, like He loves you."

Though they were big words for a two-year-old to understand, somehow, he seemed to understand. He whirled around in her lap and flung his arms around her neck. Lizzy squeezed him back. *Overcome unkindness—Robby's and mine—with God's love.* “Jesus loves you, Robby,” she whispered into his ear. “Did you know that?”

He looked up at her and grinned. Then, in typical Robby fashion, he jumped up and rushed over to the toys. “Dis one.” He pulled the bin of hexagon snaps down and tottered back to Lizzy. He dumped the bin onto the carpet, relishing the crash they made tumbling out of the bin for the second time that day.

This time, Lizzy flashed a broad smile at the little boy's excitement. “Okay! Let's play, Robby. What should we make?”

It wouldn't be the last bin he'd overturn that day; but she wouldn't dread it anymore. As she and Robby connected a mat of hexagon snaps on the carpet, Lizzy rejoiced. She *did* have “victory in Jesus.” Instead of being overcome by evil, she had overcome evil with God's forgiveness and love.

THE MONSTER IN THE MIRROR

by Danielle Stewart

 **Commencement Contest Winner** 
—Original Fiction—

What do you do when everything falls apart?

Bella's sunken face twisted into an expression just short of horrific as she stared at the number displayed on the glass scale beneath her feet. She marveled that it did not shatter under her weight. Glancing over at the full-length mirror hanging directly to the left of the scale, she lifted her shirt to examine her stomach. Bloated. She pressed on her protruding hips and winced. Bruised. She stood up straight and evaluated herself. Broken.

"We have a lot in common, you and I," she whispered to the mirror, noticing the cobweb cracks that riddled its delicate surface.

Turning away from the monster she saw in the mirror, Bella let her shirt fall back loosely over her emaciated frame and exited the bathroom to get ready for school. She tugged on an oversized hoodie and loose jeans, her go-to outfit as of late. Then, she framed her black hair strategically around her face to conceal her "flabby" jawline and the cheeks she thought were too round.

After rushing out the door to catch the bus, Bella wondered how many calories she had burned in the two minutes she spent running to the bus stop.

"Sit with me?" asked Amelia, a bubbly cheerleader who had recently befriended Bella. Her bracelets jangled as she moved her polka-dot backpack off the seat next to her.

"I get too sick in the back," Bella lied, wanting to sit alone. She slid into an empty seat near the front and tapped her foot incessantly for the duration of the ride, trying to burn fat even while sitting.



Lunchtime. Bella was certain the carb-filled heaps of calorie-dense food was the stuff of nightmares. She shakily accepted the tray handed to her by a gruff lunch lady with greasy gloves and sat down at an empty table so she could be alone. Did she have friends? She used to. Now, it was too risky to be close to anyone. Someone might notice her sickly state; the fact that she slid food around her tray but never took a bite, the way she sucked her stomach in so far she struggled to breathe, the bruises that highlighted her bony elbows and ribcage. Besides, Bella had stopped believing she was worthy of attention when she lost Jess, her childhood friend. At the start of ninth grade the girls tried out for the cheerleading squad together, but only Jess had made the team, dividing the friends into separate factions of high school popularity. Now, a year later, Bella was determined to fight her way onto the squad and back into Jess's life.

Bella thought of Anita, the kind school nurse who had patiently sat with her all the times she felt too weak to go to class. Maybe she should try to eat something . . . anything. Surely, the nurse would eventually notice why she was always sick. Bella would be put in therapy and forced to start eating again.

SEE ME! everything inside her screamed. And yet somehow, she hoped no one would.

"Bella! You're coming to cheerleading tryouts tomorrow, right?" asked Amelia, bouncing up to the table.

"Oh—oh yeah," Bella replied, sitting straighter. "You know I've been preparing for weeks."

"That's what I thought. I TOLD Jess you'd be there. She didn't believe me. She thinks you're too sick. I mean, girl,

you've been in the nurse's office at LEAST three times this week."

"Jess asked if I was coming?" Bella questioned, picking up on the one part that mattered to her.

"I told her you came to me for help with the tryout routine."

"And I've been practicing what you showed me. Lots. I'm gonna make it in." Bella paused. "Thanks for all your help, by the way. I wouldn't even be there tomorrow without you."

"Sure thing!" Amelia said, twirling her hair. "Oh, and here," she pulled out an apple and handed it to Bella. "I hate school lunches too." She motioned to the full tray still sitting on the table. Bella's cheeks blushed redder than the apple as she bashfully nodded her thanks.

After Amelia left, Bella stared at the apple in her hand. She should eat it. She had bounced her leg enough today to justify it. Her short jog to the bus had burned enough

She was terrified of food itself.

that, surely, she wouldn't get fat from just a fruit. Besides, she should work on energizing herself for the tryouts tomorrow. In a strangely Snow White-like moment, Bella contemplated the idea of taking a bite before bringing the red apple to her lips and breaking off a piece with her teeth. She chewed. She swallowed. She panicked. Getting up from her seat, she hurled the apple into the trash, disgusted with herself. Then she glanced around, hoping Amelia hadn't seen.

She wondered how things had gotten this bad. A few months ago, it had started out as just a diet. She'd count her calories, scrutinize food packages, and set weight-loss goals. But now it was as if she was terrified of food itself. Bella placed her fingers around her wrist to measure how thin it was. Could it be that it had really swollen to twice its size just from one bite of apple? Bella shuddered and

got up to go to her next class, determining to intensify her workout routine later that day.

Classes dragged on with Bella struggling to focus until finally it was time for her to go home. She tapped her foot incessantly for the ride's duration and questioned how much of a workout it was to fight the bus on every turn. When the bright-yellow beast screeched to a halt in front of her house, she rushed inside, eager to begin her evening cardio.

"Where do you think you're going?" her mother asked, stepping between her and the stairs. Her soft eyes narrowed with concern as she rested a hand on her hip.

"To my room to do homework," lied Bella, staring at her shoes.

"It's Taco Tuesday. Come on, help me get everything ready. You can work on school right after."

Bella hesitated. In all her temptations to skip meals, she had not yet missed Taco Tuesday. It was her absolute favorite—a family tradition since she was little. She thought of the warm, spiced meat and the tart sour cream. Her mouth watered. Then she remembered her oversized wrists and bulging stomach. Her thoughts revolted.

"I actually don't feel that great, Mom."



Bella's mom shot a worried look across the room at her husband, who had just entered. He shrugged but eyed his daughter apprehensively.

"Aw, okay," her mom agreed. "You go do your homework. I'll leave everything out for you in case you get hungry."

"Oh, don't worry. Just put it in the fridge. I'll pull it out again later if I need to." Bella trudged up the dimly lit staircase to her room—a room too full of brightness to be hers. She hated how this sickness had made her such a good liar. After letting her half-zipped backpack slip onto the flowery bed, she started to rehearse her tryout routine. Now began her evening ritual of ensuring the soft thuds of her feet on the carpet could be logically explained by the homework she had said she was doing. Bella's workouts often extended long into the night, but she always made sure to get at least a few hours of sleep. Now, though, the desire to be thin outweighed the desire to rest, and she did not stop for hours. Her dehydrated body struggled to perspire. At last, Bella fell next to her backpack into bed, already feeling guilty that she could not continue any longer.

After a fitful night's sleep, Bella woke up with a headache. She couldn't tell if it was from overexertion, dehydration, or exhaustion. She took a moment to revel in the fact that she had successfully starved herself so long she no longer felt hungry in the morning. Then she threw on some old gym shorts and her favorite crewneck before going to school.

When the old bus groaned into the crowded school parking lot, Bella hopped off the bottom step and skidded into the gravel before rushing to her first class and finding her seat. The boys blew spitballs above her head and girls passed notes around the classroom, but Bella was focused on grounding herself so she didn't pass out. As the day progressed, she began to realize that maybe she should have stayed home. She was nowhere near ready

for the tryouts. But, at 11:00 o'clock, she found herself in the locker room with the other girls, changing into bike shorts and a matching athletic top. She hoped it made her look skinny. After the girls were done changing, they filed into the gymnasium one by one. The current cheerleaders were seated on the bleachers, not realizing that to Bella, they were the determiners of her entire high school experience. Jess stepped forward.

"You should each have a ten-move cheer routine prepared," she said. "After you have performed it, we will teach you a new cheer and see how fast you catch on." She clapped her hands together. "All right, let's go! And remember, we aren't in middle school anymore, girls. This is the big leagues, so give it all you've got."

Bella watched the other girls perform one at a time. Then she studied Jess's reaction. So far, no real competition. She hoped Jess would notice how hard she was trying to fit in. Maybe once she made the squad, they'd be friends again.

"You're up, Bella!" called Jess.

Nervously, Bella stepped into the center of the gymnasium and took a breath. Then, she pasted a big smile on her face and repeated the motions Amelia had taught her.

One move. . . two . . . three . . . she slowed. She stopped. Her breathing was shallow; her head, light.

"Bella! Bella, are you all right?"

She tried to answer, but her own voice blended with those now rising around her. The world spun. Her feet staggered. She blacked out.



When Bella came to, the first thing she saw was a Bible verse, framed and hanging on the wall above her bed. Even though her vision was blurry, she still tried to read it to focus herself. It was written in beautiful, swooping calligraphy against a watercolor background.

“Psalm 139:14. I will praise Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” she recited to herself, still stumbling over the partially blurred words.

“That’s right, dear,” the school nurse chimed in, gently removing a blood pressure cuff from Bella’s arm. She motioned to some water beside the bed. “You’ll want to drink that.”

Bella’s eyebrows lifted in surprise to find someone else in the room. “Thanks,” she mumbled as she lifted the glass to her dry lips. “What happened?”

“You passed right out in the middle of cheerleading tryouts. Can’t say I’m surprised with how much you’ve been coming to me lately,” Anita ts’k’d disapprovingly. “Always feeling weak . . . dizzy. Looking more and more like a Halloween decoration every time. Sweetheart, you want to tell me what’s been going on?”

Bella forced some water down her throat before she had the chance to question how much bloating it would cause. “I’m just not feeling well.”

Anita eyed Bella suspiciously. “Mmhmm . . . Seems to me you haven’t been thinking much ‘bout the meaning behind that verse you just read.” She reached up, pulled the frame off the wall, and set it in Bella’s lap. “Someone made this for me when I was your age. It’s a powerful verse. Helped me realize . . .” she paused to take in Bella’s sad state. “I didn’t need to try so hard to be beautiful.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you’re too busy thinking your worth is in how thin you are, you’ll never know how perfect you are to Jesus. He didn’t make you with a body this sick. He intended for you to be healthy and strong, with round, rosy cheeks and those sparkling eyes you used to have. Honey, you aren’t taking care of the body He gave you.” She paused. “Now drink more of that water.” Bella sipped.

“I’m tired of seeing you in here every day. You keep going like this and I won’t be seeing you at all anymore. You deserve to be healthy, Bella.”

The nurse laid her big hands on top of Bella's pale, thin ones. Then she lifted the frame and swiped her finger along the top of it, dispelling the dust that had accumulated.

"Here," she said. "I want you to have it. But on one condition. You promise me to hang this in your room and read it every day. And you let me make you an appointment with the school counselor."

Tears formed in Bella's eyes, stemming from emotions she didn't understand. She thought of her Heavenly Father, who had seemed so distant the past few months. She remembered how she had pushed her family and friends away, and how consumed she had been with her own image. This sickness hadn't made her happier. It had swallowed her whole, and nothing, not even the cheerleading squad, was worth giving up the life God intended her to have. She took a long, deep breath.

"All right," she agreed, and traced her finger over the first letter of the verse. "Thank you."

When Bella got home later that day, she gave her mom a hug and offered to help make dinner. While washing up in the bathroom, she glanced at the mirror. She still hated to see her reflection. But when she remembered the verse, her hair appeared a little fuller, her smile a little brighter, and her eyes full of sparkle. Although her recovery process wasn't going to be easy, she had now begun the journey to a full and happy life. She was about to leave when she paused and took a second look at the mirror.

"Mom, did you replace the mirror in the bathroom?" she called to the kitchen.

"Oh, yes. The old one was broken, but I think you should be able to see yourself a little better now."

Bella smiled. *Yeah, I think I do.*

She had now begun the journey to a full and happy life.

CURBS

by Rachael Stearns

*A car accident nearly destroyed my life,
but the details saved my life.*

“You want somebody else to drive?” My dad called to me as we walked out of the gas station toward the cars.

“I’m a little tired, but I’ll be okay,” I answered, jingling the keys to my blue Nissan Versa.

I’ve never regretted saying a sentence more in my life.

My 12-year-old brother, Joshua, scrambled up onto the passenger seat. He handed me a bag of sour cream and onion potato chips. I switched on the radio, turned the key in the ignition, and put the car in reverse. For the last time.

I followed my family’s car, caravan style, out of the parking lot. My dad stopped at the exit of the gas station lot, his right blinker flashing. But at the last second, he switched on his left blinker, crossed oncoming traffic, and turned into the left lane on the opposite side of the median.

His left turn surprised me. I flicked off my right blinker and panicked slightly as my family’s car took off toward the highway. We were in the middle of Alabama on



our way home from my freshman year of college and a family beach vacation. If I let my dad drive too far ahead of me, I knew I'd get lost. I always got lost. And I didn't want to put us behind schedule.

Even though I'd glanced left at the oncoming traffic, I inched the car forward and looked to the right. I didn't see the gold-colored Camry careening toward me at fifty miles an hour.

The Camry's tires screeched. From the corner of my eye, I saw the car sliding toward my driver's side.

I screamed and covered my head. My body tensed for the impact.

This isn't real.

More screeching tires. And then the blow.

My head slammed against the driver's side window as the Camry crashed into the side of my car, pushing us into a curb. Somewhere in the distance I heard people shouting over the whirl of my crumpled engine. My brother whimpered softly from the passenger seat. I wanted to turn and check on him, but my head was too heavy to lift. My mind was swimming, and the blurry world was reeling in slow motion—as if I were drowning. I sank deeper and deeper until the world went silent.





“Rachael!”

Someone was screaming my name. They sounded scared. Worried. Like they were crying.

“Rachael!”

Joshua was pulling my arm that still covered my head. His breathing was ragged. His eyes were red. “Rachael, can you hear me? Say something—please say something!”

“I . . . what happened?” My head pounded and my eyes burned. I blinked like someone trying to wake up from a terrible dream. My windshield wipers, like two mangled arms, dragged back and forth across the bug splatters on the glass.

My music was still playing—but it was eerie and off-key like a broken music box. The seat belt alarm rang in my ears. But my seat belt was still on.

“Oh my goodness, oh my goodness,” I murmured over and over. “Joshua, are you okay? Please tell me you’re okay! Oh my goodness . . .” I fumbled with the seat belt button until it released.

“I’m fine,” Joshua said, his voice trembling.

“Let’s get out,” I told him.

Since the Camry was jammed against my door, Joshua and I were forced to crawl out of the passenger side, clinging to each other. But when my feet hit the ground, my legs almost gave out.

My entire world had changed in a matter of seconds. Until the moment that Camry T-boned my car, I had no idea what it felt like to come within inches of losing everything I ever cared about.

Memories flashed through my mind—the cute boy I liked, my grandparents waiting at home, my hopes, my dreams, and my plans for the future. I almost lost it all in a matter of seconds.

I almost lost my family.

The thought shattered my heart as I looked up, searching for my family’s white van. I will never forget the

look on my mom's face as she jumped out of the rolling vehicle and bolted across the gas station parking lot. Sobs wracked my entire body as she scooped me into her arms and pulled me close, just as she had done when I was little and scared of the dark.

I drenched her purple shirt in my tears. I thought I would never stop crying. "I'm so sorry," I sobbed over and over. But every time she would whisper "Shhh," and stroke my matted red hair.

Then my dad was there. I felt his strong hand on my back as he helped me limp over to a shaded curb away from my mangled car. My body was shaking uncontrollably, and I could only see his outline as he bent down to look at me. "Listen," he said. "Everything's okay. Your brother is fine. The lady in the other car is fine too. You're gonna be okay. It could've been worse."

It could've been worse.

What an empty sentence.

Sounds, colors, and voices whirled around me. I heard the wail of a fire truck siren and my mom's urgent tone as she called our insurance.

A firefighter took my vitals. "She's just in shock," I heard him tell my dad. "She probably hit her head pretty hard, maybe a minor concussion. Just keep her calm and hydrated and she'll be okay."

It all felt like a dream. An awful, horrible dream. I just wanted to wake up. Rewind. Go back and fix everything.

Everything changed so fast.
Seconds. Milliseconds.

***Sounds, colors,
and voices whirled
around me.***

I looked up and saw my mom walking over to me with the lady from the other car. My heartrate quickened and more tears burned in my eyes. I couldn't believe she was okay. I couldn't believe I could have killed her.

I will never forget what she said to me. "Hey, honey, it's okay. These things happen. That's why we call them

accidents. I was about to trash that car anyway!” She laughed softly. “As long as everyone’s okay, that’s what matters. You can replace cars, but not people. It could’ve been worse.”

It could’ve been worse.

That sentence still sounded so empty—meaningless.

I heard that sentence way too many times in the following days, and I cringed every time. I totaled the car that had been gifted to me just three months ago. My insurance covered only the other lady’s car, not mine. I stranded my family in Alabama and traumatized my little brother.

We made it back home, but the next few weeks were hard. In fact, I never let anyone know how much the accident affected me. I cried when I was alone in my room. Dark circles shadowed my eyes. My appetite disappeared. But I didn’t know how to escape the tangled web of anxiety and trauma wrapping itself around my mind.

I was upset it happened. I was beating myself up because a mistake cost so, so much. A lot of people can walk away from something like a car accident and not lose sleep over it. But I lost sleep over it. I was terrified to close my eyes, because when I did, I re-lived the accident over and over again. Tires screeched, my brother screamed, I covered my head . . .

But sometimes the flashback ended differently. Sometimes I woke up with tears streaming down my face. Sometimes it wasn’t Joshua who shook me awake. It was a stranger whose face I couldn’t see—telling me my little brother was gone.

The accident changed me. I never could have lived with myself if anything had happened to Joshua, and I thought about that all the time. It sobered me. It made me realize how fragile life is. I realized that tiny miracles were happening to me every day. I just wasn’t looking hard enough to see them.

Over time, I began to piece together details of the accident. But I didn't come to terms with what had happened until about a month after the collision.

"Wow, look at that." My uncle pointed at my dad's phone. After church one Sunday, I found my dad and my uncle huddled together. My dad was showing him the pictures of the wreck.

My dad zoomed in to where my uncle pointed at the picture.

"The curb," my uncle said softly. He noticed me inching closer and looked up at me. His nine-month deployment as a prison guard in Afghanistan had given him the ability to pick apart minute details that everyone else had missed. "If that curb wasn't there," he said, "your car might have gone flying. It might have saved your lives."

I swallowed hard. He was right. The image of my crumpled engine flashed in my mind.

"Look where the impact was, too," he continued. He swiped to a picture of the left side of the car where I had gotten hit. "Since you're 5'2", your feet were probably . . . there." He pointed at the lower side of my door just centimeters from where the car was mangled.

"Maybe that's why my brake and gas pedals were stuck," I whispered to myself.

My uncle looked back up as I stared wide-eyed at the picture. "You jerked the wheel, didn't you?" he asked me pointedly.

"I . . . I don't know. I guess I did."

He nodded and pointed to the picture. "Three things. You jerked the wheel away from the other car before you covered your head. You got hit just centimeters away from your feet. And that curb stopped your car from flying."

My mouth dropped open and my eyes filled with hot tears. I had no idea. I had no idea the hand of God had been shielding my life. He was there. He was right there.

***The image of
my crumpled
engine flashed
in my mind.***

It could've been worse. That sentence no longer felt so empty, meaningless.

I finally understood. I had been so upset by what happened that I couldn't see past what happened to see everything that *didn't* happen. I wasn't able to see God's hand because I was so focused on my mistake. Sure, I would still go back and change things if I could. But thinking about the accident now points me to the reality that God could've taken me to heaven if He had wanted to.

The fact that my car is in an Alabama scrapyard somewhere still makes me sad, but it reminds me that God has a purpose for me. He is shielding my life with little miracles that often go unnoticed.

I haven't looked at curbs the same way since my accident. Curbs are kind of like speed bumps in life that make you stop and think. The accident put my life on pause. That pause could've been longer—it could've been a traffic jam instead of a red light. But in God's providence, He reached down and put His hands around me.

I'm not scared to drive anymore. Sure, that accident did alter my life in a small way. But through the pain, the flashbacks, and the guilt I waded through, God proved Himself merciful and kind. I saw firsthand His protection over my life.

He used something as mundane as a cement curb to stop my car from rolling and crushing me and my little brother. And He used that same cement curb to pause my life—to show me that He's not done with me yet.

IT COMES IN WAVES

by Josie Rutgos

Sometimes hearts heal in the most unexpected places.

Leora took a deep breath. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .* Her mother often told her that, to control her temper, she should count to ten before she spoke. She made it only to four.

“Mom, you *have* to be joking. You can’t just uproot us and move us out to the middle of nowhere! Just because *you* want to move doesn’t mean that *I* do—you’re literally just making everything worse!” Leora gave the spruce coffee table a kick, adding another scratch to the collection of similar scratches that had accumulated over the years.

Leora’s mom, who was used to her outbursts, shifted placidly in her green leather chair. Many similar conversations had taken place in that living room—Mom reclining in her chair, Leora struggling to control her temper. Leora tried to recall those times. They had all turned out fine in the end. But the more she tried to remember them, the more they seemed to fade from her memory. Of all those conversations, she was certain that this one was the worst. The green leather chair squeaked as Leora’s mom shifted. Leora ran her fingers through her brown hair in exasperation.

Her mother’s voice was calm. “Honey, I know it’s sudden and that you’re upset, but I couldn’t pass up such a good opportunity. Promise Island is a growing area. I even have a sales job lined up once we get there. The hours are good, and maybe my paintings will bring in some extra money.”

“You already have a job? Your mind is made up?”
Leora felt her veins popping out of her neck and the

freckles standing up across her nose. There was no point in arguing with her mother. Her family had always lived in Hollows, and her mother always had wild ideas. But when Dad was alive, Mom seemed more balanced. Dad had that effect on her. Out of all her mother's wild ideas, uprooting everything just seven months after Dad's funeral was by far the worst. And they weren't moving just anywhere. They were moving to a lighthouse on an island. Leora was furious.

Dad had died, and Leora dealt with it. She switched her high school classes to online, and she dealt with that. Her home and her friends were the only real stability left in her life. After Dad's sudden accident, she clung to every shred of normalcy that life could offer. That consistency didn't change reality, but it gave her a sense of control. She thought her mom wanted the same thing—stability. Apparently not.

Several weeks later, Leora and her mom packed their belongings and sold their house. They stuffed the trunk of their beat-up suburban and took off to their new home—the lighthouse on Promise Island. Leora hadn't packed much: it seemed that everything she really wanted was being ripped away from her anyway. The drive was a blur, and before she knew it, she was hoisting her suitcases up the rickety stairs of the lighthouse.

If she hadn't been so angry and disappointed, she would have appreciated the haunting beauty of the old lighthouse. It was late October, and the gray sky seemed to melt into the gray-green seafoam. The trees shed red and orange and yellow tears, that fell to the unforgiving rocks at the bottom of the inlet.

Leora would have noticed the abandoned sailboats, like lost children, bobbing near the distant dock. Before his fatal accident, her dad had owned sailboats just like these. But Leora was too focused on being angry and on staying angry. It seemed that her anger was the only thing she had a choice about anymore.

Hands full, Leora trudged up and down the lighthouse stairs. Slowly she began to unpack her belongings in her new bedroom. Everything was worn and wasting away. The only thing that caught her attention was the small window above her bed. The windowsill was starting to corrode, but she had a clear view of the ocean and the dock.

Her mom wandered around the room, her exaggerated earrings clacking together. “If I were you, honey, I would paint or write in here. You have a fantastic view.”

“I guess,” Leora said with a sniff.

She moved to Leora’s side. “I’m going to start setting up my studio upstairs, but could you do me a favor? I baked some cookies for Mrs. Morrow. Could you drive them to her house? I know you love driving.”

Throughout the move, Leora didn’t pay attention to any of the details. What was the point? She didn’t have a say in anything anyway. The Morrows were the previous owners of the lighthouse, but Mrs. Morrow and her son sold the lighthouse after Mr. Morrow became ill. Leora knew that much. The Morrows had been her mother’s friends for several years.

Her mom’s last statement felt like a slap to the face.

“Mom,” Leora felt her blood pressure rise. “Can I just finish moving in and, like, . . . processing *anything*? Please?” she huffed. “How can you move on with life so easily after everything that happened these past few months? You’re acting like everything is normal and it’s *not*. I—”

Her mom cut her off before she got carried away. “We can talk through everything later, but for now, can you do this for me? The Morrows are going through a really hard time.”

Her mom’s last statement felt like a slap to the face.

I’m right here! Am I not going through a hard time? Leora folded her arms. She was not in the mood to see or speak

to anyone. She wanted to cry and protest. Instead, she nodded.

With the lighthouse not far outside town, the drive to the Morrows' house was quick. Their house looked just

Leora tried to say something friendly, but nothing came out.

like the other houses in town: beach-themed and a bit worn down. Shells were strung across the door frame, and an old surfboard leaned against the porch. Leora rang the doorbell.

She had imagined Mrs. Morrow as a little old lady but was surprised when a tall woman in her fifties opened the door.

"You must be Leora! Your mom told me you would stop by. Thank you so much." Mrs. Morrow gingerly took the container of cookies.

Leora tried to say something friendly, but nothing came out. She gave an awkward half-smile and turned to walk away.

"Please, come in!" Mrs. Morrow stopped her. "At least for a moment."

Leora was afraid that if she spoke, she might accidentally say something rude. With a sigh, she followed Mrs. Morrow inside. The house was dimly lit, but when her eyes adjusted, Leora drew in a sharp breath. The interior was decorated with maps, charts, and an old ship's log open on the coffee table. What startled Leora, though, were the small model ships mounted on the wall.

They look just like Dad's. Leora shuddered.

Mrs. Morrow noted her reaction. "Those are my son Jesse's ships. He loves boats and sailing—he always has. He should be home soon."

Leora and Mrs. Morrow settled in the living room, which was furnished with wooden bookshelves and more model ships. Mrs. Morrow served Leora some of her mom's cookies, which she accepted.

"How are you liking Promise Island?" Mrs. Morrow asked as Leora took a bite.

"We officially moved in today. It's been all right so far." Though Leora heard herself say those words, they might as well have come from someone else. They were far from true.

Leora's muscles began to tense. The model ships were everywhere, and she felt as though they were crushing the air out of her lungs. She tried not to think, but she could feel the anger bubbling up in her chest. In the pocket of her hoodie, her fingers were counting to ten.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .

"I do miss the lighthouse," Mrs. Morrow said. "But it was better that we sold it, since Mr. Morrow is so sick. I wish Jesse didn't hate living in town so much. He's only ever lived in the lighthouse, and he loved it more than anything. But I had to make the best decision I could for our family. Jesse needs to finish high school, and now we're closer to the doctors."

Leora stared at Mrs. Morrow blankly. She was still counting in her pocket.

Five . . . six . . . seven . . .

Mrs. Morrow studied Leora for a moment. Leora was afraid Mrs. Morrow noticed her struggle for composure. Finally, Mrs. Morrow spoke.

"Aren't you also in your last year of high school? Maybe Jesse could do some repairs at the lighthouse for you and your mother. I always tell him that he should help others instead of focusing on what he can't change. That's the best way to overcome the past and make the most of the present."

Mrs. Morrow was interrupted by rattling at the front door and a loud *clank*.

A frustrated male voice rose from the front of the house. "Mom, this house is so run down, I can't stand it anymore. I just ripped off the doorknob when I o—"

He stopped in the doorway of the living room, the offending doorknob still in his hand. He was tall with a mess of dark hair.

“Jesse,” Mrs. Morrow said, “This is Leora. She and her mother just moved into the lighthouse.”

Jesse looked at Leora with a dismissive expression. He acted as if she weren’t there and continued to rant.

“Mom, I *can’t* live here anymore,” he said, his tone moving from frustration to despair. “All I do is go to work, go to school, and come back to this rickety house while my *entire life* is falling apart. I can’t even take the sailboats out like I used to, to get away from everything. Why are we living like Dad isn’t really, really sick? We can’t pretend that he doesn’t exist when he’s getting worse all the time! Why would we leave the lighthouse and everything that he ever cared about? Why would we do that?” Jesse demanded. Unable to go on, Jesse slumped into a nearby armchair and dropped his head in his hands.

Leora looked over at Mrs. Morrow, expecting her to say something—hoping she would say something. Mrs. Morrow stared at Leora with pain-stricken eyes, nervously twisting the corner of her shirt in her fingers.

Only then did Leora notice that she had stopped counting on her own fingers. The suffocating feeling was gone. She wasn’t angry anymore. Instead, her heart began to hurt for this family. She hurt for this boy who was feeling things that were all too familiar to her. There was a long pause.

“Jesse?” Leora said hesitantly.

He lifted his head, and for the first time, seemed fully aware of her presence in the room. His eyes met hers.

“The sailboats—at the dock by the lighthouse—are they yours?”

“Well, one of them is, yes.” He paused and then added, “I patched it up myself. I like to sail to clear my head. The cure for almost anything is saltwater.”

Leora paused. *Dad used to say something like that*, she thought to herself. She felt her chest tighten again, but instead of nursing her own anger, she took a deep breath. She looked at Jesse and smiled.

“That’s really cool, actually. When I was little, I used to go out with my dad . . .” Her voice trailed off. “Sailing was one of his favorite things. If you wanted to come over and sail—I mean, it’s still your sailboat. I mean, I would love to sail sometime if you ever wanted to.”

Jesse stared back at her, and his expression softened. He looked almost grateful.

***The cure for
almost anything
is saltwater.***

“I would love to,” he murmured.

When Leora returned to the lighthouse that evening, she was half sure the sailing trip would never happen. Maybe Jesse only agreed to go to be polite. Then again, maybe he hadn’t.

Just then, the phone in the hall began to ring. Leora raced down the stairs to answer it, and Jesse’s voice crackled over the line.

“Hey, do you want to meet at the dock—tomorrow? Unless you’re busy.”

She wasn’t.

They met the next morning. Mist crawled along the ground, obscuring the path in front of them. It didn’t matter, though. Jesse knew the way.

Aside from the groaning of wooden planks as they walked on the dock, the bay was silent. Jesse and Leora hadn’t discussed which boat they would take, but they found themselves wandering toward the same one. It was a small sailboat with the name *La Mittere* hand-painted on its side. Leora unfurled the sails while Jesse untied the thick ropes securing the boat.

“There. We’re free,” he murmured and shoved off from the dock.

The water ebbed as their boat drifted out. The scenery reminded Leora of her mom’s paintings. The fog and

grayish water were severed by a few weak strands of sunrise. Waves lapped against the boat as the two enjoyed the silence of each other's company.

"I've missed this," Jesse said, running his hand over the knots in the boat's wooden bow. "Thanks for inviting me."

The dock shrank farther into the fog behind them. Leora could almost feel her dad there sailing with her, like he did when she was younger. A familiar choking feeling welled up in her throat. The scenery evoked strong emotions for Leora, but in a way, it also helped her make sense of them. There was nothing to blame—nothing to be angry at out here on the water. She simply missed her dad. She drew a deep breath before she spoke.

"My dad always told me to make the most of the present. He always cared more about other people than about himself. I guess it just seems so unfair to lose him."

Jesse's gaze dropped to the wooden floor of the boat. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I would do without my dad."

"Ever since we moved to Promise Island, I've felt as if my mom and I were moving on without him. I can't move on without him yet." She paused. "I know he would've wanted me to make the most of the present, but the way everything is changing just makes me angry, you know? Being angry—" Her voice trailed off.

"I know what you mean," he said. "Being angry is easier. It's not really living, though." Jesse turned to face her, his eyes heavy with emotion. "Thank you. I'm serious. Your dad would be proud."

The waves slipped past as they sailed along. The mist embraced them like an old friend. Leora felt something that seemed impossible a few days ago: she began to feel at peace.

When they finally moored the boat at the dock, they meant to say goodbye but decided to go to town for lunch instead. Meaningful conversations made the day slip away, the first of many days like it. When Leora began

her drive back home—back to the lighthouse—a sleepy sunset filled the sky.

As she drove home, Leora's heart felt full. It still held confusion, frustration, and hurt. But, for the first time since she lost her dad, she realized that her anger did not give her control over her circumstances. She didn't have to stay angry, and she shouldn't stay angry. Even though she had to work through her grief, there was more life to be lived—there was more life to be discovered through loving others.

As Leora drove, she counted. She counted down the minutes of her drive until she finally arrived home. When she did, she gave her mom a big hug.

A CAT'S APPRECIATION

by Regina Massey

The feline perched atop my wire gate
Is grooming his gray fur without a care.
I fill his bowl with food, a tasty bait.

“Oh, Kitty! Kitty!” noisily I blare.
He turns his head to face me with a whirl,
Returning my calls with a ghastly glare.

He leaps below, beginning to unfurl
His bushy tail along the grassy ground,
And bounds behind a chittering brown squirrel.

He chases, captures, drags the prize he's found
Across the yard to my peaceful doorway.
That moment, I learn something quite profound:

Your cat may bring you back his mangled prey
As thanks for what you do for him each day.







SEASONS OF CHANGE

Caprice

Poem

•

A Pocketful of Change

Fiction

•

The Red Bandanna

Nonfiction

•

Will I Ever Arrive?

Nonfiction

•

Rivers of Earth

Nonfiction

•

The Unwanted Guest

Poem

•

Angels in Hiking Boots

Nonfiction

CAPRICE

by Sophia Widholm

Walking around our north Georgia neighborhood one February, I felt an odd shift into warm weather. Buds blossomed early, and birds sang joyful tunes they normally would have saved for March. I pondered the unreliability of the weather—how we weren't sure if winter had left just yet—and "Caprice" came to mind.

Last year, upon the springtime's eve,
The chill of winter took its leave.
We breathed a glad farewell, but then
Vindictive, with an icy blast,
It made us feel the year had passed
And winter come again.

This year, it is but February—
Blossoms blush upon the cherry
Boughs while birds, delighted, sing:
"Are you so certain it's not spring?"

I think perhaps we're being teased:
A frost may soon beset the trees
And freeze the peach's sap and bite
The blossoms from the boughs at night.

And yet—who knows?—the weather's warm.
Does it forewarn a coming storm
Or hint that spring is on its way?
There are, of course, the birds that sing:
"Are you so certain it's not spring?"
It seems to be, today.



A POCKETFUL OF CHANGE

by Mr. Mark Wainwright

Can money make up for lost moments?

“Hey, Kevin. You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Dad says. He glances toward the open casket at the front of the church, his eyes red. “I just don’t want you to regret not having closure.”

I place a hand on Dad’s arm and give it a squeeze. That’s just like him to be thinking about me even while mourning the loss of his brother. But I guess that’s because Dad always sees the best in people. Wish I could be more like that. As I think about Uncle Ronnie, the first thing that comes to mind is how greedy and grouchy he always was.

Every Christmas, Uncle Ronnie stopped by our house for dinner. My guess is that he came out of obligation. Yet even then, he never brought presents or eggnog or a poinsettia. Instead, he stepped through the front door with a scowl on his face. After Mom and Dad made a fuss about how glad they were to have him there, he positioned himself near a corner of the room. And as he stood with tight lips and a wrinkled forehead, his right hand jingled coins in his pocket.

When I was six years old, I asked him what all that noise in his pocket was. “Just some change,” he replied.

“For me?” I asked.

Uncle Ronnie let out a sick laugh—the only time a laugh escaped his lips. “If you want money,” he said, “get a job. Don’t be a freeloader.”

I must’ve looked sad because a moment later, Uncle Ronnie huffed and pulled out a pocketful of change.

He picked out a quarter, a dime, a nickel, and a penny, then dropped the coins in my small hand. “Merry Christmas,” he said, his voice dry as dust.

Every year after that, Uncle Ronnie gave me 41 cents for Christmas—a quarter, a dime, a nickel, and a penny. By the time I turned twelve, I knew I’d never get anything else from him. Just 41 stupid cents for Christmas—year, after year, after year.

But during the fall semester of my sophomore year of college, Uncle Ronnie got sick. Dad said he had a brain tumor. I didn’t think much of it until, out of the blue, I got a letter in my campus mailbox. There was something heavy inside it. I opened the envelope and pulled out four coins—a quarter, a dime, a nickel, and a penny. The note, written in Uncle Ronnie’s scratchy cursive, said, “In case I don’t make it to Christmas, here’s 41 cents. Work hard but take it from me: common sense is worth more than a fistful of cents.” I wasn’t quite sure what Uncle Ronnie meant by that, but 41 cents sure wouldn’t pay my college bill.

A couple weeks later, I stopped by the cashier’s office to make a tuition payment. I was way behind because of not getting enough hours at Home Depot. Plus, the broken



radiator in my 2006 Camry cost an arm and a leg to fix. I was already making plans to drop out after the semester since I couldn't keep up with my school bill. I pulled 480 dollars from my wallet and placed it on the counter. "Here's part of what I owe."

After asking for my ID number and looking up my account, the cashier's eyebrows rose. "Hold on," she said. She left and reappeared a minute later with an older lady by her side. The woman with oversized glasses studied the computer monitor. "Your account is paid in full," she said. She lowered her glasses and stared at me. "In fact, someone has paid your tuition and room and board for—" She glanced back at the screen. "For up to 41,000 dollars."

I blinked hard. My mind raced. And yet I couldn't think of a thing to say. After a moment, the woman broke the silence. "Because the donor is anonymous, there's no information about who it is. But you won't have to pay anything until you've used up those funds."

That was five weeks ago. I'm now in line, waiting my turn to glance into Uncle Ronnie's casket. He wasn't much of an uncle. Just a grumpy cheapskate that didn't smile, didn't laugh, and didn't care about people. And yet, I know it was him who paid my college bill. That 41,000 dollars

"Your account is paid in full."

is worth way more than a lifetime of birthday and Christmas presents. Still, I kind of wish he'd spent a few dollars buying me an ice cream cone or taking me to a baseball game when I was a kid. Instead, he hoarded his cash until the very end.

I step up to the casket and stare at Uncle Ronnie. He looks cold and stiff, a shadow of who he was in real life. While standing there, I feel sad for not missing him much. Maybe it's because I didn't really know him. Maybe because he was just a crusty old man that showed up at our house each Christmas and jingled change in his pocket.

With a sigh, I reach into my own pocket and pull out four coins—a quarter, a dime, a nickel, and a penny.

I feel like placing those 41 cents in Uncle Ronnie's lifeless hand. At that moment, though, a phrase from his final letter comes to mind. He had said, "Common sense is worth more than a fistful of cents."

Maybe, in facing death, Uncle Ronnie realized that life is about more than just money. It's about people and about spending time with those you love.

With a trembling hand, I softly place the coins into his casket. I take one final look at Uncle Ronnie's hollow face, then walk away.

THE RED BANDANNA

by Rachael Stearns

 **Commencement Contest Winner** 
—Original Nonfiction—

*As rubble fell from the sky like giant cement
meteors, not everyone cowered in fear.*

Black. Everything was black.

She tasted gasoline and blood. The pungent smell of seared flesh made her stomach heave.

She blinked, but everything was still dark. With trembling fingers, Ling removed her glasses and rubbed the lenses with her thumb. Her glasses were splattered in a dark, warm liquid. More trickled down her cheek from the gash above her eyebrow.

Something isn't right.

She squinted, trying to make out shapes, objects—something familiar that would tell her where she was. Why was she lying on the floor? Her vision began to clear as she struggled into a sitting position. Horrified, Ling looked down at the boils on her arms. Her hands and fingers were twisted and unrecognizable beneath the black burns. But she couldn't feel anything. The nerves were dead.

Smoke enveloped the room. Ling could just make out a light swinging eerily back and forth like a pendulum, clinging to its splintered black wire. It reminded her of a ticking bomb. She had to find someone. She had to get out. But besides the light, nothing moved.

For a terrifying moment, she thought everyone was dead. Shards of glass were sprinkled around the bodies that lay strewn across the floor. She stifled a horrified cry

as her gaze stopped on the corpse lying on the ground beside her, the face unrecognizable beneath the burns.

Ling tried to scream but nothing came out. Her lips were swollen, her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth, her heartbeat throbbing in her throat.

The clinking of broken glass startled her. Two shadowy figures stumbled into the smoke. Ling caught a glimpse of their faces in the light cast by the fire licking up the North Tower directly opposite the South Tower lobby. Her pulse fluttered, and she uttered a tiny plea for help as she recognized the two people. They were coworkers. Friends. And they were still alive.

The bandanna was the first thing she noticed.

“Help,” a voice cried hoarsely from behind her. Ling spun around and saw her boss Diane pinned beneath a piece of blackened drywall. Ling’s two other coworkers navigated the maze of bodies and pulled Diane out.

Ling felt like it must have been an eternity before the four survivors sat down in a tiny circle. But the light still swung like a pendulum—what felt like hours must have only been seconds. There was something gloomy and suffocating about the silence—almost as if there were a hidden bomb planted somewhere. They weren’t safe. People weren’t coming to help them. This wasn’t over. But there was no way out.

Something isn’t right.

“Hey!”

In that one word, Ling sensed a strength, a hope in the voice of that man standing somewhere in the darkness.

“C’mon, hurry, I found the stairs!”

Then Ling saw it. The red bandanna. Days, months, and years later—she would still remember. When he emerged into the reflection of the flames devouring the opposite skyscraper, the bandanna was the first thing she noticed. It hung limply around his chin as if it had been used as a mask against the smoke. Over his broad

shoulder he carried a woman from another floor. “This way,” he called.

Ling swallowed the vomit rising in her throat and struggled to her feet. She followed the soothing voice through the smoke and dangling wires until his frame was in front of her. He was in his mid-twenties, about the age of her own children.

He motioned to Ling and her coworkers to follow him. He pushed aside a bowed wooden plank and ashy fragments of drywall, then ducked into the opening.

Ling looked up at him through her blood-streaked glasses.

Ling slipped through the breach and stepped into what looked like a warped tunnel. As it arched down toward the stairwell, the contorted hallway looked like a haunted corridor.

She followed the man’s heavy footsteps until she reached a warped door hanging from a single hinge. An eerie exit light blurred the chamber as Ling stepped inside. The smell of sulfur stung her nose. Water rushed down the cracked walls as if the stairwell had been wrenched and twisted in different directions by the hands of a giant.

Ling felt Diane wrap her arms around her. “Let me help you,” Diane whispered. But for the first time, Ling sensed the raw agony of the burns on her skin when her arms touched Diane’s. “I can’t do it, it hurts,” she mouthed.

Ling’s head spun as she looked down at the staircase that spiraled into endless darkness. The young man brushed by her and placed a fire extinguisher in her hands. She immediately dropped the metal can as the burns in her hands boiled with unbearable pain. Ling looked up at him through her blood-streaked glasses, anguish and fear written across her sooty face.

When he smiled at her, it reminded Ling of her own son. “It’s okay, Ma’am,” the young man said. “Just follow me down.” He secured the woman he carried

over his shoulder and slipped his free hand down the paint-chipped railing. He disappeared into the murky darkness that swallowed the dim light of the red exit sign. Ling followed.

One step. Another step.

The world was spinning again. Besides the taste of blood in her mouth and the fire eating away at her skin, Ling's senses were numb. It all seemed like a dream, a terrible nightmare that happened to another Ling Young in another lifetime.

Ling's sense of reality drowned, and her head swam as if it were underwater. Glimpses of earlier that morning flooded her mind—all disconnected, all confusing, yet somehow real.



At 8:46 a.m., Ling froze at her desk on the 86th floor. “What was that?”

For a moment, no one spoke. No one moved.

Smoke billowed into the New York skyline and clouded the window. Finally, Diane breathed, “Oh my goodness. I just saw a plane hit the building!”

Someone screamed. Fear was scribbled in forehead lines as chaos spread through every floor of the South Tower. People cried in corners, gathered belongings, or stared motionless at the flames engulfing the North Tower. Most pulled out phones and called family members in hushed tones. A few floors above Ling, a young man left his mother a voicemail. “Mom . . . this is Welles. I . . . I want you to know that I’m OK.”

But Ling stood silently, her chest tightening in apprehension. She pushed through the crowd until she reached Diane. The color drained from Diane’s face and her eyes darted from the window to the elevator.

“I’m going down,” she stated. Ling inhaled sharply, then followed Diane down to the 78th floor and the express elevators.

Within seconds, Ling was pushing her way through the crowded lobby on 78th for another look out the window. She had to see for herself.

Flames tore apart the side of North Tower, licking at the shards of glass like a hungry beast. The heat was so intense she could feel it through the glass. A dark shape launched from within the flames and fell thousands of feet to the street below. Then another.

A bad taste stung her throat. Those shapes were people. Jumping. Falling.

The entire building froze as the intercom beeped. "Stay where you are," a voice crackled. Shivers crawled up and down Young's spine. Helicopters whirled outside the window and sirens screamed on the streets below. *Something isn't right.* The scratchy intercom voice gargled on, "It's not your building . . ."

It happened both in slow motion and at lightning speed. She heard the shattering of glass and a piercing scream. In an instant, everything was engulfed in a blast of orange. The plane exploded on impact.

Now she remembered. A flaming piece of metal careened through the air directly toward her. The deafening explosion rang in her ears. Everything went dark.



Ling snapped back to the present. She remembered now. That's why her arms were blistered and burned, and she had been lying on the floor. Ling gasped for air as the pressure in the stairwell squeezed the oxygen from her lungs.

Suddenly, the young man appeared again. He had sent the woman he was carrying down ahead of Ling. He paused on the stairs and looked at her for a long moment, willing hope into her soul. She felt it.

Then, with a nod, he passed her. He went back up. Back to the death, the pain, the fire.

Ling choked back the cry that rose from her throat. What about his mom? Surely he had a family just as she did.

She wanted to tell him to come back, to wait for the firefighters, to get where it was safe. But she couldn't. Her throat was too tight.

The pain of her seared skin rivaled the agony she felt inside. She thought she was losing control. The world started spinning again. But this endless staircase that spiraled into nothingness was her only hope.

"Whoa, whoa, don't faint," a voice spoke from the flight of stairs beneath her. The reflector strips on his jacket gleamed. A fireman reached out and touched her arm. "You're burnt. Come on."

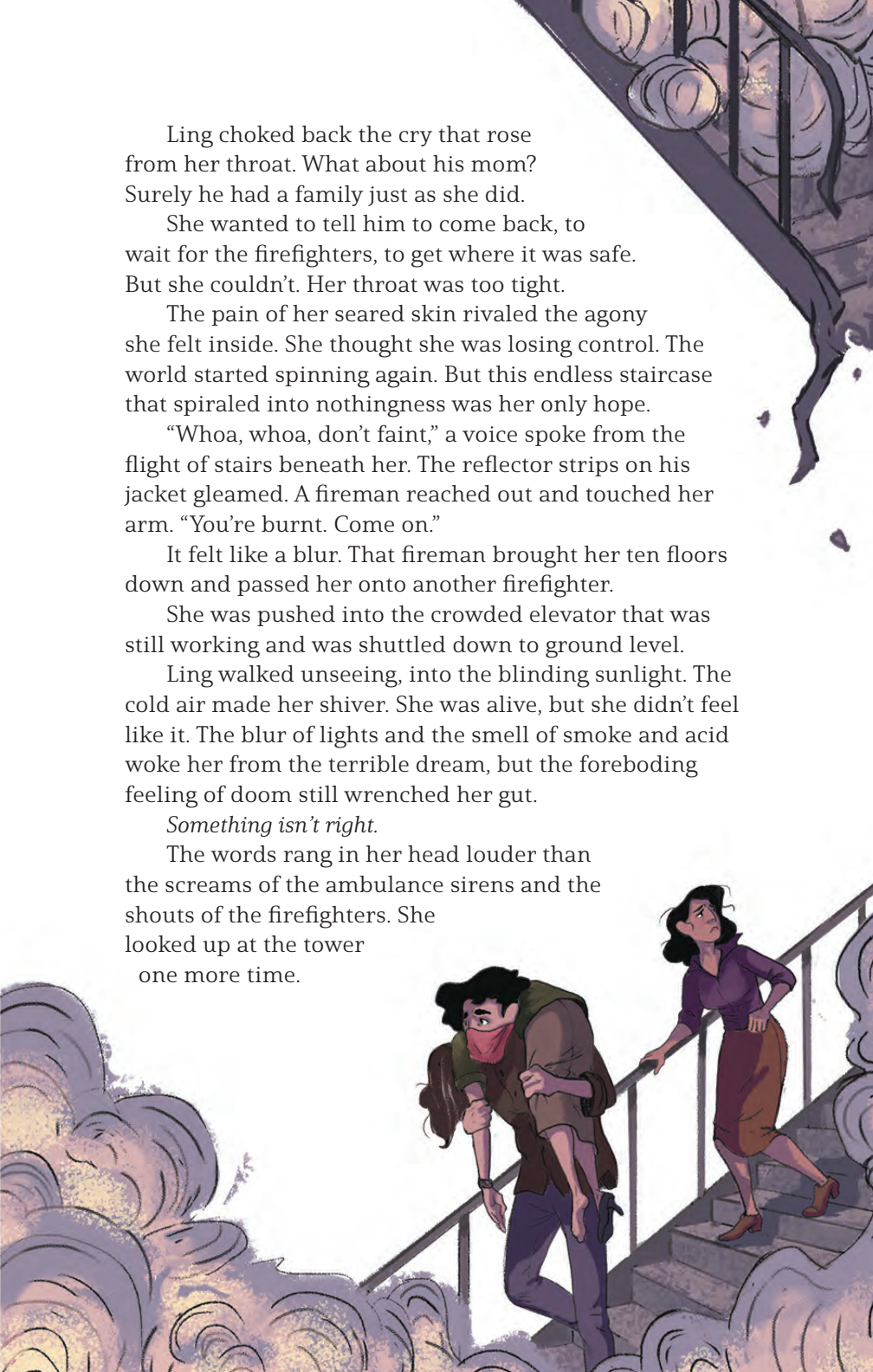
It felt like a blur. That fireman brought her ten floors down and passed her onto another firefighter.

She was pushed into the crowded elevator that was still working and was shuttled down to ground level.

Ling walked unseeing, into the blinding sunlight. The cold air made her shiver. She was alive, but she didn't feel like it. The blur of lights and the smell of smoke and acid woke her from the terrible dream, but the foreboding feeling of doom still wrenched her gut.

Something isn't right.

The words rang in her head louder than the screams of the ambulance sirens and the shouts of the firefighters. She looked up at the tower one more time.



Somehow, Ling found herself in an ambulance, careening through the blur of traffic. When they pulled up outside building five, the paramedics opened the doors.

Ling watched the South tower collapse. Rubble fell from the sky like giant cement meteors, crushing the bottom of the tower and all those trapped inside.



Six months dragged by. Months of questioning, hurting, healing. The hospital became Ling's new home as she underwent six surgeries just for her left hand. Her fingers had been burnt to snubs and the skin on her hand had been seared off.

A red and black scar marred the left side of her face. It stretched from her eyebrow to the shriveled skin around her ear. But the heartbreak of those who were lost hurt more than the injuries sustained by victims of 9/11. Some in the Towers lived, but most died. Ling, and the others who survived, asked themselves why.

"Mom, look at this." Richard Young pointed to an image attached to the email on his laptop. "Is this the guy who saved you?"

Ling squinted at the image. Then she saw the red bandanna. "Yes!" she cried. "Yes, that's him!"

Ling Young connected with the family who had sent the email. The Crowthers had spent months searching for someone who had seen their son before his death on September 11. "His name is Welles Crowther. He worked for a banking firm in the World Trade Center," Alison Crowther told Ling.

"Without him, I wouldn't be here," Ling whispered to Alison, tears welling up in her eyes. Later, when she was interviewed about her 9/11 survival story, Ling said, "He saved my life and he'll always be with my heart and always be with me. Unfortunately, Alison had to lose him to save me."

Alison found solace in the fact that her son had spent his last moments going back to save others. Police officials suggested that Welles was responsible for saving as many as eighteen people on September 11, placing concern for others over his own survival.

“Of course, it’s horrible that we lost him,” Alison reflected. “But it’s no surprise to us what he did. He was doing what he was meant to do that day. He was there to save lives.”

The man with the red bandanna gave his life so Ling could live hers.

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WILL I EVER ARRIVE?

by Paige Romig

Does a writer truly arrive?

I wonder, will I ever arrive?

After rewriting the same book more times than I can count, I've never thought, *This is it! I did it. This piece is the pinnacle of my ability.* Instead, I fear that the moment I "arrive" as a writer, I have failed. To arrive means to cease growing, improving, polishing. To arrive means that I've stopped caring.

But this is a deadly mindset.

By believing that I can never achieve a permanent style of writing, I force myself into a sickening cycle of revisions. The characters in my book are forever stuck in Chapter 2, and I, pounding miserably at my laptop screen, pity them (from afar). Because I assimilate pieces of style and tone from authors and media, I never return to my story feeling the same way I felt when I left it. My voice is constantly under construction. And after a lifetime of revisions, my book reads like a shabby hand-me-down. I try it on for size, but it doesn't fit anymore. It's no longer *me*. The characters are all wrong. Everything is wrong.

But there was a time when nothing held me back.

When I was younger, I wrote feverishly. *Dauntlessly.* Whether or not my style was tasteful or terrible didn't matter to me. My only desire was to set free the characters in my head, to run wild with my protagonist, to have *fun*.

Because I have progressed as a writer, I would hate to return to that writing style (complete with spelling errors and dangling participles galore). But I miss that dauntless girl. The occasional error, the failed metaphor, the page-long run-ons these happen. But if I write, driven by that same fervor, hunger, excitement—I think then I will experience true growth.

RIVERS OF EARTH

by Bethany Conrad

 **Commencement Contest Winner** 
—*Extemporaneous Essay*—

Norman Rockwell painted a family tree in a famous illustration, showing how a pirate and a Spanish princess at the roots led to a little red-headed boy at the top boughs. Through the boy's bloodline, Rockwell expressed a concept: heritage, knowing who you are because of your ancestors and traditions. But heritage doesn't express itself in just physical traits, nor does it look quite like a normal tree. I've begun to think of heritage as a broad river, fed by tiny tributaries and rolling faster and faster to its conclusion.

Many of the traits my tributaries deposited have shown up in my life. I am a child of missionaries stretching back as far as Germany, right as America was discovered. There, a kindly count named von Zinzendorf called believers to live on his grounds. One of my ancestors—I like to think of him as a tall, noble man with a thick brown beard—came across to the new Bethlehem and there had many children. I've always thought of my heritage as being blessed because of this man and his missionary zeal. My father must have been inspired by our ancestor as well because we also moved across the world for missions. I claim obedience as a trait passed to me through that ancestor.

But I have another tributary that left a more problematic trait.

A sweet British woman met a rough Irish man on a boat coming from the British Isles. They discovered many like interests and ended up, when they got to the new

shores of Canada, marrying. My many-great grandfather could never return to Ireland, however. He had been a terrorist for Bonny Prince Charlie and had fled Ireland when the British began cracking down on the rebellion. He fought for freedom and independence, but rebellion now lives in my bloodline, a taint in my heritage.

This is not the only taint. I have ancestors that have committed terrible crimes. I have ancestors that fought in the Civil War. I have ancestors that have cheated on their spouses, robbed, murdered, and pillaged. I have ancestors that have bandaged wounds and designed buildings and raised wonderful families. Such are all heritages.

I believe, though, that all heritages feed into each other, and all heritages are in fact part of the same great river. All countries have ledgers stained red, all people have saints and sinners in their bloodlines. If I trace it all back, I can see the original taint flowing from Adam, a dark line of sediment that clouds the water. A heritage is always a murky place where the water doesn't reflect the sky.

But a river doesn't always stay dirty. An old song says it best. "There is a fountain filled with blood / And sinners plunged beneath that flood / Lose all their guilty stains" ("There Is a Fountain").

Eventually, our earthly heritage will end.

Jesus' blood runs through the believer's heritage, washing away all the clay of sin in the believer's personal tributary. His bloodline

connects ours to a heavenly heritage. Eventually, our earthly heritage will end. Water will be purified, new tributaries will flow, and as the water runs, runs, runs to its conclusion, the taint will be lost in the ocean to come.

THE UNWANTED QUEST

by Paige Romig

Winter came boldly to my town.

She howled her title through the streets,
Rushed recklessly through the blue air,
And boxed my ears ruddy-red.

I hushed her when she whooped at night
And shushed her when she stormed unwanted
Down the chimney of my home.

The world blanched at Winter's indecorum
When she ordered Autumn, "Go,"
And spread an opal blanket beneath my window.

So I did what Northerners do best
And stoked fires and sewed scarves,
Ignoring, in part, my guest's grim, blue moods

Until the season passed.

Rain melted the bold, white world,
Spinning Winter's garments into rivers.

At last, Spring gave me green, yellow, gold,
And shooed bold Winter away.



ANGELS IN HIKING BOOTS

by Mrs. Ariel Lunsford

*Torrential rain and muddy jungle trails
are no match for prayer.*

“We can’t tell the kids. They’ll worry too much,” Mom said. Ariel immediately wanted to know what she should be worried about. She kept her eyes closed and listened from inside her sleeping bag as her parents talked a few feet away.

Hazy strips of light pierced through the cracks in the bamboo walls. The floor creaked as her parents moved, the tiny hut shaking with each step. The white noise of rain sent a chill up through the floorboards. A fire crackled in the center of the room, large gray stones separating it from the rest of the floor. The smoke rose and danced through the rays of light then drifted up into the grass roof.

Later that day, they would move into the new house—a big wooden one with a metal roof. The house wasn’t done yet. It still needed floors in most of the rooms, but it was livable and warmer than the hut.

“Hey,” Dad said. “God wouldn’t have sent us to Papua New Guinea if He wasn’t going to take care of us. We just have to trust Him. We won’t starve.”

Ariel’s eyes popped open. *Starve?* She waited, wanting them to say more, but they didn’t. Even as a six-year-old, Ariel sensed her parents’ worry.

Ariel crawled out of her sleeping bag, moved through the hut, and plopped down in front of the fire. Dangling on a metal hook was a small pot. Usually, this was the pot they used to make tea, but today Mom was stirring rice

in it. There wasn't a lot, and Ariel wondered if her parents were fasting again. Mom dished the rice onto four plates then sprinkled a dash of cinnamon on top.

Ariel's four-year-old sister, Hannah, asked, "Do we have any sugar?"

"No, sweetie, but more will come on the airplane. It'll bring supplies soon," Mom said.

"Today?" Hannah asked.

"No, it's raining again today. Doesn't look like it'll stop anytime soon," Dad said.

Ariel took the plate her mom handed her and balanced it on her lap. "It's always raining," she said.

Dad laughed. "So it seems, huh? It's been raining every day for two months now!" The four held hands while he prayed. "Dear Lord, thank you again for another day. Thank you for allowing us to have enough dry wood to build the new house. Thank you for my family, and I pray that you would help us to be grateful for everything we have. We know you will take care of us. Please help our actions to please you today. And Lord, if it be your will, we ask that you would stop the rain soon. We love you, Lord. In your precious name, Amen."

"Amen!" Hannah shouted. She picked up her fork and thrust it into the air. She swung her fork down, scooped up rice, and shoveled it into her mouth.

By that afternoon, they were moved into the new house, but it wasn't easy. The rain poured so hard and the puddles were so big, that no matter how hard Ariel tried to stay dry under her umbrella, nothing worked.

That night, Mom used the new stove to heat water for the bath. They went to bed early, wrapped in blankets and wearing multiple layers of socks. Ariel's stomach growled as she fell asleep.

When Ariel woke up the next morning, the rain still hadn't stopped. Over a warm cup of water with cinnamon, she watched it rain. She wanted to visit her best friend,



Ken, who lived up the mountain. They hadn't seen each other in days.

"Mom, can I borrow the umbrella to go to Ken's house?"

"Sure, sweetie, just be careful with it, and be back before dark."

Ariel took off her socks and stepped barefoot into the rain. She stumbled sideways when a gust of wind threatened to rip the umbrella away. Mud and grass seeds clung to her legs as the rain curled up under the edge of the umbrella. Once she reached the jungle, she pushed the umbrella through the bushes. It was a tight squeeze, but the path grew wider inside.

Heavy droplets of water fell to the trees then thunked against the top of her umbrella. Birds called out from above, hopping from branch to branch, unable to fly in the downpour.

Ariel followed the roots and puddles to Ken's house. She was almost at the end of the path when she heard deep voices speaking English. Ariel had only ever heard her parents speak English. She lifted her umbrella and

Ariel said nothing in response. Instead, she ran.

saw six pale men walking toward her. Heavy water droplets dripped from the ends of their noses and fell from their beards.

Yellow plastic coverings were strapped over their backpacks, held in place with bungee cords, rope, and a few vines. Mud covered their torn clothes, and all color had drained from their cheeks.

Ariel felt her heart race. She had never seen so many men like her dad before. Ariel looked left and right. Tall grass and jungle on both sides.

"Hey, kid!" One of the men shouted. His eyes widened in surprise. Ariel said nothing in response. Instead, she ran, her little feet carrying her across the familiar jungle terrain. The umbrella slowed her down, and when she tried to close it, she tripped over a moss-covered root.

Crashing to the ground, she rolled a few feet down the trail. She jumped back up to grab the umbrella, but the men were close behind her. They had quickened their pace—but they weren't quite running after her, either. Ariel grabbed the umbrella and ran all the way home. She burst into the house, tracking mud onto the new wood floor.

"Ariel! What did I say about washing your feet—"

"Mom! There's white men—coming down the mountain!"

Both of her parents dropped the items in their hands and rushed to the front door. They stood on the porch, squinting through the thick rain. Ariel hid behind her mom and held onto her skirt. "Who are they, Mom?"

"I don't know, sweetie."

As the men approached, her dad went outside with the umbrella to greet them. Ariel and her mom stood on the porch and watched as the men interacted with each other. Her dad gestured toward the house and the men smiled and nodded.

"Hey, Beck, we have guests!" her dad said as he closed the umbrella under the porch roof. All six of the men filed up onto the porch, making comments about how beautiful the house was and how they had no idea other Americans were out here in the jungles of Papua New Guinea. Dad handed them dry towels as they dropped their heavy backpacks inside the door. Soon six pairs of boots sat on the porch, mud and leaves clinging to the sides and water dripping from the laces.

Ariel followed her mom into the house and around the kitchen, as her mom put pots of water on the stove to make tea. Ariel clung to her skirt till she was told to go change out of her wet clothes. While Ariel was changing, she heard her parents through the thin wall.

"What are we going to feed them?" Mom asked.

"What do we have left?"





“Half a bag of rice and two potatoes. That was just gonna be enough for the four of us tonight.”

“Hey, don’t cry,” Dad said. “It’s going to be okay. Maybe we can send Ariel to someone’s house to ask if we can borrow something.”

“This is what we already borrowed.”

“Oh.” He began to pray. Ariel felt as if she should close her eyes and pray too. He prayed for a miracle—for some way to be able to feed their guests and Ariel and Hannah.

Mom cooked the rice and potatoes and served it to their guests. Ariel watched as neither of her parents made a plate for themselves. “Oh, we ate right before you got here,” they said. Ariel knew they were lying.

The adults laughed together and exchanged stories of how each of them had ended up in the jungle. Hannah fell asleep, but Ariel sat quietly, listening to every word.

After dinner, one of the men retrieved a bag from beside the door and pulled out a pineapple. Ariel had been curiously eyeing the lumpy sacks since the men arrived. “Do you mind if we cut this up?” he asked.

“Sure!” Mom said, handing him a knife and cutting board. Her parents accepted the slices offered to them but didn’t ask for more. Another man pulled cookies from his bag. Ariel knew not to ask for one, but her mouth watered a little at the sight of them. Mom got up to wash the dishes and asked Ariel to help gather the plates. Ariel went to each of the men, stacking the plastic plates and forks on her left arm.

“Here, kid,” the man with the cookies said, offering one to Ariel.

Ariel grabbed the cookie and before she could open her mouth, Dad stopped her. “Ariel, what do you say?”

“Thank you!” Ariel chirped, smiling at the man. As she looked at his kind face, her nervousness melted away. Color was returning to the man’s cheeks, and his hair had dried in a tangled mess, like ramen noodles. Ariel held the cookie in one hand and balanced the dishes

in the other. In the kitchen, she took a small bite of the cookie then slipped it into her mom's hand.

"What's this?" she asked, trying to hand the cookie back to Ariel.

"You didn't eat dinner," Ariel said, pushing the plates up onto the counter. She ran back into the other room to grab the cups. When she returned, she saw her mom wipe her cheeks with her sleeves.

"Are you okay?" Ariel asked.

"I'm fine, sweetie. Go back out there, okay? I can do the dishes by myself tonight." Ariel nodded and ran back out, jumping into her dad's lap. She listened until her eyes grew heavy. She woke up every few minutes when her dad laughed, his chest rumbling like thunder.



The next morning—silence. The rain had stopped.

Ariel rubbed her eyes as she walked to her dad's office. The men were all gathered around the satellite radio. It buzzed as they twisted dials before an Australian pilot's voice crackled through.

"Kanabea, this is Tango Mike Kilo. I think we might be able to make that Kerema run today. Ova."

"Tango Mike Kilo, this is Kanabea. Did you get the supplies from Kerema? Over." Ariel's dad waited nervously for the reply.

The men were all gathered around the satellite radio.

"Eh, negative. The hangar was locked this morning, so we'll try to bring 'em tomorrow. Ova."

One of the men put a hand on the desk. "Ask if he has space on the plane to take six guys to Kerema." Her dad nodded and repeated the message to the pilot.

"Ah, roger that. I've got an empty flight goin down, if those boys wanna hop on. Ova." The men silently pumped their fists. They ran to put their boots on. If they were

going to make it to the airstrip, they would have to hike a trail that usually took an hour, in half the time.

One of the men lifted his bag onto his shoulders then put it back down. "That's so heavy. Hang on, we don't need to take all this food to Kerema." He looked at Ariel's mom. "If we left some food here, could you guys use it?"

Ariel's mom froze. Because she couldn't speak, she just nodded. One by one, each of the men emptied their backpacks onto the kitchen table.

Sugar. Rice. Cans of soup. Beans. Boxes of tea and bags of coffee. Ramen. Spam. Powdered milk. Eggs.

"That'll make hiking a lot easier!" one of the men said. "Thank you so much for letting us stay overnight. Sorry we have to rush out so quickly."

Overcome with emotion, Dad hugged each of them silently. The men said their goodbyes and disappeared back into the jungle as quickly as they had come the day before.

Ariel sat down and watched Hannah pick up the bag of sugar. Her parents stared at the jars, cans, and boxes piled on the table.

Dad mumbled something under his breath: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.' I believe that's in Hebrews."

"They were angels?" Ariel asked, knowing the answer could change the rest of her life.

He didn't move. None of them did.





SEASONS OF JOY

What My Grandmother Learned

Poem

•

Frost-Bitten Plans

Fiction

•

When Autumn Falls

Poem

•

Run the Race

Nonfiction

•

The Freshman Christmas Bash

Fiction

•

Birch-Leaf Tambourines

Poem

•

Core Memories

Nonfiction

WHAT MY GRAND- MOTHER LEARNED

by Paige Romig

 **Commencement Contest Winner** 
—Original Poetry—

She loved to sit and stare out her window
And fondly watched the ripples in the grass.
And there all day she glimpsed the sad willow.

She listened when my voice like sounding brass
Droned on with memories of me and her,
And not recalling, she frowned out the glass.

Yet I became her favorite stranger.
She blushed with shame when she forgot my name,
But beaming I told her, “It’s no bother.”

She laughed so brightly when I made a claim
To know her name before she said, “Just Pat,”
Though for me, she could not recall the same.

She learned I loved her, and when words went flat,
We gladly watched the willow where we sat.



FROST-BITTEN PLANS

by Emily Dean

*Sometimes things don't go
according to plan. They go better.*

I didn't just follow a schedule; I lived by the color-coded calendar that hung front and center on my fridge door. Yet, nowhere in the month of December did I write, "Get stranded on the side of the road."

"We're going to die all because you wanted eggnog!" My sister Kate screamed words I didn't have time to hear at that moment.

"We are *not* going to die," I responded. Unlike the snow outside, my car wouldn't move.

"Rebecca." Kate poked her bony finger into my arm.

"What?" I pushed the gas pedal—still nothing.

"I have no bars." She held her cellphone up in the air, searching for a magic spot of reception.

"You won't get any until the storm lets up." I rested my head against the steering wheel. *This cannot be happening. Lord, please perform some kind of miracle on my dilapidated car.*

"The snow is going to keep falling, covering the entire car, and no one will find us until spring. By then we'll just be frozen corp—"

"Kate!" I snapped my head back up.

"Or worse—we could die from carbon monoxide poisoning. Something is probably stuck in your exhaust pipe, pouring toxic chemicals into our lungs."

"We are not breathing carbon monoxide." I glanced at my watch. 5:15 p.m. Forty-five minutes before the dinner party. Within that time frame, we would have to retrieve the eggnog, drive home, drop off Kate, pick up Eli, then try to get to the party somewhat on time. I should've

left a lot earlier, but no, I had to wait for Kate to find the right shoes.

"It's one of the top five ways people die." Kate flung her phone around as if she were looking up the fact that very second. Obviously, she wasn't.

"How do you even know that?"

"Google." She smirked.

"Didn't Dad tell you to stop googling morbid survival tips?"

"Didn't Dad tell you to get your engine looked at?"

I let out a dry laugh. *Why didn't I put a trip to the mechanic on my schedule? Oh, right, I was busy attempting to make Christmas go smoothly.*

"My survival tips are more helpful than your dead car. You never know when you could end up stuck on the side of the road because your sister is too cheap for a mechanic and wanted eggnog. You don't even like eggnog."

"I do too like eggnog."

"Nuh-uh." Kate rolled her eyes. "You said, and I quote, 'Eggnog is overboiled milk with bits of raw, chunky egg.'"

"It wouldn't be Christmas without a good cup of eggnog," I lied.

"Does Eli like eggnog?" She mocked me with a swooning gaze.

I said nothing as I attempted to ignore her insinuations about my boyfriend.

"So, we're going to freeze to death because your boyfriend wanted eggnog. You should've told him to get his own eggnog."

"He's busy. You didn't have to come." We would've been back already if we had left at the time I had scheduled.

"Mom made me. What is Eli doing anyway?"

"I don't know." *Probably being scared off by the rest of our loony family. I shouldn't have left him there alone. Who knows*

"We are going to freeze to death."





what childhood stories or conspiracies Great Aunt Gertrude is filling Eli's head with? Welp, there goes that relationship.

"See. He could've gotten his own eggnog,"

Kate argued.

"I just want everything to be perfect."

"Why?"

I gripped the steering wheel in an attempt to gain control of my shattering life. "He's going to ask Dad something."

"I ask Dad for stuff all the time, and no one buys me eggnog."

"This is different." As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted speaking them. Kate would either pry or mock me.

"Ooooo!" She fluttered her eyelashes. "So, you finally have the groom for the blue and white beach wedding you've spent years planning."

I gasped. *How did she—*

"You should really private some of your Pinterest boards. Also . . ." She ran a finger through her hair. "I may have been snooping through his stuff."

"Kate!"

"He has great taste in rings. Wanna see?" Kate pulled a tiny black box out of her coat pocket.

"Katherine Hudson, why do you have that?"

"You were yelling at me to hurry up, and I may have been looking at it. I heard Eli coming upstairs, so I didn't have a chance to put it back." She flashed the box again. "You sure you don't want to see?"

"No, I don't want to see. Stop getting in the way. Is that so hard?"

Kate looked hurt, and I realized what I had just said.

"Sorry." Kate turned around to face the passenger door, sitting cross-legged as much as possible, completely avoiding eye contact.

Two could play at that game. I looked away and rammed my head against the steering wheel. The perfect family Christmas I had envisioned had become an utter disaster. Without eggnog, there would be no celebration, nothing would go as planned, and the question would not be asked. Instead, I was stuck in a dead car without cell service and with a sister who was mad at me.

Wind blew tiny snowflakes onto my windshield. Maybe Kate was right. Maybe we would be stuck here until we died. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. Chills ran up my arms. I buried my hands in my sleeves, but nothing could warm my frozen fingers.

I looked over at Kate. She still refused to make eye contact. Suddenly, a memory invaded my thoughts—a memory of Kate and me burying ourselves in the snow, flapping our arms and feet, creating angels across our driveway—of our cold, wet coats and boots creating puddles in the doorway—of handing Kate a steaming hot chocolate and freshly baked, melt-in-your-mouth chocolate chip cookies.



“Kate?” I reached over, feeling her hand—cold.
“Come here.”

Kate scooted back around, embracing me in a hug. “I miss you.”

I stroked her hair as she cried softly.

“You’re never around, always off at college doing important things. When you do call, it’s always about Eli. I wanted to hang out with you this Christmas, but, no, you’re too busy making sure everything goes perfect.”

“Kate . . .”

“I wish we could make cookies or something like we used to.”

I smiled. “If we get out of here, I promise I’ll make cookies with you.”

“Really?” Kate sprung upright.

“Really.” I wiped the tears out of my eyes.

Bang, bang. A fist knocked on my window. Kate screamed.

The storm made it impossible to figure out who was trying to force entry into my car. I grabbed onto Kate’s hand. The knocking continued. Who would be crazy enough to be out in this storm? Cautiously, I opened the door a crack.

“Becca?” a voice said.

“Eli?” Sure enough, Eli stood outside my car door, getting pelted with bits of snow.

“Get in my truck!” he shouted above the roaring wind.

“We’re saved!” Kate exclaimed. She threw open the passenger-side door and jumped out, darting for the warmth of Eli’s truck as fast as she could run through the storm.

I took Eli’s hand, and he helped me out of my car. As I climbed into the truck’s passenger seat, I glanced at Kate. She had settled in the back seat, checking her phone.

“Still no signal.” She sighed.

"I'll call a tow truck once the storm ends." Eli climbed into the driver's seat. His tires squeaked against the snow as he pulled back onto the road.

I checked my watch. 5:45 p.m. Once we dropped Kate off, we'd only be twenty minutes late. I let out a deep breath. Everything would be okay. I wouldn't miss the party. My perfect Christmas hadn't been ruined after all.

"How did you find us?" Kate asked.

"You've been gone for a while," Eli answered. "I decided to come looking."

"I'm glad you did. We almost died." Kate threw her arms up dramatically.

"We did not almost die." I choked back a laugh and twisted around in my seat to look at her.

"That's because Eli found us before we actually froze to death." Kate gave me her best *duh* expression.

"Thank you for clarifying."

"You're welcome." She flipped her hair.

I turned back around, focusing my eyes on the road. A few more minutes until my schedule would be back on track. Only, we didn't get the eggnog. Oh well. Getting to that party was more important.

***My perfect
Christmas hadn't
been ruined
after all.***

As we pulled into the driveway, I checked my watch for the thousandth time. 5:55 p.m.

"We're finally home!" Kate jumped out of the car.

"We've only been gone for an hour."

"It's been a long hour." She slammed the car door behind her and started to run toward the house. "Wait. Eli, I have something of yours."

I turned my eyes away from the box that Kate handed to Eli. He grinned at me.

"Well, this wasn't exactly what I'd been planning, but . . ." He dropped to one knee and my heart stopped. "Will you marry me?"



I heard Kate gasp behind me.

“Yes!” I squealed.

“About time,” Kate said with a hand on her hip.

I hadn’t planned on the weather, the timing, or a spying little sister, but this was perfect.

“Ready to head to the dinner party?” Eli asked as he slipped the ring on my finger.

I smiled at Kate. “Could we go make cookies instead?”

WHEN AUTUMN FALLS

by Natalie Kennedy

I light my orange candle and the whole room
Fills with the warm, sweet smell of cinnamon

The cold, crisp chill of autumn looms;
I pull my blanket tight up to my chin.

The trees in amber technicolor sleep
Until spring comes to wake them up again.
The wind against my window chills skin-deep,
And I am content to stay tucked in.

Then like a bear I prepare my den for
The frost to come. I have my fill of bread
And take my sweaters from behind the door. In the
hearth's glow I leave no book unread.

I stay within the safety of these walls—
I light my orange candle when autumn falls.

RUN THE RACE

by Katelyn Peterson

*Eric Liddell's faith is tested when he must choose between
his convictions and the chance of a lifetime.*

Bang!

Eric Liddell launched forward at the starting blast of gunfire. He shot down the track at a speed no one expected and that no one could possibly maintain for an entire 400-meter race. His arms pumped back and forth. He threw his head back. His legs pulled him onward. With each stride, his shoe spikes dug into the Olympic track.

Every odd was counted against him. Eric's expertise lay in the 100-meter run. So why was he running a race four times that distance? The answer started one year earlier in 1923.



In 1923, Eric found himself at the Stamford Bridge stadium in London for the Amateur Athletic Association Championships. Eric had started running at Eltham College where he had trained and competed, but never in a race as big as this one. This was his first race outside of Scotland.

He stood beside his coach, Tom McKerchar, both of them watching the crowds fill the stands. Eric might have been more nervous had he known there could be Olympic scouts watching the race.

"How're you feeling, my wonderful boy?"
McKerchar asked.

"I'm ready, my friend," Eric said, hands on his hips. "It's a grilling hot day. Perfect for short-distance running."

McKerchar, satisfied with the answer, patted Eric on the back. "You'll do very well. You'll win."

Eric smiled, then stepped out onto the dirt track. He observed his opponents. The three runners were all older and taller than he was, as Eric was only twenty-one years old and five feet eight. The runners seemed focused on nothing more than the race facing them. Henry Stallard bounced from foot to foot, loosening his muscles. Guy Butler spoke with the race starter, but Eric wasn't close enough to hear what they were talking about. Harold Abrahams kept his focus down the track, dancing on his toes.

Eric didn't prep like these men. Instead, he approached each of them, starting with Stallard. "I pray you do well, Stallard," he said, extending his hand.

Stallard stopped his bouncing. His eyes flitted down to Eric's hand then back to his face. With a slight squint, he accepted the handshake. "You too, Liddell."

Eric moved on to Butler, who was tying his shoelaces. Eric approached as his fellow runner stood back up. "I pray you do well, Butler."

Butler shook Eric's hand and smiled, his lips pressed together to the point that Eric questioned if he had any to begin with.

Finally, Eric came to Abrahams. "Hello, Abrahams," he said, already stretching his hand out. "I pray you do well in the race."

Abrahams paused in his warm-ups and turned his attention to Liddell. Abrahams's face was long, his eyes sallow and unfocused. He chuckled at the sentiment and shook his head. "I don't need your prayers, Liddell."

Eric's hand dropped, his face crestfallen. Abrahams stepped forward, tilting his head up to look down his nose at Eric. "I've heard people talk of how you run," he said. "They say you run like a wild animal. That unnerves me."

Eric's lips turned up. "I already know what people say of me. I know they laugh at me, but I take no thought of my form, and neither does McKerchar. I run how I run, and if I win, it's all for God's glory." He turned and made



his way back to his starting position. He glanced back and called, "I still pray you do well."

Eric had perfectly timed his talks with each runner, for as soon as he got back to his lane, the starter called them to their places. The four had already dug their foot holes, which would give them an easier start-off when the gun fired.

"Runners," the starter announced, "on your marks . . ."

Eric set his left foot in the back hole and his right foot in the front hole. He bent forward, placing his hands on the track, perched like a cheetah ready to pounce.

"... get set . . ."

He breathed in, bracing for the shot, then breathed out.

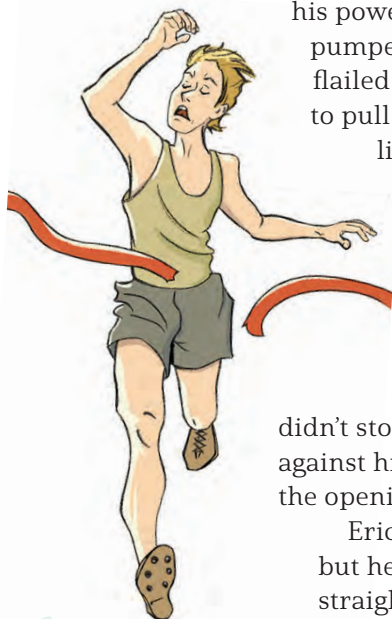
"... go!" The starter fired the gun.

Bang!

The runners pushed off. They pumped their arms. Their legs pulled them forward. All eyes were trained ahead.

The runners were evenly matched coming round the turn. That is, until Eric executed his power play. His arms no longer pumped in a steady rhythm, but now flailed as if he were grasping at the air to pull him forward faster. Looking like a baby giraffe running for the first time, he threw his head back, looking to the sky as though praying for God to send him just a little more speed. Within milliseconds, Eric pulled ahead of the other racers. He didn't stop until he felt the tape break against his chest. He won first place in the opening heat in 22.4 seconds.

Eric's lungs screamed for oxygen, but he forced himself to stand up straight, planted his hands on his



hips, and grinned at the sky. He felt a pat on the back and looked over to see Butler congratulating him. Stallard did the same. Eric didn't let it bother him that Abrahams didn't show the same sportsmanship.

McKerchar jogged up to his pupil. "I knew you would win!"

Eric set his hand on his coach's shoulder. "Thank you, my friend. But I still have the semifinals and finals to win."

"You *will* win, Eric," McKerchar said. "You *will* win."

And win Eric did. He finished the semifinals in 21.6 seconds. Because Abrahams couldn't bear another defeat against Liddell, he dropped out of the race after the semifinals. In the finals, Eric managed to pull another 21.6-second win, walking away with multiple gold medals.

A few weeks after the Stamford Bridge races, Eric received a letter. He took the envelope, broke the seal, and retrieved the letter inside. His eyes raced over the words as though he were competing against an invisible being to get to the end of the note first. His eyes widened when he realized what it said. The British Olympic Association had invited him to compete in the 1924 Paris Olympics.

"I knew you would win!"

The Olympics! Eric Henry Liddell had been singled out to run in the Olympics precisely a year away. Eric lowered the letter, dropped into the nearest chair, and leaned his head back. He ran a hand through his thin blond hair and laughed.

What a race that would be! To run for Britain against all the other athletes considered the world's best. Eric could already feel the rush of adrenaline that would course through his body after the starting gunshot.

This would be the chance of a lifetime. He wanted to accept right then and there, but he knew he had to talk to McKerchar first. That afternoon, he brought the letter with him to the Powderhall Stadium where he trained with his coach.



"They must have been very impressed with the Stamford Bridge races," McKerchar said after Eric told him about the letter.

Eric rubbed the back of his neck and flashed a sheepish grin. "I have to admit, I surprised even myself."

"You did well. And you should go to the Olympics."

"You think I should?"

"Of course you should. I'll help you train," McKerchar said. "But you know you'll have to give up rugby this winter."

Eric flinched as though McKerchar had struck him.

"Give up rugger? What for?"

"You need to focus on your training for the Olympics now."

"I haven't even accepted yet."

"But you will," McKerchar said. Eric shook his head but still smiled. His coach continued, "You won't have time to play any other sports. And there's too much risk in rugby. You can't risk getting hurt."

Eric nodded, knowing his coach was right. He turned his gaze to the track he spent so much time training on. "You're right. You're always right." He looked back to his mentor and sighed. "I'll give up rugby."

McKerchar cupped his hand on Eric's cheek, nodding his approval. "Excellent. Now go write your response. We'll start our training on Monday."



Only a couple months after Eric agreed to run in the Olympics, he came face to face with a dilemma.

He had received the Olympic schedule, but he decided to wait to look it over until he could meet with McKerchar. When Eric arrived at Powderhall for training that day, he finally opened the schedule, holding it up so both he and McKerchar could see it. He scanned for the 100- and 220-meter races. As soon as he found the first one, he stabbed his finger onto the paper.

"There! The 100-meter is . . ." He deflated when he saw the day it was on. "Sunday."

Nobody at the British Olympic Association, none of the other runners, no one else would think anything of the placement of this race except for Eric.

McKerchar sighed and looked up from the paper. Eric stared at the schedule. He wouldn't be able to race the 100-meters. God made it clear in the Bible to keep the Sabbath day holy. "I can't run on Sunday," he said.

"Maybe you won't have to," McKerchar said.

"What do you mean?"

"It might still be early enough to request that the race be moved. If you write to the Association, maybe they can get it changed."

Hope filled Eric's eyes. "D'you think so?"

"We won't know unless you try."

And try Eric did. He sent a request to the Association, asking that the race be moved to a different day, but they didn't take Eric seriously. They set aside his letter, not bothering to respond to his request until November 1923 when Eric withdrew from the 100-meter race.

"I can't run on Sunday."

Frantic to keep him in the race, they pleaded with the International Olympic Committee to move the race on behalf of religious convictions. When that attempt didn't work, the Association switched tactics and tried to change Eric's mind. They sent him multiple letters. The first said, "In France, the Sabbath ended officially at noon."

Eric sent back his response: "My Sabbath lasts all day."

The Association's second letter said, "If God made you fast, wouldn't you be doing His will by competing? Wouldn't it be a slight against Him if you didn't run?"

Eric didn't let such an attack on his conviction anger him. Instead, he sent another response, reciting what he called "the three sevens": the seventh verse of the seventh chapter of the seventh book of the New Testament. "For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that."



Each time the Association tried to convince Eric to run, he stood his ground. He knew his beliefs. He wouldn't run on Sunday. Finally worn down, the Association offered him a spot in the 400-meter race instead. Eric agreed.

Although the strife with the Association had been resolved, a new conflict emerged. People began to find out that Eric had dropped out of the 100-meter. Angered that he would be betraying his duty to king and country, they branded him a traitor. The newspapers slashed him, people called him names, and very few believed in him. Even though Eric tried not to let the criticism bother him, it still weighed on his heart.



Eric's Olympic races came soon enough. Still, no one believed in him. No one thought he could win in the Olympics.

The 200-meter race was first. Eric tried his best, ran his hardest, but he proved the world right. He didn't win. However, he still received a bronze medal for finishing third in the race.

Next was the 400-meter race. The contenders were Eric Liddell, Horatio Fitch, Guy Butler, David Johnson, and John-Coard Taylor. Horatio Fitch, the American runner, was expected to win. He ran the opening heat in 52 seconds, while Eric ran it in 50.2. Since he was still considered a traitor, Eric's time didn't elicit any cheer or praise.

The quarterfinals placed Eric at 49.3 seconds, and Fitch managed to break the world-record time of 48 seconds by finishing in 47.8 seconds. The crowd roared in applause, whooping and cheering for the guaranteed winner. The semifinals didn't prove any better for Eric, and Fitch was still in the lead. No one saw Eric as a threat.

Then came the finals. July 11 brought the perfect weather of 79 degrees. "Heat makes the muscles loose,"

McKerchar told Eric before the race. “No need for a massage today.”

“Thank you, my friend,” Eric said. He could hear the strain in his own voice and was certain that McKerchar picked up on it. But Eric couldn’t help it. How could he not be nervous? McKerchar gave Eric’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze, then left him in the dressing room.

Eric collapsed into a nearby seat and dropped his head in his hands. “I wonder if I’ve done the right thing,” he said to himself. He meditated on this thought for a moment, then shook his head. He looked up and planted his chin on his folded hands, his elbows resting on his knees. “Yes, I’m sure.”

Just before 6:30 p.m., an electric bell went off in the dressing room. Like clockwork, the other runners left their spots, lined up, and walked out to the track. Taking a deep breath, Eric wiped his sweaty hands on his shorts, then stood up to join them.

As he turned to exit the room, he found one of the British team masseurs blocking his path.

Without saying a word, the masseur slipped a piece of paper into Eric’s hand and walked away. Eric watched the man leave, then looked at the note. His heart leaped when he read it.

*“I wonder if
I’ve done the
right thing.”*

“It says in the Old Book, ‘He that honours me, I will honour.’ Wishing you the best of success always.” The quote from 1 Samuel 2:30 sent a surge of energy through Eric’s body. He glanced in the direction the masseur had gone, smiled wide, and strode out of the dressing room to join his competitors.

When he stepped outside, he was met with the sound of the band playing “Scotland the Brave.” His heart beat a little faster. His confidence was spurred anew as he jogged over to his starting spot on the outside lane, also known as the “worst lane.” The other racers were already digging their starter holes. As Eric began to do the same,



Joe Binks, the athletics correspondent of *News of the World*, walked over to him. The two gentlemen had become acquaintances through the exchange of letters during Eric's hardships with the news.

"I wanted to wish you luck, Mr. Liddell," Binks said.

"Thank you, sir." Eric stood and shook the man's hand.

"You have a chance to win this race, you know."

Eric nodded. "I do know."

"I would think . . . rather, I suggest that you should run mad, Mr. Liddell," Binks said. "Keep in front and make all the other five come after you to the tape."

Eric chuckled. "I think that's a good idea."

Binks nodded and went to the stands to watch the race. Eric finished digging his starter holes. A minute later,

***"He that honours
me, I will honour."***

the starter called the runners to their starting marks. Eric placed his feet and pressed his hands onto the baked cinder ground.

"On your marks . . ." the starter began.

Eric breathed in and out.

". . . get set . . ."

He thought of the verse the masseur had shared with him. "He that honours me, I will honour."

". . . go!" The gun fired.

Bang!

Eric shot forward. He broke into a full run.

The other runners fell behind, but since Eric had the outside lane, he couldn't tell if he was truly in the lead or if he just appeared to be. He didn't look behind him. He didn't slow down. He charged around the bend. He locked the finish line in his sights.

Halfway through the race, he began to wonder if he could keep up this speed. If he couldn't, he would lose. Just then, he felt a tingling sensation on the back of his neck. A shadow crept over him from behind. Eric shivered. Fitch was closing in. Eric's lungs started to burn. His flailing arms grew tired. His legs strained.

Can I last home? Eric thought to himself.

For one second, he closed his eyes and prayed for strength. The next second, a newfound energy coursed through his limbs. He no longer felt the strain on his muscles. He no longer worried about how heavily he was breathing. All he knew was that God was helping push him onward.

Eric threw his head back, puffed his chest forward, and powered to the finish line. He still felt the itch of his rival right behind him. Eric pushed himself harder. Fitch fell behind. Eric's lead was secured.

The tape broke against his chest. The crowd screamed, arms flailing in excitement, cheering for the man they had all doubted.

Everyone cheered for Eric Liddell, the man who refused to run on Sunday.

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THE FRESHMAN CHRISTMAS BASH

by Regina Massey

*Wade has to choose—his best
friend or the girl of his dreams.*

Wade stood barefoot on the tile floor of the bathroom, carefully combing his brown hair to the side. He dug through the drawer until he found his Axe body spray, then sprayed it up and down his body, on his neck, down his shirt, into his hair, and—

The door swung open, and his roommate began coughing violently. “What’s going on in here?” Morris cried, snatching the spray from Wade’s hand.

“Getting ready for the party,” Wade said. “Give that back. I wasn’t done.”

“Well, you should be.” Morris tossed the spray bottle into the air, and Wade scrambled to catch it. “Ah, that’s right,” Morris said. “The Freshman Christmas Bash thing is tonight. I forgot. It’s been so long since I was a freshman.”

“Morris, you’re a *sophomore*.”

“This isn’t about me. Are you going with a girl or what?”

Just then, someone knocked on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Wade said, shoving past his roommate. He opened the door to find Eric, his friend since high school, wearing a dark green crewneck sweater and a Santa hat. He held a poorly wrapped present under his arm.

“Well,” Morris said, “I hope you didn’t put on all that cologne just for Eric.”

Wade glared. “No, I’m meeting up with a girl there.”

“You’re wearing cologne?” Eric said with a smirk. “And it looks like you’ve showered. You must really like this girl.”

Wade's face turned hot at the mention of Kathryn from speech class. He'd had his eyes on her all semester. And it was true—this morning, he had finally worked up the courage to ask her to hang out with him and Eric at the Christmas party.

Wade huffed and crossed his arms. "Can we just go?"

"Hold on," Morris said, ushering Wade back into the bathroom. "Let the guy who actually *has* a girlfriend help you out." He ruffled Wade's hair until it flopped against his forehead.

"What are you doing?" Wade said, squirming away. "I worked hard on all this."

"Yeah, that's what makes it so sad. Now let me finish." He continued to mess up Wade's hair before spitting on his hand and swooping the hair over again.

Wade cringed. "Thanks."

Eric adjusted the collar of Wade's white shirt to fit better around his tie. "Christmas tree tie, huh?" Eric said. "Classy." They walked back into the bedroom, and Eric stopped short of opening the door. "Oh," he said, "don't forget your gift for the white elephant game."

"You also might want to put on shoes," Morris said, leaning against the bathroom doorway. "Not that my advice means anything."

Wade put on his red Converse, grabbed his gift, and followed Eric out the door. He was relieved to be rid of Morris and his criticism.

When they walked into the rec center, many freshmen had already arrived and were busy showing off at the bowling alley or tripping around the ice-skating rink. Red and green streamers clung to the walls and ceiling, and a large Christmas tree stood in the center of the room, sparkling with multicolored lights. A girl wearing an ugly Christmas sweater handed Wade and Eric slips of paper with different numbers. Then she directed them to add their gifts to the pile under the tree.



Wade scanned the room for Kathryn, studying every blonde girl, hoping they wouldn't notice him. *Is that her?* he thought. *No, that's the girl from English class. Look away, look away!*

"Let's hit up the snack table," Eric said, walking toward the long table topped with trays of cookies, chocolate-covered pretzels, a punch bowl, and other Christmas snacks. They loaded their plates and searched for a place to sit. Students crowded around each table, outnumbering the few chairs in the room. Wade kept searching for Kathryn.

"Wade!"

He turned and finally saw her seated at a small circular table with Justin from speech class. Kathryn grinned and motioned for him to come over.

"Hey, Wade!" she said as they approached her. "How are you?"

"Uh, good." Wade felt his heart pounding harder and harder, his face burning with awkwardness. Why had she brought another guy?

Kathryn soon turned her attention back to Justin, who was halfway through talking about his workout routine. Wade sat on the floor near the table, only half-listening. He focused on eating his snacks and sneaking glances at Kathryn when she wasn't paying attention.

"Let's go bowling," Justin said suddenly. He pushed against the table as he stood up from his chair. Kathryn immediately jumped up and followed him.

"Wow," Eric said once the others turned the corner. "That was awkward."

Wade stood up. "But I think it's going really well so far."

"We had to sit on the floor, Wade," Eric said with a frown.

"It's just because there aren't a lot of chairs in here," Wade said, rolling his eyes. "Now come on, or they're going to start bowling without us."

They already had, to Wade's dismay. He saw Kathryn preparing to throw her purple bowling ball down the

lane. Beside her, Justin demonstrated the best way to line up a throw with the dots on the floor.

"Sorry, man," Eric said, clapping Wade on the shoulder. "Wanna play Ping-Pong? Maybe you'll actually win this time."

"There's some extra seats over there," Wade said, having barely heard his friend. "We can go sit with them. Maybe we can play the next round once they're done."

Eric crossed his arms. "I really thought you and I were going to hang out tonight."

"We are hanging out!"

"No." Eric scowled and pointed a finger at Wade. "You're obsessing over a girl who clearly isn't into you. I'm going to get more snacks. Feel free to join me when you're done being a third wheel." He turned and walked back toward the snack table without another word.

Wade almost followed him, but he held himself back. He was here to spend time with Kathryn, he reminded himself. If Eric wasn't going to be supportive, then Wade would have fun without him. He straightened his shoulders and approached the others at the bowling lanes.

"You're obsessing over a girl who clearly isn't into you."

"I'm back," Wade said.

"What took you so long?" Kathryn turned and sent the ball careening toward the pins, knocking down all except for the seventh and tenth. She missed both on her second try.

"Good job!" Wade said with a grin as Kathryn trudged back toward him.

"Yeah, *good job*," Justin mocked. "She got the seven-ten split, man. Don't get too excited." He grabbed the heaviest ball and aligned himself carefully with the dots. Then he threw the ball, hitting only three pins on the corner of the lane.

Wade burst out laughing. "And you thought Kathryn was bad."



Justin whirled around to glare at Wade. “You think you’re so great? You get the spare,” he snapped, pointing at the lane. “Go on.”

Wade looked to Kathryn for help, but she said nothing. He stood up and grabbed a random ball from the rack. He did his best to align himself with the dots as he had seen Kathryn and Justin do. He reeled back his arm and let go of the ball—just as he realized he hadn’t put on bowling shoes. The force of throwing the ball knocked him off balance, and the ball landed with a hard *thump* on the lane before swerving into the gutter. Wade’s face burned with humiliation. He contemplated throwing himself down the lane to knock over the pins just so he wouldn’t have to turn and face Justin.

The loudspeaker began to blare with a woman’s voice, telling everyone to find a seat near the Christmas tree for the white elephant game. Wade finally faced the others. Kathryn was still giggling about his gutter ball, and Justin had a smug smile on his face.

“Um, do we want to go find some seats?” Wade said, focusing his attention on Kathryn instead of Justin’s mocking stare.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Kathryn said, standing up. Wade walked with her to return her bowling shoes, and they made their way toward the Christmas tree as Justin lagged behind. “I hope I can get a Starbucks gift card,” Kathryn told Wade. “That’s, like, the best option in games like this.”

“Oh, yeah.” He laughed weakly. “That’s true.”

“Let’s sit by the tree. Less walking.” Justin shoved ahead of them, moving toward three empty seats near the tree. He sat down first and took the middle seat, forcing Wade and Kathryn to sit on either side of him.

Wade clenched his fists, fighting the urge to get up and walk away, knowing that he should have hung out with Eric instead. He stared at his shoes until the game began.

When Wade’s number was called, he walked through the large circle of people to the host and showed her his

number. Rather than stealing a gift that had already been opened, he opted to open the smallest gift under the tree. It was a fifteen-dollar Starbucks gift card. He grinned as he walked back to his seat. *I'll give it to Kathryn when the game is over, and I'll be her hero! Or—even better—I'll ask if she wants to grab coffee with me sometime.*

When it was Justin's turn, he walked over and showed his number to the host. Then he turned back and grabbed Wade's gift card right out of his hand. "I'll take that, thank you."

Wade frowned as he grabbed another bag from under the tree and opened it. It was filled with old Fudge Rounds from the cafeteria. He didn't even *like* Fudge Rounds. He slumped his shoulders and trudged back to his seat, knowing he was stuck with his new "gift."

He listened as Kathryn joked that she would use her turn to steal the gift card from Justin. But right before Kathryn's turn, Justin said, "If you don't steal my gift card, I'll use it to buy us both a drink. How about that?"

She smirked. "Promise?"

"Yeah." He laughed.

Wade ground his teeth, tempted to grab one of the Fudge Rounds from his bag and crush it in his fist. Maybe it could at least function as a stress ball.

After an eternity, the game ended. Wade still had his bag of Fudge Rounds, and Justin had managed to keep the Starbucks gift card. Kathryn and Justin left to play mini golf, and Wade sat wondering how he'd let the night go so badly.

Hands clamped down on his shoulders, and he jumped in his seat. From behind him, Eric laughed. "Calm down. It's just me." He plopped down in the empty seat beside Wade. "I guess things didn't go so well with Kathryn."

***He didn't even like
Fudge Rounds.***



“Could they have been worse?” Wade covered his face with his hands.

Eric sighed. “I may or may not have been watching you guys during the whole game. It was rough, man.”

“I know,” Wade said, loosening his tie. “I never should’ve ditched you like that. I’m really sorry.”

Eric smiled for a moment. “I saw that you got someone’s leftover Fudge Rounds,” he said. “Are you going to eat those?”

Wade handed him the whole bag. “Come on,” he said, standing up. “Let’s play Ping-Pong. I hope you’re okay with losing this time.”

BIRCH-LEAF TAMBOURINES

by Sophia Widholm

*During a vacation in Colorado, the author felt inspired
by the beauty of the mountains' rustling birch trees.*

Delicate pale coins—
Translucent, stirred by the breeze.
Golden sunlight slips
Through waving branches praising
God with birch-leaf tambourines.



CORE MEMORIES

by Rachael Stearns

Life carries on. Should we?

Pause.

It's the button on the TV remote that fades first.

We pause because we love to freeze time, to take everything in, to replay something over and over again in our minds. We pause because there are some things we want to remember forever.

I wish life had a pause button like the TV remote. That realization hit me when I looked up at the sky turning orange and purple, and at the ocean shimmering a beautiful gold as the sun slipped below the horizon.

I dove into a frothy wave and burst through the other side, saltwater dripping from my face. The setting sun and the crystal blue water warmed my skin as I turned and watched my friends swimming, spraying each other with water, laughing above the roar of the waves.

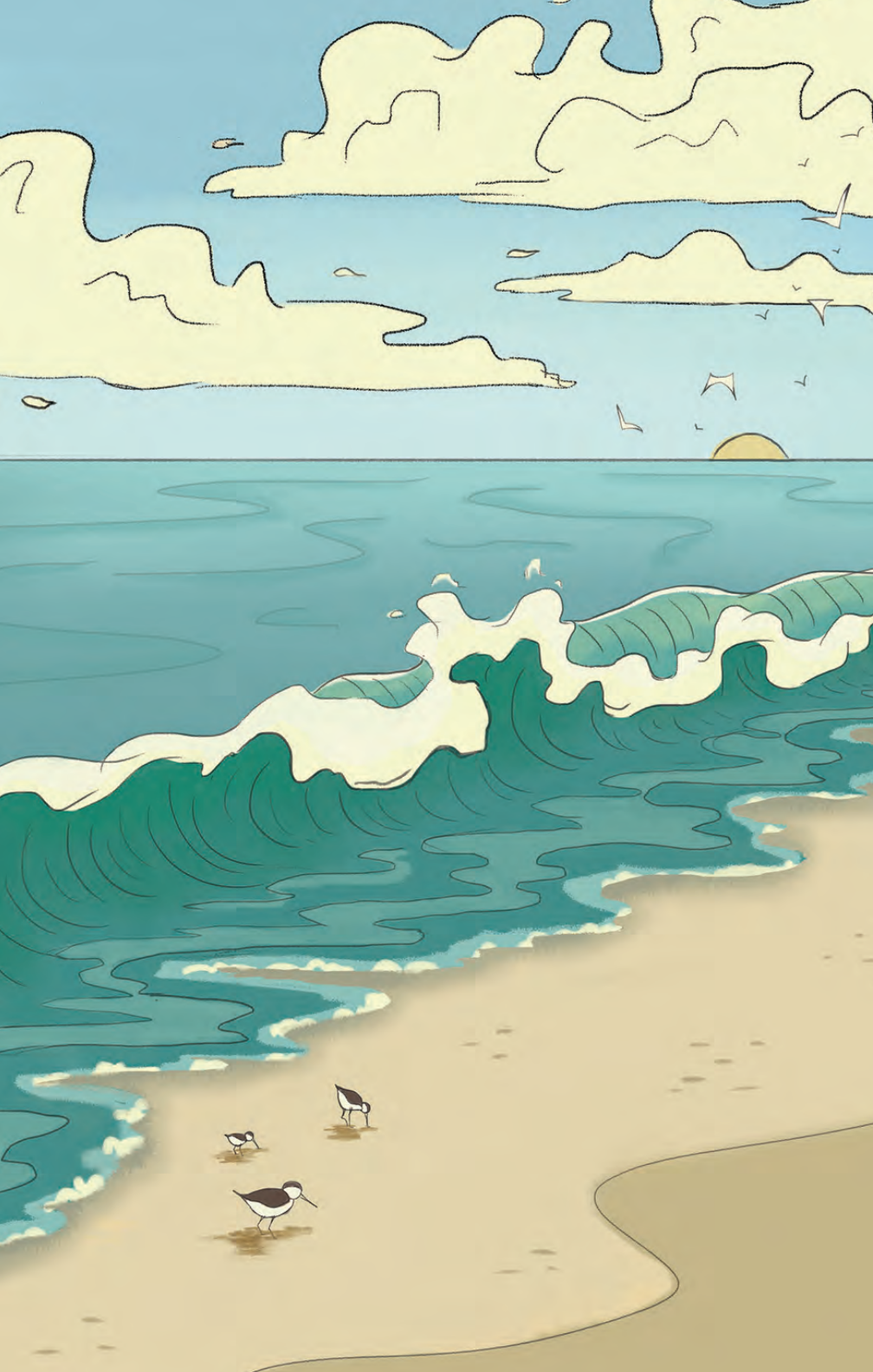
I stood still for a moment and took everything in.

Standing there, with waves crashing all around me, I realized that this was a moment I'd never forget. One I'd want to relive throughout my life. It was a memory I wouldn't be able to recreate.

As we drove back to campus that night, I leaned back in my seat and smiled. The ocean breeze drifted through my open window and played with my hair. Moonbeams stretched across the water, and the stars glittered overhead.

I was tired, but it was the best kind of tired. My hair was salty, my arms were weak from battling the waves, and my shoes were full of white sand.

I wish life had a pause button. But it doesn't. So I live in the moment, make lifelong memories, and soak it all in. I hold those core memories in my heart forever.



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