



Table of Contents

cover artwork "Pause of Blue" by Alex Felkel '21

January Kaleidoscope by Nicholas Zak	2
The Hell With It by Jonathon Fales	10
King by Philip Boveri	17
Trouble in Albany by Kevin Korte	23
Art Has No Color by Tanner Jackson	28
Max & the Magic Eight Ball by Tanner Jackson	34
Not Prank War, but Locker War by Louis Hess	38
Boys Town by Brady Burke	43
Johnny & the Sandcastle by Paul Bytnar	52
Pride by Kevin Jeffries	57
Lessons by Kevin Jeffries	62
Home & Hakim's by Mike Mattern	69
Keeping the Sport by Braden O'Shea	74
Unnatural Disaster by Ryan Hughes	81
Friends Until the End by Ryan Hughes	84
The Fall of Avalon by Ethan Becher	88

The Scrivener 2021

The De Smet Jesuit High School Literary Magazine

Moderator

Robert Hutchison

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January Kaleidoscope

by Nicholas Zak, 12

The Snowstorm had been blowing for two weeks on the afternoon of January 7th when Adam was walking back to his car. The sides of the street were piled high with old snow that was stained black from the asphalt and salt and beginning to melt and overflow onto the sidewalk. Adam's dirty black boots ground into the film of salt appearing on the sidewalk and deftly maneuvered around the areas of ice that still remained as he walked down the street. To his right was an oft used road, cars whirring past occasionally, their exhaust blowing over and heating his chilled nose and ears for a brief moment. As one particularly large minivan drove past, his mind wandered to the warmth of the car he would soon be arriving at. It was not a fancy car, but Adam had worked hard for it and now he could go wherever he pleased in it. As Adam had not yet reached his car though, he struggled through his thick gloves to pull up a gray striped scarf over his mouth and a large black beanie down further over his head.

Despite this, the cold still stung the insides of his nostrils as Adam came up past the power cut that signaled only a couple blocks left to his car. In days past he would have used that cut to walk further to the old park that, today incidentally, Adam had left his car at. He wondered at the benefits of maybe once again taking that old shortcut from long past, the speed with which he might get to his car weighed against the shame of being a grown man caught trudging off the beaten path. Eventually though something sparked inside Adam, a feeling thought long lost, and Adam took one big black salt covered boot and plunged it into the snow off the sidewalk. Another step, and then another, and a car blew past melting more snow into slush on the side of the road, but now Adam was too far away to feel the warmth of it, for he was in the snow.

Soon Adam had left a trail behind him, salted shoes growing clean as their excess was left behind in the pristine snow now imprinted with a single set of boot prints. Adam let his mind wander to a time when this walk would have been common, where a snowstorm could have done little to fight against the pounding of dozens of children's feet. Where once there had been a vibrant path, now only Adam's boots stepped. He reached the first of the great metal towers that dotted the power cut just as he began to have second thoughts about making this arduous trek. Thinking back to the time before Adam brought his large nylon gloves up to the freezing metal of the tower and let his hand rest along an old line of graffiti tagged by some group of disaffected teenagers long ago. Adam remembered the day the graffiti first appeared on the tower. How Charlie, with his hair down below his eyes and a perpetually lost tooth shouted out,

"Hey everyone look what's been painted on the tower here!"

How the gaggle of kids behind Charlie had jostled him out of the way to see and touch and wonder about the arrival of this new painting in the static world they spent every day in.

"I bet they were six feet tall with great spiked jackets and Mohawks!" shouted Claire, the only girl Adam's friends could allow within



Nicholas Hale, 12

their group. A short kid with wavy blonde hair piped up,

“Are you stupid? Clearly they all wore ski masks and black hoodies to hide their faces.” While Claire had gained the respect of most of the group, this newcomer, whom Adam had always been certain was from the rich kid’s academy down the road, had still not been convinced on Claire’s standing in the group.

“Well I think Claire’s right” said Adam who could freely admit years later that he, and everyone else in the group, had a crush on Claire, but at the time would have denied the accusation with a punch to the jaw.

As Adam pulled his hand back from the graffiti and the scene playing in his mind, he tried to think of what had happened to all those friends he had known years ago. Charlie had gone into accounting, Adam

was fairly sure, but Claire, and that blonde headed kid? Adam tucked his hands back into the coat pockets of his much too expensive coat and shook his head to dispel the thoughts. Car, warmth, getting home in a timely manner, these were what mattered, not some old winter day from years ago.

He stepped away from the old tower and back out into the snow of the power cut. The cold was beginning to become pervading the further he got from the road and its life. He breathed in deeply and the cold pierced his nostrils in an almost physical way. A smell reached him quite unlike any that could be produced by a freezer or any cold room on a hot day. This smell was natural, and it was one that Adam had long forgotten existed. He reached up to cover his nose with his scarf, but the cold remained, beginning to seep into him.

As he moved off the edge of the power cut, Adam reached an old path through the brush of the woods taken many times by a younger version of himself. The snow underfoot began to mingle with dead leaves and grass and the crackling of broken twigs. Adam brushed away a branch coated with fallen snow to make way for his adult frame and realized that if he was still a kid this path would have been entirely accessible. It was only in the last few years that its secrets had become lost to him.

The brush around him brought back memories to Adam of summers

long forgotten, and winters of another time. He remembered days playing tag when he would race through the forest, branches tugging at his clothes and tearing scratches into his arms and legs that he would stumble over when explaining the dirt and grime to his parents. He remembered the winters when the snow reached up to his knees and he had to wade through the snow like a great frozen river on a quest to a friend's backyard to build a snowman or participate in a snowball fight that would be regaled to those who missed it for months after. Adam even began to recall times in between when he streaked mud along the bottom of his vampire's cape on the way to a Halloween gathering, or stained his shoes with grass and wet as he attempted to sneak off after a Sunday spent in endless boring church.

But no, Adam was here to get to his car faster. He took a step and another and the memories were gone. It was not as if Adam had intentionally left this life behind. He had grown up, and with growing up comes changes. He told himself the times spent on a little forest path and out next to an old tower daring each other to electrocute themselves by touching the sides were nothing more than the wants of children. He was an adult now and he knew the secret to it all lied with his car and in getting home in a timely manner.

Adam's step onto the firm concrete of the sidewalk brought him back to the real world. A passing car blew the pervading cold from his nostrils and the ever-present road salt once again returned his boots to their afflicted state. Adam waved to a neighbor, Mrs. Margorie, as he walked by and she waved back only thinly masking the surprise at the sudden greeting.

"I suppose the cold isn't letting up anytime soon Mrs. Margorie." Adam called out to the old woman sitting on her porch nearby, with its overabundance of wind chimes and knickknacks only able to be acquired through years of dedicated hoarding.

"Oh no dearie, I think it's going to let up any day now. The cats have



been pawing at the door to be let outside, and they're never wrong."

Adam smiled to himself at the picture of one of Mrs. Margorie's many scrawny cats pawing at the door to escape the confinement of her house.

"Well then if that cats have spoken, I guess the weather will be alright!"

"Do you remember back when you were a kid and your group of rowdy munchkins always played with my cats?"

Adam did in fact distinctly remember this moment, though he would have used the word terrorized.

"Yes of course, we always chased them around your yard, but don't worry I don't think we stepped in your flowers even once."

"oh no of course not dearie."

Adam smiled under the bulk of his scarf as he passed beyond Mrs. Margorie's house. He distinctly remembered the dozens of times that Charlie would accidentally fall into the flowers and cover his somehow already mud-stained clothes in the pollen and petals of the mutilated flowers. Every time that happened though, Adam would grab one arm and someone the other, and Charlie would be heaved out before they sprinted off to some new spot to play before Mrs. Margorie was any the wiser.

Ah, but there was his car, sitting under the old sycamore tree with its peeling branches and mottled texture. Despite only being there for a couple hours, Adam's car had begun to be covered in the endless snow. The windows caked over in a sheet of frost would be the most difficult to heat up Adam thought. He would have to get the ice scraper from the back seat and aggressively remove the cold and the ice from the windows just enough to drive. He would not forget to remove the snow from the back windows though. Adam began to really smile in earnest as he remembered that day, not long after he had first got his license, with Charlie in the seat next to him, craning his neck to try and see through the blocked snow that he had thought unimportant. Where had they been going that day? Adam couldn't remember. Probably up to the old McDonald's to get some warm fries or down to the Bread Co. for the mac & cheese and hot chocolate. Charlie would have shouted

"Hey man you're gonna kill us both if you keep driving like this!"

And of course Adam would have shouted back,

"I don't know what you expect, I can't see out of the windows!"

Now Adam would have been stupid if he hadn't known Charlie's response to that question. A thousand days spent together in the sun and the snow and Adam had never once known Charlie to give up in an argument.

"Well then why didn't you clean them?"

The conversation would have gone on like that the entire ride to Bread Co. or McDonald's with retorts from Adam such as,

"If you had helped me they would have been clean!"

And a defensive remark from Charlie, who was an expert in habitually forgetting his own forgetfulness,

"I forgot my coat, you can't expect me to go out in that kind of storm with no coat on."

Adam stepped back from the car and took a deep breath through the thick wool of his scarf. He was going to remember everything today wasn't he? As if in answer to his own question, he noticed the park across the street with rusty swing-sets covered in snow and an old jungle gym that wouldn't have been considered safe in the 80s. No, Adam was going to get in his car, and turn on the heater full blast and drive home to his

warm house with his comfy sofa and roaring fireplace and dry clothes. His trip down memory lane had been fun, but he was finished, there was nothing else he needed out of this past. He had brought along everything he needed. Nothing had been left behind.

The snowstorm had been blowing down its dreaded bounty for two weeks when Adam stepped onto the old grass covered lawn that separated the road and its slush and salt and discolored snow from the playground's immaculately covered landscape. The snow had really begun to dig into the old playground and Adam supposed, him too. The cheap discolored plastic top of the jungle gym had two weeks of snow piled on top, marred only by the occasional kid with a wish to see it all come tumbling down. The old tennis courts were untouched except for a few footprints made by some hopeful who thought that a game might still be played anyway. The hill at the back of the small park was crisscrossed in the lines of old sleds, rushing down on their way to collide with a tree or some poor toddler not paying attention. And somehow all of this, was exactly how it had been all that time ago. Adam had stepped into a park, but he had also stepped back into the past.

The snow was beginning to come down in earnest around him as Adam passed by the old swing set, shaking back and forth in the growing breeze. It soaked into the top of his beanie and found its way into the cracks between his gloves and his coat. Soon, Adam was blinking the flakes out of his eyes as he stepped through the snowdrift at the back of the playground. Memories flooded his mind during the bluster. A warm summer day far gone when he had tried to learn tennis with his dad on the cracked surface of the old court, a breezy autumn day when the wind had picked up and carried the leaves around in a small tornado as Adam and his friends watched on in wonder, a spring game of tag that had given Adam a skinned knee and a few tears that he dutifully hid from his friends, all appeared before him like refracting lights in the flakes around him piercing the veil of time on all sides as he plunged deeper into the storm.

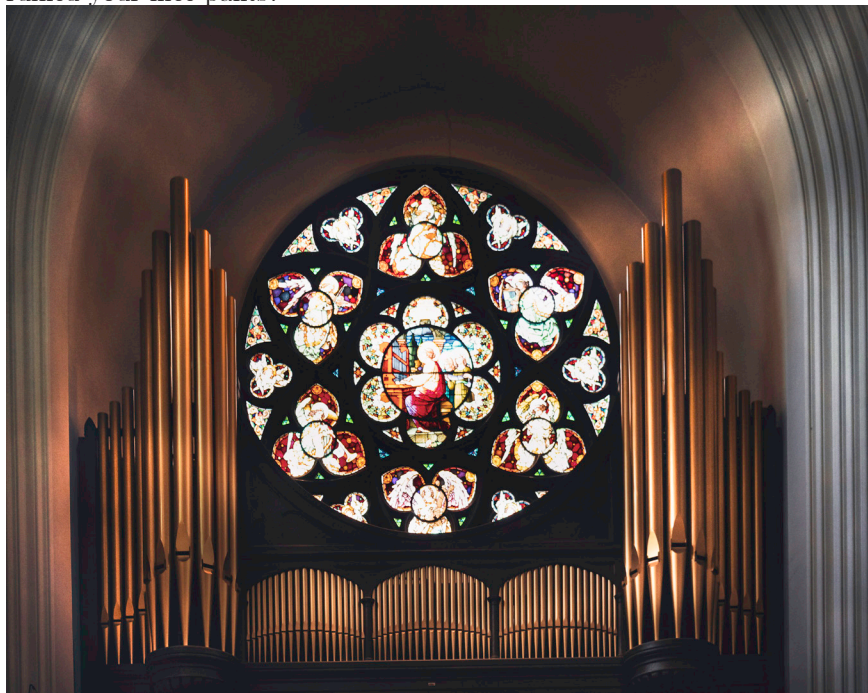
Adam's body shivered in an attempt to reject the cold suffusing into him as he reached the old sledding hill, but the cold had sunk its claws in deep and was not letting go. The snow-covered car under the old sycamore was just a distant memory now, like those swirling around with the ice on the breeze. The sledding hill laid before him, but as Adam put one foot down he slipped and came down hard into the drift coating the hillside. His gloves were now thoroughly soaked, and he doubted his pants would last much longer. If he didn't leave the cold might take him, but Adam could avoid this no longer. He needed to remember, to see that which he had once known for one last time. He crawled up the hillside, sometimes on his feet, others on his hands and knees. His ascent to the top was marked with naught but two footprints in the ever deepening snow. Footprints that were to mark the next passage of Adam's descent down this road.

A forest path appeared then and was undertaken once again by the man out of time. It was trudged through, its branches and leaves, heavy with snow, pushed back and cracked to make room for a much larger traveler. It too tore at the clothes that now provided Adam little warmth, joining in its brother's marking of tears on Adam's too expensive coat and wool scarf. But now it held up one final challenge before Adam, a large low-hanging tree he would have to scramble under. The

path saw as Adam ducked under and shuffled along, now adding mud to both his boots and his sodden gloves. The branches caught, they tore, but with a final yank Adam was free again, of both the trail and his black beanie.

His black hair now covered in the mud and leaves of the passage and coated with the snow still perpetually plummeting down around him, Adam reached a clearing. He looked up to his left at an old balcony, weighed down heavily with snow and bending with the rot of time. He remembered the days he and his friends ran past this porch, its residents, the residents of some long forgotten old folk's home, how they had shouted down to the kids,

"Stop running on our lawn! You're ruining the view. And you'll mess up those nice pants of yours! You want your momma mad cause you ruined your nice pants?"



Paul Bytnar, 12

Adam and his friends hadn't minded much what they were saying as much as the way they said. Like an old raspy mummy giving a prophetic warning to a group of unworthy children. They had made it into a game. Someone would shout,

"Hey I bet you can't go up and touch the tree by the porch."

And someone would shout,

"That's suicide!"

And then the races would be off.

"Well if you weren't chicken you would do it!"

"I heard once that Petey carved his name into the side!"

"I could do that!"

"Then why don't you?"

Adam walked over to the old tree, marred by years of kids who

had first heard the story from a friend of a friend. Only the bravest could go up and carve their name into it, and only the fastest survived when the grounds keeper came to catch them. Adam realized that his friends were probably once the highlight of those residents' days. With the scarcity of visitors, the trespassing kids were probably the only people outside of the home that they talked to all day. Adam realized that maybe they hadn't been mad at all when they scolded the children for tearing holes in their good pants or caking mud into the fronts of their shirts, the elders were probably just imparting misunderstood advice. But now the residents were gone. Adam's friends had simply not shown up in that clearing one day and the time spent together by those two disparate groups was over.

Adam peeled off one mud and snow caked glove and pressed his hand against the side of the old tree. He traced the lines left by the kids and found their names: Charlie, Claire, the legendary Petey, Smith, Matthew, John. He bent down and curled around the tree to a little bulge near the roots and found his own name right where he left it. Adam. The ground had shifted and mud now attempted to cover the lines, but Adam's name was still in that tree. He had remembered it was there. As the cold turned the tips of his hand red and cracked, it was also beginning to bring back what he had forgotten, what he had left behind.

Why had he forgotten? He couldn't remember, but he knew where to go now. His boots left tracks in the snow as he moved across the clearing. His gloves had been stuffed into the pocket on the side of his coat, too damp to be useful anymore, and now his hands were hiding deep within the pockets of his pants. His hair, no longer protected by the beanie, had long since been drenched and now laid heavy in front of his eyes and over his ears. But the cold had already made its home in Adam. He had confronted it in that park, and on the path, and he was confronting it now again as he reached his next destination.

The old public pool had been shut down for months when Adam reached the old chain-link fence that surrounded it. Its walkways had been undisturbed until Adam had hopped the fence and left two large boot prints in the pristine snow. Its basin had been filled with a different kind of water, leaving a sheet that looked almost deep enough to jump into. Its peeling paint had been frozen in stasis until Adam had dragged his hand along the wall, breaking the chips off and leaving shards under his fingernails. Adam supposed it would open once again in the summer. Kids fresh out of school would flock here with their swim trunks and towels thrown over their shoulders. The old fraying rope would be thrown out into the water to separate the shallows from the deep end. The spring of the diving board would be audible for miles as kids and adults alike lined up to prove they could make the biggest splash. A single lifeguard would sit high in their chair, hoping against hope that he would never have to actually do his job.

As the kaleidoscope of snowflakes obscured his vision with their blanketing force, so too did memories of this fateful location. This pool had been a haven for his friends during their summertime jaunts. They could bring the meltiest of ice cream, and spend the entire day just playing in the water. When the weather got scorching in July and August, the pool could always be counted on to be just a little too warm. That didn't bother Adam and his friends, though, as they spent the whole day there anyway. None of them had cars, or errands, or even jobs besides cleaning up their rooms. They had been free to see the world as it was

and to appreciate all it contained. With their growing up, though, priorities had changed. Like the pool closing in winter, they had closed up shop and one day, a day that none of them had foreseen, they had played at the old public pool for the last time.

All that was left was a single jumped fence and a backyard cut through and Adam was there. He supposed that he had seen this old building a million times, from this exact vantage point even, but it had been years since he had approached it from this way. He had been here as early as this morning, but now something had changed. He had left in a modest car, travelling along the slush-covered roads and contributing to the discolored snow that piled along its edges. But he had come back in another manner entirely. Where every day he had come home to the front and immediately entered the garage, now he was really forced to see it from all sides. The old wood and brick siding did little to add to its beauty, but it had been there since time immemorial and Adam knew that. The old waist high chain-link fence surrounded the property as if intruders could be stopped by merely forcing them to lift a leg over the side. And old oak tree stood in one corner of the yard, an oak tree Adam had fallen out of more times than he could ever remember. Adam had arrived at his childhood home, but not the one he had slept in every night since his parents' death, the home that Adam had slept in on dreary school nights and on Christmas Eves and everything in between. He had arrived at the same place from a different road and discovered it was not the same at all.

The snowstorm had been blowing for two weeks when Adam decided to stay in his childhood home. Maybe tomorrow that decision would change, Adam would wake up in the morning trying to grasp at the lesson he had learned like a dreamer in the night or a child trying to hold onto a melting snowflake, but for now Adam had decided to stay. He had started a fire to warm up both his sodden clothes and his probably frostbitten fingers, but came to find that in some way that he doubted he would ever know, he had become warmer than under all those layers. Maybe tomorrow everything would change again, but for tonight Adam was content to call up an old friend not seen in years, and sit by the fire while he still saw the world for all it was.

The snowstorm was finally beginning to die down outside. The salt would remain for days on the sidewalk, and the discolored snow on the side of the road would remain for weeks, but it seemed at least to Mrs. Margorie's cats that things were beginning to change for the better. And while the snowstorm might return later, or the sun would melt it all away, but for now if one was to walk down the old sidewalk with its weathered cracks and old cemented footprints and slip on the black ice still lurking where the salt doesn't reach, maybe when they lifted their head off the ground they would turn a little to one side and see a single set of footprints trailing off into the pristine snow.

The Hell It Will

by Jonathan Fales, 12

Jeremy brings his hunting knife, waterproof matches, a tarp, 500 feet of rope with a 750-pound load capacity, couple days-worth of clean clothes, and a very worn sleeping bag that he had since he was thirty years old, the first time he went camping. Right before the last shred of light fades he came across a small island that he deemed fit for his liking. He finds a good spot to dock and begins to set up camp.

Jeremy Abaddon is a retired forty-five-year-old man with no wife or children. He lives near Naples, Florida, with his friend of twenty years, Jim Dallan, who is the same age, in a condo that overlooks Naples Beach which is just a quarter of a mile away. He loves to go on camping trips all around the United States in National and State Parks. Some of his favorite things to do while on these trips is to go fishing and hiking. After every trip he finds a local pawn shop. He never has skipped out on going to a pawn shop after because it is the one thing he looks forward to the most. It is Sunday around 7:30 PM right in the peak of June. The sun is just barely starting to set and Jeremy is looking out to the horizon from his balcony. He watches the few remaining boats on the water come in and dolphin pod swimming back out to sea. Jim is inside making a dinner of six fresh spiny lobsters from the Gulf and two bowls of pasta loaded with clams that they had just hunted for earlier that day. Jeremy lives for the thrill of adventure. While watching the few boats coming in a desire rises to the front of his thoughts. "Jim," he called. "Hey, I just got a great idea. Let's go camp'n!"

"Hold that thought Jerm. I'm take'n the lobster out of the pot," he says as the lid to the pot crashes to the floor.

"You need a hand in there?"

"Nope, I got it. After I

finish up with this we'll be ready to eat. Can we can talk while eat'n?"

"Yup, no problem," Jeremy responds as he walks back inside and heads toward the silverware drawer to grab forks and cloth napkins.



Jim carries over two huge bowl of pasta with two good sized lobsters on top. "Thanks for making dinner tonight Jim. Looks delicious!"

"No problem, you bought it all. I just cooked it so thank you."

"You're welcome. Man this is my favorite meal!"

“Mine too. So what did you want to tell me?”

“Oh yeah! I had the idea to go camping in the everglades this week in honor of Johnny. Ya know it’s the twentieth anniversary of the accident.” John Ajal, Johnny as Jim and Jeremy called him, was Jim and Jeremy’s best friend who introduced them to each other by going on a camping trip in the everglades. Jim went to high school with Johnny and Jeremy met him in the Marines in 1995 while the US was involved in the Bosnian Civil War. Johnny died while he and Jeremy were gathering firewood. He accidentally tripped on an exposed root and hit his head on a big rock. It ended up cracking his skull and causing internal bleeding.

“You know I don’t like going camping down there anymore. It doesn’t have the same feeling without him with us.”

“Come on, you know that Johnny wouldn’t want that to ruin your experience. And plus we go every year so we can remember him as the person he was when he was alive. Also we’ll only be there for three days.”

“Don’t you try and guilt me into this. I only see the glades as the place where he died now, and that won’t change.”

“I understand, but could you just tag along to keep me company. You don’t have to do anything crazy, you being there would make all the difference to me.”

“Alright fine, but we’re not going back to the spot where it happened if I go. Deal?”

“Deal.”



Nick Hale, 12

After they finish their dinner they go to their rooms, do some laundry, and packed their things for the next day. The next morning, Jeremy wakes up just after 6:30 and gets ready for the day, dresses himself with a red, sun-faded Marines tee-shirt, a fraying pair of light blue jeans, and a pair of brown and camo hunting boots. Jim wakes up shortly after him and they make a nice-sized breakfast of over-easy fried eggs on English Muffins along with griddle fried pepperoni. Once they finish breakfast they load up Jeremy’s 2021 silver Ford F150, that was parked next to his 2020 black Escalade, with their cooking materials such as pots, pans, and clothing. Jim also packs Jeremy’s Hornady .22 revolver in case if they come across any gators or deadly snakes. After they finish loading up, they hit the local Publix grocery store to grab food for the next three

days. They buy dry goods like cereal, noodles, and other miscellaneous items. They also get two one-and-a-half-inch thick fillet, three pounds of ground beef, tomato sauce, ten gallons of water, and some vegetables that can last in a cooler with ice. They get back on the road around ten. Sometime around 11:30 they stop for lunch at a Denny's. They finish lunch around quarter to one and drove another thirty minutes to the boat rental place for a total of almost two hours on the road from Publix.

When they pull into the parking lot they pass a huge sign that says: 'Ole Muddy's Fan Boat Rent-n-Vend'. They are greeted by the manager saying, "Hello there! How are y'all doing ta'day?"

"We're do'in just fine. How bout yarself," Jim replies.

"I'm doing very good; especially with this weather. My name is Ezra by the way."

"I'm Jim and this here is Jeremy."

"Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

"Is there anything I can help ya with?"

"Well ya see Jeremy and I are look'n to go on some sort of adventure to explore the everglades and to live off the land for a li'll bit. So we'll need us a boat to use."

"Ah, I see. Are y'all look'n to rent or possibly buy one of these beauties?"

"I'm just look'n to rent for now, but ya never know we may end up buying it."

"Well we got just the boat for you then. That one over there has a two hundred fifty horse power engine with a light aluminum body," pointing towards a generously sized seaplane. "She'll max out around a hundred twenty miles per hour I believe. Is this what you're look'n for good sir?"

"I reckon she'll do. How much will she be," Jim says as Jeremy puts on an olive windbreaker and walks over to boat.

"Bout four hundred a day and every day after that will be two fifty."

"Good deal. I'll take her."

As Jim and Ezra walk towards a little building to finalize the transaction Ezra says, "Your friend there not talk much? He hasn't said a word since y'all got here."

"Not really. Every once and a while he might say something to someone he's around but other than that he really just talks to me."

The building had a small gift shop inside with tee-shirts, hats, stickers, and signs that all said 'Ole Muddy's Fan Boat Rent-n-Vend'. After Jim pays Ezra to rent the boat he looks outside and sees Jeremy right in front of the boat as if inspecting every inch of the it. Jim and Ezra take the boat to the boat launch. It was now two hours till sunset, which is around 8:15, and Jeremy and Jim want to start their adventure before it becomes too dark to set up camp so they set off immediately and Jim decides to drive. As they speed through the everglades, Jeremy, with his powdery blue eyes, stared into the horizon; the bottom of the boat skimming the surface of the water, as they faded into the radiant, violet skyline.

Jeremy brought with him a hunting knife, a lighter, a tarp, rope, couple days-worth of clothes, and a sleeping bag. Right before the last shred of light fades they come across a small island that he and Jim deem fit

to their liking. They find a good spot to dock and begins to set up camp. Once they both have their tents set up Jeremy goes to gather wood to make a fire. Taking his knife, he whittles down some dead red mangrove roots to make a finely shaved tinder. He places them on a patch of dry ground and begins to place some small pieces of dead mangrove root on top of the shavings. Jim takes out a zippo lighter from his breast pocket of his dark green flannel; hands it to Jeremy who then uses it to light the tinder. He starts to blow gently, causing the delicate flames to grow larger and far more energetically. Placing larger sticks on top, Jeremy starts to build a tepee of sorts of larger pieces of wood such as dead, fallen limbs from cypress trees. Once the limbs light it whispers a gentle low-pitched cry as it evaporates off the moisture from the wood. Jeremy takes off his windbreaker now that the fire is starting to put off a decent amount of heat.

By now it is 8:45 and the fire is slowly burning down into hot coals. They both start to get hungry. Jim asks, "Hey, do you wants to make dinner tonight?"

"Nah, I'm good unless you want me to?"

"No, I'm fine with cooking. I just didn't know if you wanted to."

"Alright then. I can cook breakfast tomorrow."

"Dude we have cereal for breakfast, dry cereal. There is no cooking involved or needed."

"I'm just mess'n with ya. But really I can take the next hot meal we eat."

"Sounds good!"

Jim gets out a skillet that they packed and drizzles some olive oil on it with some garlic bulbs cut in half horizontally, placing it on top of the coals to get it nice and hot.

"Don't let'em burn now Jim," Jeremy says while leaning back against a tree and closing his eyes.

"Shut your mouth. I've been cooking filet since you were a baby," Jim responds.

"We are the same age you old fool."

"My point exactly," Jim says then he proceeds to get the fillets out of the cooler. He seasons them with salt, pepper, and a tiny bit of ground



black truffle and then lays them very carefully into the searing hot pan. He cooks them for about four to five minutes on each side, giving them a beautiful crust.

“Damn! Smells good Jim! Bout how long till they be ready?”

“Probably around eight minutes.”

“Why will it take that long? You’ve been cooking them for bout ten minutes already!”

“I just flipped them about three minutes ago and they have to rest for a bit still.”

“All right, just wake me up when they’re ready.”

With the last side done cooking, Jim places the filets on a wooden cutting board they brought, letting them rest for five minutes. While they are resting he sprinkles some additional truffle on top.



Paul Bytnar, 12

“Jerm! Wake up old man, food’s ready!”

Jeremy gets up and they eat. After taking the first bite Jeremy howls, “Damn this is some fine filet. Best steak I’ve eaten in a long time.”

“Same here,” Jim replies.

Once they finish eating they clean up the dishes from dinner, they have a little scotch that Jeremy brought with him in a little flask and hit the sack.

The next morning Jim and Jeremy get the fire going again to help keep the mosquitos and other bugs at bay. Once the fire is resuscitated, they eat breakfast and get both change into old denim jeans, boots, a ball cap, and a tee shirt. They fill up their water bottles from the water jugs they bought and go on a morning hike. Right before they leave camp

Jim calls to Jeremy holding the revolver out to hand to him, "Hey, I brought your pistol just in case if we run into any trouble out here. There are drug deals and other sketchy things that go down out here, not to mention the gators and snakes."

"Good thinking," Jeremy says as he accepts the gun from Jim.

They start their hike and they walk for two miles. Jim stops walking but Jeremy doesn't notice. Jim finally says, "Hey Jerm, come back here and look at this," after he had already walked a good fifty feet past him.

"What is it?"

"I think I found something."

"Alright I'm coming over," Jeremy replies. He starts to walk back to Jim but he then gets a glimpse of what Jim found and is struck with a sense of panic. A severely worn brown, leather trifold wallet with the United States Marine Core Crest branded on the front of it. It was buried underneath a layer of dirt and fallen mangrove branches in the middle of the path right next to the bank.

Jim yells, "Hurry, I think I know whose it is. I think it is Johnny's wallet. The morning before he died I saw him put it in his pocket and it looked exactly like this!"

Trying to come up with something quick Jeremy replies, "Are you sure, because police say he lost it while him and I were looking for firewood. They said it must have fallen out when he bent down or even at camp when he sat down and it fell into a pile of leaves or something."

"Yeah, but if that did happen don't you think the police would have been able to find it? I mean you did tell them where you gathered fire wood."

"They probably didn't think it was important. I mean it doesn't really matter because we knew who he was and he didn't get robbed. I was with him the entire time," Jeremy said just before Jim opened the wallet. "Jim don't open that! You don't know whose it is and it is probably stolen. Do you want your prints on it?"

"I doubt it. It definitely belonged to a Marine and I highly doubt someone who tried to mug a Marine would get away with it. I mean you know better than anyone that a Marine is more than capable of talking down a three-hundred-pound person and what person of even close weight is going to be out in the middle of the everglades?"

Jim, ignoring Jeremy's warning, picks up the wallet and opens it. He reads aloud the name on the driver's license, "John Ajal, five foot ten inches and two hundred five pounds. My God it's Johnny's! How the hell did it end up here? We weren't even camping on this island. We were at least five miles away."

"I told you not to open it," Jeremy says as Jim looks up finding himself looking right down barrel of the .22 pistol.

"What's going on Jeremy? Why you point'n that thing at me?"

"I told you not to open it. You're asking too many questions."

"What do you mean?"

"I might as well tell you. This is what really happened: It was late at night and we were gathering firewood as you already know. Johnny and I started talking and he said he had some good news. He said, 'Jerm, ya remember that ticket we bought together?'

I said, 'What ticket? I don't remember buying a ticket.'

'The Powerball ticket you idiot.'

'Oh yeah. I forgot about that but yes, continue.'

'Yes, well I went to check the numbers and when I saw them I said:

‘Well I’ll be damned, we won. Jerm, we won the lottery!’

‘You’re kidding right?’

‘Nope!’

‘How much did we win?’

‘We won 13.5 million dollars and that is with tax already taken out!’

‘Okay, now I really know your messing with me. Come on you really expect me to believe that?’

‘Jerm, it’s for real.’

‘Dude, really? I can’t believe we won! Where is the ticket?’

‘I have it in my wallet. Why?’

‘I was just making sure you are keeping it safe.’

‘Alright. Hey, I had an idea I wanted to run past you.’

‘Okay, throw it at me Johnny.’

‘I thought it would be a good idea to split the money with Jim.’

‘You mean that awkward dude back at camp?’

‘Yup.’

‘Yeah, that’s not happening.’

‘Why not?’

‘First of all, I don’t believe he chipped in to pay for the ticket and second of all, that means instead of splitting the money two ways we’d be splitting three.’

‘When I said I wanted to run an idea past you and that it was giving Jim a cut, I wasn’t as much asking you as I was telling you.’

‘You bastard. There is no way in hell that I would ever give away a third of my cut to that guy I barely even know.’

‘Well then I guess the money will just have to be split between Jim and I.’

‘The hell it will,’ I screamed at him. At that moment I realized that if I wanted my money I was going to have to take it by force. That’s when I picked up the rock, raised it over my head and smashed it into the right side of his head.

The split second before the rock hit him he yelled, “No!”

After he was taken care of, I placed the rock underneath his head, took out his wallet, and then I ran back to camp to call for help. I never wanted to kill him, but it was the only way of ensuring that he wouldn’t cheat me out of my money. After the police came and took the body and you went with them, I cleaned up camp and used the boat we had rented to get to an island farther away where I could dispose of the wallet after I took out the ticket. I couldn’t have left it there because it would have had all of my fingerprints on it.”

“Well then, does it all make sense now?”

“All except for the part about why we ended up on the island you dumped the wallet.”

“Well that was a coincidence. Because you were driving I wasn’t paying attention to where we were and it just so happened that you thought this island would be where we camped. Anything else that you need explained before I cut off this loose end?”

“No.”

Immediately after the word left Jim’s mouth Jeremy pulled the trigger. That was Jim’s last word he ever spoke, the same exact word Johnny said before his death.

King

by Phillip Boveri, 12

It was only 6 AM on a Saturday morning. The woods were quiet and cold, perfect conditions for the hunt. I have been waiting all year for this deer season. Since I didn't get anything in the past two years, I wanted this year to be different. My name is Thomas and I am 17 years old. I'm 5'10, have brown hair, ocean blue eyes, and I am very passionate about hunting. I asked my dad, Jerry, if he would be interested in going with me, but he wasn't up for it. I'm hunting a deer that my dad and I nicknamed "King". King is a 14-point buck. His antlers surround his head like a crown and we thought that it was a fitting name for him. He is the biggest deer that we've ever seen. My dad and I have been trying to harvest this deer for the past five years, but every year he seems to fly under our radar. We know he's out there because we're always getting footage of him on our trail cams, but he seems to avoid the cams when we're around them. As I was sitting in the stand, I kept telling myself to not get tempted to shoot another deer because I was here for one reason and one reason only -- to hunt King. After only seeing a couple does, I decided to head back home.

We live on a 400-acre property right outside of a small town in Iowa called Ashville. Our house is an old cabin that was built about 75 years ago in 1944. When I stepped through the janky, rotting front doorway of the house, Jerry said,

"Did you get him!?"

"Not this time." I responded with a chuckle.

I love how excited my dad gets over hunting. It's one of my favorite parts about coming back to the house, and what I want to see more than anything is his reaction when I come through that door and tell him that King is down. My dad and I have always had a great relationship, especially because I am the only son of 3 children. I have two older sisters, Lily, the oldest, and Sam, the middle child.

Lily, Sam, and our mother aren't big into hunting, but for my dad and I, hunting has always been a big part of our lives ever since I was born, and we really like to bond over it. I started going with my dad when I was about 9 and started to go by myself at the age of 13. Jerry is getting older so it's becoming harder for him to move around and he doesn't feel comfortable going alone. It's hard for me to see how Jerry is becoming less capable to hunt. He is the most loving man I know and it scares me to know that one of these next few hunts could be his last hunt ever.

I'm not that upset about today's hunt. I didn't really expect to see him today anyway since I've only seen him one time in person with Jerry a few years back. I remember that day like it was yesterday. I remember sitting in the stand to the right of Jerry, I remember the feeling of the roughness of the under-barrel of the rifle rubbing against my bibs



Phil Boveri, 12



Phillip Boveri, 12

as I tapped my foot. I remember how cold it was, my dad and I shivering against the tree, trying to lean up against each other for warmth. The moment we decided to head back to the UTV, we saw him. Our jaws dropped. It was possibly the best and worst day ever. We were already on the ground and didn't have a shot on him so we stood there and watched him for about five minutes before he saw us and ran away. It was one of the coolest moments of my life nevertheless. We still talk about it to this day.

As the sun began to fall under the line where the sky meets the trees, I knew that I was going to be tired all morning if I didn't get to bed soon, so I hopped in bed and got a good night sleep.

Alarm ringing

It was early Sunday morning. I quickly hopped out of bed, stretched, and started getting ready for day two of the season. It was 6 AM and I wanted to get out there by 6:45 since that was when the sun would rise. Jerry was already awake, waiting downstairs.

"You movin' around up there yet?", Jerry yelled up to me.

"Yes sir.", I responded with a grin on my face.

I was ready. I had my jacket, bibs, boots, rifle, and backpack with all of the essentials: deer bleat, can call, rattle bag, buck snort call, hand warmers, water bottles, and toilet paper, just in case. I hopped in the UTV and had a lead foot all the way up the hill, through the woods and to my stand. I made it up to the stand at 6:30 and sat in the stand in silence for about 30 minutes before I started to call.

I started to lose hope early on since just before the sun rises is the most active time for the deer. I didn't let that mess with my hunt, however. I sat in that stand, calling, doing everything in my power to influence a deer to come towards my direction. Every once in a while, an acorn or twig will fall from the trees, hitting the dead leaves on the winter ground, tricking me into thinking that I had just heard the footstep of a deer.

It has been quiet up to this point until suddenly, I heard the loud



bang of another hunter in the distant woods. I hate the sound of gunshots. I always end up convincing myself that King had been taken every time that someone shoots, but I know that King has never wandered that far from the property before.

I was getting sick of the sound of the squirrels running around in the leaves because I couldn't tell if it was a deer or not. It was driving me crazy. I tried to focus on something else and that's when it happened. About 80

yards in front of the stand, there was movement. I couldn't tell what it was since it was blocked by low hanging branches and leaves from small trees. I kept my eyes pinned on that same spot until the movement continued, and when it did, I could not believe my eyes. It was King. My heart was pounding, palms were sweating, I had buck fever. The adrenaline running through my body was the most intense adrenaline rush I have ever felt. Trying my hardest to keep the rifle steady, I aimed it at King and waited for a good opportunity. King was behind a tree, keeping me from getting a good shot on him. He stood there for about 5 minutes until another gunshot sounded in the distant woods. King got spooked and ran off, stripping me from my most important goal.

I sat there, frozen, hoping that King would make his way back, but I then gave up and decided to head back home. I was upset. I was robbed of an opportunity of a lifetime by a gunshot from a distant neighbor. When I arrived at the front door, Jerry asked, as always,

"Did you get him?!"

"Almost, I had him in my sights, but right before I got a chance to take him, he was spooked."

"Damn, why didn't you stick around to see if he'd come back?"

"I couldn't convince myself to stay out there. I had already accepted the fact that he was gone."

Later that night, I wanted to check to see if King ever did return so I drove back up to the stand, grabbed the SD card that was in the trail camera and brought it back to the house. I sat there for about 15 minutes downloading the pictures onto my school laptop. As I was scrolling through, I saw that King did return about an hour and a half after I had left. This was very unsettling for me. If I had only stayed out there for a little longer, I would have gotten the deer I've been after, but now I have to wait until the next weekend because I have school that week. I sat in bed for the rest of the night thinking about how I could've changed the outcome of the hunt.

The next morning, I grabbed my backpack, threw it in my F150, and took off. I just wanted to get this week over with so that he could get back to hunting. Throughout most of my classes, I had been working on this sketch of King. I was told to stop only a couple of times throughout the day, but I didn't listen. I was not in school mode during this time. I was so into hunting mode that I began to view school as a distraction.

The next day during school, the principal pulled me out of class while I was doodling once again. I assumed that I was in trouble since I hadn't been working so I was nervous. When I got to his office, I could

see on his face that there was something wrong. Principal Laury didn't quite know how to tell me what had happened.

"What happened?" I asked.

"It's a family emergency." Mr. Laury responded.

"Is everything alright, is someone hurt?"

"I'm afraid it's about your dad."

I was scared. I sat in the office for about 30 minutes, waiting for my mom to show up. I was trying hard to hold back the tears, but I couldn't. The moment I saw my mom come through that door crying, I knew it was bad.

Jerry had been at home and decided to go sit out on the porch. As he stepped out the door, the rotting boards below his feet made a loud cracking sound as he fell through. Parts of the split, rotten wood pierced him in many areas on his way down as his head banged against the boards. He was rushed to the hospital in critical condition.

I began to blame himself. I knew those boards needed to be replaced. I knew that they were going to break at some point. I knew that he could've prevented this. I began to cry. I didn't try to hold the tears back anymore. I couldn't believe that my dad was moments away from possible death.

For the next few days, my family and I had all been at home, worried sick about Jerry, and then on Thursday, our family received a phone call. The call was from Jerry's doctor.

"We've done all we could but he didn't make it. I'm sorry."

I couldn't believe that my best friend had just passed away. I didn't know what to think. I sat in my bed all night thinking about all of the good times that we've spent together. The thought that I wouldn't be able to make any more memories with my father tore me apart.

I stayed home for the rest of the week. When Saturday finally came, I decided to get back in the stand because I knew that my dad would've wanted that. I sat in the stand for a couple hours and saw nothing. When I walked through my front door, the silence destroyed my heart. Knowing my dad would never be there to ask, "Did you get him?!" ever again was something that I would never get over. All I have ever wanted was to walk through that door one day and say,

"I got him, dad."

I was overwhelmed with so many different emotions so I just decided to go back to my room and cool off for the rest of the night. I sat in my bed and scrolled through all of my pictures with us, remembering how great of a person he was. I wanted to do something in memory of him so I promised myself that I was going to sit in the stand all day on Sunday so that I can finally win this battle against King for my dad.

The next morning, I grabbed everything I'd need to last the whole day in the stand: food, water, rifle, hunting bag, boots, bibs, and my jacket. I wasn't messing around. I hopped on my four wheeler and took off. I got in my stand about an hour before sunrise at 6:47. I wasn't allowed to shoot until 30 minutes before sunrise so I sat there, dead silent, waiting for King.

The action started early this morn-



Phillip Boveri, 12

ing. There were already four does that passed just below the stand and I could see a buck sniffing and following their trail in the distance. I couldn't tell if it was king or not, but it was moving slowly, probably because it didn't want to scare off the does.

The buck had made its way a bit closer, but sadly it wasn't King. King has 14 points, this one was only a 10 pointer. As the buck walked under my stand, I could see that it had been in a fight and got roughed up pretty good. I was surprised since he was the biggest deer I've ever seen on our property other than King, so he must've gotten in a fight with him. This gave me hope. If this deer did get in a fight with King, then King must be around.

Up to this point it had been quiet. The only movement I've seen was squirrels rustling through the dead leaves on the ground. I believed that it was because I was going too crazy on the calls so I decided to give up on that.

Due to the very little movement, I had fallen asleep and had just woken up to the sound of a plane flying overhead. I felt ashamed of myself. I felt like I had let my dad down, but I wasn't ready to give up yet. I grabbed the snort call out of my bag and blew, waited a few seconds, then blew again. Only seconds later, there were three does that ran across right in front of me, followed by a loud snort. I began to shake. I couldn't tell if it was because I was nervous or cold. I grabbed my rifle, loaded a bullet, and sat there motionless as if I were a statue. I could hear him stomping. Moments later, he emerged from the bushes. It was King. He was walking right in the path of the does that had just gone by. My stomach dropped. I didn't believe it. King was walking lined up to give me a perfect shot. I flicked the safety off, aimed my rifle, and waited for the right moment. King took a few more steps forward, turned broadside, and gave me the perfect angle. I wasn't going to let this moment slip through my fingers. I looked down my scope, pointed the crosshairs at King's heart, and slowly began to pull the trigger. BANG!

I couldn't believe it. I had just taken my first ever shot at King. Almost instantly, King dropped. For the next few minutes, I sat there in my stand in silence. I was happy and heartbroken at the same time. I had finally gotten the biggest deer of my life, but the journey ended without the person I started it with. I worked up the courage to climb out of my stand. I started to make my way over to king. As I got closer, I became more and more amazed with the size of this deer. It was so big and so beautiful. I would've given anything just to be able to share this moment with my dad. I began to get emotional because this isn't the way I wanted it to end. I cleaned him, tossed him in the bed of my UTV, and worked my way through the thick woods back towards the house.



Phillip Boveri, 12

Right when I got home, I ran in the house and gave my mom a hug. I told her that I got King and she said,

"Your dad would be so proud."

"I miss him so much already." I replied as I began to cry.

She squeezed me tighter. My parents have always been there for my sisters and me. Through the highs and the lows, they always made us their number one priority. I wanted my mom there to share this moment with me as I took King to our local taxidermist, whom we called Butch, to get a shoulder mount on the deer.

"Damn, that's the biggest deer I've ever seen!" Butch said.

"Yup, my dad and I have been hunting him for years, we finally got him." I responded.

"I'm sorry about what happened to your dad, he was a great man and a great father, he is in a better place looking down on you with so much excitement, I guarantee it."

Butch saying this to me really helped me feel better. Butch has always been a sympathetic man and he always has the right words to say. He knew my dad better than anyone and he knows how great of a man he was. The relationships that my dad had made with almost everyone he met were inspiring. Everyone who knew him loved him. When Butch asked me what I wanted the text to say on the mount, I gave him a sticky note that I had already written out that says,

"King"

Harvested on 11/18/2019

Shot by Thomas Clark & Jerry Clark

Butch loved it. My dad had mentioned King to him before and explained how we've been hunting him for a while and he knows that putting his name on the mount would've made him so happy.

The next day was my dad's funeral. This whole week went by so slowly. I didn't know if I was ready for it. I walked in the church and I felt like everyone's eyes were on me. It was a really bad time for me. My mom, sisters, and I walked up to the front and took our seats. When the priest began talking, I just felt empty. The worst part for me was when my oldest sister began her eulogy. I was balling my eyes out for the rest of the funeral. I was not ready for this day to come, I never really expected something this bad to happen to me. When the time came and we were ready to bury him, I wanted to do one last thing for him. When everyone was dropping flowers on his casket, I reached in my pocket and pulled out the shell of the bullet that I shot King with. In my eyes, this was the best way for me to honor the life of my dad, so I dropped the shell in with the rest of the flowers. Afterwards, my mom, sisters, and I went back home and I tried to distract myself from my sadness by doodling a picture of my dad and I with King that I could put up on my wall.

Six months later, everything had calmed down. I had accepted the fact that my dad was gone, but not forgotten. I was sitting in my room working on homework when my phone rang. It was Butch. I answered it and he told me that the mount was ready. I was so excited. I drove over to pick it up and it was just the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I went back home and found a spot to put it up in the house. Right above the fireplace. Now, every time I look at it, I remember what my dad and I went through together and how great of a father he was to me.

Trouble in Albany

by Kevin Korte, 12

It was a bright, sunny day in Albany, New York. It was rather chilly in the upstate that day, and it was right around 45 degrees with a howling wind that pierced the silence of the farmland with the eerie sound of a distorted “hoo” of an owl that made anyone who heard it rather uncomfortable.

As I ventured out of my house that day to meet my friends, Zack and Michael, I was quite quickly reminded that I forgot my jacket, and what a bad decision that was. My name is Jacob Doakes, and I suppose you should get to know a little more about me and my friends before I can truly start this story.

Starting with me, I am 15 years old, I attend Albany Public High School, I am about 6-feet-tall and I weigh about 160 pounds. A little about myself, I am extremely timid. I put on a front for myself where I act extremely cool, but deep down inside, there’s a creeping darkness and curiosity. I think that might stem from the trust issues I was left with after my dad left my mom and me last year. Either way I’m insecure, since I have no idea what people see when they look at me. My dad saw what he needed to see and he didn’t like it. Besides Michael and Zack, I pretty much keep solely to myself.

As for Michael and Zack however, I only met them this year, freshman year and they were the only ones who seemed like they weren’t judgmental whatsoever. So I let them in I guess. For the long run, I guess I’ll just see where it leads. I don’t really need friends anyway. I’m an introvert if you couldn’t tell.

Zack is the group leader. He’s about 6’3” and 200 pounds which is pretty intimidating, so I was just avoiding trying to piss him off because of his rash decision making. He always pressures us into doing dumb things, and it has proven costly almost every time. Earlier today Zack convinced Michael to go down a hill on his bike and crash into the melting snow bank at the bottom.

“I bet you won’t do it. You’re just a chicken, the hill’s not even that high” Zack taunted Michael.

“Oh you really think I won’t You’re wrong,” Michael responded.

That proved costly for Michael, as he ended up with a broken arm once he crashed through the snow bank, and landed wrong on the curb. That was just this morning, too, I could name 15 other times like this where we almost got hurt because of Zack being a daredevil.

This brings me to Michael. Michael seems extremely similar to me. Except his family is perfect, and he doesn’t have the same problems that I have had. Michael is timid to a fault and will never stick up for himself. That’s what helped him end up in the hospital today. As far as I am concerned this friend group is destined to bust up and go its separate ways in a year or so.

But as I walk down this mushy, wet, spring sidewalk telling you about my friends as the sun begins to fall behind my back, there’s something about them. I can’t put my finger on it. My friends are just weirder than kids I would have thought I’d make friends with in high school. For me friendships tend to be just for people who get lonely easily, and I

don't, so I have yet to understand why I am in the predicament I am in in the first place.

Tonight, I am going to Michael's house. Michael's dad is a cardiothoracic surgeon, which means two things. First and foremost, his job is cutting into people's chest to repair their hearts and lungs. Maybe I should get him to talk to my dad and he might give him a change of heart. Second, he makes a lot of money. Michael's house is ginormous. However, as I walk up the street to meet my friends, something odd catches my eye.

"Dude I can't believe you hit that shot on me this game is broken!" Michael shouted at Zack.

"No way bro! I'm just better than you!" Zack retorts.

As these two morons lose it on each other on the couch I can't help but get lost in what I saw on the way up to Michael's house today. I took a different way from my house and it proved to be informational. At the top of the giant hill in Michael's backyard, there sat an old, crappy barn. While it looked like it might be fun to explore, it didn't pique the exploring idea in my brain. It just seemed suspicious. It wasn't suspicious in a good way either, it really had me on edge. Just as I was about to return to the conversation, I hear Zack mention to Michael;

"Hey Michael, what's that stupid barn in your backyard?"

I've never seen anyone in all my 15 years get as red as Michael did right there. It was as if he knew something about the place, why it was creepy, or why it was on his property. Either way, he had answers.

"I don't know Zack; I have never been up there," Michael responded.

Now I didn't care how creepy this place was. It piqued my interest. I wanted to know what was out there, because as red as Michael got he knows there's something bad about it. Just as I was getting ready to mention exploring the barn tonight, Zack beat me to it.

"Michael I don't care what you have to say about that barn, but I'm checking it out tonight whether you say I can or not," Zack said, fresh with new mischief.

Considering Zack's manners for as long as I've known him, I understand why his parents might think boarding school is a good option for him. I personally can't confirm or deny it, but the rumor is Zack will not be in New York at all next year, and that his behavior is going to land him up in Maine at the new boarding school that just opened up in the northern area of Maine, country land as far as Zack's eyes will see will just be fields. However, in this situation I'm going to change my timid ways and back Zack.

"I agree. Zack I'll go with you later. Do we need flashlights?" I asked.

"NO guys!" Michael shouted. "My dad's stuff is up there. You can't explore it. Even I have never been up there!" Michael said back to our proposal.

"Yes we are," Zack said. "And you can't even stop me from doing it right now. So how are you going to later."

The arguing for those two went on for a little while. But all it took was some good old peer pressure and Michael would be coming with us. Five minutes later, he was excited and looking forward to being a part of the barrage on his dad's secret belongings.

We gathered flashlights after Michael's parents fell asleep, and we headed up that hill. I'm pretty sure Michael got PTSD from just the hill, having broken his arm just earlier today. Funny how some people just

can't learn. I guess Michael is one of them. As we approached the top of the hill we began to shine our flashlights on the door, slightly ajar, as if it was a signal that we should come inside.

As we approached the barn, we could see now that it was badly damaged, and it had not been cleaned for years. The exterior was dirty, and many planks of the wood used to build this barn were missing, others were chipped, or still in poor condition.

We looked behind us before entering the barn, just to ensure Michael's dad had not caught us sneaking out to his "work area." As we turned back, and realized the coast was clear, we entered the barn. Zach went first practically dragging Michael by ear to get him in there.

"Michael let's go! We're already up here, you're going inside!"

I heard Zack yell. As I passed him and Michael up, eager to get inside and explore, the first thing I noticed was the awful smell. It was gut-wrenching, and it was if something had died in the barn. If that was the case it had to be recent, because the smell was still extremely strong. Zack and Michael noticed it too, and Michael was instantly weirded out.

"It smells funny in here! Like something died in here!" Michael shouted, worried.

"It's a barn, Michael." Zack said. "Stuff dies in barns, stuff craps in barns, so it's not a surprise to me that the barn smells bad."

As we moved about the largely built barn, we kept feeling like something wasn't right. Nobody said a word the entire time, including Zack, which I thought was odd for his character. We eventually split into two groups, Michael and Zack, and I was by myself.

As I ventured off towards the other side of the barn to try and find something cool, I freeze. There's breathing. I hear it. It's getting closer to me. It couldn't possibly be Zack and Michael; they were on the other side of the barn.

Now I'm glad I have friends because if I was completely alone in this barn with whoever was breathing with me, I was screwed. I acted like nothing was wrong and went to find Zack and Michael, but for some reason they were nowhere to be found. I was the closest to the doors, it just seemed like they had vanished. That's when I heard a pair of screams, and I turned to see their bright flashlights shining in my face.

"We totally got you Jacob!" Michael claimed.

"Yeah you were white as a ghost! Hahaha!" Zack said.

"Oh yeah, you guys got me pretty good." I said.

I'm glad I responded that way because had I not, it most definitely would have ended in a petty argument about whether or not I was actually scared. Thankfully it didn't though. As I finished my sentence we heard a noise coming from the door, and turned to watch in horror, as a masked man pulled the door shut and locked it from the outside. We all quickly began looking for a way out, but to no avail as the only way in or out of the barn was through the big door at the front. That's when we heard it. A lighter. We watched as a path of gas trickled towards us. Shortly after, the gas turned from a thick, brown, liquid, into an orange and red ball of fire, hurdling itself towards us.

"Well this definitely is not good," Zack said, just trying to remain calm.

You could hear the fear in his voice though. Michael was beyond that point, he was tearful, and he was fighting with everything he had, trying to break some of the chipped wood, but whoever built this barn did a great job with making it sturdy. We were stuck.

We got as far away from the fire as possible and began to accept our fates, when Michael's father and some firefighters began breaking the door down. I remember thinking, "What if they can't get in here in time? What will happen to my mom?" But most importantly, I wanted to know who did this to us, and why. It didn't make sense.

I remember being scared at the end, because the fire was about to hit us, but I also remember how good of a feeling it was that I had my friends with me. None of us was alone, and we were all thankful for that. I was wrong about them. They're good kids in their own ways, and I remembered that I wouldn't know what my life would be like without them. Just as the fire was about to burn us alive, the wood had been broken in the front door and firefighters charged in. I remember Zack saying,

"No freaking way."

That's exactly what I thought as well. They quickly put out the fire and whisked us up and out of the barn. That's when I saw the cop cars. I was interested, because they seemed to be looking for the guy who lit the barn on fire. One of them started asking questions while we were getting our lung evaluations. He asked us;

"Do you guys know which way this guy ran after he set the barn on fire?"

Zack and I both responded no. Michael however, said yes.

"I saw the guy's foot shadow under the barn as he ran off. He ran directly behind the barn almost in a straight line." Michael told the officer.

"Thank you buddy that's going to help a lot."

The officer said, and he rushed over to his colleagues and told them what Michael had just mentioned.

The manhunt shifted towards behind the barn, and within 20 minutes they found the guy, still masked, halfway up a tree. They brought him down and brought him over to us. They told us,

"This is the guy who burnt the barn, correct?"

"Yes." We all responded.

"Well you guys can go ahead and take his mask off then. You guys deserve to know." The officers said.

I had a feeling I already knew who this person was. I could feel it in my stomach as if I was about to throw up. That feeling consumed me as we began to take off his mask.

Just as I suspected, but still in disbelief, the masked man was Jason Doakes, my father. He had the most sinister look. He meant to do it. He knew I was in that barn. I was no longer insecure about me. I was only infuriated about him. From that day on, I was glad that whatever caused him to leave, existed. Although I was positive it was not me, I could not say the same about my mother. I know he was probably kicked out by her, I just never put the dots together. That's why he wanted to burn the barn when I was inside. To get back at my mother.

I never blamed myself for my father leaving after that. After that night, I became very confident in myself. A year later, my dad was sentenced to 50 years for arson and attempted first degree murder in three counts, and would be spending the rest of his life in a maximum security facility. I will never go see him. Of that I am sure.

After that night, Michael, Zack, and I grew apart. Michael got into boxing, and he really started to stick up for himself, so I am proud of him. Zack did end up at boarding school for a year, and he came back completely different. He apologized to Michael for peer-pressureing him all

those times, and even changed his entire demeanor. I guess if I ever need to send one of my kids to boarding school I know which one to send them to.

As for me, I made a new group of friends, but I got way closer with my mom. I spend equal amount of time with my mom as I do with my friends, but I still would rather be with her.

I learned a valuable lesson that day in the barn. Life is short, and sometimes shorter, than you expect it to be. I learned that people you may view as a mentor or someone you look up to, may not respect you the same way. However, because of my father, I have become more confident, but I will keep my cards extremely close to my chest. But most importantly, I will not take this life for granted, and I am thankful for that night in the barn with Zack and Michael, even though it was the most uneasy night of my life.



Paul Bytnar,12

Art has No Color

by Tanner Jackson, 12

Joshua sat under the willow tree that provided refuge from the blistering Louisiana heat. Joshua sat with his paper and pencil. The pencil, so dear to him, was hand-carved and whittled to his liking. With every stroke, his brown and small hand produced a more lifelike and vivid image. Joshua had been drawing portraits for over 3 years now and was beginning to think of it as a profession. With obtaining all the education he could've being a black kid in the south, he was thinking artwork was his best option. Using pictures given to him by different people, Joshua crafts amazing bodies of work. With precision and ease, he stroked his pencil back in forth, shading and blending every line. Upon completion of his portrait, his father approached him. A large and intimidating man, he seemed to threaten any man with just a look to the eyes. Joshua's father, stern and overbearing, exclaimed,

"Silly boy, I have told you numerous times, you can't make no living drawing boy! You know that them white folk won't give you no chance. Shoot, you can't even be in the same place as them for the most part."

"But father, if you just look at it I think you will like it very much", Joshua replied.



"I said no, Joshua! Artists, don't make money! Now I want you home in 15 minutes. Your mother is almost done with dinner", said his father.

As his father left, Joshua began to grow frustrated. Joshua loved to draw and he couldn't believe that his father just wouldn't respect that from him. The fact of the matter was that Joshua's father has always had to work. As a kid, he was a product of abuse at the hands of Joshua's drunken grandfather and has a hardened demeanor because of it. Because of his grandpa's inability to provide for his family, Joshua's dad had to step up. Doing labor like ground keeping and factory jobs he grew to be quite large in stature. Thinking about what his father had been through he realized that he just doesn't want to struggle the way he did. As he made his way home, Joshua contemplated what his father had said.

"Maybe art is just a hobby and not something I can pursue full time," Joshua said to himself.

Finally, he reached the door to his family home. When greeted by his mother by the door, Joshua gave her a big hug.

"Let me see them drawings of yours," said his mother. When shown the portraits Joshua's mother was in awe. "They are beautiful son," she says. "I believe that you can go far in your art."

As Joshua listened to his mother's consoling words, he too believed could go far in his art.

At dinner, Joshua awaited his plate of food. The aroma of ham hocks and black-eyed peas filled the house. The spices mixed into the black-eyed peas gravy were mouthwatering. The tender ham hocks which fell off the bone were cooked to perfection. The recipe was passed down to Joshua's mother from his grandmother which was passed down from her mother. When handed his food, Joshua said his grace along with his family.

"God is great. God is good. Let us thank you for our food. Amen," they all said together.

Sitting at the quiet dinner table, Joshua's mother tried to start a conversation.

"How was everyone's day," she asked.

"Work is work. I don't like boss and any of them crackers in that factory," started Joshua's father.

"Samuel," interrupted Joshua's mother.

"I don't care, Marybelle! Boss got me and them other Negroes working in that same factory as them white folks, got us doing all the heavy lifting, and still pays us less than them," continued Joshua's father.

As tension grew Joshua had grew uncomfortable.

"No need to fuss, Samuel! I don't ever condone their actions, but there ain't no need to call them that," Joshua's mother said.

"I ain't expect you to understand Marybelle! You ain't have you no real job! No real responsibility! I pay for everything! Don't you forget it," exclaimed Joshua's father.

"Whatever, Samuel, I'm over it," sighed Joshua's mother.

"Whatever, Marybelle, I ain't got to put up with this nonsense," Joshua's father said.

Joshua's parents had been arguing for months. Petty arguments that only lasted for brief intervals had felt like lifetimes. Joshua believed that it was just a matter of time before they separated. He believed they argued so much because of his parents' different upbringings. Unlike his father's tarnished past, his mother never had to struggle like her father.

Besides being black, Marybelle had never faced any other obstacles a day in her life. Born to a cobbler who owned a small shoe store in Baton Rouge, Marybelle never experienced financial instability. Therefore, she never had to work like Joshua's father did to provide for his family.

"How was your day Joshua," his mother asked.

"It was good. As ya'll know I been drawing up my different portraits for my portfolio," Joshua replied.

Joshua's dad rolled his eyes.

"What did I tell you about that nonsense? Ain't none of them white folks gonna give you the time of day to show them drawings of yours! You can't make no money off of that son! You need to get a real job," he exclaimed.

Joshua, frustrated, shot up from his chair.

"Dad, I am tired of this. You ain't ever believe in me none at all! Just because you didn't have the life you wanted doesn't mean I can't," Joshua explained.

Joshua bolted out of his house, hopped on his bike with his drawing in his leather satchel that contained his drawings, and headed away from home.

"Boy you better come back here right now," his father said.

Joshua ignored his father's voice as it echoed behind him and rode off into the night on his bike.

Hours passed. Joshua grew more tired. His skinny legs pedaled tirelessly. The only thing that kept him awake was the loud and continuous chirps of different bugs. As he pedaled, Joshua spotted an obscure sign. As he came closer to the sign he was able to make out the words on it. The words said Lenox High School. All the black kids know about Lenox. Lenox was known as the place where the "snotty" and "upper class" white kids went to school. The kids who attended Lenox were also seen as some of the most bigoted kids in town. Knowing he had gone too far from home Joshua became worried.

"I gotta get home," he thought.

As he left he noticed something at the corner of his eye. A large green container sat next to the school. The dumpster had been through it. Its once grass-green color was now rusted and tarnished. Joshua approached the dumpster and looked into it. As he looked into the dumpster, Joshua remembered what his father had told him.

"What did I tell you about that nonsense? Ain't none of them white folks gonna give you the time of day to show them drawings of yours! You can't really make no money off of that son! You need to get a real job," Joshua's father's voice echoed in his head.

Joshua's eyes filled with tears and a stream began to flow down his face. He didn't understand why he couldn't pursue art. Joshua, distraught, picked up his satchel from his side and lifted it over the dumpster. All of a sudden Joshua was startled. A bright light so radiant is shined in his eyes.

"Hey! Who goes there?" a loud voice cried out.

"My name is Joshua. I am just throwing something away. Please don't hurt me Sir," Joshua replied.

"Boy I ain't gonna hurt you", the voice softened. "What are you doing here at this hour?" the voice asked.

"Nothing. I just needed to clear my head, I saw the dumpster, and

need to throw something away, Sir," Joshua replied.

The heavy sounding boots approached Joshua. The uniform was recognizable but at the same time frightening to Joshua. Joshua knew how policemen treated black people. What he has seen in the paper and what he heard from family. Headlines like, "Unarmed Black Man Killed by Police," or "Black Man Gets Beat Up by Police," were the recurring words that struck fear in the Black community. It was hard to swallow the pill that the people meant to protect you were the ones most feared. Joshua recollected the time his parents talked to him about the police.

"You must do everything they say to you. You answer yes sir, no sir, and yes ma'am, no ma'am. Don't backtalk the police ever," his parents had told him.

Joshua's parents had told him these few things because from what they had seen, being black gets you killed when it came to the police.

"Our blackness is the weapon that they fear", Joshua remembered his mother saying to him. These words were so basic but held so much meaning. What Joshua took from these words was frightening. Joshua, like most young black men, feared the thought of being killed by the police because of his blackness. Whether the "fit the description" or looked "suspicious". The fact was his appearance was what could get him killed.

"What you throwing away boy?" the officer asked.

"It's nothing at all sir just some trash sir," Joshua replied.

Clomp...Clank.... Clomp...Clank..., the officer's heavy boots approached.

"Boy imma ask you one more time! What are you throwing away?" the officer asked.

"Ok. Ok, sir. It's just my portraits sir," Joshua said.

The officer had approached Joshua by this point. He was tall in stature. The officer also wore a dark navy blue ensemble that was buttoned up in silver buttons, finished off with a matching hat. He was muscular. Not like Joshua's father but just a little smaller. The officer's badge read Officer Williams. As Joshua looked at Officer William's face he noticed something. Something very different than what he'd seen recently in the media. Officer Williams had something in common with Joshua. Officer Williams was black. A huge weight was lifted off of Joshua's chest.

"Whew," Joshua sighed.

"Boy, now I ain't your father, but I know damn well you shouldn't be out this late," Officer Williams exclaimed.

"Don't you think I know that officer? I just couldn't be in that house no more," Joshua exclaimed.

"Boy don't you dare talk back to me or I will take you down to the station myself," Officer Williams exclaimed.

"Why would you do that to me brotha? Don't you know how they do us negroes in the system," Joshua asked.

"First, I am not your brotha, I am your elder and you will address me as such. Second, you will address me as Officer Williams, do I make myself clear?" Officer Williams asked.

"Yes, sir" Joshua replied.

"Come sit with me for a second, boy, I need to tell you something," Officer Williams demanded.

Joshua and Officer Williams sat on the curb by the dumpster.

"Of course I know how they treat us in the system boy. I been on this

earth longer than you and done seen things you ain't ever seen. I've done seen young black men and women killed, beaten, and made a victim in this system. You have to realize something. We is living in a white man's world! Ever since the beginning we Negroes had less and still have less! You have to adapt, do what you need to do to make it. Or else...you won't. It's that simple! I know how they treat us in the system. I see what they do to young black boys like you, I do. You must do your best to show that you are better than what they think. You need to do your best to make it out. Shit, sometimes your best may not even be good enough. Why are you throwing your pictures away," Officer Williams asked.

"I want to be an artist. It is my dream to draw and showcase my work. The thing is my father said I can't because he doesn't believe that them white folk will give me a chance," Joshua responded.

"Well boy, I have a few things to say to that. It is your life and how you decide to live it is up to you only. Now I done been on this earth for 54 years and something that I have realized is that art has no color. Now you may look at me like I'm stupid. Talkin' 'bout some, 'Officer Williams of course art has color.' I know art has color, but what I can say is that just because you're black doesn't mean you can't be an artist. Every race, culture, religion, got they own form of art as does every person. It flows within all of us. The art of 'keeping the peace' is my form of art. Drawing is your form of art son. Own it! Live in it! It is your life and you must do what makes you happy," Officer Williams exclaimed.

"Wow sir, you mean all of that?" Joshua asked.

"Every last word," Officer Williams replied.

"I know what I have to do now," Joshua said.

"And what is that?" Officer Williams asked.

"I have to tell my dad that I am going to be an artist sir," Joshua replied.

"That is all you can do, boy. Now I ought to tell you, I believe that you can make it far. Based on them drawings, I can tell you got the skills to make a name for yourself. Just promise me that you won't give up on your dream. Live in your truth. Be who you are called to be," Officer Williams said.

"I promise," Joshua replied.

"Now boy you better get on out of here. The sun gonna be coming up soon and you gotta get home before your folks wake up," Officer Williams said.

"Oh shit you're right! Thanks again Officer Williams for the advice," Joshua exclaimed.

"No problem, boy, now get on your way", Officer Williams replied.

Joshua jumped from the curb and put his drawings back into his satchel. He fastened his satchel over the side of his body and jumped onto his bike. As he rode off, he waved to Officer Williams to show his gratitude for his willingness to believe in him. Officer Williams waved back. As he rode off Joshua thought about what he would say to his dad. He knew what to say, it was just a matter of how he said it. Joshua didn't want his father to hate him or feel any animosity towards him and his decision. Joshua knew that it was up to him and how he expressed his feelings that would affect how his dad felt about the whole idea.

As the hours passed, the morning sun began to rise. The bright orange and pink were the most beautiful sunrise Joshua had ever seen. The colors were truly a sight to behold. As he pedaled and pedaled Joshua

finally made it back home. Joshua jumped off his bike and ran up the steps into his house. When he opened the door his father sat waiting for him at the table. Joshua's mother then entered the room when she heard the front door.

"My baby! You're ok," Joshua's mother exclaimed.

"Of course I am," Joshua replied.

"Samuel, our boy is alright," Joshua's mother said.

"I see, Marybelle", replied Joshua's father.

Joshua sat down next to his father at the table.

"Hey Dad", Joshua said.

"Hey, son", his father replied.

"Listen, dad, I just wanted to say," Joshua began

"Save it," Joshua's dad interrupted.

"What," Joshua asked?

"I have been thinking and I know what is best for you," Joshua's father said.

"I know you think that I-", Joshua started.

"Should be an artist", Joshua's father said.

"Are you serious", Joshua asked?

"Yes, son. I remember when I was younger I used to dream. Given the circumstances, I had to give up on them. All a father wants in life is for his son to be happy and live the life he wants. And I would give anything to make you happy. You deserve a chance in this world regardless of how you look and who will accept you", Joshua's father said.

"Thank you so much dad", Joshua cried out.

Tears in his eyes Joshua reached out and embraced his father. For what seemed like the first time in a long time, Joshua and his father were finally connected. Able to fill the void that had been in between them for years. Joshua's dad dismissed the belief that his son's appearance would hold him back in his career path and that people would have to accept him for him. Thus proving that art has no color.



Max and the Magic 8-Ball

by Tanner Jackson, 12

Max Jones had just finished a long and taxing school day. His black unkempt hair that was brushed before school showed the effects of the harsh day. The tiny 4th grader whose backpack seemed to engulf him walks down to the main office to wait for his mother to pick him up. Sitting there, Max remembered what his mother had told him that morning.

Max's mom, a large, yet caring woman had said, "If you get an A on your times tables test, then we will go out and get Chinese food to celebrate."

Max sat there holding his test, scared to see the score that lies beneath. Before he flipped it over, Max reached into his bag with his child-like hand to retrieve the trusty Magic 8-Ball he won at his school fair recently.

"Did I get an A on my test?" Max asks the 8-Ball.

When he turns the 8-Ball upwards the message says something he was dreading. The 8-Ball read, "Outlook not so good!"

Hesitantly, Max flipped the test to reveal that he didn't get an A but he got a C on his time's table test. Distraught and confused, Max, being



the intelligent and witty kid he was, turns the grabs a pen the same color as the pen used to grade his test and changed the C to a circle.

Max asks his 8-Ball, "Should I change the actual grade on my test?"

The 8-Ball once again read something Max didn't want to hear. It read, "NO!"

Un-phased by his Magic 8-Ball, Max wrote an A+. All of a sudden he heard his mother calling out for him.

"Max, I'm here, let's go," his mom said.

Swiftly Max returned the pen and his Magic 8-Ball to his backpack and hugged his mom. During the embrace, he and his mother expressed how much they missed each other during his long day at school. Once in the car, the words Max dreaded most came out of his mother's mouth.

"How did you do on your test today Max", his mom said.

Hesitantly but full-heartedly Max said, "It went good." Reaching for his backpack, Max reached in and grabbed his test. "Look, mom, I got an A+," he said.

"I am so proud of you." "You know what that means..."

Together Max and his mother say "CHINESE FOOD!"

Just a few moments later Max realized that he and his mother had just arrived at the Chinese restaurant. When seated Max began to get nervous.

"What's wrong son?", his mother asked.

"Nothing, mother", replied Max.

The waitress approached Max and asked, "What can I get for you today?"

Max replied timidly, "Can I get the shrimp fried rice please?"

"Right on it", replied the waitress

In little to no time, Max had his favorite shrimp fried rice right in front of him. The smell of the rice reminded him of a better time. Max got emotional just thinking about the joy the rice gave him. The rice, rich in spices and seasonings, was the same meal his father used to get before his passing. In fact, Max's father was the one who introduced the meal to him in the first place. Max started to remember why his father was not there with him and his mother now. Max remembered the day before his father's deployment he decided that he wanted to treat Max to his favorite Chinese restaurant in the town. When they reached the restaurant, the smell of different spices and dishes filled the air. Mouth-watering images different foods filled the menu. Max looked through the pages swiftly to find something that would satisfy his picky yet monstrous appetite. Instead of ordering his food, Max's father ordered one

large order of his favorite shrimp fried rice. Max, being picky, automatically assumed that he wouldn't like the dish his father chose. When the food was placed in front of him he looked at it with suspicion. Tasting the meal, Max's eyes widened. His father chuckled at the sight of his son scarfing down something so different from his normal, picky diet. Max, finally full, gave the rest of his food to his father. The bright smile and light Max's father radiated always made Max feel safe and secure.

The next morning his father left to go back into the military. Waving to his father, not knowing this was going to be the last time he saw him. It was a rainy day. The rain pattered on the roof of Max's home as he looked out the window when all of a sudden two soldiers show up in the front of his door. When his mother answered the door, her eyes filled with tears and she fell to her knees. Max embraced his mother after hearing that his father would not be returning home. Remembering this, the rice had a very special meaning for him. The rice was one of the last good memories of his father and is the only memory he wanted to have of his father.

Max looked down at his plate with the images of good times with his father racing through his mind. The thought of his warm embrace and radiant smile seemed to make Max feel better. The short amount of time that he spent with his father eating their favorite meal made him closer and more unified.

"Maybe this food is the best way to end my day," Max thought.

Finally, Max and his mother finished, left the restaurant, and got back in the car. As they began driving, Max, still nervous, took his 8-Ball out of his bag. Max asked it silently himself, "Should I tell my mom the truth?"

The 8-Ball replied with, "Signs point to YES." Max huffs and looks at his mother.

"Mom, I have something to tell you," he said.

"What is it son?" his mother replied.

"The truth is, I got a C on my test not an A+," Max said.

"I can't believe you would lie to me, Max, you knew the rule about your test. 'I just can't believe you would lie to me after everything we have been through! We are supposed to be each other's number ones,'" his mom replied.

"I really am sorry, mom. I know that I have been acting out and haven't been my best. I promise I'll do better next time, for you and dad," says Max.

As soon as Max said this a large horn blared out. Following it was the loudest noise Max has ever heard. The sound of metal clashing against each other made little Max grind his teeth together. His mother reached out in front of him to protect his frail body from the impact of the air-

bag. It seemed like hours, but the altercation was over in minutes. A man from a neighboring car came out and approached Max and his mother.

“Are you alright?” said the man.

“My mom please help her”, Max barely conscious replied.

Hearing the sounds of sirens Max began to doze off having reassurance that his mother would be okay.

Regaining consciousness, the shine of a bright light stung Max’s eyes. Awake and hooked up to an IV, Max looked around for his mother who was nowhere to be found.

“Somebody please help me! I can’t find my mother”, Max said

Swiftly, a nurse made her way into the room.

“Max you are going to be okay. Your mother is in surgery at the moment, they are retrieving a piece of debris from the crash from her stomach”, said the nurse.

Tearfully Max said “Ok”. And began to cry.

“If I hadn’t lied to her then we would be home and not out of the house getting the stupid Chinese food. We could be home asleep and everything would be ok,” said Max.

“Kid you can’t possibly blame yourself for what happened tonight. You and your mother were hit by a man who ran a red light and that is the only reason you and your mom are here tonight. It is not your fault at all, kid. Please don’t beat yourself up about it,” explained the nurse.

“I have someone who is here to see you,” said the nurse.

Suddenly, a paramedic from the scene entered Max’s hospital room.

“Hey buddy, I know it seems a little rough right now but I am confident that you and your mom are strong enough to get through this,” said the paramedic.

He reached into the hallway to grab a trash bag with items that were retrieved from the crash. The items were money, Max’s mother’s purse, and other personal belongings. Suddenly, Max noticed something familiar. The black and spherical object was a source of comfort and belonging for Max. It was his Magic 8-Ball.

“Oooh please, can I see that 8-Ball quick before it’s too late”, asked Max.

The paramedic handed Max his 8-ball and watched, puzzled. The 8-Ball so familiar and smooth in the hands of Max gave him an idea. One idea that may change whether or not Max would leave the hospital with his mother or not. Tears in his eyes and his heart pumping 100 miles an hour, Max asked, “Will my mom make it out of her surgery?”

Max turned the 8-Ball upright and the answer reveals to him. A definite answer that he has wanted all along. An answer that he wouldn't have to think twice about. The 8-Ball revealed the messages. "YES!"

Thankful for the answer of the 8-Ball, Max had a little bit of hope restored. Seconds grew to minutes to two hours. Impatiently, Max began to question the 8-Ball's response. All of a sudden, he saw these big doors down the hospital hallway open. Through those doors was a woman on a hospital bed being wheeled in from some other room. Max, uncertain, sat upright on his bed to get a better look. Though the woman was unconscious Max recognized the features of this person. Without any hesitation, Max realized that it was his mom.

"Mom!" yelled Max.

Max's nurse returned to his room. "Your mother is going to be ok, her surgery was a success", said the nurse.

"Thank you so much," said Max. Sitting on his hospital bed, Max realized something.

Maybe the 8-Ball is magic and can predict the future? Or maybe it wasn't at all that magical? Maybe the surviving of the crash was dad watching over me and mom through the crash? Hope is something that must be kept in order to get through any rough times but, most importantly, it is important to cherish the times we have with those we love in order to be fulfilled. It is these times that we find the most magical of all.

Not Prank War, Locker War

by *Louis Hess, 12*

The smell of Axe body spray filled his nose as he entered the lockers. The sharp, painful stench coated the air as plumes of spray poured out of the open doorway. Thick and muggy, it stuck to his clothes and hung low to the ground, but not low enough to be avoided. Trying to avoid running into members of other teams or tripping on the bags, helmets, and clothes on the ground, Finn stumbled towards his locker with his shirt over his nose. The farther back he went, the thicker the air became. The minty, unnatural air he could taste on his tongue, the strong smell of alcohol and herbs burned his eyes, and the humidity from the showers could've started a rainstorm. Finn was lightheaded just as he pulled his locker key out.

"Christ, I can barely see a thing," James said, who had made it to his locker before Finn.

Finn, who hadn't even noticed him until then, replied, "Yeah man, I can hardly breathe either. Where the hell do they even get all this spray?"

"Beats me," James concluded. "God forbid anyone lights a cigarette. This entire place would be leveled."

"I'm pretty sure chemical warfare is against the Geneva Convention.",

Finn choked.

"Yeah," James coughed. "Where's the UN when you need them?"

"Good question," Finn replied. Both of them laughing and coughing at the crude joke.

James slammed his locker shut and said, "A'ight, I'm getting out of here. I'm going to start hacking up my lungs in a few minutes."

Finn shut his locker and says, "I'll bring a gas mask next time. Or a lighter. Or zip ties. Surely not even the football team can survive in this stuff much longer."

Finn follows James up some stairs leading to the field. The air becoming noticeably clearer and cleaner, before finally opening the field doors outside.

Both take multiple deep breaths, stretching their arms as if they just left a coal mine.

"Clean air has never tasted so good. That down there was bad," Finn gasped.

"If that ever happens again, I'm changing at my car."

"You expect that not to happen again?" Finn said, surprised at the notion.

"Okay, scratch that. From. Now. On. I'm going to be changing at my car from now on," stated James.

Both of them laughed and begin walking to cross country practice.

This wouldn't be the last time such an incident will occur, for this was only the beginning of what would be known as the Great Locker War. Luckily for Finn and James, cross country did not require them to change in the locker room or carry equipment with them. The same could not be said for the football, lacrosse, soccer, and baseball teams. You see, the football team was not very happy with their experience in the locker room. When someone rumored that the soccer team had played this dirty, minty trick on them, the football team wanted revenge. It started with each battle looking similar to the last. Some members of the football team zip-tied and threw about 16 new cans of body spray into the locker while the baseball players were changing. The baseball team tried to retaliate, but mistook the lacrosse team for the football team, putting the lacrosse players against the baseball players. An unholy alliance was formed between the soccer and baseball teams verses the football and lacrosse teams. Thus began the start of a relatively long war that would end up being the most memorable set of weeks for both students, coaches, and especially the janitors.

Ground rules were set when a meeting with all the Fall sport team leaders was held after school a few days later. The war was to be strictly fought during practices and in the lockers. The way of battle must not be to intentionally cause permanent bodily harm. Be as creative as possible without destruction of person or property. Any prank was to be directed towards the team and not a singular person. There was to be a record held by each team that recorded who they were attacked by, when that attack was and what was used for the attack. This record was not to be shared unless the school tried to crack down on only one faction; it was to be used to lessen the blame taken by the offending team by bringing everyone else down with them. Something so simple and childish had developed a system to maximize its lifetime while minimizing the risks of disciplinary action towards the individual.

Cross Country was not a major player in the locker wars. It was not

required to meet in the lockers after school and their practices often take place outside of school grounds, making it difficult to pull a prank off. The only remarkable attacks on the Cross Country team was a drive-by water gun spraying, which was more of a favor rather than an attack, and blocking a route with cones to imitate construction. Compared to the shenanigans happening to the other teams, it was rather peaceful. But cross country runners were few times “hired” by other teams to spy or pull off pranks because of this status; and to save themselves from being dragged into this war was to convince the other teams not to add another enemy.

The alliance between the soccer and baseball team and the lacrosse and football team was what determined the factions for the first stages of the war. Often members of different teams, but on the same faction will work together to pull something off. For instance, two soccer players teamed up with several baseball players to grease up the walkway to the football field, causing the football players to slip back down the ramp towards their lockers when they tried to leave. Pranks like this often strengthened the alliance between the two teams, however, spies for the other faction who over-hear such agreements have planned sabotages and ambushes for the would be prankers. An example would be when the soccer team tried to replace the lacrosse team’s equipment box with an air trap filled with confetti, but an informant over heard the conversation about it and told the lacrosse team. The lacrosse team preemptively took their equipment to another location and hooked up a trip wire device that would trigger when the box was opened. When the soccer players opened the box, Rick Ansley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up” song began playing over the PA system inside the lockers. It wasn’t the only time the song was used to counter-prank and it became a common way to foil one’s prank plan.

Of course, to say that the faculty were unaware of this war would be very ignorant. The coaches especially were aware and had been witness to some of it. Most of them at first looked the other way, but when it seemed like it wouldn’t stop they began to disapprove of such behavior towards their team and factuality began trying to catch people in the act. This meant that the pranking had to evolve from simple, crude pranks to drawn out, complicated set of steps. It was this risk that filtered the smart, witty, and tactical geniuses to the forefront and gave them an environment to thrive in.

It was a crisp Saturday night. The cool air that followed the humid day put a layer of fog on the ground. In the distance, the baseball team was in the middle of a game. The stadium lights only illuminating the field, leaving the rest of the school grounds in darkness. The objective was simple: sneak into the baseball teams’ locker room and place mini pumpkins everywhere. It would require multiple trips, but they needed to empty out an entire trunk load. The players involved were three members of the lacrosse team, one football player, and one cross country player. Finn was the XC player and tasked with opening the door. If he was caught, his excuse was that he’d left something in his locker. His alibi was all set up too, just in case whoever got him didn’t believe it. The brains behind this operation was Eric from the football team, and the three lacrosse players were there with the pumpkins. Finn moved behind Eric, flanked by the three lacrosse players.

"Alright," Eric sighed, "This is where we part ways for a bit. Meet you by the West entrance in five minutes. Don't get caught."

"Don't worry." Finn said, "I'm the least suspicious guy here. See you in a bit."

Finn moved down the stands towards the field entrance. It would be the only door unlocked at this time. Looking over towards the game, the score board read that it was the top of the 7th inning and the score was 3-5.

"It seems like we've got some catching up to do," Finn thought. "Typical. We can never seem to get the lead first, but that's what our team's good at coming back from."

Finn hastened his walk to the entrance and opened the door for a spectator heading out of the building. The door slowly closing behind him as he started jogging to the West entrance.

Opening the West entrance, he found Eric and the three lacrosse players waiting with the truck. One had brought a wheelbarrow and the rest had bags already filled with pumpkins.

"Any trouble getting here?" Eric asked.

"No one batted an eye. The halls are also empty, but keep your ears open. Someone from the game was leaving right as I got in," Finn answered.

"Good man. Here's the \$10 for getting us in. You'll get five more dollars when we're done," Eric said.

"That was the deal, but just know I'm not doing this for the money only. They were the ones who put a bag of dog crap on the track," Finn responded. "It's the least I can do."

The next twenty minutes were spent moving mini pumpkins to the locker room. At first it was easy finding places to put them. On benches, on coolers, in the showers, next to toilets; if you can name it there was probably a pumpkin with it. But eventually there was nowhere else to put them, so they began to layer the floor with tiny pumpkins and leaving just enough room to tip-toe around.

"I swear this has to be more than 400 pumpkins," Eric said, admiring the work done. "Jack, I'm glad your cousins work on a pumpkin farm. Are you sure they won't miss them?"

"Are you kidding?" Jack responded. "They were more than pleased. They were the ones who lent me the truck."

Eric redirected his attention to Finn and said, "Okay, here's the other \$5 I promised. Now let's pack up and get out of here."

And not a moment too soon. There was a muffled air horn that sounded through the building, signaling the end of the baseball game.

"Scheibel!" exclaimed Ryker. "We needed to leave five minutes ago. They'll be here any minute!"

Knowing that the end game ceremony only lasts about 5 minutes, the team hurried to remove any trace of their presence.

"Finn, turn off the lights and start shutting doors! Jack, Ryker, and Karl; you three get the wheelbarrow out of here!" Ordered Eric, "I'm going to check how close they are."

Eric ran out of the lockers towards the field entrance. Finn began turning off the lights as the lacrosse players picked up the wheelbarrow and hauled it into the hallway as fast as they could.

Shouts from Eric could be heard through the lockers, "They're coming! 200 yards from the door! Go! Go!" he shouted. Jumping over the pumpkins and past Finn who shut off the last light switch and closed the door.

The sprint towards the exit seemed longer than normal. Adrenaline running through his veins as the feeling of capture closed in behind him. Finn bolted out the door ahead of Eric and saw the truck pull away. The lacrosse players made it out.

“Go! Run to your car and get out of here!” yelled Eric, slightly out of breath.

“No need to tell me.” Finn replied, already running up to his car. Unlocking it as he approached.

Getting in, he started the engine and began to pull away. The lot put him in view of the baseball field where he could see commotion. Suddenly, someone popped up to the parking lot. More figures appeared behind the first. Fearing that he was about to be identified, Finn kept his head lights off and cut through more of the lot. He could see in his rear view mirror the figures running into the parking lot. A pair of brake lights appeared and turned into the street.

“That must’ve been Eric.” Finn thought. “He’s barely gonna get away with that.”

Finn pulled around the building. Turning on his headlights and turning off of the school lot and into the streets. A successful mission execution, if not a close call. Only time will tell if he truly got away with it. For now, he was going home. He told his mom he was going to watch the game and, since it had ended, there was no time to dilly dawdle.

The news of this prank reached official news on Monday. The amount of pumpkins was absurd enough to warrant an investigation by the school, but since no harm was done, it didn’t last long. The news story even got a night segment, pushing the prank war into public light. The news broadcasters were light on it, calling it “mild teenage joking” and “boys having fun by being boys.” However, the reaction from teachers and faculty were not so lighthearted. They vowed harsher punishments for anyone caught, installed motion sensors in the hallways and security cameras were set up around the school to try and catch anyone sneaking in at night.

Eric was a suspect in what was known as the “Great Pumpkin Plant,” but he enforced his alibi, claiming to have been sick all weekend; his parents even backing him up. The three lacrosse players were in the clear. Jack later caught Finn by his car and told him the hysterics that ensued when his cousins saw the prank on the Monday night news. Finn’s participation in the “Great Pumpkin Plant” was one of the only pranks he took part of. Other than these few times, he tried to stay out of many of the pranks, for he did not want to get dragged into the factions nor put his own team at risk of being targeted. So Finn slipped back into the background of the prank war and watched as the factions continued to go at each other.

Boys Town

by Brady Burke, 12

Since our birth, my sister, Jess, and I have been inseparable. We are twins. Born five minutes apart, she will say she's older but it's really me. My name is Edward. About ten minutes after we were born, we were given to our now parents Katherine and Scott Helfrey. Being born out of wedlock, a family adopted us. We never met our birth family nor wanted to. The Helfrey's showed kindness and love that was unmatched. Independence was their method of parenting and boy did it work. We were excellent students and relied on each other for help more often than not. Most people could tell we were adopted. Walking down the street our physical differences are clear. Katherine is a thin tall woman with warm brown long hair, green eyes, and a darker complexion, she was from the south of France. She would never tell you but she moved away when she was three. Scott is a tall man with black curly hair, broad shoulders, muscular with a pair of Ray Ban glasses that sat on his nose. While my sister and I were long straight haired blondes with blue eyes. We have Scandinavian blood, I have sharp features that make me seem more serious, while Jess has softer warmer feature. People tell us that our smiles light up a room and we have very infectious emotions. My parents are very refined people. Wearing nice clothing and driving nice cars was their forte. Enjoying physical pleasures and life's many luxuries. They held manners to a high standard, but they were always kind.

The family was packing up for our long trip ahead. This year for Thanksgiving we were headed for grandma's, my mom's mom. My dad wouldn't say it openly, but he knows she never approved of him. It mattered not, he would always hold his chin high and make the most of it. The problem wasn't just grandma. We live in Northern California and she lives in Omaha, Nebraska, with the rest of my mom's family.

My father always says, "The Great Plains aren't that great."

His disdain for going to visit the family sinks into the earth they reside on. However, I do see his point. There is nothing like the California mountains on a sunset or the great Pacific Ocean on the coast. A place where people can go and become lost in nature. Jess and I had our own trifles with Grandma. Growing up as the adopted kids of a family we became the golden children. Our family is religious so they saw us as a miracle.

"My blessings from God," my grandma would say to us in greeting.

I was tired of it. I don't speak for my sister but I know she was sick of it too. Religion was a taboo at the Helfrey house. My mother knew boys who were touched by their pastor. Let's just say we didn't get along with the church. Regardless of that my family held itself to a high ethical standard. Treating others how they want to be treated, looking for friends rather than enemies and always being willing to extend a helping hand were just some of their lessons. I was raised on morals and rational thought, not the gratification of religion.

On the road to the airport that afternoon the sun was setting along the mountains. I just stared at it, as if it would disappear at the blink of

an eye. Jess pulled my shoulder so that I was facing her.

She began to whisper, "Did you hear about Charlie?"

"No, what happened?" I whispered back.

"Apparently he got caught with a whiskey bottle last month and his parents are fed up, who knows what Grandma will do," she responded.

"Damn, well I'll talk to him when we get there. I don't think I can help but I'll try to keep him calm this year," I finished the conversation.

My cousin Charlie had always been a trouble maker. No one could ever control him. He has the spirit of an untamed stallion running wild. He isn't like me or my sister by blood, but he always kept us under his wing. He's the oldest of the cousins at seventeen. He's tall but shorter than my dad. The traits of brown curly hair and soft brown eye ran deep in their family. He is always willing to do the crazy or unthinkable. That's why he was my favorite to be around. I think he felt the same about me.

Over the past few years, Charlie has gotten in trouble at every family holiday gathering. Last year he got his keys taken away after coming home at 3AM. He was unpredictable. The next fourth of July he went off with his friends on a speed boat and didn't come back till the next day. He got chewed out by Grandma for that one. But the worst of it was when he was at my cousin's confirmation. I didn't know it, but his balance was off. He was wobbly and tripping on old lady hand bags. All I know is he went to the bathroom with his dad. And they didn't come out till the closing song. That day Charlie was so pale, he looked almost sickly. After that, he they forced him to get a job as a life guard at their country club.

The question I couldn't get out of my head, "What will they do to him this time?"

"Do you think he will get pulled from dinner this year?" I asked Jess, rekindling our conversation.

"Maybe, I mean look at last year," she responded.

"You're right," I said.

Last year Charlie drank Grandma's wine. She offered it to him so he could sip on it but then he chugged the glass. Grandma didn't like that. She is an old French woman very short around 5'3 with thin glasses. She was a refined woman like my mother. She had her dark olive skin, she short brown hair and green eyes. She swung back her hand. SLAP. The smile on Charlie's face dissolved into horror. No one was laughing, not even Jess or I could bare a smile. Grandma has never hit a grandchild, never. Charlie sat back down.



Charlie began to speak, "I'm so sorry, Grandma..."

"La Pute. Go to your room, no dinner for you," she shouted and pointed to the stairs of the house.

Charlie was and will always be my favorite cousin. He is never scared of what the family might say after a crazy night. I admired him. No matter how much he messed up I was always on his side. I remember after he drank that wine, he and I went and played video games. He kept me under his wing and I learned a lot from him. I wouldn't have traded the memories we share for the world.

Before I knew it we arrived at the airport and parked the car. The sun's colors were now bright pink. The air was heavy with my mother's perfume; it was fruity with hints of jasmine. The day was still warm even though the sun began to dip below the horizon. Jess and I had quiet conversations about people in the airport and other things of that nature.

"Look Ed, she's wearing an Irish dancing dress."

"Stop yanking my chain," I responded.

"No. Turn around!" she said while spinning me.

Low and behold, a woman in an Irish dancing dress. I had to hold in my laughter.

"Do you think she will do a jig for us?" I asked.

"Depends on how much we pay her" Jess said with a smile.

We boarded the plane and were off to Omaha. As we took off, I saw the last sliver of the sun disappear. The sky embraced the night and the world darkened. As we flew my eyes grew heavy and I fell into a deep sleep. By the time I had woken up the plane had landed. We began to get off the plane. My father shook me awake.

"If I have to do this then so do you", he said to me with his usual grin.

I got up and grabbed my carry-on bag, a black leather backpack I got for my birthday last year. I was disoriented from having just woken up. We headed for baggage claim and once we had our bags we headed for the pickup. There Charlie was with open arms and a warm car for us. It had previously snowed in Omaha and light snow laid on the ground.

"It's going to snow again tonight. Good thing you got here ok," he said cheerfully.

It was around midnight on Thanksgiving day. The night was pitch black, no moon in sight. We loaded ourselves into the back of Charlie's Mom, Kathy's minivan. As Charlie talked to my parents about his family and how his junior year of high school was going. Their words were muffled to me. The thoughts in my head were overwhelming. I wanted to know if I could hang out with Charlie. I knew he was in deep water from the whiskey but he was like the big brother I never had. Would they send him away? They couldn't, it would ruin us. I tried to relax by resting. My head sat on the cool glass of the window. The rocking of the car sent me into a deep slumber. When I awoke I was laying in the guest bed of my grandma's house.

I got up to grab some breakfast. Jess was already up along with the rest of the family.

"We didn't know if you would wake up in time for Thanksgiving" Jess said jokingly.

"Ha Ha. very funny," I said groggily.

My parents let out a chuckle from the kitchen table. They were in

robes and silk pajamas. My father was reading the paper with a cup of coffee. My mother sat with orange juice reading a Home Décor magazine. Jess sat at the kitchen bar counter with a plate a waffles in front of her. The kitchen had a dark wood floor and white cupboards and cabinets. It was a very open space with the bar counter in the middle facing a pane glass window. Dark galaxy marble sat on top of the white cabinets. It was similar to the one my parents had created in our home.

My grandma would always say “great minds think alike”.

My stomach growled and I became increasingly aware of the hot waffles in front of Jess.

“Did you make me any Jess?” I asked, hoping she had.

“No, make them yourself. Don’t be lazy,” she said as she poured syrup over the waffles.

I wasn’t in a position to argue. I grabbed the waffle iron and began to heat it. My stomach was growling at me impatiently. The coffee pot was almost empty so I started another pot. By then the waffle iron was hot and I poured the buttermilk batter over the iron. While my waffle cooked I poured myself a cup of coffee. I put cream and a sugar in it. I used to take it extremely sugary but I’ve cut down over the years. Someday I’ll be drinking black coffee. The beep of the waffle iron rang in the kitchen. I took out my waffle and put it on a plate. I buttered and poured syrup on the waffle. I dug in and before long it was gone. My coffee cup was empty and I decided to prepare for the day.

I took a shower and put on my Thanksgiving outfit, chosen by my mother. A white button up, a dark blue tie, a navy blue velvet blazer and dark suit pants. I approved. I looked sharp. I went to check on the family and saw we were all dressed to the nine’s. Jess wore a blue dress with a black fur jacket. My mother wore a deep maroon dress and a white trench coat. My father wore a grey suit with a maroon tie and black trench coat. We stood in the kitchen waiting to go out and see the city of Omaha. Suddenly, we were ambushed by my Grandma.

“Would you all like to join me for Church?” she asked.

The silence of my family was broken by my mother. “Yes, we would,” she said.

My father’s shocked look was shared by my sister and I. Church. The one dread of our family. As I said earlier it was a taboo in my family, but anything for grandma. A hushed conversation between my parents changed my father’s demeanor.

“Alright Ed, Jess, let’s go heat up the car,” he said with a forced smile.

“But...” I was cut off.

“It will be fine Ed. Let’s just heat of up the car,” he said as he moved toward the door.

“C’mom, Ed,” Jess said following him

“Fine,” I said.

Charlie was right. It snowed overnight. A layer of white snow covered the ground. The black car was topped with soft snow. It was grandma’s, a black Jaguar SUV. We opened the doors and sat in the cold while the car heated up. Once it was warm as a toaster oven, grandma and mother came out the front door. My father turned to Jess and I quickly

“Now this year is going to be hard, you heard about Charlie? Either way, Mom’s family is sensitive this year. I need you two on your best behavior,” he said.

"Dad you are the one that always gets mad at the family," Jess said. "That may be true, but this year is different. I'll explain later." He was cut off by my mother opening the door.

My Mother, Jess and I were sitting in the back. My father tried to listen to the radio through my grandmother's long tirades about the Church or some other uncomfortable matters. I couldn't stop thinking about Charlie. He has messed up in the past like when he would take me to cause mischief. We would drive around and smoke some kind of cigarette. I don't exactly know what it was, but it always made me laugh. I remember his parents found out about that last year. Apparently, Charlie got an ear full. Even then my father never talked to me about the trouble he was in.

Church was uneventful. Jess and I tried to help ourselves from boredom, but there was no stopping it. Our family chooses to sit during communion and let others pass us. We think it needless to receive the blessing of someone we don't share beliefs with. However, I was amazed by the giant metal sculpture of the crucifix they had. It captured his pain, death, and forgiveness. It reminded me of Charlie, as if he was born to cause trouble all leading to his purpose in life and redemption. I never prayed but that day I said a prayer for Charlie. When we were leaving, I could see the relief on my father's face. I checked my watch and saw it was already 1PM. The rest of the family was probably at Charlie's family's house. The trip back was slower than the drive there. I could feel my father's annoyance. Leaving one torment and heading toward another. His opinion this year didn't matter. We needed to act right for mother.

By the time we arrived dinner was all prepared. The table was glass but long enough for all twenty of us to sit together. On the table were all of the dishes. Turkey, corn, green beans, rolls, gravy, mashed potatoes, etc. It was a delicious spread. On my right sat Charlie. On my left sat Jess. Dinner was delightful but went by fast. Charlie left a little early around 3PM to see friends. The majority of the night I sat in front of the TV watching Thanksgiving football. Around 7PM, Charlie came home.

Charlie entered the house from the garage. Following him was his father, mother and our grandmother. I couldn't tell what happened, but they were pissed. They wouldn't let the family see it, but deep down they were boiling. Charlie sat next to me on the brown leather couch as if nothing happened smiling and joking around with Jess and I. His sister Grace shot him a look, almost as if asking a question. Charlie nodded his head. The smile from his face drifted into a cold thousand-yard stare. His sister hadn't looked away, frozen in disbelief. She put her head in her hands and began to sob. Jess wrapped an arm around her for comfort. Grace after taking a few deep breaths got up and headed for the stairs to her room.

"What's wrong, child?" Grandma asked her.

"This family, this family is wrong," she said as she slammed her door.

My parents were whispering something but I couldn't hear them. They sat on the couch across from us. My mom's expression dropped as my dad said something. It seemed like the color drained from her body. A single tear formed in her eye and she padded it away. Dad saw me and shook his head. They left the couch for the back patio and a cigar. My sister leaned into me.

"How come no one is going to comfort her?" Jess asked me.

"Something is wrong," I said. "I think Charlie is in trouble."

"Ok. I'll go to Grace; you stay with Charlie," she said as she left for

Grace's room.

I looked at Charlie. An expression of dread marked his face. He was bouncing his leg nervously. The rest of the family had continued conversation after two members had left. My grandma was staring at me or Charlie. We were so close I couldn't tell. Her eyes were full of not hate but disappointment.

"Maybe we should go to the hearth room?" I asked him.

"Yes. Please," he responded quickly.

We left the living room. Charlie still seated on my right. When we got into the hearth room, he put a few logs on and started a fire. The room was used as a study. A large black desk sat at the back of the room with book lined bookshelves on its left and right. In the middle of the room two large leather chairs sat on an bear skin rug. The room had a bit too much mahogany for my taste, but then again, I didn't design it. He stared into the fire. He had the Helfrey eyes, deep brown like chocolate. Silently we sat there listening to crackle of the fire. Feeling the heat of the flame, I had to break the silence.

"Do you remember when we went kayaking on that frozen lake," I asked him.

He looked at me. "Grandma's old lake house," he chuckled, "How could I forget?"

"I will never forget them yelling at us from the balcony, 'Get back on the shore, you'll freeze if you fall in,'" I said joyfully.

"Everyone except your parents. They took the pictures," he said. We both laughed at that.

The most famous picture taken from that day was when we were coming back to the house. We were in Christmas clothes. Both of us had sweaters, button up shirts, ties and khakis. We looked at the camera surrounded by ice and flipped the bird. My parents have it in a Christmas ornament for our tree.

So Charlie what happened?" I asked carefully. "The family seems a little tense."

He didn't respond. I continued, "Did something happen with your friends?"

"I wasn't drinking if that's what you are implying," he said while staring into the fire.

"I wasn't implying anything. Just curious is all," I said trying to pry anymore.

After a moment of silence, he spoke again, "I got into a fight"

"A fight? That's why you have the limp? Why did you get into the fight?" I asked.

"Well, I was with a buddy of mine and we were smoking cigarettes and I showed them grandpa's pocket watch. They liked it at first. Then this guy I didn't know took it as a joke. I pushed him to the ground to get it back, but he came back up and tackled me. We both went down and I start wailing on him. I mean hitting this man with pistons. From the ground, he swings a hook and knocks me off him. When we get up, he kicks my leg out from under me. He tries to start kicking me, but I pull him to the ground.

"What about your other friends? Why didn't they help?" I asked.

"I'm getting there, just listen. I got him on the ground and put him in a choke hold and he passed out. Immediately my watch from him. My friends at that point separated us and took us to our cars. I came back here and when I arrived they could tell I smelled horribly. They checked

my pockets and found my buddy's cigarettes. So now I'm in the dog house again."

I was shocked I knew what this meant: Boys Town. They were going to send him there and he didn't get it.

"What do you think they are going to do?" I asked him.

"Probably ground me, but nothing more," he said calmly.

I could feel my face get hot and heart begin to race. He couldn't see the forest through the trees. If I know anything it's that this family is not in a place to be trifled with. They are at their wits end with him. God, what was he thinking? I could help. If I told him about Boy's Town maybe it will knock sense into him.

"Charlie, this is pretty serious, what if... what if they send you to Boy's Town," I said as I stared at my feet.

"They wouldn't, I'm family. They wouldn't send their own family away." He said calmly "Listen Ed I —"

I cut him off, "No you don't get it Grandma is on her last straw with you."

"Calm down Ed. You need to relax. I want you to take Grandpa's pocket watch. I think that sooner or later someone would steal it from me so... here take it."

Charlie pulled out our grandfather's pocket watch from his pocket. A gold pocket watch. On the watch, beautiful French lilies were engraved. The chain was a vine of gold and silver entwined. The face was ivory white with gold lettering and silver hands. Along the outside of the face sat sapphires. The watch was a beautiful piece made in France passed down for generations. I took the pocket watch from his hands.

"Charlie, I don't know what to say," I said still admiring the beauty of the watch.

"Well, normally people say thank you," he chuckled.

"Thank you Charlie. Thank you so much," I said happily.

Just then my parent walked in. My mother still had tears in her eyes. My father stood sternly, not showing his emotion. They already had their coats and mine.

"Leaving so soon?" Charlie said with a laugh. As if everything was fine.

"Unfortunately, yes, we have a long flight tomorrow," my father said.

"But we cannot wait to come for Christmas. Now come on Ed we need to say goodbye to everyone," Mother said eagerly.

"Ok." I hugged Charlie tightly. "Good-bye Charlie."

"Good-bye Ed. I'll see you next month," he said smiling.

"Good-bye Aunt Katherine." He hugged my mother and she hugged him tightly.

"Bye Uncle Scott." They embraced.

My father whispered something to Charlie in their embrace. Charlie's smile dropped from his face. My hand grabbed the watch. Charlie and I exchanged a look before he swiftly left the room. The study became silent besides the crackle of the fire.

"What happened?" I asked my parents.

My father spoke up, "Grandma and your aunt and uncle are sending him to Boy's Town."

My face became hot and my hands began sweating. "How could they? He's our family. Did you just let it happen?" I argued.

A shocked expression came across my father's face, until he exploded, "Don't you know I love him too? I want him to stay with us. I want to

celebrate Christmas with him, but Jesus Ed what did he tell you. I mean, he screwed up. Can't you see that? He probably told you that he courageously fought for his grandfather's watch."

Silence hung in the air for a moment before I answered, "Yes that's what he said."

My father's rant continued, "Well, he didn't. He was out to buy weed. He walked up to the dealer and was short a couple of dollars. As Charlie rummaged through his pockets, his watch fell out. The dealer looked at him, then the watch. When the dealer tried to grab it, he stomped on his hand breaking two fingers and a few bones in his hand. Charlie then pummeled the kid. He was only seventeen. He broke his nose, his orbital bone, and shattered his jaw. Doctors said it would be years before he gets his speech back to a hundred percent."

I couldn't believe it. "How do you know all of this?" I asked him.

"When your mother and I went to the back patio, we saw police light in the street. After we approached them with Charlie's parents, they explained the situation. They weren't going to charge Charlie because it was reported self-defense. However, they encouraged something be done to discipline him or the state would step in," he responded.

"Alright why don't you grab your sister. Grandma is going to stay the night here so we can go back to her house," my mother told me.

I left my parents in the room. They shared a few murmurs before following me into the hallway. Quickly I made my way to the steps towards Grace's room where I assume Jess was. As I crossed the living room, I saw Charlie speaking with his parents and our grandma. All I could make out was the faint begging from Charlie.

"Please, please don't send me away," he pleaded.

The door to Grace's room was closed. I could make out soft whimpers from inside. As I knocked on the door, the voices went silent. Jess opened the door for me. Grace was sitting on her couch anxiously crying.

"We have to go Jess. Mother and Father are waiting," I said to her.

Grace spoke without looking at me, "What about Charlie, what are they gonna do?"

I grabbed the pocket watch and responded, "They are sending him to Boys Town. He got into a fight."

She began to cry, "He just had to get into trouble, He never understands that his actions have consequences."

"Alright Jess, we have to go. Say Bye," I told Jess, hoping to end this uncomfortable encounter.

She and Grace exchanged a hug. "It's going to be alright," Jess whispered.

She got up and then followed me down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs we saw Charlie now on his knees begging. His parents sat on opposite couches on the right and left flanking Charlie. Grandma sat in front on Charlie, like a king receiving a peasant. They sat in a way that he had no escape. He was trapped in his consequences.

"Please Grandma, I'll change I swear. You will see. Just give me another chance," he said.

"No, you have had enough chances. Time and time again you show us you have no discipline. At Boys Town they will teach you responsibility, discipline and a right attitude." She said staring him down. She saw me and Jess standing there, "Do you think Jess or Ed would act like this? Stoop to your level? I am shocked my blood runs through your veins."

Charlie now sat, almost bowing to our grandmother. Anger began to

grow in my chest. My knuckles tightened, my heart beat increased, and I held onto the pocket watch. I needed to act, to help him.

Jess whispered to me, "Make it stop".

I looked back at Jess and stepped forward, "Stop it!" I bellowed. "Please stop. Why do you have to do this? You sit there in you high chair looking down on him. What makes you so mighty?" I said furiously.

I realized I had the attention of everyone. My parents, Jess, Charlie, Grandma, my aunt and uncle all looked at me dumbfounded. They couldn't believe I spoke out. The fire gave the only sound for a small moment.

I continued, "You say 'Jess and I would never to something like this.' But what if we did? Imagine if we were the worst behaved kids alive. You would write us off as not your blood and a mistake for the family. You try to justify your own dislike for this family by blaming the other person. Look, I hold myself to a higher standard to please this family. If this is what my efforts are towards, why should I continue? Grandma, you call yourself Christian but didn't Christ say to love one another as I have loved you? Yet you stand here attacking your blood for mistakes. Didn't the bad son return to his father with open arms. You call yourself noble but you are a hypocrite. If this is how my family acts, then maybe we should just stay in California."

Before anyone could respond I stormed out the door and into the car. I held the pocket watch in my hand as I watched the rest of my family join me in the car. As we drove away, the car was filled with silence.

My father spoke up to me, "I will never send you away I love you".

"I know dad. I love you too, and you were right," I responded.

"Right about what?" he asked

"The Great Plains aren't that great," I chuckled.

The whole car burst out with laughter as we drove away. We fell silent after that. There were so many questions now. Would we go back? Would I see Charlie before he goes to college? Regardless of the future I know I won't let anyone, family or not, run my life.



Johnny and the Sandcastle

by Paul Bytnar, 12

The morning sun pried at the puny eyelids of the boy. Johnny fought back and covered his eyes with his marker stained hands, but he couldn't help the growling beast within his stomach. Bacon crackled and sizzled, like the heat outside his window. His eyes swollen with slumber, Johnny gave them a few rubs. In one hand he fiddled with the belt of his robe, in the other he clutched a stuffed animal and sucked both his wrinkly thumb and a good portion of the fur. Mikey was a polar bear, but his fur was nearly brown after several trips to the sandbox. When he went to the store, Johnny asked for a stuffed penguin, but his mommy said the bear was brave like him.

Between the rock hard kitchen floor and the uncomfortably hard chair, Johnny adored the soft cushions of his couch. He could almost hear Elmo's voice, or Bert and Ernie, asking him where he has been. So he swallowed his toast and ventured to the gray wool couch. Johnny laid down on the couch, in his favorite curled up position with Mikey close by. He stared at the glassy screen for minutes, then hours, until finally his eyes became sore and he wanted no more. They burned and they blistered. But he couldn't bear to go outside, the sun was remarkably harsh.

Mommy waltzed in suggesting, "How about you change into your play clothes so you can go outside?" but Johnny whined and said "Outside is too hot! The sun is angry, Mommy!" So he slouched back on the cushions and jabbed at the volume button.

The instant he heard the doorbell ring, Johnny remembered his best friend Jimmy. Last week Mommy agreed they could play at Jimmy's house today. Last week, however, was not nearly as hot as today. After the click and quick sear of burning seatbelt, Johnny raced through the familiar gate of Jimmy's backyard near his playset.

Picking up a piece of mulch, Jimmy asked, "Do you wanna play on the swings?"

The sun glared off the swing sets and Johnny shielded his eyes.

"Hmm, no thanks. They look too hot."

"Yeah, you're right." He picked up a plastic shovel. "The sandbox is more fun anyway."

After the two boys examined the land, they drafted a quick blueprint with a stick.

"We can build a castle for Mikey!" Johnny exclaimed, setting the stick down.

Pointing to the corner of the sandbox, Jimmy said, "Good idea! Let's put two towers here, they'll be the front."

"Oh yeah! Then we can dig a moat and put a bridge right here!" he said, setting his favorite stuffed animal down.

With the scoop of a shovel, the excavation began. Jimmy hauled a load of sand away in his yellow toy dump truck as his best friend made his way around the construction site. When the moat was just deep enough, Jimmy filled it with water. The hose gurgled and flooded the ravine.

"That's perfect!" he said "Now time for the drawbridge!"

Johnny fetched the biggest stick around. "How's this?" He asked

"No. That stick is too long, we need a short wide stick for the bridge." He argued.

Disappointed, he snapped the stick in half.

"Better?" He shoved the branch in front of the boy.

He shrugged. Johnny speared the sand and the drawbridge stretched over the moat. It was just a bit too short.

"Can I borrow some sand from your truck?" he asked.

"No. This is my toy. You can use your shovel over there." He mumbled without looking up.

Johnny frowned, but did what he said. Next, he filled his pail with sand and water, packing it down extra hard. The boy carefully placed the bucket upside down over the sandbox. Jimmy glared as the sand slid out. He was proud of his sandcastle. The sand set perfectly and he carved ornate windows into tower walls. Jimmy snatched Johnny's bucket. He loaded it with sand and built a tower too. Then he packed another bucketful and created a two-story tower.

"My sandcastle is bigger than yours, Johnny!" His friend sneered, adding another story.

The boy stood up from the sand. A bead of sweat formed on the back of his neck. He puffed up his little chest and looked down at the boy.

"No it's not." Johnny hissed as he stomped on top of the tower with all his might.

As the castle crumbled, Jimmy bolted to his feet. He tore away the draw bridge and clasped the branch in his hand. Johnny turned his little head and shut his eyes, awaiting the pain of the blow. Jimmy wound his arm back as his eyes pierced the boy. But just before he could strike, Johnny's mother swept him up into her arms.

"What's going on here, Johnny?" she asked, wiping his tears away.

"Jimmy's sandcastle was bigger than mine." He pouted, brushing the sand off of his feet.

"Well Johnny, sometimes our friends have nicer things than us, you need to learn to be okay with that." She said, putting his socks and shoes back on. "Do you feel sorry for your friend?"

He shook his head. "No I don't."

With a thumb in his mouth, Johnny didn't speak another word from the time they left Jimmy's house, nor in the blistering hot car ride, nor when he came home. He laid down on the couch, in his favorite curled up position. Quickly, the cushions became marshmallows and cotton candy. They became clouds and piles of snow. At last they were so soft and he fell straight through them into a dreamy winter wonderland. He floated like fish in the sea, but all he could see was igloos and penguins. A frost filled breeze whistled over the icy domes.

All the animals cried out "Who are you? Who are you?"

Johnny said, "it's me! It's me!" He tightened his robe and looked for his gloves or his hat, but none of these he could see. "How far am I from home?" He asked, so the penguins came dressed in their tuxedo feathers to offer a flipper to him. They brought him inside their igloo and showed him a map of the South Pole.

Puzzled, Johnny asked for a cup of tea. "Antarctica! This place is cold! Do you have any tea here? Tea could warm me up."

The taller penguin, Stephen folded his feathers, "But Johnny, there's no tea here!" he explained.



Paul Bytnar, 12

“And why not?” he whined, filling a kettle with a cup of water.

The penguins complained, “The steam is too hot, it will melt away our home!”

But Johnny’s fingers were blue, and became cold to the touch. So he lit the stove and turned it hot. The kettle turned red. It squealed and screamed

Finally! He thought A chance to be warm!

But as the steam rose from the kettle, the icicles began to drip.

The tea was perfect, and tasted great! But the snow melted into water, and soon the igloo roof began to give way.

The penguins crowded around Johnny and yelled “What have you done to our home!”

Startled, but warm, Johnny reasoned, “I needed tea to stay warm! It’s freezing here” He said, steeping the tea bag.

A penguin threw his flippers in the air. “Are you kidding me!?! A cup of tea is more important to you then our home?” he yelled, knocking an icicle off of the South Pole sign.

Johnny sniffled and wiped his nose with the back of his robe. His bottom lip shivered, but not from the temperature. A tear rolled from his cheek and froze as it hit the snow.

“I didn’t know your home would break,” he mumbled.

“Johnny!” shouted the tallest penguin, “We warned you, and you didn’t listen!”

“He never will! Johnny is weak and cares only about himself,” a mother penguin said, comforting her bawling chick.

The tallest penguin stood upon a rock. “Look around you,” he began, “the penguins of the South Pole are furious! Only one man can solve this

problem.”

All around Johnny penguin beaks chirped the same name, “Emperor! Emperor! Emperor!”

The name became louder and louder, drowning out the crying chicks. Penguins began leaving their igloos to join the riot. The boy became surrounded by a swarm of black and white feathers. A pair of slick flippers grabbed hold of Johnny’s frozen legs. They paraded Johnny through the pebble streets passing igloo after igloo. His polar bear was his only comfort, the tea had left him and he was cold once more.

Four icebergs rose high above the village like skyscrapers. A deep blue color joined the pillars together into one large dome. Captured by the birds, Johnny had nowhere to run. A frozen bridge stretched over a river and onto a floating iceberg. Carved into ice read a massive billboard “The Emperor’s Palace.” At least one hundred windows arched across the entrance of the fortress, crowning the dark wood double doors. The chants evolved into songs, hymns echoed from the cathedral. Johnny was dragged down a long narrow path. It led straight to a towering throne, a packed pile of snow. Gems and jewels topped the crown of a penguin, taller than Stephen. His beak was straight and his feathers were spotless.

“Silence!” he boomed across the great hall.

The flocks settled down in the snow, their flippers clenched and flexed. The chants faded to murmurs and whispers.

“Who do you bring to me?” the Emperor asked

Stephen and the speckled penguin shoved me forward. “We bring you Johnny!”

A current of boos swept across the crowd.

“And what is this child’s crime?”

“He destroyed Stephen’s home!” someone bellowed as two muscular penguins swept snow away from a circular gap in the ice.

The emperor stared long and hard into the boy’s terrified eyes.

“Johnny, destroyer of igloos,” he branded him.

The clink of metal on ice rang out from behind the throne. A penguin presented the emperor with a long chain attached to a metal ball. As he bowed, the ball and chain slipped and left a crater in the ice.

The Emperor rolled his eyes, but asked the crowd, “Shall he sink or float?”

Birds from the balcony boomed “SINK HIM!” A horde of chicks etched SINK into a pile of snow.

Johnny realized what the hole was for. No one was ice fishing here. The ball and chain was for him. The verdict was clear.

The Emperor marched down from his snow steps to the frosty floor. He looked deep into Johnny’s brown eyes. The boy stood inches from the freezing water. The palace was so silent he could hear the ice below him cracking and creaking.

“You destroyed one of our homes,” the Emperor whispered.

Johnny shivered as a cold tear rolled down his cheek.

“Why should we not destroy you?”

Though he spoke softly, the words cut deep into his heart. His quivering lips produced no sound.

In the blink of an eye the emperor lunged at Johnny. But he tore Mikey straight from Johnny’s hands and threw him straight into the ice. The stuffed bear plunged into the sea, freezing Johnny’s tiny toes. Mikey floated upwards, coated in a layer of frost, until he slowly sunk under the ice.

Bawling, Johnny reached out towards the hole. He wanted to clutch Mikey. He wanted to feel the gentle fur, the smooth glass eyes, and the so fluffy stuffing. If only I could go back home...he thought. My mother is gentle, and the grass is soft, but best of all the sun shines and not a single snowflake falls. There is warmth back home...

Dreadful, Johnny threw himself down in the snow. He began clawing at the snow like a dog. The slush chilled his fingers, but he kept digging.

"I wanna go home, I wanna go home now!" he cried.

The penguins mumbled wondering what they should do. The Emperor shouted at the guards who snatched at the boy. Johnny was too fast. Surrounded in a snow tunnel, he saw a thin slit of light peering from above. The warm glimmer brought him a glimpse of hope. He ripped the snow apart and the light flooded around him like a spotlight. The golden glow warned him. Johnny could feel the comfort of the sunlight. His little fingers combed a familiar wool. He wiped his tears and discovered he was at home lying on his couch. Johnny reached for his favorite teddy bear, but found only the couch.

"Where's Mikey?" he whispered to himself, checking under the couch. Besides a few dust bunnies, he saw nothing. "Mommy?" He ran into his bedroom and looked for his teddy bear.

Nothing.

"Mommy, where's Mikey!?!!" he screamed. The boy was met only with silence. Silence, like a darkness, eating up the light. There was no one around, no one could find Mikey. He was gone for good, it was not even worth the effort. Then, a familiar ring broke the silence. The doorbell. Mommy!

The front door swung open and he raced to the door.

"Hi Johnny! Look what your friend found," Mommy said.

There he was. Mikey, covered in the grime of affection dangled from the sandy hands of Jimmy. Johnny outstretched his hand, but stopped himself. He lowered his head and mumbled, "I'm sorry I knocked over your tower, Jimmy."

The boy smiled, and handed him his warm teddy bear.

Pride

by Kevin Jeffries '12

Dante is the name. I always loved my name because it was after my grandfather who played professional football. We were really close apparently when I was little. He would play catch with me all the time. He had problems though. He would mess around with married women and then one day he messed up with the wrong man's wife. He was shot that day. My dad completely changed from that day on. My grandpa didn't give any money to my parents though. Money has always been a problem. Mom's a teacher and Dad left when I was little. He just wasn't the same after his father died. His whole perspective changed, he hated his life and his family. Still haven't heard from him in five years and the last thing he said was, "Treat people with respect. Forgive others. Take care of your mom." I still remember his voice and how deep it was. I had no clue my dad was going to leave me at five years old.

I live in the Bronx. I am going to make my momma proud and do good in life. Some of us won't go to college, or just drop out of school, but I will stay in school, get a football scholarship, and then maybe my pops will come back. Right before he left he gave me a gift and said open this in fourth grade after you score that touchdown. Me and him bonded over football. He was really good until he tore his ACL. I still remember him telling me about his games. We would talk every night and I would just fantasize playing. I finally got to play when I was four. He came to every game and would come to a lot of the practices too. I'm going to show him what he wanted to see before he left.

Throughout the course of three years I averaged three touchdowns per game. We got second place last year in the third grade finals. My team's the Bronx Hoppers. We were the best team in the conference until our quarterback got hurt. Our backup quarterback couldn't throw more than 10 yards. He was the coach's son. Great kid but horrible player.

One practice my coach said to my friend Piper and me, "You boys are up for cleaning up the trash." Coach picks two people every practice to pick up the trash and go throw it away in the dumpster. My lucky day was today. I take a deep sigh and Piper and I walk around and pick up all the paper cups, plastic that may have fallen off equipment, and dump the water jug.

As we're walking over to the dumpster Piper turns to me and says, "Hey Dante, do you miss your dad?" I can tell that he looks upset. Piper's dad is in jail for robbery.

"Yeah, I do. Especially on days like today when everyone is hanging out with their dads," I told him.

We made it to the dumpster and I saw something shiny. Right as Piper was about to throw the bag in I yelled, "Wait!" I jumped up and saw they were gloves! I jumped in right away and grabbed them. They were white with silver on them. There was a hole on the palm of the right hand and a hole on the pointer finger of the left hand. They were super worn out and had been used so much the white had turned black in some places.

"I've never had football gloves before," I told Piper.

"Me either," He said. We both tried the gloves on. When we were

playing catch some kids from the school we were practicing at came up to talk.

“Hey look, it’s my old gloves I put in the trash today. They have holes in them and are useless. Just go buy some new gloves, maybe your dad can go buy them for you,” The group laughed as their “leader” smirked. Landon, five feet tall in the fourth grade. I didn’t even think that was possible. He could throw over fifty yards. He gets a new pair of cleats every week because he doesn’t like the look of dirty shoes.

Piper turns to me, “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah, y’all better go,” Landon shouts as we’re walking away.

I get home and go up to my mom, “Mom! Look at the gloves I found.” She works overtime so that I could play football.

“Those look amazing honey,” She said with a glass of wine in her hand. She never has wine, only on special occasions. The wine had to have gone bad by now. My pops got it for her right before he left, but I guess old wine is better than no wine. Yesterday was her birthday. Forty-six was the lucky number. She looks like she’s 30 though. Long legs, long brown hair, big blue eyes, skinny body, and almost no wrinkles in her face.

When she talked to me I could smell that wine. It made me shiver. All I could think was that night. Saturday October 16, 2005. The night my dad left. My mom had a glass of that same wine that night. We had just finished watching *American Idol*. It was a fun thing we did every Saturday to get together because they were always busy with work. My parents argued a lot, but Saturdays they usually didn’t argue. They seemed like they really did love each other when we would get in front of that



Kevin Jeffries, 12

10-inch television every Saturday and be together, but that night it was different. I was going to bed. I heard a loud bang. It sounded like a glass breaking.

Suddenly I heard my mom, “Stop it! Get out! You have ruined this family.” I peeked down the stairs and my dad was throwing plates and glasses on the ground. Breaking almost all of them. I saw my mom crying, screaming, hurting. My dad stomped upstairs and grabbed all of his stuff and threw it out the window. I heard my mom screaming out the window, “Leave and never come back!” That night my whole life changed. My Dad would never...

“Dante, Dante, Dante!” My mom hits my arm.

“Yes, mom, sorry I just zoned out,” I respond.

“Can you please do the dishes,” she asks me.

“Yes,” I know she had a long day and yesterday was her birthday so the least I could do for her was do the dishes before she goes to bed for two hours and works her early shift. I picked up one of the plates and

that night came to mind, but I had to move on and do the dishes.

Monday morning, my least favorite morning because it's the start of the week. I struggle with school, a lot of Cs and Ds. I have a great friend group though. They know how much I hated that kid Landon.

"Hey, Dante," Piper said, "We should go egg Landon's house. Then that little rich kid will never make fun of you again." I ponder the idea. What if we got caught? How are we supposed to get in? Landon lives in a gated neighborhood with a guard at the front 24/7.

"There's no way we can get in," I tell Piper, "There are cameras around the entire neighborhood."

"You think I don't know that? I know how we can get in. We dig a hole and go under," he says with a smirk on his face.

"Are you dumb? Digging a hole would take forever. Yeah good idea let me just go dig a six-foot-deep hole with a shovel." I replied in a mocking tone.

"That's a good point. Oh! What if we took my really tall ladder? We could take silly string and spray the camera and that would last us at least a minute to get up the ladder and over."

I smile and say, "Let's do it."

The next day we go to the dollar store right up the street. We look around and find silly string and five eggs for a dollar. We both had a dollar saved up from when we picked up trash and found some change. We buy the stuff and go back to Piper's house while we wait until dark.

"Want to play Nintendo 64?" Piper asks.

"What games do you have?" I ask.

"Well, we got Mario 64, Mario Tennis, Donkey Kong, and Super Smash Bros."

"Load in that Super Smash Bros. I have never lost a game. Kirby is easily the best character in the game."

"No way! Link is the best! Kirby does no damage. Link does so much damage and he can kill people so easily because of that."

"But Kirby never dies, Link doesn't have a recovery move and Kirby can just fly all the time."

"I guess we'll have to wait and see. I have also never lost a game, so good luck." We sat there for hours playing. Going back and forth on winning and losing our games. We got pretty frustrated with each other but luckily it was all in good fun. We knew we had a job to do that night.

"Dante, will you be joining us for dinner?" I hear Piper's Mom scream down the stairs.

"Yes ma'am," I reply. She made stir-fry that night. She put sriracha in it so I was dying from the spice. It really woke me up, which is good because it was time. It was pitch-black outside. We grabbed the ladder and the other supplies we bought from the garage and started walking to Landon's neighborhood. We were about a mile away and with this 20-pound ladder, the eggs, and silly string I was carrying, it felt like a lot longer. We finally reached the fence.

"Get down!" Piper whispered to me. Suddenly, I look and see the two cameras and a guard walking around the neighborhood.

"There's no way we can do this." I tell Piper. I'm shaking viciously. The nerves are really setting in. Do I want to do this? This is a crime. Trespassing has to give me years in jail. My mom will be so mad if I get in trouble with the cops. I will be disappointment. My pops told me to treat people with respect and forgive. Am I following his advice?

"Dante, Dante!" Piper hit my shoulder, "Here take this and spray the

right camera and I'll get the left one. On three. One, two, three!" We both turn to our sides of the tree and spray. Direct hits.

"Yes, we got it!" I whisper to him. We set up the ladder and both climb over. Piper is the second one to climb the ladder and notices something.

"We need to bring the ladder or else we can't get back over" he said to me. So he stands on top of the fence and pushes it over. It makes a loud thud as it hits the ground. I look at him while he looks at the ladder and says, "It's fine, let's go." We are sneaking through backyards, hiding in bushes, doing anything we can just to stay hidden. We get to the house and I look at Piper and say, "It's time." He gets out the eggs and I go for their car first. A brand new Mercedes. White with chrome wheels, mirrors, grill, and Mercedes logo. I break off the logo on the front and throw it on the ground. I throw two eggs, one at the back, one at the front.



Kevin Jeffries, 12

"Okay what's next?" I ask Piper

"Throw the rest at the house." Piper tells me. Nervously I throw two at the garage. Perfect shots. After I throw one at the first-floor window and second-floor window. The first one went a little left and hit the red bricks of the house. The second one hit perfectly on someone's bedroom window. I see two eyes peek from the window.

"Crap, I just saw someone look at us. We got to get out of here!" I tell Piper. We start running. It felt like an eternity running back. I kept looking back to see if someone was following us. I see the ladder. We're getting closer and closer. "Set up the ladder!" Piper sets up the ladder. We climb up and I say, "Wait, grab the ladder."

"Just leave it, we'll get it another day," Piper responds. I just go with it because we need to run. Running through the streets we finally make it back to Piper's house. We sneak in and up to his room. "We made it. Great job, we really made Landon think twice about messing with us

again.”

“Good job, now we need to go to bed because we have to be up early so your mom doesn’t think we were out late.”

“Good idea.”

We are abruptly woken up at three a.m. by red and blue lights outside and knocking on the door. Piper’s mom walks downstairs and opens the door.

“Can I help you officers?”

“Yes, you can ma’am, we believe your son and his friend egged someone’s house,” says one of the officers.

“Guys, come downstairs!” We walk downstairs. I am shaking uncontrollably. How did they know? It was dark out and we left right away.

“Is this your ladder ma’am?” asks one of the officers.

“Yes, it is.” We make it downstairs and the officer looks at us and says.

“Did you guys egg your friend’s house?”

“Dante threw all the eggs!” Piper really rattled me out! He just threw me under the bus and it was his idea!

“Let’s take you home, kid,” says one of the officers to me. I get in the police car and it is dead silence. I can hear my own breathing as I start crying in the back seat.

We get to my house and the officer knocks on the door. My mom answers the door and says, “Hi, officer, what happened?”

“Well ma’am your son egged someone’s house and the damage is about \$2,000 dollars. He broke a window on a car, damaged paint on the car, and damaged paint on the house.”

“Two thousand dollars! Well there is no playing football next year. Thank you, officer. I will be in contact with the family and will severely punish Dante for his actions.”

“I will have a call with your insurance company. Have a good rest of your night ma’am.”

She closes the door and looks at me and yells, “What were you thinking! We don’t have the money for this!”

“He made fun of dad! I had to defend him!”

“Honey, people are going to make fun of you your whole life! You need to ignore it! He’s a spoiled little kid with a lucky life but we have more love in this family. I love you so much but remember what your dad said. Treat people with respect. I don’t care if he talked about him but this is hurting us more than him insulting your dad.”

“I’m sorry mom. I won’t let my pride come in the way anymore. I promise.” We hugged and then fell asleep together that night. The night the last sip of wine was had.

Lessons

by Kevin Jeffries '12

Stop! He's seen him. The small glimpse of brown through a forest filled with green. A deer, he thinks. He starts inching his way towards it. Due to his giraffe-like body, he ducks behind a bush trying to keep the element of surprise. Creeping toward the deer, the leaves crunch under his feet, despite his best efforts. Crunch, crunch. The deer's ear twitches in response and sends him running away. "Damnit, John," he says, sighing to himself. He drags his feet back to his cabin. The leaves leave a green hue on the bottom of his boots. Before going into the cabin he scrubs the soles till they sparkle. He uses the water from the wooden tub he built. The murkiness of the water guilts him into replacing it with clean water; it has been over a week since he cleaned the tub. Before leaving, he chucks more wood into the fire, ensuring it wouldn't diminish while he was gone. Gripping the handles he built on the bottom, he pulls the tub on its side, successfully dumping out all of the water. Sweat gleaming down his neck, he throws the tub into a wheel-barrow like wagon and starts the trek towards the fresh spring water. With the sun beating down on his head, he constantly brushes his long brown hair out of his face. As time passes, the sweat seems to have made his hair into a mop, making him even more agitated. His legs whimper in pain, yet he knows it could be worse. He starts thinking about how his parents left him, but he would rather be holding on by a thread here, than holding on by a thread at the adoption center. Knowing that every day, parents decide to adopt a different boy, raise a different boy, love a different boy. It hurts him knowing that no one will take him and care for him. He is just overlooked like a dog at a shelter.

"Daaaaaad!! Where are my Louis Vuitton shoes!! I left them here before Sarah came today," Hanna shrieks.

"They should be in your closet," he mumbles back.

"That's my point, they aren't there." She whispers under her breath, "God, we need a new maid. That chick is always stealing my stuff." Tucking her dyed-blond hair behind her ears, she bolts up the stairs towards her room. Hurrying to get ready, she throws on the tightest pink dress she could find; matching it with the "stolen" shoes, which she found under her dirty clothes.

"Got them," she exhales.

She puts the little heels on and runs downstairs; the shoes you could hear from a mile away. She finally gets to the kitchen where her dad is waiting at the elevator.

"Come on, we're late!" he says with an angry look on his face. He reaches down and jabs the "ground" button. The silence is filled with the chiming from Hannah's phone from the Snapchat notifications. She is glued to her phone. You can see the pictures she takes based on her facial expressions: happy, flirty, sad, annoyed, or even don't talk to me. She must have snap chatted more than 100 people during the 30-second elevator ride to the ground floor. As they exit they are met with a wall of

money-hungry employees.

“Mr. Gene, would you like a complimentary water, face wash, hand sanitizer?”

“No, thank you, ladies,” he tells them. Handing them each a \$20 he walks toward the door. The doorman pulls the door open to reveal his driver waiting on the other side.

“Mr. Gene, how are we doing today?” he asks.

“Better than ever,” he responds as he and Hannah crawl into the car on the way to dinner. They make it to dinner and their table is already ready for them. Drinks are prepared and are waiting for them as they sit down. They are instantly greeted by their server.



“The usual, sir?” The waiter asks.

“Yes sir, filet cooked medium rare.”

“And what for you ma’am?”

“I’ll have the...”

Kevin Jeffries, 12

Chop! He watches the head roll off the bunny he just trapped. The bunny is bigger than usual; providing him with dinner for a least a few nights. He estimates around seven pounds. Mating season has caused the bunnies to be smaller this season. Slicing into the bunny, his arms veins start bulging out. His broad shoulders are hitting the walls in his little cabin. His head can almost touch the ceiling. He may be tall but his face is small. He has the smallest nose someone has ever seen, smaller ears, a small mouth, but big blue eyes that glisten off of the sun. He puts the pan down over the fire and starts to cook the meat. He throws in some carrots from the garden outside. He has to save some though because winter is coming up and he hasn’t gotten a deer yet. The deer usually last him throughout the winter if he is able to cut it up perfectly and freeze it. Luckily, last winter he built a cooler. He would dig down and then put some fur on the bottom, put ice, then the meat, and then more ice and it worked really well. It kept the meat from going bad for that winter. He wanted to try to replicate that same thing this winter, so he

started to dig to prepare for when he gets his deer.

As the food is cooking he knows he has to start to dig. He digs a one-foot by one-foot area and then starts to dig downwards. About a foot down he stops and turns to flip over his meat. It's starting to smell really good, it almost smells professional. He turns and starts to dig some more. As he digs he starts to think, what if he went back? Would they let him just leave? Would they let him make his own choices, or would he be controlled like last time? All of these questions float through his mind. He takes the food off the skillet and sets it on his plate. He says a quick prayer and starts to eat. The meat was almost cooked to perfection if it weren't for the dryness.

"Must've been an old one," he says to himself. He still eats it though. Meals are hard enough to get, so he can't be picky.

"Dad my food is raw! How can this be? I thought we were the most important people here! We should not be treated like the peasants who are working here," Hannah says while pushing her food away from her.

"Sir," Mr. Gene says while pulling over the waiter. "My daughter's food is raw."

"I am so sorry sir, we'll get another steak out for you right now," the waiter says while sprinting to the kitchen.

"I'm sorry, honey."

"It's fine, it's just a waste of my time and a waste of that food."

"The food doesn't matter. They should not treat my daughter like that. They will not be getting as big of a tip tonight!" She has a troubled look on her face; she feels like it was wrong of them to throw that away. Why can't they just put it back on the grill? Sometimes she wishes she wasn't in the high-class crowd because it just makes life seem so posh. She feels useless because everyone is doing things for her. She really wants to try something new and work on learning life skills.

They finish off dinner after her food gets back and they get in the car when the valet pulls up the car. They got in and didn't say a word on the way home. Hannah, once again, was snap chatting people over and over. Her father was sending emails on his phone while listening to the band Fun. She was more of a country gal. She liked Luke Combs, Kane Brown, etc. When they got home she went upstairs to her room. She sat there on her phone for hours. Her father came upstairs and asked, "Do you want to go camping tomorrow night?"

"Sure!" Her response was quick. She had a smile from ear to ear and her eyes glistened like the sun was beaming light onto her face. She had never been camping before.

"Do you want me to rent an RV or do you want to use a tent?"

"Let's use a tent, I want to know how to do the basics in case I get caught stranded in the middle of nowhere and have to survive."

"Sounds good, I'll have to remind myself on how to make a fire, set up a tent, and we'll go four hours north to those woods. Sound good?"

"Sounds great! I am so excited!"

"God damnit! This fire won't start," John says. It's a little chilly outside tonight. Around 50 degrees. He has dug his hole a little bigger, but he still has work to do tomorrow. He constructed a plan. First, go out most of the day and try to get a deer. Second, field dress the deer. Third,

finish the hole for the freezer. He goes outside to find more wood he has stocked up. He finds a couple of small twigs and brings them inside with some leaves as well. He makes sure they are really dry, then throws them into the fireplace. He starts lighting matches and tossing them into the fire. It finally starts a little flame and he starts to blow on it to ignite it.

"Finally," he says with a sigh of relief. He shuts all of the blinds and goes to bed.

"Hannah are you ready to go?" Mr. Gene asks.

"Yeah, I'll be down in one second," she replies. She scrambles and throws as much as she can into her suitcase. Having never camped before, she didn't know what to bring. She threw in workout clothes, dresses, heels, tennis shoes, fancy sneakers, pajamas, swimming suits, etc. She came downstairs and her dad ran and helped her with the bag.

"Why did you bring so much stuff?" He asked while laughing.

"I didn't know what to bring."

"It's only one night, honey," they both laugh as they get in the car, "I'll teach you how to pack when we get back. Your mother taught me before she passed." Hannah has a sad look on her face as she thinks about her. She misses her. They were always so close. They went shopping every weekend and lunch following. She would always have someone to talk to about boys and drama. It's harder now with her dad. She doesn't feel totally comfortable yet.

They take their SUV today because they have a long drive ahead of them. Hannah again is snap chatting people on the way there.

They finally arrive. They both stand up and stretch their arms as the sun is beaming on top of them.

"Good thing I brought sunscreen," Mr. Gene says.

"Oh, I brought tanning oil," Hannah replied. They both laugh and just take a look around. They watch the amber gold tree leaves softly float to the ground. They can hear the birds chirping and the animals running over the leaves. "Look! That's an American eagle!"

"That's beautiful, isn't it honey? The wilderness is a beautiful place. Grandpa used to take me camping here. This brings back so many memories and I am so happy I am able to take you here now."

"Thank you, dad." They both hug and start to unload the car. They find the perfect spot where there is a circle with no leaves where they can set up camp. "Honey, do you want to go find some small twigs and branches while I keep unloading the car?"

"Yeah! I'll be back!!"

"Be careful!" He screams as she runs out into the wilderness.

He sees the deer he's been looking for. He slowly starts to walk towards it. He ducks as he sees somethings running through the trees. He hears leaves crunching. Is it another deer? He sees his first deer running away. Now he has to get this one. He can only see a little bit of brown through each tree. He hears humming, not too sure what it is. Suddenly it stops. It's a girl. A human. He hasn't seen one in this forest in years. Suddenly she stops. She must have heard him. She turns around and sees him. They make direct eye contact. He can't believe it. She is the most beautiful girl he has ever seen. Her long blonde hair is just blowing with

the wind. Her blue eyes look like the ocean. Her little nose and her bushy eyebrows are the perfect match. She is around five-foot-two inches. She is super skinny and has a brown jacket with a white shirt on underneath and black leggings with hiking boots on.

"Hi," she says softly.

"Hey," he replies, stepping out from behind the tree.

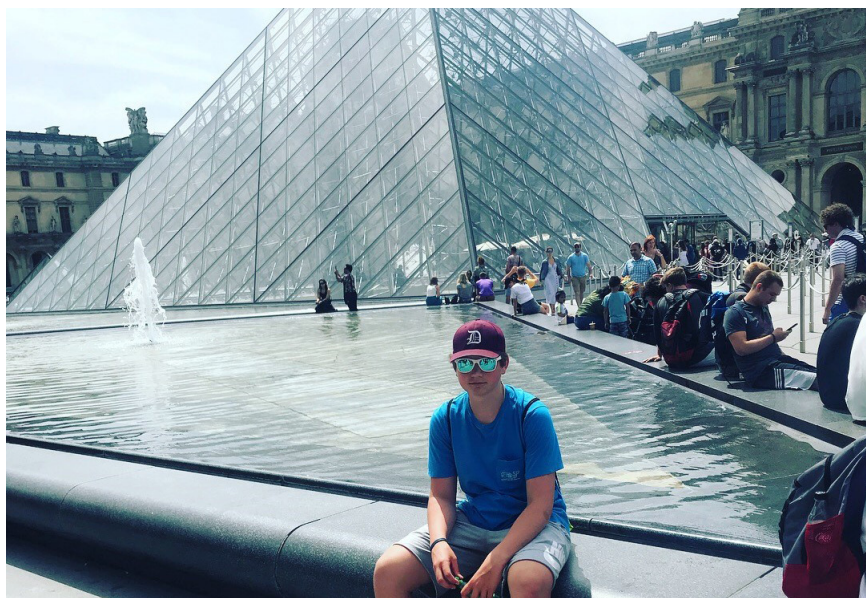
"Are you camping out here as well?"

"No, I live out here."

"Oh well, I am just looking for some good firewood. It's my first time camping ever."

"There is some good wood on your left."

"Thanks." She turns and sees the small branches. She starts picking them up and putting them into a plastic bag she brought. Her cheeks are turning a little red. Right when she saw him it was love at first sight. His



Terri Jeffries

long muscular arms and legs. His face is a perfect size. You would think it is too small but it just fits him. His eyes, oh his eyes, she feels like she can see right into his soul. She peeks around and sees him staring at her, "My name is Hannah," she says.

"John," he replies.

"Do you want to come to see our campsite?"

"Sure!" They start to walk. It's dead silent. The only thing they could hear was the footsteps from the leaves.

"How old are you?" Hannah asks.

"Seventeen," he replies.

"Oh, me too." They start talking all the way back and agree on everything! They were a perfect match. They get back to the campsite and see Hannah's dad unpacking the suitcase. "Dad! I found a friend in the woods."

"Get away from my daughter!" He says and pulls a gun out of his

pocket. John instantly puts both of his hands up. "Hannah, come here now!"

"Dad, it's okay he's super nice!"

"Look at him, honey! He lives out here. For all we know, he could come and kill us tonight because you showed him where we are staying. I am calling the police right now!"

"No, sir, please," John quickly says, "I escaped the foster care system. I don't want to go back. Please, you don't understand!" His legs are shaking. Tears are falling down his face.

"That's even a better reason to call. You're a runaway!" Mr. Gene says as he picks up his phone and dials 911. "Hi, I have a missing child who is living in the woods." He gives the women the location and holds the kid at gunpoint.

"Dad! Stop! He's just a kid," Hannah is pleading. "Please just let him go. He's super nice! I love him!" She falls to the ground crying as she sees the red and blue lights pulling up to the site.

"Hannah, please help!" John screams as three officers drag him to the police car and shove him in the back seat.

"I love you!" She screams as the door to the car slams shut. She runs over to her dad and screams, "What the hell! He was just a kid. We were a perfect match! I loved him!"

"Honey, you can't love someone after knowing them for five minutes."

"Have you ever heard of the saying love at first sight? Yeah! You just ruined that for me!" She storms off and slams the car door behind her. Her dad packs up all of the stuff and puts it back into the car and they start the drive home. No one speaks the entire way. The radio doesn't turn on. All you can hear is breathing and the rumble from the road. They made it and Hannah ran to the elevator to make sure he didn't go up with her. She sprinted to her room, jumped on her bed, and covered herself in her blankets, and just cried. She cried for hours. She didn't talk to him or come out of that room for the next two days.

"Hi, Mr. Gene is the name. I was wondering if you have any kids at the orphanage named John."

"Well, yes we do, let me go get him." Mr. Gene walked around the room waiting. He saw all the pictures on the wall of the kids who were adopted. He also saw the adoption list. It had more than 50 kids. He wondered how they fit all of them in this tiny place.

"Hannah's dad?" John's voice startled Mr. Gene. He quickly turned around.

"Can we talk?" Mr. Gene asked. "I am very sorry for what I did to you. I think that you are a good kid and have just had a rough start to life."

"It's been hard," John replied, "The orphanage system is rough. I sleep with five other people in the room and we don't have much food to eat. When I escaped I was happy because I got to do the things I wanted instead of just waiting to be picked like an apple is waiting at a grocery store."

"John, would you like to be adopted?"

"More than anything. Sir, your daughter was the only happiness I felt in a long time."

"I would like to adopt to you if that is okay with you."

"Oh my god, yes it's okay with me! Oh my god, I can't believe it."



Nicholas Hale 12

“I still have to do some paperwork but they accepted my application so let me fill it out.”

“Okay, thank you so much!”

Mr. Gene went and filled out paperwork for hours. John sat there anxiously waiting to drive to his new home. Once he signed the last paper, the lady shook both of their hands and they walked out. They both got in the car and started their drive home. They talked about life on the way home. John would tell him all the stories from living in the wild and Mr. Gene told him about Hannah and his family. When they got back to the penthouse Mr. Gene opened the door to Hannah’s room. She wouldn’t even face him.

“Hannah?” Hannah thought she heard that voice before. No, it couldn’t be. She must be dreaming. She instantly got so happy. She turned around and there he was. John! She ran towards him and jumped onto him.

“Oh my god, how are you here?” Hannah asked

“Your dad adopted me,” John replied

“Dad, you did this for me?”

“Yes, honey. I saw how happy you were with him and I couldn’t let that go. So he is now a Gene and we can add one more to the genes in this family”

Home and Hakim's

by Michael Mattern, 12

"All packed up, Mase?" my father Ben asked tucking his hands into the sides of his flannel.

"Yeah, I think I've got everything."

"You think or you know you have everything?"

"Um...Yeah, I have everything."

"Good, let's get going then."

The rumbling start of my dad's grey sedan indicated the beginning of our journey. We set course to a plot of land hundreds of miles away that had been passed down for generations. To say I grew up on that plot of land would be an understatement. The land had become a part of me. Although the naïve excitement of these hunting trips had worn off, I still didn't mind heading down to southern Kansas, near the Chikaskia River.

The midwestern sun was still rising as we approached our exit. The summer heat ascended off the black asphalt while spare clouds passed over providing seconds of shade. It was truly an August in Kansas.

"Mase, look in the cooler and find a Busch for me, please." Beers were a staple in the Chilwell family. I'd never enjoyed one with the family, but I knew which ones were sacred and the ones that were unholy. I unbuckled my tight body that had been resting against the leather seats for hours and reached back, lifting the top of the Yeti cooler.

"Thanks, Mason. Are you hungry?"

It was almost like he had been ignoring the roars of my stomach for the back half of our journey.

"Yes, please, I could use some Macdon's right about now."

"McDonald's? Mase, you're going to college in a few weeks, you can't live off that food for nine months out of the year. How about we hit a local diner here?"

"I don't know; I-I really just want a quarter pounder with fries right now." I didn't feel like trying new stuff right now, Macdon's was safe and I liked it. To my dismay, we pulled up to a local diner that wreaked of cigarettes and displayed flickering, pink, neon lettering.

"Welcome to Hakim's Diner, I'm your server today Mateo, what can I get for you today?"

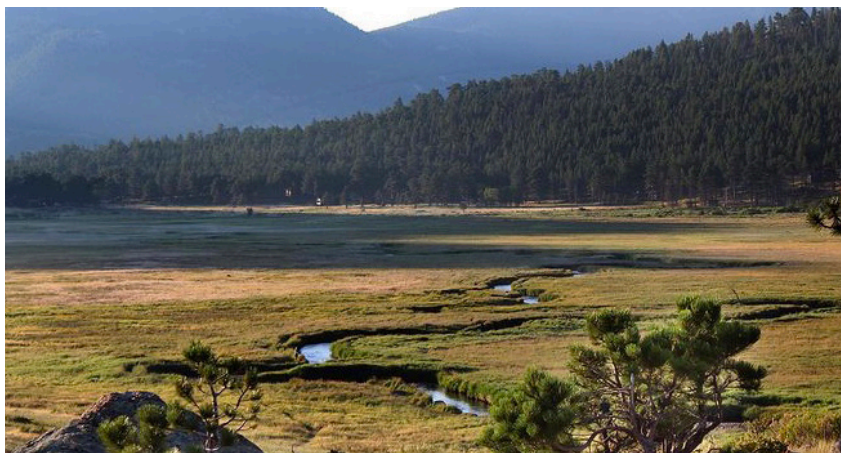
"Just water for right now, thank you," my father said affirmatively to Mateo. I slumped onto the red, chrome stool adjacent to the counter. I didn't want to be here. I didn't even really want to be on this trip with my dad. It would be better if I could go to the spot by myself and hunt those majestic white tailed deers. I usually don't mind my dad's company, but this time he kept pushing my boundaries. I glanced over the menu, looking for the items and foods I knew best.

"Oooo, would you look at that: The Hakim Special, a buttered smash burger with specially seasoned fries. There's that quarter pounder you wanted." Said Dad while smirking at me.

"I think I'll just get a plain cheeseburger with regular fries. I just don't know how much I'll like it; I'll stick to what I know." My stomach quaked, I needed food soon or else my stomach would collapse.

"Oh, come on, this is your last time here before college. Try something for once."

"No, I'm fine. I don't want to try anything new."



Paul Bytner, 12

“Fine,” my father signaled over to Mateo and spoke, “Yeah, we’re ready to order.”

“Good, what can I get for the both of y’all?” Mateo said as he fumbled for his pen and notebook.

“The Hakim Special for me and just a plain cheeseburger and fries for my blue-eyed boy over there.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, it is. Thank you, Mateo.”

“No problem, sir. And if you don’t mind my curiosity, I’ve never seen you round these parts before. What brings you down here?”

“Just a hunting trip with my son, Mason. Oh, excuse my manners, I’m Benjamin.” My dad reached out his right hand toward the body of the waiter.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Benjamin,” Mateo spoke as he accepted the hand of my father.

“And nice to meet you, Mr. Mason.” He said as he reached out to me. If I learned one thing from my dad, it was handshakes spoke a thousand words. As my hand met Mateo’s, I felt as if my hand was being put through a meat grinder. As my bones moved around my pale white hand, my mouth forced out an answer, “Nice to meet you too, Mateo.”

“Alright, I’ll write in this order and it should be out in 20,” Mateo said as he was closing his notebook.

“Thank you, my good sir,” my father responded sharply. I turned my head from the diner counter to the window. The view was similar to the one I had just seen for six hours straight: a highway filled with cars, trucks, and trailers. The sides of the highway were filled with either corn stalks or wheat grass with the occasional soybean plants. The farm near Hakim’s was growing almost mature corn stalks, their maturity was a characteristic of a close harvest, usually in September. I pulled out my phone. The black off screen provided me with a moment of reflection. Blond hair, blue eyes, the mole above my top lip, and the large ears I got from my father. I awakened my phone to find only one bar of 3G service. Nice.

“Heerreee you guys go,” Mateo said placing down our food. “Enjoy.”

“We will,” my father responded. We sat in silence as we dug into our local endeavor. My bun was soggy and the plate was set messily, with

fries scattered throughout. I think my dad caught my disappointment.

"What's the problem, Mase?"

I sat there, poking around my plate and lifting up the bun, "I dunno, it just looks a bit strange to me."

"Just give it a chance Mase, you'll like it, trust me." I looked over at his plate. It looked even worse than mine. It looked like the chef dumped red dirt on his fries and his burger was fried instead of grilled. I was too hungry to keep protesting, so I gave in.

"Not bad," I responded as we walked out of the diner.

Scratching his stubble, my dad answered, "I'm glad ya liked it. Alright let's get a move on." I hopped back into the seat that I've commanded for many hours before and strapped my seatbelt. One more hour.

We pulled into the cabin's gravel driveway as the sun was casting shadows on the east. We unloaded the trunk and walked through the oak doorway, placing our items in the living space.

"How's about we take a scouting run real quick while the sun's still out?" my dad spoke softly. I hesitated. We'd been here millions of times before. We knew where the good spots were.

"Why's that?"

"Just come on, Mase and take a walk with me then. I'll do the scouting." I followed his lead. We explored the scenery we'd both grown up with, our legs trudging through knee-high grass with tall trees whistling in the wind. Following farther, we took a route around the property, stopping at each hunting stand making sure nothing was wrong with it. The walk was nice, and we both watched the orange and pink sunset together in a stand.

"You won't get any more of these any time soon, eh?" My father remarked.

"I guess you're right."

"Hey, Mase, what's with all this guessing you've been doing recently? Man, I swear every time you're tasked with answering a question, you're always so unsure of yourself."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I asserted boldly.

"How about when you were picking a college?" His tone began to pick up. "Hell, I'm not even sure you'd have one picked right now if it wasn't for mom."

"No, I want to go there. I'm sure of it." I reminded him.

"Are you sure about that, because there's still 10 other college brochures sitting on your desk like you're still debating your options."

"You're completely overstepping your boundaries, Dad. It's my decision, not yours."

"Make it your decision then."

"Fine, I will." I've never stepped out of a stand quicker. I got back to the cabin as quick as possible and went to my room. I thought to myself, "Who does he think he is? Calling me 'Unsure.'"

Pause.

I never questioned that he might be right. College. Yeah, that's right, college. I'm confident in my decision; sure, there were other options that had some really good pros to it, but I think I made the right choice. Ok. I'm confident in this. Bedtime.

I woke up to the glaring sun poking through my shades. I tossed my covers to the side, put on my shorts from the day before and walked into the living area to see my father all ready to go. He closed his book and turned to me, "How about we get a move on then?"

"Yep, let me get something in me before we go," I said. He turned back to the book and I opened the cooler. Busch? No. Ham and cheese sandwich? Yes, please.

"Hey, do you mind if I take the tree stand today?" I asked while gnawing on my sandwich.

"Not a problem, just be careful up there." I like the tree stand a lot. It was super high up and gave you a great visual of where the most deer crossed. Not to mention how secluded it was from everyone else. Dad unboxed the rifles while I ate and got dressed. He took a few brews for the road too. We opened the door to the same light that had woke me up earlier. Bright and blue.



Paul Bytner, 12

"Alrighty, I want to be clear here, so take this serious." My dad commanded.

"Sure, what's on your mind."

"I need you to promise me you'll be careful up there because you know what happened, and that is not happening to you too." My dad was talking about what happened to my brother, Callum, who's now paralyzed from the waist down after falling

from the tree stand. It shook our family to the core and I'm surprised we still hunt even to this day, let alone keep that damn stand.

"Yes sir."

"Good boy, let's meet back here at about 1 p.m. or when we hear gunfire, okay?"

"Gotcha, see you later." I turned and started the journey to the tree stand. I eventually made it and got up the tree.

"Damn, look at that view," I whispered to myself. This was my first time up here and it didn't disappoint. I removed the brown rifle strapped around my shoulder and placed it on the stand. I removed ammunition from my pocket and carefully loaded it into the chamber. I unbuckled the scope lens cover and removed it. I peered through the scope and scouted the land. Good day for some hunting.

Time had passed and there was nothing to write home about. I pressed my eye against the scope and scouted the area.

"Shit," I murmured to myself. There it was. A black bear squaring down with my father. He stood still, trying not to provoke the bear. The bear originally ignored my father, until he sharply turned his head toward my dad. I quickly moved into a prone position, moving the rifle under my right shoulder. I rested my right index finger on the trigger and moved my thumb to the safety while viewing down the scope. The bear inched closer to my father as I began to set my shot. Without hesitation, I pulled the trigger on the rifle.

Crack.

I scampered down the tree as quickly as possible to go and visit the scene.

"Are you alright, Dad?"

“Yeah, I think so.”

“You think so or you know so?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” He smiled at me. I looked over to the bear and saw the remains of my kill. Usually, you do not want to aim for the head, but this shot blew through the top of its head for a quick kill.

“We should probably clean this up, I’ll grab the four-wheeler,” my dad said walking towards the bear. As he walked away, I looked over my kill. Adult male, roughly 300 pounds, and humongous paws. I’d never seen a bear here before this one. I’m not sure what brought this bear over to southeast Kansas, but I’m sure there was a higher reason for it being here.

The rumbling sound of the four-wheeler began to grow louder as it drove over the hill and there father was, sat on top of the camo Kawasaki four-wheeler with the yellow rope hanging off the back, flapping in the wind. He stopped next to the bear and unstrapped the rope from the four-wheeler.

“Alright, let’s tie it up to the back,” he commanded to me. He tossed me one end of the rope and we began to tie up the bear, starting with the paws. We strapped the bear to the back, and my dad drove back to the cabin, leaving me alone to walk back.

I went back to the stand, climbing back up the tree to retrieve my things. I grabbed my rifle, backpack, and other things. I went back down to the ground and the journey home began. As I collected my things, I collected my thoughts.

That really just happened, That’s fucked. What the hell.

I was greeted by my dad when I entered the cabin, “Hey, how are you doing buddy?”

“I’m good, dad, thank you. Are you good too?”

“Yes, I’m fine, luckily. You had a good shot there, anywhere else but the head and you’re having to make a sad phone call home.”

“Yeah, it was a good shot, and it was one of the quickest lineups I’ve ever had.”

“Mase, come take a seat here next to me and grab two beers for the both of us.” As he talked, he signaled to the cooler then softly patted the couch. I opened the cooler and walked over to the couch with the cans, dripping with water.

“Mason, I can’t thank God enough for giving you as my son.” I blushed. “And I can’t thank you enough for saving my life.”

“It’s fine, Dad, and thank you for all that you’ve done for me.”

“And I’m sorry for hurting you yesterday. You’re right, it’s not my decision.”

“Dad...you were right, I lived my life questioning every decision I made. I was never sure I made the right decision. Now, I feel a lot better about myself. I know where I’m going from here and sure it might not be the best decision, but it’s my decision and no one can change that.”

“Mase buddy, I want you to be happy. That’s it and if somethings not making you happy, you can tell me.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“No problem, Mason. Now, where do we go from here?”

“Hakim’s, then home. Preferably.”

“Mase, I’m eight beers down and it’s 3PM, we aren’t going home for a while.”

“Yeah and I don’t feel like driving, so we better find something to do.”

Keeping the Sport Alive

by *Braden O'Shea*, 12

My little cousin, Nick, just turned 10 years old. On September 15, we set out together for the hunt of a lifetime. Seriously, this was an amazing experience. Nick loves hunting almost as much as I do. He has a Bear Archery Cruzar G2 Compound Bow, but he has never actually hunted with it. All of his hunts, up until now, have been with his dad using a light-weight .22 Rimfire rifle, shooting things like squirrels and rabbits. To bow hunt, you have to get up close and personal with the wildlife. For most hunters, the target must be no farther than 50 yards away. Because Nick only pulls back the minimum poundage, he needs his target to be no farther than 30 yards away. This is no easy task, as wildlife have very keen senses, and this is why this hunt was such an amazing experience for both of us.

Let me start at the beginning. Nick has listened to my personal bow hunting stories for years now. He listens from the edge of his seat, asking me lots of questions. Nick always wants me to provide every detail from a hunt. For years now, Nick has begged me to take him on a bow hunt. Each time, I say the same thing. "I will take you with me as soon as you can get your, "draw weight," up to 40 pounds."

Nick is a small kid who barely weighs 80 pounds, so pulling back 40 pounds of pressure with a bow is a real challenge. Nick reminds me a bit of myself. We even look alike. Nick has wavy blond hair with green eyes. When I was Nick's age, I was just as small and just as skinny. Anyway, at almost every family gathering, Nick is showing me his pushup routine and other strength building exercises. It is hilarious. He is, without a doubt, committed to getting his draw weight up to 40 pounds.

As a side note, there is a real shortage of hunters right now, and for conservation reasons, it is important to encourage people of all ages to give it a try. Hunting acts as a funding source for state agencies that help conserve habitat. It also helps control prey species, like deer, who might otherwise have population explosions due to reduced predator populations.

This July, Nick finally gets there. I am absolutely thrilled for him. In keeping with my promise, I take him to the archery range for practice sessions just about every weekend from July through September to prepare for this hunt. We are absolutely ready!

When September 15 arrives, we are both excited and ready. We schedule a trip to Sainte Genevieve County with my dad's good friend, Mickey Montero, who lets us hunt his land. Mickey has about 200 acres consisting of woods and fields. It is the perfect place to hunt.

The night before this hunt is a little different tempo. Nick and I arrive at Mickey's cabin on time. We talk with Mickey for a brief while telling stories of past hunts and thanking him for hosting us, and then I say, "Nick how about dumping your gear out floor for a final check?" Without hesitation, Nick jumps from his seat and gets to work. I hear Nick call out,

"Bow? Check.

Brodhead's? Check.

Rope? Check.



Hunting Knives? Check.

Headlamp? Check.

Flashlight? Check.

Gloves? Check.

Snacks? Check.

Range finder... Where is my range finder?"

Kyle O'Shea, 12

All three of us start looking around. Nick checks under the couch. It is not there. Mickey and I turn the cabin upside down checking everywhere.

I ask, "Nick, do you think it might have fallen out of your bag somewhere in my car?"

Nick immediately runs out the cabin door with my keys and screams back to us in a panicked voice, "It is not here. What are we going to do?"

At the time, I felt really bad. I wished that I had brought my gear along just in case something like this happened. But, I didn't. Anyway, I am sort of glad that I didn't because the hunt would not have been as special if Nick had remembered that range finder.

A range finder is one of the most essential tools for a bow hunter. If your yardage is off by just five yards, you can miss a target by a foot or more. Missing by even a foot can be the difference between going home with a deer or going home with nothing but a lost arrow and a broken spirit. To be a successful bow hunter, you definitely need to know the exact distance between you and the target.

When Nick came back in from the car, I tried to act like the range finder was not a big deal, and told him to repack his gear and get to bed. There is not much we can do about the range finder now. Unfortunately, I keep thinking about it. A feeling of nervousness comes over me. I struggle to fall asleep. I am having thoughts of a big buck coming out and Nick missing the shot of a lifetime just because of me. This scenario runs through my head all night. When morning comes, I try my best to make the best of it.

On the ride out to my stand, I convince Nick and myself that I am good at estimating distances. We get as far as the trail can take us on the side-by-side. We hop out. We begin our mile-long walk to my deer stand. As we walk, I randomly pick a tree in front of us and try to guess the distance between the tree and me. Then, I have Nick pace it out. We do this same routine another 20 times or so. By the end of my walk, I am feeling much better about my ability to estimate distance even

without a range finder. In fact, I actually start to feel confident. So, we climb into my stand and anxiously await day break.

Nick asks, "Braden, how will I know when to stand up?"

I explain, "Nick, I will tap you on your leg so that you know it is time to stand up. When you do, please move very slowly because sudden movement will spook the deer."

Nick agrees, and then asks, "Should I start to pull the bow back right away, or wait until the deer turns away?"

I explain, "Nick, you will want to pull the bow back very slowly. If you can wait until the deer looks away, you will have better odds of it not seeing you."

Nick agrees, and then asks, "Do you think I'll see a buck?"

As I attempt to answer, Nick is already delivering his next question.

Nick says, "What if I hit it with an arrow, but it doesn't die?"

At this point, I start to smile, and say, "Nick, calm down. Your questions are coming at me too fast. I hope you do see a big buck, but you should be very happy if a doe comes into range. There are not many hunters who can kill a deer with a bow. It is not easy. So, let's not worry about whether you get to take a doe or buck. Second, if you don't think you can hit it with a 'kill shot' then you shouldn't release the arrow. We don't want the deer to suffer."

Nick nods his head in agreement.

I also explain, "Wild deer, unlike deer we see in our neighborhoods, do not give you the chance to see them. Wild deer are constant victims to coyotes, disease, and of course, people. If a wild deer thinks that it is being watched or stalked, it will react. Most people forget that wild deer have excellent hearing and very fast reaction times. A deer can drop about six inches from the time you fire your arrow and the time the arrow arrives at its target, depending on the distance, of course. A wild deer will run off into the thick brush where it feels safest. This is why bow hunting is especially difficult. With a rifle, you can kill a wild deer from up to 300 yards away. This decreases the odds that the deer will actually sense your presence. With some newer rifles, it is no trouble at all taking a deer at 500-plus yards. Bow hunters, like us, have a more limited range. This is why I typically aim at the bottom of the vitals and never past 50 yards."

Nick jumps in, "You mean never past 30 yards."

I reply, "Yes. I was just making sure that you were listening. Good catch! But, still try to aim at the bottom of the vitals. After 30 yards, your arrow slows in velocity and it drops significantly.

Nick smiles as he thinks about what I just said, and he is pleased that he corrected me.

When it is finally light enough to see the field in front of us, we start looking for landmarks at a variety of distances. A tree stump is about 20 yards away. A lump of grass is about 30 yards away. A rock is about 40 yards away. A big oak tree is about 50 yards away. We are feeling confident about our ability to estimate distances and are ready for the hunt to begin.

Minutes slowly turn into hours as time slowly passes.

I remind Nick, "Hunting is not as easy as it looks. Most people get bored. They don't understand why we are willing to sit quietly in a stand for 10 plus hours at a time, maybe never seeing a single deer the entire day. They don't understand that this is a time to think, to experience nature, and to just be a part of the environment. It is therapeutic.

At the same time, it is exciting. Those long days in the woods and long hours of practice in the summers become well worth it when I get the chance to fill a tag. Typically, the excitement only lasts a brief amount of time, but it is an adrenaline rush, so every single second is worth it."

Nick replies, "I just want a big buck to come through here."

I smile.

Nick smiles.

For the next hour or so, Nick and I listen to the squirrels and birds without seeing a single deer, which on warmer days like today is normal. The best times to hunt deer in this county, especially on a field where we are, is sunrise and sunset. Those are the times when deer typically come out of the woods to graze because they feel less exposed.

Some hunters will only stay out in their stand for a short period at sunrise and sunset, taking a long break in between, but Nick and I feel good about this hunt so we will stay out for the entire time. The odds of getting a deer between these times is low, but I have done it on prior hunts. It is definitely a possibility for Nick today. We both have a really good feeling about this hunt.

It is now about noon. We are eating a snack when I hear something walking behind us in the woods just about 100 yards away. It is amazing how loud everything outside seems when you are miles out from the closest town.

I say, "Nick, do you hear that sound?"

He replies, "Yes."

I explain, "This is why a hunter's hearing is one of his best tools. If you can listen close enough, often times you can hear a deer before you see it."

Nick nods his head in agreement.

The deer is still behind us in the woods just about 100 yards away. It sounds like it is coming our way. It is closing the distance quickly. Nick puts his bag under the chair, grabs his bow, and starts to stand up. He is a real natural. I didn't even need to tap his leg. Nick gets ready and is in position to draw back. His heart is pounding. His stomach begins to twist. His knees are shaking. At this time, the deer is still in the woods. We guess that it is now about 50 yards away based upon the sound.

I whisper, "Nick, stay calm."

Nick does not respond.

Right on time, a doe walks out of the thick brush near the tree stump in front of us. It is just about 40 yards away.

I whisper, "Nick, draw back."

Nick slowly begins to draw back his bow.

Just as Nick is about to release an arrow, we hear something else in the woods also coming out onto the field.

I whisper, "Nick, hold off on your shot."

Nick stops his draw.

Just then, a little fawn comes onto the field to be with its mother.

I whisper, "Nick, let your bow down. We don't want to make the fawn an orphan."

Nick agrees and lowers his bow.

I explain, "Many hunters would not pass up this opportunity, but we do not want to orphan the fawn. We show mercy. And, there is always a chance that the fawn grows into a nice trophy buck in the future."

Nick nods his head in agreement.

For me, seeing the doe and fawn at this close range is just as exciting as killing a deer. My adrenaline is high, and I am enjoying nature in its most natural form. For Nick, his facial expressions leave no doubt that he is tired, frustrated, and disappointed. He wanted that doe.

The doe and fawn slowly move off of the field and into the woods.

Nick begins to gather himself. He hangs up his bow.

I say, "Nick, now is the time to think about each step that you just took. What did you do right? What can you improve on?"

Nick thinks, and says, "I stood up too fast, and I remember almost tripping on my bag."

I reply, "So, this is a good time to move the bag."

Nick reaches under his seat. He moves his bag out of the way.

I reply, "Good. Bow hunting requires stealth and timing. One sudden move at the wrong time, and the deer will take notice. Your chance to tag a deer will be gone in an instant. This is why you have to take so many precautions to ensure that you do not ruin a good hunt with a stupid mistake like stepping on a misplaced bag. If the deer hears the sound of you stepping on your bag, it will never show itself on the field."

Nick nods in agreement, but is clearly still frustrated and disappointed.

The woods and field become quiet again. Time passes. The day is almost over. It is now just about 5 p.m., and we only have a couple of hours left to hunt. Sunset occurs at 6:30 p.m. This is an exciting time. The evening hunts are always the best for me. In fact, I killed my last two deer during evening hunts. Another 30 minutes pass. I notice a



group of deer entering the field about 200 yards away. This has to be the worst part about bow hunting. There is always some obstacle to overcome. It can be weather, or a deer catching your scent, or a deer just out of range.

Nick says, "I wish I brought my rifle."

I laugh, and then whisper, "All we can do now is hope that the deer work their way within 30 yards of our stand." After 20 or 30 minutes of them feeding on the field, the closest they come is about 100 yards before retreating back into the thick woods.

Nick asks, "Should we start packing up our gear?"

Just then, we both hear movement. I see it out of the left corner of my eye. I am pretty sure that Nick sees it even clearer than I do. It is a big buck! Nick starts to shake with excitement. His adrenaline is definitely pumping. He carefully and quietly grabs his bow and stands up. Be-



Braden O'Shea, 12

fore he has a chance to pull back yet again, we both hear another noise in the woods. Then, we see another set of antlers emerging from the woods. Not only is it a buck, but this guy is a stud buck. This buck belongs on a magazine cover or in a wildlife video. It is at least a 12 pointer, and still in the velvet stage. At this point, Nick's heart is pounding so loud that I can actually hear it. Nick is shaking with excitement. His knees are knocking against each other. His teeth are even chattering.

I say, "Nick, calm down. Breathe."

Nick does not respond. He slowly draws back his bow, and releases his arrow.

As the arrow is released, the buck lowers its body and dashes into the brush. The arrow flies just over the buck's back. The 40-pound draw was not enough, the buck jumped the string.

"Nick, you were so close. On your first hunt, you almost took down a magazine-worthy buck."

Nick turns to me and says, "If only I had remembered my range finder."

I laugh, and say, "Nick, that was a good shot. It was just unlucky he ducked so much. I have never taken a shot at a buck like that one. You

should be extremely proud."

Nick responds with a grin. His body is full of adrenalin. He climbs down from the stand almost in a single motion to look for his arrow in hopes that it may have a trace of the buck's blood or hair on it.

Just then, Nick yells, "Braden, what is this?" as he holds up a leather object.

I walk over to Nick to examine the item. It is a wallet. We open it, and read the owner's driver's license. This is where our story gets crazy. This wallet belongs to Luke Voit.

"Nick, have you heard of Luke Voit?"

Nick responds, "No, he looks like an old man."

I laugh. "Have you ever heard of the New York Yankees? He plays first base for them. He lead the whole American League in home runs this year."

Nick looks at me somewhat confused, and says, "Why would Luke Voit be here?"

When we return to the cabin, Nick is quick to tell his tale of the elusive magazine-worthy buck to Mickey, and I am just as excited as Nick to tell our tale about finding Luke Voit's wallet. Mickey inspects the wallet further, and finds a phone number. We call it. Luke answers his cell phone, and is still in the area. It turns out that he is retracing his steps looking for his wallet. Mickey gives Luke the cabin address, and we wait for him.

About an hour later, there is a knock at the door. It is Luke Voit. We welcome him into the cabin, and offer him something to drink. We chat a bit, and then we ask him, "What on earth brings you to Sainte Genevieve County?"

Luke responds, "Well. I actually grew up in St. Louis like you, and played college baseball at Missouri State University. My family is friends with your neighbor, old man Howard. I have hunted these same woods with my dad ever since I was a boy, and every year I look forward to coming back here if even just for a day or two."

Nick joins the conversation asking Luke, "Did you see a large buck with 12 points?"

Luke responds, "I did, and I even released an arrow in his direction. I thought for sure that I had taken him, but I missed. I am guessing that I lost my wallet while I was tracking that buck. I sure wish that I would have taken it. It was my dream buck."

Nick responds, "Did he have a drop tang on his right antler?"

Luke responds, "Yes, sir."

Nick then takes over the conversation, telling Luke every detail of his own hunt, an almost near take-down of his buck, while Luke listens with intense interest from the edge of his seat.

Simultaneously, Luke and Nick exclaim, "That is the same buck!"

Nick then says, "Next year, I am going to get him for sure."

Luke counters, "No you are not. Next year, I am going to get him."

Along with a new rivalry, a new hunter is made.

Unnatural Disaster

by Ryan Hughes, 12

Beautifully crafted snowflakes gently floated from the sky as the ceiling collapsed. I rolled over in my sleep as my door caved into the floor. My eyes flashed open as my lamp fell into the dark green curtains, igniting instantly. I looked into the shattered mirror, seeing the shadow of my scrawny frame contrast against the inferno looming over my shoulder. But the heat of the fire was nothing compared to noise of wood cracking against wood, or metal scraping against metal. I realized that maybe it wasn't the metal that was shrieking; I realized that I hadn't moved.

"Oh, God!"

The only thought that crossed my mind was a plea for mercy from a god I had spent my life questioning. The lumpy carpeted floor suddenly tilted downwards, revealing the torn furniture and the Christmas lights swaying frantically in the invisible storm below. The next thought was for someone I knew to be real:

"Anna!" I shouted.

The sound of bending metal shrieked and contorted until I could hear a faint noise in a miraculous beat of silence.

"Barry!"

I pressed my stomach against the floor, desperately trying to see beyond the ruined living room beneath my bed. All I could see was an impossibly black void that the house was collapsing into. Then I saw a flash of blond hair almost beyond my vision. The jagged cavity wasn't particularly inviting, but I only came to that realization during my fall to the ground floor. My leg let out a relatively unimpressive crack as I hit the floor, and as I looked up I could see chunks of my long brown hair caught on the edges of the new opening nature had wrought. Water dripped down my face. The flames elegantly danced across the wooden floor, and I ran towards the last place I had seen my sister. A tower of ancient VHS tapes and well-used DVDs crashed into place behind me as I sprinted towards the eye of the storm. I flung aside a stray disc and continued on my path.

Splinters bloomed in my wake as the floor began rise and fall in an uneven wave. I pushed into the kitchen. A magnificent canopy bed laid haphazardly across the once gleaming marble countertops. Faint streaks of muddy red decorated the floors and walls, and I knew I needed to move faster. The smell of sulfur permeated the air, adding to the sensory overload of the house. Plate after plate shattered onto the ground as I carefully made my way across the bed to the next door. The wooden frame painfully groaned, and it suddenly shifted halfway into the ground. I was thrown onto my back against the headboard, and suddenly the pain in my leg was outmatched by the pain in my head. The taste of iron filled my mouth. Movement was suddenly visible in between the cracks of the next door, and I gritted my teeth. I reached up towards the handle of a nearby drawer, and jerkily pulled myself up. Everything turned

black. A few seconds later, I regained consciousness and gripped onto the handle with renewed strength. I slowly pulled myself from the bed, black spots dancing across my vision. As I rested my hand on the counter for a moment, a third and final thought hit me: hesitation. I looked forward into the unknown, the area the floor unnaturally tilted toward. I remembered that flash of blond hair, and then I thought of Anna. I saw her curious brown eyes in my own reflection on the refrigerator, and I remembered her strong hands gripping my shoulders trying to cheer me up. A duffel bag full of her tennis clothes laid askew on a chair off to the side. Then I looked across the ruined expanse of my kitchen and back into what was once our living room. I remembered my own brown eyes with thick glasses and my own arms and legs, aching with pain. I turned my thoughts away from my sister. A thin flame quickly darted into the kitchen. For a moment the smell of sulfur burned its way through my nostrils, and then the explosion of the stove blew me backwards into a choice I had not made.

“Oh, thank God, you’re okay!”

The black spots fluctuated across my vision as I looked into the relieved, but worried face of Anna.

“I thought maybe you had made it out already, or that maybe you were already...”

“Please...” I managed to choke out, “Tell me you had a plan coming this direction.”

I took a quick moment to get my bearings. The walls beyond the door had almost been completely wiped out, and I could see the full scope of the damage. Grass and cheap garden gnomes and flamingos were half buried in the ground and huge trenches covered the entirety of our yard. I glanced down. At my feet, a huge, gaping pit laid before me, almost like the drain of a sink trying to consume the house. The carefully constructed spiral staircase that had led to the second floor laid across the holes, like the rickety bridges in movies that crossed impossibly deep chasms.

“I figured out it was a sinkhole after I woke to part of my wall collapsing,” she explained, “and then I heard what I hoped was the wall crumbling around this area. Then I fell into the kitchen. Luckily, it turns out I was right.” She pointed to a thin pathway around the pit toward the street, and looked back with a pained grin.

“Are you sure we can make that?”

“Let’s hope so.”

With a quick leap, Anna ran along the tilted floor and dove onto the grass beyond the fallen wall. I watched as the dust began to settle from where she had made contact with the floor, when more dust re-emerged from a particularly violent shake from the sinkhole.

“Now!” she screamed.

I took a deep breath and leapt. An expression of relief took over Anna's face. And my foot went through the floor. My hand instinctually flung out and grasped the railing of the fallen spiral staircase. I looked up and saw her running towards me, almost in slow motion with the amount of adrenaline I had. I glanced to the side and saw a picture, somehow still standing on a portion of the wall that was still up. A young girl with dirty blond hair stood with a wide toothy smile and hands covered with dirt, and a little boy with skinny arms and legs with a cap covering his face. The adrenaline died down and I felt every atom in my body screaming for some kind of release. I looked down and saw the bottom of the pit covered in the shattered furniture and glass that had made up this room. I saw my sister safe on the outside, staring at me in horror. The greatest quake of all shook the house. As the picture fell to the floor, I made a choice. I watched as the ceiling grew further away and I made one more prayer to a fictitious god. Just in case.



Friends Until the End

by Ryan Hughes, 12

Of course he had friends.

Everyone knew who Alex was, and that was exactly the way he liked it. There was nothing particularly special about him. He was just a simple kid, with thick blond hair a little longer than average and a stature a little shorter than average. He never dressed too nice with a collared shirt and tie, nor did he dress too shoddily with dirty shirts with torn pants. He dressed comfortable; he wore clean shirts with large pictures and logos emblazoned on them and shorts he could jump into the leaves with. He also needed glasses, but no one at school knew about that. Of course, nobody really liked Alex like Duncan. Duncan was the friend that showed up first to birthday parties, the first person to be invited to a sleepover, and the first person to help Alex whenever he was in trouble. He was even shorter than Alex, with a thin layer of dull brown hair and not in particularly good shape. What he lacked in physicality, he made up for with his endearing charisma and kind personality. Unfortunately, all anyone cared to see was the outside, and Alex was the only one who gave Duncan a chance. Duncan would do anything for him, and that was perfect for Alex.

“Come over!” Duncan said, with all the energy a kid the day before school.

Alex rolled over onto his back, his mind quickly adjusting from the mindless Sunday he had thought was in store for him. “Yeah! Yeah, of course! But, I mean, what would we even do?”

“I have millions of games we could play, and my mom just bought this giant T.V. for our basement! Ask if you can spend the night so we can watch movies.”

Alex looked wistfully over at the tiny T.V. sitting across the hallway in his cramped kitchen, and suddenly turned back to the phone with excitement. “Awesome! I’ll bring a few movies and come over right now!”

As he walked out the faded wooden door of his own house, Alex looked ahead. The thin door slowly creaked closed, and he stood near his most prized possession: his bike. It looked beautifully made, with a deep red base and silver streaks running through it; you could practically smell the paint from a mile away. Even with the squeaky back wheel and the broken brake, Alex adored this bike. With the smell of dust in the air and falling leaves surrounding him, he took off towards Duncan’s house.

As he passed under the falling canopies, Alex found the smell of dust turning into the smell of autumn, as he began to notice the vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds that the autumn season brought about. Once he saw the vividly red leaves of the gnarled tree rising above the rest,

Alex knew he was near. He carefully biked around the plant matter on the ground, and he confirmed he was finally at Duncan's; intricately crafted silver gates guarded the driveway, already opened for his arrival. He stepped toward the dark wooden door towering over him, and put three steady knocks against the door. Within seconds the door had been flung open, and his weekend had finally begun.

"I don't think we can even play Twister with two people."

Alex looked down at the colorful box in his hands, and then back at the mountain of half-opened games they had already finished. "Well, I'm pretty sure this is the last game, what else can we do?"

"We haven't even looked at the movies!"

"Oh, I don't know if I'm really in the m-

it!"

"C'mon, you love Harry Potter! I've got all eight movies, let's do

"I guess, but at least grab Spider-Man on the way up, just to give us a break from Harry Potter."

Duncan looked at Alex with some uncertainty. "I don't really know if I still have that..."

"Oh, then don't w-"

"But I'll find it!"

Duncan's expression flipped from uncertain to excited in an instant, and he bolted out the door into the maze of his house. Quiet spread in Duncan's wake.

As the minutes passed waiting for Duncan, old thoughts began to return to Alex. The difference between his house and Duncan's kept sticking in his mind, it was an idea that he couldn't shake. Then, at the capstone of the afternoon, he saw it. The purse. The object that sprung all of those thoughts into a plan. The bag almost looked like a dark brown leather, and it laid innocently open for the world to see. As Duncan went to get the next set of games, Alex curiously looked inside. More money than he had seen in his entire life was neatly tucked inside. Alex had seen this house inside and out; he knew how every pillow was more expensive than his bike. Duncan's family already had everything Alex could imagine, and didn't even have half. Logically, the money should belong to whoever needed it most. After all, he knew that Duncan would do anything for him.

He grabbed the bag, stepped out of the room, and turned to go back. A wave of guilt passed over him, and he stopped underneath the doorframe. He knew what he did was only fair, but Duncan might not understand. He had to leave. Taking a few cautious steps down the expansive staircase, Alex turned and fled to the driveway, taking his squeaky old bike and pedaling away.



He thought he could hear a call of “Alex!” as he fled the scene. The imposing house was left behind, and he was grateful that the spiked gate was still open. He quickly pedaled underneath the giant trees, his vision obscured by the waves of falling leaves. All he could feel was relief when the smell of dust returned and he could see the dead trees that made up his neighborhood. He was home.

Alex woke up the next morning, hair sticking straight up after a night of agitated rest. He had stowed the bag away in the floorboard under his bed, one of the few didn’t creak. He knew they needed that money, and Duncan would understand that. The night had left him with quite the headache and an unexplainable stomach ache. Ignoring his hair and his stomach, Alex began to get dressed and go downstairs with both eyes still asleep. Breakfast was skipped for the first time he could remember, and he opened the skirling door to the fall morning. It would be a bleak Monday.

Alex stepped outside and suddenly stopped. Not a leaf was falling through the air, and the sky seemed like a gray slate. He groaned as he went off onto his bike, the steady squeaks becoming the only noise in the autumn air. The roads were nearly empty on his ride to school, and it seemed like the air became more stagnant the closer he got. As the garish red bricks of his school approached, he finally put a name to his feeling: dread. Duncan stood outside, panting slightly, looking frantically across the landscape in Alex’s general direction. Their eyes connected. Hurt and betrayal filled Duncan’s eyes, and Alex couldn’t help but let his guilt spread to his own. The betrayal fermented into anger, and finally it settled into a cold, distant stare. Realization almost struck Alex onto the ground, as he realized he had made a mistake. He thought that Duncan would have helped him in a heartbeat, but he had felt his stomach being crushed the moment his hand was on the leather purse. Duncan turned away with an air of finality about him, and Alex couldn’t find the courage to convince him otherwise. A leaf fell between the two of them as they entered the school. Alex came to realization.

He had no friends left.



The Fall of Avalon

by Ethan Becher, 12

The streetlamp wavers, throwing shadows against the timeworn timber of the bar. Hand-hewn and stained a dark brown, its rough texture smoothed out from years of rain and snow. He dared not take a look inside, but the growls from his stomach forced his body up from the seated position he was in. Wiping away the first layer of frost, he could make out a warm, happy scene. Drinks poured out and laughing men cast their money on a game of poker. He knew what would happen if he walked through those doors. The pudgy bartender, with a mustache thicker than his skull would run towards him and threaten him with a beating if he didn't leave.

"PAHYIN' CUSTUMERS ONLAH" he would roar, before picking Tommy up and casting him back into the unforgiving cold. Even on nights such as these, where the only shelter from the icy night was a hand-me-down jacket he got before his father passed away. Orphaned at 12, with no money, he was a cast-away. Homeless. Among the homeless, however, he was a king. Having been educated up until his father died, he was one of two who knew how to read and write. Slumping back down against the wall, he pulled the thin jacket close to him, his wavy blond hair spilling out underneath his cap. Snow crunched underfoot nearby. His eyes met those of a stranger. Dressed in a trench coat with hands stuffed in the pockets, the stranger drew nearer.

"This the bar?" a gravelly voice reverberated through the empty square. Tommy looked under the brim of the cap, searching for the eyes. The very same light that illuminated Tommy shaded the features of the stranger.

"Y-Yeah, that door right there" Tommy stammered, voice cracking a bit. The stranger walked past Tommy swiftly, and the trench coat fluttered in the wind, exposing a pair of shoes made out of worn leather, but still polished. The door jingled open, lighting up the walk and air with the boisterous singing of men who had won their bets. The stranger looked back at Tommy. He could feel the eyes wondering, asking, but he gave no answer. Instead of the usual questioning glance and then dismissal, these eyes pondered.

"You coming in?" The voice startled Tommy more than the question. No one ever talks to him more than they have to, and this random man was asking him a question. Tommy shuddered, whether from the cold or the question, he did not know.

"Not allowed" Tommy finally croaked out.

"Come on in, I'll buy you something. Keep me company," Tommy looked up. The stranger's warm brown eyes, and kind smile illuminated by the fires inside shone down on Tommy. He stood once more, brushing off the layer of snow that had accumulated on his stagnant body. He followed the stranger inside, warm air blasting him from all sides. He shivered.

The barman, noticing something off about the new patron, craned his stubby neck and spotted the jacket of the homeless kid that was perpetu-



Ethan Becher, 12

ally outside, hovering behind the new client. Before the barman could even get a word out, the stranger diffused his look of anger with three words. "He's with me." The kid and the stranger both saddled up to the bar. The barman watched, amused, as the kid rubbed his hands together and the stranger shrugged off the big coat. Hanging his trench coat on the back of his chair, the stranger pulled his chair out, scraping it against the dilapidated wooden floor. The bar, now soundless, focused on the two new patrons. Spinning around once, the kid looked up at the barman, satisfied. The stranger, noticing the aura of silence turned around, "Go back to your games," he addressed the crowd dismissively.

"What's yer name?" The barman inquired.

"Does it matter?" The stranger replied.

"Teh me it does."

"Will."

Deep into the night, the barman was preparing to close up shop. Most of the carefree, boisterous customers had left, and only three or four pairs remained. Hunched over, as if protecting their idea or shielding their secret from the world, faint whispers resonated around the room. The most interesting group was the kid and the "Will" character, seated at the corner of the bar and the back wall. He meandered over, trying to be quiet and maybe pick up on a few words.

"We'll meet back at the manor, alright?" Will directed.

Tommy nodded. Realizing that they had a potential new person in the conversation, he looked up at the bartender somewhat alarmed. Will, noticing this, whipped his head around to meet the barman's gaze.

"Don't you know to keep your nose in your own business?" questioned Will, words as sharp as his steely gaze.

The bartender feigned apology. "Jus' wanted to let yer know I'm shuttin' it down for the night soon," he said, "so if you want anything else—"

Will cut him off quickly, "I think we will be going, thank you very much." Nearly dragging Tommy from his place at the bar, Will threw on

his coat in one motion and strode out the door with Tommy in stride.

The bitter wind hit Tommy like a dagger in the side. After just a few hours inside, he had already grown accustomed to the warmth. Will, just in front of him, was beginning to pull away. The brisk pace and longer legs of his companion were a huge advantage in the ever rising snowbanks. Quickly, Will repeated. A right, followed by a left. Down 4th street, then a left onto Riverside. Eventually the river waned away from the road and the brick road made way to cobblestone, then eventually a dirt path. Tommy had never been this far from the center of town before. Rounding a small hill, the manor came into view. Lit up like a Christmas tree, it shone like a beacon. It seemed to hail the pair, as if saying Come in! Come in and bask in my warmth! Will finally relented and seemed to slow at least a little bit.

“Home, sweet home” Will muttered, semi-audibly.

“What’d you say?” Tommy asked, not hearing.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Will reached deep into one of his pockets, producing an old brass key as if by magic. Slotting it into the handle of the equally old door, he turned it once. Straining against the huge door, he tugged it open. He slipped through and then beckoned his co-conspirator. Will showed the awe-struck Tommy a room and slept the rest of the night away.

In the morning, Tommy arose to the smell of sizzling meat. Sitting up, he realized he had left bits of dirt and mud over the bedsheet. Futilely he tried to wipe it off, but he just ended up smearing it. Grimacing, he walked downstairs.

Eating breakfast, he realized he had had more food in the past 24 hours than he had all week. Nothing was said between the two as food was shoveled into mouths. Finishing silently, Tommy helped Will with the dishes

“Are you ready?” Will asked.

“Yes.”

PART TWO



The festival of Avalon was set to begin the Tuesday following Christmas, as it had for the past 62 years. The square was usually decorated in the nations light blue, white and yellow. Streamers strung between buildings in elaborate fashion, with flags flying out of every window. This year was different. A new government had taken power—one with much more power, and one that emphasized religion over anything else. When they took over that fateful day in June, nobody could have predicted how much worse the Avalonians' lives were going to be. Before long, shortages arose in the most basic of amenities, like bread, clothing, and spices. The new monarchy threw many well-known and well-respected religious scholars in prisons, while almost all remaining church leaders disappeared overnight without a trace.

One of them was Will's brother Samuel.

The town's usual banners displaying the nation's colors of white, blue and yellow were instead replaced with the new regime's red trident on a black and white field. Instead of giving citizens a choice, it was mandated that each household much display the colors. If you didn't, you too would disappear.

Tommy's new job was simple — he had to create a distraction. In the chaos that followed, Will would have to overpower the new king's guards and take the king into custody. But for today, Tommy just had to act like business was normal. Returning to the square that afternoon, he began his usual routine of begging for money. Tin cup in hand and pleading eyes at the ready, he was able to get enough coinage to buy supplies for his distraction. When the sun went down, Tommy retraced his footsteps back to the manor, where Will awaited, door slightly ajar.

"Dinner's cooking. How'd your day go?" Will nodded at the can in Tommy's hand.

"It's enough."

"Good. Good."

Tommy tried to squeeze past Will and into the open door, but Will caught him with a hand on his shoulder.

"My friend is in there. He wants to help. Do not tell him the nature of the plan. I've told him all he needs to know."

Tommy shrugged the hand off of his shoulder and pushed the door open. There a man sat. His muscled frame and short hair indicated some kind of training regime, but whether military or personal, Tommy could not tell.

"lo"

"Hello, Tommy. Will's told me all about you. I'm Calum." Calum rose to shake Tommy's hand. His bulked figure was even more pronounced.

"Nice to meet you." Tommy eyed Calum and stuck his hand out. It was engulfed in Calum's massive paw.

"Ready for the festival?" Calum inquired.

"As ready as I can be."

PART THREE

The day of the festival came quickly. The air of festivity was not there. In fact, an impending sense of doom seemed to envelop the citizens. The banners that hung were not celebratory, but seemed overlordng on the townfolk. The air was stagnant. Tommy brushed away his hair and concentrated. The old clock on the wall of the hotel was slowly moving

towards 12, then the festival would begin. From his rooftop vantage point he could make out the castle across the river. The big wooden doors, slowly winching their way open. Windows opened and people looked out amongst the square, which was slowly beginning to fill. The crowd was restless. Small kids jostled for a front row viewing, while others climbed atop parents and older siblings. The small procession was now crossing the river. Tommy looked back at the clock. He made sure the package was secure. The convoy was nearly in front of him.

DONG.

Tommy reached into his pocket.

DONG.

Pulling out a match, he picked up the package in his other hand.

DONG.

He lit the match.

DONG.

He used the package as a windbreak, so as to not let the flame die out.

DONG.

He held the match to the package.

DONG.

The small fuse caught fire, sending small sparks everywhere.

DONG.

Tommy heaved the package, as far as he could.

DONG.

The little boy in the front row noticed it first. His eyes wide and his chubby little finger, outstretched.

DONG.

The package landed with a thud in the middle of the street.

DONG.

“Any moment now...” Tommy muttered through gritted teeth.

DONG.

A piercing screeching sound filled the square as 16 of the biggest fireworks he could find were lit simultaneously. Hands flew to ears.

DONG.

The fireworks erupted in flame, smoke and intangible amounts of noise were produced. People fled from the noise. The procession, with the king in tow, was thrown into confusion and chaos. Tommy, his part now done, began running across the rooftops to meet Calum and his horse drawn buggy down by the bar where it all begun. Will’s specific instructions were to not wait for him and not look back.

Tommy looked back.

Will, standing defiantly in front of the Royal Inquisition, with a bow drawn. The guards advanced. Will fired, missing all of them. Tommy followed the path of the arrow, through the guards, through the air, and into the chest of the king. Will, turned, looked up and said one last phrase.

“It was never meant to be.”

This literary magazine was the result of work by students at De Smet Jesuit High School. Under normal circumstances, this can be a unique challenge for students. The conditions of learning in a pandemic made this a gargantuan challenge for students. Their ability to persevere and accomplish the task - whether in person or remote - is inspiring. This issue is a testament to their writing abilities as well as to skills that will make them successful no matter what the future brings them. I am so proud of what they have done.

Special thanks to the work of Harris King who volunteered to edit and layout this final version. Without his efforts this year, the magazine would not exist.

This issue marks a turn in the development of *The Scrivener*. Over the last few years, there has been such an influx of good stories that we feel confident utilizing a new model now and moving forward. The stories contained in this issue demonstrate high quality writing, dynamic characters, strong dialogue, and vivid setting. Utilizing these techniques, the authors have been able to create images and characters that grab the reader emotionally.

We hope you enjoy this special issue. Well done gentlemen.

Mr. Robert Hutchison