City on a Hill (Matthew 5:14)

By: Calvin Hackett, Grade 12

First Place

This story primarily takes place in the city of Chicago. The key characters take the trip out of the suburbs and get exposed to a different world than to which they are from. The title City on a Hill comes directly from Matthew chapter five, where Jesus tells his followers that they are to be a city on a hill and a light to the world. The protagonist grows to struggle with this idea.

On the fourth day of my summer class at Wheaton College, we were scheduled to go to downtown Chicago. After three days in the classroom and two nights of evening study sessions, it was already time for an off day from our courses. For most of us, it was the summer between our junior and senior years of high school, so they probably didn't want to hit us with too much too fast.

We were given special T-shirts to wear that day. The t-shirts were orange with "Wheaton College Summer Institute" across the front over a graphic of the chapel. And there was a bible verse on the back.

After breakfast and a motivating morning chapel, everyone gathered in the shadow of Billy Graham Hall before walking in groups over to the local train stop in town. We were told it was around a thirty-minute ride into the city. We were roughly organized by floors in our dorm, and I stayed close to Matt and Dean. Matt was from the Chicago area, and he promised to take us to the best places. He knew just where to take us for our first Chicago hot dog.

When we got off the train, Dean beelined for the bathroom, so Matt and I complained about the orange t-shirts and then talked about the printouts the college gave us with a proposed itinerary and schedule for the day. Matt said a lot of the stops were skippable, and as long as we regrouped with the rest of the dorm before the last stop, we would be okay. Dean joined us, and we left the station excited.

Following all the other small groups of orange t-shirt-wearing teens, we stepped out on the sidewalk in downtown Chicago. I noticed a lady off to the side, probably in her late thirties or forties, watching the waves of teens pass, and just as I came close to her, she spoke.

“Oh God, here come the Christians.”

Matt and Dean heard it too, and we looked at each other and winced before continuing down the street. We had a full day ahead of art museums and

Chicago-style hot dogs, so her comment was easily dismissed, and I didn't think about it again until we returned back to the same spot at the end of the day.

As we all gathered back together, everyone swarmed the three stressed-out hot dog vendors at the top of the steps. Dean wanted another, so Matt and I stood alongside him as he pressed his way forward to order.

"Dude, this is actually crazy good," gasped Dean as he downed probably his eighth hot dog of the day.

"Life changing," I joked.

Getting on the train back to Wheaton was different than in the morning. It was a busy station downtown, and the train cars were much more crowded than when we had faced the small station in Wheaton. Most of the guys from my floor got into the same train car, but the open seats were scattered. I was one of the last in our group to get on, and I looked around for any empty spots. I saw an open area and moved past the other guys back to an area where there was one open seat. It was a long train ride back to Wheaton, and I had been on my feet walking all day, so I took it.

It wasn't until I sat down that I realized that I was right in the middle of a group of five people in their twenties. And I, with my bright orange t-shirt, sat right in the middle of them. They were a little

every night for around the next 2 years, and show my Mom how to clean my head for the next 2 weeks. I just sit there wanting to cry.

The ride home from the hospital was quiet, and my mom asked me if I was ok and said I was fine, but inside, I was so broken I felt like I wasn't good enough and hated myself. When I got home, my dog Flynn cuddled me for hours, and his happiness of being a golden retriever makes me smile.

But in the end of going through all this, I know I will fuse back together like my skull will one day. I'll still have cracks you can see that will look glued together, but I know I'll be ok, and healed, one day. But yet after all this hell I had to go through from a diagnosis to medications that don't work to many tests to hospital stays to two brain surgeries to being diagnosed with three disorders to a major brain surgery, many people say that I am a strong, beautiful girl. But really, my insides can be so much darker and different from what my outside shows. Just like how these hospitals are so pretty from the outside, but you don't really know what is on the inside and how dark things can be on the inside of someone than the beauty from the outside of that person. You never know how pretty the outside of anyone is, and how broken they really are on the inside.

breathing peice, nose tube to also helping me breathe, purple flat donut pillow I had to lay my head on, woke up in a dark room, with 40+ staples in my head, and had to see my parents sitting next to me who looked nervous and scared, with their flushed faces which made me feel heartbroken inside.

“Hi, Ry.” Both my parents say to me.

“H-h-hi.” I say, I couldn’t really get words out yet.

My doctor went to get me some Gatorade, since I had the breathing piece in my mouth for so long, they said I would have a sore throat, and need to get some liquids inside me after not having anything to drink for almost 24 hours. I remember they said so much more to me, but all I can remember thinking is “I am worthless, I’m ugly, I’m a waste of time, I’m a waste of money, and I'm just as broken as my broken skull is. I feel like I am just worthless anymore.” I think to myself for a long time after surgery with my ugly, shaved, bloody head. “Or maybe I will be worth something someday. I might be able to grow my hair out and be beautiful again, and be included with the cute soccer hairstyles again with the high school and travel soccer teams. I might be worth someone's time one day. God's plan, Right?” I think to myself.

They keep me overnight and talk to my Mom, show my Mom the device I need to scan my head with

intimidating, a few with tattoos and dark jewelry, so I was glad to have my phone. I pulled it out and looked down at it, intent on ignoring the people around me.

“What with all the orange shirts?” the biggest one asked.

I looked up. There were eight or ten orange shirts just like mine throughout the train car.

“We’re from Wheaton College. Had a day off to come into Chicago.”

“And they made you wear those.”

“Yeah…I know,” I said and looked back down at my phone.

“Wheaton,” he said. “That’s the big Christian College, right?”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t look up this time, trying to avoid any more conversation. But it was only a few seconds before he had another question for me.

“You guys don’t like gay people, right? Max and I here are gay.”

The girl by the window spoke.

“Jordan, leave him alone.”

“I just have a couple more questions. If that’s okay?”

I didn’t know if he was asking the girl or me.

“Can I ask you a question?”

That was definitely for me, so I looked up at him.

“You think Max and me are going to hell?”

“Jordan!”

The girl by the window again. Jordan turned to the girl.

“Hey, your sister’s gay. Don’t you want to know?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Can you talk?” he asked me.

“Yeah.”

“People at Wheaton think gay people go to hell, don’t they?”

I felt like I had to say something.

“I don’t…”

“You don’t what?” he asked me.

“Jordan!” again from the window.

Was I going to say that I didn’t know if he was going to hell? I couldn’t say that. I suddenly felt myself shaking my head, and no words came out of my

The lights are off, and my hands tend to have veins you can tell out very easily, using the red light to find my veins, and I’m so nervous inside, every time I had to get I.V.’s, it has never gone well.

“All done,” the I.V. specialist says.

“Wait, what! I didn’t even feel it.”

I’m holding my mom's sweaty hand for around twenty minutes in the room in fear, and can see the fear they are holding back and not showing me to not freak me out in their faces.

“Hey Rylee, you ready?” Says Dr. Kennedy

“As ready as I will ever be,” I say

My parents get up, and both kiss me on the forehead, with an I love you and you are going to be ok. Next thing you know, I’m wheeled away from my parents, from my saviors, from my everything.

Small surgery table, I was lying on, huge black screen of my surgery I had to get, and medical details, gigantic room, multiple surgeons were surrounding me, gigantic operating light was above me, gas mask was shoved onto my face.

“Relax, take deep breaths of the air. Okay. We are putting anesthetic gas in now.” The anesthesiologist says.

I woke up with a broken skull, a metal plate, a device are in my brain, a dried out mouth from a

is just like how every pretty person has a beautiful exterior, but on the inside, it is not always the same. All the pretty decorations and posters and gifts you can see on the windowsill, and how the different beautiful colors of glass are used.

I remember shaking in that chair in fear before I got called back to the pre-surgery rooms. They gave me the wipes I had to wipe down my body with before I got dressed into the gown. You would think it is pretty, but this might have been one of the ugliest things I had to wear. As I wipe my body down, I feel these goose bumps of coldness and fear go down my body. I put the gown on and have my mom button it up for me. Honestly, as I grew up, I thought my Mom would be buttoning and zipping up my Homecoming, Prom, and Wedding dress. But turns out, she also had to help me with this ugly "dress".

"Hey Rylee, we are here to put in your I.V. We have heard that you have had a lot of issues with getting I.V.'s inserted in the past, so we called the I.V. team to come up. They are specialists when it comes to inserting I.V.'s. We will have to turn off the lights, and they will use a red light to help find your veins. Is that ok?"

"Yes, I have had a very traumatizing and painful past when it comes to I.V.'s, so whatever it takes for it not to hurt so bad."

mouth. Why was he asking me about hell? I was seventeen for Christ's sake. But I'm wearing this bright orange t-shirt advertising something that this guy obviously didn't care for. So maybe he really just wanted to know.

I had no idea what to say to him about hell. Honestly, I had grown out of the idea that hell was some place inhabited by a little red devil with horns, a pointy tail, and a pitchfork standing around managing the place. Was that what he was asking about, something like that? Because I could say that I doubted any of us were going someplace like that. Should I try to really talk about this? Tell him that I really don't know what hell is—maybe it is the absence of God in our lives or something like that. I really didn't believe that it was a place where gay people went, but I wasn't brave enough to say anything.

"I think he thinks I'm going to hell," he finally said before they started talking amongst themselves again.

I didn't look up from my dead phone, and in two more stops, they got off without saying anything else to me. And I was glad.

When we got back to Wheaton, we walked back to campus in our orange shirts. The campus was beautiful, and it was good to be back. Maybe not good so much as safe again.

We didn't change shirts before we all went to dinner together and to a worship night in the auditorium. And all of us stood during the praise songs, and many held their hands in the air, confident in their orange shirts. But when I got back to the room, I took off the awful orange t-shirt, crumpled it up, threw it into my dirty laundry basket inside the closet, and slammed the door shut.

That night, in a plain brown t-shirt, no verses or anything written on it, I lay in my bed thinking about the people on the train.

"Mom, I really don't want to get surgery. I am so scared."

I'm sitting in the car in the traffic getting down to Philidelpha not wanting to be here with the fear I had inside me in these moments. I had points I wanted to die and wish I was not here anymore, or even just wished my parents didn't have me and put this money towards a way better use than me and my screwed up brain.

"I know, Rylee, this is really scary for Dad and me, too."

I could see it in their faces.

"What if it doesn't go well, what if it leads to a brain bleed, what if… what if… what if…"

"Ry, I promise you are going to be ok, you are going to one of the best brain surgeons in the state."

"Yes, Rylee, we are going to get this monster out of you." My Dad said to me. He always called my epilepsy a monster due to how much it has affected my everyday life.

I listened to them, and I believe them, but it was one of the most horrible car rides I had ever had. We start getting into the city. Wow, I think to myself. All this beautiful glass and structures around me are so pretty. It's like a city of hospitals. However, it

Pretty Outside, Dark Inside

By: Rylee Underwood, Grade 10

Third Place

In 8th grade, I was diagnosed with really bad epilepsy. I would seize more than once every single day. I always had to go to the Philadelphia CHOP hospital for my 20+ tests and appointments I had. And I still have some appointments, but not so often due to my three brain surgeries. I remember every time I was there, I always told my Mom how beautifully sad the hospitals are, so pretty from the outside, but so much sadness and darkness inside the hospitals. You go there and see all this beautiful glass, posters, and decorations that people have gifted their loved ones. Or you walk in and see someone strolling a suitcase because they are going to be in the hospital for a while, or see loved ones carrying gifts for their family members. These hospitals represent to me how on the outside we are so pretty and look like we have such an amazing life. But inside of us, it can be so dark, inside us dealing with some of the painful stuff you might ever feel in your life, and nobody knows. People looked at me and thought I was always such a lucky girl for everything I had, but no one knew how mentally sick I was and the pain I had to deal with since 8th grade.

Library of Life

By: Ella Weaver, Grade 9

Second Place

When I started writing this story, I had no idea how to fit it into 1,500 words. I love reading and writing fantasy, but five short pages are not enough to build an entire fictional world. I chose instead to set my story in a real building in downtown New York, allowing me to incorporate a few fantasy elements without making it too overwhelming. Cass works at the New York Public Library, and her adventure involves secret rooms in one of the restricted wings of the library, which is how I connected my story to the "Downtown" theme.

After a long, yet riveting, day at the New York Public Library, Cass was ready to go home. Usually, she found comfort in the rows and rows of enormous bookshelves that stretched to the ceiling. Today, she just needed to leave. After interning at the Library for the last three months, she was growing weary of the initial fascination.

Cass had just started packing up to leave when she heard a strange humming sound. Checking over her shoulder, though she didn't know why, Cass crept down a narrow hallway, trying to find the source of

the sound. Seconds passed, and she thought she had lost it when an old leather-bound book on the top of a small display shelf started shuffling around.

Cass froze. Surely the book wasn't moving by itself? She peered over her shoulder again and realized she had no idea where she was. The hallway she'd come down was not part of the main library, and with a start, Cass realized that she had wandered into one of the restricted wings. Too late now. Marching back to the shelf and the mysteriously humming book, she reached up to pluck the book off the shelf.

Instead of sliding off the wood and into her hands, the old volume tipped forward, and Cass heard a click. As she watched in wonder, the wooden bookcase, which had previously been standing flush against the wall, swung outward to reveal a dark doorway. She dashed around the corner and hugged the wall, putting her back to it as she slid to the floor.

Cass's mind ran rampant with the idea of shadowed doors and hidden rooms, encouraged by the magical stories she loved to read as a kid. She pulled her arms around herself and breathed in. That's all fantasy. The doorway was perfectly safe; she was probably just letting her mind go crazy.

Rising to her feet, she cautiously crept around the corner and returned to the mysterious doorway.

As soon as Cass finished reading and realized the meaning behind the final words, the page that described her last day dissolved. She felt the volume growing thicker under her hands, as if it was adding time onto her previously nineteen-year-long life. Suddenly, she was looking at a new story.

Cass read as her future self used the information she just saw. Future-Cass strolled out of the library to the parking lot, but in this version, she decided to stay the night in her car to avoid her untimely death. The next morning, she woke to find the secret door to the Library sealed and Amanda tapping on the window, worried and demanding the story. As she told it, one main thought surfaced in her mind.

Though Cass had no idea who or what led her to the Secret Library, she was sure they had just saved her life.

With a sense of dread, Cass flipped to the last page of her book. She could barely read the words with the tears swimming in her eyes, but she made out, “The End of Cassandra Evelyn Parker’s Life,” written across the page. Cass realized it was a chapter header, and while tears tracked down her cheeks and stained the pages, Cass read about the visitors she had helped that morning, the lunch date that she’d had earlier with her boyfriend, Danny, the tiny conversations with her fellow intern, Amanda, and finally her discovery of the door to the secret Library.

She read on, even though she could barely see out of her eyes or turn the damp, tear-soaked pages. She read about her future self, just later that night. Book-Cass strolled out of the library after dark, squinting against the deep night. She walked to her car in the rain as she pondered what she was going to use to make a late dinner. As she drove home, she called her best friend Gemma, and they sang along with Olivia Rodrigo on the radio. Book-Cass was just two minutes from her house as she saw a flash of headlights out of the pouring rain. With a staggering crash worthy of an action movie, she was thrown violently into the dashboard. The last page of the book spelled out the truth: Cassandra Evelyn Parker died at the age of nineteen while driving home from her job at the New York Public Library on November 10, 2025, at 7:13 PM.

Now that Cass looked closer, she could see a faint glow coming from the room. As her eyes adjusted, she realized that the hidden room was smaller than she had originally imagined, only about the size of one of the study rooms.

She stepped inside and was greeted by the smell of old parchment and dried ink, much like the library she had envisioned at Hogwarts. The room had towering bookshelves stretching to the ceiling on all four walls, leaving no space to see the wallpaper underneath. In the center was a stained oak table with ornately carved chairs all around it, and a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The shelves were packed with hundreds, even thousands, of thick, leather-bound books like the one she had heard humming outside. On the wall next to the hidden door she’d come through, a ladder hung parallel to the shelves like in the huge, fancy libraries she saw on TV.

Cass stepped farther into the room as she examined it, the old floorboards creaking under her weight. It seemed to be much older than the main library outside, and when she swept her finger along the edge of a bookshelf, it came away covered in a thick coat of dust. It seemed that no one had been here for a while.

Cass heard it then, more humming coming from the book next to her finger. As she brought her eyes down next to it, another book began humming, and

then another. Cass stepped back and watched in awe as the books around her came to life, humming and shuffling about on the shelves that contained them. The flurry of movement spread across the room to all the books, then died down until there was only one book left humming and moving. She crept closer to it, and the closer she came, the more it didn't sound like humming. She recognized it as a song, though she couldn't put her finger on which one. It sounded modern and popular, but at the same time, it reminded her of music class back when they had studied Beethoven.

Whatever song it was, Cass loved it. It sounded like all her favorite things: cool mornings, crisp autumn leaves, and lattes from the cafe. When the song had finished, Cass wasn't sure how long she'd been there, standing and listening to the alluring melody. She carefully pulled the tome from its spot on the wall and walked it to the table in the middle of the room.

It looked newer than some of the books in the room, and the teal blue cover hadn't started fading yet. Written in an elegant gold script so swirly it was hard to read was the title. Cass drew in a breath, startled. The cover read: The Life of Cassandra Evelyn Parker.

"A book about me?" Cass breathed. "How is that even possible?"

She opened the book and gasped again, finding herself looking down at a picture of her in her mother's arms after she had just been born. To the left of the photo, it said "Table of Contents," and Cass looked at her whole life up to the age of twelve, laid out on paper like it was made up of chapters. She turned the page and was surprised to see that there were only seven more chapters displayed, illustrating her life up until this night.

"Well, that makes sense, because even the book can't tell the future," Cass thought as she flipped through her life. She saw more baby pictures of herself, and as she read, she began to recall the stories that the book was telling.

Looking at the walls, her breath caught as she realized every single one of the volumes must be a life. While that could be fun to explore, she turned back to her own book. Cass skimmed through the chapters, trying to find good stories she remembered or friends she didn't see anymore. But when she neared the end of the book, coming up to her nineteenth birthday, something felt different. She looked at the volumes on the walls and saw that almost every single one of them was huge. Nearly four or five times as thick as her book. Now and then, she saw a thinner volume that looked a darker gray color, but where were all the other kids? They must have thinner books, too, if they were still young and hadn't lived their whole life yet.