

FIRST PRIZE

The Builder

JOSHUA PATTED HIS FOREHEAD DRY. The earth beneath his boots cracked. Crumbling buildings cast menacing shadows. Overhead, a crow squawked. He'd lined up for five freaking hours. It reminded him of applying for a 2032 provincial passport. He'd reached the front only to have his documents stamped in red: DENIED. He'd avoid the same mistakes today.

The man in protective gear gestured with his clipboard. "Sanitize first. Then approach the desk."

Joshua stepped into the glass cubicle. His eyes crinkled, and he held his breath. The medicinal spray was more toxic cleaner than healthcare armour.

"Name?" asked the masked foreman.

"Joshua Reynolds." He contained his sneer. Yesterday, he'd been a painter.

"Skill set?"

"Builder." Joshua fidgeted. The industrial-grade denim was itchy, but he stood tall. His N95 mask hid his face. His eyes smiled. *Pick me, pick me.*

He kicked the ground, and a dust cloud rose. His mother often teased "impatience" was his middle name. He missed her.

After receiving his government-issued work permit, Joshua joined the crew idling by the school bus. The rear window was smashed. "Free the People" had been spray-painted across the side. Joshua cringed at the gang tag. Last year, the militant group had stormed the legislature. An RCMP officer had secured his safety in the boiler room. Bile bubbled in his belly at the memory.

"I guess we're buddied-up," said the man beside him. "I'm Ben. Can't shake your hand. That's taboo." He elongated the *oooh* sound, imitating a wounded ghost.

Joshua collapsed onto the vinyl seat. His feet hurt. He was thankful for the ride to the construction zone.

"Who'd have thunk our houses would be condemned as petri dishes," said Ben, gripping the seat rail.

Joshua grimaced at Ben's blackened fingernails. At least he had the North Saskatchewan River to bathe in. He focused on the rock-chipped window. His life was equally shattered.

Ushered off the bus, the men awaited instructions.

"We received thirty shipping containers from Winnipeg," the loudspeaker barked. "Your internment efforts will benefit sixty families."

Internment! Lol. Conscripted jail, thought Joshua.

The carpenters were gloveless, yet the project managers wore hazmat suits and face shields. That distinction designated him a second-class citizen.

Joshua could refashion metal boxes into living spaces. He'd swung a hammer before, for a Habitat for Humanity photo-op. The media cameras had captured his Harry Rosen suit. He wished he had a silk tie to fasten the flap on his corrugated-cardboard shack. The colony was a mishmash of useless pipeline equipment and pallet racking. Hardly summer camp.

An official handed Joshua a wood shaver.

Ben shuffled towards the wooden planks. "You look familiar." He pounded nails.

Joshua shook his head. His political dreams were crushed. There was no pension fund to collect. No sky palace to escape to after a political debate. Sawdust tickled his nostrils.

Ben nudged his ribcage. "I thought you were a carpenter?" He stared at the wood ribbons curled at Joshua's feet.

"I said I was a builder."

Ben scowled. "I know your voice. Where were you when the coup happened?"

Joshua clamped Ben's forearm. "Shush! I was in Aruba. Earned vacation."

Ben shook his hand away. “Man, you got horseshoes up your—”

“Radicals destroyed this province.”

“I dunno, man. Half our educators died from defective government-issued personal protective equipment. I can’t believe you’re working the restoration effort. Your political cronies got shipped to work the triage centres.”

A splinter stabbed Joshua. Blood stained his hands. COVID-30 haunted him. He’d held his ground when provinces fought over supplies. When federal martial law rolled in, the black market rolled out. Soldiers patrolled the streets. Citizens traded toilet paper for medications. Opposing factions torched each other. If only he’d listened to his ageing mother. If only he’d accepted the healthcare experts’ advice. If only he hadn’t chosen ambition over survival.

Ben glanced at the labourers. “The trades are in demand. My wife designs virus-resistant clothing at the retrofitted university. That place shrunk. Which minister thought education was for sissies? Anthropologists are extinct. Urban planners have zilch analytical skills. The nursing program flatlined. Our world has shrivelled.”

Joshua wiped his brow. He’d never visit an Airbnb in Aruba again. Abandoned cars were now three-star accommodation. Scrounging for scraps was now dining out.

“Your secret’s safe,” whispered Ben. “But I want your food tokens, today and tomorrow.”

Joshua nodded. Tomorrow they needed optometrists. He’d raise his hand. He was a visionary.

Beneath the mask, he smirked. He’d fooled them. Today he was a builder.

by Desiree Kendrick

Edmonton, Alberta

SECOND PRIZE

Awake

GOLDEN LIGHT FROM THE HALL framed two adult silhouettes in the doorway.

“She’s never gone this long without talking.”

“Don’t be so mean.” Her elbow jabbed his ribs.

“She looks beautiful, though. Very peaceful.” He hummed one long, low note. “Finally sound asleep.”

She turned her torso to face his, pressed against him, and whispered, “It’s getting late, and I’m starving. Let’s go get something to eat.” With that, the young couple left the room.

I remained motionless. *Be a statue. Don’t breathe. Don’t make a sound.*

Moments later, a mouse-squeak sneeze gave my sister away. She paused in the doorway, sneezed again, then crept closer. “It isn’t fair. You get all the pretty things—the *expensive* things.” Her nasal whining pierced the darkness. “That necklace should be mine. None of this is fair.”

Her resentment was palpable. *Wait and see what she does.*

“I do love you—but this should be mine.” The gold chain slithered around my neck. She unclasped it and slowly pulled it off me. With it clenched in her clammy fist, she backed out of the room and shut the door.

Keep still, I thought. Do not react. Don’t move a muscle.

Things stayed dark and silent for a long time. I may have drifted off.

Suddenly, a strange man with icy hands and onion breath jostled my body. The room was too dark to see his face. Panic gripped my ribcage. Screams choked in my throat. I didn’t know the assailant or how he got into my room. He adjusted my limbs, but my clothes stayed on. Then, as suddenly as he came, he was gone.

You’re okay. Don’t cry. Catch your breath. Open your eyes.

I was alone in the darkness. *It must have been a nightmare.*

“The Owl and the Pussycat went to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat . . . ,” a lilting voice from my childhood kissed my ears and warmed my body. “Hand in hand on the edge of the sand, they danced by the light of the moon.” Christmas cookies, candyfloss, and chicken noodle soup kaleidoscoped in my mind. Grandmama had come to visit! We hadn’t seen her in years. “Oh, how you loved those sing-song stories,” she chortled and stroked my hand. “Recite it with me, dear. . . .”

I strained left and right, but no one was there. My hands lay empty at my sides. *Maybe I was hallucinating?*

Blinding white light flooded the room. The door repeatedly opened and closed. Chairs were dragged across the floor. Voices I did not recognize greeted each other and rattled off lists. “Expect more people within the hour,” someone politely instructed.

Don’t draw attention to yourself. Stay quiet. Pretend you’re asleep.

Try to deduce what’s going on.

“And please be sure to bring the flowers to the next location.”

Next location? Are we switching rooms? Taking a trip? No, wait! A birthday party!

They’re throwing me a surprise party! I’ve wanted one all my life.

Squinting tightly, I stole a peek. Everyone I knew was there. Friends and relatives huddled in clusters—nodding, hugging, and whispering. They all thought I was still asleep. Mother and Father approached me slowly, squeezing each other’s hands. Everybody held their breath. I did too. One at a time, my parents leaned in to softly kiss my forehead, and all assembled *aaw’d* in approval.

Just before I could sit up and grin, my father reached over and closed the lid.
“Dearly beloved,” said a strained Irish voice, “funerals are never easy.”

by Maria CampbellSmith
Ottawa, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

Perry's Career Reaches Its Peak

PINT-SIZED PERRY—all four feet, eleven inches of him—figured he had it made. Newly hired as a custodian at a large commercial bakery, a union job no less, his weeklong probationary period was over, and he was ready for his first solo midnight shift.

Besides the usual stuff, such as emptying wastebaskets and mopping bathroom floors, he would be in charge of one essential task: adding the yeast to the dough at midnight.

As he went from desk to desk, emptying the trash bins and giving each desktop a cursory dusting, he calculated in his head what his first paycheque might add up to. No matter what it was, it would not be enough—what with an overdue car payment and an expectant wife waiting at home, it was all spoken for. At least some new money was coming in.

Perry had it tough all of his life. The youngest of nine kids, all living in a shack on the highway, everything had to be shared or passed down: clothes, beds, food, toilet time, parents' attention, even IQ. Seems there was a fixed amount of brain matter assigned to that household, so with each additional child, the IQ pie had to be split into ever-smaller slices. Perry was last and got the least.

He came up short in the Looks Department, too. With a nose much bigger than his head needed, he cut a distinctive profile. To compensate, Perry always tried to look cool. He took up smoking at an early age and drove a beefy, oversized car, which had the reverse effect of making him look smaller.

This was the 1970s. Jobs for unskilled labour were plentiful. Car factories paid well. But they had minimum height and weight requirements. Perry hadn't predicted he wouldn't measure up before he'd dropped out of school in the eleventh grade. He married his pregnant girlfriend shortly after and drifted around doing odd jobs—some legit, some not. The bakery job would be his big break.

Being a janitor wasn't hard work, and with no boss around to yell at him, he was going to like it. It was just his impulsive, easily distracted mind he had to keep under control. His boss had left him a checklist of tasks. But Perry had lost the list somewhere in the bakery shortly after starting his shift at 10:00 P.M. *No worries. Just empty trash cans and clean a few toilets. Surely, things couldn't get too dirty in one day. If I miss something tonight, I'll catch it tomorrow night. No sweat.*

He went from desk to desk, toilet stall to toilet stall, and was pretty sure he hadn't missed anything. Things were going well, other than feeling lonely. He was the only one in the building, and with a lot of strange noises in this bread factory, he frequently spooked himself.

It was soon 11:30 P.M. Without his task list, he wasn't sure how far along he was, but he was confident his pace was good.

He'd worked almost two hours, and that meant two hours without a smoke. His body was signalling him that his nicotine levels were dropping. It was time to top up. *And why not? Why not catch a quick smoke? I am my own boss, and my work is caught up. I can slip outside for some cool night air and a few puffs. No harm in that.*

He parked his cart of cleaning supplies and headed to the front doors. There were steps outside. He could sit and relax and smoke a few.

Perry popped through the door, quite pleased with himself. He pulled out his pack of Players, flipped the lid on his favourite lighter, spun the wheel, flicked a flame, and the cig was lit. *Aww, that first, long, deep, satisfying draw, filling his lungs.* He closed his eyes. He stretched out his short body on the steps and finished one cigarette, then another. And another.

At midnight, he heard the clock at City Hall hit a single long gong, notifying the townsfolk that one day was done and another had begun. The few remaining working neurons in Perry's skull sparked a connection: *MIDNIGHT! THE YEAST!* He jumped up, ran to the door, and gave it a hard yank. It did not move. He rattled it furiously, then tried all the others. No luck. No phone. No options. Perry got into his car and drove off.

Two thousand loaves of bread failed to rise that morning.

by Gary Drouillard

Surrey, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Things Change

TODAY I DISCOVERED a new rock by the path in Crescent Park—a boulder, really. It was no doubt dropped there at the end of the last ice age, ten thousand years ago. This boulder was huge, half as tall as me. It was silent and camouflaged in soft cool moss nearly the same colour as all the plants around it in their many different hues of green.

I seldom walk this path in this direction, even though I can't count the number of times I've walked it northward. Footpaths are like that. Like roads, they sometimes open up a whole new experience if you simply change your direction of approach. We notice that the road doesn't change, but its markers do.

That was an interesting point of contemplation for me as I walked past huge fir trees. These were the same giants that I've walked past over the last forty-some years. They've become so huge now that three people my size would have to hold hands in order to encircle one trunk. Same old path, but everything around it is new and different. It just seems to mirror the way we travel through life.

Now it is after lunch, and I'm heading off to work at the daycare, driving along 128th Street right beside the park where I walked earlier. For some reason, the camera at the intersection traffic lights doesn't pick up the imprinted image of my iris. Up at the highway, the police computers report the omission, and I am pulled over for the second time this week. They fiddle with their own system and will likely make me late for work again. They eventually pick up the error in their computer and wave me on without an explanation or apology for wasting my time. No point in making a fuss. They are the authority and are maintaining the position that nothing is askew. Everyone knows there is something going on.

When I first drove to work on this road, over a decade ago, there was not even a traffic light, let alone a camera inside to read the irises of my eyes. Who knows who is watching the movement of people's irises or why? The way electronics have been messed up lately, they will be stymied in their attempts to watch us, just as presently we are often blocked from even having functioning appliances at home or at work.

People just assume that there is another storm on the sun interfering with communication systems and electrical activities here on our planet. We all experienced that sun storm a couple of years ago, and it proceeded in the same step-style as this. The news media has calmly mentioned an electrical interference in a telecommunication satellite up there somewhere. We have been assured that it could all be transferred to a couple of other satellites. Not everyone is feeling assured by their comments. This is beginning to feel alarming, uncertain, unstable.

Underlying the calm that people project in their day-to-day lives is an inner panic that, this time, possibly all the satellites girding the Earth will fizzle out, overloaded with current. People like me and most people I work with have filled up with gas, gotten a whack of cash from the ATM, and filled the fridge and can cupboard.

I pull into the daycare parking lot where the charging station is blinking a red flashing out-of-order light, so I will have to figure out that hurdle before I go home. Such a vulnerable system we live in now. Any old burp from the sun, and we are all unable to function. When did we turn down this road? What were we thinking?

by Katherine Hill (70 years)
Surrey, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Regret

BRYAN STOOD before the brightly coloured soda machine looking at his choices: soft drinks, cola, and energy drinks. He wanted the latter. The rush his system would receive from the caffeine and sugar-laden beverage might clear the fog his brain was swirling in. But he could hear Sarah's voice in his head as clear as if she were standing there by his side: "*Don't you even think about it! That stuff will give you a heart attack or a stroke!*" Sarah. She was constantly giving him a hard time about his terrible food choices—among other bad habits. But she was his world, his everything. And now, he may never again get to hear her voice, chastising or not. He slumped his forehead against the cold metal, the purr of the machine's motor combining in his ears with the hum of the overhead florescent lights, lulling, easing the pressure on his chest threatening to suffocate him.

He'd been short with her that morning. Again. It hadn't been her fault. It never was. He'd slept past his alarm, spilled coffee on his shirt and had to change, and then couldn't find his keys. But snapping at her because he was going to be late for work had eased his stress. He'd seen the way her face had fallen, the crease in her forehead that always showed just before tears. But instead of taking the moment needed to brush a kiss over her forehead to erase the line, to say sorry for his harsh words, he'd rushed out the door, slamming it behind him. Again.

He'd been in the middle of a meeting with his company's top client when the call had come through. He'd been annoyed by the disruption when his assistant had buzzed the intercom to say he had a phone call. He'd told her to hold all of his calls. Then she said it was an urgent call from the police. He'd excused himself to the client and picked up the phone, baffled by what the police could want with him. His heart stopped as his brain struggled to process the words the officer was saying: "*Accident . . . drunk driver. . . Sarah . . . hospital. . .*" He dropped the phone; he's not even sure if it fell into the cradle. Then he rose from his desk and walked out of the office.

The drive to the hospital was a blur. He didn't remember the face of the nurse who came around the registration desk when he asked for Sarah, just that she'd led him to this little waiting room and pressed him into a chair. She said Sarah had been rushed straight into surgery, and he needed to sit here and wait, that a doctor would come speak to him when they knew more.

The squeak of rubber-soled shoes slowed and stopped behind him. Bryan straightened and turned to face the scrub-clad figure.

"Mr. Connors?" Bryan nodded. The man led Bryan back to the chair where the nurse had left him hours ago. He sat next to him, and Bryan felt all the blood drain from his body as the doctor described the injuries Sarah had sustained, summarized the procedures they'd tried. "I'm sorry." The doctor squeezed Bryan's shoulder and rose and left the room.

An orderly, who had been waiting by the door, took Bryan down the hall to a bleak colourless room. A gurney sat in the middle of the room. A small, sheet-clad figure lay on it, the white covering pulled up to just below her chin. Sarah's long dark lashes rested against very pale cheeks. He'd never seen her so still and quiet. Sarah was never still or quiet. She was vibrant and full of life and energy. He stroked a hand over her forehead where the crease had been that morning. A drop of moisture fell and landed on the tip of her nose; he kissed away its saltiness. Then a horrible wrenching sob filled the room, and he collapsed against her small sheet-draped form.

"Oh, Sarah! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

Then the room fell silent once again, broken only by the wail of regret.

by *Shelley Norman*
Kincardine, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Mother's Roses

THE SUN BENDS DOWN on a cloudless day and paints a grinning face on our arms and shins. Freckles bloom around us, as we run. The Catalina bushes reach for us, cradling us in the soft damp of a neighbouring elm, but we run on. We swerve up a hill, just to propel ourselves down it. We laugh as we collapse in the waist-high grass, pulling away as we land on the pods of an unknown bush. Our shirts snag, our legs and arms rise dotted with thin red lines.

Maybe the sun stopped smiling, maybe the Catalina bushes began to call with urgency. Whatever the cause, we pull away, through the trees across the gravel, into the embrace of Mother. The knitting needles pull from their loops and dance on the ground, but Mother hardly notices. She silences the scrapes with bandages and assurance.

A week passes, and we clear a shortcut through the grass with our favourite stick. The wind crowds around us, but we battle full strength. The treacherous blades are beaten back until we come to the bush. We ready our weapons; we strike. Mother rushes over, voice frantic.

“What are you doing? Leave the roses alone!”

We eye our rival quietly. “We don’t see any roses.”

“Those are rose bushes; you will.”

THE SUMMER HEAT COMES in droves, hovering near the door, perching on our foreheads, rubbing against our chins. It calls us early in the morning, and cries late into the night. Mother sends us out to hang clothes, between baths and lemonade. Our skin steams. We retreat to the Catalina bushes before noon.

Morning rips us from our sheets and draws us to the window. We abandon the tresses of normalcy and cut through forgotten paths away from the Catalina bushes’ reach. Mother follows behind. The air around her slows to the pace of a bumblebee. It hums and twists and finally lands.

We swarm a quiet pink flower, booming with an almost dusty aroma. “What’s this?” we ask.

Mother smiles as she bends closer. “A rose.”

The world turns limp, suddenly. The grass grows dull, while the air is filled with one hair, floating above Mother’s eyebrow.

“A rose?” We scrunch our noses.

Roses are full and layered, fancy. They grow in nice little hedges. This is the plant that scratches and tears. This flower is simple, scraggly, and wild. This is not our rose.

Mother smiles and picks the pink form, summoning red across her fingers. “It’s beautiful, like you.”

AUGUST APPROACHES like a hunting cat, toying us between its paws. The laundry stays damp. Mother tells us to bring it in anyway.

We make friends with a box. It perches on our windowsill and screams. Day and night. If anything survives in the heat, we call it a friend, even if its screech deafens us. Well, anything but Mother’s roses, still pregnant with dust. They scuttle in the grass, caring not whether they are mowed over. Unharmful by our rage, they smile.

Mother takes us to the gardens. The paths stand tall, bowing slightly through the cracks in its paving. We wobble indoors looking to escape the heat, only to be swamped with dew. The gardeners are dancing around paths of roses with sprinklers.

The air is too small, the path too damp, the roses too loud.

“Let’s go home.”

Mom nods and leads us away.

FALL SWEEPS IN across the lawn, but we are forced away from it. We stumble into a world of orange roads and screaming stop signs. We measure moments by ninety-degree angles as the leaves waltz outside. The world freezes before we can wish the last summer breath goodbye.

The walls bulge to contain us. Before the seams can completely unravel, we are wrapped in padding and hurried outside. The wind charges. We bounce around the bare branches and stumble up the forgotten hill, finally taking our stand. We lose. We slip down the powder slope and reacquaint ourselves with the taste of ice.

Slowly, we lift our heads. There, between the glaring white and blue, rests a small shrivelled berry. It yawns, surprised by sunlight. We call Mother over, ecstatic, but she buries it back in the snow.

“A rose hip.”

Of all the things to survive the snow. . . .

“Come on, my little roses,” Mother pulls on our hands.

We stare at the lump of snow, waiting for spring. We know.

We are our Mother’s roses.

by Bethany Vidler

Brandon, Manitoba

HONOURABLE MENTION

Of Leaf Green and Bark Brown

ON A CHAIR BY THE STOVE I sat, bathing in the flickering flashes of the flames. The crackling of the fire sharing with me its stories, as it had done age after age to each that would sit quietly by and listen. The warmth of the whisky in my hand brought me nearer to the heat and filled me with comfort unequalled in my small house on the top of the hill where I lived for many years, in quiet solitude away from the busy bustle of the world outside, and it was in these moments that I found myself allowed to truly breathe life.

Three knocks at my door.

By no means aggressive or demanding, but somehow polite and inquisitive. My curiosity suddenly aroused and my attention taken, I stood up, resting my glass on the nearby wooden table, and went for the door. Behind it the night sky had crept over my roof, bringing with it a cold, bitter rain, mercilessly pelleting an older man standing at my door. His beard was wild and untamed, contrasted by the politeness and wisdom of his eyes. He wore a green hooded jacket and dirty brown pants the colour of bark, both used by age beyond repair, and yet the man's smile displayed no discontent.

"Good evening, sir. Pardon my intrusion," he said in a deep voice. "I seem to have been surprised by the rain. Would you mind if I stand here?" he asked in a voice that held no accent, no hint of this strange character's origin, or any sign of fatigue or strain.

"Stand? There?" I asked, with a much less mysterious voice. "My friend, come in; it's pouring out there!" I said, opening the door and stepping aside to let him in.

But in reply, he raised his hand in a polite dismissal, his smile unchanged. "It is a cleansing gentle rain, no need to run from it," he answered. He then turned slightly and pointed to my front yard. "May I stand there and enjoy the rain at my leisure?"

I was shaken and confused by this midnight visitor's request, and without much thought, I nodded. "I mean, if you'd like. I have a warm fire and whisky inside, if you'd prefer." He shuddered at the mention of fire, and a foot slowly retreated.

"No, thank you. The rain is fine for me. I bid you goodnight, sir," he said, gently nodding his head in acknowledgment as he turned towards the front yard, some distance away from the road but still far from the shelter of the house.

I watched him stand there, arms at his side, hands open outward, his face gently tilted upwards, accepting the rain as a blessing. I felt guilt at wanting to return by the fireside and the dry, warm comfort I had just left, while this stranger stood soaked to the bone in the darkness and the cold wind. My chair seemed far less comfortable; the fire didn't want to talk, and the whisky stung. I only stayed a moment before checking the window, where the stranger hadn't moved a hair. He puzzled me, bothering my peace simply by being peaceful in a way I didn't understand. I felt a warmth rise in my blood, different from the heat from whisky. I recognized this as the heat of jealousy. I finished my whisky in a single gulp and resolved myself to think of this strange man no longer, and yet in the back of my mind, even as I lay to sleep that night, his presence stood strong.

I woke the next morning to the smell of wet grass and the sound of birds. I woke with a smile, thankful that the whisky of the night before hadn't brought me a headache his time, and I had time to bring myself to my feet before the memory of the strange man returned to my mind. And not bothering with getting dressed, I made my way to the living-room window.

There was no man standing on my front yard, nor was it empty. My heart picking up pace, I threw a housecoat over my pyjamas and ran out of the front door, where I found myself in the shade of a tree rooted strong between my house and the street. It stood where the night before a strange man had enjoyed the rain dressed in leaf green and bark brown.

by Gil Alexander

Dieppe, New Brunswick

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Changeling

WITH THE EXACTING EYE of a Renaissance sculptor, the young mother brushed a rogue tendril of her son's damp hair back into place. She gave him a final once-over and beamed with pride. The razor-straight part in Zo's hair matched the crease down his khaki shorts and, although the trendy mother wanted him to wear a tucked-in polo shirt, the kindergartener succeeded in donning a t-shirt with a game controller on it by reminding her how much she, too, enjoyed video games as a child. The pair left the bathroom for the kitchen to gather his school accoutrements.

"You ready to seize the day?"

Zo wondered what seize meant. "Like A, B, C's the day?" he countered, putting his bento box into his lunch bag.

"No, silly Billy," the doting mother explained. "It means making the most of the day." She shouldered his oversized backpack while they slipped on their shoes and walked out the door. The autumnal wind ruined Zo's coif, much to his mother's chagrin. Upon entering the school grounds, the mother kissed Zo goodbye on his forehead and watched him disappear into the recesses of his classroom. This morning routine continued with little variation throughout Zo's primary school years. As children do, he began to dress less formally and rebuffed his mother's attempts to style his hair.

Zo grew into a boy who was invited to birthday parties and praised by teachers for his manners, but in the spring of third grade, his mother received a call from the principal about an "altercation." She was finishing her lunch when the phone rang.

"Yes, hello, I am looking for Lorenzo's mother," an imperious voice queried.

"This is she," Zo's mother replied concernedly.

"This is Mr. Kennedy, the principal at Carleton Elementary. There has been an altercation at school today," the man's tone slipped into a reassuring one, "but Lorenzo is alright." The principal explained that a classmate of Zo's had lunged at him, and upon listening to both sides, he determined Zo the victim. "It seems the boy felt frustrated when your son didn't pick him as his partner and didn't use his words to express his feelings. Your son has a small scratch on his arm, but otherwise, is in good spirits." The principal concluded that the boy would stay in his office for the remainder of the day.

The mother, relieved and mollified by the end of the call, resolved to remind her son over dinner about the importance of inclusion and forgiveness.

THESE CALLS ABOUT THE BOY who couldn't control his emotions or keep his hands to himself continued annually. The altercations were always minor, and Zo was always the injured party. The in-school and eventual at-home suspensions did nothing to quell the classmate's outbursts.

Exasperation gave way to outrage, and by the end of fifth grade, the mother declaratively told the principal that Zo and the other boy must not share a classroom next fall.

Thus, Zo began his sixth-grade year in a split 6/7 class. It took him time to acclimatize himself to the senior atmosphere as there was only a trio of sixes. The mother soon lamented that Zo was less forthcoming about his days and didn't want to be walked to or from school anymore. Zo seemed to have grown up quickly in half a school year.

ONE SPRING AFTERNOON, as if on cue, she received a call from Mr. Kennedy.

"Ms. Cambiare?" the familiar voice asked.

"Hello, Mr. Kennedy," Ms. Cambiare returned flatly.

"It seems there's been an altercation with Lorenzo."

Ms. Cambiare got ready to upbraid Mr. Kennedy's inefficiency when she was silenced by his next words.

"Lorenzo has been bullying a boy in his class."

Aghast, the mother vainly searched for a response. Instead, she heard how her son had relentlessly teased a boy for his long hair and lunches. Lorenzo was spending the rest of the day in the office.

They walked home from school in silence. She wanted to voice her disappointment but, again, couldn't find the words. She stared at this boy she didn't recognize.

Lorenzo's misty-eyed gaze met his mother's. "Mom, I'm not a bad person. I just made some bad choices," he whispered.

Mrs. Cambiare was torn between wanting to comfort her son and scold him. She wondered how her lessons on kindness had been supplanted with mockery.

"In this seventh-grade class, it's . . . it's bully or be bullied." Lorenzo looked away with shame.

His mother grieved her son's coming of age.

by Rebekah Williams

Vancouver, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Jiǎozi

GINGER. Ground pork. Garlic. Soy sauce. Sesame oil. Salt. Cabbage, steamed and shredded. Mix together by hand, let the meat and spices run through your fingers. Now, roll out the dough. Flour, water, and patience. Knead, roll, shape, repeat. To stuff the wrappers, put a tablespoon of filling into the middle of the dough. Fold it over like tucking in a baby, and pinch, pinch, pinch all around. A grandmother squeezing her granddaughter's cheeks. Don't let any filling fall out. Support the heavy middle, like cradling a newborn baby.

I follow these steps carefully, the movements muscle memory as I pleat the folds of the dough.

"What are you making, Auntie?" my niece asks me, blonde hair tied into a wispy braid and big brown eyes looking up at me with innocent curiosity.

"Dumplings," I reply, focusing on closing the ends of the wrapper. The dough is soft and malleable in my hands, the wrapper paper thin and almost transparent.

"Can I help?" my niece asks hopefully.

"Sure," I say, placing a wrapper on the floured table and scooping some of the filling into it. She eagerly takes the dough in hand and folds it over. It falls apart immediately, a poorly swaddled baby blanket.

"You need to use water," I tell her. "Like this." I gently trace the water in lines across the edges of the wrapper, clear ink across Manila parchment. "See? The water acts as a kind of glue, to hold it all together." I fold the wrapper over and show her the closed dumping.

"Okay, I can do it!" my niece says eagerly, making grabby hands for the dough. I hand another one over and watch as she carefully folds the dough and runs her small fingers along the edges.

"Well done," I smile, refocusing back on the dumpling in my hand.

"I want to do another!" My niece peers over my shoulder at the filling, the sweet scent of ginger wafting through the air, mixing with the saltiness of soy sauce and warm skin. I hand her another wrapper, watching as she folds it on her own.

"You have to make sure to pinch the ends closed," I explain, gathering the corners together and sealing them up tight. "Otherwise, all the filling will fall out."

"Sorry." My niece looks up at me, and I soften my words.

"It's okay. Just try your best." I gently manoeuvre her hands to mimic my own. As we continue to work, I feel a sense of melancholy within me. This is how dumplings are meant to be made—together with loved ones, being taught from one generation to another.

But I learned this dumpling recipe from a Wikipedia article—authenticity replaced with artificiality. I will never be taught by my mother how to make something that should be as familiar to me as the blood that runs through my veins. I'll never sit around with her and my *āyí* and my *nāinai*, being taught a recipe that has been in our family for generations.

"I'm all done!" my niece says proudly, showing off the dumpling held tightly in her pudgy little hand.

"Good job," I smile at her, voice somewhat tight. I look down at the dumpling in my hand, having been squashed into a gooey mess by my clenched fingers. *You must be gentle when handling dumplings—too much pressure and you'll ruin the shape, too little dexterity and you'll end up with a lumpy mess.* I look over at the pile of deformed dumplings my niece has in her corner.

"This one is good," I tell her, pointing to a dumpling with closed lines, all the filling sealed inside. My niece beams up at me, before running off to play with her brothers and cousins. The boys didn't want to sit and patiently fold each dumpling with us, and I don't know if I should be grateful or feel guilty that I didn't have to teach them all.

As I tidy up the flour and filling spilt like snow and guts across the counter, I smile at the thought that my niece and I made something together—that she learned something

from me. I may have lost my culture, but over time, I've found my way back to it. Longing, understanding, and patience. I have a connection to my family that, at its core, is worth more than blood. Because blood may be thicker than water, but water is what you use to hold the dumplings together.

by Madison Marvin

Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Sarah

“CONGRATULATIONS, SARAH! You have been selected to participate in our Global Live beta program, which aims to give the Global Live Search Engine a human approach. Your IQ scores are among the top 0.03% in the country. A yearly compensation of one hundred thousand dollars is granted to all participants. Your first meeting is June 21, 2025. We look forward to seeing you there, should you choose to accept this opportunity.”

“Wait, Mom. Is this for real?” Sarah asked.

Sarah’s mom looked up from the letter, her eyes twinkling as a rare smile graced her tired face. Sarah’s little sister gripped the lip of the kitchen counter, trying to peek at the letter. “Of course it is. Don’t you see the logo? It’s official.”

Sarah got up and took the letter from her mother, reading it over. It was too good to be true. It had to be.

“Sweetie, this is great news. Don’t you see? One hundred thousand dollars!”

“There’s got to be a catch, you know that. I’m going to toss it.” Sarah held the letter in her hands, knowing that life was never this easy. Not for her anyway.

She walked over to the trash but stopped. Her little sister was tugging at her pant leg. “Sarah? What if it’s real? You could buy Mommy a new stove so she can make birthday cakes again.”

Jaylee was an optimist, and Sarah knew that to let fear win would be to kill her sister’s hope. Sighing, she moved away from the trash. The paper was thick, and a faint lemon scent rose from the ink. That kind of money would change her life. It would change her family’s life. The room shrank around her as she stared at the letter, trying to picture what her future might hold.

“I guess it won’t hurt to see what it’s all about,” Sarah said, and the room stopped shrinking, but in its place, a heavy stone settled in the pit of her stomach.

JUNE 21, 2025: GLOBAL LIVE BETA PROGRAM—PARTICIPANT INITIATION

“Name, please?”

“Sarah Bell.”

“Do you agree to the terms of this participation program? Sign your name on page 45 if you agree to all terms. Please provide your social security number and bank information for your payment.”

Sarah began reading through the paperwork, but the pages seemed to get longer and longer as she went. By page 20, she was skimming, and, before long, her name had been scrawled across the signature pad.

A man in a sleek grey suit guided her down a hallway and into a room lined with fifty chairs. Men and women sat with their eyes trained on a computer screen. She was directed to the far left of the room. A nurse arrived and began swabbing Sarah’s forehead.

“Excuse me, what are you doing? I don’t—”

“Miss Bell, this is a neurotransmitter, it allows you to communicate with the others in the Global Live program. Don’t worry, you won’t feel a thing.”

“Wait, this is not—”

“Honey,” the nurse said, inserting a shot into Sarah’s arm, “it was in the contract. You can’t refuse.”

The room became a thousand times cooler, and goosebumps broke out on Sarah’s skin. She was aware of the nurse at her temple, dabbing at some blood with a half-inch swab of gauze.

“After training is complete, you will be stationed in libraries or street kiosks in order to service the public with your knowledge. You will be able to search hundreds of minds in seconds. The sedative will wear off shortly, and you can begin.”

SEPTEMBER 21, 2025: DETROIT PARK KIOSK, MICHIGAN

“Global Live representative. How can I help you?”

“Sarah? It’s me, Jaylee!”

“Hello, Jaylee. I’m Sarah, your Global Live representative. What can I do for you today?”

“I want to know when you’re coming home. Mommy says it’s hopeless, but I know you were just pranking her. You must really love your job.”

“I do love helping. What is it you require assistance with?”

“Sarah? Don’t you recognize me?”

Sarah looked down at the girl, her small fingers gripping the ledge of the kiosk, a memory flicking to her brain. *Recognize, Jaylee, counter, letter, Mommy, recognize.*

“Sarah?”

“I’m sorry, I am not trained in facial recognition. I have transmitted a memo for it to be included as part of the Global Live Charlie program. Is there anything else I can help you with today?”

by Ashley Haynes

Campbellville, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Full Moon

IT WAS THAT NIGHT. Remember? We howled like wolves at the moon, sitting cross-legged in the log circle on Maple Point around our collected driftwood fire. Two kinds of smoke mingled above our heads—one of wood, the other weed—while higher still that grey speckled moon strutted its radiant roundness. You were across the fire from me, and I could see your face clearly in its glow. Every once in a while, we would lock eyes in a shared observance. Mark began playing his guitar just like old times, his fingers gliding skillfully from one fret to the other, his new gold wedding band refracting in the fire's blaze. Finally, Mark was calmer, happier, almost like when I'd first met him. Before our breakup. The rest of us linked arms, moving united to his music, euphoric, singing off-key in alcohol-drenched voices.

What is it about a moon? A woman's cycle is changed by it, coyotes hunt in it. Our inner psychic feels more powerful.

I had been nestled into that log, snuggled close to Sam so long that I'd lost the concept of time. My bladder, however, had not, and its urging complaints became hard to ignore. Remember how stupefied we were when Mark brought that plastic glass of wine to me, saying something like, "To the future. May we both get what we deserve." Weird at the time, which spilled while I was stretching my legs. I just watched that white wine soak slowly into the red pine needles with a relieved sense of finality—that empty glass representing the end of our shared relationship nightmares.

Sam saw it all, holding his hand on his heart, standing to throw his large buckskin jacket around my shoulders tenderly. We were a team with a future ahead of us, and he embraced it for all to see. Even offered to be my guardian of unforeseen terror in the woods. But soon, there were three guitars strumming; people had pulled out harmonicas, and Sam's favourite song "Hotel California" had just begun. As I stumbled off to the woods in search of the first isolated tree, I heard Sam belting out the lyrics at the top of his lungs as if he were in his own private rock band, and you, my friend, were companionably egging him on.

The moonlight plays tricks on your mind. I was startled by the chill in the air away from the fire's warmth. I was seeing shadows where there weren't any. The moon's magic light was ringing trees in white. I lost my perspective and missed the path leading to the old maple tree. It had only been half a glass. Finally, I yanked down my pants and let loose, just wanting to get out of the chilly air, back to the fire.

Then a strong hand cupping my mouth closed was digging fingers into both of my cheeks, and an unmistakable prick of a knife's blade nicked my skin while cutting my bra. I felt it erupting, a struggling volcano of breath and words pushing to get out, but that hand suppressed the air in my throat. My pants were still around my feet, and this other stronger body was pushing the rest of me down. I tasted vomit rising in my throat, feeling that pain—hurtful, unwanted, definable pain.

Later, alone—more alone than I had ever felt on the hard icy cold ground—the air around me damp, heavy with morning dew, I was shaking, shivering, pulling on my lungs in rasps of agony. First came whimpers, followed by gasps. I welcomed the bits of breath that came all the same.

Then I began to remember. I retched uncontrollable yellow bile. Yes, I heard you call in the distance and desperately wanted to respond, knowing you would tell me everything was going to be all right, hold me until I stopped shuddering with memory. But looking down, my purple beaded peasant shirt was torn open, exposing bruised breasts, and my once white bellbottoms were an unrecognizable blackened tangled ball around one ankle; it took sheer

wobbly willpower to attempt standing. When I reached with a trembling hand for the belt attached to my jeans, I felt a sticky familiar residue dripping down between my legs.

Knees buckling, I crawled further into the covered shadowy forest, away from that voyeuristic see-all moon.

by Ann Hutcheson Harris (67 years)
Collingwood, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Lighting in a Bottle

RISING FROM THE COUCH in a once-white tank top, Dad Universe pawed around the cluttered coffee table, made a hitchhiker's thumb, and then pressed a Bic lighter into consciousness. A few loud words dislodged the gravel from his morning throat.

"Can't see shit. You forget to pay the hydro bill again, Trela?"

The same lighter then greeted a cigarette, which he slid into that bramble between his nose and chin. A few minutes passed before he attempted to butt out the surviving end into a whisky bottle. As ashes landed on the table and became one with the grey powder from losing scratch tickets, Dad stormed again. "Boy! Get me the flashlight!"

Almost obediently, a small gust of wind sent the closed blinds chattering and dancing against a half-open window. Yellow laser beams shot through the cracks and revealed a young superhero standing quietly at the foot of the stairs. With dried LifeSavers welded to his stained pyjama bottoms, a mask over his eyes, and a bed sheet improvising a cape down his bare back, he put his hands on his hips heroically and unleashed his thoughts.

"I'm not a boy. I . . . am . . . Juice Universe! Commander of Light and Destroyer of Darkness!" The superhero flew across the room with aplomb and handed over the flashlight. "Let the war against shadows begin!" announced Juice, entering into a horse stance.

The flashlight's big silver eyeball winked momentarily, but both its light and optimism soon retreated, and the room was once again under the shroud of the enemy. Dad Universe hammered the flashlight against the coffee table, hoping it would awaken the batteries.

"I got an idea!" Juice volunteered, his eyes bright and wide under his mask. "If we need light, then I'll catch lighting in a bottle!"

"Lightning," the dad corrected. "It's *lightning* in a bottle. And it won't work. It's just an expression."

Juice Universe heard none of this lesson: he was already out the door to save the day.

And for the next few hours, the young hero was hard at work. From the front yard, he could hear the sound of Dad stumbling around, then cursing, then stumbling around again inside the house. Juice discovered some unopened bottles of Jack Daniel's in the garage, dumped them into the flowerbed, and then placed the empties atop a small mound on the lawn. The day had turned cloudy, but Juice was pretty sure when the sun came out again, he would bottle those golden rays and bring them indoors. Of course, it would take all of his available superpowers and, possibly, a bit of magic.

It was early evening when Dad Universe finally noticed the assembly of whisky bottles across his front lawn. Juice was in the garage when Dad's shadow appeared ominously in the doorway. He had grown twenty feet tall, and Juice was almost certain those were red lasers ready to shoot out of his eyes. *This is my greatest battle yet!* thought Juice, adjusting his mask and feeling his heart within his chest. As the giant approached, the garage floor shook violently.

"What the shit?" Dad Universe roared. "What did I say about touching my stuff?"

The twenty-foot monster's hands, now claws, grabbed Juice by his tied-on cape. He hoisted him high into the air, pinning him to the wall by his shoulders.

"Must . . . summon . . . my . . . powers . . .," Juice squeaked, staring defiantly into the red-hot eyes of his aggressor.

Dad Universe proceeded to slap Juice across the face so hard, his body fell from the wall like a paint flake. Picking him up again, he propped him up, this time by his neck. Juice's face went red. "Little bastard!"

Juice tried to wiggle free but could only slice the air weakly with his flailing arms. "You can't defeat me," Juice choked. "I'm made of super steel!"

“Wanna bet?”

After another minute of struggle, Juice Universe, Commander of Light and Destroyer of Darkness, went limp within the mighty grip of his tormentor. His body slid down the wall, landed on a bag of soil, and lay breathing but motionless.

About ten minutes passed before the faint sounds of sirens cut through the quiet evening air. Dad Universe, now inside the house, pried apart the blinds with his quivering fingertips and stared into the distance. He reached for one last cigarette and, from the corner of his eye, watched as that parade of bottles on his front lawn caught swirls of blue and red light.

by Tony Gryner

London, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Evolution by Means of Man-Made Selection

NIRVANA BLARES THROUGH BEATEN-UP SPEAKERS, and my white Nike sneakers are tainted with sorority blood and crumpled beer bottles.

Tomorrow is another day, and tonight, I am here and sparkling in the flashing neon lights. I toss back another shot with the boy I shared my first kiss with in a darkened room so many years ago.

The roulette wheel spins in unison with the ticks of the grandfather clock standing tall in the corner. Someone's bra dangles from the corner, and I grip my strap to check it isn't mine.

He has drifted back into the ongoing mass of people, all swaying and breathing together as we vie for attention from unyielding fathers.

In the middle of it all, she is dancing. Her arms float around her, drifting over shoulders and necks, a touch to ensure each person is real.

"My mama named me Darwin," she had told me once, irony glittering as bright as the powder on her eyes. "*She wanted me to be a geneticist.*"

Tonight, she commands the room, our eyes and hands and smiles made just for her. A girl straight from imagination, a promise of love or lust or whatever the fuck we all were looking for.

I remember her before we grew. Big brown eyes full of the wisdom only a six-year-old can have, she used to play house beneath the slide.

She finally sees me and brightens, and now I understand how I end up falling in love with her every night. Her finger beckons me closer, and the crowd draws me in, a pulsing tunnel with her at the end.

"I like the dress," Darwin murmurs, hand finally clasped in mine.

I laugh, the raspy voice of Kurt Cobain drowning me out. She told me red was an overrated colour once, yet here I am—red fabric draped as if I'd been born to wear it.

It will stay on tonight, gripping to my body like a bulletproof vest.

She sways to the music with me, and I let myself get lost in it all—the party, the music, the sweaty bodies that dance off beat.

There is a sick sense of satisfaction that rolls through me as an ex-lover walks by, avoiding my eyes. *Something about Darwin makes us immortal*, I think.

Fireworks go off outside, and I laugh and hold Darwin and remember, *Today is the fifth of July*.

There is screaming, and the delicate thread that sewed us all together unravels. All of a sudden, everyone is running. Kurt Cobain sings on as people fall all around me. Darwin's hand is a lifeline in a sinking boat.

I don't know if I'm fleeing or charging as we all try to find a door. The boy from earlier looks so young in a crumpled heap on the floor, discarded with blood-painted beer bottles, and all of a sudden, I am the only one who will remember my first kiss.

I fall onto grass, and Darwin is next to me as we tumble down together, and I am laughing and crying because we are alive, and survival is suddenly in our grasp.

Darwin has stopped running now, and I force her on her back, and all of a sudden, I am applying pressure as I'd been taught when I trained to be a lifeguard at sixteen.

Her dress is the same colour as mine, and only when I am roughly pulled away do I realize she'd been wearing white tonight.

by Amy Rich
Toronto, Ontario