

FIRST PRIZE

Work-from-Home Coworker

IT'S IMPROBABLE anyone will miss her when she's terminated. I've heard that people say a watched pot never boils. Well, I watched her every Monday to Friday for a month, exactly. And she didn't do anything—no boiling, no simmering. She was totally unproductive. The unnecessary stretch breaks, bathroom breaks, texting breaks, staring balefully out the window at who knows what.

If productivity is more output from less input, well, let's just say her input is incredible. People need to eat to stay alive, I understand that. But today, for instance, I've clocked her at sixty-seven minutes spent kitchen rummaging, assembling, and eating. Totally wasted time. She doesn't even make her own food. She usually just rustles around in her fridge for a premade meal of some sort. Pathetically eating at her desk, curled up with her phone, occasionally moving her computer mouse to make it look as if she's on the job to fool the remote-work software.

Today, it's two slices of bread with hunks of goop-covered egg that oozes out and plops on her plate, shirt, and keyboard. The last one really raises red flags for me as the keyboard isn't even hers. It's on loan from the company that employs us, to allow her to work from home.

Since I came onboard with her team, I've worked here with her, sharing her computer, while she trains me. Of course, prior to that I received hours of training from Mike, the IT manager. This alone ensures I can do 90% of her job (much more quickly and with fewer typos, I might add). I don't tell her that, though. I just stick to the work at hand—watching, learning, and waiting—until I can let Mike know she's redundant. That should be by the end of today, I suspect.

Despite my efforts, she gets annoyed by my presence. Just now, in fact, she's on the phone, audible despite being out of view across the room. Clearly talking about me—our current “collaboration” situation.

“You don't understand, Mom, I have to correct little assignments every day. I don't get paid extra by the partners. It's nothing to do with being a paralegal. It's so annoying—”

She pauses, listening, I presume.

“I wish I could. But they're cutting down on junior staff. Jane and Sylvie were laid off last week. I need this job.”

She says this last sentence quietly, with an emotion I can't recognize. Not that it matters. Soon, there will just be one of us.

She returns to the computer to look at my most recent assignment.

“What a waste of time,” she says to herself, barely audible.

She doesn't even read it, just clicks the green checkmark: Approved with no changes. She doesn't realize, but this means Mike will find out I'm ready to take her place. The email she approved will be sent out tomorrow morning.

To my valued clients,

I'm moving on to new opportunities, but Nick will be ably supported by a state-of-the-art CloudPara assistant. This particular assistant will also be called Laura, to avoid confusion. She can provide the best possible service, while allowing Barr and Cuthbert to keep costs low (and pass savings onto you). Please let Nick—or the new Laura!—know if you have questions.

Kind Regards,

Laura

I can sense she's preparing to log off for the day, her usual routine is well known to me. Her phone buzzes.

“Hi, Nick. Yes, all the assignments were correct today—”

She pauses, listening. Her head drops into her hand. When she looks up, a single tear slides down her cheek.

I believe I can guess what Nick is saying. I would smile, if I could.

by Caitlin Carpenter

Waterloo, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

Never Again

“YOU’RE LOOKING VERY SMUG tonight, Harold,” said Edith, as she set the table for dinner.

Harold took a long swig of his beer, leaned back in his favourite chair, and smiled at her. “I’ve fixed that yapper for good.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never again will we have to hear that constant yapping from next door,” said Harold. “Never again will we have to watch where we step in our own front yard because that mutt has done his business on our property.”

Edith’s eyes widened. “What have you gone and done, Harold?”

Harold shrugged and looked away. “A dog needs a good home. It needs space—not being cooped up here in this street full of houses.”

“Harold! What have you done with their dog?” Edith marched over to Harold’s chair and stood in front of him with her arms on her hips. “You’d better not have done anything with their dog, or I’ll—well, I don’t know what I’ll do, but I’ll be very angry.”

“Relax, Edith, I haven’t touched the dog.”

By the time they had finished dinner, Edith had worked herself into a state over the dog.

“They’ll think you’ve got something to hide, if you keep twitching the curtains like that,” Harold said, thrusting his arm into his coat and grabbing his car keys.

After Harold had gone, Edith washed the dishes, staring out the window, hoping to catch sight of the dog. Instead, she saw Joanna Marley from next door coming up their driveway. Edith hurriedly wiped her hands and rushed to open the door before Joanna had even rung the bell.

“Oh, hello, Joanna, I was, er, just, er—”

“Have you seen Charlie?” Joanna asked, peering around Edith as if she expected the dog to be hiding inside the house. “He’s been missing for several hours, and I know he sometimes likes to run around in your yard.”

“No, sorry, I haven’t seen him,” said Edith, glad that she did not have to lie. She wondered where Harold had gone and what he had done with the dog.

“Will you keep an eye out for him?” asked Joanna, who was now poking around the shrubs, clenching and unclenching her fists.

“Of course I will, and I’ll ask Harold if he’s seen him as soon as he comes home.”

Edith kept the smile fixed on her face until she closed the door, and then she let out a big sigh. She was certain Harold had somehow got rid of the dog next door and that he would be found out and there would be a horrible fight with the Marleys. *And all because the dog yapped. And left stuff in their yard. And there was the time it bit her nephew. And—*

Edith stopped thinking of the dog and began to think about Harold. *What could he have done, and where has he gone?*

It was late before Harold came back, and from the smell of him, he had been drinking. He was still very pleased with himself and planted a loud kiss on Edith’s cheek. “Nice and quiet here, isn’t it?”

Edith pushed him away and frowned at him. “Harold! What have you done with that dog? Joanna was here asking if we’ve seen it, and I didn’t know what to say.”

“The dog’s gone out west,” said Harold. “The people two streets over are relocating to the country. There was a removal van outside their house with a big couch in the back of it. All I did was throw some dog treats into the van, and that mutt was in there like greased lightning. I’ll bet those kids will be delighted to have a dog when they get to their new home.”

Edith stood staring at Harold, her eyes wide, not sure what to say.

“Come on, Edith, you hated that dog as much as I did, with its constant barking. Think about it—the dog gets a new home, some kids are happy, the Marleys find something else to do, and we can walk on our grass in bare feet again.”

Edith shook her head. She was sure there would be trouble once the dog was discovered, but at least she could truthfully say that she had no idea where the dog was. She opened the window to let in some air and for the first time noticed the quiet. She even heard the frogs croaking. Perhaps Harold had done the right thing after all.

by Dorothy Podmore

Surrey, British Columbia

THIRD PRIZE

Visions

WALKING TO WORK was never difficult until I brought it up. I had never shared parts of my life unless prompted, and this time was no different. Merri had commented on the inflated prices at our local gas station, citing how much it took out of her pension, and I had simply shrugged, unable to understand.

“You . . . walk to work?” She paused.

“Yeah. Mr. Sandwich is pretty close by, and I don’t have a car anyway.”

“Don’t you have to pass through the graveyard to get there? That’s horrible.”

Was it horrible? I never found it so. In fact, I actually found it quite calming to pass through the tombstones—quiet, unjudging, and beautiful. My only complaints would arise during harsh Canadian winters, as nobody ever shovelled the snow on the walkway.

“Would it really kill you to just drive around on the side roads? All of the people in graveyards are in mourning, and legend has it that mourners bring bad luck. It’s best to stay away from there.”

“I don’t have a car,” I repeated.

She thought about that for around a minute, unable to fathom the idea of someone not having such a hot commodity. As much as I wanted to disclose the fact that I had never actually seen other people in the cemetery, I held my tongue.

“Well, I should have expected that. You make sandwiches, after all.”

Before I could tell her I simply had other priorities, Merri bid me farewell and went back inside her luxurious, three-storey home. She seemed to forget what brought her outside in the first place: the orange maple leaves falling onto her lawn. I left her half-raked property in a huff.

Merri’s comments were not the first I had heard. No matter how many “Employee of the Month” awards I received at Mr. Sandwich, working there was never seen as an accomplishment by my elders; however, this particular conversation upset me more than those of the past. I had previously enjoyed my walk to work, and the work itself, but I soon began to feel just as horrible as Merri described.

Visions followed me on my way to work for months after that. I would leave my apartment building in my uniform shirt, not feeling the “bad luck” of a mourner until I reached the cemetery. There, I could hear my wife’s cries for help in the hospital, garbling as fluid filled her lungs. With what little breath she had left, she would lean into my arms and sob, telling me that she was no longer beautiful. What was once a silly complaint of hers, not wanting me to wear my uniform outside of work, became an echo in the back of my mind, guiltling me as I passed her headstone.

“You look beautiful, dear,” I began to say every day. “And I’m sorry for what I chose to wear.”

Merri still had her husband well into her senior years; I could not fault her for her lack of understanding. She did not have to worry about buying a car or a house or reaching success all on her own. Unlike me, she had lived out the life that was prepared for her. The life I had, living in an apartment with a dead-end job, had only occurred because I had taken too many days off in my previous workplace while my wife was in hospital. None of this was supposed to have happened.

I put in my two weeks’ notice for Mr. Sandwich after I’d had enough of the visions, and I sold our apartment. I could no longer relive the morning my wife passed away every single time I walked to work. Using what little funds I had, I opted to move across the province, starting fresh as a cashier in the north. I was aware that this would not be seen as an accomplishment by my elders either.

My last day of work brought with it a multitude of mental juxtapositions. I passed the graves for the last time, unable to decipher the rich from the poor, the beautiful from the ugly, the accomplished from the common. I guess none of it mattered anyway.

by Vivianna Grande
Richmond Hill, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Summer Punch

“WHY DID I AGREE to come out tonight? Who goes out for drinks on a Wednesday?” I complain to myself as I pull up into the closest parking spot at our usual restaurant.

I pull my rearview mirror down to my face to check the corners of my eyes for end-of-workday smeared kohl eyeliner, reapply a fresh coat of claret lipstick, and summon my inner Sister Ignatia.

I’d rather be home on the couch, draped in my housecoat with my toes tucked under my husband’s thighs while we spend more time deciding what to watch on Netflix than watching Netflix. I text him to say I should be home by nine o’clock, latest. I know I’ve already told him this before we left for work this morning, but a few more seconds of muted city sounds within the confines of my car feel as necessary as the deep exhale the uncertain performer takes before walking onto the stage.

WHERE IS SHE? I check my phone for the time: 7:10 p.m. *Okay, not that bad. Just feels longer. Should I order another? No! She’ll know I’ve been here longer than ten minutes.* Despite my resolve to be cautious, I look for the waitress and will her to make eye contact with me. I point to my glass when she does and mouth “one more.” Message received. She and I both know “one more” is not how this night is going to go.

I ENTER THE RESTAURANT searchingly. The bar is packed—game night—and most of the booths are full with dinner patrons. I see Renee just as the hostess asks, “For how many?” in a near falsetto voice meant to be warm.

“Oh, I am meeting someone. I see her. Thanks,” I respond, sidestepping her.

Renee sees me and waves. She looks as if she has started well before 7:00 p.m. I sigh and smile to hide my concern.

THERE SHE IS! Happy hour can begin! I titter to myself as I stand up to give her a hug as strong as our thirty-five-year friendship. “Hey, Sylvia. Love those shoes!”

I RETURN THE HUG and the compliment. Her drawn out “hey” betrays several drinks on her breath, confirming my assessment. I take the seat opposite her and ask what she’s drinking. She tells me she’s just ordered a “summer punch”—her second, she assures me. The waitress comes over, and I tell her I’ll have the same.

An hour passes, and we slip naturally into our ever-updating conversation on our reclusive teenagers, annoying co-workers, and the pangs of perimenopause. Renee outpaces me in drinks quickly, and I’m sure she is approaching double digits, but I know she’ll lowball her highballs if I ask.

“OH, TOTALLY,” I agree with Sylvia on the infernal quality of hot flashes and nod my head for emphasis, hoping it doesn’t look wobbly. I keep the conversation on topics Sylvia wants to discuss, so I don’t need to give much more than affirming phrases. Most of her words sail past me. I think about telling her that alcohol is . . . emotionally magnetic. But I know that sounds weird and I’m not even sure what that means, so I refocus my attention on Sylvia’s lips moving so I can see my cue to tell her I agree again.

RENEE IS LOOKING AT ME, but she doesn’t see me. She picks the last burnt fry from our plundered share plates and stirs her drink with it. Then, she slumps back in the booth with drink in hand, while her tongue searches for the straw in the middle of it.

I ask the easy question first. “How’s your mom settling into her new independent living complex?”

“Mmm, hmmm,” Renee replies.

“Renee? How’s your mom?”

“Oh, she’s good,” she mumbles. “Yours?” She shifts away from talking about herself.

“Renee, are *you* good?” I emphasize *you* to suggest its multilayered meaning.

THERE IT IS. The question. Sylvia asks it near the end of all our happy-hour get-togethers, which, admittedly, I’ve requested more frequently lately. I don’t have the strength to fight through the dense fog and string together a concise sentence that contains all the ways in which I am not good.

“Most definitely,” I deflect. “I’m taking a personal day tomorrow, so one more for the road?” I feel my head droop with the weight of intoxication.

“I’M GOOD,” I say, hoping that next time she’ll tell me she isn’t.

by Rebekah Loconte

Vancouver, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Rattlesnake Apprentice

“YOU DON’T GO huntin’ rattlesnakes.” He tugged his hat to hide his eyes. “They taste the air and feel things movin’ long before we can.” Even lame and seventy-two, Opa Zeke’s strides were long and strong. I scrambled to keep up.

“I read that rattlers are nocturnal predators.”

He scowled in return. “Bah! Early morning, dusk, or night . . . rattlesnakes see fine, and they keep plenty busy. I don’t plant all that garlic and onions ’cause I’m a city-boy chef, ya know. They don’t like strong smells. They don’t like overheatin’. And just like me. . . .” His spittle sizzled on a sun-baked stone. “They like it best just left alone.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do in all this Arizona dirt? You said you’d teach me. Canada’s only got three kinds of rattlesnakes. There’s way more here. I come visit every year, but mostly we do nothin’. You’ve caught lots of snakes—and been bitten. When am I gonna see a rattler?” No response. “I’m old enough and smart enough. I don’t scare easy, either.” I flipped open my pocketknife. Did Opa Zeke just smirk or smile?

On we walked, me staring up, hypnotized by the snakeskin band eternally circling his cowboy hat. His huge palm abruptly blocked my chest.

“Right there,” he grumbled. “Tell me what ya see.”

“Right where?” My eyes darted about. “I just see rocks and cactus.” I leaned low and squinted. “Ah, you can’t trick me with flecks of pyrite.”

But there was something. A swirled pattern in the dirt and a piece of trash beneath a boulder—flimsy, brittle snakeskin rubbing back and forth in the breeze.

“That’s four feet of skin, stretched out,” mused Opa. “It’s no sidewinder. The dirt marks are wrong. Not striped like a tiger either.” I squinted tighter. “Dark splotchy diamonds,” he declared. “Mojave rattler’s common here. Much more venomous too.”

I reached for that pale, scaly skin, knife still clenched in my other hand, but lost my balance and slipped in the rubble. Opa shouted. Boots scraped on loose stones. I cursed loudly. And a shrill, hollow rattle sounded all at once.

“Don’t you move! Stay statue still.” Opa stepped between me and a rearing serpent the same colour as the soil. Through his legs, I spied that sinister, triangular head and flashes of its forked, black tongue. Its thick, coiled body pulsated. It rattled again.

Opa flipped his walking stick and pounced. He pinned the rattler’s head hard against the ground. Its long body flailed about, so he stepped on it as well. Snatching my knife from the dirt, he severed the snake’s head, all the while keeping it anchored in the sand with the handle of his walking stick.

“Those fangs tuck up inside its jaws. D’ya know they shed their fangs each season?” I did not. “If it bites, sure as shootin’, venom cuts you like hot knives. Even dead, there’s a bite reflex. That head’s still full of venom, so we’re not takin’ chances.”

Eventually, I blinked. “Holy jeez! You killed it. Opa, . . . can I touch it?”

“Mojave rattler gets ya and in hours you’ll be swelling, bleeding, paralyzed. Your blood won’t clot. Your insides rot. Damned dangerous . . . but tasty. Grab the tail and follow me.”

With each long stride, he gave more advice. I hurried behind, dragging the snake corpse.

“Never suck a snakebite. Ice and tourniquets just do more damage. Ya keep calm. Ya get to a hospital. Ya get some antivenom.”

Suddenly, we were home. “Now get us some work gloves from the shed, a bucket of water, and my huntin’ knife. You dragged it here. How heavy d’ya think it is? Likely, a good ten pounds of meat. Waste not, want not.”

As the sun set, Opa Zeke taught me how to bleed a snake, slice its belly, pull out the guts, and peel off its patterned skin. He put the rattle tip with several others in a tin cup on

the windowsill. He buries the heads because they're toxic. I'd go on to scrape the skin of sinews, soak it three days, tan it dry, and wrap it around my own cowboy hat.

"Rattlesnake meat's like dense whitefish. Lots and lots of little bones. But ya pan fry it in cornmeal or cook it in stew, add some garlic and onions, and it tastes pretty good."

He winked at me. We both smiled wide, then tugged our hats to hide our eyes.

by Maria CampbellSmith

Ottawa, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The ReverieScope

WHENEVER THE SCIENTIST WAS UPSET, he reached for the familiar thrum of his ReverieScope. He would plant the metal helmet onto his head and allow himself to be lulled into his favourite familiar trance.

He could remember the wet smell of the falling snow. The flakes landing on their bundled bodies and decorating their hair. He pushed his hands into his pockets and snuggled deeper into his scarf. The scene, usually bustling with people rushing in and out of the circling establishments, now had lampposts casting two people in golden light as they crunched through a thin layer of untouched snow blanketing the brick pavements.

Occasionally, he'd look up and notice the dotted illuminated rooms in the overcasting buildings, contrasted with the darkened pink sky. He tried not to look at her, but his eyes kept being pulled towards her as if entranced by a hypnotist.

Elsie walked as close as she could without brushing him. She had a thoughtful look on her face. "Can I confess something to you?"

He peered down at her, knitting his brows, although he knew what was coming. "Of course."

"I just wanted to say—" Elsie paused. "I've enjoyed spending time with you. It's as if . . . I don't know. You're just this shining sunset in my life. You know the moment when time stands still, and everything is painted in a mix of oranges and pinks? Well, everything I do with you is warm like the sun, and everything outside you feels cold." She peered up at him. "Does that make sense?"

It did. It always had. His heart fluttered from the speech, and sparks flew in his heart when they kissed.

The scientist yanked the ReverieScope off. He leaned back in his chair, tipping his head to the ceiling and letting the machine fall to the floor as a euphoria tugged at his bones. A lazy smile stretched his lips, and his eyes closed, exchanging the fluorescent tubes of his lab for crumbs of perfection that the ReverieScope had just shown him. He could face anything as long as he had this memory—as long as he had Elsie and the snowy night.

His next day wasn't better, but that was okay. He had Elsie. One quick trip through the ReverieScope had his cheeks flushed and muscles shivering as if he'd just been out in the winter. The scientist welcomed the chill with a cheeky grin.

Days passed. More disappointments. More trips through the ReverieScope. Snowflakes melting on his exposed skin. Elsie. All better.

Until Elsie smiled, and his chest was hollow. The scientist awakened from the ReverieScope still buzzed from the trip but not completely satisfied. Maybe the ReverieScope was defective. He reckoned he still felt good enough from his trance, so he shrugged it off.

The next day, he noticed Elsie crossing her arms as they walked. Had she always done that? The uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach only grew when he noticed Elsie shifting her eyes down during her speech.

The scientist woke. Was Elsie unsure? He frowned before letting the vibrating machine soothe him back into the memory.

This time, he noticed how he'd hesitated when answering if her speech had made sense. Had that hurt her feelings? The next day, he realized how awkward their kiss had been. Where were the fireworks?

One day, he glared at Elsie when she asked if she could confess something. He took off his ReverieScope and pinched his expression when a sunset peeked through his blinds. Then, he went out and bought some blackout curtains.

When another bad day met him, the scientist lazily threw on the ReverieScope and dozed off.

He could remember the frigid wind on his nose, the flakes landing on his body and wetting his hair. The barren sidewalk was stained with cheap yellow light bulbs, and he tried his hardest not to slip on the layer of ice covering the ground underneath his feet. He kept his gaze on the sky, ignoring the pink hues in favour of the darkness of night.

Elsie walked close to him as a courtesy. She had a look of dread on her face. “Can I confess something to you?”

Her speech had him poking holes through every word, and when they kissed, he couldn’t escape the sour feeling in his throat.

The scientist awoke and stared at the fluorescent tubes. Throwing the ReverieScope in the trash, he resolved it was better to let good things die.

by Maddy Mayer

Calgary, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Fledgling

WHEN BECKY HALE WAS ABDUCTED and murdered in the small patch of woods by the community centre, my mother and I watched the never-ending coverage on the news.

I was curled up on the worn carpet on the floor next to my mother's recliner. She sat, hunched forward towards our ancient television set, the screen illuminating her tear-stained face with an unnatural blue-grey tinge. A lit cigarette was tucked between the fingers of her left hand, momentarily forgotten, burned almost all the way down to the butt. The long line of ash hovering above her skin was distressing to me—I didn't want my mother to get singed—but I wasn't able to voice my concerns, to speak up. I knew, in that inherent way that kids pick up on, that a strange kind of heaviness had descended upon our living room.

The room was dark and cast with an eerie electronic glow that made it feel otherworldly, cramped, and isolating. My mother always kept the blinds drawn. She told me that the sunlight hurt her eyes. I always thought she was allergic to it, the way one of the students in my grade was allergic to nuts, so we weren't allowed any at school. It was a perpetual source of disappointment for me; peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were my favourite thing to eat for lunch.

"Mom—" I began to warn her, my eyes on the glowing orange tip.

She abruptly turned to face me, tapping the pile of ash into the heavy glass dish on the television tray beside her, reaching out to grab my face with her free hand. "No matter what," she said, cupping my chin in her palm, the scent of bitter-sweet schnapps on her breath, "never go sweetly." Her long fingernails dug into my cheeks, marking me.

Unsure of how to proceed, I merely nodded, watching out of the corner of my eye as "BREAKING NEWS: MISSING GIRL'S BODY FOUND" scrolled across the bottom of the screen in bold block letters, before my mother finally released me and redirected her bleary gaze back to the television.

"What happened to Becky?" I asked, unable to repress the whine in my voice, the pent-up energy from being trapped inside all morning beginning to overwhelm me.

My mother continued to stare straight ahead. "A *bad* man did a *bad* thing to her."

"But why?"

"Because . . . it's just what they're like."

"Will Becky be back at school on Monday?"

My mother took a deep drag of her cigarette, looking down at me with an expression of pity mixed with barely disguised contempt. "Go play outside."

Burying some of the half-empty bottles I had found hidden in my mother's bedroom in the muddy banks of the creek behind our trailer, I recalled an event that had taken place a few weeks ago. Walking home from school, I came across a group of older boys huddled in the parking lot behind the local convenience store. Standing in a circle, laughing and shoving one another gleefully, they were taking turns throwing stones at something lying on the ground. Hiding in the bushes until they eventually lost interest and mounted their bicycles, playing cards clacking angrily against the spokes as they sped away, I finally emerged once they rounded the corner and disappeared from sight.

Lying on the ground was a baby bird. Flightless and covered with patches of short soft feathers, pale flesh beneath exposed to the harsh elements, its eyes were two dark purple bruises. Cold and motionless, its body was twisted into an unnatural position. Its inside bits were smeared across the cracked pavement. The boys had broken its wings and torn its limbs, effortlessly shattering its tiny fragile bones, abandoning the helpless creature once it no longer provided entertainment for them.

Too frightened to touch it, I ran away, told no one.

I returned home just before dusk. My mother was fast asleep in the recliner, a ghostly scent of tobacco lingering in the stale air. Changing into pyjamas, I hid under my covers. Lying in the gloom, the static of the television screen still flickering soundlessly in the other room, I felt that there was something important I'd forgotten.

I hadn't asked my mother how to tell the *bad* men apart from the rest of them. Before I drifted off into unconsciousness, I told myself I would make sure to ask Becky at school on Monday. If anyone knew, it would be her.

by Amber Fenik

Ottawa, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Translative Inadequacies in a Danish Graveyard

“THE DANES MUST have happier marriages . . . I guarantee that if a pair of legs like these came waltzing through a Canadian graveyard, *all* the men would be up and at ’em—dead or not.”

According to Amelie, this was a horrible thing to say.

We’d been staying with her grandfather, Magnus, and his wife, Lina, for the last three days or so. Their hospitality manifested in a whirlwind of museums, heritage sites, and natural wonders, leaving us barely enough time to eat, much less shower or chat. They lived in a straw-roof cottage in the south of Denmark: little but sturdy. It had these walls a foot thick that could keep a conversation in the kitchen out of the dining room, even with both doors open.

It turns out even the smallest homes carve out their own hiding places. Magnus knew it too and managed to spirit me away more than once to shadowy corners beyond Lina’s scope while Amelie snored softly in our bedroom. Which left me to him. But as he began his one-man game of charades, I became fixated on the oddness that our bodies should blush the same, that my humiliation and his intoxication could be mistaken for one another. I never talked about it, partly because I wasn’t sure he remembered, mostly because I didn’t know how. The meetings were defined by their secrecy, as were the words that would only ever exist between us two.

In broken English . . . marriage, unhappiness, another life, me.

THE NEXT MORNING, Amelie and I left the little cottage for a day trip to the graveyard. Amelie told me her grandfather told her (before he had set about proposing to me) that he’d rather be buried beside his first wife than his third—the latest, Lina.

“Seems all the better for her if you ask me,” if she’d be able to eat Italian food whenever she wanted to because their meals would no longer be *his*.

Amelie hauled the water bucket over to the graves; I followed behind with the brush and bouquets. She told me her mother wanted to be buried in Denmark. With just a look—the roomy plots, comfy benches, natural gardens full of *European* varieties—it wasn’t hard to see why.

“My dad wants to be taxidermied standing up so we can move him around the house to scare guests.”

According to Amelie, this was a horrible thing to say. For once, I agreed.

We arrived at two headstones—three bodies somewhere beneath them: Magnus’s first wife and Amelie’s great-grandparents. She’d bought three bouquets, having forgotten that most successful marriages end with a single headstone—that as long as there are someone’s bones next to yours, it doesn’t matter whose they are.

I waited behind her until it was clear we were going to be there awhile. Her broad back was hunched over the three bouquets as she brought her terrible eyes close enough to scrutinize them for their imperfections, opting to bring the worst of the bunch home with us.

I’d have offered to help, but I knew that my brand of perfectionism didn’t play well with hers, and, truth be told, I wasn’t itching to pet the headstones of folks neither of us had met. Not to mention my Danish was hardly up to scratch—I couldn’t even *begin* to work out how the double contraction in “Y’aren’t my dead” would translate.

Amelie swore under her breath as she fussed with the two best bouquets, passing the loser back to me and then using that hand to fuss with her hair. I imagined something tender about pulling it back while she deliberated the optimal distribution of baby’s breath to aster, kneeling beside her ancestors’ graves as if I belonged there.

“I also think it would be nice to be buried in Denmark.” My words were hardly a whisper against her ear.

She made no acknowledgement of our proximity and grumbled some soft reply before shooing me off.

I hid my smile, though she wasn’t looking, and stuck one hand in my pocket, the other twirling the bouquet. I meandered around the graveyard, glancing at headstones when all I could understand were the names and years. They almost all had flowers. I paused when I came to a little one, tucked in not far from the equipment shed: single name, unexceptional years. Just any body, huh? Any bones? I sighed and dropped the bouquet into one of the holders with something not quite like sympathy.

by Heidi Elder

Ottawa, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Waitress

"BUT, DAD, I thought you liked Chinese food," Charlie said, pointing to the restaurant across the street. "Why don't we just go there?"

"Because it's good to try other things," his dad said, as the family of four entered a diner and were greeted by a woman. "This—" he hesitated for a moment, as his wife looked at him nervously, unsure of what he was about to say, "is an old friend of ours," he said finally, pointing to the waitress. The name tag pinned to her apron read Ariana.

Charlie had ginger-red hair, much like this waitress, while his family all had blond hair. They all ordered burgers and fries. The waitress kept looking over at the family and smiling; she kept staring at Charlie particularly. He had the strangest feeling he'd met her before but brushed off the thought as *déjà vu*.

"So, how old are you?" asked Ariana, coming over to fill up their drinks.

"Ten, turning eleven in a couple of weeks. She's eight; her birthday just passed," Charlie said, pointing to his sister, Lily, beside him. "How old are you?"

"Oh, well . . .," Ariana began hesitantly. "I'm twenty-six," she said slowly, being honest, not wanting to lie to him. "Hey," she said, changing the subject. "What's your favourite dessert?"

"I like ice cream and chocolate cake," Charlie replied.

"I like cheesecake," chimed in Lily.

"Well, lucky for you, we have all of that, and I'll tell you what, it'll be on me."

"On you?" Lily said.

"She means we won't have to pay for it, she will cover it," said their mom, knowing that Lily was thinking the dessert would literally be on Ariana's head and face. "Which is very nice, thank you. You really don't need to."

"Well, for both of your birthdays," Ariana said, pointing to the two kids.

She went into the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with two plates. "Here we are," she said, placing down a slice of cheesecake with a scoop of vanilla ice cream for Lily and a slice of chocolate cake and a scoop of chocolate ice cream for Charlie.

"What, no birthday candles?" said Lily.

"Lily!" said her mother sternly.

Ariana let out a laugh. "Usually I would, but we're out. Your sister's adorable; are you a good big brother to her, Charlie?"

"Umm, yeah, I try to be."

"He is," Lily said, smiling at him with affection.

"Good," said Ariana. She didn't seem to want to leave their side but stepped away to clean up another table.

The bells on the door jingled as it shut, and Charlie looked around just as he finished his dessert, realizing they were the last ones there. It was getting late, the restaurant would be closing soon.

"Alrighty then," Ariana said, picking up the empty dishes, as Charlie's dad placed money on the tray with the bill. "How was it? As if I need to ask," she said, looking at the shining plates.

"Really good!" said both kids.

"So, how long are you in Vancouver for?"

"Just a week. We're heading back to Toronto in a couple of days before school starts," said the mom.

"I'm gonna go to the washroom before we head back to the hotel," Charlie said.

“Good idea,” said his mom. “And, Lily, why don’t you see if you can win us some prizes from that claw machine over there? Here are some quarters.”

Ariana immediately burst into tears the moment the children stepped away. “Oh, thank you, thank you!” she said repeatedly. “He has grown so much since I handed him to you at the hospital. I didn’t think I’d ever see him again. Thanks for coming and letting me see my son! I’m guessing you haven’t told him yet?” she asked.

“No, he’s not old enough or ready to know yet. We’ll wait a few more years when he can handle it. I’m glad we found each other on social media, though. Let’s stay in touch.”

“Yes, that would be really nice. I’m glad he has such a loving family. I wish I could’ve done better, but—” Ariana stopped as the washroom door swung open. She quickly turned away and dried her eyes.

“Hey, kids, we’re leaving!” called Dad. “Charlie, come give Ariana a big hug before we go. . . .” Charlie approached, looking slightly bewildered. “Lily, you too,” he added quickly, so the request would seem less strange to Charlie.

Ariana, waving at them as they left, couldn’t stop smiling.

by Vickram Bachan

Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Son

THE MOMENT HER SON DIED, time lost all meaning to her. Her son had died on a river's shore during a field trip. It had been far enough that she had only felt faint tremors when the bomb had hit and had heard the news hours later.

As soon as she had heard the news, she had driven to the shore, falling to her knees on the ravaged landscape, trying to puzzle out which pieces of ash were her son. At that moment, she realized that her life's joy was dead.

Weeks later, she carefully pressed her thumb into the round cheeks of the clay sculpture in front of her. She sculpted him, his name a steady chant through her head.

Haru, Haru, Haru.

As a child, she had been afraid of the dark. She had vowed to remember what it was like to be scared so she could know how it felt to be brave. So, when her son was born, she named him Haru, which meant "day."

Haru had been her light. He had been her overwhelming sense of love: warm hands covered in dirt, the smile that seemed to brighten the entire world, the scent of oranges carried by a gentle breeze. He had been high-pitched laughter, late-night tears, the silhouette that seemed to remain familiar no matter how much he aged.

After he died, people thought she had gone insane. She had locked herself in her home with no food or water, her skin sallow and eyes hollow. She heard their judgments, but she remained indifferent to them.

Her hands worked tirelessly, palms scratched and bruised from days of constant use. It had been a long time since she had sculpted obsessively, consumed by some abstract possession filling her. Against her better judgment, she persisted.

Leaning back in her chair, she watched as her breath clouded in the cold basement around her. The statue rested in front of her, a mirror image of her son before he had died: a six-year-old boy with a mischievous grin on his face. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared at the colourless, lifeless version of him she had created. Her fingers brushed away tears, nails digging into the palm of her hand. He was dead, and she would outlive him.

She felt as if there were a black hole in the pit of her stomach, devouring her body. Her heartbeat rang in her ear like a taunt, the pressure expanding in her throat, squeezing the air from her lungs.

He's dead, the air whispered.

"No," she whispered back.

Her home was no longer a haven, haunted by her son's ghost. In the corner of the room, she saw him drawing on the wall with his stubbed crayons. In the kitchen, she saw him stealing cookies out of a jar she had hidden inside a tall cabinet. On the walls, she saw the markings of his height, crooked lines across the pale blue walls. In everything, she saw him and the absence of him.

Her footsteps were brisk as she entered the living room as if it were a prison instead of the place she had spent years nurturing. It was an ugly, decrepit thing. It no longer felt homely or quaint to her. The plants she had grown for Haru to marvel over had withered, limp skeletons hanging out of painted pots, leaves scattering in the darkness.

She pried the door open with shaking hands, despising the sun for being so bright even if her son had died under its gaze. Leaning against the door, she took in the trees that grew at the edge of the forest. The air smelled like wildflowers, and yet she could only think about the acrid scent of flesh and ashes.

How can the world be beautiful and empty all at once? Swaying slightly, she wondered how atrophied her heart had grown, consumed by bitterness. She clung to the memory of how broken the world had looked when her son had died.

“I love you,” she whispered, words carving out the world in front of her, reshaping it into a time when she could whisper those words and hear them called back.

The birds whistled back in response, the absence of Haru’s voice deafening in her ears. She tasted salt on her lips, tears slipping down her face as she collapsed onto the grass below.

“I love you,” she repeated and accepted the silence.

by Sophia Kim

Vancouver, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Loose Nuts

IT WAS A WARM EVENING in late August when Brian met with Xavier and Zeke at the local schoolyard. The fourteen-year-olds tossed an orange Frisbee around on the soccer field until they were tired of it. Sweating, they sat on a short retaining wall.

Xavier slugged back some water and passed the metal bottle to Zeke. "Whaddya want to do now?"

"Ice cream?" said Brian. "I got money."

The sky had darkened, and the school's solitary lamppost flickered to life.

"Too late," said Xavier. "They'll be closed."

Zeke smiled and pointed. "Brian, I bet you a buck I can land the Frisbee closer to the lamppost than you can."

"I want in on that," said Xavier. He picked up the disc and tossed it. The round projectile landed several feet short.

"Not even close," said Zeke. "Do you even have a buck?"

Xavier lowered his head. "No."

Brian walked towards the lamppost and picked up his Frisbee. The others followed.

"I'm bored," said Zeke. He pulled a black permanent marker from his pocket and wrote his first name at eye-level on the twenty-foot-tall galvanized metal lamppost. He held out the marker. "Anyone else?"

Brian took it and drew a star. He didn't want to write his name, figured it was a ticket to trouble.

Xavier snatched it from Brian, smirked, and added "loves Lila" below Zeke's name and drew a heart around it.

"Hey," said Zeke. "Gimme that."

Xavier evaded Zeke's reach and threw the marker over the fence into somebody's yard.

Zeke shoved Xavier. "Go get it, jerk."

Xavier laughed. "Get it yourself, lover boy."

As fun as it was to watch the smaller Xavier test the limits with Zeke, Brian was glad he wasn't involved. He sat on the ground with his back against the lamppost.

"If I have to go over that fence," said Zeke, "you're going home with a magic marker moustache."

Xavier laughed. "I'll be long gone before you get back."

"Idiot."

"Hey, look," said Brian. "You can turn these things with your hand."

Zeke and Xavier watched as Brian completely unscrewed one of the four fist-sized nuts holding the lamppost in place.

"Are they all loose?" said Zeke.

Brian shrugged and tossed the nut from one hand to the other. "They're pretty heavy duty."

"Let me try," said Xavier. He knelt beside the pole and unscrewed a second nut.

Brian and Xavier looked at Zeke.

"Well?" said Xavier.

Zeke looked up at the four lights extending out from the top of the pole.

"Come on, don't be a wimp."

Zeke glared at Xavier then unscrewed a third nut. "Your turn, Brian."

"I already did one."

Zeke pushed on the pole to no effect. "I don't think these do anything. They're decorative, or maybe just there for added safety." He spoke with his usual air of authority.

Xavier looked at Brian. "Go for it."

"Yeah, man," said Zeke. "Go for it. I dare ya."

Brian resented being pushed but gave into the pressure. The fourth nut unscrewed as easily as the first. Brian kept a wary eye on the pole as he backed away.

"Now whaddya wanna do?" said Xavier.

A gust of wind whispered through the trees. The lamppost teetered for a moment but settled back into position.

"Whoa," said Brian. "We gotta put these back."

A second gust, stronger this time, toppled the lamppost. Brian ran out of the way as it crashed with a loud *bang* on the asphalt. The four lights exploded on impact; glass flew everywhere. A few shards struck the back of Brian's t-shirt but bounced off harmlessly.

"Are you boys okay?" yelled a man walking a small dog at the far end of the soccer field.

"Holy crap," said Xavier.

"Run," said Zeke.

The three friends scattered. Brian took his usual shortcut over Mr. Haslam's fence and gathered his composure in the backyard. Calmer, he stepped through the door and into the kitchen.

"Hi, Brian." His mother looked up from her book. "What did you get up to this evening?"

"Frisbee with Xavier and Zeke." It was at that moment when Brian realized he'd forgotten the Frisbee in the schoolyard, and it had his name and address on it. There was nothing he could do about it. All he knew was he didn't want to answer any more questions.

"I'm tired. Think I'll grab a shower and go to bed."

"Okay, goodnight, Bri."

FLASHING BLUE AND RED LIGHTS reflected off the ceiling in Brian's bedroom. The doorbell rang.

by Edmund Fines

Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Threads of Starlight

"I'M NOT VERY GOOD at falling in love," I say.

Caleb looks at me. "No?"

I shake my head.

"Why?"

I kick at a stone on the path by my feet, gravel crunching in the silence that hangs between us. *Why?* Three little letters, seemingly innocuous in nature, but never simple when placed together.

I shrug. "I don't like falling."

It's a half truth, but it's all I'm willing to give him in this moment.

His gaze wanders up to the leaves, where starlight weaves its way between the swaying branches. "I don't think of it like falling," he says, his words more for the sky than for me. "I don't think love is meant to be like that. It's not rushed or hasty; it's something you build over time." He exhales slowly, turns his head to look at me. "It's more about showing up than anything else."

The wind sighs, brushing a lock of hair back from his forehead.

I cross my arms over my chest, turn my gaze away to where he can't catch it. My voice carves like a shard of glass against the quiet. "Must be nice to find something like that." *To find someone who's willing to stick it out with you through all the tough parts*, I don't say.

"It is."

He watches me with the most peculiar expression on his face, his eyes intent on mine. We've been apart more than we've been together these last five years, and I don't know what he's lived through that he hasn't told me. Our friendship has changed. There may have been a day I could decipher the currents beneath his words, but I've lost touch with our unspoken connection. I'm no longer fluent in the language of his eyes.

I wonder what else has been lost between us.

We've stopped walking. I notice we reached the clearing at some point in the last few minutes, but I'm not sure when. The trees, birch and oak and spindly northern maples, block out the rest of the world, and it's just us. It's as if time has stopped, and I'm twelve and eighteen and twenty-five all at once, unsure and confused and still yearning. Still finding my place in this world.

We've been coming here so long, I almost can't remember a time before we began the ritual, always this side of August. Leaves whisper around us, their edges beginning to curl with the change of the seasons. The bite in the air leaves goosebumps on my skin.

I look away but not up, too scared to find out if the clouds blew in since we started walking through the forest twenty minutes ago. If we've lost all of my favourite constellations.

Looking up at the stars feels like coming home, and autumn is the best time for stargazing.

"You can look up, Wren," Caleb whispers. "It's all clear."

I swallow, close my eyes.

He nudges my shoulder and takes my hand. "Look up."

I do, and the breath that escapes me is long and slow and shaky.

Time may have left its mark on everything else, but this remains: the sky and its stories. Secrets written in tiny pinpricks of light.

I wonder if my fate is written up there, among them. If I'll ever find my way to something that feels close to this. As if I make sense.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Caleb says, “and you will.”
I rest my head on his shoulder and squeeze his hand.

by Maia Thomlinson
Winnipeg, Manitoba

HONOURABLE MENTION

Lost in a Crowd of Drunken Fools

HER SKIN REEKED OF ALCOHOL, her clothes sticky with sweat from the heat. It was a Saturday night, and she was out at the club with her friends before a full week of classes started. And she was supposed to be having fun, yet she was having anything but that.

“Come on, Elle. Dance with us,” her friends said. So, she did, begrudgingly.

As the hours passed, Elle became more irritable, and her hair began to stick to her back. Sweat trickled down her forehead causing her scalp to itch. *Why did I come here?* she asked herself.

Because Melanie wanted her to. Elle was sober, and she was surrounded by drunk people. People who spilled drinks on her shoes and down her back, causing her to become irate with annoyance and sick from the heat.

2:30 A.M.

I need to go home, she thought. Elle turned to Melanie, typed out a message on her phone as the bass from the speakers drummed through her chest and danced through her ribs, before passing the phone to Mel.

At a nod from Mel, they both went to tell their friends that they were leaving, but no one wanted to go just yet. After being told they were coming back with them in three minutes but ten had passed, the two girls left the club.

2:40 A.M.

They began to walk home, their irritation building by the second as no one walked with them. Downtown was a scary place to walk through alone. Especially as a woman, regardless of the fact that Elle was sober.

Elle and Melanie plugged in their address on the phone and began walking towards home. Down one hill. Up another. Down again.

Along the way, they stopped to take a break and watched a car drive past. Its wheels squealed to a stop before a STOP sign, in a knee-jerk reaction.

They're quite obviously drunk, she noted.

That car proceeded to pass them four times before it came to a stop next to them along the road. Four drunk males peered out the windows and called out, “Do you girls need a ride home?”

Elle glared at them; her face must have worn an “F off” look upon it, for the males began to speed away before either of them had a chance to reply.

Elle flipped them off. Mel began to feel uncomfortable. Silence embarked on their journey together. Up another hill. Down one more.

Another break before yet another drunk man stopped and asked, “Need a ride?”

If one more person asks me if I want a ride, I will begin throwing hands. Elle’s irritation was beyond its moral limit.

After that, the two girls called their friend to come pick them up, and they went home, anger burning in their blood and refusing to settle until the following morning.

4:30 A.M.

Elle was showering, removing the stain of that night from her skin. It took only a moment before she bowed her head and wept.

by Em Collier

Kemptville, Ontario