

FIRST PRIZE

Little Joys of July

In June I bought a pocket camera
To capture all the little joys.
Nothing much. Some grainy photos,
Sunset drives, and the milkshakes I enjoy.

The snapshots remind me that I need not
Do more than simply exist.
Wild lavender, pleated hair,
Watermelon on the grocery list.

When I notice the present,
Then it has become the past.
Sunscreens hearts and overalls,
Film to make the moments last.

Now the lens doesn't quite capture
The pulse of the heat. The world
Is not forever summer,
The photographs are bittersweet.

Videos of acoustic songs,
Belly laughing with a friend.
Let her live, let her live, let her—
The summer is bound to end.

The pictures hold hostage
The goddess of small pleasures.
Newborn cows, fireflies,
Images of veiled treasures.

The month hugs me goodbye,
I caress the blissful crumbs.
I will be here for tomorrow
And all the Julys to come.

by Logan Henriksen (14 years old)
Ottawa, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

Those Dark-Brown Eyes

I knew I loved you
Glances exchanged across the room
Even back when we were shy
Staring into those dark-brown eyes

You were freshness, bright and new
Beautiful, all I wanted was to know you
Like the first dandelion in the spring
I was unaware of the joy you'd bring

I knew I loved you
Time drying away like fresh morning dew
Days turned to weeks, to months, to years
Soul awake, making the world so clear

You brought flooding colour into my life
Energy, excitement sharp like a knife
Our destinies colliding
Fates crashing and tumbling

Now that I know this feeling
How did I ever live that life so fleeting?
How could I ever go back
To not knowing you were the something I lack?

But the world went on
The shadow of your existence was gone
And I was completely unaware
Never a thing yet, but very much there

Isn't it crazy to think
Not knowing, not a wink
I've passed by places you've walked
That it was the love of my life I could've crossed?

I was missing a piece of my heart
Brought to me at the perfect time, our love like an art
I never knew, not in the least
Not seeing that you held the other piece

I didn't know you would mean this much to me
Making my heart and mind complete
A whole world, galaxy, universe
To live a life without you would be a curse

Now I'm used to this, it's true
But I will never be bored with you
A warm soul next to my own, a strong heartbeat
Comfort, fireworks, and smiles so sweet

Right then, I knew I loved you
And I knew you loved me too
With your hands entwined with mine
Staring into those dark-brown eyes

by Reita Liu (15 years old)
Richmond Hill, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

Silent Teacher

I spy you on a damp Friday morning,
your stony body resting on a boulder.
You're sitting, legs tucked under you
as if time stopped and left you frozen.

Your folded wings are speckled
from last night's shower,
and your solemn eyes are carved from dark stone.
I am startled by your beauty;
your elegant neck arches in an impossible curve.

I must have walked past you hundreds of times,
never once aware of your presence,
so I make up for it now,
basking in your beauty.
I take in every detail,
though I'm sure you hold more secrets
than anyone could discover in one day.

I pull my gaze away from you,
and glance at the time as I turn away.
I'm late for school but it was worth it.
Now, I appreciate the small secrets
in life, and I am forever grateful to you,
my silent teacher.

by Ruby Langley (13 years old)
Halifax, Nova Scotia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Limited

I know that lives are compelled to limitation,
But sometimes, I fear that I am the limit.
Maybe wanting everything is a vain delusion,
But is wanting more really so impossible?
Because the mere possibility of it all is simply too overwhelming,
And its domineering pressure keeps me locked away
From an ideal world that exists only in my mind.

Even so, I remain hoping
That at the end of my path,
I'll look back to see a paradise saturated with thrills.
I know that I cannot be each hue, tint, tone, and shade
Of every single colour,
Yet I am terrified of looking back
To see a scene void of anything at all.
That what will haunt me is not what I was
But, instead, what I was not.

And nothing comes without chase,
But I can't bring myself to take the step
Into an unfamiliar landscape,
Afraid to venture outside of the little box I've drawn,
Even if the lines are just as imaginary as all of my futile wishes
That slip from my hands as I desperately try to catch hold—
Too far out of reach,
Vanishing by the second.

by Kriti Sathyan (15 years old)
Kitchener, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Unmask, They Say

Unmask, they say. Be yourself.

Unmask, teachers chirp, bright smiles with cheerful gleams
Like daffodils and tulips and spring sunshine.
But we are not windows to be cleaned
And uncovered, not so flat and defined.
No, we are diamonds within diamonds in
A cave so shadowed and yet glittering.
A million facets shown to match our companions'.
So, could you not say that we all have
A million
Masks?

Unmask, a mother murmurs, concern in her face
Like autumn drizzle, dusky asphalt under streetlights.
But we're like the skies, different shades
Of blue and grey, crimson at dawn and navy at night.
Yet the sky will not turn green to please the grass—
Nor fall down to spite the clouds.
We hold a constant in all these masks
That we cannot
Doubt.

Unmask, they all say, as though they do not wear
A thousand masks too, I trust.
We make our masks, these versions of us, near
To ripples of a lake, but they do not
Make us.

My masks, I tell them, *are pieces of myself.*

by Lauren Zheng (14 years old)
Guelph, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Mirror, Mirror

Mirror, Mirror . . .

I look into your glass, and all I see is a broken reflection,
staring at myself, becoming lost in my own imperfection.

My body, just a canvas of flaws and defects,
it's hard to look at, like a mound of insects.

Every curve, each bump of bone, they make me hate my body whole.
Society's standards weigh on my already cracking soul.
I crave for my own confidence, yearning for the day I finally feel whole,
but I know it won't come, not unless I reach their ideal weight goal!

They say beauty is not a number or a size,
then why do I feel pressured to have bigger thighs,
yet keep my small waist,
and so-called perfect face?

If I am not pretty, then I am a disgrace.
If I am not pretty, then who will I be?
If I am not pretty, then who will love me?
If I am not pretty, then I am a mockery.

Mirror, Mirror . . .

Am I just another broken girl,
jumping over another high hurdle?
A hurdle society has set too high—
a hurdle that will hopefully,
one day,
be left to die.

by Olivia Jonas (13 years old)
Waterloo, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Memories

Sometimes
When you are in a place
Memories wrap around you like an old quilt

When I walk through the elementary hallway of my school
I am seven again
And I am eager and full of energy to learn
A kind of motivation no one ever has now
But we all did at some point
I could be anything I wanted
As long as I imagined

I am an astronaut, floating through space
I am an explorer, walking through the jungle
I am a little girl with a wild spark in her eye
As she climbs further up the tree
Or
Runs in the rain with her friends
Pretending she is a dragon
Maybe she is a fairy
Maybe she is a beast
Maybe she is the princess or
Maybe she is the knight

I see that girl when I stroll through the hallway
I hold her small hand in mine
But then reality hits me
Like how the *Titanic* hit the iceberg
And that girl is nothing more than a ghost

But there is still hope
When the little ghost comes back the next day
I take her and put her in my pocket
So that a part of her will always be with me
That imagination, that spirit, it's still there
Even if you think it's not

by Cambrie Lundeen (12 years old)
Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Me and the Blue

The blue surrounds me
No matter where I look, all I see is the blue
Fish everywhere darting and dancing in the blue

Just me and the blue

As I sink further into the blue, I seem to love it more
It's so colourful yet so dull
And so exciting yet so still
It doesn't change, no matter what I do
There are no people in the blue

Just me and the blue

The fish around me don't judge me the way people do
Sometimes, they swim right up to me then disappear into the blue
They don't know who I am or what I've done
And I don't know who they are—we're just, in the blue

Just me and the blue

When I'm in the blue, I am as calm as can be
There are no math problems to solve or people to please, just the blue and me
When I listen, all I hear is the blue—no cars or traffic, just me and the blue
There are no voices or sounds of any kind in the blue

Just me and the blue
I love the blue

by Aidan Lindhardsen (11 years old)
Cambridge, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Joe's Problem

Joe is smart,
and he loves his job.
He works with Cecelia,
Marcus, and Bob.

When Joe leaves his house,
something happens that's strange.
Joe has a problem
he can't seem to change.

One day, it's his lunch,
another his comb.
He's always leaving
something at home.

He looks for his car keys,
but they're not anywhere.
He suddenly sees them
right under the chair.

Joe frequently leaves
his briefcase behind.
Sometimes he thinks
he's losing his mind.

One day, this happened
purely by chance.
Joe left the house
without wearing his pants!

by Kyler Chen (10 years old)
Newmarket, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Party for Mice

Last night I heard a *wheeeek*.
It sounded like a mouse's squeak.
I thought to myself, *Maybe it's a party for little mice?*
Oh, that really would be nice!

At their party, they ate Mexican rice.
And in their drinks, they put little cubes of ice.
They always do whatever they please,
While stuffing their bellies with Swiss cheese.
They didn't come on my mattress, but instead,
Were disco dancing under my bed.

But when I woke up, there was nothing there.
My bedroom floor was completely bare!
I asked myself, "Could it all have been a dream?"
It had just seemed so real, the things I had seen.

by Emilia Mirabelli (9 years old)
Aurora, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Fear and Anger

It worries me
It protects me
I get stressed
I get flared up
I scream
It sounds as if I'm falling into a pit
Everything makes me stressed
Such as taking care of a baby or living alone

I get stressed
I get paranoid
I get worried
I get afraid
I fall in a pit
It is bleak
I cannot be happy in the pit

There is hope, though
I think about the good things I have
I retrace my steps to see what happened
I think happier
The pit I fall in gets smaller and smaller
But it is still in me
Its fear and anger control me

But I meditate
I think about the happy things I want
The fear and anger get sucked up like a vacuum
And with one deep breath, the anger and fear swirl into a bubble, then, *pop!*

Now, I am free
I have completed my process to be reborn
A new me
Happier
And in harmony

by Philip Gu (8 years old)
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Snowflake

“Snowflake, Snowflake,
where are you?”

“Hiding in the branches,
hoping not to be seen.”

“But please show yourself.
You are as pretty
as the moon.
You are shining like
the sun.”

“Here, I am,”
says the snowflake.
“I am just a little shy.”

by Arya Ai (8 years old)
Richmond, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Pizza

Pizza is the best food
It cheers up my mood

Eating pizza is so much fun
You can bake it in an oven

Cheesy pizza is so yummy
It fills up my entire tummy

I like pizza hot or cold
Everyone loves it, young or old

Onions, peppers, and bacon
Olives, mushrooms, and chicken

Choosing toppings is too much fun
Sharing slices also teaches fractions

On my birthday, it's a special pizza treat
With my friends, it will be fun to eat!

by Rayirth Ranjan (6 years old)
Burlington, Ontario

FIRST PRIZE

Mockingbird

MY EYES OPEN to a glaring metal abyss littered with dozens of polished steel figures.

Groaning, I sit up. My hands are pale, smooth, and uncannily white, and I am wearing nothing but boxers. Out of nowhere, my memories come rushing back, hitting me like a cargo truck.

My name is Canis, and I am a teenager with only one friend, Jack, and I have two siblings, Meredith and Jacob. Both of my parents make seven figures as founders of an artificial intelligence company.

My vision clears, and I see a metal SYNTELLECT tag engraved on the ceiling.

Strange. Must be a weird dream. A dull mechanical humming soothes me back to sleep.

WHEN I AWAKEN, it is to the sight of a lavish mansion bathed in a golden light. I get out of bed and stand on a warm, heated floor. Meredith and Jacob surround me, their eyes red and puffy. They gaze at me with a mixture of disbelief and awe, as if seeing a ghost.

“What’s going on?” I manage to croak, my own voice sounding foreign and hollow to my ears. No response. “What’s going on?” I rasp again, this time louder.

Meredith mutters softly, “You’ll never be him,” thinking I am out of earshot. Her words hang in the air, heavy with sadness and resignation.

Before I can process her statement, our parents storm into the room, their expressions a mix of concern and frustration. “Be kind to Canis. He’s still getting adjusted.”

Adjusted? I’ve been in this family my whole life.

DESPITE THE TENSION in the house, life continues on its course. I go to school like any other day, trying to ignore the curious stares and whispers that follow me wherever I go.

“Hi, Jack,” I greet my friend enthusiastically.

His face is paler than the morning fog, and his knees are trembling like brittle branches in the wind. His piercing blue eyes stare through me, as if I am transparent. He tries to grin, but it comes off as a weak smile, and he raises his hand in a futile attempt to wave. “Hey there.”

I wonder why everybody’s acting so strange, as if I have risen from the dead.

ONE EVENING, I stumble across a strange room, hidden beneath the concrete floor of my basement. Tucked into the corner is a thick computer with a SYNTELLECT tag engraved into its steel body, with the text “PROJECT 052” illuminating a terminal. The terminal’s interface is bare, only containing a few dozen names. I type my name—Canis—into the search bar. What comes up leaves me breathless: a detailed file with my name, birth date, age, weight, and another file called *memories.json*, but as I scroll down, a horrifying realization dawns on me. There’s a photo of my lifeless body on the road and a timestamp of two years ago.

Below it all is a video log. I click on it, and to my shock, my mom is in a white lab coat, holding a model of my head. “This is my most realistic model yet. If the memories are inserted correctly, I truly believe that it will be able to function like the real Canis.”

The real Canis. Without a word, I flee to my room, the heated floors feeling colder than ever. With shaking hands, I reach up and begin to tear away at my skin, the truth revealed in the cold, metallic aluminum beneath.

The word SYNTELLECT is branded across my metal frame—a testament to the artificiality of my existence, the lie that I live.

Tears blur my vision as I stare into the mirror. The reflection staring back at me is a mockery of the person I thought I was. *Canis, they call me, but who am I really? Just a machine, a soulless imitation of the person they truly mourn.*

I tuck my head into my hands and begin sobbing.

The door creaks open, and Meredith walks in, settling next to me.

by Edward Wang (13 years old)
Richmond Hill, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

Just One Bite

Bzzz. Bzzz. It was 6:00 a.m.

The buzzing of Rocco's alarm clock sliced through the muggy air of the early summer morning. In his one-bedroom apartment, crammed with his large twelve-member Italian family, Rocco proceeded with his morning routine like a comfortably rehearsed dance. For Rocco, arriving to work promptly was as vital as the air he breathed.

Despite the uncomfortable humidity, the sight of seeing his beloved family forced an endless smile. Nearing 7:00 a.m., Rocco left home and walked down Gerrard Street West with earnest eagerness, despite the daily reminder from his Nonna that "everyone hates Italians, so watch out." His steps synced with the unyielding rhythm of voices in The Ward, as he neared the turn onto Hayter Street. Walking down Hayter Street's congestion felt like a global journey, where each step unveiled a rich tapestry of diverse cultures. At the end of Hayter Street, lay his sanctuary—Mr. Wilson's bakery.

"*Ciao tutti*, and let's get to work." Unscathed by the humidity, Rocco proudly put on his chef's hat and apron. The air soon became fragrant with the scent of sweet ingredients. Rocco's specialty was the cannoli.

The bakery opened its door to the public after the punctual arrival of their boss, Mr. Wilson, at nine o'clock. Rocco adored his Canadian boss, but their relationship hadn't always been so amiable. Rocco remembered the day he first met Mr. Wilson—it was June 1, 1950, and he had just emigrated from Italy with nothing but the shirt on his back—he desperately needed a job. Rocco never did forget the scornful looks and hurtful words he was greeted with: "*We don't want Italians here*," yelled Mr. Wilson. Crushed but undeterred, Rocco recalled offering to work without pay for two weeks. But the memories of daily rejection were painful. Rocco truly believed in the power of food to bridge divides. He recalled the moment of acceptance when Mr. Wilson finally decided to try one of Rocco's cannoli. The cannoli stood as an edible emblem of cultural acceptance. It took just one bite—Rocco was hired on the spot.

Their relationship, from that moment onward, began to be rooted in mutual respect, marked by a morning tradition where Rocco served Mr. Wilson espresso, a fresh cannoli, and a heaping mound of waffles drenched in maple syrup. Mr. Wilson adored maple syrup-drenched waffles. Though not fond of this, Rocco eventually joined in on eating the waffles to seize the opportunity to get to know him. As they ate, conversations about their lives flowed easily.

After their routine breakfast that humid morning, Mr. Wilson asked, "How about you come over for dinner tonight? Twelve of us are getting together."

Excitement surged like wildfire as Rocco eagerly accepted the invitation. Rocco immediately thought to mark this occasion with a new creation dedicated to Mr. Wilson: a maple syrup-flavoured cannoli. He thought to himself, *This cannoli will have a red maple syrup mascarpone filling with the ends dipped in crushed maple syrup candied pecans—an Italo-Canadian marriage!*

It was 5:00 p.m. The second he locked up the bakery, Rocco dashed home and delicately wrapped up his dozen creative cannoli and trotted to the door.

"Rocco, where are you going?" echoed Nonna's voice, tinged with concern.

Bubbling with excitement, Rocco replied, "Mr. Wilson's!"

Nonna was stunned. "You're going where?" Nonna's words were a mix of disbelief and hurt. "How could you betray our family?" She fiercely grabbed her splintered broom and blocked the exit.

Rocco, undeterred, unwrapped Mr. Wilson's gift. "I want you to try something."

Nonna sharply looked away.

Rocco then took her hand, placed the cannoli in it, and asked, "Please try it, just one bite?"

"Why is the filling red? This is criminal! But . . . I'll try it."

As Nonna slowly contemplated the new taste, Rocco explained, "Mr. Wilson gave me a chance and learned about our culture and our struggles. Over time, he recognized our common humanity. Give *him* a chance."

There was a long uncomfortable silence between them that seemed to last an eternity. Her nod, simple yet significant, was an unspoken agreement. She slowly stepped away from the front door.

Rocco missed the dinner, but he arrived just in time for dessert. As he unveiled his maple syrup cannolis to the twelve guests, Mr. Wilson's eyes sparkled with delight. "Your thoughtfulness touches me—you know how much I love maple syrup. But why's there a cannoli missing?"

by Gregory Perri (15 years old)
North York, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

The Sound beyond Mars

PEOPLE BACK ON EARTH believe that life on the Mars colony is exciting and adventurous. But they are wrong. Mars is bleak, barren, and boring. The landscape is covered in small craters and huge basins from meteor impacts with some scattered outcrops from ancient lava flows. Powerful sandstorms can engulf the planet and cover everything in red dust rich in iron oxide.

Life on the Mars colony is about perseverance, adaptation, and hard work. Just like on Earth, kids on Mars go to school every day, but after school, everyone has assigned chores like laundry, cleaning, and food preparation.

The Mars colony is mostly underground, grey, and monotonous. There is a small gym and a recreational centre with couches and board games. My favourite chore is nurturing the crops in the hydroponic gardens beneath the artificial sunlight, which provide a splash of green beneath the monochromatic Mars landscape.

The most fun I had was not on my birthday but during the rare times that I was allowed to leave the colony to explore the Martian landscape. We put on our space suits and explored the area around the colony. We weren't allowed to go too far or stay out for too long because of radiation exposure.

Mars has wicked sandstorms, and the landscape is constantly shifting, which was when I discovered it. That week, a massive sandstorm had shifted almost half of one of the hills, and I found it when I climbed to the top. It was shaped like a rhombus and covered with strange writing. It was definitely not human. When I touched it, a strange and eerie sound filled my head. It was like music but not like any music I had ever heard before. I picked up the object and brought it back to the colony.

We weren't allowed to bring anything from the Mars terrain inside the colony because it could be contaminated and dangerous. So, I left the artefact outside. Everyone knew it was alien, but nobody believed me when I told them that it was speaking to me when I touched it. They thought I was just a crazy, imaginative kid.

As days passed, the artefact began to speak to me even when I wasn't touching it. I heard it while I was in school and doing my chores. Slowly, barely noticeable at first, the sound became louder. Not just louder but also closer. I heard the sound in my dreams at night, and it felt as if it were speaking to me. I tried to explain this to the adults, but nobody believed me.

Then, one day, the sound was so loud that I couldn't hear anything else. That day, they suddenly appeared in the Martian sky. Everyone was afraid. They sent the children deep into the underground bunker, which was meant to keep us safe from meteor strikes. All of the kids were terrified, including me.

Later, my parents told me the ship had landed close to the colony. The door opened. The aliens came out and carefully looked at each colonist. When they didn't find me, they turned around, boarded their ship, and left. That's when the sound stopped.

by Ryan Zander (11 years old)
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Fifty-Eighth Friday

EMILIA WHITLOCK WALKED the streets, nervous and observant, knowing that in approximately two hours, she was going to die. But the idea of dying didn't faze her; if Death came to her, truly came, she would accept it. And maybe slap him in the face too—because she did not like that Death was playing with her.

In the past fifty-seven days, Emilia Whitlock had died fifty-seven times. Every afternoon at exactly 5:02 p.m., something would happen, and she would die—only to wake up the next morning in bed, her phone displaying the same date and time.

Every. Single. Day.

Emilia lived and died through every possible Friday the thirteenth. On her fourth time, she had spent her entire day at home, only for it to happen again. That was when she realized that no matter what happened, or where she was, she was going to die.

A musician was playing with his guitar the way he had for the past fifty-seven Fridays, eyes closed and at home on the streets. Emilia passed him, the way she always did, passing by all the faces that were now so familiar to her.

She entered the Starbucks she had been walking to, the little bell on the door ringing to announce her presence. She waited in line, catching her reflection watching her in the window: a blonde girl, with large, honey-brown eyes, a straight face, and flushed cheeks. A face and look so simple and common that she could've been just anyone and not the cursed Emilia Whitlock.

"Next!" a voice called, and she found herself in front of the cashier, ordering a coffee. He asked for her name, and then she moved off to the side so that she could wait for the coffee.

"You!" a voice exclaimed from beside her, and somehow, she knew that it was directed towards her. She turned in her spot to see a man her age in a simple shirt and jeans staring at her with wide eyes and windswept dark hair.

She pointed to herself, confused. "Me?" she asked.

"You—" His booming voice, which had startled some other people waiting in line, lowered to a harsh whisper. "You died yesterday."

Emilia froze, her muscles tense as she stared at him with frightened eyes. This had never happened to her, in all fifty-seven Fridays that she had lived. "No," she refused. "I did not. As you can see, I am perfectly alive."

"No. You were in the paper," he insisted. "Emilia Whitlock, right? You were in a car accident. And you-you died. . . ."

"I did not. I don't know who you are, but people don't usually rise from the dead." *Except me*, she thought miserably, but she didn't dare say that out loud.

"Jeffrey?"

The man beside her looked up and smiled as the barista slid a pink drink towards him. But once he had gotten the drink, he didn't move. He stared at her, as if he were waiting for something.

"Emilia?"

She cursed. That had been what he'd been waiting for, wasn't it? She grabbed her coffee and dodged Jeffrey, wanting to walk past him and wait for 5:02 p.m., but he grabbed her arm.

"I died yesterday, too," he said in one breath. "Five hours after you did."

She turned slowly and shook her head. "No, you didn't."

"I died—and woke up in my bed," he whispered. "That-that happened to you, too, didn't it?"

"Fifty-seven times," she whispered back, swallowing. She looked past his shoulder at the clock mounted on the wall. "I'm dying in an hour."

"We need to—"

"We can't!" Emilia cried. "I've lived through every possible Friday, and it all ends the same!"

"There has to be something that can be done!" Jeffrey insisted, and then he frowned. "Wait. Did you say . . . Friday?"

She nodded.

"But—" His eyes were wide, and he took out his phone, showing the screen to her. "Today is Saturday."

"What?" A choked sound left her throat, and she stared at his screen, pulling out her phone; it was Saturday. Tears threatened to burn her eyes. "But this morning, . . . it was Friday!"

"You were released from your time loop," realized Jeffrey. "And I'm stuck in mine now. It must pass on to someone else."

A lone tear fell down her cheek as she pulled out a paper and pen, writing down her address. "Find me when you wake up tomorrow," she said determinedly. "We'll end this, you and me."

by Wafia Kamran (15 years old)
Ottawa, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Magic Outlaw

I'M INVISIBLE. I'm invisible, and there is no possible way that they can see me. I repeated those phrases inside my mind like a mantra. My heart was racing. If they could see me, then—

"Focus," I heard a voice urge me.

Surprised, I turned around trying to see who'd just spoken before realizing that the voice had been my companion, Irovanya, who was also invisible and on the run like me.

I concentrated on making sure I stayed invisible and kept moving, though I was still terrified that my magic would fail me and leave me completely visible to the police officer standing a few feet away.

With a panicky feeling in my stomach, I moved, making sure to keep myself invisible.

"I see footprints," said the police officer, speaking through a device to communicate with others.

I looked down. Sure enough, my footprints were still on the ground. I must've forgotten to erase them with my magic while I was focussing on keeping myself invisible.

I broke into a sprint. The police officer's eyes followed my footprints as I ran. They pulled out a potion from their pocket, and I instinctively knew it would make me visible.

I stopped in shock as they threw the potion. As it hit me, I turned visible.

"Put your hands up. You're under arrest for illegally using magic!" shouted the officer.

I laughed, my facial expression shifting from stunned to amused. This was an ordinary police officer who couldn't use magic. We had the upper hand.

"Oh, buddy, I'm under arrest for more than a little bit of magic usage," I said.

"Is that so? Like what? Who are you?" asked the officer.

"Plenty of things: aiding a convicted *criminal*, disobeying an officer of the law, high treason, and more. I'm Galia Forest, after all," I said.

"H-high treason?" said the officer, frightened.

"Yep! Yeah, the other day on our quest to save the world, my companion and I stormed the palace," I said, forcing a grin.

"R-right. . . W-wait, who's your companion?" asked the officer.

"My companion is—" I started.

"Me," Irovanya interrupted me, turning visible and taking my side.

"And who are you?" the officer asked.

"Irovanya Forest," Irovanya said.

"Irovanya Forest . . . like the Irovanya from the legends? . . . And wait, you both use the same last name. Are you related?" the officer asked.

"I prefer the last name of a legend to one of a family who rejected me just because I can use magic," I said.

"And yes, I am *the* Irovanya from . . . *legends*, or whatever Crystal, your little queen, wants to call me. Meaning I've both created and destroyed universes and could *easily* kick your butt, especially with another powerful magic user at my side," said Irovanya.

"R-requesting backup—" the police officer started. Then, I grabbed the device they had been using to communicate and smashed it.

"I'd rather settle this without a fight," I said.

"I-I have a weapon!" they said, pulling one out.

"And we have magic," said Irovanya.

The weapon disappeared from the officer's hands and reappeared in hers. I drew a bow and arrow from thin air, ready to fight if necessary.

"You have two options now. You can either let us go so we can go save the world and potentially be punished by your boss. Or you can *try* to stop us and, if you don't succeed, end up injured, and if you *do* succeed, be the reason the world ends. I'd rather not hurt an *innocent* person, but I *will* if that's what it takes to save the world. Consider your options wisely," I said, hoping they wouldn't choose violence.

"G-go!" they said after a pause. I gave them a sympathetic look.

"Thank you. You've made a good choice," I said.

I was about to turn invisible again when Irovanya stopped me.

"I honour those who don't choose violence. What's your name?" she asked the police officer.

I looked at her, surprised. I couldn't remember her ever doing this before.

"Xander Firestone," they answered.

"Xander Firestone, is there a *nonviolent* request we can grant you before we leave?" asked Irovanya.

Xander considered this. "Could I come with you two?" they asked.

"But you're a police officer," I said.

"I'd rather not be if I get to save the world," Xander replied.

“All right,” I said, shrugging. Irovanya gave me a look. “I’ll cover them,” I said.
“Fine,” she relented.
So, we continued on our quest to save the world.

by Naomi Iskra (14 years old)
Halifax, Nova Scotia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Assignmentitis

IN THE LITTLE TOWN of Doodleville, there lived a boy named Charlie Wiggins. Charlie was a typical third grader with a rather peculiar problem: he was allergic to homework.

It all started on a Monday afternoon. Mrs. Green, Charlie's teacher, handed out worksheets with simple math problems. As soon as Charlie saw the paper, his nose started to twitch.

"Uh-oh," he muttered, his voice developing a familiar squeak.

Mrs. Green noticed from across the room. "Charlie, dear, is everything alright?" she asked.

Charlie held up the worksheet, his face starting to flush pink. "I don't think so, Mrs. Green," he sniffled. "Every time I see homework, I get . . . this weird feeling."

A few giggles slipped out from a few classmates, but Mrs. Green quickly shushed them with a gentle wave of her hand. "Let's hear you out, Charlie," she encouraged.

Charlie, his voice barely a whisper now, mumbled, "My nose itches, and I sneeze a lot. Like, a LOT. And sometimes my face gets all puffy and red!"

The class erupted in laughter again. Mrs. Green, however, couldn't help but smile. Charlie's vivid descriptions always painted a picture. "An allergy to homework, huh?" Mrs. Green said, a hint of amusement in her voice. "That's a new one for me, Charlie."

Charlie's shoulders slumped. "Yeah, I know. My parents don't believe me either."

"Well, how about we make a deal?" Mrs. Green suggested, her eyes twinkling. "Show me what happens when you try to do the homework."

Charlie hesitated then slowly pulled out a pencil. As he began to approach the worksheet, a small sneeze escaped his nose. He rubbed his itchy eyes and tried again. But another sneeze, bigger this time, wracked his body. His face flushed red, and his eyes watered.

"See!" Charlie exclaimed, his voice thick with congestion. "It's happening again!"

Mrs. Green observed him carefully, her brow furrowed in concern. This wasn't typical classroom theatrics. Charlie's discomfort seemed genuine. "Alright, Charlie," she said, her voice gentle. "Let's see if we can figure something else out."

Charlie's parents, bewildered by their son's strange reaction, took him to see Dr. Thompson, the local pediatrician.

"So, you say homework makes you break out in hives?" Dr. Thompson boomed, examining Charlie with a stethoscope and a brightly coloured rubber chicken.

Charlie, still sniffling slightly, nodded vigorously. "It's awful, Dr. Thompson! I can climb the tallest tree on the playground, no problem. But homework? Forget about it!"

"Charlie, you are allergic to homework. It's a rare condition known as 'assignmentitis.' There's no cure, but the symptoms only appear when you do homework."

Charlie's parents were flabbergasted. How could their son, who could handle any dare on the playground, be allergic to something as harmless as homework?

Back at school, Mrs. Green was determined to find a way to help Charlie. She was known for her creative solutions, like the time she used dance-offs to teach multiplication. She pondered her options and finally had a light-bulb moment. "Charlie, why don't you show what you've learned in a way that won't make you break out in hives?"

Charlie thought about it. "What if I, um, made comics instead of doing math problems?"

And from that day on, Charlie became The Mathinator, a superhero who used his mathematical powers to solve crimes in Doodleville. His comic strips featured villains like Dr. Decimals, who tried to confuse the townsfolk with tricky math problems. The Mathinator always saved the day with his quick calculations and witty remarks.

Charlie's comics were a hit. His classmates eagerly awaited the next instalment of his adventures. The other kids in the class got in on the fun too. There was Emma, who illustrated Charlie's stories, and Sam, who wrote theme songs for each comic.

Charlie's allergy symptoms disappeared when he worked on his comics. He was no longer stressed because he was having fun and learning in a way that made sense to him. The whole school got involved, turning homework into a series of creative projects.

Years passed, and the legend of The Mathinator grew. Charlie's comic strips became famous, and he was invited to speak at schools across the country about his unique approach to learning. His allergy to homework was never cured, but it didn't matter. Charlie had found his superpower—creativity. And so, the boy allergic to homework became a celebrated comic artist, proving that sometimes the best solutions come from thinking outside the pencil case.

by Samuel Yunxuan Yao (13 years old)
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Tigers

TIGERS—RESEARCH PROJECT, TERM 1

I know what you're thinking. How is a ten-year-old girl from the heart of boring Toronto supposed to do a research project on tigers? Well, I actually have one in my house!

My mom.

TYPE: Chinese

CHARACTERISTICS: Protective, competitive

TYPICAL: Yes

AGE: [confidential]

OBSERVATIONS: Tiger moms are quite common. They live in metal and brick jungles called *houses* or *apartments* in urban habitats. The specimen I'm studying has a townhouse. *Note:* tiger moms are never satisfied with the size of their house, claiming that there is too much clutter inside.

I creep down the hallway at 6:00 a.m., careful not to wake the tiger mom's snoring mate. I see a light flicker downstairs and hear the coffee machine rumbling. Tiger mothers are very early risers, it seems.

The specimen takes a sip from her mug of the urban jungle's version of water called "coffee." Tiger moms sustain themselves on this bitter midnight-hued elixir as well as a healthy number of leaves, wild fruit from the neighbourhood grocer, and the seeds of certain pods called "Lays," "Nutrigrain," and "Gummies—0% Sugar!" However, this is apparently the only way they can produce enough energy to organize, maintain, and carry out their offspring's crazy schedules, while tracking its progress, smoothing out difficulties, and coordinating extracurriculars—and still making sure it is fed, happy, and well rested.

The tiger mom finds me and demands whether I've brushed my teeth or changed into clothes for the day. When she finds out that I haven't, she is shocked.

"Are you crazy? What have you been doing? Two minutes and you have to be back. There's a lot to do. Well? Why aren't you moving? Go! Go!" she snaps, waving her paw angrily.

Tiger mothers talk quickly, and it is hard to determine whether one of their questions is rhetorical. Guessing wrong has consequences consisting of indecipherable roaring at over 300 decibels.

After I'm changed and my teeth are clean, I rush downstairs. The tiger mother's mate is awake. Glancing over my shoulder and seeing my notes, he stifles his laughter. "Better not show that to her!" he winks.

The tiger mom comments on how supposedly yellow my teeth are and how bad my breath smells as we eat breakfast together.

Half an hour later, my father finally comes down to complaints from my mother; however, she has a point—she *always* has a point. Even though she's been shown in an unreasonable light, it comes from love. She wants her offspring to succeed and be better than all of its peers, which she reminds her child (while still supporting her). These are some of the biggest characteristics of a tiger mother: strictly competitive, apt to use double standards, and the very definition of tough love.

We finally head out. During swimming class, some competitive tigers have charged yet painfully polite conversations outside the change rooms, as is their standard; we then go to lunch, which we can't decide on. In the end, the tiger mother agrees to her mate's suggestions with an exaggerated sigh to signify her sacrifice. Allegedly, the coffee in the morning wasn't strong enough and she needed more: this species requires at least five cups daily.

The day is busy, but the tiger mother navigates it well until piano practice. Common to most Chinese tiger mothers, piano seems essential. High expectations and strenuous two-hour-long sessions are associated with the task in every household. I know complaining is fruitless, so I drag myself over and make my way through my pieces, constantly reminded of what to do and what not to do by my attentive tiger mom. I'm lucky to have her, though—she goes to every class and writes notes, reciting them at home. Nevertheless, I'm extraordinarily glad and tired when it's done.

The day was long. I scramble into bed and bid my mother goodnight. She finally has "me time"; I've gotten through the day without more than two scoldings. We are relieved, but we will have to repeat everything tomorrow—with school and homework.

FINAL OBSERVATION: I've learned much from my research. Tiger moms aren't all bad! They are simply a breed of extremely capable, extremely stressed beings who are not as perfect as they feel they should be. So, if you have a tiger mom, always appreciate her and all she does. Give her a lick, for her roars often go unappreciated and her fierceness comes from love. Thank you, tiger moms!

by Evalyn Ho (12 years old)
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Tea Leaves

SWIRLING AROUND the greenish water, the dark-green crinkled leaves circled around endlessly.

As I watched, I pondered. The leaves in the cup swirled around, and I wondered if our lives as humans were the same, swirling around the endless loop of life. We cannot avoid it, and despite that, we still try to break free, but just like tea leaves, we still keep spinning around the endless loop.

I was overthinking the way I always do. I'm the manager of a tiny teashop in the middle of a hustle-bustle city, not a philosopher. I flipped the baby-blue OPEN sign to CLOSED, a procedure I repeated every single day.

As I walked along the sidewalks of the streets, I reminded myself of how tired I was and how much I wanted to sleep.

I entered my ancient apartment building and collapsed onto the prehistoric sofa. I forced the last bit of my energy into flimsily grabbing the remote from my cedarwood coffee table to turn on the news. Sinking deeper into the couch, I fell asleep.

I WOKE UP to the sight of my light-beige ceiling, and I rolled myself off the couch. I groaned as I stood up and did some sort of a zombie shuffle to the bathroom.

A few minutes later, I was walking towards my store.

Around three quarters of the way there, I noticed a clump of something light brown. I bent over to inspect it, and that's when I saw the beak, shining orange on its light-brown body. I walked towards the feathery creature and inspected it with a stick I found lying on the ground.

After bringing it back to my shop with a handkerchief, I examined the bird with care. Its wing had been injured, and the bird was shivering despite the hot summer weather. As I lay some tissues inside a shoe box, I grew deeply saddened, my pity for the bird growing. I put a bag of peanuts and a bottle cap filled with water into the box. I then closed the lid and put it into a corner of the storage room.

OVER THE SPAN of the next week, I continuously checked on the bird and gave it food and water. After around ten (or so) days, the bird's wing had almost completely healed and was starting to regain its ability to fly. Around two days later, I decided that the next morning I would release the bird into the busy city.

After serving the last customer, I walked up to the door to flip the sign, closing the store for the day and letting me get some sacred rest. I wondered if everything I had done for the bird was . . . just a waste of time. *Had I just disrupted the food chain? Was that bird meant to be . . . food?* I shook off these thoughts, though some still lingered in my brain, echoing through my head.

Today, I dreamed that I was the bird, helplessly lying down on the hot pavement. I dreamed that an owner of some random tea shop had saved me from being on some animal's dinner plate, and from this dream, I knew that I had done the right thing.

AFTER I ARRIVED at work this morning, I hadn't done my usual routine of flipping the sign and all of that. I headed towards the storage room and picked up an old shoe box from a dusty, dark corner. I brought this box across the street, away from the morning rush hour and into the city park. I sat the box down on a bench and opened it. As it flew out of the box and high into the trees, I smiled.

This small bird, no bigger than one of my teapots, had made me realize the joy in life, and from that day on, instead of a constant frown on my expressionless face, I had a smile.

by Timo Zhang (11 years old)
Whitby, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Keeper of the Last Tree

ONCE UPON A TIME, in a dusty barren land cast among historic ruins, there stood a single oak tree. But this land had not always been this way. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

Long ago, the land was a beautiful valley with an abundance of lush forest and wildlife. The trees grew tall, the animals—well, they grew wide, and life was peaceful. That is, until the loggers came. The forests were cut down for their wood. The animals were caged and shipped away. The valley was destroyed, and all that remained was a single oak tree. Its roots gripped tightly onto the land, holding on to the fond memories of times before.

An old, wise woman named Jade lived in a small cabin beside the oak tree. Everyone knew her as The Keeper of the Last Tree. Jade nurtured the tree by giving it water and keeping the soil healthy with compost that she made from leftover fruit and dead leaves and branches. Jade loved the oak tree, but the people in the town wanted to cut it down for more space. They didn't like living in their small, cramped houses and longed for bigger houses and paved roads; however, the oak tree stood in the way of their construction.

One evening, the mayor, Kyran, along with a mob of townsfolk, came to Jade's house to warn her that the town's future was at risk. "The town is unhappy. If we cut down this tree, you could help everyone and they would greatly admire you," he said.

But Jade didn't care for fame. "This tree is so important. If we cut it down, our history will be left behind."

Kyran's face grew red. "It is just a tree and will forever be just a tree. We should care more about what's going to happen in the future than what has already happened. We must help our people!"

Jade thought for a moment and then said, "Yes, of course, we should, but sometimes we need to think about the long-term consequences. If we cut down this tree, it might help us now, but in the end, what will we lose?"

Suddenly, dark clouds emerged, and a storm gathered overhead. Thunder roared and shook the ground, while the people demanded shelter.

"Everyone, under the tree!" Jade announced. The people mumbled in disagreement, but soon, they headed under the protective canopy of the tree. Even amid the storm's fury, the tree stood tall, its branches and leaves thriving in the rain.

Kyran began to consider what Jade had said. He had been so focused on the future that he hadn't even taken a second to think about the present. He realized that progress didn't have to come at the cost of the past. There was always a way to balance both the past and future.

After waiting under the tree for what seemed like hours, the storm finally ended, leaving the tree standing strong without a hint of defeat.

The sun peeked out from the clouds, and a beautiful rainbow crossed the sky. The tree sprouted new seeds, and its leaves glistened in the sunlight. It shone a newfound presence, and the townsfolk began to realize the importance of the oak tree.

A few days later, the loggers and construction workers arrived; just months ago, a decision was made to call for construction—to cut down the tree and expand the town. But just as they raised the axe, the mayor, Kyran, along with a mob of townsfolk, came just in time to protect the tree.

The oak tree was so important to their past, and they would let it stand strong for many years to come.

And so, as time passed, the town always remembered what Jade, The Keeper of the Last Tree, taught them. The valley became a place where people lived with nature, respected the past, and looked forward to the future.

by Cameron Fan (10 years old)
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Heir of The Light

My name is Jason Kashpov. This story of what changed my life all started when I was about to go to Los Angeles. I was grieving after my mom's funeral. So, I was looking forward to this trip.

After the three-hour first-class flight, I went to the dealer to buy a car. Out of nowhere, a gigantic robot was tearing down everything in its path! I went mad for a second, and the screaming in the streets rattled me, so I hit the gas. My car went crashing into a warehouse that appeared out of nowhere! I leapt out of the car. The floor holographically shimmered open, and I went into another world.

I fell on a tree and went crashing through a roof. As all the moving stopped, my body and mind gave out.

After a while, I heard, "Hey, wake up!" from a teenager my age. "My name is Alcazer."

I woke up, and Alcazer led me into the village, where fantasy lived. Everything was so magical, the people seemed to have some kind of power.

"Magical, isn't it?" said Alcazer. "What is your name?"

"I am Jason Kashpov," I told him.

"Heir of Vano Kashpov?" Alcazer asked, as he raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah," I said, as people around were staring at me.

After a while, Alcazer said seriously to me, "If that's true, you have to pack your bags."

I asked Alcazer what was going on, and he told me the story.

My great-grandfather Vano Kashpov, known as The Light, was a dead enemy with Razorflame, the evil of all. He had weakened Razorflame—but not completely. He knew that Razorflame would come back. So, my great-grandfather Vano forged out a lighting sword for me. The sword was gifted by the big three, which were Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. Vano, aka The Light, said that after four generations, his heir, which is me, would use that sword to defeat Razorflame once and for all. But he hid the sword in a cave that was far away. So, I had to get the sword from somewhere faraway. Luckily, Vano left a map for me.

Alcazer and I set off.

After a long walk, a trapdoor on the ground opened, and we went falling right in.

After we were asleep for a few hours, a voice woke us up. "Hey, wake up and leave before they come back," said a servant with the name tag Dave on it. I felt grateful, but there was no time to thank him, so I got up and ran, with Alcazer behind me. A bunch of rock giants were chasing us, and Dave tried to help by making stalactites fall and stop the rock giants. We trembled, and then a bolt of red light shot both of us, and down, down we fell. . . .

We eventually rolled to a stop in front of a crystal mirror. Then, I couldn't believe my eyes. Alcazer and I both looked like thirteen-year-olds. Somehow, we hadn't lost a bit of smartness. I turned around, and I saw a ghost! I screamed and so did Alcazer. Even Dave seemed surprised; however, Razorflame and Mystique, a helper of Razorflame, seemed as if they were about to explode. Then, the ghost turned around. It was the ghost of Vano Kashpov! Alcazer, who was calmer now, and I followed Vano.

I saw a tower of gold coins and chests building up to the sword that had a dragon symbol on it. I grabbed the sword, and then the cave collapsed. I pointed the sword tip upwards, then . . . *kaboom!* The giants came through, and I swung the sword. A flash of light appeared. I looked down at my feet, only they were claws. I had transformed into a dragon! I knocked out the giant.

Mystique was supposed to teleport and seize me, but Dave wrestled her to the ground and then used some ropes to tie her up. Razorflame charged with fire at me, and I attacked with full lightning power. Then, another *kaboom* erupted, and the giants started evaporating.

Mystique was captured and executed. Dave got what he always wanted to have: freedom. Vano was still in my blood, and both Alcazer and I got a reward of a chest of gold. We used that to build a castle and kept some, so it looked like a time to celebrate. Razorflame was gone forever—or was he?

by Luke Xu (10 years old)
Oakville, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Girl Who Was Easily Disgusted

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a girl who was very easily disgusted. Her name was Quinn. Every time someone ate off their desk at school, she nearly vomited. Every time somebody at school ate off the floor—well, let's just say that's a mess for another day.

One day at school, Quinn and her best friend, Alyssa, were eating lunch in the cafeteria. Alyssa accidentally dropped a cracker on the table and then ate it. So, Quinn said, "Ew! Why did you do that? That's gross! You know I'm a germophobe!"

Alyssa sighed. "So? It's not as if you're eating it!"

"Still! It's disgusting to watch and think about you doing that!"

Alyssa was tired of Quinn complaining about everything anyone did. She hated it when she complained about anything. It was all "I'm this and I'm that!" Alyssa wanted to stand up to her, so she said, "Stop it! I'm tired of you criticizing my every move! It's time I stand up for myself." She stood up, "If you're going to think it's gross, keep it to yourself!"

Quinn was shocked to hear her best friend speaking to her like that. "What? Why are you being so mean? I'm just scared of getting sick," she said, her voice taking on a whiny tone. "So, leave me alone." She stood up too. "Leave me alone where I can eat in peace! I-I'm unfriending you on Facebook!" She nearly shouted the last word. All eyes were on them, and the cafeteria was dead silent—so silent you could hear a fly burp. She should have been embarrassed but wasn't. At least, not until Alyssa sadly trudged off, trying to find an empty table. They had been friends since preschool. They were like sisters, and now, their first fight. . . .

EACH CLASS FELT like two hours. Quinn nearly slept through biology and got detention. Canada was going through a heatwave.

Finally, it was lunch. Quinn tried to talk to Alyssa, but she tried to act as if she didn't see her. A few minutes later, Quinn noticed Alyssa eating her tuna casserole on the table to her left. *I don't think she likes it*, Quinn thought to herself. *We never really liked the lunchroom food, anyway*. Quinn chuckled to herself as Alyssa made faces. She hadn't noticed how much she missed her bestie until then. Then, she did something without even thinking about. She ran over with her food to Alyssa's table. For a second, Alyssa looked excited to see someone sitting with her. But she must have good eyesight because, barely looking up from her food, she mumbled, "Oh. It's you."

"Yup. Just me."

"What do you want?" Alyssa asked with a hint of attitude in her voice.

"To say I'm sorry," Quinn declared.

"For what?" Alyssa asked.

"I'm sorry. For everything. I'm sorry for being bossy, unkind, and rude. I'm sorry for criticizing what you do. You're my best friend—no, my BFFAE (Best Friend Forever and Ever). So, hug it out?"

"Only on one condition," said Alyssa.

Uh-oh, Quinn thought. *She's gonna make me hand over my Super Ultimate Platinum Rainbo Soda card! It's ultra rare! I had to wait in line for seven hours and pay one million dollars!*

"Re-friend me on Facebook!" said Alyssa.

Quinn couldn't help but . . . burst out laughing! Through snorts and giggles, she said, "I didn't unfriend you on [snort] Facebook! I don't even have Facebook!"

"Oh," Alyssa said, her cheeks going red. "Right."

"So, we good?"

"We good."

Alyssa went in for a hug, but Quinn said, "Ew! No touchy touchy!" She hesitated, ". . . Ah, whatever?"

They hugged.

IN THE END, Alyssa tried to be cleaner, and Quinn tried to be dirtier. That is until she got the flu.

by Quynh Ly Capitano (9 years old)
Waterloo, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Bell Walker and the Lost Gem

MY NAME IS BELL WALKER. I live in a small house that used to be owned by a princess named Ameera who disappeared long ago. My friends Kelsey and Robin came over to my house for a sleepover. We ate pizza and went into the basement to watch TV. Then, it was finally time to sleep.

I woke up in the middle of the night because I was thirsty. Taking Kelsey and Robin with me, I went downstairs. Kelsey, who was staring out the window, asked, "Why is your shed door open?"

"Huh? I remember my dad closing it yesterday?" Curiosity swarmed through us. We looked at one another thinking the same thing.

"Should we?" Robin said.

"I don't know," Kelsey replied.

"Let's do it anyway," I concluded. We quickly put on our shoes and ran out the back door.

I beckoned for everyone to be quiet. We heard footsteps. Was it Dad? Mom? Then, we saw a figure in black looking right at us. The figure turned and ran as we screamed. Kelsey and I turned to run back into the house, but Robin stayed put. "Come on!" we yelled.

"Wait. What was he looking for?" We shrugged, but she walked into the shed. Robin gasped, and we ran into the shed to see what she was looking at.

There was a halo of green light around it, and it shone in the dark. It was a gem! Beside it there was a scroll that looked like a map. I opened it and saw that at the top it read, "Ameera A.F." Was the gem hers? There was a map underneath with an X over somewhere called Clamberville. At the bottom were the words "Magic is what you need. It is real." We exchanged puzzled glances.

"Magic is real . . . Clamberville . . . gem . . . Princess Ameera . . . Hmm," I muttered. "I think I got it! We have to go to this Clamberville place to return the gem with magic!"

Kelsey and Robin both gave me a quizzical look.

"Magic is real?" Kelsey asked. I nodded enthusiastically.

Just then, a blue-green wispy ball sped by and exploded into the words "Magic is real."

"Now do you believe me?" I asked as Robin and Kelsey watched it in awe.

They smiled. "Sure, but how are we supposed to use—?" Robin asked.

Before she even finished her sentence, another wispy ball, which was golden this time, exploded into three different-coloured balls that went on our heads and dissolved into our hair.

"What now?" Robin said.

I opened the map, and the ball that went inside me came out and brightened up the shed! "Guys, I think we tell them what to do and they do it!" I grinned.

"That means we can go to Clamberville!" Kelsey said.

And before we knew it, we were being whirled around in a tornado, teleporting.

We whirled and whirled until landing on something that felt like a soft carpet. "Are we in Clamberville?" Kelsey asked.

I looked at the map. "Sure looks like it," I said.

When I opened the scroll, the map transformed into a picture of someone named Larry A.F.

"Isn't that Princess Ameera's cousin?" I asked.

Kelsey nodded, while Robin went up to a nearby goblin that had a badge on his shirt showing his name was Rick the Librarian. We asked him to take us to Larry. Rick was kind enough to do so, and we teleported.

Rick gestured to a man sitting near a fountain. He seemed to be waiting for us. "He must be the key to figuring this puzzle out!" Kelsey exclaimed. I took the gem out of my pocket and passed it to Larry, who took it eagerly.

Immediately, the green glow became brighter. The light rays swirled around the cell and formed into the shape of a person. A girl with a blue-green dress flowing to the ground appeared. A gold crown adorned her head. It was Princess Ameera!

"You guys read my note and found the gem!" she exclaimed. Then, she explained that Larry was wrongfully accused of making her disappear. The cousins left to rule Clamberville, and we were once again whirled away.

We were still in my backyard as if we had never left. My friends and I smiled. It was a sleepover we would never forget.

by Faiza Mahmood (8 years old)
Maple, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Cat That Can't Climb

IN A SUNNY BACKYARD, there was a white cat named Black Cat, and her friend, a black cat named White Cat. Every day, White Cat climbed the fence and visited her friends, but Black Cat always got left behind because he could not even climb the fence or the window of a house.

One day, Black Cat walked up to White Cat, and they started to talk about stuff—funny, funny stuff.

“Hi, White Cat. Can you teach me how to climb?”

“Yes. I can teach you how to climb. First, put your paw on the fence and then switch from one to another. Here is a tip: do not look down.”

So, Black Cat tried, and on the first try, he got halfway up, but then he looked down! “Ahhh! Sorry! I looked down because I thought I should look down to see how far I had climbed, but I lost my grip, and I fell on my back, and now it hurts so much! I’m going to sleep. Good night.”

The next day . . . “Good morning. How are you feeling, White Cat?”

“I’m good. How are you, Black Cat?”

“I am good.”

“Good, because I am going to continue teaching you how to climb!”

So, Black Cat tried again. This time, he got over, but he almost did not make it!

“Now I can visit my friends! Thank you, White Cat!”

by Sofia Huskovic (7 years old)

Vaughan, Ontario