

A Candle of Life

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1st Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

The air was sharp as snow blew and buffeted the dark, shallow cave in the side of a hill by the winter moon. The hill was rough and coarse, with a dark opening that was like the mouth of an animal waiting to crunch down on its prey. Yet through a small crevice a faint light protruded from the darkness around it. A feeble candle burning almost on its last thread shone from inside. Wax bubbled as it trickled little by little down the sides of the vanishing candle, escaping from the hot flame that rested on the wick. The fire swirled and danced as it burned on with the desire to live and be free. Warmth emanated from it, as a small orange glow shimmered from a coal black wick. This candle is a beacon of hope for the lost, a scrap of food for the hungry, warmth in extreme cold.

The candle lit the small, desolate cave, making it completely visible. It was bare and dirty, with ice forming on the damp walls. There were no comfortable amenities. It was completely empty, yet through all this emptiness the candle gave life and filled the chamber with radiance.

Outside, snow beat silently against the ground, cruelly blanketing the pines and browned grass. An unconfirmed howling that would send chills to one's spine pierced the air in the distance: it could be a coyote or the blustery weather.

An old man, who lived his years without regret, shivered in the cold, holding his treasure of life and heat close to his frostbitten body. He was stranded in the harsh wilderness, lost in a frozen world of hatred and frost, astray in a tundra in the northernmost parts of the world. The man had a long, shaggy beard, a weather worn face with deep wrinkles, but a naturally cheery countenance that would make anyone happy. He wore torn clothes, a dirty over-shirt and leather

pants that stretched on his thinning legs. Smiling, he felt the candle by his side. Though the wick burned weak, the fire in his heart raged on. His cold, ice-strewn beard warmed and melted. His chapped and freezing cheeks filled with life again.

The man tried to enjoy his last moments, but the candle's time was limited, and it limited his life. His vision and hearing suddenly enhanced and he felt like he did when the blood of youth flowed strong in his veins. He was strong with a powerful heart, and sounds of laughter rang and echoed through his head. He smiled as memories of his past flashed in his mind. His grandchildren were holding onto his hands while the warmth of the sun beat down upon them. They were laughing and he set his youngest granddaughter upon his shoulders. The green grass shone with the yellow light of the sun beating against it. The breeze was cool and it refreshed his lungs with every rejuvenating breath. These thoughts warmed his heart even more. But then his mind went back to how he stepped into the horse-drawn carriage that would change what little remained of his life, and it sent him back to reality. He was sitting with that candle in his hands in the cold, dark cave again.

Finally, the candle started to flicker its last moments, and silence enveloped the night; even the wind seemed to halt for a moment in time. Tears appeared in the old man's eyes as he realized what was coming. As the light disappeared the old man saw his final breath come from his mouth and vanish before his eyes, and the fiery glow in his heart went out.