

*2016 West Virginia  
Young Writers Contest  
Anthology*



## *Introduction*

We proudly present the anthology of the 2016 West Virginia Young Writers contest. It showcases the stories of eighteen students who won first place in their counties in their grade level divisions and then placed at the state level. These young writers represent counties from all around the state. Included are the state winners of first, second, and third place in each grade level category.

The West Virginia Young Writers Contest has honored excellent writing by our state's students in grades one through twelve for over 30 years. The contest is an initiative of West Virginia's National Writing Projects and is supported by the West Virginia Department of Education. University of Charleston graciously hosts Young Writers Day each year. The 2016 contest was directed by Dr. Barbara O'Byrne, Central West Virginia Writing Project, with assistance from the West Virginia Department of Education. A tireless Steering Committee contributed invaluable support and advice.

*West Virginia Young Writers Contest and Young Writers Day* are initiatives of the Central West Virginia Writing Project whose mission is to improve the teaching of writing and learning in West Virginia schools. To learn more about Writing Project professional development programs, visit the website listed below.

Central WV Writing Project:  
NWP at WVU:

[www.marshall.edu/cwvwp](http://www.marshall.edu/cwvwp)  
[nwp.wvu.edu](http://nwp.wvu.edu)

### **Sponsors**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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Judges are teachers associated with National Writing Project sites in West Virginia.

### **Editor of the 2016 WV Young Writers Anthology**

Barbara Norvell

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# *A Changed Life*

Savannah Lilly

Gilbert Elementary School, Mingo County

Teacher: Barbara Grimmert

1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

I used to live in Logan, but things changed. My dad had passed away, so I lived with my mom, my little sister, my baby brother, and my papaw. My life was difficult. My mom had problems, so I had to take care of my sister and baby brother by myself most of the time. Things were hard and I didn't get to go to school most of the time. I had to try to make sure my sister and brother were okay.

One night, after we had been having a real hard time for a while, someone knocked at the door and said, "Go find you some clothes. You are coming with us." We were scared at first. We went to NECCO where a lady came and took us home. We were with her for a little while, but she had a death in her family, so we had to leave. We were at the second house for just a little time. Then on December 7, 2014 we went to the office at NECCO and Myra and Eugene Lilly came to meet us. They said they wanted us to come to their house. My baby brother, though, got placed with someone who couldn't take us all. We were nervous at first. We hadn't been with a family like this before. I was used to being in charge, so it was hard to act like any other 6 year old. We weren't used to rules and having to pick up after ourselves. But we started to learn rules and started being a part of a real family. I love my family. My dad loves taking us on 4 – wheeler rides and vacations to Tennessee and North Carolina. He takes us fishing and he has taken me hunting this year. My mom takes me shopping, she takes us to church, and she likes to come and read to my class. I also got a new sister in my family. At first, I was afraid I would have to take care of someone else, but she helps me a lot. My life

had a rough start, but on July 17, 2015 I got adopted into the Lilly family. I have a big family now, and I get to be a normal little girl.

# *Brothers*

Tyler Kincaid

Hope Elementary School, Fayette County

Teacher: Tammy Darnell

2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

On May 2, 2010, God gave me a little brother named Mason. He liked to laugh and play. He loved everybody and everybody loved him. Even though my brother was special needs, he always figured out how to have fun. One of the things he liked to do the most was swimming with me and mom. He always loved playing at Pawpaw's.

I helped take care of Mason. I helped Mom by fixing Mason's bottles. Mason's favorite thing to drink was orange water. Mason had to do a lot of therapy to make him stronger. I helped by sitting him up and helping him play with his toys. I also helped him by holding his feeding tube while Mom poured his special milk into it. When we went somewhere I pushed Mason in his wheelchair. I loved helping take care of my little brother. Mason had epilepsy. That means that he had seizures. Mason could not walk or talk. But he could communicate by laughing and crying. We knew that he was happy when he laughed and was sad or mad when he cried. Whenever he clicked his tongue that meant he was trying to talk.

Even when he could not walk, he could still get where he wanted to go by rolling. Mom and Dad would take Mason to the hospital. It was in Ohio and was called Cincinnati Children's Hospital. I went a few times and we went to the zoo. Mason and I liked seeing all the animals. Mason liked getting splashed by the animals.

On March 20, 2015, my brother passed away. He is now my angel. I miss him every day and all the fun times we had together. I am happy that I had almost five years with him. I know he watches over me.

# *Three Wishes for You and Me*

Madalyn Haddix

Flemington Elementary School, Taylor County

Teacher: Kathleen Jones

3<sup>rd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

Clang! A fairy godmother glided into my chimney and out through the fireplace. The fairy godmother said, “My name is Thea.” She had a disco wand, butterfly earrings, glass slippers, and wore a sparkly purple dress. She said that she was going to grant me three wishes for being a very helpful and special little girl. I liked her already on that day!

My most important wish is to have a cure for cancer. A young boy named Jack was diagnosed with Neuroblastoma cancer when he was two. On Christmas Eve he was hurting. The doctors told him he had cancer in his left kidney. When he was in the hospital he was eating very little. He is fighting hard to get better! JACK STRONG!

Secondly, I wish to go see my grandpa in Heaven! I believe I was five when he passed away. My mom told me he used to tell me old-fashioned stories about when he was a youngster. Sometimes I look at old photographs so I can remember him. We will be together again when I am in Heaven.

For my concluding wish, I want my hermit crab to come back to life. Her name was Butterfly and lived about two years. I named her Butterfly because her shell had a purple and blue butterfly on it. She was the best hermit crab I had in my whole entire life!

After I made my wishes, it made me feel like helping more people in need. Hopefully, I will get to see Grandpa in Heaven, there will be a cure for cancer, and Butterfly will come back to life. If this happens I’d be happier than a puppy chewing on a hambone!

# *The Biggest Game of My Life*

Turner Garretson

Arnoldsburg School, Calhoun County

Teacher: Dana Ferrell

1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

WVU vs. Kansas was the biggest game since 1983 when WVU played UNLV. They were the last number one team to play at the Coliseum. It was a good matchup because WVU was ranked number seven and Kansas was ranked number one. I got to go. It was sold out and it was \$60.00 per ticket. That's how you can tell it was a great game.

It was 4:15 PM and we're a mile from the Coliseum. The traffic was horrible because of the awful snow. There was road work ahead and we had been traveling in a blizzard. We only moved an inch in five minutes. I got tired of waiting and I went to sleep. I was going to be heartbroken if we didn't make it.

It was 6:30 and the game started at 7:00. My dad was mad; he wanted to get there more than I did. So he moved to the other lane that we didn't realize you could use. Then everybody followed us. Thankfully, we made it.

They started the game. West Virginia started out with a five point lead. The student section was going crazy. West Virginia had the lead for the whole first half. In the second half Kansas caught up and at one point they had a three point lead. Then, later on in the game there's two minutes left and we know we're going to win because West Virginia not only caught up but we had a ten point lead. My dad took me to storm the court. Five, four, three, two, one, the game is over!

WVU player Jonathan Holton got up on the commentator's table and my dad and I along with everyone else stormed the court. Then everyone started

singing Country Roads. Jonathan Holton looked at me and said, “Come up here.” Then he held me up in the air. He was sweaty and slippery and almost dropped me! It felt amazing to be held up in the air by a player who had helped beat the number one team. The college students were taking pictures of me and yelling and screaming in excitement. I never thought my night would end with such excitement.

The next day everyone was sending my mom and dad messages on Facebook and said they had saw me on ESPN. I was on the internet, TV, and in the newspapers. I was in the biggest newspaper in West Virginia, the Charleston Gazette. Jonathan Holton told the newspaper that when he lifted me up, it was like holding Simba from The Lion King out to the crowd. I hope that the circle of life will continue and I will one day play for my favorite team, the West Virginia Mountaineers. At school, everybody was telling me that they saw me on the news. I think I have a new favorite player.

# *The Science Fair*

Hayden Curfman

Wirt County Primary Center, Wirt County

Teacher: Sarah Carpenter

2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

Well, it's time for the science fair at my school. Everyone thinks they stink, that is except for me. I love the school science fair. I build projects every year. This year I built a shrink ray. I was looking at it because there was a malfunction when I went to test it in the science lab. I looked down the barrel. Suddenly, the shrink ray fired and the ray hit me, shrinking me down to the size of a small rat.

Now I had to find a way to reverse the shrink rays effects. I was looking at my surroundings just so I could figure out where in the science lab I was. Then I heard a large squeaking noise. I turned around and saw a small army of mice heading towards me. I stood my ground, and when they got closer, I put my hands up. The biggest mouse in the army was in front. "I, am the Mouse King!" he said with as much authority as he could. "You are our prisoner now come with me, or be fed to the termites!" Seeing no other available options, I went with them.

They took me to a small hole in the wall I never knew was there before. "Get in there!" exclaimed the king. I went in. I was amazed at what I saw. It was a whole kingdom, covered in lights and small street vendors trying to sell things like Toe Nail Bites, Moldy Cheese and Hair Hats. They led me down a small alley and into a chamber. A sign that said "Dungeon" was printed in big letters above the entrance. "Go in. Make yourself comfortable too, you will be here for a very long time. The king pushed me in the dungeon, and walked out laughing.

I was about to sit down in defeat when I saw a pair of keys, laying in the floor. “The king must’ve dropped these on the way out!” I thought. I realized if I can grab those keys, I could escape. I reached. I reached as far as I could, and eventually grabbed them. “Got It!” I said to myself. I unlocked the cell door, and ran out the door into the kingdom.

“Don’t let anyone recognize anything strange about me. Like the fact I’m not a mouse.” I thought to myself. “Almost there!” I ran towards the gate as fast as I could. I made it out. My shrink ray was in sight. I ran over to the table I had placed the shrink ray on. I climbed the table leg up to the shrink ray, and changed it from shrink mode to un-shrink mode. “Ok. Let’s do this!” I said as I pulled the shrink ray’s trigger. I slowly went back to my normal size. That afternoon, I showed my shrink ray to the judges. It won 1<sup>st</sup> place, and I lived happily ever after.

# *Trapped in Fairytales*

Serenity Stanton

Warm Springs Intermediate School, Morgan County

Teacher: Shanahan Elmore

3<sup>rd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

May and Cissandra adored reading. One day May went to the biggest library she could find. She looked through all the aisles and finally found the perfect book called The Book of Fairy Tales. May took the book to Cissandra's house and they read it together. Afterwards, Cissandra said "I want to be like Alice from Alice and Wonderland," pretending to sip a cup of tea, which made May giggle. May replied "I want to be like Little Red Riding Hood," pretending to put on Red's hat. When May looked at the back of the book she noticed in big, bold, red letters "DO NOT CHECK OUT THIS BOOK!" May and Cissandra looked at each other peculiarly, wondering what that meant.

The next morning each girl woke up in a strange place. May was in the woods standing next to a picnic basket. "I must be in Little Red Riding Hood!" May exclaimed. She picked up the basket and started to skip. Cissandra knew right away that she was in Alice and Wonderland and whenever she saw the rabbit, she scampered after it.

As May was galloping along she noticed two paths. Suddenly, a wolf appeared and told her to follow him. May had heard about the Big Bad Wolf and ran towards the house, dodging trees and hopping over logs. She rushed into the house and searched for a way out of the fairytale. She encountered a rancid goblin covered in mud. He told her about a book that would get her out. She hustled around frantically until she found it inside the picnic basket. The book said the only way to get out of the fairytale was to find a well, but May

only had an hour to get there! She ran speedy quick, but got lost. Unfortunately, it had gotten to be past an hour and she got stuck in the fairytale for all of eternity.

Meanwhile, as Cissandra was following the rabbit she noticed an enormous castle with guards and hearts. The guards began to chase her! She bustled back to the house to find a blue fairy with sparkling wings waiting. The fairy told her about the book and Cissandra found it under a bunch of tea cups. She only had an hour to find the well. She dashed through the woods and came across two paths. Luckily, she saw a sign in the tree that said “go straight.” She finally reached the well and leaped in. She ended up back in her room and waited for May for an hour, then a day, even a week! May never returned and Cissandra realized she probably didn’t see the sign and got lost. Cissandra started to weep.

Years have passed and Cissandra still misses May, but she made some new friends. Once in a while they ask what happened to May, but Cissandra never talks about it. She will always remember, and although she still misses her, she will forever be in her heart.

# *Test Preparation*

Aria Schoon

Point Pleasant Intermediate School, Mason County

Teacher: Annette Cook

1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

"I'm sure you'll do fine, you've been studying for weeks! You could take the test in your sleep." My eleventh grade teacher- Mr. Mokohito- reassured me. I gave him a faint smile, despite the tension in my gut. He knew as well as I did, I wasn't going to handle the test easily. Just thinking about it made me hyperventilate.

Later that day, Mr. Mokohito let us into the library to work. It was the quietest place in the entire school, and he knew some of us had no time to study at home.

I sat next to Nate, and he glanced at me. "Oh, hey Blade." He softly said, trying not to get caught talking.

"Hello to you, too," I said softly. He smiled, like he did with his younger siblings. I took out my ELA book and turned to the chapter we were studying.

Nate looked down at his book, "Of all subjects, why *English*? I mean- sure, for a smart guy like you Blade, it's no problem! But seriously, why *this* subject?" He complained about English class all the time.

"Would you prefer math?" I teased. He rolled his eyes at me, and I laughed a little.

"You have a point, but you panic about both," he teased back. Nate was the only one I'd told about my anxiety- aside from my teacher. I smiled, and we spent the rest of the time studying.

I wasn't sure if working with Nate would ease my anxiety, but it seemed to calm me. We'd been friends since preschool, and I bet that had something to do with it.

After class, I gathered my stuff, and got ready for band class. Before heading to band, I put all my stuff in my locker and grabbed my clarinet. I honestly didn't care that I was the only boy who played a clarinet. People who made fun of me were just jealous of my skills.

I reached band class, to find I arrived a few minutes early. I was thankful, because I always took a while to assemble my instrument. Everyone else arrived soon after I did. So the unique feeling of being the only person in an empty classroom faded.

We started class with our typical warm-ups, the eight-note scale, and the songs we were performing for the upcoming concert.

Aside from being the second loudest, next to Clarity the trumpet player, I didn't accomplish much. I packed up my instrument and headed to math class.

The day passed quickly, due to the fact I paid little or no attention in all of my classes...since I already knew and understood everything the teachers went over. I guess you could say I was *gifted*, in a way.

When I got home, I went straight to bed, knowing the test was the next day. I wanted to be fully rested, in hopes it would help with my nerves.

I awoke the next morning, half awake, and headed to school after my daily morning routine. "The test is first thing today..." I muttered to myself, rereading every word I had memorized in the book wasn't helping. I knew I was ready, my teacher knew I was ready, so why was I panicking so badly?

I arrived at school, and eyed my homeroom door. Hesitant to open the door, knowing what awaited me. Just as I was about to enter the room, a sudden wave

of nervousness hit. I swallowed hard, and stepped in anyways. I sat down at my desk, the test already there, and repeatedly told myself, "*It'll be fine... It'll be fine...*"

The room was completely silent, I was sweating more in my palms than my forehead. I couldn't keep my pencil still. As I neared the end of the test, I realized why I was so panicky. *Failure*. The last five were the hardest for me to finish. Although I was dreading it, I stood up and turned my test in. It could only end two ways...

# *Lucky*

Ian Bush

Cameron Elementary School, Marshall County

Teacher: Alan Cox

2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

I felt the cool rush of air as bullets flew past my head. It had only been a month since I was drafted back in February. I was a thousand miles away from home, fighting in a war that wasn't mine. Without warning there was a loud explosion off to my left. A Japanese soldier quickly came running through the smoke, pointing his rifle at me. This was the first time I ever had to kill somebody, but it was either me or him. I felt the blood start to pump in my veins. I reached for my rifle, held it up to my shoulder and pulled the trigger. It felt like my stomach had been turned upside down. I knew the boy hadn't been much older than I was. I turned and ran down the trench, past the fighting and past all the killing. I got the end of the trench and was told by the general in command that I was to get on the helicopter and fly back to base. The war had been lost.

We flew back to base. It was dead silence.

I asked if my friend, Thomas, had made it out. They said he had, but they last heard that he tripped a mine and was being flown back. As soon as we arrived back at the base I searched the hospital rooms looking for him. I found him. He was in good condition, but he had lost both his legs up to the knee. I decided to head back to the barracks. I lay my head down on my pillow and drifted off to sleep.

I had only been a little while before I was shaken awake. The Japanese had launched a counter attack. Quickly, I dressed, grabbed my rifle, and headed out the door. I was overwhelmed to see what had happened. The buildings were on fire and the ground was littered with dead Americans. I tore through the smoke, shooting at the same time. I jumped in a jeep and headed to the hospital. I reached the front doors jumped out and ran to them.

Just before I could open them a Japanese soldier grabbed me, threw me to the ground, pulled his rifle to his shoulder, and aimed it at my head. Without thinking, I lurched forward for his gun's barrel, grabbed it, and pulled it down. He pulled the trigger and shot me in the leg. It felt like somebody just blew it off. I kept calm and reached for my gun, pulled it up to my shoulder, and pulled the trigger. His body dropped like a rock. I picked myself up wincing in pain. I hobbled off, opened the door, walked in a few steps, and collapsed.

I pulled myself over to a wall and rested against it. I thought about my wife, kids, and my friend, Thomas, too. I got up and limped to his room. He was awake, sitting upright in bed. He asked what was going on and I told him that he tripped a mine, we lost the war, and now the Japanese were launching a counter attack on us. I told him that we had to go. I rolled a wheelchair over to his bed and put him in it. Then I wheeled him down the hall, out the doors, to straight to the jeep. I sat him in the passenger seat, hopped in, and drove off.

I heard over the radio that a helicopter wanting to take some people out. I drove as fast as I could and in a few minutes we were there. I pushed on the brake, but it wouldn't work. We crashed straight into the carrier wall. Everything went black. The only thing I can remember is them pulling me and Thomas out of the car and running us over to the helicopter. I woke up a week

later in New York. My family was there and Thomas. I later found out that we made it out just in time. As soon as we got out the base was bombed killing nearly two thousand.

I looked over at Thomas and said, "We're lucky."

# *Matt and the Whale*

Alex Mendelson

Third Ward Elementary School, Randolph County

Teacher: Lisa Henline

3<sup>rd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

Hello, my name is Matt and I am a photographer for National Geographic Magazine. My story is about how I met a whale and how it saved my life. I used to travel all over the world taking pictures of exotic animals. On that particular day in February, I was on a scuba diving excursion on the waters of the Pacific to capture sperm whales in their natural habitat.

The day was sunny and pleasant, yet the waves were quite choppy. I donned my wetsuit and goggles but as I was preparing the rest of my gear, I tripped over my oxygen tank and fell off the boat! The impact of the water slamming into me did not knock me out as it should have, and lucky for me, my diving mask stayed on and allowed me to see the great expanse of the underwater world.

Around me was a vast sea having thousands of hues of blues, blacks, and greens. It was so peaceful. Fish swam in large schools around me! The sun glinted off the surface of the water and looked like dancing diamonds. I realized then that my oxygen tank had gotten entangled by my feet and I was sinking. Down, down, down into the depths I sank. I was out of breath. My vision began to dance with black spots. Then I saw something coming out of the darkness beneath me. I thought it was a great white shark that was ready for dinner, me being the meal! As the shark came closer, I realized it was not a shark after all. It was only a sperm whale! “Ha, that’s funny,” I thought, “a whale was just what I wanted to take a picture of but I am going to drown

before I can snap the photo.” Then blackness overcame my vision and I found myself unconscious, floating in the ocean.

The sound of popping in my ears brought me back from the depths of unconsciousness, and I found myself rising slowly to the water’s surface. “How can I be rising?” I wondered. Then I recalled the gigantic, gray monster of a sperm whale that had surprised me before I had blacked out. I looked down and there was the peaceful beast pushing me up to the surface using its body as a raft. When the whale surfaced, my diving team began throwing ropes to help pull me aboard. They were shouting for me to grab onto the ropes, but I did not have the strength left in my body.

Then the most extraordinary event occurred for which I will be forever thankful. That great beast began to push me towards the boat. Closer and closer to the groping hands of my diving team I was carried until they were able to reach my nearly lifeless body. We have all heard stories of how dolphins have helped sailors in trouble but never have I heard a tale of someone being rescued by a whale. I think the whale understood that I was there on a peaceful mission and not a harmful one.

My mission that day brought me to love and protect all the animals in the ocean. If a whale can help save me, then I will certainly help save them. I did not see the whale again for two years, but during that time I had spent countless hours looking at every record of every whale sighted in North America. One day my hours of research finally paid off.

On a chilly March morning while I was floating in the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, I sighted the whale I had been looking for. We noticed each other. It swam nearer. It came so close; I could reach out and touch its soft skin. As it swam by, it looked at me with its big black eye and seemed to say

“Your Welcome”. After several minutes of silently speaking to each other, my big blubbery friend slid back into the ocean. I never saw him again.

# *My First, My Last*

Anneleise Rockacy

Petersburg High School, Grant County

Teacher: Heather Thompson

1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

It is a scientifically proven fact that in the first seven minutes after death, your memories play back in sequence, "flashing" before your eyes.

One.. Two.. Breathe in.. Breathe out.. I'm sitting on a soft surface, the feeling of something heavy on my chest. It's becoming harder and harder to breathe. A strange chill sets in my veins leaving me gasping for air, then.. everything just fades away.. and it begins.

Minute one: My first breath, the bright lights, deafening noises. I cry because I am frightened. My first steps, the excitement, gentle hands swiftly picking me up and swinging me around, loud cheering. I laughed, exhilarated. My first broken bone, the big tree, a daring climb, the crack of bone breaking against the unforgiving ground. I cried, in excruciating pain. My first kiss, the nervousness, a soft touch of his lips against mine, the blushing, butterflies. I giggled because I was happy. My first heartbreak, the tears, mom's consoling, wishing it would've lasted.. Hoping he would come back. I died inside because he promised forever.

I began to notice the memories clearing, almost as if they had been covered in fog.

Minute two: My first day in collage, the exhaustion from a day long drive, a soreness from hauling my belongings into my dorm. My first real job, entering the facility, learning the ropes. I smiled because I had finally done it. Meeting the man I would spend the rest of forever with, his sweet words, loving embraces, soft kisses. I was in love because he was perfect. His proposal, the

beautiful ring, the way he smiled, the feeling of being in love flowing through every ounce of my being.

My wedding day, the gorgeous dress, all our family and friends, an enchanting tune. The feeling of cold metal slipping onto my finger after saying our vows. Then my positive pregnancy test, the look on his face when I showed him. We were so thankful, for we had been blessed. The first appointment, twins, one boy and one girl, the woman's smiling face as she told us.

Minute three: The day I gave birth, the drowsiness from the anesthesia, the colorful curtains in the operating room. Holding the twins for the first time, the soft coo coming from their throats. Our first Christmas as a family, the wonder in their eyes, the shattering of a few glass ornaments. I was so happy. Their first day of pre-school, the tears in my eyes as I sent them to grow up. Grace's first boyfriend, the notes, the slight redness in her cheeks as we spoke of him, her heartbreak after the breakup. Grayson's first girlfriend, his fear of messing up, the notes he wrote her, his disappointment when it was over.

Minute four: Their first day in High School, the preparation, the make-up, the clothes, the nerves, that "perfect look". I was happy for them. Grace's acceptance letter, the collage of her dreams, the packing, the excitement. Grayson's record deal, buying dinner for the band, packing him for Hollywood. I was sad, my babies were all grown up.

Minute five: My husband and my first trip out of the country, the odd cultures, the amazing foods, and the bright lights of downtown Tokyo. My little girl's wedding, the upbeat music, exotic strobe lights, she always had been the more eccentric of the two. I danced like no one was watching.

Minute six: The reality of becoming a grandmother, the little heart shaped box, a note, "Happy Birthday Nana", Pictures of an ultrasound. I smiled

because I was ecstatic. Grayson's first tour, the pressure, the money, he was different, but I was glad he was happy.

Minute seven: My heartbreaking diagnosis, The inoperable tumor in my heart, the cries of my children and husband, Grayson canceling the remainder of his tour, the doctor's words resonating in my brain even now, "Two weeks, make 'em count". Our last family dinner... My last chance to hold my grandchildren.. My children.. My love. The shrieking of ambulance sirens.. The last whispers of love to those I care about.. a silent prayer echoing inside my mind.. then.. Darkness.

# *The Promise*

Brianna Call

Hamlin PK-8, Lincoln County

Teacher: Janette Cremeans

2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

A special day was finally here for Zoey. She'd been looking at the pale blue dress hanging expectantly on her closet door for days. Even though her shoes were sitting across the room in a box, they were shining like little dots of glitter in the dark part of her bedroom. Laying on Zoey's nightstand was a cute yet sophisticated looking necklace.

Now freshly showered, Zoey sat in front an old wooden mirror applying some of the hand-me-down makeup until every spot was covered with some kind of color. As she glanced down at the half chewed off finger nails, she realized she forgot to apply her press-on nails that would keep her from having to try and paint them. Then she issued a sigh of relief as she realized it was a relatively painless procedure. Ordinarily, Zoey was a tomboy who would rather toss softballs on the field than toss bows in her hair, or be shooting hoops with the mouthy boy from down the street. Zoey knows she can beat him with shots at the foul line, but will never admit he's got great game at the three point line. She would also never admit, from her mouth, that he's kind of cute (not yet anyway). As she finished the glam routine laid out by her grandmother, Zoey double-checked the list for presenting herself like a girly-girl for the evening, thinking it seemed more like a long chore list or some kind of punishment for kicking the neighbor's cat or double daring the Johnson twins to lick the frozen flag pole in the park last winter. Just hot rolling her hair with curlers was enough torture for the day alone.

Zoey checked off the list and gave Grandma one last text and kissy face emoji for the evening. She took one more glance at herself in the mirror all dolled up and begrudgingly admitted she did look pretty amazing. Maybe she could work this routine in between seasons of ball.

Zoey turned, shut the bedroom door, and strutted herself past a few family pics hanging in the hallway, one in particular catching her eye. So many memories that flooded her mind and she struggled to fight off the feelings of sadness and loss. With a swipe of her glittered nails across the one tear running down her cheek she got herself back on track, and blew a kiss to the dark haired beauty in the picture frame before skipping childishly to the kitchen.

The past couple of hours doing her glamour session had made her tummy grumble, but only a left-over half-popped bag of popcorn could be found in a rush to tame the hunger beast. Besides, Zoey didn't want to ruin her appetite. Her dinner date had promised her she could not only have a main dish but a desert too. She giggled to herself and said, "That's the way it should be on a first date anyway." Zoey heard the familiar knock on the front door, and with one last glance in the oven door, she grabbed her matching hand bag (bought to hide her retainer case- no more digging through public trash for them again) and hurried to the door. Zoey swung open the door and was greeted with a side hug and a kiss to the forehead. She felt her face blushing as the compliments came pouring in about how the shade of blue was a perfect color to match her eyes and how the curl in her hair was a nice finishing touch, instead of the usual pony tail or messy bun.

Her date was a perfect gentleman all evening. He opened her car door,

held open doors, and even pushed in her chair for her. And keeping to his promise, she did get dessert with her meal, but that wasn't the only promise he fulfilled. Zoey's father had sworn to her mother a year before she lost her battle with cancer that when Zoey was ready to talk to boys he would be her first date, to set an example of how a lady is supposed to be treated.

# *Painting by Emotion*

Molly Pennington

Ravenswood Middle School, Wetzel County

Teacher: Jackson County

3<sup>rd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

Each emotion has its own color. Some of them, like happiness, are as bright as the sun. Others are dark, like the depths of the sea. Most are somewhere in-between, a perfect balance between the day and night, happiness and sadness. Likewise, each person has stories to tell with their emotions. It is my job to tell those stories. I am an artist. I paint people. I don't paint by numbers or colors or appearances. I paint by emotion.

Happy people are the most fun to paint. Smears of yellow and orange on the canvas define them. They intoxicate you with their contagious smiles. Content families in a sea of orange, a little girl laughing yellow, these are the works that adorn the walls of my studio. They come to life with the color I give them. They become the people they are, still breathing and living and laughing, no matter how long gone they are. They tell the stories of sunny days and summer love long since passed. They convey the joy in blowing the seeds from a dandelion. They are the brightness of humanity, forever immortalized.

Blues and purples mark the melancholy and lost. They live in waves of navy and strokes of violet. Every tear, every frown is marked with the utmost of care. These things tell a story. It would be a crime not to make it noticed. They stare at you with piercing eyes, begging for help. They beg you to understand. You can, if you just look hard enough. In every pair of eyes, there is a story to be known. Watching a friend die, attending a funeral, fighting with a loved one,

these are the things you could see, that anyone could see, if they only looked. They are trapped in this moment of mourning and sorrow. They demand to be noticed while sticking to the shadows. They are forgotten, lost in time, as their stories are, because no one decided to look.

Then there are those in the middle- the regular people. They are the people you see on the street every day. They are war veterans, starving actors, cancer survivors, people you know. They come to life in greens or reds or light blues. They, too, tell stories. I give them life. I make sure those stories are told, because who knows where they'll go if they aren't? Stories of bravery and valor, of cowardice, of happiness, of pride, are all visible. These are the most important, because these stories inspire. They encourage and uplift. They make people feel empowered to do the same. These are the stories that spark revolutions. These are the stories that need to be heard.

# *Peppermint Twist*

Skylar Lane

Keyser High School, Mineral County

Teacher: Vickie Saville

1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

Off the bus and into the general store I dashed, the same routine that every weekday held. Mr. Henry was waiting for me at the door to offer the usual peppermint.

“Good afternoon, Aubrynn. You’re looking quite fine today. Here – have a peppermint!” he croaked.

“Thanks, Mr. Henry.” He always gave me peppermints, but I rarely ever ate them.

I never found it appropriate for Mr. Henry to compliment me the way he did, but I figured he was only trying to be nice. Mr. Henry came here every day to buy newspapers and peppermint candies but usually stayed long enough to talk to my parents.

We closed up shop at five o’clock, so until then I sat in the store room and did homework.

“C’mon chick, it’s five!” Dad danced in and tossed me the store keys.

“Be right there.”

Outside I fumbled with the lock. It was sticky and the key never seemed to fit quite right. Trying to force it, my hand slipped and the keyring fell on the damp, dirty sidewalk.

“Ugh...” I thought. I crouched down and grabbed the keys and found a silver wrist watch with gold and silver twisted lining lying against the wall. It looked as if the clasp was broken. I pocketed it and locked the door with a second try.

“Hey, Dad; do you know who this could belong to? I just found it on the ground beside the door.”

“Ya’ know what?” my mother, looking from the driver’s seat, chimed in. “That’s Mr. Henry’s watch. He wears it every day.”

My father stroked the smooth braid and watched the seconds tick by. “Mr. Henry should be missing this, you know. Hmm... Aubrynn would you mind running this down to his house tomorrow morning?”

“Do I have to?” Extra exercise was not my hobby.

“Please; we won’t see him at the store until Monday. He’s probably missing it.”

“All right, but I’m not staying long.”

At Mr. Henry’s house, I walked up the footpath to the door and rang the bell. With shuffling steps, Mr. Henry appeared.

“Oh! What a surprise! The beautiful Aubrynn has come to visit me! Come on in, you may sit anywhere you like. Make yourself at home.”

"Uh, thanks, Mr. Henry." I walked into the house and stood by a couch near the door.

"So, would you like to watch some TV? You may stay as long as you like! I’ll make us some snacks."

"Wait! I found this. Is it yours?" I pulled the watch from my pocket.

He stopped and took a long look at not just the watch, but at me too.

"My watch! Where did you find it?"

"It was on the ground outside my parents' store. The clasp was broken, but my dad fixed it last night."

Mr. Henry hesitantly took it and without warning swallowed me in a hug. I hugged him back gently and awkwardly, then loosened my grip. When he didn't seem to want to let go, I said,

"Um, so you're glad to have it back?"

He squeezed me tighter before slowly letting go. "Oh, yes! Thank you, Miss Aubrynn, so much. This old watch means the world to me." He paused and rubbed his thumb across the smooth silver and gold. "Here, sit down just a moment."

He gestured to the couch and I sat, leaving ample room for him. But, he sat so close; it made me uncomfortable. "Aubrynn," he took my hand, "I like you a lot. I'd love it if you could come over to visit me more often. You're such a pretty young lady." He rubbed my hand affectionately.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Henry. I should really be going." I walked toward the door.

"No, you can't leave yet. Stay! We can have fun together." He slowly rose and shuffled in my direction.

"I'm sorry, sir...uh...my father wanted me back soon. I...I...have tons of chores." I grabbed the door and backed out through the opening. "Thank you for your hospitality."

Mr. Henry may have been old, but he could hurry when necessary. He caught my hand at the top of the steps and said, "Aubrynn, I want you to come back and see me. I really do like you." I gingerly pulled away.

"Have a good afternoon, sir."

Since then, I tended to avoid Mr. Henry. When I got off the bus I'd walk down the street and back, allowing enough time to make sure he was gone. His peppermint odor always lingered, however.

"Mr. Henry has been asking about you," my father told me the next Friday. "Says he misses you."

I wouldn't doubt that he did, but I wasn't comfortable around him. And, I didn't miss the candies he gave me either. I never ate them. What he did last Saturday was just too friendly for me to want to be near him.

A week later, my father mentioned him again but not as I had expected. Mr. Henry had died a few nights ago from a heart attack. He wanted my family at the funeral.

On Sunday, as we walked into the grand church, an organ played songs of sadness. Pictures of Mr. Henry lined the entrance walls. One of them in particular caught my eye. It was a photograph of Mr. Henry with a young girl, probably my age. She held an unwrapped gift box that contained a silver watch with gold and silver lining.

"Who's the girl in that picture?" I whispered to my father.

"Mr. Henry's daughter."

"Where is she now? Is she here?"

He whispered, "She passed away in a car crash. She was 17."

We kind of looked alike. She must have given him that watch right before the accident.

The picture haunted me the whole service. As I listened to the speeches and listened to the beautifully practiced hymns, I pressed a peppermint candy against the roof of my mouth, trying to hold back the tears.

# *Llamada Cerrada*

Alexis Droppleman

Union Educational Complex, Grant County

Teacher: Aimee Cummings

2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

It was a cloudy day in Spain, and the date was April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1912. Alfredo Diaz was walking to the factory that he worked at. Alfredo was a young handsome man with dark skin and the deepest darkest brown hair you've ever seen, and he was as tall as a sycamore tree. He was usually a man of his wits who only cared about doing his job and taking care of his family. His family consisted of his wife Josephina and their son Bleene. Josephina was an average-heighted woman with lighter skin than her husband. Her hair was so long it stretched clear down her back, and it was the color of charcoal. Alfredo loved her more than anything, but his job didn't pay enough to provide for them now that they had Bleenie. That is why he had to get her out of Spain, and today he was going to do something that would get them to America.

On this particular day as he walked to work he saw it. It was the same poster he had looked at and admired daily for the past month. He slowly walked up to it and placed a hand on it. "THE TITANIC" it read across the top, and at the bottom it had the departure date for its maiden voyage. Alfredo took down the poster making sure no one saw him, and he quickly folded it up and slid it into his pocket. He had waited for this day his whole life, and now that he had enough money he was going to America. All he had to do was get Josephina to say she'll come with him, but first he had to go put his time in at the factory.

After work, Alfredo hurried through the streets trying to get home as quick as possible. He was bursting with excitement, but he could not let it show.

If he had any chance of Josephina agreeing with him he had to keep his demeanor. He began to see their house in the distance and his excitement grew. Their house wasn't big by any standard, but it was a little shanty in the middle of the town that they called home. As Alfredo approached the house he prayed. He didn't just pray that she would say yes he also wanted her to be excited about leaving. He slowly grabbed the door knob and opened the front door, and there she was. As he entered the house and shut the door he could tell Josephina was happy to see him. He thought to himself that this was the perfect opportunity to ask her to leave, but he would have to be careful on how to approach the topic. So he led her to the couch and they both sat down.

Then, Alfredo froze and he couldn't say anything that he wanted to. So he just sat there looking at Josephina and suddenly he found courage in her eyes. He grabbed for the poster and fumbled with his pocket trying to get it out. All of a sudden it was free and in his hands. Alfredo handed it to his wife and she slowly unfolded it. When Josephina had completely unfolded it she stared in astonishment. He carefully moved closer to her and asked if she wanted to start a new life in the new world.

Time flew by and a week has passed in no time. It was now time for Alfredo to buy the tickets. He had slaved day and night ever since Josephina said that she would love to go to America. Now all he had to do was walk up and purchase the tickets. There was an enormous line ahead of him, but he was still positive he could get tickets. As he waited he couldn't help but get excited. Every time one person got out of line and he moved closer his pulse accelerated, and before he knew it he was at the counter. Excitedly he looked up and told the man behind the counter he needed three tickets. The man

looked at him sadly then he spoke. He told Alfredo he was very sorry but they were all out of tickets and then he closed the window.

The next two days were filled with grief. Alfredo and Josephina knew they needed to leave Spain, but now they had no idea how to make that happen. They had spent long hours pondering about how they could get to America. They had searched and searched for another ship to take, and then a friend of theirs bought a boat. Shortly after finding this out they also found out that their friend was sailing to America. They soon devised a plan to ask their friend if they could come with him. This plan was filled with them talking to their friend and explaining what they wanted. This is how they executed it; Josephina cried while Alfredo comforted her. It wasn't executed perfectly, but at least the friend said they could come with him.

Two days later they were ready to leave and Alfredo, Josephina, and Bleenie had packed all their things. This was the day Alfredo had waited for, but this wasn't how he had imagined it. He pictured himself relaxing in the bottom of the Titanic with his family. This was still a happy day though, and after he and his friend loaded all the bags they were off.

Their voyage took twenty-nine days. It was a brutal experience, and in the middle of it they all thought they were going to die. The waves were always lapping at the sides of the boat, and the sun was always burning down upon them. Their lips were cracked from the salty sea air, and their once dark skin was now blood red and blistered. But when they saw the shores of America all that pain went away, and it was replaced with happiness. This was the start of their new life.

It was now May 14<sup>th</sup>, Alfredo and Josephina had been in America for three days. Alfredo now had a well-paying job, and he could help support his

family. Josephina got in touch with an old friend so they would have a place to live. They were settling nicely when they saw the newspaper. It was dated 16<sup>th</sup> of April, 1912, and the article on the front page read “The Day After the Titanic Sank”. They were so shocked to hear the news, but they were also relieved. They realized it was a good thing that the ticket stand had been out of tickets. If they hadn’t been sent away by the man at the counter they would be dead right now. After they read the article a chill went down their spines, and the only thing Alfredo could manage to say was “que era una llamada cercana”. In English what he said translates into “That was a close call”.

# *Listen*

Alex Banks

Berkeley Springs High School, Morgan County

Teacher: Dusty Jenkins

3<sup>rd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

I was busy the day I got on the plane. Heading to my new high-paying job in the city, I quickly scrambled to get my things together and rushed aboard. I saw a young woman sitting in my seat in first class. “Pardon, Ma’am; you’re in my seat,” I said. I waited a few seconds, but there was no response from her. An elderly man dressed all in black got up from his seat and said, “There’s one open beside me.” Reluctantly, I sat down next to him. He had several WWII books stacked on his seat and a water bottle, but no luggage.

As the plane took off, I started to doze off, but was soon interrupted by the sound of the man’s voice. “Why are you headed to Oahu?”

Hastily I replied, “I got a job opportunity,” and looked away.

There was some turbulence; I heard a clink from his seat. I noticed he was wearing two dog tags. He smiled at me and saw I had noticed his tags. “They’re my brothers’—which brings you to why *I’m* headed to Hawaii.” He paused for a moment. “I’m visiting my brothers.”

“Oh,” I replied with a nod.

“They were killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor.”

I felt the need to show a little sympathy, so I frowned a little and answered, “I’m sorry for your loss.” At that point, though, I knew I was too deep into the conversation to turn back.

“It was 1941—and I was working as a mechanic for planes used on the naval base. I was tiny and quite frail back then, whereas my brothers were strong military men. One was eighteen, Jackson, and the other was twenty, John. You could say I was always the one they protected, the youngest. I guess you could also say I was the most disappointing at the time. The thing to do back then was to join the military. I have a heart murmur, though,” he said, motioning to his chest. I yawned a little to speed the conversation up. “John was in the Air Force and Jackson in the Navy. They were both men anyone would be lucky to have in their life. They died too soon, I always said. December 7<sup>th</sup> was a crisp morning. The sun seemed to rise a little later that day.

“We were all joking around; how foolish it seems now, sitting around drinking Coke and listening to the radio—didn’t think anything of it. I’d had breakfast with my brothers that morning in town and we’d talked for a good hour or two. Then they went out and did what they had to do. I used to think people overused the words ‘I love you,’ but now I know you can’t say them enough. That morning I didn’t tell anyone I loved them—not my brothers, not my mother, not my father. We’d been sitting around for a while until lunch. My boss said he heard a bang, followed by another, but we’d heard nothing. Then the planes came.” The old man took his hand and motioned a plane flying through the air. “They were little ones. Of course, we assumed they were our men just playing around. There were so many of them, though. Still, we disregarded it. Then they started shooting. Looking closer in disbelief, we saw the white and red symbols on them. You could see why we thought they were American at first. But there was no blue. No blue. We knew then they were Japanese. Most of my men hid in the basement for the entirety of the first wave. I couldn’t move at first, just stood in utter disbelief. I knew Jackson was on the

*USS Arizona* and John was probably shooting back from low ground. The only thought running through my head was: ‘What if my mom becomes a widow with three dead sons?’ I was a coward, really. When it came to my brothers’ lives I always figured I’d be the first one to help. No. I was p...petrified,” he stuttered.

“You can’t say for sure how you’ll react until put into a situation. I’d always glorified being in the military until I understood it firsthand—having lost two brothers to it. Really, it’s the bravest thing to do. I couldn’t have made it out there. It’s mind-wrecking when you know your best friend is dead beside you, but when you know a thousand men are dying trapped inside a ship, can it get worse? One of the good men to survive brought Jackson to me after things had calmed a little. I stayed with him until I couldn’t feel the warmth of his hand. I kept telling him I loved him, even though I knew he consciously couldn’t hear me. But then more fleets came and we knew it was over. I had to leave him there. I still thought of him as the high school boy who fended off my junior high bullies, the brother I’d shared a room with for fifteen years. We hadn’t talked as much as we should have since he left. I didn’t return his calls; I was too infatuated with my other affairs.

“So all I’m trying to tell you, boy, is that you ought to remember to love when you still can. You can’t bring people back. You have to love them while they’re here. It’s too often that we fail to appreciate them until we can’t have them anymore.”

The plane hit some turbulence and then shuddered to the ground. The man gathered his things and quickly tried exiting the plane.

“Sir!” I yelled tugging on his coat, ashamed now of my initial response to recoil from interaction with this man. “You can write to me or something. I really appreciated your stories.” I sat shaken.

“It’s fine, boy. I’ve wasted enough of your time.” With a nod and a sad smile, he was gone—never to be seen again.

## *Moments in Time*

Miranda Smith

Mingo Central High School, Mingo County

Teacher: Katie Endicott

1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

### *One year, nine months, two days, and eleven hours.*

That is how long she has left.

### *One year, two days, seven hours.*

“Anthony?” she breathes out questioningly, staring at their transformed apartment in shock. Candles decorate every available surface, illuminating the sight before her with a soft, romantic glow. Their living room furniture is nowhere to be found; in its place sits the dining room table covered in food from her favorite restaurant. Her eyes trail along the flowers strewn across the floor before coming to rest on him, the man kneeling in the center of the floor adorned in a suit, their dog resting at his feet.

He pulls a hand from behind his back, revealing a small velvet black box. “Deanna,” he begins. “Will-“

Before he has a chance to finish his speech, she launches herself across the room, collapsing at his feet and pulling him into an embrace. “Yes,” she whispers. “Yes.”

### *5 months, four days, nine hours.*

She does not fuss like others do.

It is a fact that never fails to impress him. He has always loved the soft trill of her voice, but is even more enamored by her silence, by the way she communicates with expressions and gestures but no voice.

He glances up and finds her standing silently at the door, eyes closed, listening to the steady drone of his drill as he erects the cradle. Instead of paying close attention to the task at hand, he finds his eyes keep drifting towards her. He takes note of how her expressions change, how she sinks further against the wall, a serene smile forming on her face, eyelids fluttering close.

He knows what she is thinking, *One day, you're going to be here, you're going to seem more real... You'll change our lives and introduce us to happiness beyond belief. You'll leave your mark on the world, I'm sure of it. Just like your father.*

It has been three months since they had found out about the baby, and everything was perfect, their lives and interactions marked by a feeling of perpetual bliss. She wanted nothing more than to start a family, and he knew she would be a wonderful mother-this was obvious.

Still engrossed in his inner musings, he seamlessly molds together the basket of the cradle to the legs, never slowing down, even as he sets the drill aside and reaches for his hammer. He can see her face change, watches her shoulders move as if she were adjusting herself to the loud pounding of the tool.

He had always thought his job would be the love of his life, that his desire to build a life would go unfulfilled. And now, as he finds himself crouching haphazardly on the floor building something to hold the life the two of them had created together, he has never felt more content.

He is kneeling on the floor in concentration because he loves her smile and her gentle nature, cherishes her beauty and her thoughtful manner. And so he'll remain, submerged in the echoing sounds, and look at her face as he smiles and wonders how he managed to have somebody like this at his side

every day.

***Three months, nine days.***

When she says “I do,” time seems to stop.

She glances around, taking in the photographers, their family. She hears the ecstatic screams in the background, and knows she should focus on those, she should join in.

But instead she finds herself staring into his eyes, at the promises he seems to be making her and the future that appears to be reflected in them. They are as bright and green as always, and she hopes the happiness she sees in them is an omen for what is to come-as she pulls him in for a kiss, she is sure it must be.

**Three weeks.**

“Matthew Giacomo,” she announces over dinner.

“Hmm?” he asks.

“That’s the name for him,” she explains, setting aside her napkin and lovingly rubbing her expanded stomach. “It’s perfect”

Her giddiness is infective, and he feels a reciprocating grin stretch across his face. “It is,” he agrees.

***Two hours, one minute.***

“I’ll see you later,” he tells her, bending down to kiss her cheek.

“Try not to miss me too much,” she teases, smiling broadly at him as he steps off the bus.

***One hour, four minutes.***

“I’ll have to run the numbers one more time to be sure, but everything appears to be in order,” she tells her coworker. “I don’t think we overlooked anything.”

“That’s fantastic,” he replies. “I…”

Confused, she glances over and finds him staring out the window, his jaw slack and gaze locked on a rapidly approaching object just past the neighboring tower. With each passing second it grows larger, heading straight towards the building with no signs of stopping.

*It’s a plane*, she thinks incredulously, dread pooling in the pit of her stomach.

Eyes wide, she stands and is immediately thrown through the air, the impact echoing around her as she spares a moment to pray for the safety of her unborn child before everything fades to black.

***Ten minutes.***

When she comes to, she is crumpled on the floor near her desk; her head is pounding and she is disoriented. Her eyes snap open and she surveys her surroundings, taking note of the total darkness that has fallen over her once bright office, now illuminated only by the flames leaping from the floors below. She shifts gingerly, hand rubbing her quivering stomach soothingly, and attempts to inch forward, her palms scraping over broken glass and pieces of filament. Thick plumes of smoke billow around her as she gasps, struggling to breathe.

***Five minutes.***

She turns, focusing on the rectangles of light from the other side of the office. The windows show a temptingly clear, smokeless horizon, marred only by small puffs of smoke floating languidly through the air. Determined, she begins to crawl over, dodging the debris that litters the floor.

***One minute.***

After what seems an eternity, she makes it. She slumps forward, exhausted and dizzy from oxygen deprivation. She coughs, lips twitching into a smile as she slowly rises to her feet, intending only to regain her breath so that she can find a way to escape.

***Ten seconds.***

She steps forward into the light, the fire from her office hot on her back, and plummets downward. She clenches her eyes shut and opens her mouth to scream, but chokes before she can. She gasps and coughs, greedily gulping down fresh air while she has a chance.

***Six.***

She feels the wind whip past her face, and summons the courage to open her eyes. As she surveys the sight below her, she watches the sea of spectators point and surge back. Her gaze locks on the quickly approaching asphalt, and she prays Anthony isn't one of the people in the crowd below; she prays he will never see her as she is in this moment, limp and helpless, incapable of preventing the inevitable.

***Three.***

She reaches down to cradle her stomach.

***Two.***

*I'm so sorry, she thinks.*

***One.***

“I love you.”

***Zero.***

# *The Final Stretch*

Laura Morris

Tucker County High School, Tucker County

Teacher: Barbara Zimmerman

2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

Everyone was simply trying to make it to the end. The workers in the large brick room were like bees. They were constantly making noise, wearing a lot of black, and working themselves to death. The office was their crowded hive and Mr. Vega, who ruled his employees with an iron fist and soft voice, was the queen bee. The work they did is irrelevant but how much they did is monumental. All of their obligations were a perpetual river flowing through their brains and a heavy weight sagging on their shoulders. It should be noted that every single employee was counting down the days to when their four year contract expired like children anticipate their birthday.

For three years, eleven months, and five days Jane's job had been to sit in the back corner collecting sunbeams and anxiety. Her official requirement was to take in all the unhappiness from the room to alleviate the workers. This is more difficult than one might think.

As simple minded as Mr. Vega was, he was well aware that he needed someone like Jane, for this business was a cruel one and he had lost many employees before to the pressures and malice of the job.

"But what should I do," Jane naively asked on her first day, "if it all becomes too much for me?" Already tired of speaking to the girl, Mr. Vega shrugged indifferently.

"I don't know," he replied. Then glancing up he added, "There's a window behind you, you can look out of it." Had he known how seriously Jane would take this advice he might not have suggested it. She turned behind her

and gazed at the serene afternoon. White, fluffy clouds pinned themselves against a light blue blanket. The sun, 93 million miles away, pierced through her window.

She grinned and said, “I can make it four years here. I can make it to the end.”

And so she sat. Her quiet demeanor and austere appearance made her the wallflower of the rambunctious workroom, planted steadily in her hard metal seat. After nearly four years, the chair had morphed to cradle the fragile shape that was Jane. It held her up in her exhaustion.

Each day, she took in everybody’s stress and discontentment and wrote them down in her book.

May 2nd, 2016:

1. Ed had to stay up until 3 o’clock in the morning to finish his reports.
2. Whitney’s mother is still in the hospital.
3. Cole has decided that he doesn’t love Julie anymore.
4. Julie has to move all of her things out of Cole’s apartment.
5. Jackson’s telephone has stopped working.
6. Mr. Vega has cut Dawson’s pay.

On and on she went, sucking everyone’s problems and stress into her little body then writing them down in her book. As she did so, lines slowly formed on her forehead and her shoulders drooped just a tad; but nobody noticed because that wasn’t their job.

When she grew faint from the day’s work, Jane would place both of her hands on the large window behind her and collected the afternoon sunbeams through her fingertips. The magic light rejuvenated her and she used it to spread sun into all of the workers.

On May 2nd, 2016, the contract's expiration date was only 13 days away. Everybody could feel their freedom getting closer. It was like inching up a large hill on a rollercoaster.

But there were many things to think about. Freedom can lead to uncertainty. There were better jobs to find and apply for, there were dreams to embark on and lovers to marry. There were still bills to pay. There were friends to say goodbye to. The office was a whirlwind of emotions.

“Jane, we need more sun. All the uncertainty is unbearable!” So Jane gave them her sun.

But Mr. Vega felt nothing as his freedom was nowhere in eyesight. He began to pile mountains of work on desks. He was squeezing his employees like an empty container of toothpaste to get all the work he could out of them. He piled and squeezed. Everybody in the office worked more vigorously than ever in those last days. A runner always pushes himself the hardest on the final stretch.

“Jane, we need more sun. The work is endless!” So Jane gave them her sun.

Somehow, the final day came in the blink of an eye yet as slow as molasses. When the last bell rang the workers jumped and screamed like children. They ran outside as the world awaited them. Whitney turned back to glance in the office one last time when she spotted Jane. The girl was slumped over in her metal seat. A soft light fell on her shoulders while her hand was pressed inside of the last page in her book.

The stress was too much. The sun beams weren't enough. She didn't make it to her last day.

# *Finding X*

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My grandfather was a smart man. A mechanical engineer by profession, he worked with Columbia Gas Transmission for forty years as a gas compression expert. A notoriously humorous person, he was serious about his work. When one's job is to ensure the movement of a highly volatile material through pipes that run through towns and cities into homes, then one had better know what they're doing.

He did.

Pipelines aside, he was my mentor, and one of the most brilliant sources of life advice I've ever had. Early on, I knew I'd never be a professional mathematician. Though I never truly struggled in elementary school, some topics still frustrated me since I couldn't get my head wrapped around them. That's when my grandfather would step in and explain whatever it was over and over again until it made sense. Sometimes it was simply a different way of solving a problem. Other times it was visual (my favorite example being a large Styrofoam ball that he meticulously marked with lines of latitude and longitude). But one lesson of his has stuck with me over the years, and (quite possibly) benefited me even more than the Great Ball O' Meridians. My grandpa taught me how to find x.

It starts off simple:  $x+2=4$ .

Now, as a senior in high school, it hardly takes a second to determine that

$x=2$ . But back in the early days of middle school, it was almost impossible to believe that variables *could* exist. We had learned our ten digits (0-9), and could therefore make any number imaginable. That universe was turned on its head with the invasion of the alphabet into math, and the concept of the unknown became the greatest numerical mystery since negative numbers. I, for one, could never see how  $x$  had gotten lost in the first place. I figured that as a letter,  $x$  belonged in the alphabet between  $w$  and  $y$ , and had no business keeping me from the answer to a math problem. It was an unending frustration, especially once  $x$  edged its way far enough into the curriculum to bring  $y$  along with it. Eventually, my grandpa intervened as he usually did, and explained that  $x$  wasn't invading mathematics or stealing the rightful place of a number.  $X$  was standing in, so to speak, while we figured out what it was supposed to be. Nothing was wrong with variables, and I suddenly realized that  $x$  is just a letter who dreams of growing up to be a number, and one day solving a big problem.

I am  $X$ .

I've been plugged into equations since the day I was born. As is every other person on Earth, past, present, or future. In life's great equation, we are no more than variables trying to fit in- letters among numbers. From Day One we live up to our name- we vary. As children, it's typically a more whimsical variation, as they'll be pirates, princesses, and back again. Realistic or not, they're trying out different lives. They're changing numbers to see what fits the equation of the world around them. Eventually something will click and they realize that because fairy queen isn't really an option, they'll have to settle with human being. Like magic, they've solved a little piece of the equation. Children

coming to terms with reality are one step closer to finding  $x$ . The next step? Elementary school. It's the first time most kids are exposed to a large peer group and social interaction. Their variable keeps changing, eliminating numbers where they don't fit. Children begin developing their personalities, and continue substituting in possible numbers, getting ever closer to the elusive  $x$ .

Middle school continues the ambitious search for the unknown, and a massive portion of the equation is whittled down by things such as cliques and extracurricular activities. Students have begun honing into a range of numbers that may fit their life's equation. The possibilities of what the solution for  $x$  could be are still immense, but no longer infinite. Most know by the first or second year of middle school what they are naturally drawn towards. There will be kids who gravitate towards math, others to language arts, some to music, and others to either a mix of several areas or seemingly none at all. The latter, unfortunately, are often frowned upon since they don't fit any one mold and instead float between subjects, looking for their interest. They're not lazy. They're not failures. They're variables. They're searching for their solution like everyone else, but perhaps their pool of numbers hasn't been narrowed down as much as those of their peers. Perhaps for these little letters, the equation is condensed, or factored down to a simplified form. They shine through once the equation is expanded, revealing the wide range of choices and possibilities life presents.

Entering 9th grade, I was fairly certain of a couple things. I was never going to be a ballerina. I was never going to be a singer or soccer player. The chances of my becoming a theoretical astrophysicist were slim to none, and clearly, I would not be one of the popular girls. It didn't bother me a bit. I enjoyed history and the quirky company of my fellow band members. I could quote Robert

Frost, Richard Bach, and my favorite word was antidisestablishmentarianism. I was still  $x$ , but my equation was shorter and my pool of possible solutions more shallow as I focused on my interests and looked towards the future. I kept substituting numbers. While my past dreams of genetics and engineering didn't fit, I discovered a new passion for psychology and physiology. I'd been unknowingly attempting to solve a large part of a larger equation for nearly four years. At long last, some of the numbers I'd been relentlessly cramming into my equation over the years have started to fit. I've found my niche, and now my solutions are leading me towards college- the next part of life's spectacular math problem. Soon, I will have eliminated high school from the equation, as it's no more than a series of steps on the road to an answer.

When my grandfather first taught me to solve for variables, it was to complete a worksheet. He never knew how much it truly meant, or how much his lessons would help me understand my life and the world around me.

It ends:  $x+2=4$ .

We all live this simple little problem each and every day in infinite forms. Say, for example, that a copying machine gets jammed.  $x-7=2$ . Remove the troublesome sheet of paper.

Add 7 to 2. Copying machine functions.  $x=9$ . Two problems, two solutions. Some parts of the future's equation will change based on past answers, but that's okay. It's how life works. Big or small, everything's part of the equation. Only when we have reached a point in life in which we are truly content- having found peace and happiness in and with ourselves and those around us-

can we say we've solved the equation. Only then, as my grandpa would have said, would that little letter have finally grown into its number. Only then will we have finally found  $x$ .