



SPEAKER'S

AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS



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ABOUT THE AWARD

The Speaker's Award for Youth Writers was launched in 2015 to celebrate the writing talents of Ontario's youth.

Each year, students in grades 7-12 are invited to submit their short stories and personal essays to this writing contest. Original fiction and non-fiction submissions are welcome and a winner from each of the following three grade categories is chosen:

Grades 7-8
Grades 9-10
Grades 11-12

SELECTION COMMITTEE

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SPEAKER'S AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS

2020 SPEAKER'S AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS

Grade 7-8

WINNER

Mirren Litchfield - *Just Around the Bend*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Sophia Bianchi - *Heroism is Ageless*

Grade 9-10

WINNER

Casey Kisielewski - *Isn't it Extraordinary?*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Blaze Cucksey - *Every Breath*

Grade 11-12

WINNER

Saihaj Rehsi - *The Life of a Sikh Kid*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Lily Boughton - *The Gatekeeper*

WINNER (GRADE 7-8)

Mirren Litchfield - *Just Around the Bend*

Anticipation floats in the air; thick, like honey. The air is sticky too; as often happens at the end of the school year when summer break is right around the corner. And this hot, sticky air, this anticipation, this excitement, it's all through the house. The dog's mood changed as soon as the first suitcase was laid out to be packed. She knows we're leaving soon and she doesn't want to be left behind. But just in case she's sitting there, whining, making herself obvious beside all the packed bags. My dad comes back in through the front door and the dog jumps up. He grabs two more packed bags and heads outside again. Once the van is packed and the old canoe is tightly strapped to the roof, we eat dinner and go to bed early. We'll be waking up at five in the morning to drive through the city before the rest of the world is even awake. We're on our way to the lake.

I wake up to the sun rising over 'the 401' and the sound of cars rushing past. I vaguely remember my mom helping me stumble out of bed and to the car. I think I fell asleep shortly after we pulled out of the driveway; the night sky still above us. Now the warm buttery rays of the rising sun are filling up the van. Behind us the city skyline is a silhouette against the bubblegum pink sky, but the intense pink colour is fading fast. My mom turns around in her seat. She stage-whispers so as not to wake my younger brother and older sister, "Still a while to go. But we're going to stop for breakfast soon." At the mention of food my stomach grumbles.

Twenty minutes later we pull over at the ON-Route. After everyone takes a bathroom break my parents order their 'double doubles' and some breakfast sandwiches to-go. Back in the van, I chomp down on mine, but the plastic-like cheese and rubbery egg make me gag so I give it to the dog. That makes the poor girl happy.

My parents' playlist is perfectly predictable: lots of Canadian bands, heavy on The Hip. We all sing along but there is no avoiding the inevitable boredom of this journey. The morning stretches and the sun creeps higher in the sky. The air in the car is getting hot and stuffy and the sickly-sweet, tree-shaped air freshener barely masks the smell of stale air that fills the van.

Time drags on but telltale landmarks begin to whisper that we are getting closer to the lake. We turn off the main route and hit the winding roads. After fifteen minutes of this I'm really starting to feel sick. "Look," my sister suddenly cries, "There's the house with the blue roof!" We all know that once we pass that there are only a few more turns until we have the lake in our sights. Everybody keeps shifting in their seats and craning their necks to be the first one to see the lake this summer... We are so close! One... Two... Three... Four... and there it is! "I see it!" we all shout in attempted unison.

In that quick glimpse before the road takes another turn, I can see the dark blue water, almost black, reflecting the sun; making it sparkle like the night sky. Surrounded by the lush greenery the lakeside cottages begin to emerge. Now we round the last bend and the whole lake stretches out in front of us. My dad eases off the van's gas pedal and effortlessly rolls into a parking spot near the village dock. We push and shove to get out. I hop to the ground and the crunch of gravel fills my ears.

I take a deep breath, letting the scent fill my nose. Perfection! The smell of pine and boat gas mingles with the smell of fries from the local burger joint down the street. We instantly start to unpack the van and bring the bags over to the dock. We know the drill. I put on my sunglasses and lifejacket.

Other families are unpacking their own cars, loading their boats and bringing their stuff down the lake to their cottages. My mom walks to the slip to get our boat as I do a last check of social media on the marina's wifi. We don't have any wifi at the cottage so my sister and I usually volunteer to boat back here once a week or so, to pick up milk and eggs and to catch up online with our friends in the city. In past summers our interest in

our social lives back home fades with each week we spend here. At the beginning of each summer I can't ever imagine that happening again but it somehow does every year. I finish posting on Instagram just as my mom arrives with our little aluminum boat. With five of us, the dog, and most of what we'll need for the next few weeks, it is obvious she'll have to make two trips. My dad and I jump in with a few bags and the dog and join my mom for the first boat trip down the lake.

The wind whips our hair and the water splashes up and sprays us. The dog stands at the front of our little tin boat and lets her ears flap in the wind. Her stance is like a carving mounted on the front of old sailing ships. When she tires of that she walks across our groceries, popping the bags of chips and squishing the loaves of bread. She leans over the side to drink the splashing water.

When we finally arrive at our old dock I cannot stop grinning. My dad starts opening up the cottage and connecting the water for the summer, and my mom heads back to the village to get my sister and brother and the rest of the bags. I enter the kids' bedroom and a cobweb catches on my face. It's a weird slippery feeling and when I try to swat it away it's like there's nothing there. Mouse poop is scattered across the kitchen countertops and the cottage feels unused, musty and cold. My job is to open all the windows and let the fresh air in. After I open the second window the air swooshes in and the dead flies on the kitchen table go for one final flight. The second boat load arrives and soon enough we are all busy cleaning and unpacking. Many hands...

After an hour or so, although we're still supposed to be helping, my brother, sister and I sneak away, throw on our bathing suits and go for a swim. The water isn't cold, I try to convince myself, it's refreshing. The dog, as always, is reluctant to get in the water but my brother sneaks up behind her and pushes her in. She remembers what she's doing and starts splashing around. The kids next door invite us over to jump off the roof of their boat house. We climb up the ladder and take running jumps off the roof into the deep water beyond. I sprint as fast as I can and take flight as my feet leave the roof!

Later that afternoon CBC Radio flutters in and out of range in the background while we play cribbage and wait for dinner. Following that we waltz our way down to the dock to watch the sunset. It is a clear night and I can tell that the sunset is going to be beautiful. But eventually the bugs are too ferocious and we abandon our plans and rush up the path to screened-in safety. As we climb the front stairs I can just smell the smoke and roasting marshmallows from some nearby bonfire.

We all settle down to read by lamplight but eventually someone is the first to yawn. It's contagious and it's obvious that we all need sleep after such a long day. I brush my teeth then climb into the bottom bunk. The sheets are cold; but I know they'll warm up soon enough. The dog comes into the room and jumps up on my bed. She sits on my feet as if she knows I want her to warm them up. She's exhausted from all the running around. Her life in the city involves much more sitting. I guess that's the same for all of us. More rushing around but less actual moving.

I'm getting sleepy looking out the window, watching a firefly glow in and out between the stalky grass with the bright round moon high in the night sky. I feel myself drifting off. Like a photograph negative the moon becomes the sun in my dreams as I reluctantly close my eyes. A summer of swimming, boating and spending time together is just around the bend.

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADE 7-8)

Sophia Bianchi - *Heroism is Ageless*

Anette and Jeremy waddled towards the buffet area of the community retirement home, their stomachs rumbling for food. The mouth-watering aroma filled their nostrils, and they couldn't wait to sink their teeth into the fluffy bread rolls and squash soup.

It was truly a dream for Anette and Jeremy. The pulchritudinous sunlight soaking the room, the exceptional retirement home staff, the sensational food, and, of course, each other's company.

The elderly couple got in line, just as any old couple would. They served themselves, just as any old couple would. Finally, they sat down to eat, their backs sore and uncompromising.

"This is just divine." Anette noted as she inhaled her soup. Her silver hair was wrapped in a bun, and dark circles lined her wisdom-filled, cinnamon brown eyes. Wrinkles stretched across her face, and her arms sagged with age. She did, however, find pleasure in the simple things, such as splendid squash soup.

"Indeed." Jeremy agreed. Unlike his wife, Jeremy was youthful and eccentric. He had almost no hair, and wrinkles only around his eyes. His cerulean blue eyes shone with adventure, which made sense, considering the adventures he had been on over the years.

"I hope the boss doesn't call today." Anette complained in a lowered voice. "Today, I just want to relax and enjoy my soup."

"I couldn't agree more." Jeremy concurred. His life was like that; constantly letting his wife do the talking, and him just nodding along. Even when they were fighting crime, it was like that. But he wouldn't trade it for the world.

"I really don't feel like fighting any villains today." Anette whispered.

"My joints *are* sore today." Jeremy added.

"Arthritis is bad?"

"You know it."

They continued to eat their soup and bread in silence as the other elderlies filed in, as they knew that discussing work was prohibited in front of the Regulars.

Jeremy slurped his last bit of soup, and slowly stood up to return his bowl. He dropped off the bowl, and just as he did, his watch buzzed. He glanced at it. "*Villains spotted at Bernard McGee bank. Report for duty. -Chief*" was flashing across the screen. Bank robberies were not the most perilous, but still posed as a threat. Jeremy sighed, irritated, but knew that when duty calls, he and Anette must answer the call.

After all, that was what it meant to be superheroes; even if you were a senior citizen living in a retirement home.

He whipped around to see Anette. Her eyebrows were furrowed, and her jaw locked. She had gotten the notification.

Jeremy nodded at her, and she reciprocated his nod.

It was time.

Jeremy dashed towards the exit of the retirement home. He acquired a lot of attention, everyone turning to gawk at him. The residents of the home all thought he was crazy, for he dashed off and didn't return for hours on an almost daily basis. Since he always returned unscathed, the staff let it slide.

Anette, on the other hand, was much more discreet than her husband. She tip-toed out of her seat and into the lavatory. She checked under the stalls, nearly breaking her back in the process. Coast was clear. She dug her nails under the window and lifted it open. She cautiously climbed out, careful to not get stuck or injure herself. Once she was out, she ran as quickly as her old legs let her to the front of the building and met up with Jeremy. He always waited for her.

"Jeremy, you need to be more silent!" She scolded. "You'll get us caught!"

"Oh, Anette." He chuckled. "You always say that, yet I am never caught. Let's just meet up with the chief."

The chief resided in the agency headquarters, which was disguised as a cosmetics company to trick the Regulars. The Regulars were normal, non-superhero people, who were unaware of the presence of superheroes in society. All of the important superheroes lived in the headquarters. At one point, so did Anette and Jeremy. They moved out, as the retirement home was much more pleasant.

They made their way to the front doors of the building. Before they could go in, they had to present themselves to the usual guard.

"Identification?" He asked. He was young, wearing a black tuxedo and sunglasses that concealed his eyes.

Anette and Jeremy flashed him their official superhero cards, or OSCs, and the security guard jammed a key in the keyhole and let them in.

The headquarters was incredibly high-tech, with ultra fast elevators and artificial intelligence instead of secretaries.

Anette and Jeremy didn't have time to check in, and briskly rushed towards the elevator. They were zoomed up to the 172nd floor, where the chief was situated.

The elevator opened into the chief's office, where he was seated at a desk. He was maybe fifty, with a toupee placed awkwardly on his bald head, and it fooled absolutely no one.

"Anette. Jeremy." He intoned in a deep baritone voice. "I have an easy case for you today. Simple bank robbery; nothing you two can't handle."

They nodded.

"You ready?"

They nodded again. When it came to the chief, you only spoke when absolutely necessary. In fifty years of working for the agency, many chiefs had come and gone, but Jeremy and Anette had spoken a measly one sentence to each.

"Then get in the pod!" He bellowed.

Jeremy and Anette raced to the pod. The pod was a cylindrical transportation device designed for quick travel. They shuffled in, the automatic doors closing behind them with a hiss.

A lady’s animatronic voice spoke. It was cool and soft.

“Verbal identification, please.” It spoke.

“Anette Adamson.” Anette replied.

“And Jeremy Adamson.” Jeremy added.

A series of beeps vocalized as the machine calculated their mission. “Jeremy Adamson and Anette Adamson, reporting to tend to a bank robbery at Bernard McGee Bank. Suspects are a 37-year-old female and a 37-year-old male. Unidentified as of now.” The voice explained.

“Team Guess.” Anette muttered through gritted teeth. Even though they were unnamed, the couple had dealt with the vulgar Team Guess for many years. The thing with them was that one could never predict what they would do. One day they could plot to collapse the entire economic system, the next they could try kidnapping a tree. It was always a game with those two.

“Ready?” The voice asked.

“Yes.” Jeremy and Anette answered confidently.

The pod shook from under their feet, gathering speed and strength. The shaking progressed, and soon they could not even stand upright! Suddenly, the vibrations stopped at an abrupt halt, and Anette and Jeremy knew they had arrived.

These superheroes didn’t have costumes or superpowers. They were more like detectives, using deductive reasoning to solve mysteries and crime.

They climbed out of the pod, where they were on the sidewalk in front of the Bernard McGee Bank. There was commotion, with bank tellers screaming, some pedestrians sobbing, panic stricken, as others dawdled obliviously, and police scratching their heads in confusion. Then, in the center of it all, was none other than Team Guess. They may have been wearing masks, but there was not a doubt in Anette or Jeremy’s mind that it was them.

“What do we do?” Jeremy asked Anette. She was usually the one to get the ball rolling.

Anette stared into the distance, the gears in her mind shifting to form a coherent idea.

“Here’s the plan.” She announced, whispering to Jeremy.

Jeremy nodded, ready to take action.

Anette dove into action, sprinting to the doors of the bank. Police tape blocked off the entrance.

“You can’t go in there, ma’am.” The officer ordered.

Anette disregarded him, jumping over the tape with the height and velocity of a kangaroo.

“Ma’am!” The officer called, chasing after her. “Get out right now!”

Anette refused, dashing to the ATMs. After years of being a superhero, she had become a natural at hacking ATMs. (She only used this skill for good, of course.)

She punched in a code, and the machine dispensed a handful of cash.

“Ha ha!” Anette teased. “I stole this money, and there’s nothing you can do about it!”

The officer’s face turned red, and his fists were clenched.

“Any other officers, turn your attention to the psycho in the building!” The officer demanded. Soon enough, the attention was redirected at Anette.

Meanwhile, back on the sidewalk, Jeremy was faced with two robbers and a gaggle of onlookers. His first priority was to get rid of any witnesses.

He did as Anette instructed. Using an old-school approach, he politely asked the Regulars to leave, as it was dangerous. Almost all of them abided, except for one.

There was always one stubborn onlooker who just never understood!

“Sir, I need you to leave.” Jeremy asked kindly.

The boy was a teenager, who obviously knew absolutely nothing about what to do in the event of a bank robbery.

“No! This is cool. I want to film a fight and put it on the Internet. I’ll get famous!” He exclaimed.

Jeremy rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Please, just leave. It’s for your own safety.” Jeremy pleaded.

“No!” The boy was growing angry. “I won’t! Besides, what’re you going to do about it, old man?”

That was like a slap in the face to Jeremy. He had to resist the urge to strangle the boy right there and then. He swallowed the urge, and did as protocol suggested.

Jeremy unbuttoned his coat and pulled out a faux FBI identification card. Of course it wasn’t real, but it was an exact replica.

The boy gasped. “I-I’m s-sorry!” He stammered.

“Just go, before I have you arrested.” Jeremy roared.

The boy scrambled away. Part of being a superhero was acting.

Jeremy turned to face Team Guess. They were nowhere in sight.

Damn it, He thought. We’re too late.

Jeremy had to think on his feet. He scanned the sidewalk, but the twins were out of sight.

Jeremy ducked into the bank, where Anette was being restrained by police officers.

“Jeremy!” She called. “Go! Find the twins! Bring them to justice!”

Jeremy nodded, and pulled out his hand from his pocket. His watch served as a watch, a pager, and a tracker. The GPS showed that the twins were already at the villain headquarters.

Jeremy gulped. He couldn’t face all of them on his own!

There was no time to call for backup. He dashed down the streets as fast as possible, following the path on his GPS.

He came to the villain headquarters, located in an abandoned dump. Team Guess was celebrating with the other villains present. Jeremy snarled in disgust.

“Hey, you.” He called in a deep voice. “Return that money.”

The twins, with their sandy hair and green eyes, laughed at him.

“You think you can stop us?” The girl, Nancy, mocked.

“You can’t do anything, you old fart!” The boy, Nathan, taunted.

The villains cackled wickedly.

Jeremy had no choice but to resort to calling the agency for backup. He paged the others on his watch.

“Oh, look at that.” Nancy coaxed mockingly. “He can’t fight us, so he has to call for backup.”

Jeremy was infuriated. Before he could do anything, Nathan pinned him against the gate of the junkyard, and the other villains followed.

Jeremy fought to unrestraint himself, but couldn’t. He was no match. The herd of villains laughed.

In less than a second, a hulking fist came flying at Jeremy’s face. His eyes watered, and his nose throbbled. Blood trickled down his chin.

“Look at him.” Nancy teased. “You call yourself a superhero?”

“Ha!” Another one chuckled. “Might as well just strangle him.”

Nathan’s hand clutched at Jeremy’s throat, and Jeremy found himself gasping for breath. The villains laughed and encouraged it.

Jeremy recalled a tactic, and kneed Nathan right in the gut. He collapsed to the floor, and Jeremy escaped.

Jeremy lunged towards the sack of money, grabbing it in his arms. The villains chased him as he ran out.

Jeremy may have had a head start, but they were gaining on him.

A heavy-set villain jumped on top of Jeremy, kicking him to the ground.

The other villains grabbed the money from him, cheering.

Just as all hope seemed lost, Jeremy spotted a pod in the corner. Agency superheroes marched out, and an entire battle happened as Jeremy slowly fought for consciousness on the ground.

He tried to keep his eyelids open, but they were growing heavier. The background noise silenced, and the lights grew dim. His eyes closed. Unconscious.

Later, Anette hastily ran into the hospital room of the agency headquarters, where injured heroes resided to regain their strength. She found her husband, awake on his bed, with a nurse tending to him.

“Jeremy!” She exclaimed, relieved. She met him at his bedside.

“Anette, how are you?” He asked, confused. “What happened? Did the twins get away?”

Anette sighed. “Jeremy, that battle happened yesterday. You’ve been unconscious for an entire day.”

“Nothing I haven’t done before.”

Anette chuckled. “Nurse, can I take him? The chief wants to see us.”

“Actually, I was just about to discharge him.” She replied. “He’s all yours.”

Jeremy got changed out of his hospital gown, and he and Anette rode the elevator up to the 172nd floor.

The door opened into the chief’s office.

“Jeremy. Anette.” He said by way of greeting. “Take a seat; we need to talk.”

Jeremy and Anette seated themselves at the chief’s desk.

“Your performance has been down. Luckily, we were able to imprison the villains from yesterday, but you two certainly wouldn’t have been able to do it on your own. You’re no longer the superheroes you were before.” He berated. “That’s a problem. A *very serious* problem.”

They gulped. Melancholy swelled in them. Would they be fired?

They waited, in distress, for the chief to continue.

“Then again, that’s expected. You’re old; much older than our other heroes.” He explained. “I think it’s time I take you off duty. You two, instead of fighting villains, will be teaching superhero classes to new recruits.”

Anette and Jeremy sighed, in relief. After all, they were old. Their bodies couldn’t take much more fighting.

“You two are some of my best heroes.” He complimented. “Teach your skills. Your strategies. Help educate the next generation of heroes.”

They nodded.

“You’re dismissed.”

The two stumbled back to the retirement home. Just as they were about to walk in, Anette spoke up.

“Are you happy with this?” She asked.

Jeremy sighed. “Yes.”

Anette smiled. “Me too.”

They pushed open the doors of the retirement home, and the smell of delectable green beans and mashed potatoes wafted through the air. They lived out the rest of their lives in the retirement home, just as any old couple would.

Unlike any old couple, they also taught superhero classes. After all, heroism is ageless.

WINNER (GRADE 9-10)

Casey Kisielewski - *Isn't it Extraordinary?*

Imagine everything we cannot see.

Imagine what’s right in front of your eyes, but is invisible to them. Imagine what is just beyond your line of sight. Imagine what you can’t see beyond walls, and past barriers. Imagine what is happening around you. In the air, the wind blows, but there is no evidence. It’s strong, and it’s forceful, but there’s no way to see it coming. Imagine looking down a straight road; a path going on forever, making circles around the globe when you walk it. Imagine watching the road grow thinner the further it went on, and imagine seeing the Earth curve at the end of your vision. Imagine the way the air would steadily fade whiter as the path grew longer. Imagine seeing nothing farther. Imagine what is there. Imagine how you wouldn’t see it. Imagine it just beyond your grasp. Think of your surroundings, and notice the way they’re placed. Notice the walls, the doors. Notice anything blocking part of your sight. Notice anything taking up a lot of space. Notice anything taking up space... Notice anything you can... Notice anything. And imagine what’s behind it. Think of what’s around you, but just beyond your sight; just barely out of your line of vision. Imagine everything that is invisible. Imagine everything just beyond your reach. Imagine everything that’s floating right in front of you. Imagine what’s past your line of sight. Imagine what’s around you. Imagine everything right in front of your eyes. Imagine everything you cannot see.

Imagine everything happening now.

The world is very large. It’s a place with many wonders; with many disasters. The world has many mistakes. The world has many successes. The world also, however, is always happening. The things that happen to us day-to-day are only glimpses, of everything else. You have your own life, as everyone does. But yours is special, right? Everyone’s life is special. Nobody is exactly the same, no matter how hard you might try to convince yourself otherwise. When you take a break and stay home, or go to sleep, what are you breaking from? You pause for the world. The world does not pause for you. When you are asleep, the night goes quiet. The lights of the city shut down, and the stores close, and the people sleep. You sleep. But half the world is waking up. You get into bed and say that it’s the end of the day. But, imagine everything that happens while you are asleep. Imagine the jobs being done while you lay in bed. Imagine how life doesn’t stop. Imagine every place you’ve wanted to go, and imagine what is happening there, now. Imagine how something is happening everywhere. Imagine how time is always moving forward. Imagine how every person has a life as intricate and complex as your own. Imagine how every single person is doing something now. Imagine how every single life is moving forward at the same speed as your own. Imagine how the world is ever-turning, and how it dares not rest. Imagine what

is happening now.

Imagine what has happened.

Imagine history that you know. Imagine history that you do not. Imagine history that nobody knows. Everybody knows about something that has happened, be it to themselves or otherwise. Think of how schools teach history based on the nation they’re in. Think of how everyone should know something about their country’s past. Imagine, now, what it was like a long time ago. Imagine a time before countries. Imagine when the world was all there was, without labels put on its separate parts. Think of the people that lived. Think of the groups of people; the families and the communities that were. Think of how they lived their lives together as we do today. Think of how so many years of evolution haven’t changed the way we interact. Imagine what happened. Imagine how they lived. Imagine how so many people have lived on the same Earth as we do, and how we know absolutely nothing about them. Think of what not a single soul can recall. We pick up clues from history that help us to understand groups of people. We don’t know anything about the individuals. There’s no way of knowing about the people who have been. Imagine everyone who has come and gone, unrecorded. Now forgotten. Imagine, we walk the same land the people walked long ago. We live our lives the same way. Imagine the people that we’ll never know, and imagine what they’ve done. We know few great names in history, and our knowledge, even of them, is blunt. Imagine the communities that were. Imagine the lives that have been. Imagine the things that were done. We can’t know about the people who lived unrecorded, but we can always imagine. So imagine the lives of the people long ago. Imagine the history you know, and imagine what you don’t. Imagine history that nobody knows. Imagine what has happened.

Imagine what we don’t know.

Don’t think. Take a second to breathe. Forget everything you know. Forget logic and common sense. We aren’t trying to remember, we’re trying to imagine. Look around you. Notice what you see. Don’t think too hard, only acknowledge what you perceive. Take a breath. And a deeper one. Now imagine what you could know. Imagine everything you are capable of figuring out, and everything you will know. Imagine all of the time you have. Think of the different ways you can see things. Imagine everything you could know. Imagine it again. Imagine everything you are capable of learning, and everything you are capable of discovering. Try, now, to think of what we do know; what people have already taken the liberty of discovering for us. The largest discoveries have already been made. Imagine, at the time, they weren’t discoveries that were thought to have needed making. Nobody had the faintest idea. They thought they had already discovered everything. Imagine now, how we can still discover worlds of ideas. We won’t know what needs to be discovered until we’ve discovered it, and only then will we realize what we hadn’t known now. Take a second to breathe. Don’t think. Only imagine. Imagine what hasn’t been done yet. Imagine what we might never know. Imagine how we think we know everything, but how that’s what they’d always thought. Forget logic and common sense and everything else unimportant. Forget everything you know. Take a second to breathe. Don’t think. Imagine what you don’t know.

Imagine what’s outside your grasp.

Imagine the feeling when you forget what you were going to say in the middle of a sentence. Imagine when you reach for something, and it just doesn’t brush your fingertips, when it’s just out of reach. Imagine when you smell something incredibly familiar, but you can’t remember what it is. Imagine when something is barely outside of your grasp. Imagine the way that feels. Imagine how it doesn’t reach you the way you’d like it to. Imagine everything that’s outside your grasp, barely missing your fingertip when you reach for it. Imagine all the things you’re familiar with, but you just can’t place. Imagine everything that makes you feel this way. Imagine what’s outside your grasp. Imagine what’s beyond.

Imagine what you can’t.

Imagine. Imagine to your heart's content, until you can't any longer. Imagine until there can't be anything left to imagine. Imagine every place, and every scenario, every time and every variation; everything that hasn't been imagined. Imagine all the things. Imagine everything there is to imagine, and keep going until you've imagined it all. There's no way to do this, though. Infinite possibilities mean infinite imaginations, and sadly, unfortunately, there is not enough time for that. At some point you will run into a dead end, because you've exhausted your imagination. You will loop back around to the same thoughts you started with. No matter how long you try, your ideas will continue to fade. No person could imagine everything, because there is simply no time to do it. Imagine, now, why your imagination came to a halt. Imagine what you forgot to imagine. Imagine the sections you didn't think of, and imagine the perspectives you forgot to see from. Imagine what you didn't, and imagine all over again. Imagine the things you hadn't thought of imagining, and this time, imagine more. There are no barriers to the imagination – only tiredness. Now imagine what you just couldn't. Imagine everything you did, and imagine what you didn't. Imagine what you will imagine. Imagine what you might not. Imagine what you can't.

Imagine what's out there.

We have limited perspective on things. We're not to blame, but as humans, our perception is faulty. Society makes it clear what's true and what's not. We've been taught how to trust the truth versus a lie. We have also generally been taught, that myths are lies. We've been told that legends are just old bedtime stories. Imagine how the world itself is a mystery to us, even after we've been living here for millennia. We debate things like whether or not the Kraken is real, because it's so obvious to people that their opinion is right. Imagine the ocean. Imagine the vastness. Imagine the 95% that hasn't been discovered, and what lives inside. Imagine the waters that still have yet to be explored, and imagine what we have yet to find underneath the surface. Imagine the possibilities. Imagine the variables. Think of the way we fear myths and legends, and how we've never proven that they aren't true. Imagine now, the stars. Imagine the way they fill the sky at night, scatter across the expanse of the darkness. Imagine how they dance. Imagine what lies within them. Imagine the worlds we can't begin to place. Imagine every possibility that lies in the stars. Imagine the Earth. Imagine the oceans. Imagine the stars. Imagine what's further. Imagine what's out there.

Imagine life.

Imagine every person. Imagine who you know. Imagine yourself. Life, as we know it, is large. It's beyond our comprehension. But just because something is beyond comprehension, it never means it's beyond imagination. Nothing is beyond imagination. Imagine the way you move. Imagine the way you walk, the way you breathe. Imagine how we live without thinking about it. Imagine how we talk mindlessly, and effortlessly, and imagine how we do it. Imagine your life. Imagine your mind. Imagine, now, the rest of the world. Imagine the life, sprouting from the Earth. Imagine the colours. Imagine the greenness of the grass, and the reds of the roses. Imagine the rainforest, and the desert, and imagine the mountain tops. Imagine how the world is bursting with life. Imagine the way that life thrives wherever it's placed. Imagine how it works with what it has. Imagine how we live with what we've got. Imagine how the world is interdependent. Imagine how your life could never work without other lives, to provide love, or to provide food and water. Imagine how beautiful life is. Imagine how precious. Imagine yourself, and your beliefs; imagine your loves and your hates. Imagine the way you talk, and the way you move. Imagine how unique you are. Look around. Look at the world. Look at the life everywhere. Look at it thrive. Imagine the grasses and the trees. Imagine the flowers. Imagine the plants. Imagine all the people of the world. Imagine yourself. Imagine those you know. Imagine those you don't. Imagine every person. Imagine all the life.

Imagine the little things.

Imagine the way the world turns. Imagine the way people smile. Imagine the cars driving past on the roads. Imagine sailors at sea. Imagine what makes you happy. Imagine the way the bees buzz. Imagine the way the birds chirp. Imagine the way the world falls silent at night. Imagine how the stars dance. Imagine the dark

between the stars. Imagine how the rain falls on a cloudy day. Imagine how the drops ripple in puddles. Imagine how the sky turns purple when the sun is just right. Imagine the greens of the trees. Imagine the whiteness of the sky on a misty day. Imagine the waves breaking on the shore of the beach. Imagine starfish washing up. Imagine the things that make people happy. Imagine the way people laugh.

Isn't it extraordinary?

Imagination has no end.

Imagine what you can and what you can't. Imagine to your heart's content.

Imagine the big things and the little things. Imagine all you can.

Imagine.

Keep imagining.

Don't stop.

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADE 9-10)

Blaze Cucksey - *Every Breath*

Eyes lose focus, numbness spreads, heart palpitations increase, and my courage escapes me. Standing here, amidst so many people, I feel my wits draining away as my fellow teammates stretch and prepare themselves. Obviously I should do the same but I am frozen in place, staring at everything I compare myself to: their athletic ability, confidence, and social grace. How I wish I had those qualities to my name, qualities that have always seemed to elude me. Now is not the time to focus on my imperfections though, but to strive to surpass those I deem superior. If I push myself hard enough, I could win this race and finally reap the respect I have hungered for so long. At the thought of this I wake from my trance and join the other girls, eager to prove just how determined I am.

In each specific practice I keep up with the leaders of these drills, sometimes even surpassing them. This will later attest to my lack of energy, but for now I want to stay ahead and feel that ounce of dignity that comes with leading a group of people. So, I continue on, and no later is our coach calling us to have a pre-race discussion. Again my nerves jump and I feel my body tense up, my stomach curdles and fear transforms itself into my motivation. I must succeed, I must win, and I must push myself as hard as I can, even if that means there will be consequences afterwards. This one race means so much to me, yet when I look back I didn't prepare half as much as I should have to appease these desires. My unhealthy food decisions, the mere six hours of sleep I accumulated, and my irregular workout routine. How foolish I am to want this grand accomplishment, yet I need this victory even more than before.

"Alright everyone, settle down. As you know, today's race is particularly important for us to advance into the finals. With that said, I need you all to give everything you've got and nothing less. Do you understand?" Said my coach, anxiously looking at each of our faces individually. When his eyes get to mine I feel a sharp pain of guilt run through my body. Deep down I know that he is directly implying for the weaker members, like myself, to work harder. I don't want to let him down, or anyone else for that matter, but I doubt I will meet his expectations. My legs begin to tremble once again and I take a step back, reconsidering my being here. Is this race worth all of this pressure? Slowly I back away, when all of a sudden I am pulled into a huddle and they begin to chant:

“We are the victors, faster than the rest...” (*But I am not that fast*)

“Today we’re gonna win, and we aren’t even stressed...” (*My skin loses colour as I begin to think about the race*)

“We train everyday, so put our skills to the test...” (*Homework gets in the way of some practices*)

“We will be the victors, ‘cause we are the best!”

Once the final word “best” was yelled, the group of people dissolved. I was left standing alone, in a damp field, caked in mud, as a light rain drizzled onto the heads of about three hundred runners, all of whom were with their teams in identical clothing, smiling to one another as they proceeded to their starting positions. If I had the time, I would ask why they were smiling when they were about to run a long distance race, on uneven terrain, against a hundred or so girls competing for the same medal, but since I did not I simply went to the back of my team’s racing lines and dealt with my anxieties privately.

The Race

A dreadful quiet lingers in the air, the rain begins to fall harder, and everyone is in a fixed position looking dead ahead, awaiting the starting pistol. Every nerve in my body is on edge, and the tension on my muscles is almost unbearable, so much so that it restricts my ability to properly intake oxygen. Without a sufficient amount of air I become lightheaded, my hands and feet feel numb, and I am more fearful of what this race entails than ever. I attempt to regain feeling by rubbing my hands together and jumping on the spot, but eyes soon land on me and I cease to continue my efforts. So, here I am, nervously shaking yet frozen to the ground.

Then, without warning I hear “on your marks, get set.” This is it, now is the time to prove myself. I need to win so as to finally be accepted, to feel equal to a team I know I have not earned to be amongst. There is so much pressure on my shoulders, even though I will one day learn that this pressure was only put there by me. Maybe it will be worth it. Maybe I will win, or maybe this pain will be for nothing.

My senses are accelerated as my body jerks forward; the pistol has fired. Girls push and dart forward as they sprint to the front of the pack. Mud splashes all over our calves and already some people have soaked their shoes. After dodging a series of holes and puddles I have made my way to the leading group of girls, with over a hundred people behind me all gunning to be where I am. For a fleeting moment, after reaching the top of a hill, I feel as if I might actually have a chance at winning this race. A moment, which left as soon as it had come. I begin to realize that I am not at the front anymore but now behind by quite a few people, neck and neck with one of my own teammates. She continues her pace and is now ahead of all of us. I look at her in awe, wanting more than anything to keep such a pace, but with every step I take I lose just a bit more of my will to push forward. My left foot has lost its spring, my right knee is in agony, my arms are heavy, and my vision is becoming unfocused.

I’m running in a fog, my physical pain molds itself into yet another barrier before me, blocking the finish line and distancing myself from first place. Since I cannot see clearly, all of my other senses have intensified, specifically my hearing. With every footstep that draws nearer I can hear the crunch of the gravel underneath the other runners, the splash of the mud they must step through, and each breath they exhale. Then I must wonder: what do they hear from me? Every step I take is irregular, and my breathing sounds as if I had a whistle in my throat. How could anyone take me seriously whilst I am making a fool of myself... again. I try to run away from this image, but I never seem to be fast enough to escape what others think of me. This never-ending race against my anxieties regarding the opinions of others is unbearable, and at the moment is certainly taking a toll on my energy, alongside my will to continue onwards. So, I now find myself finished one-fourth of the course, and already my sense of purpose has left me to fend against this race alone.

Looking up, the group I was in has spread out and there are just a few feet between each girl. Feet, which become tens of meters. No longer can I see anyone close by, but I cannot for the life of me push away the feeling that there is someone right behind me. I can feel her breath on the back of my neck, no, *their* breath. There are more girls, a group of them, probably all on the same team. They were waiting for the right opportunity to surpass me and leave me in their dust. They won’t even hide their satisfaction, but will glance at me with a look a racer despises above all else; pity. Their eyes will show it all, and I will feel that crushing disappointment yet again of being worse than not one, but of a group of girls.

I prepare myself to be outrun, yet there is silence. I turn around and no one is close by or even in sight for that matter. A shiver runs up my spine; my paranoia is getting the best of me. I was almost positive there were girls behind me, I could hear them! Closing my eyes, I try to relax my nerves and calm the thoughts that seem to be using more energy than the race itself, yet to no avail. I open my eyes but they are almost just as good as being closed. Everything is blurry, and no later is a splitting headache forming in the back of my mind. I glance back at the blurred world behind me to see if anyone is looking, and with no one there I allow myself to run with a limp for a minute or so. The knee that was beforehand in pain, has now locked up and shoots what feels like fire up my leg. This race has transformed itself into a battle against myself.

As the time passes and I manage to continue on through the race I notice my coach up ahead on the sidelines. He’s cheering us on, and even shouts encouragement towards me specifically. It feels empowering to have someone say your name and cheer for just you. I try to smile in reply, and almost manage doing so. When I am closer in sight even he can tell something is not right.

“Is everything okay?” He seems genuinely worried.

“Sir, I’m not sure if I can do this.” Saying this out loud forces me to feel a whole other level of shame. After all of the practices, time spent worrying and focussing on today’s race, how can I let him as well as my team down?

“Well, just make it to the half-way mark and see how you feel then.” I can tell he doesn’t want me to give up either, but I now face the choice between quitting and not finishing the race, or risking my physical safety and most likely finishing close-to last place. I could continue onwards, while more and more girls surpass me, and be the last one on my team to finish, forcing them to wait for their “weak player”. Or, should I stop running now, and escape while I still can, with dignity and enough energy to leave unnoticed. Essentially I’m at a crossroads: do I finish last or do I run *from* this race?

The Decision

Shallow breaths, soaked shirt, dried mud, and a subtle noise off in the distance intensifying with every step. The crowds of parents, coaches, and fellow teammates are cheering with all their might, trying to encourage us onwards as they scream our names and call out the schools we represent. If I were in better condition I would -like every other runner - find comfort in their cheers and have a surge of motivation. But... I am not, and with sinking spirits I’ve come to realize that I couldn’t possibly achieve what I set out to accomplish. I wanted to be first, to beat my teammates and prove myself to my coach. I wanted to be so much more, but with every minute that passes, more of my strength deserts me.

Up ahead the path is opening as the trees begin to thin, making room for the hundreds of faces ready to stare at me as I jog past them (*my heartbeat quickens*). Before I had the protection of the trees to shield me from onlookers (*I look to my right and see a faded path that leads to the road*). Now, I will be exposed in my most naked form; weak, scared, and exhausted (*if I take this path I won’t have to face them*). Before I become visible to the crowd, I close my eyes and take one final breath. I’m at a crossroads, torn between whether I should leave or continue what I’ve started. There are only two choices I can make, one that I will choose, and less than a minute to decide. When my eyes reopen, it is clear what I must do. Letting go of my fears, I run in the right direction.

WINNER (GRADE 11-12)

Saihaj Rehsi - *The Life of a Sikh Kid*

He was just a boy. He was just a teen. He was just a man. But they saw him as someone else.

He was just four. It was September 11, 2001 and he was in America. The twin towers had just come down, and people were watching the towers fall with anxiety in their eyes. His teacher turned on the radio in the class, and listened to the commentary. Even though they were only four, she saw the way the other children looked at him. He was the only Sikh kid, let alone the only brown kid in the class. His appearance set him apart from the other kids, ones he called friends. And the teacher saw. She saw everyone's eyes dart to him when the word 'terrorist' was mentioned on the radio. She called his mom, and told her to come pick him up. She wanted to make sure he would be safe, not only from the children, but also the parents who came to pick them up. He was only four.

He was just six. He now lived in Canada, a more accepting country they said. He was playing with his classmates all laughing alongside him as they played around the classroom. They were playing spies and he put up his finger guns, because he was supposed to shoot the bad guy. The teacher saw him and was horrified. She sent him to the principal's office. He sat there quietly as the principal scolded him. He sat there while his friends, who had been doing the same thing, continued playing in the classroom. He didn't really know what he did wrong, but he knew that he did something wrong. He wondered why the other kids weren't in trouble. Why was it just him? He was only six.

He was just nine. He was playing with some neighbourhood friends, when one of their moms came out. They were just playing with a soccer ball, nothing too intense. She came running out and told her kid to come inside. The kid asked her why, and she said that she didn't want him playing with those types of kids. Her son asked which types, and her eyes darted over to him. He was standing there, with his head tilted as if he were asking what he did wrong. Was it because he was younger than them? Or maybe because he was brown, and they were both white. The mom told her kid to come inside, and she said that he could invite the other white kid to come in, but not him. He stood outside, as his friends looked at him with sad faces and went inside to go play without him. He was only nine.

He was just eleven. He was at school minding his own business, when someone random passing by in the halls said something. The white boy said "Is Osama bin Laden your uncle?" He didn't react. He wanted to punch him in the face, but his upbringing reminded him that it was wrong, regardless of what the other said or did. Luckily, a teacher passing by at the same time heard what the white boy said, and took the two boys to the principal's office. The principal suspended the white boy for a few days and commended the brown boy for not lashing back. She said that as a person of colour, she would never allow anyone to say anything like that in her school. After he left her office, he began to think. Would it be different if she were white too? What would've happened if he had retaliated? What would've happened if the teacher hadn't heard what the white boy had said? Would it go unnoticed, like all of the other things said to him? He went home that day, and cried in his mother's arms. He was only eleven.

He was just fourteen. He was now in high school, surrounded by people who had the same skin colour as him. He was happy to be surrounded by people who looked like him, as he knew what it was like to be an outcast. Now that he was grown up, he understood all of the things that had happened to him in the past. He understood why, but he still couldn't help but be disappointed in what the world had become. He was in the parking lot of his school, waiting for his dad to pick him up, when it happened. A parent drove by and shouted, "Get out of my country!" He stared, astonished at what the man had said. He had been living here all his life,

and for someone to say something like that to him, was both baffling and normal. His friend who was standing with him, looked up at him with shock written over his face. The boy just shrugged at his friend's shocked face. "It happens to me all the time," said the boy to his friend. His friend wouldn't have it. "Aren't you going to do something about it?" The boy looked at the cars driving on the road, and then gazed at his friend. "What do you suggest I do?" The friend was bewildered at this point. "Go tell the teacher or something!" With a stoic look on his face, the boy looked at the sky and said, "and then what? Maybe they'll look up his license plate, and they find him. Then they ask him to come in, maybe get the police involved. Then what happens? Nothing Dragomir. Nothing is going to happen. People like me don't get apologies". "But I'm the immigrant here!" said Dragomir. "Doesn't matter Drag, look at you and look at me. It's always going to be me". Dragomir looked at his friend, and saw that he was just looking at the sky. He quickly realised how common this was to his friend. He quickly realised that he was only fourteen.

He was just eighteen. He was on vacation with his family, in the capital of his country. His country was supposed to be a very accepting place, therefore you would expect the same from their citizens. He was walking around in a market, having just bought a fresh apple. He was eating his apple and walking around with his older cousin, when a random man approached them. He asked them what they were wearing on their heads, and they told him that they were wearing turbans. At first he seemed interested in learning more, as he was asking about their religion and how to recognize someone who was Sikh. He said his goal was to talk to many people and unite everyone. At first the boy and his cousin thought that this man meant no harm, however they were too quick to judge. The man began talking about how he wanted to unite the world under Jesus. He was surprised to find out that the boys didn't believe in Jesus, as there was no mention of him in his holy book. The man soon became furious, and began shouting at them because they didn't believe in Jesus. He told them to go back to their own country, because everyone should believe in Jesus. The man then stormed away, shouting profanities at them. The two boys looked at each other, at the passersby, at the man who stormed away and they both shrugged their shoulders. To them it was normal. To him, this was normal. It had happened more times than he could count, and funny enough, he was only eighteen.

He was used to this kind of thing happening to him since he could even talk. He never knew why at the beginning, but he soon realised that this was his own reality. And he met some who shared the same fate as him, and others who couldn't even fathom what it felt like to be in his position. He knew that for the rest of his life, he was going to be facing these sorts of situations every day. He knew his kids would face this sort of thing every day, because the world doesn't change and neither do the people living on it. He knew that for generations to come, his people would face what he himself was facing today. He was just a boy. He was just a teen. He was just a man. But they always saw him as someone else.

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADE 11-12)

Lily Boughton - *The Gatekeeper*

I do not live alone.

For a while, I thought I did. But I have come to notice things that don't make very much sense, things that shouldn't happen. Moved objects that I never touched, mostly.

I often wake up to sunlight streaming through my open window, despite the fact that I always make sure to close the blinds at night. Sometimes, after I do the dishes, I come back a few hours later to find a second glass drying beside mine. Several times, I've come downstairs to find Misty, my collie, happily devouring one of her treats. But I keep the box of treats in one of the highest kitchen cabinets.

It's strange, having a roommate I have never seen. I try to be friendly. I don't mind that my conversations are one-sided.

"Good morning," I say as I make breakfast. "How are you today? Thank you for opening the blinds again. I love waking up to sunshine."

I cross over to the table with my eggs and toast, picking my usual chair—the one with its back facing the wall. There are freshly picked daisies in a vase on the table. "Did you pick these? They're very pretty. I didn't know we had daisies near here."

My days are filled with moments like this. I pass my time in the garden. I paint landscapes and write poetry, bake cookies and watch birds. No matter what I do, I try to speak out loud.

"I didn't like it here at first," I admit one day as I'm painting a view of the forest outside. "I was lonely, because my house is so far away from everyone I know. But I don't feel so lonely with you here. Thank you," I add, "for being here."

"I wish I knew your name," I say the next evening as I get ready for bed. There's a bouquet in the bathroom now, roses and little white flowers with petals shaped like hearts. "You do so many lovely things for me and I don't even know who you are. Misty loves you, by the way," I add, glancing across the hall at her, curled up on the edge of my bed. "I'm sure she would love to thank you for the cookies."

A grey sky and rain greets me instead of sunlight when I wake up the next morning. It's funny, I can't remember the last time it rained here. I stretch and climb out of bed, making my way to the kitchen for breakfast.

I pause in the hallway.

A little girl is standing at the dining room table, carefully pouring out two glasses of orange juice, her tongue sticking out slightly as she concentrates. I watch her for a moment, then take a few steps into the room.

"Hello?" I ask, a little cautiously.

She looks up, and immediately her face brightens. "Hi!" she exclaims. "I made you breakfast!" She dashes across the room and grabs my hand, pulling me towards the table, and I realize there are two plates set out.

"I don't know how to make eggs, but I made toast!"

The girl helps me sit down, then scrambles to sit in the chair opposite to me. She watches me eagerly, so I take a bite of the toast. It's a little butter-heavy, but perfectly toasted, so I can't help but smile.

"It's delicious," I say. "Thank you."

She looks very proud as she bites into her own toast and takes a sip of her orange juice. I watch her as I quietly chew my own breakfast.

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to," I say after a few moments, "but who are you? Why have you been picking flowers for me? And opening my blinds in the morning?"

"I'm Allison," she says. "I picked the flowers because I thought you would like them. And I opened your blinds so it wouldn't be dark when you woke up. You could get confused and think that it's still night and fall back asleep." The way she explains this is so matter-of-factly, like it could not be more obvious.

"It's good to finally meet you, Allison. I'm Elise."

She nods enthusiastically, taking another sip of juice.

"Are you lost?" I ask gently.

"Nope. I know exactly where I am."

"Oh. Is this your house, then?" Maybe she's a ghost.

She makes a face. "No. This is your house, you live here."

"Don't you also live here?"

This makes her pause. "I guess so," she says thoughtfully. "Maybe this *is* my house."

Then she looks at me, a touch of concern on her face. "Is that okay with you?"

"Of course it is." I say it without thinking, but it's true.

I quickly decide that being able to talk with Allison is far better than having one-sided conversations with an open room. I set up a second bedroom down the hall from mine, and she follows me around all day. I worry at first that she'll get bored, but she always manages to fill the day with lively chatter, bright ideas, and thoughtful gestures.

One day, while walking in the woods around the house, she tugs at my sleeve. "Ooh, you should do a painting of me when we get home!" she says.

I laugh. "I don't know about that. I'm not really that artistic. I don't know how to paint."

"Oh. Okay. Are you sure?"

"I can see if I have any paint tucked away somewhere, if you really want."

She turns to me and grabs my hand. "It's okay. You don't have to."

The next evening, we're sitting outside in the grassy field beside the house, watching the sun set. Allison stares at the sky silently, as if lost in thought. When she thinks I'm not looking, she glances at me.

I don't understand why she looks so sad.

"Are you okay, Allison?" I finally ask.

She seems surprised. "Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know, you just seem... sad."

She smiles. "Oh, Elise. You're so kind." She gets to her feet. "Most people... aren't as kind as you. You're very special, did you know that?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not going anywhere. But you? It's time for you to move on."

My forehead wrinkles. "Move on? Move on from what?"

"Elise," she says gently. "You've noticed that things don't make sense here."

My heart feels like it's twisting in my chest and a shiver goes down my spine. I try to laugh. "Why do you say that? Of course they do."

"This was a forest before."

"...What?"

"This field." She gestures around us. "It was a forest a few days ago. But today you said you wanted to take a walk in the field, and suddenly..." She drops her hands to her sides.

I try to think back, but I can feel a headache starting. "Allison..."

"Do you remember all the landscapes you painted?" she asks. "They're yours."

Are they? No, that's... that can't be right.

My head is pounding now.

Allison takes my hands and looks directly in my eyes. "It's okay, Elise," she says softly. "You created this, that's all. You created all of it—Misty, and the forest, and the sunshine every morning."

"I—I didn't... you don't..."

"It's okay."

I look around us, tears suddenly spilling down my cheeks. I don't understand. I don't... I don't understand what's going on. The house is gone. Misty is gone. The grass is dry and scratchy, which reminds me that it was raining this morning, but that *doesn't make sense*. How is that possible?

I look back at Allison, wearing a sad smile on her face. "I don't understand," I whisper. "Why is this happening? Where am I?"

She shrugs. "I don't know."

"But you said you knew exactly where you were!"

"I do." She pulls me closer and wraps me in a tight hug. "I'm here with you."

I can't help it. I cry as she presses her face into my shoulder. "You were so kind to me."

"No, Elise. *You* were kind to *me*. You gave me a dog to give treats to, a room to sleep in, a garden to pick flowers from, and... and a friend to spend time with." She grins as she pulls away. "You found yourself in the loneliest place in the universe and still found a way to put others above yourself." Then Allison squeezes my hand. "You don't have to do that anymore, Elise. You can rest now."

I laugh weakly as I lay down in the grass, tears still slipping down my face and clinging to my chin. "Am I dead?"

"Maybe." She weaves strands of grass loosely around my body, like she's tucking me into bed. There's an unexplainable comfort I feel, like the feeling of curling up after being on your feet all day.

"Have you done this before?"

"Yes."

She stands, brushes grass off her dress, and smiles at me one more time. "I have to say goodbye now, but I promise you—you'll be okay."

I watch as she lifts her hand towards the sky, and the warm colours of sunset darken until it's the purple of twilight, slowly fading to black.

"Allison?" I call.

"Yes?"

"Will you open the blinds in the morning?"

She gives a soft laugh. "Not anymore. But I can do the next best thing."

With another wave of her hand, hundreds of thousands of stars appear above me.

"Oh," I breathe.

Allison presses a soft kiss to my forehead as I close my eyes, already slipping into a deep, peaceful sleep.

"Goodnight, Elise."

And then she's gone.

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