



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

Franco Gutierrez is a graduate of the Masters of Teaching at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He currently serves as the Page Program Coordinator at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

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A banner featuring a dark background with a faint, repeating pattern of classical arches. The text 'SPEAKER'S' is in large, bold, yellow capital letters, and 'AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS' is in smaller, bold, white capital letters below it.

SPEAKER'S

AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS

2021 SPEAKER'S AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS

Grades 7-8

WINNER

Bhadra Thumpayil - *From One to Another*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Ysabella Yap - *A Writer's Tale*

Grades 9-10

WINNER

Beatrice Lew - *Family Photos*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Ramona Karimi - *A Woman's Fears*

Grades 11-12

WINNER

Blaze Cucksey - *The Ultimate Masquerade*

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Oyinloluwa Aderibigbe - *The Memory Book*

Lauren Macris - *A Trip to the Grocery Store During COVID-19*

WINNER (GRADES 7-8)

Bhadra Thumpayil - *From One to Another*

It began with a young girl. Her hazel curls bounced merrily that day as she ambled down the length of the field. The sky was a beautiful blue, with soft peaks of clouds resembling fairy floss dotting the sky. Birds chirped in the background, their trills accompanying the distant sound of a cow letting out a moo. A gentle gust of wind ever so slightly ruffled the leaves of the little oak sapling that lay cradled in the girl's arms. The girl gave a bright smile, one that shone down on the fragile little branches with the force of a thousand suns. She imagined how strong and tall the oak would grow to be. Her brother had always told her to be like an oak. Strong, fierce, yet unwavering and calm. Memories rushed past her eyes as the thought of her brother flitted through her head. Of her running on this very same field, with her brother right behind, both of them giggling and laughing. Of him sifting the flour for pancakes too quickly, a puff of the white powder settling on his cheek. Of the carriages rushing past on the paved streets as the girl and her brother sauntered through the bustling place known as Toronto, exploring almost every nook and cranny of the city, drinking in the sights and sounds. They had had great fun that day. The most recent memory of her brother then floated to the front of her mind. Of the whistle of a train piercing through the air as the tearful girl frantically waved to her brother, who was on board the train, fully suited in a military uniform. Both pairs of eyes were brimming with tears, but the departure was inevitable.

'I have to go fight in the war,' he'd told her earlier that day, 'to help the people. I'll write whenever I can. But until I return, can you stay strong for me?'

She'd nodded woefully, as an internal promise to never lose hope blossomed in her heart. The train started to pull out of the station, and the crowd on the platform all waved their hands, bidding farewell. Soon, the train's smoke engulfed the last car of the train, sweeping it out of sight.

That memory had happened two years before.

A light breeze shocked the girl back into reality just then, and her attention turned back to the sapling. Her smile faltered a bit, sadness tinging her expression. Softly, she placed the sapling down on the ground, crouching down so that her eyes would line up with the tiny little leaves. 'I'm Vera,' she whispered, in a tone as soft as a feather stroking the ground. 'Can you hear me, little oak?' Her voice had the lilt of someone who lived in the countryside, dripping thick with the sweetness of syrup.

Slowly, she used the shovel she'd brought to dig a small hole, scooping out the rich dirt bit by bit. The rhythmic sound of the shovel hitting the soil rang through her ears, as a few disobedient hazel strands came undone from the blue ribbon that secured them, drooping in front of the girl's eyes. The shovel dug up the last few bits of dirt, leaving a comfortable hole for the sapling to lay down its first roots. The girl clutched the bottom of the sapling, fingers digging into the pot it called home. Specks of dirt flecked across her calloused hands as she transferred the timid plant into the hole. With gingered movements, she used the soil to lock the sapling into place, all the while humming a sorrowful tune. Every so often, she smiled at the tree while toiling away, trying to wash it with a sense of comfort. When the last of the soil was in place, the girl leaned back, trying to dust away the dark brown earth staining her yellow skirt.

'Aunt Bessie will be awfully displeased when she sees how soiled the dress is. I did tell her that trousers would've been much better suited,' she remarked. Turning to the sapling, the girl reached out to finger one of the tender leaves. 'But no matter that. We're going to focus on helping you become big and strong. So that, when my brother comes home, he'll be able to see you in true splendour.'

She gave a wry glance to the now upright sapling. The smile on her face didn't quite reach her eyes, but something else shimmered in her dark green irises. Hope.

'Charlie's letter came last week. He says he is quite well, and that he hopes Aunt Bessie and I are too.' A sigh tumbled out of her lips. 'It is safe here, so I suppose I am alright. There are supply shortages, yet other places have it so much worse. Every day, troubling news comes our way. So many are perishing, leaving behind grieving families. This World War is disastrous. Even Mother had to go help. At least, Charlie and Mother are still alive. I am afraid to think what might happen to them.' Her gaze met the sky, letting the shining rays of sunlight bask on her face. 'For the time being, I'm here to pester Aunt Bessie. She crows that I'll give her a heart attack any day now, with my mischievous behaviour. The same thing always leaves her mouth, and it's that a fourteen-year-old young lady shouldn't spend her days getting her hands dirty in the field. I heartily disagree with her.' Yet another sigh wound its way into the girl's speech, carrying a melody of longing and despondency. 'I truly believe my kin will come home. But, until such a time comes, I'll aid you in your growth, my little oak. You'll be my beacon of light. You'll have nothing to fear, for I will be by your side.' Her fingers hovered over her pocket, snatching something with a newfound eagerness. A tiny wooden casket lay in one palm. Delicate designs were carved into the top of the rigid wood, while two metal hinges at the side allowed the casket's wooden mouth to open and close again. A beaten piece of paper unfurled in her other palm, with worn creases covering the white paper. Slightly smudged characters were etched on to the sheet, bringing it to life with words that were written by the girl's own hand. Carefully, she folded the paper, following the creases. A pop cracked the still air as the inside of the wooden box was revealed. Gently, the small, folded paper fluttered into the box, finding a home in the dark wood. The girl shut the lid, a satisfying snap sounding as the casket closed its jaws. Picking up the abandoned shovel, she dug a small hole into the soft earth, right in front of the infant oak. She plucked the casket from the ground and placed it into the hole, like it was a seed. Using two hands, she scooped the rich dug out soil, and covered the casket, 'till it could no longer be seen. With that, the girl heaved herself up, letting the worn shoes that adorned her feet touch the ground. She left behind traces of hope, a small yet powerful feeling, within the growing sapling's roots, and the casket that lay burrowed right in front of it. A yearning for her family to be whole again, for the world to be safe again. Even if that hope itself was dimmed like the sun setting in the girl's eyes as her brother got wounded at Vimy Ridge, as her mother was declared Missing in Action, it lay encapsulated in the emerging tree, living on to see a future in which the land was no longer plagued by war.

As time passed like the west wind, the sapling expanded, burying its hopeful roots into the ground to create a tangled network. Not many came across the ever expanding tree, as it was just a prop in the background as the world continued to morph into the future. The field the oak called home was disrupted, as paths were paved, snaking across the earth. Gone were the wispy long strands of green hair planted in the ground, with short rich grass in its place. Many walked down the paved paths, imprinting their footprint, leaving their mark. None of them ever paid attention to the not-so-little oak though. Until, one still and silent night. Leaves were fluttering to the ground, making a mirage of light oranges and fiery reds, tinged with the rare green. The moon was high in the sky, smiling down onto the nearly bare branches of the oak. The babble of a stream could be heard far out in the distance, decorating the otherwise barren atmosphere. Out by the edge of a particularly long trail, a shadowed figure was sauntering over to where the sturdy tree stood, a moody slouch taking over their form. With each step the person took, crunches echoed through the air, while the wind whistled a low tune. As they got closer to where the tree was, the moonlight peeled away the blanket of darkness cloaking the person's features. It was a boy no older than sixteen, with a blank expression plastered on their face. Startling gray eyes cut through the chilly atmosphere, staring straight ahead. His steps continued to imprint the path, causing leaves to fly and go awry. A backpack lay slung over his shoulder, hitting him in the back as he continued forward, almost as if to be a constant reminder of what he was about to do. Suddenly, the skid of sneakers could be heard. The boy had stopped completely, right in front of the tree. Slowly, his eyes came to face the rugged trunk. With a tentative pace, his fingers came to trace the ridges and grooves lining the tree. A slight hint of fascination glimmered in the boy's features, as he continued to peer at the tree. He did not know why he came upon this particular tree, why he found interest in it. All he knew was that some force tugged

him there. Dragging a hand across the wood, the boy found himself sitting down on the ground, a slight misery tinging his movements. He whipped his backpack around, settling it in his lap, before ripping open the zipper. The metal teeth parted, giving way to a small box and shovel tucked in the inside of the cloth. A hand shot into the bag, tearing out the box with a rage. Hot tears bloomed at the corner of his eyelids, before coming down in a torrential downpour. He ripped the lid from the box, tossing it aside with weakened force. The force dissipated as he extracted a stack of photos, clutching them until creases formed under his fingers. Salty water drops splotched on to the photo, drizzling down the coloured images. The top picture portrayed a family of three in front of a forest path. Everyone had bright smiles, with their arms wound around each other's shoulders. An outsider who might've taken a glance at the photo would probably think it was a happy family. But, the boy knew better. It was a family torn into bits and pieces. A broken family.

His broken family.

He threw the photos back into the box, as sobs racked his entire figure. Years and years he had spent, enduring the constant psychological abuse, hearing how he wasn't good enough, how nothing but failure awaited him. Sixteen years he had spent in that household, trying so hard to please parents who could never be pleased. They took all their anger out on him, berating him with harsh words, bringing him down with each verbal jab. Each tense, taut memory reeled through his mind as he placed the discarded lid back on the box, and took a hold of the shovel. The metal spade hit the rough dirt, poking a hole until chunks of soil were being dug out. That's when a thud sounded. Bewilderment crossed the boy's features as he reached in to pull out what his shovel had hit. Peering into the dark hole, he could discern a small rectangular like object. He yanked it out, like he was pulling a plug, trying to dislodge it from all clinging dirt. It was a casket, covering no more than his palm. Quite tiny for such a box. The cool, musty touch of its wood blanketed the skin it sat on, while bits of dirt still stuck on. The small box was scrutinised under a curious stare, eyes tracing over the intricate patterns, unable to figure out what exactly the box held. In two swift movements, the box's lid was popped open, revealing the folded paper contained inside. The boy ever so carefully opened the yellowed with age paper, intrigue burning in his eyes. The tattered paper unfurled, its edges falling apart at even the softest touch. Smudged scrawl covered the slip of paper, writing out a small note. A date was written in the corner, almost barely noticeable. The boy nearly gasped as the numbers registered in his head. *22 February 1917*, it read. Dated back over a hundred years ago. Amazement surged through his veins, as he read further, trying to make out the few words written. His peepholes scrunched up, trying to see through the haze of slightly smeared ink.

Hope. It's a bizarre thing, is it not? Even in the face of adversity, we can't help but hold onto a flickering flame of hope. Some may call it delusion. Perhaps it is at times. But that doesn't mean I won't ever stop hoping. Because, I believe, that hope gives you some semblance of strength and solace. For whatever trial you may be facing, have a little bit of hope. It will help, maybe even just a little bit, in finding a way. I know it will for me.

There was no signature anywhere. Just the message. The boy's own fire of hope leaped up as he finished the last sentence. He would be able to get through this, that much he knew now. He placed the casket back into the hole, thinking to himself how others might come upon it, just like he did. They too, might once again find hope they had once lost. It amazed the boy how a few simple words could make him feel this much. He looked up to the sky, thanking whoever had written this. Maybe they had found the way they were looking for. He hoped so.

With the calmness and strength of an oak, he whipped out a pen from the depths of his backpack. He scrawled a short message on the lid, before tucking it into the hole. One last final goodbye to his past. Maybe, someone would come across his words. Words of wisdom and strength from one to another. A mark. All laying under the oak tree.

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADES 7-8)

Ysabella Yap - *A Writer's Tale*

For those who, by their example, redefined the words "courage" and "heroism".

"If you were a bookworm, the library is the closest thing to magical," Minka delivered. "The library was a wide, circular room topped with a glass dome roof, allowing the sunlight to illuminate the place. There wasn't a speck of dust to spot on the emerald floor. The walls were painted to replicate a verdant landscape of rolling hills. Lofty marble pillars standing like sentinels shimmered as if they were polished daily and lined the walls alternately with ten-level bookshelves. Opposite the shelves, brown-stained wooden tables paired with cushion seats populate the middle section of the library for the guests."

Minka closed her binder after reading her descriptive paragraph. She reverted her eyes to the computer screen in front of her. Some seconds passed before Mr. Duke, Minka's online teacher, could comment on her work.

"Wow, you definitely have a flare for writing, Minka," He complimented. "Everything was vibrantly described. I can tell you did your homework with passion. Marvelous work!"

"Thank you, Sir." Minka delightfully replied.

"Alright, Grade 8's," Mr. Duke called out. "Everyone else will present their paragraphs next week. Meanwhile, I encourage you to get some fresh air and spend quality time with your family. I know these times are challenging with COVID-19 around, but do not forget to take care of yourselves and stay safe as you engage in fun activities. We will get through this together. Have a good weekend, everyone!"

Mr. Duke disconnected from the virtual classroom and the students did the same.

Minka turned her computer off and rose to her feet. She walked towards her vanity desk and tied her long, cinnamon-brown hair into a ponytail. Gradient hazel eyes arched over by a scar-slashed eyebrow on the left stared back at her from the mirror. She's always been told that she looked like her grandmother when she was a teenager. Suddenly, Minka felt downhearted at the thought of her grandmother who was, at that moment, in Michael Garron Hospital, mustering all her strength to fight the COVID virus that struck her frail, aging body two weeks before. Minka had nightmares about losing her grandmother; she wasn't ready to let go of her just yet.

Minka shook her head to get rid of the frightening thoughts. "Grandma will be okay," she comforted herself.

Minka paced back to her desk and grabbed her leather journal with a pen. She walked through the door of her bedroom, half-skipped down the stairs and into her aunt's bakery just below their apartment. The rectangular bakeshop had pastel-coloured walls and circular dining sets. The glass display shelves boasted of mouth-watering varieties of cookies and cupcakes. Posters lined the walls that instructed, "Wash Your Hands Frequently". A couple of those cautioned, "No mask, no service!"

"Oh, hello, Dear!"

Minka spotted her aunt disinfecting the counter. She was a skinny woman with dark, bob-cut hair and chestnut-colored, almond-shaped eyes. Her apron was speckled with flour and melted chocolate.

"Go grab a donut," Aunt Briar said. "You look famished."

Minka opened one of the display shelves, plucked out a strawberry donut and took a seat on one of the tables. She opened her leather journal and flipped through the short stories she had written, remembering her writing lessons with her grandma. There were pirate adventures, sci-fi voyages in space, superhero legends, and her favourite, fantasy fables. She turned to a blank page and started thinking of ideas for a new story.

"Oh, Minka," Aunt Briar called. "I forgot to tell you, there were 4,700 COVID cases reported today."

Minka gasped. "That's horrible--"

RINGGG! Aunt Briar pulled her cellphone out of her back pocket and inspected the caller. "It's MGH," she told Minka, who sprang from the table and ran to her aunt, eager to listen.

"It's probably Grandma," Minka said with a bright smile.

"Hello?" Aunt Briar answered. She nodded as she listened to what the caller was saying. Minka tried to make out the conversation but it was too inaudible. Suddenly, Aunt Briar clasped her mouth with her free hand. Her eyes moistened and her nose reddened.

"What's wrong?" Minka asked, desperate to know the reason behind her aunt's tears.

Aunt Briar didn't reply. Instead, she continued nodding, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Okay... thank you very much," Aunt Briar said with a cracked voice. She ended the call and inserted her phone back in her pocket.

"What happened?" Minka asked. "When is Grandma coming home?"

Aunt Briar wiped away her tears and clasped her hands on Minka's face, looking her in the eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She simply shook her head, more tears welled up in her eyes.

"Grandma has..." she hesitated. "I guess it was time for her to spread her wings... a-and fly to h-heaven."

Minka stared at her aunt; her mind was completely blank. The only thing she was able to focus on was her pounding heart. Her insides felt like a cold sword sliced through them. Her eyes became a fountain of tears. Minka understood her aunt's message but refused to accept it. Impulsively, she ran away from her aunt and made her way up to her room, her heart shattered into a thousand pieces.

The following weeks were full of pain and sulking for Minka. She barely spoke with her aunt since her grandmother Anita passed away. She ignored her friends' messages and calls, refrained from participating in her online classes, and stopped doing her assignments. Everytime she watched news updates about COVID-19 cases and deaths, she felt depressed. Living in fear of a virus and the loss it brought their family, staying home and online schooling suddenly seemed more miserable. Worst of all, she stopped writing - the one thing her grandmother told her to not give up on.

"Never stop writing. It is the one thing on this earth that creates true magic." Her grandmother's words rang in Minka's ears as she sprawled on her bed, oblivious of the online English class in progress on her computer.

She pulled out her iPad from under her pillow and started playing Roblox. That video game was her remedy for everything, but it didn't seem to help her get over her grandma's passing. A few moments passed and the iPad felt heavy on her arms.

SWOOSH!

Minka bolted up from her bed, wondering what the sound could be. She turned around to find the source of the sound.

"Woah." Minka gasped. The bedroom door had transformed into a golden one. Minka's jaw dropped so low it could've touched the floor.

"What is happening?" Minka wondered in a whisper.

The glass doorknob twisted and swung open. But instead of revealing the stairs to the living room, it presented a brightly illuminated green forest with sunbeams spilling through the leaves of trees; a dirt path curved into the distance.

Minka gasped so hard she almost choked. She slapped herself across the face, testing if the scene before her would disappear. It didn't. It's been a while since she had excitement brewing in her stomach. Whether it was actually happening, or she was just dreaming, Minka wanted to entertain the experience either way as adventurous curiosity took over her.

Minka walked through the now-golden door which slammed shut behind her once she was through and vanished in a puff of sparkly smoke. As she explored the forest with an astonished smile, she gawked at its vibrant beauty that seemed to captivate her all the more as she went deeper. Fresh air filled Minka's lungs, the rays of sunlight warmed her face, her eyes caught sight of woodland creatures, and the sound of whistling winds sung in her ears.

Minka followed the path until the forest started getting thinner. Soon, she reached an opening to a landscape of rolling hills carpeted with colorful wildflowers. Pointy mountains lined the horizon and a rainbow arched atop. The picturesque place looked like something out of a fairytale that her heart felt as if it was gasping in amazement.

As Minka continued down the rolling hills, she spotted a weeping willow tree in the middle of the scenery. Some of its roots snaked under a stone bench positioned diagonally against its trunk; a woman sat calmly on one side, playing with purple butterflies circling around her. Minka recognized the woman right away and sprinted towards her. As she drew nearer, the woman rose and opened her arms wide open, and Minka sank into them.

"Grandma!" Minka cried.

She stared up at her grandmother's kind face. Her gradient hazel eyes squinted as she smiled, wrinkling her face even more. Her long white hair fell on her shoulders, matching her simple white dress.

"My darling, Minka!" Grandma whispered.

"How are you here? I thought you..." Minka's voice broke.

"Yes darling, I am," She said. "But my soul was allowed one more visit with you." "Where are we?" Minka asked.

“For now,” Grandma said. “Let’s say... we’re in our own little fairytale. I came here to remind you of something especially important. I know you have stopped writing ever since I’ve departed.”

Minka’s head hung down in shame.

“It was hard,” Minka replied softly. “Every time I think of writing, I’m reminded of you. I already lost mom and dad as a child, and then you... the one who raised me...” Minka blinked back her tears.

“I would like to show you something,” Grandma told Minka. She pointed forward where an illusion of a knight in armor and a red dragon appeared in front of them. The dragon breathed fire at the knight, but he held out his shield and started striking the dragon with his sword.

The illusion shifted into that of a short and scrawny boy who stood in front of a taller and muscular boy. The taller boy punched the smaller one, but the latter dodged the punch. The shorter one stepped closer to the tall boy and started talking with an aggravated face. Minka couldn’t hear a sound but she could tell he was standing up for himself, judging by the bewildered look on the bully’s face.

“What do you see here?” Grandma asked.

Minka looked towards the two mirages and shrugged. “I don’t know, I see a knight valiantly fighting with a dragon like the ones in fairy tales. And then there’s a tough kid standing up to some bully.”

The vision of the knight and dragon suddenly changed into a lovely girl in a pink dress giving a basket of fruit to an old woman in rags. A few moments later, the vision changed into a girl helping an old man to his feet.

“What do you see here?” Grandma asked again.

“Um... I see some sort of princess giving food to an old woman. Then there’s a girl helping an old man to his feet.” Minka answered.

The scene shifted into a robed man pointing a glowing, wooden staff at a big black wolf. There was a family of four behind him, utterly terrified. The scene faded out to give way to that of an elderly woman lying on a hospital bed, drowning in tubes and wires. Nurses and doctors dressed in personal protective equipment scrambled around her in a desperate attempt to save the woman’s life. One doctor was using a defibrillator machine to revive the woman.

“Now what do you see here?” Grandma asked once more.

Minka didn’t like the new illusion, but she replied anyway.

“There’s a wizard protecting a family from a wolf. Then, there were doctors and nurses trying to save a woman’s life. They wore PPE’s; the patient must have Covid-19.” She surmised.

“Yes dear,” Grandma said. “The illusions had something in common, do you know what it is?”

Minka thought of it. Apparently, each of them had something in common. As she recalled the illusions, the answer started to build in head.

“The fictional characters,” Minka said. “They were like... symbols.” Grandma gave her a satisfied nod.

“What does this have to do with anything?” Minka asked.

“The little boy, girl, nurses and doctors were real,” Grandma explained. “They all read the stories of the fictional characters, inspiring them to overcome their challenges.”

“Grandma, they’re just stories.” Minka said.

“They aren’t just stories,” Grandma said passionately. “You can help a boy stand up to a bully with a tale of the knight slaying a dragon. You can teach a girl compassion with a story of a princess helping people in need. And you can inspire unrecognized heroes to continue with their heroic deeds with the myth of a wizard protecting a family. Powerful symbolisms, meaning, and valuable lessons behind stories inspire people to aim for the greater good. Inspiring others through writing is magic itself.”

Grandma pointed to the area where the illusions were. People with face masks and some, face shields, were walking on a street. But even with protective gears on, Minka could see the sadness they felt.

“These are dark days,” Grandma told her. “Perhaps, a gifted writer can change that. I’ve watched you grow into the writer you are today. Your stories are filled with much passion and meaning... the ingredients that make a story fascinating, captivating, and inspiring. You have a future in writing ahead of you. Pursue it. There are heroes fighting for us in these difficult times. Support them by using your gift and talent to write about their heroism and courage. Share to the world stories that can inspire people to be strong, positive, and brave. That way, you can champion the cause of goodness, and be a heroine, too, in your own right.”

Grandma suddenly started to flicker, like a hologram.

“Grandma?” Minka said, trying to grab her hand. She couldn’t, Anita was like a ghost.

“Remember, my sweet,” Grandma said, slowly turning transparent. “Writers are never *just* writers; stories are never *just* stories. Never stop writing. It is the one thing on this earth that creates true magic. I love you, my little writer...”

“I love you too, grandma!” Minka said, smiling with tears streaming down her face. With that, Minka’s vision turned bright white, allowing her to catch one last glimpse of her grandmother’s smile.

Minka opened her eyes to the sight of her bedroom, iPad on her chest. A few moments earlier, she was with her grandmother in a fantastical place. Minka was convinced it was just a dream; but the feeling of excitement with Grandma’s visit was for her no less than real. Moreover, Minka was reminded of something very important; something she must do.

Like a shooting star, a beam of bright light sprang out of thin air and landed on Minka’s desk. A shiny metallic pen appeared where the light had landed; dangling from the top was a crystal purple butterfly.

“I’ll keep writing, grandma,” she whispered, picking the pen up. “After all, inspiring others through writing is magic itself.”

WINNER (GRADES 9-10)

Beatrice Lew - *Family Photos*

[A photo of two kids hang on the wall, dust starting to collect around the frames. In it, the girl is laughing at the camera, while her brother stands next to her, giving her a big hug. Behind them, a mother and a father crouch, arms around their children. 2011. The girl is 7, The boy is 8.]

"Okay, smile!"

The girl flashes a smile at the camera, then blinks aggressively to get the flash out of her eyes. She's a little tired, since she was woken up so early in the morning. "Are we done yet?"

There's a chorus of laughs around the room, and the photographer turns back to her. "I promise, just one more and we'll be done," He walks over to the set, adjusting a few things before heading back to his camera. "Okay, Terra, Harris, could you pose behind them? And Seren, buddy, stand next to your sister, maybe give her a hug."

The family moves into their spots, and the boy throws his arms around his sister. They smile, and the photographer counts down.

"Okay, one, two--"

Seren leans towards his sister, giving her a kiss on the cheek. She shrieks with laughter, moving her hand to wipe her face. "Ewww, Seren!"

" . . . aaand three!"

Click. Flash.

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[The photo next to that shows three people. In it, the girl and her brother stare blankly at the camera, their smiles so small you'd think they were frowning. Harris stands behind them, grinning at the camera but his eyes are tired, smile not quite reaching his eyes. 2012. The girl is 8, Seren is 9.]

"Smile!"

The girl tries to smile for the camera, but the most she can manage is to turn her frown into a neutral face. Beside her, Seren smiles slightly, but it doesn't reach his eyes. The photographer sighs, adjusting the lighting.

"Okay then. Harris, move slightly to the right please, and thank you!"

Harris slides to the right silently, standing between where there would normally be 2 adults. This time, there's only one. The room is silent, until the photographer speaks.

"One, two--"

"I promise next year, our picture will be even better!" Terra laughs, staring at the newly hung up photo on the wall. "We just have to wait ten more months!"

" . . . aaand three!"

Click. Flash.

///

[A few photos down, after three consecutive years of grey-background photos, this one finally shows four people in it. In it, the girl and Seren sit on the floor, Harris and another adult crouched behind. They're all laughing, Harris's eyes twinkling like he just told the funniest joke in the world. 2015. The girl is 11, Seren is 12.]

"Okay, everybody, smile!"

The family smiles, and the camera flashes. Again, the girl blinks the flash out of her eyes. The lights were aggressively bright, but at least they were almost done.

"Alright, last one. Seren, Kaya, could you just take a seat on the floor? Thaaank you! And Vern, slightly to the left please? Okay, okay, let's start." He moves around the set, checking on the lights before returning to his camera.

Seren shifts slightly on the floor, squinting at the camera. He nudges Kaya and whispers something in her ear, and the two start laughing. Laughter is contagious, Seren thinks, as Vern and Harris start laughing at something too.

"One, two--"

Harris and Vern hold hands.

" . . . and three!"

Click. Flash.

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[The last photo on the wall is the biggest. The glass is clean, and the photo is fresh. Harris and Vern sit on a couch in the front, while behind them, Kaya and Seren stand. Seren and Kaya have their hands on the couch, while Harris and Vern hold hands and smile at each other. 2020. Kaya is 16, Seren is 17.]

"Smile!"

Seren fingerguns at the camera, just before it flashes. Kaya laughs, throwing her head back. The photographer sighs, but smiles.

"Okay, last one. Everyone into the frame, Harris and Vern on the couch. Kaya, Seren, on the boxes . . . Yep, okay we're good." He checks the lenses before adjusting them.

The siblings move behind the couch, and stand on boxes placed just out of the camera's view. Vern holds Harris's hand, and Seren covers his eyes mockingly. "Ew! PDA!" he says, as the family laughs.

"One, two--"

Seren uncovers his eyes, and turns his smile to the camera.

" . . . three!"

Click. Flash.

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADES 9-10)

Ramona Karimi - *A Woman's Fears*

The bustling playground, the laughter and glee. A dimpled grin spread across my face. Look at the date, it was my first day of first grade. Clutching my compact backpack, with butterflies in my stomach, I was led to the classroom. I felt my mood start to plummet as I was overwhelmed by the spacious halls and silly banter. Finally looking up, and now viewing the hyper room, the dread started to subside from my veins. Maybe, just maybe, I could finally get some friends to play with. I made my way over to my potential new friends until I was abruptly stopped in my tracks. I was suddenly overcome with a certain feeling, like when you just know you're about to be scolded. Silently jittering, my anxiety had pent up as I listened to my teacher say, "Cover yourself up, or I'll have to send you home." *What? What was wrong with my outfit?* I felt confident that day. I felt pretty. I felt like I should've been getting compliments on my adorable hot pink jumpsuit, bedazzled with little gems. Apparently, that was not the case. Spaghetti straps, that's what was wrong with my outfit. My shoulders were too distracting for the six-year-old boys. With my downward gaze, I had shamefully put on my coat for the rest of the day. Guilt-ridden and drenched in sweat, I hadn't quite yet realized that I was sexualized for the first time in my life.

Full-length pants. A long-sleeved shirt. A denim jacket to go over that shirt. And of course, shoes with laces. As I bent down to tie my laces, I sensed a repulsive gaze accompanied by a sharp whistle and vulgar words that I shall not repeat. I frantically jerked my head down, mortified, and careful not to draw any more unwanted attention to myself. I came up with excuses.

I might be nine years old, but I look mature for my age.

I could pass as maybe thirteen?

Should I take it as a compliment?

No matter how hard I tried to get over it and attempted to shake off my disgust, to this day I will never fully accept the fact that I'm routinely seen as some object for men to whistle and yell at whenever they're intrigued. Ever since that incident, I started to notice the way that some middle-aged men would ogle me like I'm some piece of meat, while I was just trying to cross the street. I still see some of their predatory gazes, it's not like they try to hide it. I still feel the contentment in their voices, as they make it their priority to badger me with strange comments and make it clear that if I don't respond, somehow I'm the problem. I don't wear shoes with laces anymore.

I was walking back home from school, my mind was fixated on the news articles I had read earlier that morning. All sorts of new human trafficking methods were constantly being discovered and used, which had made me extra vigilant and aware of my surroundings at the time. As I was crossing the street, I started to notice a man that kept on going the same directions as I was. At first I shrugged it off and thought nothing of it, but as I walked further along my path I couldn't get rid of the feeling that something was off. My adrenaline was pumping, and I started to make turns and crossed the street a few more times in the opposite direction of my home, and sure enough that man was trailing close behind me. After being followed for ten minutes, I refused to believe it was a coincidence. I did not want to be the next missing teenage girl on the news. I stopped near a few other people and fumbled through my backpack, frantically looking for my keys. Once I got them between my knuckles, I believe that signalled that I was aware of what that man was up to and wasn't about to be the next victim, but I know not all girls are lucky enough to get out of situations like that. I know that not all men are the same. I know that not all men are bad. I know that not all men are horrendous traffickers and rapists. However, I still have to be careful in public and actively keep myself safe, because I don't know which men are dangerous and which aren't. From all the comments and

micro-aggressions I've seen, I'm aware that if something does happen, the blame will be put on me.

"What were you wearing?"

"Why didn't you just say no?"

"Boys will be boys"

"Don't report it! It'll ruin his reputation."

I often think about what could've happened that day, maybe I overreacted? I have to remind myself that it's better to overreact and ensure your safety than get taken away.

What if I hadn't found other people and I'd been in an isolated area?

What if I didn't notice being followed?

Hypotheticals are petrifying, but they're vital in preparing us for future incidents. I know that this is an occurrence that I'll deal with many more times in my life, which is why I often wonder if I'd feel the same way if I were a guy.

I was sitting in my desk chair at the front of the class, my eyes were keenly glued to the SMART Board. A video on women's issues played, the first I'd ever seen presented in a school setting.

While some may have not paid much attention or had averted their gaze out of boredom, on that screen I discovered the dire need for change that needs to be made to improve the lives of future women, the life of future me. Through learning about the complex issues faced by different groups of women, instead of being engulfed by a feeling of despair, I was ignited with passion and hope for ending women's suffering. While that was a positive aspect, I immediately realized that when issues and a chance for change make themselves apparent, struggle follows closely behind. Once the video paused, the class was asked about any thoughts or reflections on the content. As I scanned around the room, I was stunned by the lack of interest.

Am I the only one who has strong thoughts on this topic?

I normally didn't speak up because I didn't want to be accused of being a man-hater, or be described as too loud.

Too assertive.

Too crazy.

Too judgemental.

However, as I aged, I slowly stopped caring about others' judgments of my actions. If I couldn't even voice my own opinion in my English class, how was I supposed to handle the real world? I mustered up enough courage and mental strength to force my hand up, disrupting the peculiar tension that surrounded my class. I started talking, and for some reason, I couldn't stop. I suppose you could call it word-vomit, but this was the good kind. I went on for a few minutes, exhausting my mind from trying to find every single time I'd noticed an injustice that I'd faced that had been solely caused by my gender. What I realized after I got all of my silenced statements out was that it wasn't that scary. I may have felt alienated and embarrassed at the time because I was the only one with my hand up, but after I had calmed down I felt so powerful. I was confident in my thoughts and points on feminism, which at the time, rarely occurred since I had nobody who'd try to listen. If we all just listened a little more to each other's struggles, we could make sure that nobody refrains from voicing their thoughts and experiences the way I, and I'm sure the majority of women, have done for too long in their lives.

We can't let women feel afraid anymore.

WINNER (GRADES 11-12)

Blaze Cucksey - *The Ultimate Masquerade*

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

The sweet smell of lilacs and honey entices you to this party. The dancing colours and resonating laughter pulls you in closer, and slowly you begin to blur alongside everyone else, your troubles drifting further and further away. If an outsider were to glance upon this beautiful—and one might say memorized—charade, they would not be able to distinguish you amidst the rest.

For a moment you are lost in the excitement of it all, but this front passes, and you are being pushed out of this cluster of bodies, person by person, who are seemingly intertwined with one another.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

You are alone.

Staring at the entire party, it seems as if every masked face is mocking you with its painted, leering grin. They dance in spite of you. Their very presence imposes pressure upon you, but you gather confidence and plunge into the crowd. Someone elbows your ribcage, another steps on your foot, and you fall dead center into a huddle of people now glaring at you.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

The once upbeat, swing music that laced the air with its captivating song spun in the gramophone, and every beat melts into a haunting, lingering, twisted version of itself. Your blood runs cold, and your mask starts to chip. Pieces flutter to the ground, and you hold your painted face so that no one will see the real you hiding underneath it, because that would be socially unacceptable.

Get up, get up now! Your inner voice is screaming at you, or is that the crowd?

Locking eyes with a near stranger, you hurriedly ask them to dance.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

The herd has accepted you once again, and you're high on this ecstasy of relief infused with fear. Don't stumble, they'll see. You're watching your feet to make sure they don't fail you, but you're slouching. Looking up, your partner abandons you.

It was your fault. You were not acting proper, so as the next masked person approaches, you make sure to balance your time wisely.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

They take one look at you and almost instantly turn to someone else. Embarrassed, you run to a nearby mirror. As you look at the person before you, the cracks in your "face" are becoming deeper and deeper, so you take some tape, powder, and a swig of some drink someone hands you, and leave to face the masses.

Hours fly by, and your half-awake half-delirious self is being tossed from person to person. You ask your partners to stop, you tell them no, but this cycle of supposed fun is too much for you.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

The night becomes day, and some people have left. You ask about them, and your newfound friends say they were the weak ones. They laugh, you laugh, but at what?

They were not weak, they were scared and hurting. One can only mask for so long until a dream becomes a nightmare; friends become monsters and hope morphs into a thin rope you hang from. Not even your reflection can save you, because recognizing whatever lies behind that thin sheet of glass becomes impossible.

That won't happen to you though. You're strong... you're nothing like them.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

Suddenly, someone screams. Their cries echo in this mansion of mirrors, bouncing from plate to plate; person to person.

Heads turn, and you see this wonderfully laced and pristine individual sitting on the ground. You can't see their "face", but this person couldn't be one of the weak. They are too beautiful, too refined. At the beginning of the dance, they were so elegant and full of potential. They must be faking.

The music melts, and you, grateful this attention is not on yourself, glare alongside the rest at this disappointment. They get up and run past you, and, for a brief second, you saw her.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

As you dance from person to person, you can't help but think of her face, her ACTUAL face! You saw tears and freckles and teeth. Such wonderful teeth! She was not a masked monster, jewelled in sparkles and gems, covered in the finest silks from the most expensive exports, but a woman.

Where did she go? You tell the others you need a drink, and near the front door. Peering out, you can see her, along with the others; the ones who left and didn't wilt away. They call to you, but before you can get a better look at their faces, you are tapped upon the shoulder.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

After so much time has been spent at this party, you thought you knew the guidelines; the preferences; the rules.

Apparently, you are not allowed to look outside. The greater world is off-limits, and once you leave, they say you'll never find your way back.

Is this happiness? Why must this dance never alter, and the crowd never budge? Nobody asks how you are, or tries to get to know you. All they want is to dance, laugh with their chins held high, and pretend that this is all there is to look forward to. But is it?

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

The room becomes cold, and the masks start... melting. The fake faces and the lying smiles churn, and resemble abstract oil paintings, sizzling, burning the flesh that you never got to see.

Holding themselves, they cry out, with pieces of flesh falling to the floor, flooding the room, gushing onto your feet. They moan and scream and tear at their faces. Someone shouts, and, looking around, all you see is a mess of melting bodies and distorted imagery. The room is getting warmer, and suddenly you start to feel the heat too.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

You try to tear the mask off, but your lips are stuck to the plastic. With each tug your eyebrows are being pulled out, then your lashes, and then strands of your hair. It is futile to try and save yourself. The thick paint pours into your throat, and when you scream all one can hear is the sound of gurgling mixed with the sobs of others. Your hands are beginning to stick to your body, so that all you can do is hold yourself as that body you neglected melts away with the rest of who you never were.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, repeat.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Everything was all just a repeating series of bodies that danced to the sound of fairy tales and falsehood. The fiction of it all encases one in a fantasy, a fantasy full of preapproved notions and overstimulation.

This life is too controlled for one to be unique, so people begin to melt together. Idiosyncratic individuals are annihilated and forced into isolation, unless... unless they accept themselves for who they are.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, but do not repeat.

You awake to the smell of lilacs and honey, and a subtle but wonderful warm glow encompasses your body. The masked people dance once again, but something has changed.

Could it be the air? The noise? The atmosphere? No. It is you. You finally see the dancing strangers as the masked puppets they always were. The strings that they hang from glitter in the sun, and they all twirl at exactly the same time. They are at peace in their ignorance. For now at least.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, but do not repeat.

Rising from the floor, you head for the doorway. They stop and stare once again, sure to consider you weak and forget your very existence. They never cared for you anyways.

Before surpassing the door frame of this enchanting prison, you catch yourself in the mirror.

Slowly you raise your hands and touch the plastic mask. Tracing your fingers across the perfect red lips and refined sculpted nose, the smooth pink cheeks and arched eyebrows. A tinge of fear sparks and a small wheeze escapes your own flawed mouth. Are you ready to take off the mask?

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, but do not repeat.

With both hands on either side of the mask, you clutch the simple piece of plastic and lift. A collective gasp erupts as everyone stares directly at you. Their plastic faces suddenly emote a rage you've never seen, and this

startling sight causes you to fumble the mask. It plummets to the floor, smashing into thousands of pieces as you stare at the person before you, stunned.

There are real eyes that blink, a nose that twitches, a mouth that moves, and teeth that can smile! You're real, and this new chapter in your life will be all the more authentic and genuine, just like your smile.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, but do not repeat.

Over the threshold and down a set of marble stairs, you run to the dozens of others that dared to leave. They embrace you, and ask about the simple things that make up you who you are: your name, your family and friends, even your hobbies... but for as long as you can remember you've only bowed, twirled, and danced to the sound of another's drum. That's all there ever was.

Urging you onwards, they guide you to your newfound sanctuary of truth, to a temple of individuality and an opportunity for self-acceptance.

Greet your partner, take a bow, twirl, but do not repeat.

You've left a room of mirrors; of reflections, and hopefully you'll lead as an example in the song that is life, and someone will follow in your footsteps from a world that is ultimately just a masquerade.

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADES 11-12)

Oyinoluwa Aderibigbe - *The Memory Book*

The maroon bricks were a bleak comparison to the vibrant clapboard that cloaked the buildings back home. Its cumbersome demeanor and aggressive lights bellowed its purpose: an oasis to abide for a week or two, evenings spent deep within soft sheets of white and mornings accented with the scents of bacon and coffee—a week of peace in solitude before melting back into the chaos of day to day life.

It was a hotel.

The week before, I hugged my best friend Catherine J. on the playground. I was going. But I had gone before—to places warm and sickeningly humid, some with scratched yellow cars and concrete buildings that stretched into the sky, others with eccentric trees and fragrant foods, nothing like I had seen in Newfoundland.

But this time, I was gifted with a purple booklet.

“We will miss you Oyin!” the booklet read in black letters. Inside contained notes from my classmates, chronicling interactions on the playground and describing moments shared at snack time. Others drew impressions of us together, stick-limbed, sparsely haired, and holding hands.

I shrugged the booklet away. I had *gone* before and I would surely return. There was no reason to worry—besides, there were games of duck duck goose to play and Bear Paws to eat.

There is a photo in a family album of my mothers’ 37th birthday. I am three years old, donning one of my favourite sweaters, pink with a tiny red heart stamped in the right corner. Tiny braids frame my head as I smile from ear to ear. My sisters, father, and mother are scattered throughout the photo. The candles on my mothers’ cake are white—outlined in red, like the ones you get from Sobeys. (We probably purchased them from Sobeys’ maritime brother, Foodland.)

Although this moment exists in a photo, I like to think that I remember it—my infant sisters’ wandering eyes as drool trails down her cheek, my older sisters’ exuberant sounds as my father reaches for the knife to cut the cake, and a tryst between my fingers the cake’s garment of icing interrupted by the eyes of my watchful mother.

And the boxes.

Tattered, they teeter to the left and right of our glass table, leaning dangerously out of the frame. We celebrated this birthday unlike others, placing items into boxes instead of taking them out—plates, cups, and cutlery. My dolls, my toys, and my books—bedtime books, colouring books, and memory books.

When Legos lost their sparkle and the television became a dull background noise, the memory books came to life. Here, my parents’ sunkissed skin glowed, faces complemented by textured afros. Strangers in shirts labelled “NYSC”* balanced coke bottle glasses on their noses. My grandmother’s hair, wrapped in a scarf; my

aunt's hair, relaxed. I had only seen my grandfather in these pages.

But some memories I could not fit into a book, like the green foliage that surrounded the vacant highway on the way to the airport, the tear-filled eyes of my Auntie Golda, a close friend whom my family had grown close to on the island, or the growing distance between us, as we made our way towards the check-in.

I was familiar with the word "plane." I had already *gone* before. As my family attempted to separate ourselves from the bustling aisle of passengers to our side, my little sister erupted into tears. I felt a distinct pang of distaste as several heads turned towards us. The discomfort increased as we ascended into the air.

And here I was, at this strange hotel, with mismatched furniture stacked in the halls and no children running through the lobby. Instead, I met people my age at a different place—the stout bright building where I had begun to spend my days. But these children were different, vowels and consonants rolling off their tongues in a peculiar fashion.

I missed circling my bike on the concrete floor of my Auntie Golda's unfinished basement.

I missed running my fingers through the colourful bushes that embellished the side of our house.

I missed the taste of hot chocolate on my tongue on evenings after a chilly snowfall.

I was ready to go home.

"We live here now."

The words stung as they spilled out her mouth, one after another.

Live.

Another word I understood, one with a strong arm of permanence. The puzzle pieces of past events arranged themselves into reality before my eyes.

I was not going back to Newfoundland.

I finally understood Auntie Golda's tears at the airport and the squeeze of her tight hug before we broke apart.

I was not going back to Newfoundland.

I finally understood the heaping stacks of boxes disappearing before our departure.

I was not going back to Newfoundland.

I finally understood why we stayed at the hotel as the seasons shifted.

I was not going back to Newfoundland.

I finally understood the gift of the purple booklet.

It, too, was a memory book, to preserve the past as I boarded the shuttle to the future, a purple briefcase holding all of which I knew.

The feelings of pain I felt at this exact moment—that I would not return to my beloved preschool, my friends, and what I had known to be my family—stung deeply, evoking feelings that I could not articulate at my age. Yet, I understood the clear feelings of loss, separation, and pain.

Long gone were the winter days of skidooing and spring trips to the creek. The stony beaches and grassy expanses were no more. The mountains that filled the blue expanse of the sky behind our town became a suburban sea of roofs. There were no more sunsets spent on the wooden swing outside my Auntie Golda's house. These moments were all but a distant recollection. My life in Newfoundland—a lingering aftertaste in my mouth.

I lost the memory book a few years later.

But the memories? They grew in number as the hotel became home and the small bright building became my school. I made new friends, students at my school who drew rounder limbs. My words shifted to sound like theirs, my voice now blending amongst the crowd. And, as I aged, it became more important to be the first at the swings, to grab the tractor in the sandbox at recess, to win the spelling bee, to get his attention, to get into university...

But, when I taste the salty granules sprinkled on a Premium cracker, watch the tide roll back at twilight, hear the crackle of a campfire, or see the track of skis in the snow, it all returns—the memories, those old and the new, the ones that reach beyond a book.

*National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is a program instituted by the Nigerian government for university graduates to support the country.

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADES 11-12)

Lauren Macris - *A Trip to the Grocery Store During COVID-19*

All of a sudden, the world shuts down. Caution tape is wound around playground structures, closed signs decorate the streets, and students zip up their backpacks for the last time. Panic looms in the air like mist over the sea and hopelessness clouds the sky. It feels like everything is changing for the worse, until a quick trip to the grocery store leads me to believe that something positive is emerging amidst this gloom. I see the bright spark of humanity as people put others before themselves, work to protect each other, and connect as a community.

This epiphany occurs as I take my place in the long line that is billowing out of the front entrance and I am immediately immersed in the sense of selflessness hanging in the air. Black barricades direct us forward like cattle in their pens. No one complains, no one buds. I mirror the movements of the person ahead, carefully synchronizing my steps to match theirs. Their scuffed runners drag along the sandpaper, cement sidewalk. The fear of infecting another weighs their feet down, stopping them from running in. We wait under the blazing sun, with sweat dripping down our backs and noses turning red, because we know it is the right thing to do. The smell of sunscreen and rubbing alcohol wafts towards me. It's an odd combination of summer memories, swimming in the pool and laughing with friends, mixed with hospital waiting rooms and trips to the doctor. It is a semi-sweet reminder of what was and what is.

The automatic sliding doors open and close to let the next brave soldier onto the battlefield, willingly sacrificing themselves to ensure loved ones are fed. The glass panes clap together, applauding our efforts and reminding us to stay strong. I scan the brick wall to my left, covered in faded posters that have been hastily taped on. They all blare the same warnings, instilling fear into our veins, except for one. In the very centre, is a hand drawn picture of nurses, doctors, and cashiers, holding hands. It is drawn with the entire rainbow of crayon colours and evokes gratitude from those passing by. Everyone, even the young, are doing their part. The doors reopen, spitting out a slim woman with two carts. She pushes one forward and drags the other behind her, stretched out like an old, weary, elastic band. I watch as the fragile figure inches into the parking lot towards a car with an elderly couple inside. She knocks on their trunk and begins to unload one of the carts into it. This accordion of metal and human has just saved them from the invisible beast outside, putting herself in harm's way to help strangers. It is now my turn to enter. The rusty doors squeak open and swallow me whole.

No one talks, and smiles cannot be seen through masks but for the crinkle of an eye, yet, there is a communication between us all, stronger than words or expressions, it is a unanimous agreement to protect each other. The scene is not the war-torn battlefield I imagined. It is a captivating picture of unity. The fluorescent lights shine brighter than ever, illuminating the efforts of a community that refuses to be broken. Employees act as bouncers, checking for masks rather than identification. They stand like statues. Their gloved hands cling on to practically empty bottles of sanitizer. A loud echo is produced from the clanging of grocery carts as one is pushed my way. I am overwhelmed by the stinging smell of alcohol as it is wiped onto the handles. People make way for me as if my cart is Moses and God is parting the Red Sea. Customers and employees alike have an unsaid agreement to stay apart. We are all marching to the beat of the virus. No one dares to get close. We move around each other as if we are mimes stuck in our invisible boxes, and we dance to the same choreography; they take a step forward, I take two steps back. It is a rhythm we all understand. Our music is the carts thumping on the ground, the shuffle of quiet customers, and the clicking of cash register buttons. It is a gorgeous tune. We, customers and employees alike, have become unified by the shared desire to protect ourselves and others.

I am surrounded by posters that scream “stay six feet apart” and yellow duct tape that separates me from others, yet, I feel connected with the customers around me like never before. Separated, but together. I loop through aisles, following the arrows stuck to the floor. Shelves are bare, their smooth surfaces covered in dust just like the forgotten memories of family get-togethers and dinner parties. I see friends that I can not hug. They are distant silhouettes that are a bright contrast to the shadow cast by the virus. We wave from a distance and are comforted by each other’s presence, finally aware of the importance of human connection. I take my cart to the checkout, carefully arranging my feet to match the red footprints that have been stamped onto the ground. Six feet behind me are another set of red feet and six feet behind those are another pair. It is a pattern that we are all a part of, a pattern that glues us together.

I leave the grocery store, exiting through the sliding doors that, once again, clap together to applaud my bravery. I pass by the employees squirting sanitizer onto hands and the line of patient customers being herded inside one by one. But above all, I notice the crayon-covered poster dangling from the brick wall that reminds me of the sense of community and resilience that has blossomed amidst this pandemic.

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