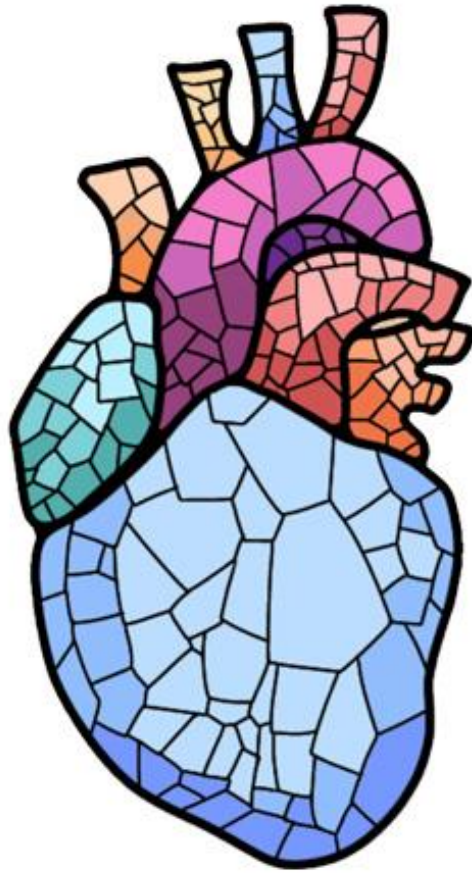


The Stained Glass Heart



A collection of works
to amuse and inspire

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Magnus and Alistair

by Bethany Stanford

A book was drifting through the air overhead. Soon another joined it, quickly followed by a third. Alistair grinned as he controlled the books with his hands, making them swoop up and down, and do loops in the air. He lowered them gently letting them come to rest in a neat stack on the table.

“Did you see that?” he asked excitedly.

“See what?” Magnus asked looking up from his book.

“I levitated those books!”

“Ha ha, Al, very funny.” Magnus returned to his studying.

“I’m not joking. I’ll show you.” He reached for the books at the same time as Magnus, still looking at his book, reached for his glass of water. Their hands collided and the water glass ended up being knocked over. Magnus jumped back as the water poured off the edge of the table. He dodged the water, but the floor still got splattered with liquid.

“I’ll go get some paper towels,” Magnus said. He hurried off, and Alistair sat there wondering if there was anything he could do. A spell came to mind that he had learned not too long ago. He figured there was no better time to try it than now.

Out went his arms, his hands hovering over the wet spot on the carpet. Slowly but surely the water evaporated. He smiled. Every time he saw magic, whether it was his own or someone else's, it gave him the same sense of awe. It was so cool that there was something that existed that was so powerful and helpful.

Magnus returned, a wad of paper towels in hand. He paused when he saw the carpet was no longer wet.

“How did you do that so fast?”

“A really cool spell. I just learned it a few—”

“Seriously? We’re doing this again?”

“Doing what?”

“The whole magic thing. I know that you believe in it, and I don’t really care, but I feel like you’re trying to force it down my throat and I don’t think I can deal with that anymore. So would you please cut it out?”

“But, Magnus, I’m not trying to force something on you. It’s just that magic *is* real, and I want you to experience it too.”

Magnus scowled. “Okay that’s it, I’m leaving.” He grabbed his backpack and stuffed his things inside, and without another word he swung it onto his back and walked out of the library.

Alistair sat there in stunned silence. For as long as he could remember, he had believed in magic and Magnus hadn’t. Alistair always tried to convince him that it was real and Magnus shrugged it off. Apparently today had been the final straw for him.

Alistair wished his friend could see that magic was real. He tried showing him, but Magnus was always looking at something else or came up with an excuse not to watch. He just didn’t understand, Magnus said he didn’t believe and Alistair told him that he had proof, and then he would never look. It was almost as if he didn’t want to believe, and that was something Alistair *really* didn’t understand. If someone told you that there was something that would make your life happier, why wouldn’t you want to believe that?

He decided to go after Magnus and see if he could get him to calm down. Maybe there was something he could say to him that would get him to change his mind. But what would that be? He gathered his things and dashed out the door. He saw Magnus making his way down the sidewalk. His shoulders hunched and his head down. Alistair ran to catch up with him calling out his name as he did so.

Magnus looked back and scowled at the sight of his friend running up the sidewalk. He turned and kept walking, but Alistair wouldn’t give up that easily. He called out his name again but this time he was ignored. Instead of deterring him this made Alistair want to talk to Magnus even more. He pushed on and caught up with him.

“Will you just talk to me?” Alistair huffed.

“I already know what you’re going to say and I don’t really want to hear it.”

“I don’t think you know what I want to say.”

“Fine. What?”

“Why don’t you believe in magic?”

“I’ve told you this before,” Magnus sighed. “I don’t believe in things that I can’t see.”

“But I’ve offered to show you magic and you never want to look. Why do you snub me when I say I have proof?” Magnus shrugged. That wasn’t really the answer Alistair was looking for it wasn’t really an answer at all. Alistair didn’t push through. He’d asked what he came here to ask, and he couldn’t force him to answer. They walked in silence for a little while, Alistair still trying to get his breath back and Magnus staring at the ground in front of his feet. Suddenly Magnus spoke, and Alistair listened intently to what his friend had to say.

“It’s because of my dad. And my mom, I guess. You know how my mom died when I was young?” Alistair nodded. “Well my dad was magic, or so he claimed. But he didn’t keep her from dying. He didn’t save her and why wouldn’t he if magic was real?”

“Because magic doesn’t do that,” Alistair said. “It doesn’t bring people back to life.”

“Well why not? If it’s so powerful and great why doesn’t it bring people back to life?”

“I don’t know.”

“I thought you were this great and powerful wizard. Why don’t you know?”

“Because I’m still learning. I don’t claim to be all powerful, I never have. I just wanted to teach you some of the magic I know that makes life better. Not perfect, because nothing on Earth can be perfect. Earth is an imperfect place, but we can still try to make things better when we can.” Alistair told him this, hoping these were the right words to tell his friend. That Magnus would understand what he meant. Magnus didn’t say anything in response, although Alistair thought that his face might’ve looked a little less angry.

They walked in silence for a while longer and when it became apparent there was nothing else to say between the two of them, Alistair said goodbye and left, heading back to his own home. He hoped that something he had said would stick with Magnus and do him some good.

Magnus walked alone down the street, the things that Alistair had told him fresh in his mind. He wasn't sure what to think so he just focused on walking. He counted the steps he took. He got to one hundred and seventy-two and then he turned to his favorite shortcut back to his home. The shortcut began next to an old, broken down building. It had been abandoned for as long as he could remember, but just recently the city had decided to tear it down, declaring it a safety hazard. The site had yellow tape around it, but it was easy for Magnus to duck under and quickly cut through. It shaved almost ten minutes off of his walk home.

He slipped under the tape and continued on just like he would every other day. But as it turned out this day wasn't going to be just like every other day. As he walked by the building the ground began to tremble. An earthquake. Those weren't uncommon in that part of the country, but still, it was scary to be caught off guard by the ground shaking under your feet.

He pressed against the side of the building, terror running through him. This was an especially big one. Then from above him he heard a great cracking sound. He looked up to see the concrete walls of the building splitting apart. He froze as fear set in. He couldn't run, and he couldn't even think as the walls came tumbling down on top of him.

Pain. That was Magnus's first thought as he awoke. It was dark, and there was pressure crushing down on him. He was confused, and suddenly it all came rushing back to him. The earthquake and the building falling. Now he was stuck here, and he was probably going to die here stuck under a pile of rubble. No one would know to look for him here. He wasn't supposed to be here, and no one would be coming to help him.

He tried to move but the weight of the concrete was too heavy. If he could just find a crack that led to the light, maybe he could call out and someone would hear him. But no. He was thoroughly pinned, and his mind was starting to go fuzzy. He thought to himself, *This is the end*. But then he felt something inside. Something that was unexpected. It wasn't the pain of the rubble, although that was definitely still there. It was more like a spark of something, he'd never felt anything quite like this before. The only word he could think of to describe it was *magic*.

That couldn't be. He didn't believe in magic. He'd been saying that most of his life. But right now, in the darkest moment he'd been in, literally and figuratively, he had a thought. What if magic was real? What if he *could* do magic just like Alistair had been telling him the whole time? He thought back to what felt like years ago in the library. Alistair said he'd made books float. Maybe if he could levitate books, Magnus could do the same thing with the rubble pressing down on him. The only problem was he didn't know how.

He thought about Alistair wishing in this moment that he'd paid more attention to when his friend talked about magic. He closed his eyes tight and imagined the rubble lifting off of him. He thought that he felt a slight relief of pressure. And then he was sure that the rubble was moving. Was it really possible that Alistair was right? Was magic really real?

Light broke the darkness and Magnus squinted out at the world around him. Just moments ago he had been about to give up on life and now he was seeing things from a whole different perspective. He watched the rubble move through the sky above him as he pushed it out of the way. He felt a strain as he lowered the rocks. He set them down, and the fuzzy feeling grew in his head. He smiled as he drifted off into the dark again. Alistair was right about everything.

Alistair sat in a chair next to Magnus's bed. A nurse was in the room too, checking his IV. Alistair looked at his friend laying there. He looked peaceful, but he was very injured. Both of his legs were broken and one of his arms, and he had also suffered a concussion. He watched his friend sleep and wondered when or if he was going to wake up. Alistair studied Magnus's face thinking about the last time they had talked. He didn't want the last time they had talked to be an argument.

The nurse finished with the IV, and she made to leave the room but before she left she turned to Alistair.

"You don't need to stay here the whole time, honey. We'll let you know when he wakes up."

"I'm okay," Alistair told her. She shrugged and left, leaving the room quiet except for the constant beeping sound that let them know Magnus's heart was still beating. A sound that Alistair was very grateful for.

Suddenly when Magnus's eyelids fluttered. Alistair sat up straight. His eyes opened, and he blinked a few times as if registering where he was. Then he saw Alistair. His face broke into a weak smile. He tried to say something, but his voice croaked.

"Here," Alistair grabbed a cup that was on the bedside table. "Drink this." Magnus took the water gratefully and took a few sips. He tried to hand the cup back but his shaking hand dropped it, spilling water all over the floor. Alistair jumped to his feet.

"I'll get the nurse to clean that up."

"It's okay, you could just do it with your magic." Alistair's face clouded with confusion. Magnus smiled at him and he smiled back. Alistair then evaporated the water just like he had done in the library. Magnus watched with a smile on his face.

"I believe you now," Magnus said. "I'm sorry I never did before."

"You don't have to apologize," Alistair told him. "I'm just glad that you're okay. And that you can finally experience the beauty of magic." He reached out and grabbed Magnus's hand. "And that you finally admitted I was right." He smiled and Magnus smiled back.

The Definition of Foolish

A Mildly Educational But Mostly Ridiculous Story

by Zane Wolfe

If you go to Google Maps, scroll six inches to the right from the starting point, and zoom in real close, you'll come upon a giant empty field. A long time ago, before there was Tesla, Olive Garden, back hair razors and Bob Ross, a small, remote town called Dullard once stood where the field is. Dullard wasn't your typical village. You see, this town was populated with imbeciles.

Dullard was looked down upon by neighboring cities and was mercilessly mocked. The town held only seven thousand people, and its only tourist location was the world's smallest dust bunny. In this village lived a man named Karl Withakay. Karl was the second-smartest citizen in Dullard (behind Mayor Newt Cleaver, who tricked the residents into electing him by having them sign voting forms tattooed on the bum of a cow).

One day, Karl was ordering a mocha at his favorite coffee shop, called Dry Beans. But instead of getting the drink he wanted, the employee gave Karl a bowl filled with ice and coffee grounds. Appalled and perplexed, Karl walked out of the shop without his latte. As he was marching down the street, Karl began to finally realize the illogicality that his town displayed. All around him mothers were being pushed in strollers by their toddlers, men were riding horses facing backwards, kids were eating their vegetables, construction workers were hitting hammers with nails, women were eating their soup with forks, and everybody was wearing itchy wool sweaters in ninety-degree heat.

Karl moseyed home, and for the thirtieth time in his life, he actually began to use his brain. Karl tried to think up ways to improve the town's overall mental health and boost the citizens' intellect. One of his ideas was to have everybody shove limes in their ears, but then Karl realized his plan made no sense. Finally, he decided the town of Dullard could greatly increase its collective intelligence by attaining thousands of encyclopedias from the distant country of Japan. (Dullard did not have a library or any books, to be frank.)

Karl thought that if the people in town all had an encyclopedia, they'd read it and eventually be smarter than Mark Twain, who was unquestionably the scientist who solved MC^2 . But in order to convince the town to spend all

their emergency dough on textbooks, Karl would have to get at least three thousand citizens to sign a petition. So he decided to go to his local mercantile to get a form printed.

Unfortunately, it was a Monday, and the mercantile happened to be closed on Mondays, Saturdays, Wednesdays, Sundays, Fridays and Tuesdays. But Karl was determined to help his town and hopefully become a local hero. He instead crossed the road over to Pauline's Potted Plants. It was there that Karl bought the largest tree he could find (and carry): an oak tree. Karl concluded that paper is made of trees, so if he got a tree and printed the petition on it, his plan would still work.

Due to Karl's low IQ and large tree, he wasn't able to fit the oak in the printer. So as an alternative, he hand-carved the entire form into the tree's bark using a sewing needle. Thirty-seven painstaking hours later, Karl finished the petition, tended to his broken fingers, took eighteen pills of ibuprofen, and headed out to find the citizens of Dullard. Karl traveled around town, getting people of all ages to sign his petition. Amused by a grown man hauling around an oak tree with his bare hands, men, women, elders, children, and babies signed their names on the tree's bark. (They used sporks, which they all carried around, because Mayor Newt Cleaver made a law that forced them to.) Several hours later, Karl had filled up his oak tree with hundreds of citizens' signatures. He then headed toward the town hall, where Mayor Newt Cleaver resided. Now, Mayor Cleaver was a strict, greedy cheapskate who also happened to be the smartest person in Dullard. He spent nearly the town's entire budget on crates stocked with cucumber wine, a hot tub for his pet goats, and sporks (which were his favorite utensil).

When Karl entered the office of Mayor Newt Cleaver, he noticed that the politician had passed out on the floor after drinking several bottles of cucumber wine. So Karl dragged the mayor outside, picked up Cleaver's hand, and used it to sign the tree. With the mayor having consented to the spending of Dullard's emergency cash stash, Karl strolled over to the bank. He withdrew the rest of Dullard's money and spent it all on encyclopedias. Then he hired a man named Gomer to drive a van and retrieve the books from Japan. Gomer would then bring the books back to the town.

Several weeks later, having completed his task, Gomer returned from Japan with a truckload of boxes containing encyclopedias. Karl had prepared a

giant celebration party for the entire town of Dullard. But he didn't take a second glance at the encyclopedias after Gomer came back. Instead, Karl was occupied preparing to make a speech.

Karl stepped on stage and stood behind a wood podium. A crowd of thousands gathered around their "hero." Trumpets resounded throughout the town, and everyone was given the day off from work. Karl started off his speech by explaining to the citizens that they "weren't the fluffiest kittens in the litter." He told the people that they now had encyclopedias to expand everyone's knowledge and brainpower. Soon, the residents of Dullard would be smarter than the citizens of the other neighboring towns. The crowd—which was made up of men, women, children, seniors, babies, construction workers, cashiers, dog food tasters, panda nannies, clowns, chiropractors, cuddle therapists, and teachers with false licenses—clapped vigorously and cheered.

Karl had Gomer and another guy bring out the first box full of encyclopedias. With the crowd applauding, Karl proudly opened the box and picked up a book. He held it up to the audience like Rafiki the monkey holding up Simba the lion. Suddenly, the crowd stopped cheering and gasped. Karl quickly began looking over the encyclopedia in his hands. Leafing through the pages, he had the abrupt realization that all the books were written in Japanese!

In shock, Karl was aware that he had foolishly spent all of Dullard's money on encyclopedias written in a language that nobody in the town could read. This new realization was very stressful to him, and Karl's heart just couldn't take it. So right then and there, Karl had a heart attack and collapsed on the stage, dead.

The entire audience descended into chaos, once they had concluded that their beloved town was broke and doomed. The next day, Karl was buried in Dullard's graveyard, which regrettably had been built right next to the infant nursery called "Eternal Naptime Daycare."

The impoverished people of Dullard attempted to survive in their failing town, even burning the encyclopedias for fire fuel, but alas, the citizens' simple cerebellums were no help. Ultimately, the town disbanded and spread out across the world, influencing others with their sheer stupidity. These people who were influenced eventually became known as "Democrats." Nowadays,

the only evidence left of Dullard is a sunken gravestone in the open field, which reads, "Karl Withakay – hero, failure, imbecile."

So ends the terrible and tragic tale of Karl and the town of Dullard. Let this story be a valuable lesson to you; the Bible does not approve of foolish, brash choices.

Proverbs 12:15 – "The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice."

Jeremiah 4:22-24 – "The Lord says, "My people are stupid; they don't know me. They are like foolish children; they have no understanding. They are experts at doing what is evil, but failures at doing what is good."

(P.S., no dogs, orphans, babies, encyclopedias, or brains were harmed in the making of this story)

Shopping
A Peculiar Poem
by Zane Wolfe

It was time to shop for delectable foods;
At home all the children were in joyful moods.
Mother was chosen to purchase the required
And give her kids grub that they so much desired.
They gave her a long list and checked it thrice more,
Then mom got into her car and drove to the store.
When she walked down an aisle to buy nacho chips,
Horrorified, she exclaimed with hands on her hips,
“These chips are made with potassium and soy!
I’d never serve these to my girl or my boy!
The dumplings and pies contain corn and high fructose!
These hotdogs and cupcakes have way too much glucose!
These gummies’ main factors are sugar and dye!
The chocolate pretzels contain dextrose and lye!
This scrap food is gonna corrupt my dear kids!
Even this fried chicken has metal liquids!”
As she tossed the big box of cookies aside,
She had an idea that she just couldn’t hide.
“I know what to do,” said the mother aloud.
“This eating of cheap junk mustn’t be allowed!”
So she threw out the list and all the great treats,
And in their stead she got zucchini and beets!

She stocked up on tofu and broccoli stew,
Green salads and almonds and kombucha brew.
She ignored the delights of what her kids needed,
“Now they’ll eat healthier,” she boldly conceded.
Hemp seeds and bone broth and juicy pickled plums,
Asparagus, vinegar, and wheat bread crumbs.
“These nutrients are healthy and soon they’ll see
I’m not buying fake cheese that has MSG!”

Mother bought these items with green dollar bills,
And drove back home all filled with delightful chills.
When mother got back, all the kids were excited,
But when they saw red beets, their joy was soon blighted.
She expected to hear shouts of joy and cheering,
But instead she heard wails of sobbing and tearing!
“How can this be?” She asked herself in surprise,
As her eardrums were filled with shattering cries.
Oh, how unhappy were the kids when they found
No treats; they were depressed as tears hit the ground.
And so mother learned that health’s not the real way,
But happy taste buds are what brighten the day.
Veggies and seaweed, in truth, are not yummy–
It’s processed foods that make a real blissful tummy.

The Coincidence in Fate

by Emma Demster

Some days are as lucky as a leprechaun. Others carry the weight of purpose and certainty. Each step taken. Each move made. Written out and planned.

Along his way to the county fair, Chance stopped by his local coffee shop. He rummaged through his pockets. He pulled out all his change.

“What a blessing I’ve been given!” he exclaimed.

It was just enough to purchase his morning cup of joe. Not a cent to spare. His drive was no less pleasant. Intersection after intersection. Not a red light to be seen. Later that afternoon he strolled through the fair. Marveling at the rides. Eyeing the show tricks and performances. Chance wandered aboard the massive Ferris wheel.

“How fortunate you are,” claimed the operator. “This is the last ride for today!”

Chance just smiled at his continued good fortune.

Not far away—just down the street, in fact—Destiny strolled past shops and small businesses. Each with colorful signs and displays. Into a used book store she turned. Skimming through the titles on the shelves. Then on one label her eyes landed, something she’d been searching for.

“Oh, what are the odds?” she cried, snatching the prized book for herself.

With this small victory, Destiny treated herself to a quick lunch. Discovering with delight that she had made it to happy hour, she splurged on a half-priced slushie. With a small buzz her phone lit up. It began to play a tune. Her boss was on the other end.

“Your coworker is retiring,” he informed her. “You are being promoted to his position.”

“What a perfect day that has been written out for me!” she replied.

With a notion to celebrate, she headed downtown.

Late that evening, in a mood for some fun, Chance strutted into a bar. He was looking forward to a good time. But he paused when he noticed a familiar face. She was sitting near the piano.

“Well, look who I ran into,” he crowed.
Destiny looked up from her colorful drink. She smiled.
“Please,” she flirted, “. . . this was meant to be.”

The Tulip
by Emma Demster

Alone she stands,
A single tulip,
A single dancer,
Poised,
Tall,
And gentle.
This foreign beauty,
She has traveled so far.
Her budding head,
Yet to bloom,
Displays the color yellow.
Not too bright,
But not very soft,
Waiting to open
In graceful elegance.
With springtime she will spread
The petals of her crown.
In the wind she'll dance
To the bird's sweet harmony.

Drummer
by Emma Demster

Steadily
The drum beats
Beats
Beats.
Quickly
The player pounds
Pounds
Pounds.
Loudly
The music sings
Sings
Sings.
Rhythmically
The listeners nod
Nod
Nod.

This Is the Story of How Chuck Norris Died

by Kyrie Western

Chuck Norris was on a mission. Well, a lot of missions actually. Number one: have a good time with his girlfriend, Saundrah. Number two: control his pet lemur named Phil. Number three: get the most strikes ever at the bowling alley. Chuck looked at his lemur, who was perched on his shoulder. He had gotten Phil on a vacation to Florida, when an ad for a domesticated lemur popped up on his phone. He loved the idea of having a pet lemur, and had owned Phil for three years.

“Ready to go, Phil?” he asked his furry, ring tailed friend. Phil trilled in response. Chuck glanced at his watch. Ten minutes.

“Chuck Norris isn’t restricted by time,” he said.

He arrived at the bowling alley five minutes later than he was expected to be there. As they walked in, Chuck noticed that the alley was overpacked with people. The clamor from their chatter, and the clashing of the balls against the pins made it almost impossible to think. Phil leaped suddenly onto the floor, catching Chuck by surprise.

“Phil! What are you doing?” Chuck shouted, but Phil wasn’t listening. He was heading straight for the counter, weaving and noodling his way through the feet of passersby. He hopped up onto the counter and turned to look at Chuck. Dumbfounded, Chuck stood in complete awe and confusion at his pet, but then remembered why he was there and rushed over to the counter as well.

“Shoes, please,” he said politely to the lady standing at the desk. She was too busy looking at the lemur that was sitting in front of her.

“Um...oh yes!” she said as she ducked beneath the desk. A few moments later, she reappeared with a pair of abnormally large shoes.

“I’m sorry, these were all we had left.” she said. Chuck stared at the size fifteen bowling shoes, and the corners of his mouth dipped. He glanced at Phil. Phil was almost in tears, he was laughing so hard. The sound was like the chatter of monkeys in the jungle. Chuck rolled his eyes.

“Ignore the lemur.” he told the lady, but she was staring blankly into the distance.

“Huh? What did you say?” she asked

“Uh well.....oh screw it. I’ll take the shoes.” he said reluctantly as he grabbed the giant shoes and strutted off toward the lane where his girlfriend, Saundrah was waiting for him. Phil followed closely behind, mimicking Chuck’s every move. Saundrah laughed when she saw this.

“Oh, you think I’m funny do you?” he asked her with a smirk.

“No, I was laughing at Phil!” she explained, still laughing.

“What?! Phil!” he growled as he turned around sharply to find Phil copying him. Phil did a little dance and ran to grab his bowling ball. Chuck clenched his fists and stormed off to pick a bowling ball as well.

“Get it together, Chuck! You can’t let this lemur, your own pet, steal your day,” he grumbled to himself. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, Phil was passing him, pushing and rolling a four-pound, blue ball across the floor. He paid no attention to Chuck as he passed. Chuck then found his own thirteen-pound, yellow ball and brought it to the lane. Saundrah already had hers.

Saundrah stepped up to bowl. She threw the ball, and it ended up in the gutter both times. Chuck was next. He lined up the ball with the middle pin, but when he drew back to roll it, he tripped over the too-big shoes and the ball went wonky. He somehow managed to get most of the pins knocked down, only one stood. The screen above them blinked, and the number ten shown in white under his name.

“Wait, but I didn’t get them all. Why does it say that?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t know,” stated Saundrah, as Chuck began to count the pins. When he was furnished, he noticed that there were 11 pins instead of ten!

“There must just be a mistake, Chuck, don’t worry about it.” said Saundrah calmly.

The rest of the day did not go well for Chuck. By the last couple of bowls, he was tired, bruised from tripping over his shoes, and he was hungry.

“Phil! Go get me a corndog!” he shouted.

“And a slushy!” Phil did as he was told, and bounced away to carry out his orders, taking Chuck’s wallet with him. He came back carrying the corndog and slushy with him.

“Thank you, Phil,” Chuck said, as he began to eat. The first bite was strange, not at all like a corndog. Saundrah leaned forward in her seat. He shrugged and continued to eat. He began to feel drowsy as he neared the end

of his snack. Why were his eyelids drooping? He took the last bite of the corndog, drank the last of the slushy, and stood up to throw his trash away, but staggered and fell over.

“Phil, our plan is working!” he heard Saundrah say. What was she talking about? Chuck collapsed onto the table.

“Mission complete,” said a robotic voice. Just then, Phil made a sound like a machine powering down, and stopped moving.

“Ph...Phil?” mumbled Chuck, as a man strolled through the door. Chuck’s eyes began to close, consuming him in darkness, and he knew no more.

“Yes!” shouted Saundrah, as she sprang out of her seat. She ran over to the man who walked in, and hugged him.

“Hey, big sis,” he said. Saundrah sighed.

“We finally got rid of that conceited, self-centered nincompoop!”

“How long have we been plotting this? Four years?” asked the man.

Saundrah

nodded. The people standing around them were in utter shock. Chuck Norris was dead? Chuck was.....dead.

“Get them!” rang a voice from the crowd. There was a roar of angry people, and so Saundrah and her brother rushed out the door. They hopped into a big black truck, and drove off, never to be seen again.

And that is the story of how Chuck Norris died.

The Flower of War

by Hannah Trotter

Her father walks out of the meeting chamber, his shoulders slumping and arms hanging loosely. The counsel follows him out, and none of them seemed pleased. The little girl hops off the wicket bench.

“What has the counsel decided, Ba?”

“Come now, Ghania, let us go home.”

The road winds between row upon row of rice, and little ponds of murky water dot the dirt path. It is only a five minute walk. Ba wears a loose garment around his waist and a thin but elaborately decorated robe above it. Ghania takes her father’s hand.

Their house rests on a riverbank. To avoid the seasonal flooding, stilts uphold the framework. All but Kunthia, Ghania’s eldest sister, are outside, tilling and harvesting the fruit of the coconut trees.

Ba calls out to Mea: “Kolab, how goes thee?”

“I am fine, dear husband, and how was the counsel?”

Ba gently gestures towards the house, and Mea knows to follow. The wooden stairs creak as they climb, and the whole house seems to collapse at the following gust of wind; a mosquito net flutters ever so slightly out the window.

“Ghania, would you help me,” requests Kravann.

“Yes, sister.”

“Good, I am glad to have some help. Kunthia is at the village market.”

Kunthia is Ghania’s other sister, just older than her. She has a reputation for being the personable and pretty one, the Flower of Sahakom.

“You know what, sisters, I feel a foreboding omen,” calls out A-wut, the brother, from across the coconut patch. “The council has finally made up its mind.”

“Enough politics,” retorts Kravann, “Save that evil talk until after dinner.”

The sun begins to set, for a last time scattering its warm breath across the countryside, with fire and haze, glow and eeriness. The tall coconut trees cast long, tilting shadows on the soft brown earth. The sitting water of the nearby rice paddy reflects the shimmering light, illuminating the ground. In

the distance, the last of the songbirds sing in the treetops of the palm trees. It is all so breathtaking, and to think that Pol Pot's army might take it all away is even more terrifying. Pol Pot despises those with knowledge. Her father was one of those despised; he was a doctor, educated in Phnom Penh. He had warned Ghania and her family that, in the face of capture, he would not be spared. Ghania did not understand why Pol Pot would not want doctors for his soldiers.

Ghania's father also told her something terrible and cruel, but this was something that Ba could not protect her from. Wickedness, he said, cannot be avoided. It will always be in the world, but it comes out in different forms, and this form, he had said, was likely to harm her. She must be prepared, and she knew she was. Though she had a mere nine years behind her, Ghania was wiser than most. She paid heed to conversation and made the most of the little education her mother was able to scratch out for her. She had not been very old when the Khmer Rouge and mass murders had begun. Rumors of civil conflict that had dotted commonplace gossip had turned into disturbed stories of guerilla warfare that possessed nearly every villager's tongue. Yes, Ghania knew what might happen, and she knew what to do if the worst came.

The sound of approaching footsteps touches Ghania's ear; she turns to see Kunthia nearing the house, a wicker basket atop her head.

"How was market?" inquires Ghania.

"Splendid as can be," Kunthia replies, a smile in her voice. "Here, would you take this to Mea?"

Ghania takes the basket containing raw rice, beef, and vegetables and begins to climb the creaky stairs.

"Mea, Kunthia has returned with your ingredients."

"Oh, thank you, Ghania."

"Would you like me to begin the rice, Mea?"

"No. Go outside please. Tell your brother and sisters that supper will be ready when the chores are complete."

"Yes, Mea." And Ghania descends the stairs.

Her siblings are feeding and caressing Tauch Ko, their little cow. The conversation, dominated by A-wut, and largely ignored by strong Kravann and delicate Kunthia, continue to be of the impending war.

“Please, A-wut,” intercedes Ghania, “Do not talk of the war. We already know enough about its devastation. We do not need to know the logistics of it.”

“You need to know about it to be an informed citizen to make good decisions,” A-wut retorts. “That’s what Ba says, and he is a doctor: smart and very aware that he is being hunted.”

“Ba is being hunted,” Ghania murmurs. “That is just it. That is the war. We do not need to hear about any more of it.”

“Please stop it,” Kunthia cries out. “It would be better if we did not talk about the war at all. It is hard enough going to market and the talk being nothing but death and drownings and torture and burnings!”

“Let’s go inside,” nudges Kravann. “The chores are all finished, and I can smell the loc lac. Ghania, would you grab the coconut basket?”

Ghania does as she is told without objection or even a hint of annoyance. This is her way.

When she reaches the house, the smell of steamed rice, spicy beef, and freshly cut vegetables wafts a delectable fragrance into her senses.

“Thank you, Mea. This smells wonderful.”

The other children echo Ghania’s thanksgiving as they all settle around the center floor mat. The wooden spoons and metal pots clank as the food is served and the sweet, sour, and spicy fragrance intensifies. Ghania’s stomach gnaws within her. Though their family cuisine has remained the same in spite of the war, Mea serves less of it than before the war, to preserve food in the case of a supply shift.

A tension pervades the room, as strong as the meal’s fragrance and as delicate as the passing wind. A sickening silence.

Ba speaks . . .

“Dear family, I have avoided telling you what you have all longed to know. The decision of the counsel regarding the guerilla warriors...” but he cannot go on. Mea continues for him.

“What your Ba is trying to tell you, dear children, is that, in grave consideration of the war, the counsel has decided to evacuate the village. By the fall of evening tomorrow, our citizens shall be traveling northward, toward the border of Thailand.”

No one can speak. Their whole lives have been lived in their cherished village of Sahakom. Now, the pain and grief are caught in their throats and flow down their cheeks.

Kravann rises from her place, asking, "What are we to take with us?"

"Nothing," Ba answers, "Or, at least, as little as possible. Journeying as a community requires the lightest load possible."

"But Ba!" cries Kunthia, "How can they do this, uproot us, slaughter for the sake of power, and sacrifice the innocent?"

"I don't know. Truly, I don't know, Kunthia, our Flower. But know that new soil can be found to root in."

"Ba," interjects A-wut, "I intend to fight."

"No. You will not." Ba's tone has turned from fatigued and frightened to stoic and unyielding. "You will come with us and save yourself and your family, not vainly search for glory through blood. Do you understand?"

"Ba, I understand your request but—"

"It is no request, son. It is a command."

"One that I cannot obey, Ba. I am sorry."

"I do not understand why you go against me."

"Our allegiances to this beloved Khmer kingdom take very different forms, Ba."

Ba has never permitted disobedience before that night, but Ghania knows that he respects A-wut's decision to fight, for fight is what Ba sincerely wants to do.

The heat lifts from the air as night falls and the stars rise. Ghania takes her place on the floor and soon falls asleep, but her slumber does not last, for her pacifism is disturbed. War and terror shake her to her gentle core, but fear—no, Ghania does not have fear, merely painful hope.

The cicadas sing, the birds chirp, and the grasses harmonize along with them. The gray hum of morning begins to warble and wake up Ghania's family. There is not the usual breakfast that morning. The early hours are filled with preparation and final goodbyes. Ghania, being the smallest, is left with the least work and the most time to sentimentalize. She ambles along the creek, going over in her head all the joys and laughter that have resonated from this serene stream through the years. The water smells of water lily pads and plumeria blossoms.

Then, a different odor pierces Ghania's senses—a strong, pungent one. Burnt flesh.

She looks to the sky and can see a barely perceptible pillar of smoke, climbing into the heavens. It is the sign of the guerilla soldiers; the bodies they kill, they burn.

Before Ghania even fully fathoms what this means, the alarm cry sounds. A shrill, booming voice cries out from Sahakom's center. Run, it says, run. And she does. To the house she scrambles and up the stairs she clammers. Mea is piling the sacks of rice onto her back when Ghania runs into the kitchen.

"Go, child, do not wait for us. We shall catch up."

Kravann seizes Ghania's hand and they rush to the river. Kunthia is already wading across the stream. The current threatens to overturn them. It taxes their strength, but so would everything on this journey.

They do not stop until, once more, they hear a cry. This cry however, is an ensemble. The entirety of the village is wailing and rushing and trampling each other. Guns fire. The sisters break into a run.

"A-wut!" shrieks Ghania, "Where are you, A-wut?"

But her words are swallowed by the din of crossfire and death. They run and run and run, an effort without ceasing, a terror without relieving . . . and still they run. Ghania cannot persevere without a respite. Amid the tangle of tropical mangroves, the sisters collapse. Faint gunshots and a hint of smoke descend upon the trees, wild animals, and desperate sisters. They are not alone, but the faces of the surrounding villagers, that would have once been familiar, are splattered with muck, tears, and fears. Not one word is uttered, but stifled mufflings can be heard.

"Mea!" Ghania calls out. "Mea!"

"She isn't here," corrects Kravann, her voice weak.

"No, there she is!"

Kravann's and Kunthia's eyes follow the direction Ghania is showing, and soon their bodies do, too. The mother and daughters' reunite in a loving embrace. She explains that she hid in a hole, covered by straw and rice stalks, for two hours. Thrice had a guerilla warrior nearly stepped onto the mat. Some even stole some of the grains.

"And what of A-wut and Ba?" pleads Ghania.

“A-wut was the reason I escaped,” continues Mea. “Your brother stole an enemy gun and began shooting at men from behind the jungle line. One of the guards near my hole . . . he was shot, and fell onto the mat, but I could not scream or else the other would know. A-wut shot the other one as well. He demanded that I flee into the woods. As I was doing so, he began shooting again. I do not know if he is alive.”

“We must go back!” weeps Ghania.

“If we do, then A-wut’s sacrifice would be rendered worthless. No, we must move onward.”

“And what of Ba?” murmurs Gunthia.

“I do not know, but I feel that we will see him once more in Thailand, for there we still must go. The soldiers are approaching. They stop at nothing. I shall gather our villagers.”

But as Mea did so, many shook their heads in despair. Their families are dead; it is only right of them to return. For the dead, they would risk death. Another woman and her child joined them, and so did Mit, Kunthia’s betrothed.

For ten days and ten nights they trek the path of trials. That decade of days was hunger; it was fatigue; it was frustration; it was devastation.

As Mit reaches the top of a hill, he cries out in exultation, “Look! There is a road, and a wall, and some soldiers! We have reached the border!”

Kravann rests her head on her mother’s shoulder, Kunthia rejoices, the mother and child settle on the muddy, jungle floor in quiet relief, but Ghania merely turns to her mother and asks, “Will we see Ba very soon?”

“Yes, dearest, we shall.”

“But what of the border? We have no paperwork,” agonizes Gravann.

“Do you remember the Apphoutheto river, the one your father mentioned many times? That is our border. It was northwest of Sahakom and thus would not be far from here. Soldiers guard the region, but they are scattered. This is the last step in our journey.”

The following day is as the epilogue of a book, hopeful but not quite finished. Those last strides toward freedom are sweet and serene.

One humid evening, a foreboding seeps into Ghania’s skin. They are within sight of the gushing river when she hears the crack of a branch. Every person’s attention is caught and hanged. The birds are silent and the air

unmoving. Then, from deep in the jungle comes a blood-curdling war cry. The forest awakes with the surge of warriors and the shriek of bullets. The children run for the river, followed by the two mothers, but Ghania falls behind, and, in the scramble for survival, no one notices. All but Ghania and her mother cross the water flow.

A shot rings out.

Ghania screams.

She falls onto her knees, collapsing into the river. Mea reaches for her before the current sweeps her little girl away. All she can do is hold Ghania close, her beautiful Ghania, and never let go. She is a mother. This is her daughter. The horror of witnessing the death of one's own child can only rip a heart in two, slowly, painfully. It is worse than torture.

Mea clutches her child to her chest; within that chest beats a broken heart. Blood stains the river.

But peace, impossible peace, fills the eyes of the little girl.

"Mea?" Ghania asks, as though she is drifting off into a delightful dream. "Mea, are we in Thailand?"

"Yes, yes, we are, my love," softly weeps her mother.

"Mea, Ba is here. You said we would see Ba again, in Thailand."

Ghania's eyes close. They are never to open again.

"Oh, Ghania, oh Ghania," cries her mother, praying to something, anything, praying over her little girl. "Where are you going, you who are so beautiful, you who are so good? Why are you being taken from me? Why you, you who have the purest heart? You have been the only beauty of this war, the only one truly against the hurt, and now that hurt is taking you. Please, please don't go. You are the only beauty of this war; you are the true Flower of Sahakom; you have been the Flower of this War."

The Creek

by Akaysha Braunsroth

If you wish for a place of solace and peace,
with the ebb and flow of waves and wind through trees,
with white, snow capped torrents of froth,
and canyons below ever moving ever changing,
leaves slowly drifting with breeze alternating.
Mossy, rough rocks content to stay down below,
with swift, glistening currents pulling minnows in tow.
Neath rocks, hide crawfish obscured from sight,
silver, sleek fishes are taking flight.
Birds in the trees, their songs ring out sweetly,
squirrels, treading lightly, are chittering meekly.
Dragonflies expertly navigate the air,
their striking colors and wings shine as if aflare.
The whole expansion the embodiment of peace,
yet the source of tranquility is found among the leaves,
if you wish to find true satisfaction,
bought at a great price, yet requiring no exaction
lift your eyes above the brook, find a sight sweeter still,
a reminder of the everlasting salvation and freedom bought on that hill.

Summer

by Akaysha Braunsroth

Summer is oppressive heat, yet all welcome its rays,
bumblebees and butterflies welcome summer days.
Grass green as emerald, grows lush from the ground,
rabbits fearful of me and you leap away in a bound,
see the majestic hawk flying up above you and I,
its lofty hazel wings drawing every eye.

The bee is buzzing.

The hummingbird humming.

The fish is burbling.

The wind is rustling.

The sun is sweltering,

and these noises join to create unlikely melody.

the breeze is ruffling the delicate daisy,

whilst the stream is gurgling lazily,

but as you soak up these summer wonders,

I leave you to ponder,

that as a cool breeze ruffles your hair

you can use it as a reminder,

that summer cannot last forever.

No Eyes Have Seen

by Adele Lett

Sarah stared at the wall of her room. Well, where she knew the wall was. She'd never actually seen her own room wall. The darkness that was her world pressed in on her. Sarah closed her eyes that couldn't see anything anyways. *What's the point of even having eyes if I can't see?* Tears welled up in her blind eyes. Sarah bit her lip to keep herself from crying. *I just want to be able to see, God. Is that too much to ask?*

"Sarah!"

Sarah jumped and almost fell off her bed.

"What, Mom?!" she shouted back angrily.

"You have a visitor."

Sarah moaned. It was probably her grandma, who never failed to mention how sorry she was about Sarah's blindness.

"Well, that's no way to greet an old friend!"

Sarah screamed. The voice was right in her ear. The bed sagged as her friend Michael sat down next to her.

"Michael!" she yelled.

"What?"

Sarah could hear the grin in his voice. She told him, "You know you're not allowed in my room! Get out, get out, get out!"

"Come on, Sarah, I used to be your classmate!"

Sarah crossed her arms. "Fine."

Michael sighed dramatically. "I'll wait for you in the living room!"

"Wait!" Sarah heard the door close behind Michael. She stood up and crossed her room. She ducked out into the hallway and counted her steps to the stairs. Fourteen, like always. Sixteen steps down the stairs. Six steps around the corner. Ten steps into the living—Sarah's legs collided with something. She tried to catch her balance but fell to her hands and knees on the other side of whatever she had tripped on.

"Jackson!" Sarah yelled. A little giggle trailed out of the room as her little brother ran away. Sarah kicked away the footrest that she had tripped over. It usually belonged a few steps to her right, by the grey chair in front of the

window. But apparently her brother had moved it in her way where he knew she'd trip on it.

"Are you okay, Sarah?" Michael knelt next to her, trying to help her up. Sarah pushed him away.

"I'm fine," She growled. Sarah stood up angrily and stomped over to the kitchen door, where she could hear her mother washing dishes.

"Mom!" she shouted. "Jackson put something in my way again!" The water turned off.

"I'm sorry, Sarah. I've tried to get him to stop. I don't know what else to try. Try to just—"

"Just what, Mom? Just watch out?" Sarah's hands curled into fists. "In case you hadn't noticed, Mom, I haven't ever actually been able to see things since I was seven!" Sarah spun on her heel and went back into the living room.

"Are you sure you're okay, Sarah?" Michael's hand settled on her shoulder. Sarah jerked away.

"I'm fine. What do you want?" She heard Michael slide his hands into his pockets.

"Your mom asked me to take you to youth group with me tonight. She wants you to get out of the house for a while."

Sarah shook her head frantically. "No way. I'm not leaving the house to go somewhere I've never been before." The kitchen door opened behind her.

"Yes, you are, Sarah." Her mom's unique scent of flowers and dirt drifted into the room.

"Mom, I don't want to go," Sarah pleaded.

"Sarah, you're going. End of conversation." Her mother went back into the kitchen. Sarah gritted her teeth.

"You can get your stuff if you want, Sarah. I'll wait here." Sarah heard Michael plop down in a chair. She slowly trudged upstairs, feeling the area in front of her before taking a step. Sarah grabbed her Braille Bible off of her desk chair. She opened her closet door. Sarah reached to the back of the top shelf and felt smooth wood with her fingertips. She rolled it forward and off the shelf. Sarah ran her hands up and down the walking stick. She hadn't had to use it for years. The all too familiar rubber grip still had the imprint of her fingers. Her hand was bigger than it used to be.

“Hello, my old friend.” She whispered sarcastically. She wanted to brush her fingers over the place where her dad had carved into the wood. But she refused to. She remembered what it said anyways: *Matthew 11:5*. She could still remember the day that her parents had given her the stick. When she had started losing her sight when she was seven, they had brushed it off at first. Both of her parents wore heavy prescription glasses, so they had assumed that their bad eyesight had passed down to her. But when they took her to get glasses, it had been something much worse than they had thought. A disease slowly stole her eyesight until there was nothing left. Sarah had lived in darkness ever since that day. A couple days after she had completely lost her sight, her parents had given her the stick. It had made her feel more independent. She didn’t have to rely on anybody to help her around anymore. Now it was a painful reminder that God had abandoned her, and she would never be the same as everyone else. She would always be the outcast.

“Sarah?” Sarah spun around and held her Stick of Pain out in front of her.

“Whoa, watch where you swing that thing. You almost hit me!” Michael chuckled. Sarah smacked his leg with it.

“Ouch!” he cried dramatically.

“Oh, quit being such a baby. I barely hit you.” Sarah rolled her eyes.

“You can roll your eyes? I didn’t know that...people like you could roll their eyes.”

Sarah tensed. “Yes, Michael. *People like me* can roll their eyes, and so can I.” She did it again to prove her point.

“Cool.” Sarah heard Michael run his hand through his hair.

“Hey, I want you to know that I’ve been praying for you Sarah, and—”

“Are you ready to go?” Sarah cut him off before he could finish his sentence. She’d given up on hoping that she would be healed. Clearly she was at the bottom of the list of God’s priorities.

“Yeah, I’m ready to go. Are you ready?”

Sarah nodded. She followed Michael downstairs.

“Have fun Sarah!” her mom yelled from the kitchen. *Fat chance of that*, Sarah thought. She followed Michael out the front door and froze. She had hardly ever been out of their yard since she had been able to walk. She knew their yard well enough to be able to go for a walk if she wanted one, but

outside of that she didn't know anything about the world around her. Michael's hand slid into hers, startling her. Sarah jumped.

"It's going to be okay. I'll help you know where to go." Michael spoke softly, like he was trying to calm a wild animal. He gently tugged her forward, and Sarah carefully followed. They walked down the sidewalk to the road. Sarah heard a door open. Michael guided her into the car and shut the door.

"Hello! You must be Sarah. Michael's told me all about you!" his mother's voice could only be described as bubbly. "I'm so glad you decided to come tonight, you're going to have a blast!"

Sarah tried to nod enthusiastically. Michael got in on the other side of the car and they started off. Sarah didn't say a thing the whole car ride. Michael's mother talked non-stop the whole drive. When the car pulled to a stop, Sarah tightened her grip on her walking stick until it made her fingers hurt. She heard Michael get out and open her door. She reached out and he took her hand, pulling her from the car.

"Squeezing that stick so hard has to be hurting your hands." He chuckled. Sarah tried to relax her grip. "You'll be fine Sarah. I'll help you get around. We sit down for almost the whole time anyways."

Sarah clenched her jaw as Michael opened the door. The sounds and smells washed over her like a wave. It was so overwhelming that it practically knocked her back a step. Michael led her inside the building. A dozen voices filled Sarah's ears, all talking at once. Sarah started counting her steps, trying to center herself. Thirteen steps forward. Two steps to the right. Three steps backward. Michael moved her hand to touch a chair. Sarah sat down and clutched her Bible and walking stick. A young man's voice, probably in his twenties if Sarah had to guess, started talking over all the noise.

"Okay, everybody. Let's calm it down a little bit. It's time to listen. Everybody come and find a seat." The noise dimmed and Sarah could hear people rustling around, finding a chair to sit down in.

"Good evening, everybody. My name is Chad, in case you don't know me."

"Hi Chad!" a couple of boys said throughout the room.

"Hi, guys. I'm going to jump right into my sermon tonight. The title of the sermon is: Do You Believe In Miracles?" A murmur went through the group. Chad kept going.

“When I say the word miracle, what comes to mind for you? Is it Lazarus being raised from the dead? The water turned into wine at the wedding in Cana? The paralytic that was lowered through the roof who walked away carrying his mat? Or maybe you think of a story from the Old Testament. It could be the manna that fell from heaven for the Israelites to eat. Hannah finally having her longed-for child. Or the Red Sea being parted. Your mind probably went to one of the many miracles that happened in the Bible. But did miracles stop occurring after the Bible stopped being written?” Chad paused, seeming to wait for an answer.

“No,” Michael said next to Sarah.

“No, they didn’t,” Chad echoed.

“Jesus performed many, many miracles in his lifetime. But because he died on the cross for us, paying for our sin, we now have the Holy Spirit with us. Miracles can still happen, and we are able to believe that miracles can still happen. The power of God lives inside of us, and He can perform miracles. His ability to perform miracles didn’t go away when the Bible stopped being written. He is still working among us.”

Sure He is. Sarah thought cynically. Sure God’s still working. I guess they just forgot to put me on the list of potential miracle candidates.

“Now, don’t misunderstand me. Just because miracles *can* happen doesn’t mean they *will* happen. God is sovereign, He can see your entire life right now. He knows every single thing you will ever go through or do. He knows what is best for you. Matthew 7:9-11 says: ‘Who among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, who are sinful, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.’ God knows what is best for us. It might not be what we prefer, but rest assured that it is the right way.”

Sarah’s temper flared. God is this the “right way” for me?! Being blind?! Are my prayers just not making it to you? Are they getting caught somewhere between me and you? How is this what’s best for me?!

“I have seen many things in my life be healed, and almost none of them were instant. Many of them took a long time to heal. But they did heal. I have seen God heal a broken bone in a few minutes. I believe that he can heal blind

eyes, I believe that he can heal deaf ears, I believe that he can heal lame legs. I believe that God can still perform miracles.”

Angry tears slid down Sarah’s face. *Where’s my miracle?*

“It’s our job to ask. So don’t be afraid to ask for healing for those around you that you know need it. Ask for healing for yourself. Trust that God hears each and every prayer you pray, and he listens to them. I’m going to close us out in prayer. If you’re comfortable with it, place your hand on the shoulder of the person next to you, and pray for them while I pray over all of us.”

Sarah reached out, but couldn’t feel a shoulder. Michael took her hand and placed it on someone’s shoulder. He put his own warm hand on her shoulder. Sarah bowed her head as Chad began to pray.

“Lord, thank you for this time we shared together tonight. Help all of these students to feel the truth of this message throughout their week. Be with them as they go out into the world to share your good news with their friends and family. I pray for anyone in this room who needs healing. Whether that’s physical or emotional. Come into this place and heal them, Lord. Heal them. Help us to all be lights in the world this week. Amen.” Sarah moved her hand off of the shoulder it was on. She opened her eyes...and saw Michael’s blurry face. Sarah stumbled back. Michael looked at her. She could see his eyes!

“Sarah? Are you okay?”

Sarah laughed hysterically. “I-I can see you,” She whispered. She watched realization flood his face. “I can see!” she shouted. Tears ran down her face. Sarah knelt on the floor. *Thank you, Lord. Thank you.*

The Swear Jar

by Lilian Haider

A loud *tink* announced the arrival of a new coin. All of the coins below let out a collective groan.

“What was it this time?” asked the oldest quarter, sounding muffled from the bottom of the jar.

The new arrival huffed in disappointment, “I really didn’t think that this is where I’d end up.” It glanced around the large jar in sorrow. “It’s kind of cramped in here,” it muttered. This was the usual reaction of a coin dropped into a swear jar. Coins are supposed to be used to purchase a person’s desire, not to pay for their mistakes. When a coin is dropped into a swear jar it just sits, instead of being useful and passing from hand to hand as most coins do.

A penny timidly spoke from the edge of the ring that had encompassed the new arrival, “If you don’t mind my asking, why are you here?”

The quarter gave a little shake at the memory, “There was a huge argument between Mrs. Crane and Garrett. Garrett wanted to go to a private college in a different state, but Mrs. Crane got upset. She said it was too much money and too far away. What if he suddenly needed to come home? Garrett told his mother that *this* was the college to propel him into his future career, but she wasn’t listening to him. Mr. Crane walked into the room and asked what was happening and when he was told he took his wife’s side. Garrett got angry and swore under his breath. His father caught him and asked what he said, so Garrett repeated himself louder and stormed out.”

There were a few sympathetic murmurs from coins in the background, but a dime just scoffed, “Oh, please,” he scoffed, “I was put in here during a fight between Mr. and Mrs. Crane. Garrett had gotten a suspension for getting in a fight with his bullies. His father thought that Garrett was in the right, he was just defending himself. His mother, on the other hand, was very upset that her son got into a fight, because she believes violence is never the answer. Mr. Crane had also gotten bullied in high school so he understood that sometimes there’s nothing that the adults can do and that you’ve got to stand up for yourself. Mrs. Crane said how thinking like this is what drives children to turn to violence in the first place. Mr. Crane became angry and swore at her.”

An older dime gasped, “What happened?”

“Oh, they figured it out. Ended up lessening the punishment for Garrett, but he was still learned to deal with the consequences of punching someone.”

Excited chatter filled the jar as they shared their stories. A particularly loud voice rose above the others, “I actually got in here because Mr. Crane had dropped one of the dishes while cleaning it with Garrett. He let out a string of curses and quickly grabbed a broom and dustpan. Little Hazel was sitting in her highchair while this happened and heard everything. She repeated one of the curses and everyone in the room went quiet. Garrett then laughed so hard he had the hiccups afterward. Hazel saw Garrett laughing and continued to repeat the word and giggled right along with her brother. Mr. Crane finished up with the broom and stood up, shaking his head and smiling.”

The coins all glowed a little bit with this story. They all had been around long enough that they had a humorous or awkward story to share, whether from the Crane family or from the hands they’d passed through before they ended up here.

The reminiscing died out a little and they all grew silent. Coins remembering their uses and their past homes. The jar suddenly jerked upward and all of the coins slid around.

“What’s happening?”

“Where are we going?”

“Are we leaving the jar?”

Voices sounded from all around the room in little trills. The coins were being brought up and forward, into the family room.

“I haven’t seen this room in a while,” the oldest quarter said with remembrance.

Garrett was sitting on the couch opposite from his mother. Remorse, worry, and hurt was painted all over Garrett’s face. Mrs. Crane was in a similar state, although she had her eyes on her son, her lips pressed into a tight line of worry. Mr. Crane’s hands were shaking a little, so subtle that the coins barely felt it. Besides this, Mr. Crane gave away nothing about his feelings.

“Garrett,” started Mrs. Crane. She looked up at her husband and nodded. The coins were set down onto the coffee table with a dull *thud*. Garrett wearily eyed the jar, remembering how the newest coin arrived.

“We have something for you,” said Mr. Crane with a gentle tone. He pushed the coins a little further towards Garrett.

“What is this for?” Garrett picked up the jar and the coins all rattled around inside. The coins were just as confused as the boy was, each one glancing at one of the parents. That’s when Mr. Crane and Mrs. Crane crossed the room and hugged their son.

“You are nearly an adult and you can make your own decisions. We trust you to make good decisions, even if it means that you’d be leaving home,” said Mr. Crane.

“We want to support you and your future, we’re here for you and we love you,” Mrs. Crane whispered into Garrett’s ear.

A soft *tink* sounded as a tear landed on top of the coins.

A Journey of Discovery

by Emma Hunter

Sometime over the course of this week I heard a quote that goes, “I’m so tired of self discovery when I’m discovering things I should already know.” I’m realizing all over again that I hate peanut butter, I want to help others, I love smarties, I’m an INFJ and a Hufflepuff, I look up to my parents, and I get really annoyed walking behind slow walkers (something high school hallways always reminded me of). I’m growing up. I’m accomplishing new milestones. My world is expanding, but it seems like I’ve personally become stagnant. Like the things that I am learning on a daily basis are things that I have already learned. I also think it’s a little funny that we define ourselves in this world by how others perceive us. Why do we allow one snide comment from a stranger to determine our worth or decide who we are as an individual? That one occurrence of when someone told me I was selfish and wanted everything for myself—why do I allow that to stay with me when I know it isn’t true? When I should instead turn my eyes onto the One who created me. As a society, we should be allowing our creator to define the created. I love to read, and when I read an amazing novel, that author has full control over their characters. The author defines his or her characters as he or she sees fit. God is the author of our lives, but why are we so hesitant to allow Him to define us? I think there’s something to say about a different journey of self discovery . . . or maybe it’s better to refer to it as the process of discovering how God sees you—a journey that I once had to go on myself.

There was a time in my life when I let the opinions of others define who I was. I was smart, kind, all the things you want to hear. But I wasn’t personable with anyone. No one seemed to know me for who I truly was, but I let myself be defined by what they said. I had to go through the process that Peter did when he walked on the water and turn my face to God. That is when I discovered who I truly am.

And I think sometimes we forget that we do have to endure trials to understand our full potential. The other day I was sitting beside a creek and found a rock ... just a random rock. It was absolutely covered in dirt. You couldn’t see its beauty - just the dirt that stained it. I decided, because why not, to clean this rock. And because the dirt was caked on, I found a bigger

rock. And I would knock the two rocks together and swirl the smaller rock among others to create that friction that would eventually take all of the dirt off of that particular rock. Maybe five minutes later, I uncovered this beautiful treasure. Something that had, at first, seemed ordinary, became extraordinary. While in the moment this was something that I was doing to keep my hands busy and not feel idle, as I zoomed out and considered the bigger picture, I realized God was teaching me something. Sometimes, we have to endure trials. Sometimes idle moments provide deeper insight into our true motivations. And sometimes being squished against other people (or rocks), to carve the dirt out of ourselves helps us see the beauty in which we have been made.

Maybe the dirt that mars another is not the same dirt that mars you. My dirt was found in my thoughts, feeling as though I was insignificant. Allowing myself to be defined by the way the people around me were treating me, and not defined by how God sees me. Romans 8:17 says that because we are adopted into the family of God, we are His children, and we are co-heirs with Christ. Personally, that gives me an overwhelming sense of peace. Maybe the struggle is allowing myself to be defined by God, but I also need to discover who God says I am, and not who people say I am. Why let the other characters define me when that is the job of the author? Allow God to define you. As one of His children. As loved. As made in His image. As worthy.

The Titanium Rescue

by Emily Clark

Nobody really knows me that well. They know that I'm that farmer kid who keeps to himself. Other than that, they don't know who I am. Some of the time, I don't even know who I am. I guess I just don't put myself out there unless my family or my farm is in trouble.

One morning, there was a knock on the door. I got up from the kitchen table to answer it. My mom was making some of the eggs from our coop and bacon from the recently slaughtered pig. I opened the door and two men in white lab coats were standing there.

"Hello," one of them said. "Is your father home?"

I looked at them, confused. "He's out in the pasture," I replied. "Why?"

"Oh," he said, "there's just some business we need to attend to."

"What business?" I asked.

"Is your mom home?" he asked, not answering my question.

I looked at him skeptically, then turned back and called for my mother.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

The other man in a white lab coat said, "Why don't we take this outside?"

"Sure," she said. They went outside, closing the door behind them.

"What was that about?" my sister, Paula, asked from the table.

"I don't know," I replied as I was sitting back down. A few moments later, my mother came back in.

"So?" I asked. "What is this all about? Are we going to sell the farm?"

My mother waved her hand. "Oh, no, no, no," she said. "We're not selling the farm."

"Then who were those guys?" I asked.

"They're scientists who have come up with a way to prevent insects from destroying crops without using pesticides."

They were starting to set up their equipment as I left for school. I didn't like how they were invading our land like that, just so they could experiment. We couldn't afford to lose that many crops if the experiment failed. Something

about those scientists unsettled me. I kept thinking about that moment throughout the school day.

When I got home that afternoon, I researched what to do to disable electronic equipment. Now, I'm not the smartest kid in the world, but it seemed pretty easy to me, plus I had some experience working on my dad's tractors and his truck. After I gained the information I needed, I waited until sundown to do it.

At dinner that evening, my father addressed the scientists who had come to our house.

"Now," he said, "things are going to be a bit different here for a while. Some scientists are coming to experiment on my crops and they're going to be having some meals with us."

"Why our farm?" I said resentfully.

"Well," he replied. "I have quite a bit of land, and I usually have a decent crop. A lot of the crop goes bad, though, because insects eat it. That's why the scientists are here. They're going to infuse the crops with titanium to keep it strong."

"But what if their experiment fails?" I asked.

"I don't think it will. This project has been going on for years now. Our farm is just the first large-scale test subject."

"What would happen if they do fail?" I asked, getting angry. "If their experiment fails, we will have nothing to sell until *next year!*" I got up from my seat and stormed out the front door.

"Silas! Silas, come back here!" I heard my father call as I ran to the barn. How could he do this to us? Who knows what those scientists could do to our crops? Our hard-earned money could go down the drain! All I needed to do was stop them. I was going to wait until everyone had gone to bed but now seemed like the time to do it. I grabbed my tools from the barn and walked to the experimentation site. Immediately, I got to work. I opened the control panel on one of the metal posts in the ground. I used my tools to fray the wires, causing them to spark. That triggered something.

The machine started up. "No!" I said. I ran to the middle to try and cover the crops, but I couldn't. A silvery gray force circulated the machine. I was lifted from the ground. As I was suspended in the air, an odorless gas sprayed

from the posts, filling my lungs, and making it hard to breathe. Then, all of a sudden, the machine turned off. I fell 10 feet to the ground and blacked out.

I woke to find myself in a hospital room, my mom sitting in the chair next to me, reading a book aloud.

“Mom?” I asked. She stopped mid-sentence and looked up at me.

She smiled and said, “Welcome back, honey.”

“How long was I out?”

“A couple of days,” she replied, rubbing my arm.

I rubbed my eyes. “I had the strangest dream where I was floating in the middle of the science equipment, and then I fell.”

My mother sighed. “That wasn’t a dream,” she said seriously.

I sat up in bed. “What?” I asked.

Just then the doctor came in. “Oh, good, you’re awake,” she said cheerfully.

“What happened to me?” I asked her.

She inhaled. “Well,” she said, exhaling, “you fell from a very high place. We’re surprised you didn’t sustain any injuries. With a fall from that high, you should’ve had at least a couple of broken bones.”

At that, I was brought back to what my dad said about how they were infusing the crops with titanium. If it was meant to keep crops strong, what would it do to a human?

I was discharged from the hospital the next day. I stood up from my bed as they brought in a wheelchair.

“Can you sit down for me?” the nurse asked.

I looked at it, then at her. “I’m perfectly fine walking. I don’t need a wheelchair,” I protested.

“I know you can walk,” she said, “it’s just hospital protocol.”

I reluctantly sat, and she wheeled me out the door. As soon as we crossed the sunlight barrier, my skin became shiny, like metal. I moved my arms, my skin glinting off the sun. Then, once we got back into the shadows, it was back to normal.

“Did you see that?” I asked my mom, who was walking next to me.

“See what?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

I got into the car and buckled myself in. As my mom was pulling out of the hospital parking lot, she got a phone call.

I looked over as she answered, "Hello?" As the person on the other end spoke, her face got gradually more concerned.

"Ok, love you, bye," she told them.

"What's going on? I asked her.

She looked over at me. "Your sister's missing."

She drove home faster than she had ever driven. I was surprised she didn't get pulled over. When we got home, the police were there. One officer was talking to my dad. When we got out of the car, the officer walked away from Dad.

"What's going on?" my mom asked. My father sighed and covered his face with his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice breaking. "I was out in the pasture and she was up in her room doing homework." He sighed. "I should've been paying more attention."

My mother put her arms around him. "It's not your fault, honey. You were just doing your job like you do every day. You couldn't have known this would happen."

As they held each other and cried, an officer came up to me. He showed me a sketch drawing of a man with scraggly long hair and a patchy beard.

"Have you ever seen this man around?" he asked me. "Some of the neighbors saw a man looking like this walk up your drive."

I took the sketch and studied it. "Sorry," I said. "I've never seen this man before in my life."

The officer took it back from me. "That's alright. Thank you for trying."

At that moment, I decided that if Paula was going to be found, it would have to be by me. By the time the police found her, she could already be dead. While my parents were distracted, I got in the car and drove back to town. I drove down the main street, scouring the buildings and alleyways for the man who took my sister. I parked the car and walked into the market. I searched and searched for the man with no luck. I got back in the car and drove around some more. After searching for four hours and still not finding her, I decided to go back home. Once I got there, my parents ran up to me.

“Where have you been?” my mother asked sternly. “We’ve been worried sick! We thought you got taken too.” As I got out of the car, I avoided my mother’s arms, and I went inside.

“Aren’t you going to tell me why you left?” she called after me.

I paused and turned around. “I was out looking for Paula, ok?” I responded. At that, I turned back around and went to bed.

The next morning, I took the car again and drove into town. I went to the market again. As I walked in, a man with scraggly hair and a patchy beard walked out. For a split second, we made eye contact. As he kept going, I stopped in my tracks. It was *him*. The man from the sketch. I turned around and got back into the car. As he drove off, I followed him. I followed him down a long gravel path to a small shack in the woods. I watched him go into the house with his groceries, then come out and walk deeper into the woods. As soon as he was out of sight, I got out of my car and got in the house. I looked around for any sign of a trap door or someone hidden anywhere.

Then, I heard a faint whimper coming from below me. I looked around and found a rug on the floor. I lifted it up, and underneath it was a trap door. I opened it, and the light from the room filled the space, revealing Paula’s face. It was cut and bruised. She looked like she had been beaten. Her hands were tied and she had a gag in her mouth. “Don’t worry,” I told her. “I’m going to get you out of here.

“Not so fast,” I heard behind me. I turned around to see the man pointing a gun at me. He clicked a bullet into place. “She’s not going anywhere. And neither are you.”

He pushed me down through the trap door. He looked down at me from above. “I’ll be back.”

As soon as he closed the door, I went over to my sister. She was crying.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “Everything will be ok.” I untied her bonds and ungagged her. She exhaled in exasperation.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this,” she cried.

“No,” I told her. “It’s not your fault. It was my decision to come looking for you. Come here.” I pulled her into me and she cried. A few moments later, the man came back. He came down the steps and saw that I had undone Paula’s restraints.

“Hey!” he said angrily. “Get away from each other! And no talking!”

He put the restraints back on her and then put some on me, this time securing me to the wall with chains. The man stomped back up the steps and closed the door, leaving my sister and me in the dark.

She started crying again. I would've tried to comfort her, but I couldn't. The man had gagged me too. It was just so heavy on my chest that I couldn't help her. I pulled on my restraints as hard as I could. Somehow, I broke the chains that were holding me. My sister looked over at me wide-eyed. I removed the chains from my wrists and the gag from my mouth. "Don't worry," I told her. "I'm coming." I snuck over to her quietly and untied her.

We crept up the steps. I listened to make sure the man wasn't around. Then, when I thought the coast was clear, I opened the door. Paula and I walked toward the door. As we were creeping toward the car, the man came around the corner.

"Hey!" he growled. He pulled out his gun and pulled the trigger. It almost happened in slow motion. The bullet flew out of the barrel, traveling in Paula's direction.

"No!" I shouted. I dove in front of her, the bullet hitting me instead. I hit the ground. Surprisingly, I wasn't hurt. Or even shot for that matter.

"What?" I heard the man say.

I stood back up and said, "Yeah, you can't get me." He shot the gun, again and again, each bullet pinging off my chest, until he ran out. Then he threw his gun down, grabbed a shovel that was leaning against the shack and barreled toward me.

He hit me with the shovel, bending it. He was taken aback by that. Then he threw the bent shovel to the ground and took a swing at me with his fist. I heard his bones crack when his fist made contact with my face. He recoiled, holding his fist, screaming in pain. I looked at him with anger.

"That's what you get for taking my sister," I told him. Then, leaving him there, Paula and I got in the car and drove home.

From then on, people noticed me. I wasn't just known as that farmer kid who kept to himself. People knew who I was. They knew me as the kid who saved his sister from a kidnapper. If something like that ever happened again, I wouldn't just sit around and wait for the police to handle it. I would take action and fight for my family and my farm.

Auction of Life

by Braden Pickrell

The Auction. It was something the others didn't speak of very often. Whenever it was mentioned, they would just stare, seemingly into nothingness – as if the word transported their minds to a completely new place. The spark would dwindle from their eyes, and they suddenly tensed. Sydney, at only 13 years old, had never understood why the others responded to the Auction this way. The time had come to find out.

As he sat in the auction hall that day—disobeying his father, who explicitly told him never to go to the auction—he felt a mixture of fear and sick anticipation.

Nala couldn't move. She couldn't swallow. She couldn't blink. She could barely breathe. She heard muffled voices on the other side of the glass. She could make out figures, see them staring at her. They were plotting how they might make use of her. Tears brimmed her eyes, but she couldn't blink them away. They burned her skin like acid.

What a miserable world she lived in. She had remained strong for all the others, tried to give them hope, but she wasn't even sure there was hope. Not for those like her. She was merely an object for humanity – a plaything.

She wanted to scream, but her mouth was held shut. She wanted to cry but her tears would not fall. So she did the only thing she could do . . . she hummed her song.

As Nala sat down at the table next to Sydney, he noticed her humming a song. It was a song he'd heard from her before a thousand times. It was enough to distract him from the conversation he'd been having with Seb, who was sitting across the table. Sydney had never really thought about the

Auction until Seb mentioned it. But that day, as they ate lunch in the training facility cafeteria with all the other kids, he couldn't shake his curiosity.

"Hey," Nala said weakly as she noticed Sydney staring at her. She adjusted a stray strand of dark curly hair with her right hand, showcasing the tattoo she had on the back of her wrist. All of the kids in the retraining program had one, including Seb. Sydney did not have one. He was not like the kids in the retraining program. But he always preferred to eat in the cafeteria with the other kids instead of his dad's dark, cramped office. He always felt like the portraits on the office walls were watching him.

Nala leaned her elbow on the table, resting her head in her hand. She smiled at both him and Seb before closing her eyes for a moment.

Nala had been Sydney's friend for as long as Sydney could remember. She was several years older than him. He believed she was seventeen, one of the oldest of all the kids at the training facility. She was friends with everyone. She taught them to sing and dance. She made them laugh. She made them happy. Sydney didn't understand why, but everyone was drawn to her. Like a fireplace on a cold winter night, she was always warm and encouraging. When Nala sat down, Sydney expected her to bring Seb out of his brooding, but she didn't. In fact, it seemed Nala's presence only deepened his dismal mood. The three of them sat without speaking for a while, only eating their lunches and staring at the tabletop. Sydney wanted to say something, but the longer he waited, the more he felt the silence could not be interrupted . . . at least, not by him.

It was Nala who finally cut through the quiet. "Seb, you need to eat. You're not going to reach your macros goal."

"I'm not hungry," he muttered.

"Do you think they care?"

Seb glanced at his tray and then back at Nala, his lips pursed tight.

Sydney's brow furrowed, though he didn't expect an explanation. He had grown accustomed to the kids in the retraining program to say things he didn't understand. Seb finally started eating, though he did so rather slowly. Nala took a breath and continued her own meal.

Sydney only watched. He began to notice other kids passing by their table glancing at them—more specifically, at Nala. Their faces were laced with pity, others bitterness. Had Nala done something?

“Is something wrong?” he finally asked.

“Do you really not know?” Seb glared at him.

Sydney flinched at the sudden jab, trying to search for the words to answer.

“Seb,” Nala chided before turning to Sydney. “I just finished my training here, and . . . I think everyone is just sad that I have to leave now.”

“Why are they sad?” he asked. “My dad said finishing the training is the best thing that can happen, because then you can fulfill your purpose.”

Seb stabbed a chunk of meat with his fork. The sound of metal hitting the polypropylene tray stung Sydney’s ears.

“How do you not know what’s happening?!” he demanded. “Your dad works here. Are you just stupid or something?!”

“Seb, stop!” Nala interrupted him. “He doesn’t know, okay. Just leave him alone. You’re going to get us all in trouble.”

Seb growled and readjusted in his seat.

“He has no excuse not to know.”

Sydney looked between the two of them, unsure how he could respond. “I’m just ... umm . . . going to leave . . . I think.”

Nala opened her mouth to answer, but she was suddenly cut off by the arrival of a stern woman wearing a black business dress, glasses, and stark black hair pulled into a tight bun.

She held a data pad in her hand —it, too was sleek and black.

“IF14-0289, please stand.”

“Ms. Gevira?” Nala quipped.

“I said stand, IF14-0289. Now.”

“Yes ma’am,” she stumbled up out of her seat in obedience.

“It’s time to go,” Ms. Gevira said, finally looking up from her tablet. “We must prep you for your sendoff.”

“But . . . isn’t the sendoff still two days away?” Nala said as apprehension welled up inside her like smoke from a furnace.

“It is, but there is still much that must be done,” Ms. Gevira said. “Come now.”

“Nala?” Seb looked up at her, tears rimmed his eyes. Sydney was confused and didn’t know what to say as he stood rooted in place, staring at his friend’s anguished face.

Nala pursed her lips and called after Ms. Gevira. “Ma’am, may I please say goodbye to my friends first?”

Ms. Gevira stopped and turned around to face her. “IF14-0289, only people can attain ‘friendships.’ Clones are not people. Those who carry that mark on their hands are not people. Have you so quickly forgotten?”

Nala glanced at the tattoo that branded her right hand, the mark of a clone. “No, ma’am. Please forgive me for misspeaking.”

Ms. Gevira nodded and continued out of the cafeteria. Nala followed behind this time, glancing over her shoulder as she waved a final goodbye.

“Remember the songs I taught you,” she whispered. Seb nodded as a tear ran down his cheek. Sydney just stared after her.

Remember the songs? He thought. How could I ever forget?

As if echoing the song in his head, Sydney heard the quiet hum of Nala’s song begin to reverberate from the mouths of the other children in the cafeteria. It was the voices of all the kids she had inspired with her music, paying tribute to the one that had given them hope.

The auction house was filled with the crowd’s impatient murmurings. Sydney fidgeted with the end of his sleeve as he looked around the darkened room. Being seated in the far rows of the auditorium, he could only see the backs of people’s heads. But he could tell they were growing restless. It made him nervous.

He wasn’t supposed to come to the Auction, and he knew his father would be furious if he knew he was there. He didn’t care. All his life, Sydney was told that the Auction was a

beautiful sendoff for all the kids that finished the retraining program. The reaction from Seb during lunch made him question that. He wanted to see it for himself. He had to see for himself.

A mechanical ring resounded from the speakers, making him flinch.

“The auction is starting,” the man seated in front of him said.

“About time,” an older man beside him grumbled.

Sydney swallowed hard as he turned his attention to the front of the room. He could make out fourteen tall glass cylinders set in a line across the stage. A tall middle-aged man dressed in business attire emerged from backstage. A spotlight was placed on him. He smiled at the crowd as he made his way to the left side of the stage, taking his place in front of the first of the many glass cylinders.

“What is this?” Sydney mumbled to himself as he leaned forward in his seat.

“Good evening,” the man began. “We apologize for the delay, and thank you for your patience. We assure you, the wait will be worth it. This batch may be our best yet. Now . . . let’s begin.”

Spotlights suddenly flared, illuminating the room before settling on the glass cylinders. The objects inside were hidden by a grayish-blue fog. The auctioneer rolled up his sleeve, a silver bracer situated on his forearm. He pressed the bracer and stepped aside. The cylinders hummed. A blue light shined from inside as the fog rolled away, finally revealing what lay hidden behind the glass. A pit formed in Sydney’s stomach. He realized what was being auctioned off that day.

He realized what was being showcased in cylinder fourteen.

Six male and eight female clones, each around seventeen years old, were on display.

They stood completely still, held in place by the advanced technology of their cylindrical prisons.

Their faces were relaxed. Their eyes were open, staring into nothingness. Each wore a white bodysuit that showcased their figure. The boys all sported identical crew cuts while the girls’ hair was shoulder length,

tied up in tight ponytails. The mark of a clone was tattooed on the back of their right hands.

“Alright then,” the auctioneer said dramatically, gesturing to the cylinder on the far left. A boy with black hair and almond-shaped eyes stood idly inside.

“Here we have our first item for sale. Clone ID# IF14-0135, a male. Date of Creation: September 2nd, 2048.”

Sydney gripped the armrest. He struggled to breathe.

“During his time here, IF14-0135 has shown exceptional athletic prowess. He follows orders well. We’ll start bidding at say . . . 9500 credits. Do I see 10,000?”

A man up front lifted his numbered paddle.

“10,000 here. Do I see 10,500? 11,000?”

Sydney swallowed hard.

“Sold to number 54 for 15,750 credits,” the auctioneer pointed toward the right side of the amphitheater. “Next is IF14-0138, a female. Date of Creation: September 2nd, 2048.”

Sydney watched as, one by one, the clones were auctioned off to the highest bidder.

Fear swelled inside him as the auctioneer neared the final cylinder.

“Now, the one you have all waited patiently for,” he turned to the girl inside the last capsule.

Sydney knew who she was.

“This one has a special place in the hearts of all of us here at the center.” The auctioneer put a hand on the glass affectionately. “IF14-0289, a female. Date of Creation: September 5th, 2048.”

The crowd murmured their approval of the girl, for she was very beautiful. Her skin was clear and dark. Her hair curled playfully, and her eyes were bright with the spark of youth. “Now, we, here at the Clone Retraining Center, abstain from giving the clones human names, however, this does not stop them from giving names to each other. I’m rather fond of the name given to IF14-0289, so I thought I’d share it.” The

auctioneer faced the crowd. "They call her Nala. Bidding starts at 35,000 credits."

Tears brimmed Sydney's eyes as paddles shot up all over the room. Everyone knew who Nala was, for she was favored for her beauty as well as her gentle spirit and musical gifts.

The bidding continued. Sydney looked into Nala's eyes. She stared forward lifelessly. He wondered if she could see what was happening.

Sydney clenched his fist. He couldn't watch Nala be treated like this, like an object that could be sold. He wanted to get up and say something, but what could he do? How could he stop the inevitable?

He gripped the armrests of his seat until his knuckles turned white. He wanted to shout out, run onto the stage, and smash the canister that held her fast . . . but he didn't do any of those things. Instead he just sat and watched, and listened to the people bid for his friend.

"Sold for 46,980 credits," the auctioneer eventually called out.

A pleased sigh escaped the lips of many of the attendees as they relaxed back from the tension of the auction. And then, in a moment of unexpected quiet, Sydney heard something . . . just faintly on the edge of his hearing. It was a song. It was her song. Nala was humming her song.

And then she was gone . . . wheeled away with the other auctioned off property . . . like so many others, slipped through the cracks. The only echo of her existence a soft song on the wind.

To the Writing Track students:

This week was a blast! We had so much fun talking with you about writing and books and the ministry of words. Don't forget the power present in your words and the ways that God can use them to nudge people in his direction. You all did an amazing job with this little book. We are so proud of you! Keep on writing!

*Chris & Jessica
Creative Arts Academy
Summer 2024*