



SPEAKER'S

AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS



About the Award

The Speaker's Award for Youth Writers was launched in 2015 to celebrate the writing talents of Ontario's youth. Each year, students in grades 7-12 are invited to submit their short stories and personal essays to this writing contest. Original fiction and non-fiction submissions are welcome and a winner from each of the following three grade categories is chosen:

Grade 7-8

Grade 9-10

Grade 11-12

Selection Committee

Gwen Benaway is a published poet. She was the recipient of the first Speaker's Book Award – Young Authors (for published authors aged 18-30) in 2015 for her collection of poetry *Ceremonies for the Dead*.

Michelle Douglas is a graduate of the University of Toronto and has been teaching high school in Toronto since 2009. She has taught a variety of subjects including English and Civics.

Erich Ko currently attends Ryerson University's Accounting & Finance Program. He has been a Student Usher with the Legislature since 2012 and an Information Officer, leading tours and programs at the Legislature, since 2015.



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2016-17 Speaker's Award for Youth Writers

Grade 7-8

WINNER

Elsa Davis - *Ember*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Grace Glosnek - *Noctivagant*

Grade 9-10

WINNER

Kaitlyn Gardiner - *A Day to Remember*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Jillian Clasky - *Tsunami*

Grade 11-12

WINNER

Phoebe Knight - *Hurricane Zinfadel*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Kendra Maynard - *The Content of My Character*

WINNER (GRADE 7-8)

Elsa Davis

Ember

Ember stared as the world around her burst into flames. Not again, she thought. Fires were an ordinary occurrence in her village and it wouldn't take long to fix it once the flames died down. Why, wondered Ember, do we keep building a village, for people who make fire and turn into dragons, out of flammable material? Maybe...

"Ember hurry up!" cried her brother, Spark. She shifted. Her spine lengthened a tail shot out. Huge leathery black wings erupted from her shoulder blades. Her arms and legs strengthened. Spines shot from her back. Black scales covered her body. Ember spread her wings and leaped into the sky.

She hovered alongside her brother. "Is anyone still in there?" she asked. "No," Spark replied, "we got everyone out. You're the last one." Flapping their wings the two black dragons shot off towards the cluster of people half-way up the mountains.

Ember crouched by the small pile of logs and brush. She held her hand palm up and thought hard. Fire, fire, fire, fire, FIRE! A small flame sat glowing and twisting in her hand. She set it down gently on the pile of brush and logs that the villagers had collected. At a fire further on Spark plunged his arms into the fire, moving some sticks into a better position.

High above the clearing a shadow hovered. Watching as the villagers settled down to sleep beside the many fires, that cast red-orange glows, bright against the dark mountains surrounding them.

Ember and Spark lay back to back. Ember facing the fire and Spark watching the woods. As she drifted in and out of sleep dark shadows appeared from the trees. They bent down, lifted a sleeping Spark up, and silently slipped back into the shadows, taking Spark with them. Ember sat up as soon as the shadows had gone. Who were they, where had they taken Spark, and why? Without stopping to think anymore Ember stood up. She slipped past the sleeping villagers and out into the woods. Her mind already made up. She was going to rescue her brother.

Ember quickly picked up the trail. Broken branches and footprints in the mud made a clear path. She followed the trail through the night and well into the early morning before she sat down on a rock, by a stream, completely exhausted. These shadows are moving a lot faster than I expected, she thought, They must have been running most of the way. How... can I possibly catch up with them. Oh right. She took a quick drink from the stream and wolfed down a couple of berries from a nearby bush. Then she shifted. The shift went as usual and soon a large black dragon was swooping low over the forest.

Ember was getting tired and grumpy. It was late in the evening and the sun had started slipping below the horizon. Couldn't these shadows stop for a little. Maybe make a fire so she could find them easier. Out of the corner of her eye, Ember noticed a small flickering glow off in the distance. Almost hidden by the tall pines. Her heart jumped in excitement and she veered off to the left. Soaring towards the light, that gave her hope and a chance to rescue her brother.

Ember landed a ways off so that she wouldn't be noticed. She shifted back to human form and raced off through the trees. Peeking around a thick old pine tree, Ember watched the shadows. One, smaller than the rest, she assumed was Spark. They huddled around the blazing fire, conversing in low voices. The sky grew dark and the

stars began popping out. The fire burned low and one by one the shadows around it began dropping off to sleep.

It wasn't until two minutes after the last shadowy figure lay slumbering, that Ember dared to creep from her hiding spot and into the soft ring of light that the glowing coals gave off. She picked her way quietly between the bodies, carefully looking at each one until she came to the one she was sure was Spark.

"Spark," she hissed, shaking his shoulder gently, "wake up. We have to go." Spark sat up groggily rubbing his eyes and looking around himself. His roving eyes stopped on Ember.

"Ember?" he said in confusion

"Shhhh," whispered Ember, "we have to go, come on."

"Coming," replied Spark as he stood up. The siblings tiptoed little ways into the woods and stopped.

"What in the world are you doing here?" asked an aggravated Spark.

"I came to rescue you," replied Ember feeling elated as the rescue had gone exactly as planned.

"I don't need rescuing," said Spark, "what makes you think I need to be rescued?" "YOU GOT KIDNAPPED!" yelled Ember, forgetting to be quiet.

"THAT DOESN'T MEAN I NEED TO BE RESCUED!" Spark yelled back. "YES IT DOES!"

"NO IT DOESN'T!" "YES IT DOES!"

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said a new voice, "but you're both being rather loud and there are people trying to sleep." Both siblings turned to look at the newcomer.

He was a tall man, with deep brown hair and a short neatly trimmed beard. He was about two heads taller than Ember, and his voice was smooth. He was the sort of person that you like immediately.

"I don't believe that we have met," he said, looking at Ember, "my name is Stephan." "I'm sorry we were so loud," apologized Spark, "this is my sister, Ember, she came to rescue me."

"We had better go back to the fire," Stephan suggested, "I think we owe Ember an explanation."

The sun was peeking above the trees when the trio returned. The camp was a bustle of activity as people cooked breakfast and broke camp. As they entered the clearing a short stout man with grey hair trotted up to them.

"There you are!" he exclaimed "The camp is in chaos! Leonora says that if she doesn't get her gills wet she's going to die. Celean saw a mouse and refuses to come down from the tree. And the cooks can't decide whether to make pancakes or oatmeal! I am at my wits end trying to keep this camp in order!"

"Relax, Corumph," commanded Stephan, "Tell Leonora that there is a stream just passed those trees over there. Ask Maaerde to try coaxing Celean down. You know how persuasive he can be. And tell the cooks that they can make both."

"Now then," he said as Corumph scurried away, to carry out his orders and create excuses for why he hadn't thought of the answers, "We owe you an explanation, Ember."

“Most people do not know this, but in a temple, not far from here, there are five stones. You do know about the elements, right?”

“Fire, water, earth, and air,” replied Ember without hesitation “but I didn’t know there was a fifth.”

“Most people don’t know about the fifth, even though it is the most important. The fifth element is magic, if you are wondering. However we only have to worry about the first four. There is a stone for each element, and for each stone there is a keeper. Every thirty years a new keeper must be appointed. Except for magic, which hasn’t had a keeper in over sixty years. Anyone magical could be its keeper, and that’s almost everyone. We stopped looking for them thirty years ago, because we never picked the right person. We took Spark to be our keeper of the fire stone,” finished Stephan.

Ember’s head was spinning. She took a deep breath and gathered her thoughts. However, before she could speak, Spark asked the question that had been on the tip of her tongue.

“Can Ember come with us?”

“ I don’t see why not,” answered Stephan, after careful consideration.

“YES!” shouted Spark, startling everyone in camp, he gave Ember an excited hug, “It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Breakfast was a simple affair. Plain pancakes and warm oatmeal, sweetened with honey. However, Ember ate it all wholeheartedly. After the meal was finished and the crowd had dispersed, Stephan called her over and introduced her to the soon to be keepers.

The four of them stood side by side, and when they did this you could see right away how different they were. Spark, with his brown hair that always seemed messy and was usually fairly tall, was dwarfed by the girl standing next to him.

She had blue hair that was cut short and her skin had a turquoise tinge to it. Ember knew immediately that she was the waterkeeper. Not because of her strange hair color, but because she had webbing between her fingers and gills on her cheeks, just below her ears.

On the other side of Spark was a boy with hair that hung down over his eyes and a sullen expression on his face. He was fiddling with something that Ember couldn’t quite see in one hand. His other hand was being firmly grasped by the fourth keeper.

She was a small mousy girl, with long black hair and she looked nervous at the prospect of a new person being around.

“This is Leanora,” said Stephan, motioning to the tall girl, “She is our water keeper, as well as the only undie in camp.”

“Hi,” she said. Her voice was bright and bubbly. She seemed very excited about the whole affair.

“This is Maaerde,” continued Stephan, gesturing to the sullen boy next to Spark, “He is our earthkeeper.”

“Hello,” he said, obviously not enjoying it the way Leanora was. “And this,” Stephan said, “ is Celean, our air

keeper.”

“Hi,” She squeaked. Something rustled in the undergrowth and Celeans eyes widened in fear. A strong wind picked up. Tossing up dust and tugging at Embers hair. Maaerde turned and said something to her that Ember couldn’t quite make out. Celean took a deep breath and the wind stopped. Before Ember could comment on the strange wind, Corumph burst into the little group.

“The camp is packed up and we are ready to move. If we leave now we should make it to the temple before lunch,” he said to Stephan, “ so if I may cut into the conversation, we need to leave.”

“True enough,” replied Stephan, turning to the group he said, “find something to carry and we’ll be off.”

Just as Corumph had said, the group reached the temple a few minutes before lunch. The temple itself was only large enough for about three rooms, but there were several buildings a little way off in the trees. All the buildings were made of a greenish stone and were surrounded by trees and winding paths.

After the group had settled themselves in and eaten lunch, Stephan ushered the six of them into the temple. There were five pedestals in the center of the room. On each pedestal was a stone.

The first stone was obviously the fire stone. It was red orange and the color twisted and danced, like the flames Ember had so often held.

The next stone was for water. This she knew because it was blue green and you could almost see the waves crashing on the edges.

The air stone was also blue, but it was lighter and softer. It swirled inside its stone. Always moving.

Ember didn’t give much attention to the earth stone. It was a blackish grey and looked like an ordinary rock. Instead her eye was caught by the fifth stone.

The magic stone was beautiful, it was every color you could ever imagine and several that you couldn’t were swirled together, with brilliant sparkles mixed in.

“Would you like to hold it?” asked Stephan, cutting into her reverly. “Can I?” she said, astonished

“Of course,” he said, picking it up gently and holding it out to her, “Just be gentle and use both hands.” Ember reached out and carefully took the stone. Nothing happened. Everybody in the room let out the breath that they had been holding. Everyone had secretly thought that she would be a keeper.

Ember was about to hand the stone back to Stephan when Corumph burst into the room. He entered the circle of pedestals and tripped over his own to feet. Grabbing Embers arm in an effort to regain his balance.

Ember watched helplessly as the stone slipped from her fingers and plummeted towards the ground. Time seemed to slow down. Spark dove for it. Arms outstretched, he caught the stone. Bright light exploded from inside. The light only stayed for a second before it dulled to a gentle pulsing glow. Everyone stared at Spark.

“I’ll just be going,” mumbled Corumph, as he shuffled awkwardly out of the temple. “Amazing,” Stephan said, once he had gone, “all this time I thought it was calling for Ember and instead it wanted you.”

“So who’s the keeper for fire?” asked Maaerde.

“I am,” said Ember. She walked over to the stone and without hesitation picked it up. A red-orange glow filled the room before dieing down to a gentle glow. One by one the other three keepers picked up their respective stones. One by one the stones shone brightly. And one by one they dulled to a gentle glow.

“Welcome to your new life,” Stephan said. Everyone smiled happily, but none as happily as Ember.

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADE 7-8)

Grace Glosnek

Noctivagant

Sometimes I feel like I'm at war with myself.

Everyone has good and bad days. I tend to have more bad days than good days. I push people away, when all I could have used was a hug, and the words "It's going to be ok." I needed those words, except I could never reach out for help because there was no one to tell. Well, there was no one who would listen. Just the idea of telling the people closest to me my dark secret was just as terrifying as the nightmares themselves. I was scared that once they knew, things would never be the same, and I would lose them forever. Then I would truly be alone, just like that night.

It was cold and dark, I felt lifeless. I was trying to scream that I was ok, but no words left my quivering lips. I tried to cry, but my eyes were frozen in fear. The look of concern on my mother's familiar face was indescribable, and forever branded in my memory. My mind and body were no longer aligned. I didn't know what was happening to me. This had never happened before.

For years I had experienced panic attacks. I did everything but sleep during the night. I already knew I was noctivagant, or in other words, a sleepwalker, but sleepwalking and talking was normal for me. Unfortunately, sleepwalking and talking escalated to sobbing, thrashing and shrieking as I slept, and by sunrise, I would have no explanation as to why my face was red and swollen. After too many unsettling sleeps, I had had enough. I didn't think I was crazy, but I knew these outbreaks were derived from a dark place, and that alone convinced me enough that I might indeed be going insane.

Many people appear perfect to the human eye, but that's because they only show you their good side, or the person that they long to be. The Japanese believe we have three faces. The first is how we present ourselves to the world, the second is how we show ourselves to our close friends and family, and the third face we never show to anyone but ourselves. The third face is where we hide our deepest darkest secrets.

The only person who knew about my deepest darkest secrets was my mother. She was the one who would rush into my room and asking me in an anxious tone of voice if I was ok, or if I was having a seizure. She would try to comfort me like all mothers do when their children are in need. If there had been an incident the night before, she never showed me how shaken she really was but I just knew because of the glare of terror in her eyes, that it had happened again. Sometimes I feel sorrier for my mother than myself. But that night, all of that changed when this time it wasn't my mother who I felt sorry for. I felt sorry for myself.

It had been a normal day. Nothing out of the ordinary occurred, until that very night. As I lay down on the sheets of my bed, I immediately fell into a deep sleep, trance like. Late in the night, my door slowly creaked open. There was a familiar shadow in the doorway. There stood my mother asking me in a fragile voice if I was ok. I tried to respond but something wasn't right. Everything was the way it should have been, except I couldn't move or talk and I was seeing everything take place from an angle I shouldn't have been seeing things from. I thought what I was witnessing was my mother seeing my lifeless body. However I realized that what I was seeing wasn't real. This was a nightmare that had progressed too far. I began internally crying and screaming uncontrollably, and the voices in my head just laughed and laughed at me.

Witnessing yourself lifeless opens your eyes to see if you're really just ok. Whenever somebody asks you how you are, your initial response is that you're ok, but someday, you're going to realize that you weren't ok, and you should have been honest with not only them, but yourself. That night I could only compare what happened to me with my body being inhabited by a ghost. You become possessed and you surrender to its control.

Feeling powerless, you let the little voices in your head jump at the chance to tear you apart. This is their time to make you feel worthless and to justify your suspicions that you may be going mad. They tell you things like you're a wreck. Your own mother thinks you're ill. One day you won't wake up, and once people know what your life's really like, you'll be alone forever. The voices never stop until you believe what they're saying too. The voices simply won't let you forget what happened, and the devil within wasn't going to either. It was as if whatever I did to stop the pain and suffering made the circumstances excruciatingly worse. The voices slowly became louder and the thoughts became nastier. That night I was ashamed that I finally surrendered to the voices when I somewhat began agreeing with what they were saying.

WINNER (GRADE 9-10)

Kaitlyn Gardiner

A Day to Remember

My name is Abigail Meoquanee, Abby for short. I miss my Mother so much. She volunteered to become a Canadian soldier many years ago. No one asked her to do this.

We live in a First Nations community in Northern Ontario. This is the only home I have ever known and I cannot imagine living anywhere else. Last Christmas my Mother left once again to live on a military base in Manitoba, where she uses her specialized training as a medical officer. She says there is no career more rewarding or challenging than serving in our country's Armed Forces. She is one of only ten thousand Canadian women, and one of only 1200 First Nations people in the Canadian military. My Mother is a bit of a hero around here.

As proud as she is to be doing her job, my Mother worries about leaving her family behind, especially me. In May, she was deployed to a foreign country to help treat children in refugee camps. She writes to me often and I sleep with her latest letters under my pillow. Some have strange postage stamps on the envelopes. My Mother says she will be back next summer just in time for me to start high school.

I live with my Father and Grandma for now. I am an only child. My Father isn't the best chef around since my Mother was always the cook in our house. Since she left, our dinners have consisted mostly of frozen fish sticks. Growing fresh fruits and vegetables in this area is difficult because of our climate, but we get them sometimes. I used to like fish sticks but now I am tired of them, and my mouth waters for her good food again. I don't know how to tell my Father without hurting his feelings, so I have not said anything. Today is my birthday and my Grandma says she will bake me a chocolate birthday cake tonight. I have not had chocolate cake since my Mother left.

"WAKE UP ABBY, YOU'RE GONNA BE LATE FOR SCHOOL," my Father yells from the kitchen. I was already awake and looking at the card my Mother gave me last year. It has a cute puppy that looks like my pup Alasie, dancing on two legs and holding balloons. Almost everyone in our small community has a dog. Inside is signed, "Love Forever, Your Wiyanga" with little hearts floating around it. I place it back carefully on my dresser.

Quickly I put on my special red dress to honour the day. My father says it is his favourite dress because it suits my brown eyes and long dark hair so well. The poppy from last year is still pinned on. I run to the kitchen and pour cheerios and milk into a bowl. "Hurry up," Dad says. The bowl slips out of my hand and breaks on the floor. "I'm sorry Dad," I say, feeling tears rush to my eyes. "Don't apologize, just clean it up," he says.

The snow is already getting deep now by November 11, and it takes me time to get to school. I am a little late. Getting to class quickly is all I can think about. I run down the hall and SLAM, my binder falls out of my backpack and onto the floor.

The notes from my big binder fall out and scatter. "Ugh, that broken zipper," I say loudly. But no one is around to help me. Now I am going to be very late.

When I arrive at my classroom, I walk through the doorway and everyone stares at me. Obviously I interrupted the class. Staring at me, Mr. Matari, my teacher turns his attention back to the rest of the students, "So as I was saying... we will be going to the Remembrance Day assembly soon." I hang up my well-worn backpack with the broken zipper, the birthday gift from my Mother last year. We hear the Principal, Ms. Kittiewinnie's voice over

the P.A. system, “Would the Primary and Junior grades please make their way to the gym now please?” Moments later I hear a group of students in the hallway talking loudly and excitedly. They are not being serious. Don’t they understand the significance of Remembrance Day?

“Oh, and Happy Birthday Abby!” my teacher says. The whole class sings Happy Birthday to me. “Thank you”, I say quietly. Ms. Kittiewinnie’s voice announces, “Would the Intermediate grades now come down to our special Remembrance Day presentation? We will begin shortly.”

I sit on the cold floor in the gym next to my best friend Skylar. We are asked to stand for the playing of O’Canada. In my red dress, I feel so proud on this special day and sing a little too loudly. A few students turn around and look at me. I smile at them as I finish singing our national anthem. We sit again, and the lights in the gym turn off when the slideshow starts.

Solemn music begins to play and pictures of poppies and crosses are shown on the large screen. I gently touch the softness of my poppy on my dress. On the screen are pictures and names of soldiers who have been killed during wartime. I want everyone to be safe, to live peacefully. I think of my Mother and start crying softly. Skylar looks at me and whispers, “It’s okay, she will call you tonight,” and hugs me. The slideshow finishes and we stand for a moment of silence.

Ms. Kittiewinnie walks to the podium and says, “Would Abigail Meoquanee please come up to the stage?” My eyes widen and I look at Skylar and she looks back at me. We are both surprised. She squeezes my hand tightly before I leave her. Nervously I walk through the crowd of students, passing the tables at the side of the gym with artifacts such as old brass buttons and dull coloured medals that were probably once shiny. Mr. Matari brought them in for Remembrance Day today for all the students to see.

At the front of the gym, where the both the Canadian and Ontario flags stand proudly beside our familiar First Nations flag, my whole body feels heavy as I climb the four steps up to the stage. I do not like being in front of large crowds and everyone is quietly watching me. I am still emotional about the slideshow and quickly wipe away the tears in my eyes. Could the other students imagine what it feels like to be me, a child who has a parent in the Canadian military?

The heavy blue curtains on the stage part slightly, and to my surprise I see my Mother in her Officer’s uniform walk toward me. Can that be right? She is still overseas. But as she came closer, I see, yes it is her! I run into her arms as she bends on one knee, and start crying. “I love you Mom!”

A loud thunder of claps and cheers erupt from the audience. For a moment I flash back to when I was in Kindergarten, remembering the first time she came home and I could not understand it all. Now I am older and can accept the dedication to the peace-keeping missions that she and so many others share. “I love you too!” I can’t stop crying and my heart fills with joy. I do not want to let go. “Happy Birthday!” my Mother whispers in my ear.

This will always be the best day to remember!

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADE 9-10)

Jillian Clasky

Tsunami

June 29th, 7:38am

24 hours, 22 minutes left

Dreams are peaceful. In my dreams I feel the waves whipping around me, sucking me into the current as my feet drag through the sand. They carry me away from everything: Away from steady ground, because steady feels too confined. Away from people's faces, because all I ever see in them is pity. Away from worry, stress, and broken pieces. All that's left is the ocean and me.

Eventually, though, I have to wake. And daytime? That's when the tsunamis hit. After my eyes fly open, I rise unsteadily and lock the bathroom door. The girl reflected in the mirror is me, except she's not; her face is drawn and her eyes are bloodshot and her auburn hair is in ratty and knotted. I close my eyes, because it hurts even just to glimpse what I've become.

I push the shower curtain aside and pull the handle. The stream of water is loud enough to block out sounds from around the house, but the voices in my head are louder. Only one more day until my sister's life is destroyed forever. And only one more day to stop that from happening.

June 29th, 10:43am

21 hours, 17 minutes left

Before, I didn't think it was legal for suspects to be held in custody before their trial. I thought wrong.

Even a month in jail has destroyed Ariella. It's not that she was completely innocent before; she's made her fair share of mistakes— but she was never a murderer, and being looked at like that, like she's capable of taking the life of another human being, it's broken something inside of her. Her eyes are still cobalt blue, the bright, striking ones I've always envied, but they seem haunted now, cloaked in dark circles and fear. And although Ariella's a year older than me, she appears so small and helpless surrounded by lifeless grey walls and metal bars.

Despite her predicament, she manages a tight-lipped smile when she sees me approaching.

"I've got letters from a few of your friends," I tell her, "and Mom and Dad are coming this afternoon with the lawyer to figure things out for tomorrow."

"Thanks, Bree. Any new developments?" She knows, though, that she's only grasping at straws.

"We're trying. I swear we're trying, Ari. But no, nothing yet." It pains me to say it, because despite what I tell her, we both know that there's hardly any hope left.

Ariella closes her eyes and exhales, replying: "It's no one's fault but Valerie's. If she hadn't turned me in for a crime I didn't commit because she saw my hair from a distance- my God, what kind of proof is that, saying she saw my hair, because it's this disgusting auburn colour, so distinctive—"

I gasp suddenly and an idea begins to form in my head: admittedly a little bit far-fetched, but plausible, definitely plausible. At least, plausible from an outsider's perspective. "Ari," I whisper. "What if..."

She glances up at me. “What? What is it?” “What if it was her? What if it was Valerie?”

June 29th, 3:13pm

16 hours, 47 minutes left

Popularity isn't exactly a hierarchy at our school, it's more of an abstract concept, but it's safe to say that Valerie Meyer is popular— and that, paired with her parents' seemingly endless supply of cash, equates to power. Valerie can make anyone's life hell if she wants to. She certainly accomplished it with my sister.

So saying that I'm afraid as I walk up the cobblestone path that leads to the Meyer mansion would be an understatement. I'm not afraid of Valerie herself, exactly, but of what she'll do to me if she realizes what I'm about to do: attempt to frame her for a murder I'm fairly certain she didn't commit.

But it doesn't matter whether or not I believe it. It matters whether the judge will. I press down the recording button on my phone before wrapping my hand around the intricate knocker. It feels cold to the touch as I hold my breath and release it. The sharp clang of metal on metal seems to reverberate for hours, but suddenly I hear pounding feet and the click of a lock, and then I'm gazing into the face of a teenage girl with silvery-blonde hair and a grimace adorning her cherry-red lips.

“Brianna Scott. May I ask what you're doing at my house?” Valerie's voice is sharp and calculated.

“Valerie. Nice to see you.” I take a deep breath and begin to speak, but Valerie cuts me off. “Stop with the pleasantries and get to the point. I have things to do.”

“What, have you got another best friend to accuse of murder or something?” I can't help myself, but I know snapping at her won't get me anywhere.

“You know nothing about me.” Her voice shakes a little bit, but the expression on her face is made of stone. “And it seems to me that you know nothing about your beloved sister, either. I bet you didn't know that her and Ben weren't that golden couple that everyone perceived them to be. I bet you didn't know how badly he treated her. She was trapped, Brianna. She was the only person with a motive.”

She appears to think her words come as a surprise to me. They don't; I iced Ariella's bruises and bandaged her wounds night after night in the weeks leading up to her boyfriend's death. I begged her, over and over again, to speak up, but she refused. She said that Ben was just going through a tough time, that it would all be okay. It's funny how much love can blind us sometimes.

“If that's all true, if killing him was her only escape, then why would you turn her in? That's not justice. That's cruel.”

“It doesn't matter how horrible Ben was,” Valerie replies quietly. “It's murder. It's killing another human being. You don't understand justice, Brianna, just your twisted sense of loyalty. And you refuse to admit what you know somewhere inside you.” Maybe loyalty is more important than justice, I think to myself.

All I say is: “What about you?” She just stares at me, confused, so I continue, “You said you saw Ariella push Ben. But is it true? I mean, you were close with Ben too. But never as close as Ari was... Where were you really that night?”

Valerie freezes just before her lips tighten into a thin line. “Are you accusing me,” she says slowly, her words dripping with menace, “of murdering Ben Ashton? Out of petty jealousy?”

“No, I—”

“Get out of my house.” And though she slams the door in my face immediately, I catch a final glimpse of her. She’s holding her chin up but I can see her trembling.

*June 29th, 5:29pm
14 hours, 31 minutes left*

I’ve given up.

The past month has been a blur of constant investigations, speaking to a horde of lawyers, and never-ending nights of fear instead of sleep. And all of it’s amounted to nothing: Ariella will be convicted tomorrow. All of the evidence points to her. She’ll never have a future, she’ll never be happy, and God knows whether she’ll even be human anymore once she gets out of that place. There’s nothing left to do but pray.

I walk, barefoot, down the rocky cliff near the pier, my mind so numb that I barely notice as the jagged stones dig into the soles of my feet. Being enveloped in seawater feels good, but not good enough; swimming is no longer an escape, not while I’m awake. I’ve always come to this particular spot because, although the cliff atop it is a common hangout for local teens, the shaded area below is hidden from the rest of the world. It’s also, it seems, an ideal location for murder. The body was removed and the evidence has been washed away by now, but I can’t look at the rock formation without imagining Ben falling, without hearing the sickening crunch of his neck snapping and seeing his blood stain the normally crystal-clear water.

Most of all, I can’t help but picture Ariella’s face when our family and Ben’s approached those rocks the next day, surrounded by police officers and grief. I remember her eyes widening, her breath catching, her heart too filled with shock for any tears to fall.

And yet, as I surge through the water, I remember her guilty relief, the look in her eyes that said she’d just woken up from a nightmare.

The first time Ariella told me about Ben, she showed me a bruise, bright purple on her shoulder blade. My initial shock struck me speechless for a moment, but when I told her that she had to tell someone, she refused. “I don’t want to hurt him!” she always exclaimed through her tears, and each time, I gaped at her, incredulous. “He hurt you, Ari,” I reminded her time and time again, pressing ice against her delicate, broken skin. “He deserves it.”

And then Ariella: “It must’ve been an accident... it’s my fault... he just got carried away, Bree...”

With each bruise, each scrape, each drop of blood he drew from Ariella’s body, I felt more and more protective of my older sister. The fury that coursed through my veins was strong and overwhelming; I wanted to hurt Ben, to see him suffer the way he made Ariella suffer.

There has to be a way out, and suddenly I see it. Because Ariella’s not the only auburn-haired girl with a grudge.

As I walk away, I say goodbye to the sea, to its sun-kissed waves and familiar rumble, and I take a final breath of salty air that will have to last me for the years to come.

At least I'll have the ocean in my dreams.

June 30th, 1:32am

6 hours, 28 minutes left

That night, my dreams are nightmares.

June 30th, 8:00am

0 hours, 0 minutes left

“Today’s case concerns the murder of Benjamin Henry Ashton.”

The judge’s words are blatant and emotionless, and when he names my sister– “Ariella Beatrice Scott”– as the suspect, I want more than anything to cry out or run up and put my arms around her, but all I can do is sit here and watch.

I watch as the first opening statement is given. Ariella’s face is grave but determined, because she knows her chances of winning the case are almost nonexistent, but she dares to hope.

I watch as the prosecutor tells the courtroom that my sister is a murderer.

I watch as Valerie testifies against her best friend. Although her hair is pinned in a neat updo and her attire is solemn and professional, I can see mascara smudges underneath her eyes.

I watch as the evidence is laid out in front of us, evidence that was carefully collected to paint my sister in the most negative light possible.

I watch as Ariella blinks hard, while her lawyer gives her closing statement in resignation. My mother’s arms wrap around me and I feel her tears soak right through my thin cardigan as the sense of foreboding in the air intensifies.

I watch as the jury deliberates, dreading the verdict but knowing the outcome. We all know it by now.

I watch as my sister is found guilty of murder.

“No!” The voice that cries out stops everyone in their place, and it takes me a moment to register that it’s my own. “You can’t convict her. She didn’t kill him! I know who did it!”

Every eye in the room is trained on me. With shaking hands and a heavy heart, I say, loud and clear: “It was me.”

Ariella’s eyes widen. “Bree, no.” “I killed Ben Ashton.”

I don’t know whether or not this is justice, but it doesn’t even matter anymore, because she’s free.

Ariella is free.

WINNER (GRADE 11-12)

Phoebe Knight

Hurricane Zinfandel

My mom, despite her refusal to accept the fact, is invariably her mother's daughter. Because of this, the first dozen Christmas dinners I was alive for were held at my house. Truthfully, I think my mother reveled in the high energy, backseat driving by my grandmother and ultimate compliments to the chef, or at least felt like she was supposed to, but god forbid something as small as a lost turkey baster decide to come up, the whole night would, in her eyes (as well as my grandmothers'), be a failure.

My fifth Christmas proved to be a particularly memorable one, indeed. My grandparents; mom's parents, were staying with us to add a little more pressure. My mom had gotten up before anyone in the house which, if you've ever spent Christmas with two kids under ten, is a difficult feat indeed. All day long the house was filled with the distinctly Christmas scents of crispy turkey skin and pine needles that my dad would sweep under the carpet to avoid having to pull the offensively large vacuum out from the basement.

The rest of the family began showing up around 6 pm. In through our big oak door trekked my other set of grandparents *(this grandma's mink fur coat and claw like nails a stark contrast to the pink turtle neck splashed in turkey juice my other one wore)*, my aunts, Liv and Di, and the boyfriends they had picked up while back-packing in Costa Rica (Julian and Oscar, respectively), and my uncle Cam and his wife, Gill.

Once everyone had arrived and every last side dish had come out of the oven successfully, thank god, it was time for dinner. I sat across the table from Cam in an Ikea wooden fold-up chair that always gave me deep red imprints on the backs of my legs, and on which I would always worry that if I sat too far back, it would fold back together and snap me in half like a mouse trap. My grandpa, who we call Sir, said grace, something to the effect of "Thanks for the grub, Big Guy", and we all were seated. My mom then made one fatal mistake, one that would lead to several casualties that night, including the tablecloth, my brand new white velvet dress and more or less every single dish she had slaved over all day.

"Cheers!"

I clinked my glass with my two aunts and reached across the table to extend the gesture to poor Cam. The subsequent event was one of National Lampoon proportions. I thrust my plastic cup of juice into Cam's glass, full of red wine, with all of the jubilation and idiocy of the town drunkard, and before I could register anything that had happened, I, along with all of our guests, were doused in Hurricane Zinfandel.

The glass had shattered in Cam's hand but thankfully he wasn't bleeding, though with the amount of red wine staining everything within a 10-foot radius, it wouldn't have been too surprising if a massacre had gone on that day. If you recall what I said earlier about my mom's strings getting pulled a little too tight around Christmas time, her reaction was very predictable. Within seconds of the shower, I was snatched up and promptly placed inside the kitchen pantry where there was nothing my (now pink) velvet dress could transfer on to. I could hear my whole family erupting in deafening amounts of laughter with the exception, of course, of my poor mom who was working busily to fix my mess, muttering profanities like she needed them to breathe.

We had ordered pizza that Christmas as my little accident had made it difficult to tell whether the turkey was actually pink and red inside because of the wine (which my mother insisted was the case), or because it was raw. Truthfully I don't think anyone was complaining about the new menu. Does anyone actually like roasted pars-

nips and mince pies anyway?

I'm sure if you were to ask anyone who was there that day they'd recount it with laughter and probably tell you how much of a relief the pizza was at the end of the night. Except for my mom, of course, who, despite the nightmare the night was, has continued to insist on hosting Christmas dinner every year since.

HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADE 11-12)

Kendra Maynard

The Content of My Character

Martin Luther King Jr. once said “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.” That was over fifty years ago. Since then we have come a long way, yet in this day and age; why do we still face racism? Why is it that I am only seen as my colour instead of my character?

The first time I ever faced racism was before I'd even left the womb. My pregnant mother was almost run down by a vicious racist driver as she and my father walked home one night. Sadly, it wasn't long before I was once again targeted. My early years in school were somewhat plagued by segregation. It wasn't long before I came to understand that I was very different from the other pupils in terms of looks as well as treatment. I have been both physically and mentally assaulted by my own teachers. Ignorant classmates have singled me out for my tanned skin or my “poofy hair”. I came to terms with the fact that people could touch my hair without my permission just because they were curious. Their curiosity came before my comfort and right to be respected as a human being. Ignorance can be very belittling: “You are pretty for a black girl,” “No offense, but you're black,” “Your hair feels so weird! Is it real?” Why pretty “for a black girl”? Why can't I just be pretty for who I am, not what I am? Why should I take offense to being called black? It is nothing to be ashamed of. My hair is not weird, It is unique and beautiful in its own way. All of these things made me feel tiny and insignificant for a very long time.

Being treated differently from the get-go takes its toll, and at a very young age. By the time I was five I already wished to have pale skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair. Once I reached twelve I loathed every part of who I was. All I wanted was to fit in, to be beautiful, because all society had ever told me was that if I was black I could never be beautiful. I tried to hide my ethnicity through the clothes I wore and the people I befriended; I even straightened my beautiful curls to look more Caucasian. No matter how hard I tried to conceal who I am, I was still treated differently than my friends in many ways. It is especially difficult for mulatto girls like me. We don't quite fit in to the white community, and we are labeled as “whitewashed” in the black community. I feel so much sorrow for all the gorgeous little coloured girls going through the same thing. I want to make each and every one know that they they are enough, that they are beautiful, intelligent, and able to make it in this world. I want my little sisters to look up to me and see a woman who is proud to be who she is so that they may grow up loving themselves. It breaks my heart to see them already going through the same external and internal struggles that I faced.

Today, even though I still face racism, I love myself inside and out. The black and white blood that runs through my veins represents a unity between people, which is incredible. I have come to accept that maybe ignorance will never die, but that my worth does not come from other people's approval. Some things from my past have scarred me and a lot of the time I have to wonder if I am paranoid or if something I just faced was really racism. I am afraid of the police. I fear the difficulty of attaining a job due to my appearance being inadequate for business. Through all of this I wish to live as normally as I can and to encourage other black people everywhere to do the same. Every human being has a right to feel equal and loved.

Martin Luther King Jr. and I share a dream, though we may be over fifty years apart. We have come a long way, and have farther yet to go. I have a dream to be seen as a human, and nothing less. I have a dream to be treated as an equal and to be seen as who, not what, I am. I have a dream that people, no matter what skin colour, will never stop fighting for what is right.

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