



SPEAKER'S

AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS



About the Award

The Speaker's Award for Youth Writers was launched last year to celebrate the writing talents of Ontario's youth. Students in grades 7-12 are invited to submit their short stories and personal essays to this writing contest. Original fiction and non-fiction submissions are welcome, and a winner from each of the following three grade categories is chosen: grades 7-8, grades 9-10, and grades 11-12.

Selection Committee

Giles Benaway is a published poet. He was the recipient of the first Speaker's Book Award - Young Authors (for published authors aged 18-30) last year for his collection of poetry *Ceremonies for the Dead*.

Michelle Douglas is a teacher at a Toronto high school. 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.



SPEAKER'S

AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS

GRADE 7-8 HONOURABLE MENTION

MY NANA

ELLA BLACK

I woke up in the middle of the night, tears streaming down my face. I struggled to take a breath. I looked around my bedroom, needing to find something familiar, something I could hold onto in order to calm myself down. My heart pumped in my chest. The only thing I wanted was for the dreams to be erased from my memory.

That was over a year ago. I still can't forget them.

My Nana died in September of my grade six year. Cancer was what took her. She had been fighting for a long time before we even found out; she died only two weeks after the doctors told her. In some ways though, I think she knew all along. For me, while the news that she had died was painful, it wasn't as bad as finding out that she was dying.

I will never forget that day. My aunt and I were on our way back from Vaughan Mills, where she had taken me shopping to buy my first-day-of-school outfit. The trip was a special tradition for us; we did it every year. This year, my aunt decided to take me to Canada's Wonderland when we had finished shopping. "It's just so close!" she had said. I was surprised but I didn't object; what eleven-year-old would say no to that? We had a wonderful time which, in some ways, made what came after even harder.

After rides and funnel cake, we headed back home. As soon as I came through the front door, I knew something was wrong. My whole family was gathered in the living room. My mom sat on the couch next to my dad, crying. My sister was with them, sitting on the edge of the couch, her eyes red and her face blotchy. I asked them over and over, what was wrong but they wouldn't tell me, they just said my dad had to speak with me for a second. My dad and I went down to the screened-in porch. The lake spread out in front of us, shimmering in the glow of the moon. My dad asked me to sit down and then told me the news, that my Nana had cancer and didn't have long to live. As I stared out over the water, all I could think about was how fitting it was for my Nana to be called "lady of the lake" and how right it was that I found out she was dying while sitting in front of the place where she felt most at home.

I think I cried harder that night than any night before. I couldn't accept the fact that my Nana, the woman I saw almost every day, that I could walk down the street at any given moment and see, would soon be taken away. How is this fair? Why was this happening to me? I couldn't think of any answers then and I can't think of any now. All I knew was that I had to make the most of the time I had with her, and man, am I glad I did. When I look back on those last couple of weeks we had, I can smile because I know that everything that needed to be said was said, and that when she let go, it was time.

The night she died was very similar to the night I found out she had cancer. I had a great day, followed by a horrific evening. My aunt picked me up from school after I had spent the day climbing high ropes and spending time with friends. I knew my Nana had passed, just by looking at her. We cried all the way home, and sadly, the tears just kept coming afterwards.

After that came condolences, the funeral and a memorial service, with me holding onto every memory I had of my Nana. I didn't want to accept her death; whenever I thought about it too hard,

I broke into sobs. Then came the nightmares. My nana would pop up in lots of dreams. One in particular, I can't seem to forget.

I was in a grocery store with my mom. We were at the checkout line and I saw my Nana come through the sliding doors with two plane tickets in her hand. She walked up to my mom and said that she had just gotten back from her trip and how happy she was. She said that the next time my mom should go with her. I'm a worrier and I tend to read between the lines. At the time, it felt like it would be my mom's turn next, like maybe the next person I lost would be her. That idea kept me up at night. I couldn't even come to peace with the fact that my nana was dead; the thought that I might lose someone so close to me again was enough to break me into pieces.

Then two things happened that finally got me to stop grieving and accept her death. I was cleaning out my closet and organizing my room when I pulled out this box from underneath my bed. It was full of lots of my old things. As I went through it, I found a postcard my Nana had sent me. In her familiar handwriting, she said, "I am having so much fun here, I love you, Nana Black." That made me cry, but I knew I was meant to find that letter. Maybe somewhere, out there in the universe, she's looking down and smiling at me. That thought brought me hope, something I really needed.

The second thing happened quite recently. I had another dream, but this time, although my Nana was in it, the dream wasn't a nightmare. We were sitting in a car of some sort, having a discussion. She told me that she had to go for good and couldn't visit anymore. I asked her why, but the words only came out as a whisper. She started to go, and just before she disappeared, she told me she loved me. I don't think I will ever forget that dream, and this time I don't want to.

When my Nana passed away, it changed my whole life. She was a huge part of me and there's never a day that goes by that I don't think of her. I've come to realize something, though. I can't change the past. No matter what I do, I can't go back in time and undo what happened to her. I do have amazing memories and I know that she is with me. She means so much to me and nothing will ever make her death okay, but I know that I am okay. Sometimes when we are going through the hardest times in our life, it's hard to think that things will get better, but they do. Once we make it through that time, we get to see the beautiful things in life, and I think that's what is most important.

GRADE 7-8 WINNER
WORDS OF THE BROKEN
JILLIAN CLASKY

Sometimes a broken heart hurts so much more than physical pain ever could.

The messages are all different; some convey agony and destruction. By now it hurts so much that I can't feel the hurt anymore. And then there are the ones with some twisted kind of determination. They laugh at me and taunt me and shove me and break me but I am who I am and someday I'll be the one breaking them to pieces.

From the outside, we all look perfect. Smiling students in preppy school uniforms, running across the meticulously manicured lawns, laughing as we gaze through the spotless windows, beaming as we walk down the newly painted hallways and into the recently refurbished classrooms. Radiant. Even the high schoolers who study here often fall victim to the charm boasted by the most prestigious private school in town.

Unbeknownst to them, there are students who feel they never truly belong amid the sea of cheerful and studious teens clad in pleated skirts and sweater vests. The basement of the school is a sanctuary for these few, a place where they go when they feel accepted nowhere else. It is the hiding place for the girl who wears long sleeves every day to cover the scars that she inflicted upon herself. It is the refuge for the boy who is shoved up against lockers just because he likes other boys instead of girls. It is the shelter for the girl who starves herself while hiding beneath hoodies and hair dye. It is the safe haven for the boy who is scared of other people because he was abused and abandoned by his own father.

But for me, it is the place I go when I feel alone and unloved, even though my life seems ideal from the outside. It is the place with walls covered in messages from other teenagers like me, who have experienced my plight and gotten through it. Their words are gruesome and inspiring, appalling and passionate, but despite the hatred and love covering the walls, they make me feel like someone is there for me.

I was always too afraid to leave my own mark on those walls. Maybe I was too scared to show the real me, or just anxious about confronting my feelings and putting them into words. I was too afraid, until I wasn't.

The words I added to the collection of pain and hope were simple, though I stressed over them for weeks before finally pressing that black Sharpie up against the wall: *I hear the voices too loudly sometimes. They remind me of my flaws and failures, always contradicting the few compliments I receive. I try to stop them but they're always there, in my head, taunting me. They are a part of me.*

Now, as I enter into that quiet, dark room, long-forgotten by teachers, principals and custodians, the musty scent is overpowering and the dust in the air makes it hard to breathe. I yank on the chain hanging beside the old-fashioned lightbulb and it casts an eerie yellow glow over the space. The walls are so marked-up that it's hard to read some of the messages. There is one message, however, that is written in red, and it stands out among the sea of words inscribed in black.

Directly below what I wrote, four words are displayed in blood-red ink: *I hear them too.*

I am frozen in place, too shocked to move. Someone answered. Someone saw what I wrote and understood. Someone else in the world feels the way I do.

It makes me feel like possibly, there is somewhere I belong. I just have to find it.

I write, *Maybe we're not alone after all.*

I haven't graced the school basement with my presence in a week, until I finally choose to visit the quiet space that has become my home. In all of the months I've spent wasting away the hours, hidden among the messages written by people like me, I have never come across another person there. Until today.

She throws open the door just as I'm about to enter, catching me off guard. I know her name immediately. Everyone does; she's one of the most popular girls in the whole school. She's the golden girl; she's the one who makes the grades and wins the awards, but still manages to attend every party and social event. She's the Student Council president, the head of the cheerleading squad, and the kind, accepting, smart and funny girl who everyone wants to befriend.

Time stands still. She looks up at me with wide, terrified eyes, then glances around the skinny hall that suddenly makes me feel closed-in and trapped. It could be that she thinks I'll ruin her perfect image and tell on her for being just as messed up as the rest of us, when she's supposed to be untroubled and flawless, inside and out.

She moves her lips, trying to speak but not finding the words. "Sorry!" she finally manages to squeak out. She rushes away, but not quickly enough to stop me from seeing the red Sharpie clutched tightly in her fist.

I enter the room, my heart beating much too quickly. *Deep breath.* I look around. It seems as though nothing on the walls has changed; no obvious red markings have been added. Still, I walk over to where I first left my mark on this place. I trace my fingers over the words and notice that a tiny message has been added underneath the last one that I wrote. Recorded in bright red is a single word that somehow holds so much hope and potential among the words of the broken.

Maybe.

The lawns are still immaculately trimmed and the windows still sparkle in the sunlight as I exit the school that day, but everything has changed. I see her walking out of the school, a red Sharpie tucked into the back pocket of her dark grey jeans. She throws her head back laughing, but I know she wears her smile as a shield.

Just like I do.

GRADE 9-10 HONOURABLE MENTION

MISTAKES

HEATHER EAST

The national spotlight being on the tiny little town of Pearce, Ontario, was strange.

With a population of a little less than 4,500, it wasn't really that much of an interest of many people. Most would consider it to be boring and not a bit entertaining. It certainly wasn't a tourist town, that's for sure.

Pearce was mostly filled with families. It was a very old town. It had been founded over two centuries ago, when the country of Canada was still being formed. Some of the families had ancestors who were there when the forest was being cleared for the town.

It was odd having the entire country looking right at the town when really, it was the definition of normal. Well, mostly.

However, the publicity was to be expected given the circumstances.

The mass homicides occurring in the community caused all of southern Ontario to come to a halt. That kind of thing just didn't happen in such small towns, which was one of the many reasons why it had drawn so much attention. The other reason why it had suddenly popped up in almost every major Canadian newspaper and magazine was that the murderer had somehow not been caught.

He was smart, and didn't leave behind even the slightest amount of evidence. That is, other than the bodies.

What the media didn't realize was that the homicide detectives assigned to that case were even smarter.

Their names were Aaron Radford and Royce Gordon.

Aaron was a man in his early thirties, the older of the two. Unlike Royce, he wasn't married, and didn't have children. He wanted to focus on saving people, and a woman had yet to put up with his slightly obsessive personality. But he was also observant, and that made him good at his job. At the time, his job and his partner were the only things he cared about.

Royce was in his late twenties, and was married to a woman named Marilyn. He had two children, a son and a daughter, but he used to have three. His oldest daughter, Cecelia, had died a year and a half ago after she had been diagnosed with Leukemia. She had only been nine years old, and Royce never really moved on. How could he?

Royce had always said that his children and his wife were the only things that truly mattered to him, other than Aaron. He used to have such a bright and infectious personality. Even Aaron was a victim to it. If Royce smiled, you had to as well. If he chuckled, you laughed too. He had been a joyful man, but this happiness that had once been seen in him was gone after Cecelia died. After he lost her, he turned dark and unconnected. He was determined to stop all evil in the world. He focused on his job, even more than his partner did.

And to Aaron, that was dangerous.

His partner was a loose cannon. It was as simple as that.

Royce had been acting odd, and Aaron, being the observant person he was, took note of that. He wanted to find out what was wrong, but when it came to anything other than Marilyn, Royce wasn't all that great at expressing his feelings. Aaron was like him in that respect.

"Somethin' wrong?" Aaron asked his friend as they both got into Royce's car. "You don't look very well."

"I'm fine," Royce said, his voice cracking a little. "Don't worry about it."

In respect of his friend's wishes, he let it go.

That was his first mistake.

When they got to the diner that Royce had chosen, Aaron also noticed that Royce had taken his keys and placed them in the left pocket of his jacket. He never did that. He was a right-handed man, he always put his keys in his right pocket. As Aaron took a slightly closer look, he saw that Royce had something in his right pocket. This was very odd for Aaron to see because Royce wasn't one to keep his pockets filled up. He only ever carried his keys and wallet. This thing, whatever it was, didn't seem to be either. The object was small and rectangular, but big enough that it poked out.

If it had been sunny outside, Aaron would have realized that it was metal when it glinted in the sunlight. Then, maybe, just maybe, he would have realized that it wasn't metal. It was stainless steel.

When Aaron asked him what was in his pocket, Royce once again spoke in a shaky voice, but this

time, it was more of an annoyed tone. "Don't worry about it!" he snapped.

Aaron held his hands up in defense, and they both walked into the diner.

Aaron had been so entranced in trying to find out what Royce was hiding, that he didn't even realize that Royce hadn't actually ordered what he always did. He usually ordered a BLT and a coke, but today, he only ordered a cup of coffee. That was especially strange for a man like Royce, who was the type of person whose favourite subject in school was lunch.

That was his second mistake.

However, Aaron did notice the way that Royce's fingers trembled as he drank the coffee. It certainly wasn't from the cold, it was the middle of September.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Aaron asked, and before Royce could snap at him again, he continued, "Your hands are shaking."

Royce didn't answer. He simply looked at Aaron, then licked his lips and set the mug down. He stood up from the chair, and told Aaron that he needed to use the men's room. Aaron once again let the subject go.

That was his third mistake.

When Royce came back a few minutes later, he had his hands shoved into his pockets and a worried and somewhat frightened expression on his face. "I need to go," Royce said.

"Alright, give me a second," Aaron said, taking another bite of his grilled cheese sandwich. He wasn't finished his meal, but something was wrong with Royce and he wanted to leave. Aaron was eager to find out what his friend was hiding. Perhaps he would tell him on the ride back to the station.

"No... I need to go alone," Royce replied, then turned and left.

Royce walked straight out of the diner, leaving Aaron to watch him in surprise. It was a good thing that they were only five blocks away from the station, because Aaron's ride back had just walked out the front door.

Aaron had let his friend go, despite the way that he had been acting. He didn't even pay for his meal, Aaron had to do it. He threw a twenty onto the table, and was getting up to leave, when he heard a scream.

He ran to wherever the sound was coming from, and it ended up being the hallway that led to the public bathrooms. A man was holding a woman to him, her head turned away from the room where the man was looking with a horrified expression. The woman was clearly distressed, sobbing into the man's shoulder. It appeared that the two of them worked there, they wore aprons and nametags on their t-shirts. It seemed that they had found something that the woman had been afraid of.

Aaron looked at the man, who was only staring at the door of the men's room. They would have told him if the murderer was in there, right? He didn't have to worry about anything truly horrible behind the door.

That was his fourth mistake.

Aaron pushed the door open, and as soon as he did, he knew what was so terrifying.

The bathroom had bloody handprints all over the white tiled walls and counter, like someone had hit the wall repeatedly and then leaned up against both surfaces with exhaustion. The mirror was broken too, some of the shards still there while others were laying on the counter and in the sink. Maybe someone had gotten angry, and just took their frustration out on the mirror? Perhaps they had stayed in the bathroom to calm down afterwards?

Aaron was too hopeful for his own good.

He was proven wrong when he looked to one of the stalls, where a pair of feet were poking out from under the door. It was as if someone was laying on the floor with their back against the toilet, and when Aaron went to knock on the door, he knew he was right. The door swung open when his knuckles hit it, and he finally knew what had scared the two people so much.

The man that was leaning up against the toilet was the source of the blood. His throat had been slashed open, likely by one of the broken mirror shards. The blood still trickled from his neck, which was startling. His eyes were blank and empty, but also wide, as if he had been terrified when he was killed. Of course he was. His left hand was curled into a fist, like he had been trying to defend himself. Once again, of course he was.

Aaron turned to the two people outside the bathroom. "Do you have any idea who was in here with him?"

"Th-That guy from earlier... The policeman... He came in after him. But the policeman was the only one who came back," the man explained, still holding the woman close to him and shielding her from the the grisly site. It seemed that two of them were too scared to move away from the door.

Aaron's heart sank when the man's words processed in his mind. It was Royce. Royce had killed them. That was the problem, that was why he was acting so strangely lately. He was the murderer. He had been all this time.

In that short split second, Aaron almost convinced himself that he didn't have to turn Royce in. He didn't have to tell anyone about the murder. He could just say that the man and woman were lying, that they were delusional. He could get Royce some help, get him out of town long enough and far enough that they would never guess it was him, or guess that he had left.

But he realized that the very idea of tricking those around him was not realistic, nor was it right. It was against every single motive or natural instinct that a detective like him stood for. It was against every code that Aaron tried so hard to keep.

Friend or not, Royce might have killed someone. Aaron didn't know for sure. However, if he did really kill this man, then he needed to pay for it. He needed to be kept away from the public, and be given the help that he needs.

And so, he reached down to his belt and pulled his radio off of it. "This is detective Radford, and I'm reporting a seventh homicide," he said, licking his lip and sighing softly before he continued reluctantly. "And a suspect."

He could now only hope and pray that this was not his fifth mistake that day.

GRADE 9-10 WINNER

TWIST OF FATE

LAURA BROWN

"Jonathan! I don't know what you want me to tell you bro!"

"Jake, why hasn't it shown up yet? I'm almost nineteen!" I cried.

I'll be nineteen soon and this stupid name hasn't shown up yet. What if fate gave up on me?

Everyone has a lover, a soulmate, a partner, whatever you would like to call it. Once you turn eighteen the name of your lover appears near the bottom of the palm of your hand. It is like a tattoo. Your lover has your name on their hand too. Normally they are sort of hard to find. Your soulmate is most likely live in your country, but good luck trying to find them.

If the tattoo doesn't appear on your skin within a year after you've turned eighteen, it means fate couldn't find your match. It means you will have to find someone yourself. Once you find your match though, it's supposed to be like heaven. The tattoo turns red after you've truly fallen in love with your partner. My parents say that when they first met, they could feel the electricity reflecting off of each other. It took only two months for their tattoos to signal that they had fallen in love.

I am about to turn nineteen in two weeks and my tattoo has not shown up. I have lost hope and even Jake has lost hope. Jake is my best friend. He got his name on his palm the day after his birthday. Her name is Jessie. Jake has not found her yet, but he is searching still. Summer is just around the corner. That is when everyone goes looking. I am sure I will have no lover to look for. I had been so excited on my eighteenth birthday. But never had I thought it would have taken this long.

"Dude, just go to bed. We've argued over this way too many times." Jake says, placing his head on the pillow. The blow up mattress he is sleeping on is old and smells a little, although we have both gotten used to it.

I fall asleep however, to the light tingling on my left hand. And sure enough, the next morning it was there. Two weeks – well, a week and a half – before the deadline. That morning I woke up to the sound of Jake yelling at me. He was bouncing around me on my bed.

"It's there! It's there!" Jake exclaimed.

I quickly looked down at my hand and there, imprinted in black cursive writing, was the name Alex. It looked beautiful. Nothing like an actual tattoo, but more like a part of my skin. People without lovers have tried to get real tattoos to make up for it. But there's no actual feelings when they meet their "soulmate". Mainly it is because fate is planned before the beginning of time and cannot be controlled. So those people become desperate and vulnerable for one. Although, I am thankful to not have been one of them. Not anymore, at least.

"I bet she's so hot!" Jake laughed as he too looked down at the name.

"Good luck finding her though." He joked lightly but I knew there was meaning behind it.

Once my parents saw my palm they took me out to dinner right away to celebrate. Personally, I did

not want to make a big deal out of it. But just when I had lost all hope, my marking appeared and proved me wrong. So yeah, I think I deserved the celebration.

I know my parents had been worried. It took my mum one month for her name and it took my dad a week for his to come in. For my older brother, he got his name after three months. It was the middle of summer when his lover's name appeared. He went looking right away. Just recently, my brother had found her. Her name is Anna and they have been together for a month now. He is really lucky it only took him a year and a half to find her. It took my grandfather four years to find his lover.

My grandfather always said, "If fate makes you wait, often there's a reason." Maybe that means I'm special. Maybe Alex's name will turn green. Although, I have never known anyone who had taken as long as me to get their name. In a way, that worries me. What if there is something wrong with Alex? I hope she's okay.

I picture her, as a small brunette, she's petite yet very sassy. She won't be that much shorter than I, her blue eyes will be almost at eye level with my green ones. I wonder if she's already searching for me. Jake says she most likely is.

Grandfather was normally right about everything. However this time, I wished he wasn't. Fate waited on me, like he'd said, the reason was extremely surprising.

I ended up finding Alex quickly. It was a week after my nineteenth birthday. I had to admit, I wasn't looking for Alex at all. The day I woke up with her name printed, Jake insisted I went into town to look for Alex. After that day, I had made no effort because Jake and I had both agreed to just wait for summer to roll around.

I ended up finding Alex, at the park by my house. Fate was extra nice to me, I had found my lover within two weeks, with no effort.

The day had been perfect until I actually met Alex. That's when my life completely changed. It was after dinner, maybe around 6:30 pm on a Friday night. The London weather was damp but the sun reflected nicely against the spring leaves. I had told my parents I was going out to the park, I had enough of playing video games.

I walked through the park quietly, which was quite calming. But as I walked deeper through the path, I heard someone crying. I walked closer to the noise. It was coming from one of the hiking trails through the park. So I kept following the noises.

As I walked deeper into the woods, I found the source. There was a boy, around my age sitting on a wooden bench on the hiking trail. He was fairly small, his legs tucked up to his chest, his face down in his knees.

"Hello?" I said quietly. "What's wrong?" I walked up to the bench and sat beside the boy. He whimpered even more as I approached him. His hair looked nice and soft, and his dark jumper made it hard for me to see him.

"Leave me alone." He said quietly. His voice was muffled just like his cries.

"I can try to help you, I promise. Just tell me what's wrong." I spoke soothingly, trying to calm the boy. His sorrow swelled my heart.

"I-it's my tattoo." He looked up at me with wide blue eyes filled with tears. My heart nearly broke in two at the sight. I sat closer to him. His energy gave me warmth and I didn't know why.

"What's wrong with it? Is it not there?" I asked. Maybe he didn't get one? Poor boy.

"No I g-got it a year ago. B-but I always cover it up with makeup." He looked down at where our thighs touched, obviously feeling the weird vibe I was also feeling.

"Why?" I asked innocently.

"It doesn't matter!" He shouted. But I knew he felt guilty as soon as he raised his voice.

"Oh I-I'm sorry." I carefully placed my hand on his back and rubbed it. He flinched at first but relaxed quickly as I tried to comfort him.

"M-my mom thought I was one of the unlucky ones.... She umm, she saw my wrist at dinner time when I was reaching for my drink. I forgot to cover it up." He looked shameful, he was not sobbing anymore, but the tears still flowed down his cheeks.

"Shouldn't she be happy? You have a soulmate!" I said with glee, but the boy didn't seem very happy.

"No... There's something wrong with it." He pulled up the sleeve of his sweater. I looked down at his pale arm and there imprinted on his palm was my name. "I-it's a boys n-name."

I looked the boy right in the eyes still holding his arm. "Alex?" I asked stunned.

The boy jumped back in shock, recoiling from me entirely. "Jonathan?"

I frowned. "You can call me Johnny if you'd like."

A million thoughts ran through my head. I thought Alex was a girl! How could it be a boy! There must be some mistake. What will Jake think!? What will my parents think?! This is why fate took so long on me, because it got messed up! Something must have went wrong! It must have!

Alex and I had quickly exchanged numbers before running away from each other.

As soon as I got home, I ran to my parents and told them with tears rushing down my face. I told them how Alex was a boy and how he had gotten my name on his palm a year ago. I told them about how I comforted him and how now he has to go home to his mother, and tell her about how he met his soulmate who is a boy. He might get thrown out of his house!

It is bad enough that I am the younger sibling and how I am always compared to my older brother. Now my soulmate, my lover, my partner for life, is a boy! Things are just getting worse.

I told my parents about how I felt sitting next to Alex, they stayed quiet and listened the entire time. I knew this was wrong. Fate must have messed up. No matter how many times I tried to deny it, deep down I knew that I felt something, the same thing my mum and dad felt when they first met.

It turns out, that every one in one hundred have a same sex soulmate. I just so happened to be that one. I'd texted Alex about it. He said he's living with his sister now, she owns a condo around the corner from my house. I know he's very awkward about the whole situation. But this is my lover, the

one that fate has chosen for me. I am supposed to spend my life with him. My parents were on edge with everything. We did not tell many people about it. I am thankful they were so accepting unlike Alex's mum. He is my forever, so we might as well start off well.

We became the best of friends at first. Alex was just how I imagined my soulmate in terms of personality. He is going to the same university as me, and we managed to share two classes together. Jake was suspicious at first. He was jealous of my new friend. So I had to tell him...

He did not take it well at all. He hated me. He verbally abused me as soon as I told him. It was the worst thing in the world. None of this was my fault and he couldn't understand it. Not many could, if only they were in my shoes, they would understand. I had to stop going to church, scared that Jake might have told the priest. Alex did the same.

Alex told me that he refused to be scared. He told me that even though we are friends now, we will be lovers in the future. And of course he was right. Alex's name on the palm of my hand, ended up turning red after one month of us knowing each other. We were only so young, and had an extremely tough journey together. That is the thing though, we were in this together. Fate had not gone wrong and I am not a failed experiment. In fact, I am kind of glad this was the outcome. Alex does not think fate had messed up because we ended up together, specially.

GRADE 11-12 HONOURABLE MENTION

FAT

CINDY WANG

I was fat. Granted, nobody ever dared to call me that to my face. Instead, they told me that my puppy fat made me look cute. They insisted that a full figure suited me. But I understood the insinuation of the word "curvy".

I saw it on their faces when I forgot to suck in my pseudopregnant belly. Their eyes always seemed to travel to the muffin top pouring out the waistband of my pants. Every jiggle my arm or thigh made, every too-big smile that caused my cheeks to pinch my pig nose – I caught every lingering stare.

Even as an infant, I wasn't much of a crowd-pleaser. Adults would gossip behind my parents' backs. My parents weren't hideous-looking people, so how did I turn out so fat and ugly? They all cooed over the other babies, the cute babies. When it came to me, their gushing was insincere and forced, merely a formality in front of my parents.

In the early years of elementary school, I was teased for being heavy and as a result did not have many friends. The girls didn't really want me to play with them, so at recess they did gymnastics knowing full well I couldn't mirror the graceful whirlwind of limbs of their cartwheels and somersaults. In comparison to them, I felt like an awkward giant. I remember at one point I felt so alienated that my only company was my imaginary friend named Julie. I thought that I could cope by acting like a tomboy who didn't care about her looks. It was easier to purport apathy regarding my appearance than to attempt (and subsequently fail to) doll up.

My parents desperately wanted to help me lose weight and be healthy. They meant well, but their incessant reminders to watch myself annoyed me. When an extra chunk of meat was picked up, they would ask, "Should you be eating that?" After a particularly rich meal, they'd tell me to go exercise. Dessert after dinner was unheard of in our household. I was so terrified of eating that I always sought

approval silently with my eyes before I extended my chopsticks.

Over the years, I grew less and less confident with my body. I felt like boys didn't like me as much as other girls. I felt ashamed and embarrassed all the time. Each glance in the mirror spurred a pang of self-abhorrence. Looking down at my doughy thighs made my heart sink. I was constantly angry and touchy and defensive. It wasn't so much directed towards others as it was to my own person. I hated myself for not being able to lose weight. I hated myself for not being strong enough. I hated myself for letting my parents down.

My friends noticed that I wasn't very happy. I constantly complained about my looks and talked of all the pounds I planned on dropping. They tried to persuade me to stop obsessing over my weight. They told me that I was beautiful, but I wouldn't believe them. I couldn't believe them. My parents had taught me that people lie because they want to be nice, and so I had convinced myself that they were holding back the truth for the sake of politeness.

And so I resorted to more unconventional methods. Throughout my first two years of high school, my weight fluctuated ten pounds. I starved myself by skipping meals and I threw out my lunches that I ostensibly didn't enjoy. Doing this made me feel famished, so then I'd gorge on everything in the fridge, even the foods I typically didn't enjoy. Afterwards, I'd feel so guilty and utterly repulsive that I'd slide my index finger down my throat and throw it all up into the toilet. Then, I would promise myself to stop binging, to lose weight properly, but one way or another I'd get launched into the cycle again and again and again.

I hit rock bottom one Saturday while I was volunteering at a reception desk. Traffic in and out of the building had trickled down to a stop. The night before I had gotten plenty of sleep, but suddenly I was hit by a wave of fatigue. I decided to rest my head down on the table just for a minute. One minute blended into twenty.

I was trapped.

I drifted in and out of consciousness and my body was completely frozen. My arms and head felt so incredibly heavy. I felt nauseous and dizzy, but I wasn't moving or swaying—I didn't even have any strength to push myself up. I struggled for a while until my supervisor sensed something was wrong. She shook me awake and forced me to eat some bread and butter. Immediately after devouring the food, I began to feel better. It had been one of the scariest moments in my life.

After that incident I stopped my unhealthy habits. It really didn't matter what other people thought of my body. I didn't need to kill myself and my happiness trying to lose weight and please them. I discovered that all along I had been overly paranoid. Nobody other than my parents and myself had thought that I was fat for many years. All the stares I thought I received were nothing but a figment of my hyperactive imagination.

It's been a while since I've started to come to terms with the way I look. I won't lie; every day is still a challenge when I confront my acne in the mirror and feel my thighs squash when I sit down. The journey of becoming comfortable in one's own skin is arduous, but I've realized that ultimately we're all travelling in the same boat. As self-absorbed humans, we're inherently hypercritical of ourselves without registering that nobody is actually paying attention to anyone other than his/herself. Everyone is too engulfed in his/her own insecurities to notice the infinitesimal flaws of other people. It would be absurd to suggest that people should eliminate their self-consciousness altogether. That's impossible. However, what we can do is foster safe spaces and establish positive support networks

wherever we go. We need to teach one another to love ourselves.

I'm ready to commit to a lifetime of love for myself. Are you?

GRADE 11-12 WINNER
DERAILED
MACKENZIE EMBERLEY

Going unconscious was not as cool as I thought it would be. I didn't visit heaven, I didn't have an out of body experience, and no one was fanning me when I woke up. Actually, no one was around me at all when I woke up, which was depressing. Seriously, I just full out collapsed in the middle of a busy subway station, I expected someone to be leaning over my body wondering why I just fainted out of nowhere.

When I managed to get over the fact that fainting was not as cool as it was on TV, I noticed while sitting up that something really weird was going on. Here I was lying on the dirty tiled flooring of the station and not one person could have cared less. Everyone was just by passing me; stepping around my body like if it was normal for some random dude to be sitting in the middle of the room moments after gaining consciousnesses. No one offered their hand to help me up, or asked me if I was okay, I didn't even see anyone whispering about my strange state. Okay then... *This is perfectly normal. Yep, nothing to see here, just an awkward teenager passing out in public.*

I finally decided to stand up, accepting that today was simply international day of letting the unconscious kid lie in the subway station without giving it a second thought. I dusted myself off and began to walk with the flow of the crowd. I don't remember why I was getting on the subway, but that didn't matter anymore. What mattered was figuring out what was going on. The more I walked and looked around, the more confused I became. The crowd of people was parting to let me by and I didn't run into anyone like I normally would when the station was this busy. Every single person was just casually getting out of my way without noticing me at all. Another thing that struck me as strange is that there was absolutely no sound. It's like I had gone deaf or someone pressed the mute button on my life. This was freaking messed up. I couldn't hear the passing of the subways, I didn't hear the voices of people around me and I didn't hear one of the many foot steps taken by the rushing crowd. I thought that whatever caused me to go unconscious made me lose my hearing as well, and that's when I started to get scared.

My head was pounding, my heart was racing and my breathing was fast and shallow. Why was no one noticing me, why couldn't I hear anything, was I dead? When my thoughts brought me to this possibility, I realized that that could very well be what happened. I have seen many movies where the spirits of dead people walk among the living going unnoticed. I forced myself to think of a better explanation because I didn't want to be dead.

Choosing to ignore the possibility that I was a ghost, I told myself that I was just being paranoid. Yeah, I was just overreacting. I mean, it's not like people would normally take an interest in me. People didn't care about random guys walking in the subway. I realized that I was reaching out to nothing, trying to come up with lame logical explanation, but it was the only thing keeping me from passing out again.

That was weird too, passing out I mean. I don't remember hitting my head or simply fainting, I just remember regaining consciousnesses from my very deep slumber and having no clue what was going on.

Frustration and anger started to take over. It was not fun being invisible and deaf at the same time. It was scary and confusing. I pounded my fists against my head trying to wake up my senses in vain. I must have looked like an idiot if anyone would notice me.

"I'm okay guys, really no need to worry. I'm just slowly going insane while you people continue with your lives!" My shouts echoed back as I jumped around.

Regaining control, I caught my breath and slowed down because I realized that freaking out was not going to be useful. I reached out to people but it was like they were simply floating away. It wasn't aggressive, so I wasn't purposely being avoided; it was more like the universe made it possible that I would go unnoticed. My body was a barrier and no one could pass it. It was physically impossible for anyone to accidentally run into me.

While my feet carried me to some place, I suddenly felt a sharp pain in my stomach. It was like being stabbed in the right side of my lower torso. I doubled over and clawed at the nonexistent wound in my abdomen. Of course no one noticed my pain, but that didn't stop me from feeling it. I lowered my body to the ground and let out a cry. Wincing and cringing, I lifted my shirt and pressed my hands against the skin. I didn't see any stab wound or see blood which was really weird. The messed up part of this, was that I felt blood. My fingers were slipping with warm thick liquid, but I didn't see blood on my stomach and my hands weren't stained red.

What the hell was going on! Something was seriously wrong! I slowly got to my feet and started to run as fast as I could, ignoring my invisible wound. As I was running to no where in particular, my head lurched to the side, making my neck bend. My face erupted with pain and my whole head was throbbing. I lifted my fingers to my nose and I felt the same ghostly blood on my hands and in my mouth, it was warm and tasted metallic. And then, my whole body started to scream in pain. Random bursts of agony attacked my legs, chest, torso and my head. I was thrashing around as I tried to fight the invisible force long enough to understand this madness.

Something made me forget the pain momentarily while my blurry vision focused in on a scene happening on the subway platform. There was a large group of people standing in a crowd surrounding something. The whole scene was very chaotic, there were people shouting (or seemed to be shouting), they were shoving one another, some people were laughing and others were frantically talking on the phone.

I made my way into the action and pushed pass the gathering of bodies with no problem; I basically just walked to the front of the crowd to see what was happening. There were three rough looking men who were towering over some poor guy on the ground. The scary looking dudes were beating up the guy crumpled on the floor. They threw kicks and punches at the young man who was barely conscious while the crowd of people just watched.

I started to walk towards the fight in order to break it up forgetting that I was nonexistent to these people, but then I stopped dead in my tracks. The attackers shifted position and parted which allowed me to see the victim. It was me!

I was laying there all bloodied and defenceless on the floor. There was a knife sticking out from my stomach which was bleeding a lot and my face was also stained with blood flowing from my nose. A dark purple bruise was already starting to appear on my head and the rest of my body looked broken.

I felt sick and sore everywhere. I fell to my hands and knees in front of myself and started to hyperventilate. I sobbed and scream and shook fervently as I watched myself get beaten to death. I hoped that the phone calls being made were emergency calls to 911 because that was my only chance.

Shockingly, I could reach out and touch my broken body without missing it. I put one hand on my head and the other on my chest. My heart beat was weak and barely there. My eyes were closed and I was motionless. However, I could still feel breath coming from my mouth and my chest still rose and fell lightly. I knew that I didn't have much longer. If an ambulance was coming, it wasn't going to make it because the attackers were still beating up my body. If someone didn't do something, I would be dead by the hands of these three sick murderers before help could get here.

This was a weird moment for me as I was leaning over my own body and sobbing with my head pressed into my physical shoulder. I realized in that moment that people were incredibly selfish and that if I was going to survive, I would have to do it myself. I left my body where it was and stood up. My plan was very flawed and it wasn't much. I needed to kill my attackers. For a while, I contemplated on whether or not I would be willing to kill someone to save myself. The three bastards were grinning and forever beating my body. Watching this sickening scene, I made my choice pretty quickly. It was self defence, and these jerks deserve to die for killing an innocent guy for no reason. I needed to protect myself and bring justice to those who do wrong. I understood that my strange experience in the subway was the universe giving me the chance to fight for my life and survive. I woke up in this place from a coma like state, which I could not explain, in order to save my dying self from these evil men.

There was one problem with the plan that I had. How was I going to kill my attackers if I couldn't touch them? I threw my fist at one of the guys but I never came in contact with his face. I lunged towards another one of the dudes but he moved suddenly and I went flying towards the gap of the subway rails. I was hanging over the roadbed of the subway with half of my body just hanging in mid air. While dangling there, I got an idea. If I couldn't physically hurt the attackers, then my only option was to push them to their deaths.

I backed away from the trench in the cement and positioned myself in front of the guy kicking every inch of my body. I reached out to his arm, and as expected he simply moved his arm away casually. Great so now, he was not able to pass my outstretched arm which left him with only space on the other side. I extended my other arm around the other side of his body leaving him only the possibility of backing up. It was like giving a hug to someone insanely germaphobic who couldn't bear to be touched. The guy looked confused because he was no longer able to hurt me. I saw the flashing red lights warning that the train was approaching and quickly started to push up against the guy making him walk backwards. He was angry by his lack of control and his anger soon turned to fear as he moved dangerously close to the train tracks. I advanced on the guy, and in no time he fell into the ditch in the cement. The man tried to desperately climb back up, but I could see that it was difficult and that he was hurt.

I approached the next attacker and did the same thing. All the while doing this, the train was getting closer and the second guy could definitely hear it judging by his scared expression. The second guy fell into his soon to be grave. He landed on the other dude and they both tried to get back to the platform.

The last attacker was frozen in his spot as he just watched his two buddies fall to their deaths. He was shaking with fear and wasted no time sprinting away from the scene. Well that was easy. "Cool." I said casually thanking the dude for making my job easier. I didn't worry too much about him

because he would surely be brought to justice somehow.

I looked at the faces of the crowd; they were all looking scared or shock. The train came barrelling into sight and rammed into my attackers. Some people on the platform closed their eyes or looked away, others had their mouths wide open and some ran away. I didn't care about anything, not my attackers who just suffered a brutal death, not the selfish, scarred witnesses; I just cared about the poor guy still lying on the ground. I went back to my body and knelt in my own blood. Every wound inflicted on my body was screaming in pain. Now that my adrenaline was gone, I felt everything, every bruise, slash, broken bone and luckily my only stab wound. But the best feeling was the weak beat of my heart. I closed my eyes and let my spiritual body lie next to my physical body as I waited for the ambulance to show up.

I couldn't tell if minutes or hours went by, but I eventually woke up to the feeling of hands gripping my body. I opened my eyes to see two paramedics lifting me onto a stretcher. I could suddenly hear the sirens of the ambulance and the many voices of the crowd in the subway station. Everything was too loud, all the shouting, the rumbling of trains and the voices of the paramedics telling me that they would help me.

It was all too much, too much stuff was going on at once and the lights were too bright. So I inhaled deeply, closed my eyes and fell into a peaceful state of unconsciousness.



Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2016