



# 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

**Claudine Brulé** is a communications specialist, sharing stories with both Francophone and Anglophone audiences. She served as a Provincial Affairs Reporter with CBC / Radio-Canada at Queen's Park, and currently works in communications at the Bureau du Québec in Toronto.

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

**Christina Orr** is a Teacher at Neil McNeil High School, in the Toronto Catholic District School Board. She currently teaches Grade 9 Religion, Grade 10 Civics and Careers, and Grade 10 Media Arts.



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## 2018-19 Speaker's Award for Youth Writers

### Grade 7-8

#### WINNER

Joey Qiao - *If We Could Go Back In Time To Fix a Regret or Mistake, Should We?*

#### HONOURABLE MENTION

Andrei Li - *A Present Of Hope*

### Grade 9-10

#### WINNER

Alisha Ahmed - *Stage Five*

#### HONOURABLE MENTION

Gabrielle La Touche - *Why Am I Black?*

### Grade 11-12

#### WINNER

Jasleen Brar - *"Mr. Wet-Brain"!*

#### HONOURABLE MENTION

Cassandra Lee - *Dear Diary*

## WINNER (GRADE 7-8)

Joey Qiao

### *If We Could Go Back In Time To Fix a Regret or Mistake, Should We?*

Ah, regrets. We all have them, every one of us, big and small. With every mistake our actions lead us to, every wrong step we take, there is that one brief moment where we wonder, "What could I have done to avoid that? What would've happened if I did this instead? Oh, if only I could go back in time, I could fix it, if only..." Sometimes a second chance is all we really need. But with that chance so out of our grasp, wistful thinking is... just that. False hope.

I still remember, quite vividly, those days of my childhood. The dark days, I called them. Gazing down defeatedly at the chessboard in a grand, silent hall, glittering chandeliers hanging overhead, yet my heart pounding heavily with the urge to simply go home and be done with this. For I did not like to lose, and every time the inevitable checkmate landed, it haunted me for days, the prospect of simply going back in time and fixing that screwed up game taunting me.

This is much a petty example, I'm sure, but at such a young age, fear can twist the mind in demented ways. And from my experience, I would like to state that, even if we could go back in time to fix a regret or mistake, we should not.

Life is much like a wild roller coaster ride, and the ups and downs we experience through it should be treasured, not erased. Why treasured, you ask? Why should we treasure a shameful flaw? Well, that depends on what the word 'treasure' means to you. To some, it is dreams of glittering diamonds. To others, it is an ancient wooden chest buried in the ground. To me, it is a golden memory, something that can be distorted and shifted over the years, but will still always be there, always be yours. Mistakes and lessons learned often lead to something good happening in turn. We are imperfect, and we will break, but instead of staying shattered, take those broken fragments and piece them together to make something beautiful again. And, most importantly, treasure the whole experience, both the good and the bad, and make it something precious to truly keep as your own. For everything we cherish; love, adventure, happiness, we cannot achieve through perfection, but instead through acknowledging our flaws and the mistakes we have made in the past, yet still walking on with our heads held high.

We all know that independence is an important prospect of human growth, but how can we develop strength when we consistently lean on the fact that if we do make mistakes, they can be easily fixed? To me, that is what matters most. Doing things with the acceptance of possible mistakes and regrets, but also taking in the risks and leaving room for logic and reason alongside bravery and strength. For there is a fine line between courage and plain recklessness, and although we shouldn't fear making mistakes and having regrets, we should be aware of the consequences and how they could affect us. If we had the ability to go back in time, we would use that ability as an excuse to charge recklessly into stupid situations and not really try our best, as we know there's a guaranteed second chance.

Sadly, however much light we shine onto this world, there are still places where shadows lurk. Some will inevitably be lost; those who passed away much too young, those who committed unforgivable crimes, those whose lives were destined to be toilsome simply by fate. But sacrifices must be made, for there cannot be a rainbow without the rain, and I know that standing here today, I wouldn't want to change any of the flaws in my past, as they are a part of me now, important stepping stones to bring me to where I am today.

Our mistakes and regrets are what shape us to be better versions of ourselves in the future, and without them, the thrilling stories we tell about ourselves, both our struggles and our triumphs, would no longer be. Caught up in the moment, the urge to fix a mistake might be strong, but know that in the future, you will look back and be glad everything in your life did happen, both the sunlit days and the dark nights.

# HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADE 7-8)

Andrei Li

## *A Present of Hope*

Thomas hated the mall. Hated the glaring white lights dangling from the ceiling. Hated the stench of bleach and mold and fresh paint hanging in the air. Pitied the sad, lonely Christmas trees shoved into the corners, bare but for a handful of crooked, crumbling globes.

He sighed and looked down at his phone: 11:27 a.m. Emily, his older sister, would be back in a few minutes, from the 'Christmas decoration' store. *Ugh*. More like the 'give-your-brother-ado' store.

"*Why can't we just use last year's decorations?*" he'd asked. "*After all, they only need a bit of dusting.*"

But *no*. His sister *had* to buy new globes, new ribbons and lights, new *everything*. And spend *three hours* doing so. And his parents didn't care: after all, Emily had started her first year of university, and they were so proud, blah *blah*.

He shifted in his seat, sending a puff of dust into his face. Even the benches were disgusting, here.

"Hey, Tom-Tom!"

Thomas looked up. Emily looked back, two bulky shopping bags in her hands and one of her flashy, forced smiles on her face.

"For the last time, Em, don't call me *Tom-Tom*," he groaned. "Where to, next?"

Emily rolled her eyes. "To the grocery store. Pay *attention*, Thomas. I already said it earlier, and I don't like repeating myself." She leaned in, lowering her voice to a hiss. "To be frank, I don't think you want to be here."

*That's right, Em. Notice that your brother's bored to hell a week late.*

"No," he lied. "I just want to go home and start decorating."

Em's smile popped back onto her face. "Well, if that's the case, then follow me! The quicker we walk, the quicker we shop, and the quicker we get home!" She chuckled at her failed rhyme.

Before Thomas could reply, his sister had already slipped into the crowd, her fancy auburn bun bobbing away like a puppet.

If there was one thing about the mall that Thomas hated the most, it would be the crowds. As soon as he entered the mix, the people around him started closing in like a giant steel cage, crushing him in a prison of sweltering coat-wrapped bodies. He clenched his teeth, sweat rolling down his back, and cut through the crowd as quickly as he could.

Suddenly, he emerged in a small clearing around the mall's marble fountain. He looked around, and groaned: no Emily in sight. He'd taken a wrong turn, and ended up walking *away* from the grocery store.

*Might as well get a break from Em, he thought.*

A giggle bubbled up from behind him. From the corner of his eye, Thomas saw a little girl waddle up to an old homeless man, sitting beside the fountain. In the man's hand was a Barbie doll, dancing through the air. The girl inched forward, hand reaching out towards the toy—when she was yanked back. Her mother.

Thomas watched, shocked, as the mother angrily stormed away, tugging her reluctant daughter with her. As the crowd watched, unmoving, indifferent. As the old man's warm smile was replaced by a desolate grimace and years of heavy wrinkles.

He looked at the old man. At his eyes, twinkling like stars in a clear winter night. At his beard, a long tail of snowy hair. His coat, a faded, melancholic red. A coffee cup in his lap, bare but for a couple of rusty nickels. He watched as he sighed heavily, and tucked the doll back into a worn duffel bag.

He wanted to say *sorry* to him. To *help* him. But how?

“*There* you are, Tom-Tom!”

Thomas wheeled around. Emily stared back, smiling.

“I—”

“I was wondering where you'd gone!” She tucked her arm around his back. “There's this really plump turkey I spotted at the grocery store. I didn't want to buy it without you, though, so...”

Thomas sighed. “You didn't have to wait for me. I'm fine.”

Emily cocked her head. “You look worried, Tom-Tom. Is everything okay?”

Thomas glanced at the old man, who was holding the Barbie doll out to passersby. A little boy stared on curiously, only to be dragged away by his older brother. A baby sitting in a stroller gurgled and laughed, only to be driven away by their mother.

The old man was a small log burning away in the fireplace, dimming as the wood crumbled to ash, as the people around stamped it out.

“No, sis,” he lied. “Nothing's wrong.”

“If you say so.” She smiled. “Follow me!”

Reluctantly, Thomas walked away.

The next hour passed by in a blinding blur. Thomas didn't know how he managed to follow his sister in the store, but he did, weaving through the bright, blinding grocery aisles.

Soon enough, he found himself beside his sister, waiting in line at the checkout.

“So!” Thomas jumped, wheeling around. His sister grinned. “Guess what?”

Thomas swore inside. He hated Emily's games of ‘Guess What?’

“Get to the *point*. What?”

Emily smiled. “Dad gave me the money for your Christmas present. Thought I might buy it today, save some time.”

Thomas almost choked.

“WHAT?!!”

He gulped, shaking his head. “You’re joking. I know it.”

“Nope.” She pulled a small wad of bills out of her pocket.

Thomas shuddered. His sister would probably buy him a pile of notebooks. Or some vile collection of textbooks *in advance* for post-university studies.

*Why, Dad? Why?*

He thought about a story his mom had told him when he was little, about Santa following people wherever they went. About people being Santa’s beacon and herald. Well, Santa didn’t seem to be following *him*, at the moment.

Emily smiled, seemingly oblivious to his thoughts. “Well? What do you want to have as your Christmas present?”

“Sorry?”

“What do you want to buy for Christmas?”

Her voice sounded sincere. Thomas decided to trust her, for once.

But what *did* he want for Christmas?

His mind wandered back, to snow and songs and holly. To his new toy car, when he had been three. His first Lego kit, from when he was five. His toy robot, still sitting on his night table after seven years. A heavy case of felt-bound novels, his first set of them. His new, gleaming phone, sitting in his pocket.

*What do I want?*

He dugged further, passing by laughter and feasts and sparkling Christmas lights. Looked through years of love and joy. Thought about his grandma’s cookies and pumpkin pie, his dad’s baked turkey, his mom’s fish stew and roasted beef.

*What else would I want, when I have everything? There’s nothing anyone could buy for me...*

And then, he understood.

“Em,” Thomas started, “can I buy my present myself?”

His sister frowned. “But—”

“I want to buy my present myself.” Thomas held out his hand. “Can you give me the money?”



Surprised, Em placed the bills into his hand. “Here. But what—”

Thomas raced off into the grocery store, ducking and diving through the aisles with some indescribable energy. A few bags of fruit here, a bag of bread there... Soon enough, he found himself in a checkout line, a full basket of groceries in his hands.

He heard huffed breaths behind him. Emily limped toward him, gasping for breath, fat beads of sweat rolling down her forehead. Thomas sighed: he *did* suggest that she exercise more.

“What— *gasp* —in the world— *gasp*— are you doing?”

Thomas smiled innocently. “Why, buying myself my Christmas present. Is there something wrong?”

“This is not— *gasp* —how it— *gasp*— works, Thomas.” Emily shook her head. “Dad said that I— *gasp* —buy your present— *gasp*— for you. And what are you— *gasp*—buying?”

“None of your business.” Thomas turned back to a very confused cashier. “I can pay.”

One very loaded bag of groceries later, Thomas rushed out of the store, his sister trailing behind.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. “I’ll tell Dad!”

Thomas slowed down. “This is my present money, for *my* present. You did say I can buy whatever I want with it, right?”

“I will remind you that this is *Dad’s* money, that you have bought an entire *useless* bag of food with!”

“He did say it was my present money, didn’t he? And don’t you do the same with Christmas decorations?” Thomas fired back.

Emily opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. She groaned in frustration. “Do what you want.”

Thomas raced into the clothing store, grabbing a turtleneck, a tuque, a pair of gloves, and a thick woolen scarf from the shelves. A few minutes later, a second bag of clothing joined the bag of groceries.

He ran back to the fountain, and gasped.

The old man had disappeared into a faded purple blanket. A pale, shaking hand wandered out of the blanket’s folds, holding the Barbie doll. The crowd passed by, indifferent. The hand fell down, and the old man bowed, defeated.

The fire was just a little smoking ember, now. Nothing more. If no one fed it, then it would be gone.

Forever.

*Be brave.* Thomas breathed in. Breathed out. And walked forward.

The old man’s head peeked out of the blankets. First, his two starry eyes, glimmering with a shadow of hope. Then, the mouth, lips slightly open in surprise. The snowy beard quivered, until the warmest smile drew itself across the old man’s face.

Thomas placed the bags at the man's feet. The old man peeked inside, his trembling hands gently brushing the bags open. First the groceries. Then the clothing. He took out the red tuque and tucked it over his head.

He looked up, and Thomas stared back. Into a pair of eyes, which suddenly meant so much. His grandparents' Christmas feast. The long chains of lights, twinkling like stars on the walls. His father, stoking the gentle, crisp flames in the fireplace. The Christmas tree, standing tall and proud, shining when all else went dark.

He thought about his mom's story, about people being Santa's beacon and herald. Thomas didn't understand, for all those years. Until now.

*Because Santa is not a person. He is a spirit. And he lives in all of us.*

Distantly, he heard the crowd muttering inquisitively, the gentle pattering of water in the fountain, his sister's understanding "Oh". But none of that mattered, there and then. In his mind, there was only him, and the old man.

The old man opened his mouth, ever so slightly, to talk, and Thomas walked forward, silent and solemn. He kneeled, and stared into the man's face. A face that meant 'Christmas' more than Santa Claus, meant more than Christmas itself.

And the present fell, down from the chimney:

"Thank you."

# WINNER (GRADE 9-10)

Alisha Ahmed

## *Stage Five*

The rich aroma of coffee, piping hot chocolate, and croissants fresh out the oven wafts through the air, accompanied by the comforting sounds of intelligent chit-chat. I sit alone, on a creaky wooden barstool at the fogged-up window, watching the cars and bikers race by on the Toronto streets, the occasional pedestrian bundled up in a Canada Goose jacket rushing by into the warmth of a nearby store or subway station.

It's just around evening, and it's one of those rare December days where you can see the sun setting over the city, bathing all the shops and buildings in its warm glow just for a second before the bitter night settles in.

My phone lays forlornly beside me on the countertop, rendered useless by the no Wifi policy of the cafe. I sit with a book open in front of me, trying desperately to read but the words are blurring in front of me. It's like a cascade, a dam opening and tears are flowing again, bleeding through the pages until the ink is running together into one amorphous blob. I don't worry about crying in a public place; nobody would notice anyway. I'm sitting completely still, paralyzed by the thought of it all, and unable to make even a sound. This is the fourth stage: depression. I've been in this stage for 2 months now, the unrelenting cycle of:

*I could've done something.*

*I should've said "I love you" when they left that morning.*

*It's not fair.*

*They're never coming back.*

The grief, and the guilt that accompanies it gnaws at your soul, your being until you're consumed by this dark cloud, buried so far in the hole you don't even remember what it was like to be happy and carefree.

I'm pouring all my energy into focusing now on the outside now, the smell of coffee and the people outside. Trying so hard to not let myself slip into reliving the accident again, but alas, my efforts are in vain.

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*It was a Friday afternoon. The torrential rain was pouring down as I rode shotgun in my older sister's car, jamming out to our favourite song The City by The 1975. My sister's phone started buzzing in the cupholder, and traffic had pulled to a standstill.*

*"Mind if I take this?" She asked, her eyes cutting from the road to look at me.*

*"Nope," I said, reaching over to switch the song now that it had ended.*

*"Hey, love!" She said, picking up her phone and smiling as she pressed it to her ear. She looked over at me and mouthed "Christie," the name of her best friend.*

*I rolled my eyes, it probably wasn't even urgent, and leaned back against the warm seat, closing my eyes and drowning out the mindless chit-chat.*

*After 5 minutes I heard the engine rev up again, and the raindrops unrelentingly hitting the window, one after the*

*other.*

*I listened to the sound of my sister swearing and my eyes flew open in panic.*

*The sounds of tires skidding, metal against metal grinding, screeching as we rear-ended the car in front of us at high speed.*

*We screamed, the sound almost as painful as that of the impact, as my sister hit the airbag hard and rocked forwards, hitting her head on the metal part of the headrest and then again on the dashboard. I fought the airbag, pushing it out the way and cradling my sister's head in my arms. The impact knocked her unconscious, and blood flowed from the side of her head like a river, washing over me. My arm was bleeding from cutting myself on something, I can't remember what it was, and the blood was gushing out onto my white shirt, colouring it like tie-dye. I sat there in shock for a minute, or maybe it was two, or ten, just staring down at her innocent porcelain face. I started to cry then, the loud, ugly sobs that wrack through your whole body, shaking violently like you can't contain them. I kept yelling, screaming at her to open her eyes, to wake up, for it to be just another joke on her clueless little sister. But she didn't open her eyes.*

*It felt like ages before someone came, looked on in horror as I cradled her head in my arms, and called the police. The authorities arrived after forever, and my heart broke as I heard the paramedics pronounce it. DOA; Dead On Arrival.*

*After that, it was the hardest time of my life, and that's an understatement.*

*First was stage 1; denial.*

*I couldn't believe that she was just... gone. One moment we were jamming out, then the next she was in my arms unmoving. I couldn't let myself believe it, let it be real. I still saw her everywhere, on the couch beside me watching Gilmore Girls reruns, driving me to school, sneaking me coffee on Wednesday nights because I was always tired after volleyball practice.*

*Then suddenly she wasn't there anymore, and I couldn't let myself believe it.*

*Then it was stage 2; anger.*

*It was anger at myself, mostly. I couldn't be mad at my sister because well... she was dead. So I lashed out at everyone else. I screamed, I cried, I blamed everyone I possibly could, including myself. I didn't have my eyes open, I didn't tell her to put down the phone, I didn't do something, anything, to prevent it. I should've done something. But then it was too late.*

*After, it was stage 3; bargaining.*

*Oh, I'm saying this now, there is so much I wouldn't/would do just to have her back at my side. I would never text, call, or drive distracted. EVER. And I don't even have my license. I wouldn't let anyone else do it either. Heck, I would forgo driving or riding in cars entirely if it meant having her back. But no amount of promises, nothing can change that fact that she is really, truly, gone.*

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So here's where I am now, stage four, depression. I'm at an all-time low, sitting here crying in my own pool of remorse, sadness, and utter desolation right in the middle of an upbeat millennial coffee shop playing soft lo-fi tunes.

I miss her. So, so much. I'm sick of living around with this pain, this anguish, these what-ifs and all the guilt dancing around in my head. I can't take the constant dark cloud, the pain and sadness, even on the better days. Why can't everything could go back to the way it was before?

My wishful thinking is interrupted by someone clearing their throat behind me.

"Excuse me, Miss?"

I turn to see one of the employees standing there with a concerned look on his face. He noticed. Someone, somehow, saw.

"I couldn't help but notice you looked really down."

I smiled weakly, wiping the tears at my eyes and nodding slowly, feeling another wave of sadness washing over me. I was so tired of it all, the pain the sadness, the inability to move on.

He held out a pack of pocket Kleenex to me and offered a weak smile in return, gesturing to my almost-empty coffee mug.

"I know that this won't make you suddenly feel okay, but would you like a refill of whatever you were drinking? On the house?"

"Thank would be wonderful. Thank you," I replied, my voice scratchy and hoarse, barely a whisper.

"Coffee?" he asked, and as I nodded assent he smiled and took my mug from me.

"With double the sugar and soy milk, please."

He left to go fill my mug and I exhaled, smiling contentedly at the act that was complete and wholly kindness, and generosity from a total stranger.

When he brought me back my coffee I smiled and thanked him, reaching into my wallet for a tip. He shook his head, as he walked back to the cash, I sat still for a minute, in wonder that somebody could be so, completely, kind.

He turned back for a moment, looked me in the eyes and said "feel better, and whatever it is you're going through, give it time."

*Give it time.*

For the first time since the accident, I felt at peace, not overwhelmed by sadness and guilt. For the first time in months, I felt the earth turning once more and starting to make sense again.

And then, I felt it, a little shift toward stage five; acceptance and moving on.

# HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADE 9-10)

Gabrielle La Touche

## *Why Am I Black?*

I am a black girl. Why am I black? I query that too often. “You have a color of your own – dark chocolate [...] you are the spot on a ladybug that adds its beauty, you are the pupil of an eye, you are the vastness of space, you are the richness of soil [...], you are the mystery in nature [...]. God has made you to rule the land, that made you a slave.”<sup>1</sup> Or at least that is what an African American author once said.

Sometimes, however, I wish I was not black.

If my skin were a different colour, maybe I would not have been exposed to the ‘n word’ at age seven while playing at recess. Maybe when I walk into a room, I could manage a whole step before being judged. Do not be fooled. I may be black but I am not ignorant nor do I ignore. I see the quick glances shot at me like darts before they disappear, like they were never there. I can hear the whispers in the background before they stop. They stop when I walk by, but they will always be resumed.

If my skin were a different colour, I would have had two talks instead of three. When I turned ten, I got the usual puberty talk. When I turned twelve, there was the birds and the bees talk. What was talk number three, you may ask? Talk number three happened when I was eight or nine. I sat on a cream coloured chair in my living room, tears streaming down my face, as my parents explained that I would be pulled over by the police more times than the average person. I remember every detail. I am to talk only when the police officer tells me to talk. I am to move only when the police officer orders that I move.

Why will I abide by these rules? I will abide by these rules because I do not want to be just another aggressive black kid who got shot. I most definitely do not aspire to be the subject of the ten o’clock news. It might sound a little extra. Except when it’s not.

If my skin were a different colour, maybe I could go to Tim Hortons with my family and order a breakfast sandwich without other customers slowly inching away. Although this has not happened yet, I wonder if it’s only a matter of time.

My skin is black but my mind is the same as everyone else’s. My eyes seem to be different however. I do not see the world the same way as my white friends do. I do not see this country as a peaceful place. I cringe every time I turn on the television and see another black murderer who lived in the projects. I sit there and try not to scream at the horrible representation of us. If only the world knew that we are not dangerous. I am not dangerous.

If my skin were a different color, maybe I could have a normal conversation with someone. Anyone.

“Hi”

“What’s your name?”

“Where are you from?”

“No, but, like... Where are you *really* from?”

Those are often the first questions people ask when I meet them. For variety, sometimes they even ask me “Where in Africa are you from?” My face would turn red from anger (if it could turn red). Except I have become numb to these questions.

If my skin were a different color, maybe people would put me into a different box. Just so you know, I am not a dropout. I do not roll my neck or snap my fingers at others. Before you ask, no, I do not have a criminal record. I do not sell drugs or own a gun. I have never even laid a hand on a gun, nor do I intend to do so. I plan on going to a good university and succeeding in life. I do not swear. I live in a nice house with a good family. I am not 'ghetto'. Do not ask me if the random black person on the other side of the room is my sibling. Do not tell me I look like them. Do not apologize to me because you feel bad about slavery. Do not use the 'n word', no matter how many black people you know. Do not turn my culture into a joke. Look deeper. See beyond colour.

If my skin were a different colour, I would not have to attempt perfection to prove that I am worthy of respect. Everybody says that being unique is a good thing. Being too unique earns you judgement and hate.

The world is not a perfect place. Canada is not a perfect place. Ontario is not a perfect place. I am eagerly awaiting the day when I will not be judged. It is sad and pathetic that I probably won't live to see that day. I pray that my great grandchildren might.

One day, maybe I will learn to appreciate my blackness. Maybe I might even embrace it. For now, I'll put my best self out there and hope you'll just let me be.

# WINNER (GRADE 11-12)

Jasleen Brar

## “Mr. Wet-Brain”!

“Korsakoff’s again?” Dr. Fields called as I passed him in the hall. He was looking down at his paperwork.

Keeping my strides even and unwavering I yelled back, “Got it in one doc!” Clutching my chipped clipboard, I attempted to even out my breath as I stopped in front of one of the bland doors that made up the rehab centre. Composing myself, I put a small smile on my face, and let my fingers curl into a fist. I rapped them against the door and waited.

I could hear the muffled, “Come in”, and pulled open the door. Making sure not to drop my clipboard and lose any professionalism I had, I walked in with an air of confidence that I definitely didn’t feel.

“So, I hear you’re the prettiest doc around, sweetheart.” The man sitting in the same drab bed in the same exact spot as the last time, drawled out, “And by God, they weren’t lying.” He smirked.

I knew he was lying. There was no way he could remember what anyone had said to him, regardless of the confident way with which he said it. “Oh? Is that what they say?” I replied not missing a beat. “What else do they tell you?” I pushed. He looked scruffier today, it wasn’t a bad look. Not on him.

“They tell me you know, *things*. Like how you can figure out the way we tick, as easy as reading the time.” He looked up as if he were recalling something. “Like, how you know just how we work, I remember coming to this place, y’know?” His eyes moved left and right at a dizzying pace. I looked away and pulled my chair up to the end of his bed. He sat up against the bedpost and faced me.

“Do you really?” I asked him. Turning back and plopping myself onto the plastic chair. “Or are you just telling me what you think happened?” He was going to start confabulating again. He paused recognizing what he was about to do. Good. This was progress.

“What did you say your name was again, sweetheart?” he asked.

“Alison Myers.” I smiled at him. It was hard not to- in anticipation. “And you’re Boris Roslin.” I finished.

He smiled back. He’d told me once he liked the way I said his name. I wondered if he’d say it again this time. “The one and only.” He said instead. That made me happy- this was a new one. “But you can call me Boris.”

Looking down at my clipboard, I began. “So, you said you remember coming to this place?”

His brows scrunched up. “Did I?” He asked, more to himself than to me. “I don’t recall.” He raised his head, and I stared into his greenish-blue gaze.

“You did,” I answered back. Peeling my eyes away, “Do you know what you’re here for, Boris?” I inquired.

His dirty blonde hair was ruffled as he let his head fall back against the post. Looking back up at the ceiling, he replied. It was said in such a lighthearted way you’d so easily miss the weight of the sentence. “I’m an alcoholic.” He stated, almost reluctantly. Looking back at me he raised a brow. Asking me to tell him he was wrong.



“Among other things.” I quirked a brow back. I dared to look back into his eyes when I replied. “You have Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome, Mr. Roslin.” I stated evenly.

He looked thoughtful and a bit uneasy, I knew that he’d make a joke of it anyways. “Now-” He started, “What does a fancy-pancy condition like that have to be doing attachin’ itself to me?” He asked.

“Well Boris, it’s a- a side effect.” This part was always difficult. “It’s due to the lack of vitamin B in your body. Which is a cause of your long-term alcohol abuse. It’s also why you keep forgetting things.” I bit my lip and looked back at him, his eyes had lost their humorous warmth. All that was left was the sharp analytical gaze that was directed at the cold tiles that held up the room. I could almost see the man that was before, or what I imagined he’d be like. The man that was buried under all the alcohol and defects. He used to be a writer. I’d read his works before. He always had a way with words, they were as fine as the hairs on his head. Now he used them to confabulate.

“I see.” He said absently. “Well. I need a drink.”

I made sure he could feel me staring at him when I answered back. “No, you don’t,” I said as tensely as I could.

“I’m an alcoholic.” He snapped. “Let me do, what I do best.” Narrowing his eyes at me like I was a pest. I knew he was just trying to push me away.

“You’re two months sober.” I pressed on. He paused again. The cutting remark I could feel biting away from behind his teeth. Held back by only what I know is the affection he can’t remember.

He closed his mouth and his jaw visibly relaxed. He chuffed a bit. “So that’s why the headaches ain’t buggin’ me.” My shoulders settled, I didn’t remember tensing up. “And here I thought it was all you, dollface.” He gave me one of those flirty smiles I knew were reserved just for me. “But that’s not what you’re really here to talk about now is it, doc?” Impishly, the writer grinned an inquiring sort of smile. “What is it really? ‘Cause my memory loss isn’t the reason they send you therapists to talk to us.”

“And why do you say that?” I asked. A bit miffed that he’d figured it out. But I wasn’t surprised. He was always amazing me. Always one step ahead even though he could never remember the game.

“I’m a writer, love. We always know the characters we write. What they do, how their lives work. You’re not here to talk to me about the thing rotting my brain. No- you’re here to talk about what led me to the poison. The poison we men, call pleasure.” And of course, he was right. This was a new conversation. I was aware that slowly, one day, our conversations would only be repeats of ones we’ve had before. I worried endlessly for the day we’d talk through everything he had left.

Forming new memories were rare in the case of Korsakoff’s. He was a bitter Ex that came to bite us from behind. God damn Korsakoff.

I already knew most of what his story was but I asked anyway. “You’re right.” I began, “And you’re also a writer so, tell me your story.”

He’d tell me now; ‘I’d much rather hear yours’.

He smirked at me. “Yes, but I’d much rather hear yours.” He didn’t disappoint. Though I hoped he would.

“Come now, this is for you.” I insisted.

He gave me an exaggerated sigh, as if he knew he'd told me about himself before - he had. And as if he were just indulging me- he was not wrong. "Well, my dear." He started. "I'm a cliché all wrapped in one." I quirked one end of my lip up encouragingly.

"I was born and raised in an absent household, that when wasn't absent smelt like the bottom of a bottle." He sent me an amused smirk before continuing. Letting the weight of the story fly away. "I grew up with parents who didn't give a rat's ass about where'd I'd been or where I was going. And so, amazingly enough, I'd found my solace in writing." The amused look turned wistful. His hand twitched, I could see the desire written plain across his face. The want of having a pen in his hand or a laptop strewn across his lap. "Eventually the absent parents would become a bit too attentive and enjoy tossing me about the absent house. And the absent house would be a bit too absent that it wouldn't be able to help." I never understood the absent house. How it could've helped? What it was a metaphor for. I never asked. "Sooner or later, the solace I'd discovered wouldn't be enough."

I watched the emotions dance along his face. Wistful longing becoming spiteful. "I wouldn't let them ruin the only thing I had left, the words I had. So, I wrote. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote. But the bottle would find me and then I'd begin to seek her out. She was probably the only healthy relationship I'd ever had." He stifled a laugh. Spitefulness gone. "I was committed." He looked back at me, I pursed my lips, hoping the writer in him would draw the same conclusions they always did.

He smiled, it brought out the laugh lines that were etched into his face. "At least I thought I was committed. But it seems you've changed my mind somewhere, I can't seem to remember. Alison."

Swallowing. This was it. "And what makes you say that?" I asked him, softly, inquisitively, cautiously. *Hopefully.*

"I'm a writer." He started, unsurely sure. "I know what it looks like when two people are in- in love." He said, he bit his lip. Mirroring my own anxiousness. But he continued despite his unease, trusting his gut, "I know what it feels like." We were staring at one another, so intensely it could cut. "And I know how people believe it should feel. And I know how to describe it and I know how to express it. I'm a writer. I know what a love story looks like, Alison." I didn't speak. "I'm sorry we got stuck in such a tragic one." His smile relaxed. Even though he couldn't remember it, he knew. His eyes were sad.

"You're right." I closed my eyes and sat back, the hard plastic of the chair grounding me. My feet against the floor and the crick in my knees loosening, bringing me back to reality. "I miss you every second," I confessed finally. The upturn of his lips and the gentleness in his eyes-his expression told me everything.

When I finally left, I let him know the nurse would be back to give him his supplements and that I'd see him next week. It was always difficult leaving. Mostly because I knew the second I'd leave the room, the warmth I'd usually feel would leave with me. And the dread would return. The connection would disappear and it'd be like nothing ever happened. I'd only ever be able to hope that he'd remember me for next time.

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"Mister Wet-Brain again?" Dr. Fields called out. As I rushed passed him.

"The one and only," I said back. I bit my lip and clutched my clipboard. I stopped in front of his room. Closing my eyes and composing myself. I looked up then curled my fingers into a small fist. I knocked on the one drab door that meant anything to me in the bland scheme of the rehab centre. And I listened for the muffled, "Come in", and pushed open the door. My smile a bit too wide for a therapist about to meet with her patient. The hope returning.

But there he was again, sitting in the exact same spot, in the exact same bed, against the exact same post. "So," the

man started. "I hear you're the prettiest doc around, sweetheart."

My smile tensed. I bit my lip and closed my eyes before stepping in. My clipboard digging into my hands, "And by God, they weren't lying."

I knew he was lying.

# HONOURABLE MENTION (GRADE 11-12)

Cassandra Lee

## *Dear Diary*

(The original submission was written in French. This is a translation.)

April 15  
4:32 p.m.  
Switzerland

Dear Diary,

It's been six months since I arrived here in Switzerland, knowing only violence and war in my homeland - my mother country, which, deep in my memory, remains encapsulated in the beauty and tranquility of the past, is now ravaged by the bombings of a cursed war. How can I learn to live in peace again when my past serves as a constant distraction? My grandmother once told me that forgetting is one way to start over. Forgetting allows us to confront obstacles and pick ourselves back up, no matter the circumstances. Still, in a country whose language and culture remain unfamiliar to me, I feel entirely foreign.

While my brothers and sisters go to the local elementary school, I am stuck at the high school with no friends or family. During the day, I go to class and learn my lessons, but during the lunch break, it's a nightmare. Communication seems more arduous than the war I barely survived. Every day, I find myself near a group of kids and silently join their circle. Their words fall deafly on the naivety of my ears, and little by little, my smiles fade as I realize that it's not worth the effort. No matter how hard I try, no one understands me. No one wants to know my story, no one will lend me a hand and no one takes an interest in me or my struggles. To them, I'm just another foreigner in their country—an unwelcome stranger. I can't help but stay wary of them.

Only one person sees past my guarded exterior... a Swiss boy, who pierces my heart with his beautiful blue eyes. He seems to understand me, but each time I meet his gaze, he turns and goes back to his friends. I want to speak to him, but I'm far too shy, and language forms a chasm between us as vast as an ocean. Yet, I can't help but feel strongly for him. I think I love him. As absurd as it sounds, I think I love him, and the very idea frightens me. I am trapped in my past, held prisoner by the emotional fallout caused by the destruction of my country and my identity. When I walk down the street, I keep my head down. When I eat dinner, I tremble at the slightest sound beyond the voices of my family. Living in fear is even worse than the fear itself. Little by little, the walls of this prison are closing in on me, leaving no room to breathe. I only hope that a glimmer of hope, the slightest glimmer, will brighten my cell and free me from my solitude.

Forgetting is one way to start over. But how can we begin again when the past refuses to be forgotten?

