



# Short Story

## Competition 2025

**TEENS & ADULTS  
SHORTLIST & WINNERS**



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# Teens Shortlist & Winners

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# **Teens Shortlist & Winners**

(aged 13-17)



# *Six months of Sunshine*

*By Erin  
Knox*



# Six Months of Sunshine

by Erin Knox

## Aurora

My head hits my pillow like a brick. My body welcomes the warmth and comfort my bed provides, my eyes threaten to succumb to sleep. Instead, I'm violently awakened to an agonising pain in my chest. Mum's right, maybe I do need to see another doctor. Instead, I breathe through the sharp pain until it's nothing more than a dull ache. A tear sneaked its way down my cheek, I couldn't deny that these attacks didn't scare me, in fact they terrified me. Pain like this doesn't come with a golden ticket to Willy Wonka's factory. It comes with a pack of pills and a doctor telling me it's only womanly issues and it should disappear soon. But I guess if their version of 'it will go away soon' is almost a year of pain, then they are right. As my chest pain eases up, my eyes flutter shut and for once, I feel at peace.

"BEEP, BEEP," I groaned and hit my phone to silence my blaring alarm. Luck seems to be on my side, as it only takes one hit from my hand. I sit up to only get a jump scare from my reflection. I can't help but chuckle at myself. My body pops and cracks as I stretch out a

night full of tossing and turning. 'Knock knock' my mum walks in. Even with her age and streaks of grey she is a beautiful woman. "Hey honey, how did you sleep?" I can't help but smile as we both know the answer. She cradles my face before speaking again. "Are you ready for all the doctor's questions?" I knew that the peace I felt would be short-lived.

The doctor's room was quiet, not one person. The smell of medicine and plastic filled my senses; I only heard my own heart beating. Is it too late to go home? I think. "Aurora?" The doctor called out. Mum took my hand; as a person led us into a cold office. I looked around at the boring decorations, as she gestured toward a seat. The doctor was a small lady about mid thirties with long black hair. Before I could ask questions she explained, "I know you were expecting to do another examination but I don't think that will be necessary" she looked confused ... No.... Concerned? "I looked at your past paper work and tests... you have a rare type of heart cancer and it seems to be terminal."

The room spun.....echoing with the sound of mum's sobs. The doctor stood there as if she didn't just tell me my life was over. At 18, I was going to die and there was nothing I could do about it. "How much longer do I have?" My voice comes out in a whisper. I could barely hear myself. I looked up to see her eyes. I wanted to cry or scream but nothing came out. "About six months...

but we will need to do more testing to see how far the cancer has progressed" the words spill from her mouth but I'm not sure I'm listening.

My world has stopped, I look out the window and watch people walk past, to think that they will continue to live their lives and I will forever be stuck in time. I replay the moment as if it would change, but my fate has been sealed. The car ride home was quiet, interrupted by little sobs, either from me or from mum, I don't know. All I can think about is the fact I'm going to leave this earth, mum will be all alone, and I will have accomplished nothing, nothing for people to remember me by. I quickly open the car window hanging my head out just before I vomit, I wheeze as I start to cry. My heart constricts not only from this parasite they call cancer but from my impending death. Then the thought hits me how am I gonna tell Atlas.

## **Atlas**

I hated family dinners. Not because of my dad's insufferable boasting about my brother, but the constant questions from my family. Like no I haven't moved out of my one bedroom apartment and no I don't have a proper job. I should've told them I'm sick and can't come but here I am, holding a pumpkin pie that everyone will think I've made. Instead of making a last minute excuse I step into the warm house filled with nostalgia and the smell of mum's famous roast chicken. "Atlas! You made it" mum exits the kitchen wearing her 'world's greatest mum' apron, I gave her for her birthday. I cringe slightly as she peppers my face with kisses. As if on cue my brother Benji walks in. Suddenly I'm that little boy that got left at the supermarket or ignored on Christmas day. I don't blame my brother, he's a world star athlete and the best runner I've seen. Maybe I'm just saying that because he is my brother but I'm nothing but proud. I smile at him and give him a big hug, the scent of hazelnuts filled my senses as we broke apart. Dinner went by quickly and it was filled with laughter and surprisingly no arguments. I saw myself out when my dad started his speech about how my brother is going places. When I sit in my car. My phone lit up with a message, it read;

Aurora; hey can we meet up?

Atlas; yea sure, are you okay?

Aurora; meet me by the willow tree.

My stomach was in my throat, I knew something was wrong. I was meaning to message her to ask her how her doctor's appointment went but time flew past from the combination of work and family. With these types of messages it's never good so I quickly drove down to the duck pond. It was a special place for us as kids and I guess it just stuck with us like an everlasting memory. I got out of my car, the gravel crunching under my feet as I walked to the big willow tree. "Hey" I whispered as I sat down. Something was definitely wrong. Her eyes were red and puffy, she was gaunt and looked exhausted. I wasn't the best at comforting people but all I knew in that moment was that I needed to hold her.

### **Aurora**

No matter how many times I swallow, the lump in my throat won't go away. He held me so close that I could hear his perfect beating heart. His scent was comforting, it felt like home. His piercing blue eyes met mine. He was gorgeous and it made my stomach flutter. "What's wrong, sunny?" his voice was shaking as he spoke, I didn't know what to say, I'm dying? I have terminal cancer? Instead I spoke with a voice I didn't recognize.

"I have six months Atlas." My heart shattered all over again, he held me tighter as I sobbed into his chest. We didn't say anything for a while. I sat there in silence thinking about the life he still had while I had a limited amount, like a ticking time bomb just waiting to explode. It made me want to bask in his embrace forever. He makes me feel safe, makes me feel like my world isn't gonna end. And that I don't have a soul sucking disease that will slowly suck me into a grave. Atlas's gentle and loving nature reminds me of the moon, he makes me feel wanted even in the dark times like right now. He's always been the best at comforting me even if he says he's not very good. "I'm so sorry" he said it so quietly I almost missed it. We again sit in comfortable silence before he starts again "I'm going to make this the best six months of your life sunny." I softly touch his warm brown locks and nod with tears threatening to fall.

## **Atlas**

Aurora was like the sun, she was bright and I'll forever want to bask in the warmth she provides. Even though words can't describe how my heart aches that her light has faded. I'll forever be grateful for the time I had with her. And for the six months of sunshine we got to spend with each other, from paragliding to pumpkin carving and even just having a picnic by the willow tree, we did it all.

Those six months with her I will never forget and as I sit in this cold barely lit hospital room I look back on those memories and realise that the blaring sun she once was, has slowly burned into a ember that will take a whisper of wind to blow out. As I hold her hand and watch her fire die, I know that I will never forget my blaring sun they call Aurora.



## 2

# The Perfection of Humanity

by Anastasia Bradley

Black is the world for me, black is all I see. Those black dripping lines, pouring on the floor at my feet, running down the canvas like water. The walls are covered in splashes, grey wallpaper re-decorated with thick drops of that midnight shade. And all I hear is their applause, their adoration of my masterpiece, and in that moment I know that they will call me a genius.

I wake.

Crawling out of my cold bed I am guided only by the pale moonlight that creeps through my fluttering curtains. The grey walls, so similar to the stage of my dream, surround me, the small size of my studio apartment a constant reminder that I am a slave to capitalism. If I were to ever paint a portrait of a starving artist, it would simply be a portrait of me. While I constantly chase the perfection of art, the perfection does not keep the lights on, and I must therefore work. But I will achieve perfection. My artwork shall transcend all that has been created before, and shall create a distinction in the very timeline of human existence: the before and the after, the glorious after where they will all understand, understand what I see and what they see, that I alone can create purity in this world, and I am their genius.

Sometimes I find it hard not to get lost in my thoughts and my goals. Humility may not be my virtue, but let pride and ambition be my sins.

My gaze draws back to my almost complete canvas. It'll be entered in an art show in just a few days time, where the world will finally be able to appreciate my greatness. Just a few more brushstrokes, a few more hours of my time, my blood and soul poured into it, and my painting will be finished. A portrait of human beauty and ugliness, the very epitome of humanity.

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The gallery is bold, bright red curtains hiding artworks, warm lights illuminating the faces of all of the well dressed guests. In the middle of the room is a great stand, and the artwork that I know is mine is covered by another luxury red curtain. This art

show also serves as a competition, where one entry will be selected as being the most wondrous depiction of the human experience. Instead of being auctioned off to the rich snobs who also fill this hall, it will be displayed in the grandest gallery in the country for all to see. That stand in the middle of the gallery holds the winning artwork, and I know that it is mine.

As I wander around the hall, chasing after someone to give me more champagne, I hear the most awful noise:

"Alan! It's so wonderful to see you!" I wince at the sound of Natalie's shrill voice. Her green dress makes her face look sickly. Or perhaps she looks sick due to the presence of the man who trails behind her, her pathetic boyfriend, Mason. A so-called "artist", but most definitely one inferior to me. "Cheater" would be better words for them both.

She grins at me now, failing to hide the smugness in her eyes.

"I had no idea you would be here" She says, also failing to hide the fact that she did indeed know that I would be here.

"Funny, I've only spoken about it for months." My response is sharp. Crossing my arms, I turn to walk away from this conversation, until he speaks.

"Don't be so cold! It's a fantastic event, isn't it? I'm so looking forward to having my painting displayed. It's such a shame that yours will simply be sold off, Alan." Mason smiles and I feel a stroke of anger inside me.

"Excuse me? How bold of you to assume that your piece will be the one displayed? You've never created anything worthwhile in your life, there is no chance that your meager contribution to this show can even hold a candle to my masterpiece!" Still, he grins.

"Oh Alan, you've always had such a high opinion of yourself" Natalie's voice breaches the sanctity of my eardrums. "Sure, you may work hard, but Mason's abilities far outweigh yours, even with a quarter of the effort! His painting took mere hours, when your masterpiece must have taken what, months? Pathetic, honestly." She giggles, and I fume, feeling almost as much rage as the night that I found out about her affair.

"Pathetic!? How dare you call my work pathetic. I have not spent the past few

months of my life working tirelessly to achieve perfection, just to be mocked by the likes of you!" My voice is rising. Mason laughs, taking pleasure in my misery.

"Gosh Alan, don't you know how outdated you are? You'll be left in the dust of history, you and your... traditional methods. You have no idea just how much time you have wasted." With that they turn and leave me seething.

I am so distracted by this incredibly upsetting event that I miss the start of the speech before my winning piece is unveiled.

"Never before have I seen a piece so majestic, so skilled, so perfect in its every detail." The old man who speaks looks like the visual representation of the upper class.

"Please put your hands together for Mason Parker!" Cheers erupt around the room, and the curtain drops from the portrait in the centre of the gallery, and the painting that is revealed is not mine.

The crowd oohs and aahs at the painting, and the fi lth of colour that stains the canvas. But it does look... perfect? It's so neat that it almost looks artifi cial, the colours so vibrant that I cannot think of how he possibly mixed them together. I cannot see a single mistake. Every detail is immaculate. Perfect.

I fi nd it diffi cult to move. My own painting taunts me. It has a plaque underneath its place on the wall: Alan Handson, second place. The fi rst loser. I approach the stand holding Mason's winning masterpiece. It is encased in glass, but as I get closer it looks... diff erent. Almost like a computer screen, the paint looks like it's made of pixels. I don't understand it.

No one is looking at me. I lift my fi nger, and press it to the glass.

And the painting fl ickers.

Shock and more confusion fi lls me, but is soon replaced with a suspicion. I approach Mason, wondering how I will go about my ludicrous idea.

"Congratulations on your success. Perhaps I was wrong." He smirks at me. "May I borrow your phone? It appears mine has died and I need to make a call." I say quickly, to stop him from saying anything.

"Of course. Take your time." I seeth, but accept it. I do not make any calls. Instead, I

search his home screen, until I find what I am looking for. OPEN ART. I open it, and I am proved correct in the most horrible way. There, on the screen, are three things: Masons perfect "painting", a button saying "create", and a search bar:

Sunset at the end of the world, painting style, colourful, seamless.

He realises as I look up, and his eyes widen, and he goes to grab the phone, but it is too late. I snatch the mostly full glass of champagne from his hands and walk towards his monstrosity of a lie.

"You are no artist! You have no understanding of humanity, and you have no idea on how to achieve perfection! You are a liar, everything that we all stand against! You make a mockery of us all!" The crowd gasps and all eyes are on me. I throw the drink at the amalgamation of a thing, and punch it. The "painting" bursts in a flurry of sparks and glass. I fall into the wires that have been revealed under the stand.

A great electric shock travels up me and I scream in pain and in joy, for I know that I have done it. I have achieved perfection. I have proved that yes, my second place artwork is perfect, is the only true expression of the human condition that can be made without the use of a machine. I have proved myself the master of human perfection. Those around me scream as electricity bursts through me, the carpet and curtains catching fire. I feel my vision going black, smoke filling the room as it starts to burn. My euphoria is not dulled by the pain. I see my painting, safe from the flames as if the gods approve of my actions.

Black is all I see, black is the world for me. The smoke filling my nose, the water running down the walls from the sprinklers. That deepest shade of black embraces me, welcomes me home. They scream, and they cheer, and they run for their lives. But I know that they will call me a genius.



## **Who's Holding the Eraser?** by Anastasia Wongcharupan

Odd spikes jutted out from its skin, white, sharp and lethal. Wind travelled past, insistent on prodding the freshly developed sores. Apparently, they would benefit everyone in the end, but some reaped, while others were reaped. Tendrils of grass brushed along my legs, scratchy and repulsed by the addition, desperate for the searing cries to dissipate. Clank. One more, joining the thousands that had been murdered before it. It fell, unnaturally still, before it thudded on the ground. Although it had been silent, its magnitude was as great as a meteor landing on earth, and the absence of its song elicited undying ringing in my ears. Like the scarcity of elusive shooting stars, this occurrence should have been rare, too.

The horizon was smooth, and all the colors that didn't belong in the sky were on stage. Forests of puppets danced to the symphonies created through breathing things, from the percussive crickets to the ever-proud, melodious bird, conducted by the wind. There were so many birds that they had to audition to reach the coveted role of soloist in their dawn and dusk performances. Pecks, squawks, ruffles. These happened daily, to the disappointment of almost everyone who lived nearby, manifesting in a guffaw of messy noise, clumsily waking up the world as your parents do when washing the dishes. Usually, the *tui* won, earning the privilege of singing from its waking hour to twilight. Occasionally, they felt the need to brag a little extra, in an encore that lasted into the night.

However, they wanted to flatter the new, strange additions, mimicking their ruckus machinery. Soon, the symphonies' melodious song changed and adapted, as artists must do in their craft, especially during the times of evolutions and revolutions. All to prevent becoming irrelevant, being left behind by these soulless, white beasts. But we often marvel at museums and such at everything that could have been erased from the painting of the earth. Even if we were the ones holding the eraser.

The audition stage grew to a vast expanse, performing to an audience of empty trees. Gradually, the piece decrescendoeed until there was not even a whisper of melody. The backdrop to the painting had become the focal point, and even that was faltering without the confidence of the melody, without anything to follow. It

was like going into an art museum and looking at a canvas painted entirely grey. Sometimes, it wasn't even that. It was going into a museum to look at a wall. Yes, the architecture was beautiful, and I could follow every edge and ponder how it was constructed, but something will always be missing from an art museum like that.

The air that had once held treasures of winged creatures continued on, muted by grief but dismissive of the recent loss. Whoosh. Gone. The stark, white eyesores kept spinning, unaware of the impact they had, powered by the need to appear good and green. Almost as childish as shoving the contents of the floor under the bed to avoid reprimands, there were the turbines, producing 'clean' energy, dirtied by blood. Caked on like mud, oxidised and crumbling behind thorny roses, red, vibrant and fresh. The bird lay unmoving, already decaying, at the foot of the wind turbine, turning, turning, turning.

# **Windy Wrath**

## **by Rudransh Sahoo**

Jim leans forward, his eyes are locked on the bright shining screen, fingers flickering around his controller. "Ahh! the cyclone is getting to me", exclaimed one of his friends. "Come on Alex, transfer some health points", Jim demanded urgently but even before arrival of any help Jim suddenly gets launched into the air and dies. "Oh! I hate this game. It is so unrealistic and boring." Jim declared. "Leave it man, it's just a game", said Travis. Exasperated Jim leaned on his chair, closing his eyes but he felt the sparks of a bright and interesting idea within his mind. "Guys have you heard about the Category 4 cyclone on the news", asked Jim. His friends nodded. "I think we should go to the real cyclone and try to record our survival. It can go viral; we will become famous". Alex intrigued by the idea, happily agreed to join him while Travis looked a bit unconvinced. Pleased to hear Alex's approval, Jim throws in a bet for Travis. He told them that each of them would be rewarded with special in-game treasures from Jim's personal collection if they join in and not evacuate. This was enough to buy Travis into the plan and make sure both won't run away. Jim and his friends were never the brightest bulbs, but they were always full of guts and courage. Ignoring all the evacuation orders and neglecting the risks, the boys fortified their hostel room with enough snacks to last an apocalypse and managed to stay put. "Guys, in twenty-four hours, the cyclone is going to hit. In that time, the city will be ours!" stated Jim. His friends cheered and praised him. They were playing long hours of video games. It seemed they were having the time of their lives when really, they were just impatiently waiting for the storm. Now there was only a few hours left till the arrival of the storm. "This is the day", proclaimed Alex. "Today, we will fight the storm" exclaimed Jim. The sky was now going shady and grey. The wind was starting to howl and was picking up speed. "One hour till the storm arrives" Jim excitedly says. The boys slip on their rain jackets and starts doing push-ups. Travis prepared the camera for recording the event. "I have prepared the car in the garage, so we can also travel around." says Jim. Both his friends followed him to the garage. It was a large SUV with heavily modified engines. Now the storm was really picking up speed. The ground was rumbling, and strange noises were coming from the house. The boys looked at each other hesitantly. BOOM! the roof

of the garage was lifted and carried away. "Hurry up," yelled Jim. Realizing they were in big trouble, Jim's friends quickly jumped into the car. Jim fumbled with the keys, desperately trying to start it. Vrooom! The car finally started. Jim shifted gears like a professional racer and gassed out of the broken garage. The rain now started to arrive, flooding the windscreen with water. Jim swerved left and right due to the poor blurred out vision. The belongings at the back of the car slammed into the sides of the car. The wind and rain of the storm was deafening, cancelling out the sound of his friends screaming in fear. Suddenly, the car crashed into something. It was grinding the metal, making a horrible screeching sound. From the corner of his eye, Jim saw a concrete shop. He drove his car straight inside. The car instantly flipped and rolled to a stop. The airbags blocked up everything. Eventually, Jim and Alex managed to crawl out and together they pulled Travis out, who was still holding the camera tightly. The shop was stable but was slowly flooding. Jim and his friends immediately took the high ground. The water rose and rose but as soon as it was up to their waist, it stopped and started to retreat. This relieved Jim and his friends.

The wind suddenly stopped, and everything became eerily quiet. The storm left behind a trail of destruction. Jim saw another car at the side of an alley connecting the main road. Although it was a bit battered by the storm, it looked usable. As Jim came closer to inspect the car, he found the unconscious driver slumped on the steering wheel. Shocked, he signalled his friends to come over immediately. "We need to take him with us," stated Jim. The boys took the unconscious driver and seated him in the middle. Jim took the keys and started the car. At first, the car refused to start but after a few tries, the engine roared to life. Jim quickly maneuvered the car out of the alley to the main road and started looking around for shelter. The city was devastated, with many broken bits of debris littering the road.

Suddenly a second wave of the storm hit. Jim started feeling like he was losing control of the car. Soon, he was airborne. This time, the debris was pounding on the windows of the car. It was the most terrifying thing Jim had ever experienced. Suddenly, Jim saw a huge black silhouette coming full speed in his direction. Whack! the car got hit by a tree. This dented the car badly and the bottom of the car was starting to smoke. The car came plummeting down from the sky and crashed into its side. Then everything went black. As Jim woke up, he was somehow trapped with a billboard on top of him. Jim immediately yelled out for help but heard back no response. He painfully slipped out of the billboard and looked around. Both his



friends plus the injured man were also under the billboard. One by one, he pulled them out. Luckily, all his friends were conscious and alive. The wounded man was in a bad shape, and he was breathing heavily. The boys tried to dress his wounds tearing their own clothes. Luckily, the sun was shining through the clouds and Jim could hear sirens in the distance. Jim quickly signalled down the emergency services and was treated with food and water. As Jim and his friends were being taken care of, another vehicle came and picked up the injured man. Jim and his friends had made it through the storm and that was all that mattered. When the boys reached the hospital, they were thanked by the injured man for saving his life. After this event, the boys became aware that there was a difference between the virtual world and reality. They vowed to become responsible adults and to always acknowledge the advice and warnings they received from authorities. The camera that Travis was carrying, which the boys completely forgot about recorded the ordeal and went viral giving them both fame and infamy. Jim decided to become a scientist when he grows up so that he could predict the path of storms and alert people. Both Alex and Travis decided to become reporters as they found the ordeal thrilling and exciting. They also wanted to influence young people to not make stupid mistakes like they did.

# First Firework

by Elizabeth Walker

The Shadow had not seen the sun beyond the brim of her umbrella for some time, though she remembered how it felt on her skin and the sting it gave her eyes, she could no longer feel its embrace. It was both a blessing and a curse, she could not be lost in the dark, but neither could she feel the warmth of the sun. So here she sat, surrounded in the shadows while the only two people in this world that she cared for basked in the morning light.

"What about fireworks?" Asked the Traveller, an inquisitive child she and the Swordsman had taken up care of. The young kid was always asking questions to both the chagrin and entertainment of her guardians. The Traveller took life moment by moment despite the mad pursuit of their hunters. While the Shadow viewed their journey as a frantic dash the Traveller preferred to think of it as an enjoyable road trip. "What about fireworks?" The Shadow repeated, giving the Traveller a confused look that made her glasses slide down her nose. The child smiled at her and sprang to her feet.

"Weeeell" she drawled out, "since you haven't seen the sun properly since the stone age why don't we have a firework show? Those are basically mini suns." She strode in front of the Shadow and the Swordsman, teetering on the edge of the cliff they sat along. The Swordsman gave the child a look, you know the one. That look when someone suggests something ridiculous that you know you'll have no choice but to go along with. "Where would we even get fireworks?" The Swordsman asks, pulling up the brim of his hat. "And stop playing on the edge you'll fall in and I don't have the energy to pull you back up." Pouting, she sits down between the Shadow and Swordsman, leaning under the Shadow's wide umbrella. "A firework show would be better than sitting here all day."

Sighing deeply the Swordsman leans forward turning his head to face the Shadow and Traveller, the bright sun glinting off the bronze of his prosthetic arm. "I know where we can get some fireworks." —

The three of them wander into a town named Twilight. A small town snuggled

between hills that grow ever taller and a roaring ocean hellbent on destroying them. Despite this fact the residents of Twilight were a positive bunch, fiercely celebrating their strengths with explosive festivals and enchanting feasts. The perfect town to secure some much needed enjoyment.

The cliffs and hill were behind them, but still visible as they would need to go back there to launch their little show. The town around them was clean with smooth stones paving the paths that wound around the storefronts and houses. Most people milled around in the stores, choosing from brightly colored clothes or picking out fruits from the stalls.

The Shadow, The Swordsman and the Traveller however continued to walk past the brightly lit stores and friendly booths. The Swordsman led them deeper into the town through back streets and alleys that got

darker as they went. He'd been here before, back when he was a soldier instead of just a disgraced swordsman with a penchant for coins. "Next left here." The Swordsman says pointing down another dark street, the tall buildings creating a canopy of wood. The Traveller, ever curious, was swinging her head around like a dog looking for a bone trying to take everything in. "Where are we going?" She asks, poking the Swordsman in the side.

"There's a place down here, sells all sorts of odd bits. I reckon they've got some fireworks I can barter for." He says, walking a few more steps before stopping in front of a chipped red door with a broken sign that read 'Alabasters All Sorts,' "This is the place."

The store was cluttered with odd knick-knacks, a wild assortment of everything from porcelain dolls to carved wooden figures. The Shadow immediately began sorting through the shelves, pulling out books and scrolls in a seemingly random pattern while The Swordsman helped the Traveller gather up multi-coloured fireworks ranging from a fiery red to a cool blue. Together they carried their small stash to the front desk.

"How much?" The Swordsman asks the man at the desk, a thin man who looked more like a wet ferret than you would expect. Despite his watery appearance he held the Swordsman's gaze, this was unusual as the Swordsman and the Shadow were cut from the same intimidating cloth. "400." The Salesman said, his voice firm.

"300." The Swordsman rebuked. He had a history of scamming unsuspecting buyers and he could spot a con from a mile away. He wasn't about to lose their hard earned cash over this. "350, and that shiny arm of yours." The salesman replied with a wide toothy smile on his face. The Swordsman rolled his eyes and briefly wondered if they could just steal the fireworks instead. "250, that's my final offer."

"I'm afraid that just won't do sir! You'll have to buy them at the set price." Said the Salesman his toothy smile seemed to get wider somehow. The Traveller was getting impatient and so was he. But before the Swordsman could reply the Salesman crumbled, his head smacking right on to the desk. Behind him stood the Shadow, a bundle of scrolls rolled tightly under her arm. "Do you have the fireworks?"

—

The Shadow strolled around the grassy hills trying to find the perfect spot to watch fireworks, she really had no idea what she was looking for. She'd never seen fireworks properly before, always been busy with something else. Spending time with the Traveller and the Swordsman had made her realize that she never thought much of the little stuff before, but she was beginning to realize the importance of every second even if she would never run out of them.

"Is here alright?" She asked, nudging the Traveller with her foot, the child had been picking up rocks and storing them in the sack she carried. The Traveller looked around, taking in the rolling hills and the clear blue sky above. The Traveller stomped on some of the grass with her foot frowning when a small puddle of water formed around feet. "Hmm nope" she said, popping the p, "I think the grass is too wet." The Traveller straightens up and points towards a higher point on the hill. "Up there should be better." Nodding the Shadow waits for her companions before she starts walking. It's an old habit to keep watch for the back but she'd be lying if she said it wasn't a useful one.

When they finally reach the crest of the hill the Traveller spends a few good minutes checking the breeze and grass, piquing the curiosity of fellows. "What exactly are you looking for?" Asks the Swordsman, flicking a coin that he refused to admit he'd stolen around in his hand.

"We don't want the grass to be too wet cause it'll mess it up but we don't want the grass to be dry cause it'll start a fire." Said the Traveller in a matter-of-fact kind of

voice. "But it can't be too windy or the fireworks won't go off but we still need a bit of wind or otherwise we'll get smoke in our faces."

"You know an awful lot about fireworks for someone so young." Said the Shadow, the Traveller often offered odd bits of information children wouldn't typically know. She'd once told the Shadow and Swordsman how to properly gut and cook a fish, much to their surprise.

The Traveller shrugged, "Me and my mum used to light fireworks all the time, I sorta picked up what was and wasn't important." Sitting down on the ground, she leaned back until she was staring straight up at the sky. "Perfect. This is the spot."

—

Smiling, the Shadow sat down on the dry grass as the last few embers of the day faded into a dim twilight. "Should we get started then?" She said, looking towards the Swordsman as he set up the fireworks under the Traveller's careful gaze. She received a curt nod before he turned back to the Traveller. The two had bickered for what felt like hours about the proper way to set up and light them until they agreed on a middle ground of sorts.

Patting the grass next to her, the Swordsman and the Traveller came and sat down just before the fireworks took off.

Now they all were ready, sitting side by side as the fireworks began their show. She'd taken off her glasses momentarily to watch the dazzling lights properly, it was worth it she thought. To be here with these people, to experience this moment with them. Yes, she thought looking over at her companions, their smiles and their joy, this is what it means to experience the sun.

# They Do What?

by Rhea Wilson

Caitlyn and Vi were always happy to look after Isha when Jinx and Ekko went out for a night of their own. Sometimes, it was even hard to give her back... While Caitlyn wasn't particularly attached, Violet had developed a rather close bond with the young girl. Their daughter, Cassandra, was also enamored with her, taking delight in having another girl her age to play with. They'd often stay up late into the night, tinkering with the little mechanical toys (courtesy of Jinx) that Isha would bring with her or running around together and causing general mayhem.

The lovebird's inevitable return was, then, was always a big fiasco. Cassandra would smuggle Isha into one of their hiding spots — under her bed, in the attic, and, on one occasion, the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard — and they would stay as silent as they could, giggling and squealing when they were eventually found and separated. The two girls were inseparable, which really was good for Jinx and Ekko, because them leaving her to Vi and Caitlyn and going off who knows where was quite a frequent thing.

"Say, Isha. Where do mama Jinx and papa Ekko go when they leave you with us, huh? You know?"

Caitlyn nodded.

"They must have an awful lot of fun to always be out so long. It's almost dark out..."

The family was currently huddled up in their rather spacious living room. Vi was lounging on the couch, Caitlyn sitting next to her and sipping a cup of tea. The two girls were sitting on the floor, papers and pens scattered across the low coffee table as they drew. Isha blinked a few times upon being asked the question, before flipping over her paper and quickly scribbling something in purple crayon.

Where they go?

Vi nodded. "Yeah. They leave you with us a lot... little man's not doing anything illegal with Powder, here, is he? I don't remember him having enough cash to be

taking her out to fancy topside restaurants every other night."

Isha startled at the mention of illegal activities, looking alarmed and quickly shaking her head. Caitlyn gave her wife a pointed look, and Vi laughed, stretching her arms out in front of her until her knuckles clicked with a satisfying pop. "Relax, cupcake, I was just joking." Then she looked at Isha again. "But, really, where do they go? I don't think I've ever seen either of them get all dressed up."

The young girl considered it for a second, then wrote something else.

I dunno

They're usually tired when we get home

Once they had lots of marks on their bodies

And mama was limping

Caitlyn choked on her mouthful of tea. Vi's eyes widened, and then she laughed.

"Outrageous... those two, exposing my beautiful niece to such debauchery..." She joked, putting on a mock offended voice before bursting into another bout of laughter. Cassandra looked curiously at them, as did Isha.

"What's 'dee-bow-she-ree'?"

Are mama and papa doing something bad?

Violet received another pointed look from Caitlyn, who was mopping up her spilt tea, and she finally calmed herself. Once she'd stopped laughing, she moved from the couch onto the floor between Cassandra and Isha, putting a hand on Isha's shoulder to steady herself. With the other, she wiped a stray tear from the corner of her eye.

"You'll find out when you're older, Cassie. And no, Isha, they're not. They're just... enjoying themselves."

Isha seemed satisfied with that answer, nodding and going back to her colouring. Cassandra rolled her eyes.

"Here, Isha, I drew us!"

It was half ten when Ekko and Jinx finally returned. Cassandra and Isha had fallen asleep together after dinner, while Caitlyn was reading them a story, and so Vi opened the door with one hand, holding an unconscious youngster in the other.

They were both covered in paint.

Blue, pink, purple... Jinx and Ekko's clothes, hair, and skin were far more colourful than they had been previously (which was impressive, considering Jinx's affinity for drawing all over her lover and his clothes). They were panting like they'd just run halfway across Piltover.

"Ah, sis... sorry... haah... sorry we're so late. And so dirty. The paintball place stays open till late, so we... haah... we lost track of time. We came as soon as we realized the time..."

She trailed off, still breathing heavily, and Ekko finished her sentence for her. "...hence why we're, uh, a little mucky."

Vi turned to Caitlyn, stifling her laughter.

"Paintball. That's what she was talking about."

"Yes. So it seems."

Ekko had caught his breath by now, and tilted his head as he accepted the still-sleeping Isha from Vi's arms. "Who was talking about what? What are you talking about?"

Vi just smiled as she went to shut the door. "Nothing."

"Just glad you two had fun."



# **The Golden City**

by Keira Dempsey

Long ago in a land of light, A city rose in golden might. Its towers kissed the morning sun, Its glory second unto none.

The king who reigned, With full heart and soul unstained By mercy, love, or sacred law— He sought the gods in awe.

He offered coin, offered flame, But silence was the gods' refrain.

The skies grew black, the rivers red, The gods rose up in spiteful dread. A curse was cast in seething breath: "A golden throne shall rot in death."

The fog rolled in, the gates were sealed, The shining walls to shadows kneeled. No voice could pass, no foot could flee, Entombed became the golden city.

Yet once each hundred years they say, The gates swing wide for one brave way— Awaiting one who dares to tread Where gold gleams bright—and all is dead.

The poem they engraved in all children's minds seemed nothing more than myth to James. The gods didn't curse someone without reason. He drew a deep chilling breath, he rose from bed, the wood worn from years of use. His bones creaked and muscles strained. He looked in his mirror. His hair once vibrant as maple now held grey like stars in the night. His beard, once clean and defined, now tangled and wild. He was no young man. If anyone had a chance at that golden city it wasn't him. As he walked down creaking stairs a crash rang out. He hurried his pace. The house he swore he'd clean not a day earlier was a mess, papers strewn around as if they were a path, books once towered high now had toppled over the desk tipping over what's left of his red ink. A small creature darted across the room and into the corner. It hid behind a chair, far too small for him, dark wood details covered in brilliant turquoise patterns, the stuffing barely worn by the weight it once held. As he looked behind it the creature disappeared, James figured it was likely a rat. James sighed and went to grab a towel. He returned and quickly mopped up what he could, the new stains on his desk blended with the old ones as if they were never there. He looked to the chair as if for guidance. This chair was all James had left of her, the last reminder

of her presence. His day was the same as ever, breakfast was the stale sandwich he forgot prior as he sat back at his desk to get to work, paper spread across the desk, simple ink trailed along the paper forming rivers, trees, paths and towns as he recreated how the world had grown. The lunch was similar to breakfast except far more fresh than returning to his desk. As he worked into the night, his back hunched over like a tree bent in the wind. The night hung in the wee hours, James finally finished his latest work. He covered his new map to avoid any mishaps and got up to

stretch. His body strained as he reached for the roof to turn off the oil lamp then headed up to his room and lay back in his old worn bed.

As he awoke to noise he expected it to be the delivery man with his latest order. He dragged himself to the door to find a man, his armor as bright as the golden city. "Cartographer! We require your assistance, the king demands you help navigate the path to the golden city!" announced the man. James sighed, knowing refusing the king meant hanging from the gallows before the day's end so he agreed. It was a rather large party with the 'Golden Knight' leading them.

The pack weighed heavily on James' back, his age showing how unfit for the journey he was. Maps made decades ago were shoved at him to decipher. The forest known for holding the golden city was shrouded in fog like a cloak. The air damp and smelling faintly of moss. This towering forest centuries old, as old as the presumed city itself. We trudged through the mud, the Golden Knight atop a steed. We came to a river where a water nymph resided. Her eyes sparkled like dew drops, her hair flowing as if it were the river itself, crystal clear and shimmering. She turned to look at us, not uttering a word, as if waiting for us to speak. "A challenge!" The Golden Knight proclaimed as he charged towards her. He drew a long golden blade but before it could pierce her the river rapids rose and washed him away as if he were never there. The water began to change, becoming a deep red color. Most of the party charged forward but were washed away. Slowly James approached, his years had taught him well, he bent down and bowed to the nymph. What was left of the party were stunned as the nymph seemed to be pleased with his respect and bowed in return before morphing into a young girl no older than 10. James was shocked

but slowly rose, taking the little girl's hand as they began to walk deeper into the forest. She followed twists and turns, as if she were leading him to something.

Before he knew it the rest of his party was gone.

James stepped through bushes and ferns, unable to see in the thick vegetation but when he came to the clearing he felt his hand lighten. The nymph was gone, as if she were never there, leaving only a few droplets on his skin. Similar to how she once had let go, only to never hold his hand again. There before him stood the gates, golden in all their glory as if it were heaven itself. Except if it were heaven it would be far more inviting, these games were open to allow fog to escape yet nonetheless James stepped through.

The Golden City was anything but dazzling, the people inside were still alive. Their bodies shriveled and stiff with sunken eyes and dry mouths. From within the castle James could see the sky for the first time since this morning. The day had given way to the afternoon as the sky was tinted orange, he didn't have much time. James rushed towards the castle stepping inside to find what was left of the great king, he was a sunken shriveled mess. In the centre of this great castle lay a pedestal with a body, her skin a murky green, flowers seeming to grow from her hair were shriveled and dead. Turning his gaze back to the king, James saw he looked worse than his subjects, unable to even speak, his hands eternally wrapped around a tablet, his eyes unable to move from the body. James slowly approached. The king looked up, his eyes glossed over as if his soul were already gone, slowly the king lifted the tablet to him, dust falling from his arms and cobwebs drooping from his robes. James took the tablet and read the poem.

Long ago, in a land of light, A city rose in golden might. Its towers kissed the morning sun, Its glory second unto none.

But greedy was the king who reigned, With hollow heart and soul unchained By mercy, love, or sacred law— He sought the gods with bloody awe.

He offered coin, offered flame, But silence was the gods' refrain. He drained his people, upon the stone, Their cries rose up, yet he alone heard no voice from skies above— No wrath, no judgment, and no love.

So in his pride, devoid of grace, He struck a nymph in their place.

The skies grew black, the rivers red— The gods arose in vengeful dread. A curse was cast in seething breath: "A golden throne shall rot in death."

The fog rolled in, the gates were sealed, The shining walls to shadow kneeled. No

voice could pass, no foot could fl ee— Entombed became the golden city.

Yet once each hundred years, they say, The gates swing wide for one brave way—

A soul with care and wisdom's fl ame May break the curse and end the shame.

So sings the wind through forests deep, While cursed within, the old kings keep,  
Awaiting one who dares to tread Where gold gleams bright—and all is dead.

This was the true story of the golden city, why the gods cursed this place. Now James could reverse it. He slowly lifted the corpse upon the pedestal with gingerly care he carried her out of the city. In front of the gates a river appeared. Slowly James knelt down and placed her in the river. As it flowed it carried her body away back to where she belonged. The golden city's gates began to creak as they shut and slowly turned to dust. The fog cleared and the forest became brighter. James headed home to his little house, with his little chair and his little life.

# Pieces of the Past

by Aryanna Billington

"I'd like to make a reservation please... your nicest suite."

...

The man walking into the hotel smelt like money. Wearing a crisp beige suit, he strode through the glass doors with an expensive-looking girl on his arm. Together, they made their way to the shiny elevator, where they ascended to their room.

Classy jazz music greeted them as they entered the suite. Once they were satisfied with their accommodation, the lady walked over to the kitchen, inspecting the collection of liquor bottles. Humming along to the song, she started opening the cupboards, looking for glasses. On the third she stopped - and screamed.

...

Winter mornings were Nadia Duke's favourite. She loved when the sky was painted an ice blue, reflecting on the frost-covered lawn. Standing outside, she breathed in the crisp air - a warm mug of cocoa cupped in her hands. She sighed when her pocket started vibrating, picking up the phone and walking inside.

"Duke," she answered, already grabbing her coat. "Another? ... Okay, I'm on my way."

Locking the door behind her, and leaving her cocoa inside, Nadia got in her car. Tying her caramel-coloured hair in a low ponytail, she pulled out of the driveway and headed over to the scene.

...

The Haven Hotel lived up to its name - tall glossy pine green doors greeted her, their gold-plated handles glinting in the icy sunlight. Inside, the aroma of lavender and wealth permeated the air around lilac cushions and sage throws. A woman welcomed Nadia with a tight-lipped smile, her hair pulled back into a severe bun that accentuated her sharp cheekbones.

"Miss Duke?"

When met with a nod, she continued, gesturing to the elevator.

"They're just this way, if you would please follow me."

They filled the time with idle chatter, little things which helped Nadia get a scope of what she was walking into.

But nothing could prepare her for the hand in the cupboard, clinically severed just before the wrist.

...

"Just like the other one, only this time a hand," the husky voice of her partner, Charles Knight, greeted her. "Hey Duke, they're over here."

The artificial lights caught his tousled blonde hair, signs of a fitful sleep. It was hard to find pockets of peace being a detective - you always had so many regrets. There were bags under his pale green eyes, ones which had seen more of the darker side of the world than most his age.

He directed Nadia over to the bedroom, where a couple was waiting. The lady seemed distressed, pacing the room while running her hands through her curly black hair. The man seemed unfazed, slightly irritated at most, from where he sat at the ornate desk.

"Nadia, this is Kira Fowler and Dairo Fortune," Charles said, nodding in the direction of each.

It was the second name that caught Nadia's attention.

"Dairo Fortune - You're the CEO of Fortune Foundations, correct? The building company?"

"Yes, that is me. And you are...?" He addressed her with a bored gaze, his countenance oozing wealth and power.

"Nadia Duke," he didn't make any attempt to shake hands, so she continued, "I'll be looking into what happened here."

"Isn't it obvious?!" Kira suddenly broke her stride to raise her voice, her British

accent thick. "There is a bloody hand in the cupboard ... literally!" Cringing slightly at the unconscious pun, she went and sat down on the bed, staring blankly at the air before her.

"When can I leave?" Dairo asked impatiently, breaking the awkward silence. "I'm missing a lot of important meetings."

"We're doing the best we can, Mr. Fortune. Hopefully you won't have to stay here much longer," Nadia re-assured, mumbling, "For both our sakes," as she turned away.

...

The hand was grotesque. Its pale form was stiff with rigamortis, blood crusting the bottom where it had been cut with precision. But the most morbid thing was the creamy white ribbon wrapped around it, the ends of the bow stained red with the victim's blood. Attached was an invitation card addressed to Mr. Dairo Fortune, requesting his presence next Friday at 6pm, inside the town's theatre.

The irony of the white ribbon made Nadia choke back a laugh. The person behind this was hardly innocent or pure. The real question was ... who did this? And why?

Oh, and also, who's hand is this?

...

The cruel sun shone down over the town, causing the frosted rooftops to glint blindingly, providing no warmth to the people below.

For the lady hopping out of the green rubbish truck, Winter mornings were the worst. Her gloved hands fumbled with the piled bags as she hefted them onto the back of the truck. One was particularly heavy, the thin plastic tearing beneath her grip. Mumbling a string of curses - a few directed to someone's mother - she bent down to transfer it into a new bag.

It wasn't until she opened it that the lady noticed the smell. Peering inside, she suppressed the urge for yesterday's lunch to re-appear.

...

Sitting in her car, Nadia mulled over what she knew - quiet classical music playing

through the cheap stereo. The lights of passing cars blended into a blotchy canvas through the foggy windows. Nadia twisted a lock of hair as she thought, trying to figure out what she was missing.

They now had almost a complete body. The leg discovered had been addressed to Lara Hastings, the creamy bow now stained with garbage waste. It clearly had not been the parcel she was expecting, and she had long gone before Nadia could even try and talk to her.

Aligned together in a mockery of a child's jigsaw puzzle, the pieces formed the body of a man in his mid-30s, just a little older than Nadia herself. All they were missing was the head. Any hopes of identification had quickly been diminished - all his prints had been wiped, and there were no tattoos or significant scars that could help. So all they could do was search and wait - the twisted anticipation that comes with the job. It would be a sick kind of relief when - if - they discovered who it was.

Then there's the matter of who has been 'gifting' these body parts to people. The only link between all the recipients was that they went to high school together, but even then they had hardly known each other.

So why did this ... psycho want to host a meeting with all these people? As a type of reunion? And why at the theatre?

There were too many questions, and not enough answers for Nadia's liking.

...

The cold winter sun was shining again, glimmering across the frosty lawn. Nadia sat at her desk, flicking through the case file. The aroma of cocoa filled the house, her cup waiting in the kitchen.

The doorbell abruptly rang, piercing through the morning quiet. Silently grabbing the gun from the drawer Nadia walked over to the door, opening it cautiously.

There was no one outside, only a severed head on her doorstep. The pale cream bow wrapped around it had an invitation card attached, a typed message on it.

"Seeing that you are so interested in me, you are also cordially invited to join us inside the town's theatre, Friday 6pm. See you there, Nadia Duke. I look forward to it."



# **The Hospital**

by Talyn Hislop-Croft

"Fear came first, then pain, followed by darkness. Those were my earliest memories of the event, which I would soon come to call the incident."

"So why come here?" The police officer said to the man sitting in front of him.

Tomas Murphy leaned back on his metal chair and stared blankly into the cup in front of him. The brown liquid inside sloshed from wall to wall in his hand.

"Where else... where else does a man go when he has seen such horrific things?"

The cop said nothing and clicked on the tape recorder

Tomas breathed. He breathed in and then began

"Pain... I felt pain, I felt fear first, but the pain was a stronger feeling. This was then followed by darkness. But this did not compare to what would come after."

Tomas paused; a tear rolled down one side of his face

"We can stop..."

"No. No, I'm fine." Tomas said abruptly

"Continue then."

"I awoke in a hospital bed. I remember the room the most, it was dark, abnormally dark. The only light came from a dim ceiling light. You know the ones you see in offices. There was a small coffee table next to my bed and..."

"Was there anyone else in this room?" The cop asked

"Yes, though I did not notice him at first. There was another bed to the left of mine, just out of arm's reach. I would soon learn the man's name in bed to be Jonathan."

"When I first awoke, I noticed I had a plaster on the side of my neck. I presumed it was from the accident, though I did not know at the time what said accident was.

I remember lying in that dark hospital room for what felt like hours."

"You didn't decide to get up and leave?"

"No, no, I just lay there and listened to the slight buzzing sound of the ceiling light. A person did come in after a while. A female nurse with long brown hair. She came in through a door which I didn't know was there at first due to the darkness of the room. Though for a brief time, I was able to get a glimpse of what was behind the door."

"What was it that you saw?"

"A long hallway, that's what I saw. It was lined with similar ceiling lights. The lighting was of a similar darkness. She came in and smiled at me as she came closer. Her smile showed her gums and teeth, it was a smile that seemed to send a cold chill down my back.

'How are we today, Mr. Murphy?' she said as she came over to me.

'Where am I?'

'You're in the hospital,' she said with another of her gummy, toothy smiles

'Why?'

She didn't answer me, she just continued to smile

'I must say, Mr. Murphy, you are looking much better today than you were yesterday.'

'Why am I in the hospital?' I asked again

This time she answered, though not in the way I wanted.

'Because you had an accident, Mr. Murphy. But don't worry, we'll have you right as rain as soon as possible.'

A quiet beeping sound filled the room for a moment, then stopped

'Well, wouldn't you know it, it's time for your pills, Mr. Murphy'

'Pills?'

'Yes, take them, they'll make you feel better'

She handed me two cardboard cups, one with water and the other with two small green and white circular pills in it.

I took them from her, stupid, I know

'What are these for?' I asked

She turned away and started to head to the door before leaving. She said, 'To help the pain, Mr. Murphy, to help the pain.'

She then left

"Did you take the pills?"

"Yes, after I did, I fell asleep. When I awoke, that's when I noticed Jonathan. The room seemed to be a little bit brighter than it was before. Though that could have just been due to my eyes getting used to the dark. Jonathan lay asleep on his bed, his chest moving slowly up and down. I noticed he had what looked like an IV drip standing next to his bed. With it leading into his wrist, he too had a plaster on the side of his neck."

Tomas Murphy paused again

The cop raised an eyebrow.

"Did you notice anything odd about Jonathan?"

"No, not at first, though his IV drip wasn't full of the average clear liquid... You know, the liquid you see in them hospital drama shows on TV."

"What was it filled with?"

"Blood, Jonathan's IV drip was filled with blood. Some accident that guy had. That was my first thought. Then... then I noticed that I had one of the same IV-drip-looking things jabbed into my wrist. However, instead of the bag being full of blood, it was only partially full."

"What did you do next?"

"The only thing I could do, I fell back asleep. When I woke up, Jonathan was gone, along with his IV drip."

"Was anything else different?"

"The amount of blood in my IV drip hadn't gone down... but up, only a fraction, mind you, but enough for me to notice and enough to set the alarm bells off. Questions started to bounce around in my head, what kind of hospital is this?' 'Why have I only seen two people?' and most importantly, 'Why is this hospital so dark?'

I sat up right, my mind feeling like a fogged-up cloud, and then she came back.

"Who did?"

"The nurse... However, this time I could see her better. She came in just as she had done before. She had two cardboard cups in her hand.

'More pills?' I had asked as she had started to shut the door

'Yes, I'm afraid, but it's the only way to make you feel better.'

When she turned... she smiled the same gummy, toothy smile she had smiled before. However, this time I could see better."

"What?" The cop asked, looking up from the pad he was absent-mindedly scribbling at

"She... she had fangs. Two K-9-like dog fangs with sharp, pointed ends. That's, that's when everything clicked. The memories from before came back like a tidal wave, and everything, everything just clicked. The IV-drips, they weren't there to give me blood but to take it out of me. The pills not there to take away the pain but to make me sleep. The plaster on the side of the neck....

I mean, I had heard the stories, you know, Dracula, Nosferatu and Van Helsing. But never thought they could be real."

"I don't follow."

"She.... She was a vampire. After the events, I pulled away the plaster and saw two small needle holes parallel to each other on the side of my neck.

Tomas Murphy pointed to his neck, and sure enough, it was there.

"So, how did you escape?"

"I didn't,"

Tomas began to laugh, a slow, quiet laugh

"I cut a deal; she grew quite a liking for me. Instead of drinking me like what she had done to Jonathan. She made me like her." Tomas said, "She made me like her."

He looked up at the cop and smiled.

A gummy, toothy smile that revealed his two white K-9-like teeth.

# Through The Khidkee (Window)

by Manvi Sharma

A woman peers back at me through the dusty window, leaning against the twisted metal railing of her balcony. Her intricately designed sari, swirling around her ample-bodied frame, faded from the orange winter sun, one that was more scorching than the one back home. Her eyes are watching my every move as one watches an unpredictable animal from beneath her wrinkle-lined forehead, where a single red dot bindi adorns it.

My feet carry me closer to the window in the makeshift bedroom that I am sharing with my sister for a few weeks. Walking around the two rickety-metal beds which were crammed against each other and covered with a heavy quilt, sown with an array of colors and patterns, which you would never find back at home. I raise my right hand, cringing against the feeling of spider webs as I attempt to clear the heavily layered dust from the yellowed glass. I wonder if it was cleaned last Diwali, when the quadrupled-storied bungalow was last repainted.

The middle-aged woman's gaze were still unrelenting even as my own eyes met hers challengingly, as if to prove that I am just like her. Her eyes still scan my western-style short-sleeved shirt and leggings, as if to prove me wrong. As if to tell me that I am still different from everyone else. But my eyes are brought to hers as I take in the emotions playing out in them; curiosity overlays the rest, whatever else she might be feeling suppressed by it.

Exotic. That was what I was to her. A girl who acts like her, a native, but also acts like the foreigners from the country where she resides. A girl who somehow manages to stick out and fit in at the same time in both nations. I smile softly back at her, and she smiles back, revealing her slightly yellow-stained teeth. She understands me, and I understand her, and that is all that matters in this moment.

"Manu! Khana ban gaya hain, aajayo bitiya!", my grandmother yells in the beautiful language of Gwalior Hindi, calling me to come eat lunch. I give the woman a slight nod before turning around and heading over to the bath area to wash my blackened hand. I know that I will be the gossip today for all of the aunties and families in the neighborhood. That's just how India is.



# Adults Shortlist & Winners

(aged 18+)

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# **Adults Shortlist & Winners**

(aged 18+)



# A Concussion of Memories

by Philip Luke

Daniel opened his eyes to seven thirty-two on the digital clock. Those red digits burned against the darkness of pulled curtains and a lazy sun. He knew this ceiling, this room, but something felt askew. The furniture appeared subtly wrong, like someone had moved each of them two inches to the left.

His body refused commands. Only his eyelids obeyed, blinking away the film of too many hours unconscious. The sheets tucked around him with unnatural precision trapped his arms, but he never tucked sheets.

A glass of water waited on the nightstand. A pill bottle beside it. The cap askew, contents partly spilled.

Someone had been here.

Someone other than Daniel.

Daniel rolled to his side. Pain occupied twenty different territories on his body, each with its own distinct signature. The spot above his right eye pulsed with each heartbeat. His ribs stabbed cold when he inhaled. His knuckles remained split and swollen, skin taut over bone.

The clock now read seven forty-five. Thirteen minutes lost. Had he fallen back asleep?

It felt like a Wednesday morning. He knew he had training at nine and Coach Wilson expected him early.

Daniel pushed himself upright. The room tilted, rearranged itself, settled. The water glass beckoned. He reached for it with fingers that seemed too large, too clumsy. Water spilled down his chin, soaked the sheets.

A memory surfaced: Coach Wilson taping his hands, the familiar ritual before gloves. "Keep your guard up. He drops his shoulder before the hook."

When was that? Yesterday? Last week?

Coach's voice again: "Your shot, Danny. Friday night is all you have."

Friday night.

Daniel reached for his phone. The screen illuminated: Saturday, 7:57 AM.

Saturday. The fight had happened? Or had he missed it entirely? Panic surged through his chest.

His gym bag sat by the door, positioned with uncharacteristic neatness, ready for the day ahead. Daniel swung his legs over the bed's edge. The floorboards wobbled under his feet. His legs trembled with the effort of standing.

Three steps to the bag and it felt like an insurmountable distance.

The bathroom mirror called instead. Daniel shuffled toward it with one foot deliberately before the other.

His reflection shocked him into stillness, for he looked ghastly..

His right eye had disappeared into a plum-colored mass. Butterfly bandage bridged the split eyebrow beneath it. His nose, though not broken, had bloomed purple across the bridge. His bottom lip bore the imprint of his own teeth, a crescent wound crusted with dried blood.

How could he train like this? Coach Wilson is going to be furious.

Hang on, where did these wounds come from?

These wounds told stories his mind couldn't access.

From somewhere distant he could hear a crowd noise, the bell clanging, mouthguard grinding against teeth. And a referee?

Daniel touched the wounds on his face. Memory fragments scattered the moment he tried to grasp them, vanishing before recognition.

He shuffled to the kitchen.

Coffee, he thought to himself with great restraint.

Coffee would restore order. His hands performed the ritual without consulting his damaged brain. The familiar scent anchored him while the machine gurgled.

A newspaper lay unfolded on the counter. Strange. Daniel didn't subscribe to papers. The headline blared across the top but meant nothing through his smeary vision.

The medicine cabinet yielded ibuprofen. Daniel swallowed three dry, chased them with coffee that scalded his wounded mouth.

His phone buzzed. A text from Coach Wilson: Call me when you're up. Doc says 6 weeks recovery minimum.

Recovery? From what?

Daniel checked the date on his phone again. Saturday. His fight had been scheduled for Friday night. Had it happened? Had he been injured? Withdrawn? How long was he asleep for?

He walked into his living room and turned on a light. The sudden brightness exploded behind his eyes like shrapnel, sending waves of nausea through his skull. The coffee mug slipped from his fingers, shattered against the linoleum floor. Dark liquid splattered his bare legs. Daniel barely registered the heat.

A memory fragment burst through the pain. Williams staggering backward. Eyes unfocused. An opening. His fists knowing what to do. Left jab catching flesh. Right cross finding bone. Left hook arcing. He wobbled like a man standing on a boat. The roar around them fading in and out.

Then the memory vanished again, like a face in a crowd.

Daniel moved toward the newspaper but stopped. He needed to know for certain. What if they had canceled the fight?

But he remembered entering the ring. He remembered singing his country's anthem. Then it was the first round, the sizing up, the testing jabs. Then it was a bell that led into the second round. Williams faster than expected, catching him with that overhand right.

Was there a third round? There must have been, as it was in the fourth round, where Williams' eye began to swell.

Then there was nothing to remember. Nothing but disconnected sensations without context.

What happened in the fight? The newspaper on the counter could tell him, but Daniel turned away, back to the gym bag. That would show him what he needed to do.

He moved through the apartment on unsteady legs, back toward the bedroom where it waited. Each step awakened new pain, radiating through his body. His ribs protested with sharp jolts whenever he inhaled. His knuckles throbbed, raw and swollen, skin split across the bone in familiar patterns. Blood had dried in the creases of his hands, telling stories his mind refused to remember. The hallway stretched before him, tilting slightly as his vision blurred. He braced against the wall, his body struggling to perform the simple act of walking.

The bag sat by the door. Daniel knelt before it with his heart hammering against his damaged ribs. Whatever waited inside would give him answers. He unzipped it with trembling fingers, the sound unnaturally loud in the quiet apartment.

Inside lay his gloves, once white leather now stained with patterns of rust and red. Hand wraps crusted with blood and sweat coiled like dead snakes. His mouth guard rested in its case, a film of dried saliva coating the plastic.

The smell of copper rose from the bag, oddly familiar. His nostrils flared at the scent that was his own blood. And maybe another man's blood? He couldn't tell anymore.

His shorts lay crumpled in a corner of the bag, the black fabric crusty with crimson hardening along the waistband and down one leg. He placed them by the side of the bag, fingers lingering on the fabric as though it might speak to him.

Beneath them, his fingers found something solid. He pulled it free from the shadows of the bag: a belt. Not just any belt.

A World Championship Belt.

Daniel lifted it. The weight was unexpected, more substantial than imagined. The metal was cold against his fingertips. He ran his thumb across the engraved letters of his name.

While he slept, his life had transformed. The culmination of fifteen years of sacrifice had arrived and departed without him.

Daniel carried the belt to the window as sunlight hit the metal. Fifteen thousand

people had roared his name in that arena. Millions more watched on screens across the world. Commentators dissected each exchange. Sports writers crafted headlines. Social media exploded with clips and quotes.

Yet for Daniel, the man who had stood in that ring, who had thrown those punches, who had earned this very belt... there was nothing. The fight existed only in fragments, disconnected snapshots that felt borrowed from someone else's life. A championship moment, the culmination of years of sacrifice, erased from the only mind that had lived it.

The belt felt unfamiliar in his hands. Had he truly won it? Or had some other version of himself, a stranger who occupied his body after that seventh round blow, claimed the victory?

Daniel pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the window. Beyond the glass, crowds chanted his name. Inside, he stood apart from yesterday, locked outside the moment that defined him by broken neural pathways.

The belt rested on the table. Sunlight touched metal. Evidence of a victory his mind never recorded.

His coffee stood cold on the counter. Saturday continued. Friday never existed for him at all.



## **Park Avenue Movers**

By Colin Phillips

Shida sat on her couch, phone in her hand, killing time waiting for the movers. She swiped left, then left, left again, then paused... before swiping left again. Shida decided that dating apps suck. Break-ups always come at a high cost. Now, she would need to wade through the endless parade of mama's boys, clueless captains, one-night charmers, and, worst of all, the so-called nice guys. It made her shudder just to think of it.

The buzzer screamed, echoing through the empty apartment, making Shida jump.

"Who is it?" Shida asked.

"Park Avenue Movers."

"C'mon up," she buzzed the door.

Shida looked at the pile of boxes stacked high in the centre of the room.

Shida went to pick up her purse but found it missing. She heard a knock at the door but continued searching for it. The knock came again, louder this time.

"Coming!" she shouted, turning over books, papers, empty boxes.

The door knocked again.

"I said I am coming," she yelled. Her search became more frantic.

What sounded like Thor's hammer hit the door.

"Jeez!" Shida walked over to the door.

"Do you mind? I am trying to find my purse," she yelled as she opened the door.

A short Asian man stood at the door. He had shoulder-length black hair and heavy glasses. A wide leather back brace was wrapped around his waist.

"Oh, sorry, I thought you were the movers."

"Yes."

"Yes?" Shida waited for more, but it wasn't forthcoming.

The guy just stood there, looking right at her.

"You're kidding me, right?" Shida asked, wondering if one of her friends was winding her up.

"No," he shook his head, "Company said you no have too much, so sent me," The man pointed to his back brace.

"Just you?" Shida looked down the hallway.

"Yes. Call me Jimmy."

"Jimmy?" Shida asked. I don't know who you are, but you definitely ain't no Jimmy, that's for sure!

"Yes, good name, yes!" he seemed so pleased with himself. "Not real name, of course. Real name too difficult for Westerners. Jimmy, easy for you, OK?"

"I guess." Frustrated but not willing to argue, Shida stepped aside. "Come in, come in, the boxes are over there. Oh, and if you find my purse, shout out, will you."

For ten minutes, Jimmy loaded his trolley with boxes and hauled them away while Shida searched for her purse. As she was walking past the window, Shida looked outside as Jimmy loaded the latest boxes into the back of the van. He looked up and caught her watching. He smiled. Shida pulled her head back quickly, wondering why she felt embarrassed. Confused but determined to ignore him, she sat back on the couch and started flicking through Tinder, swiping left, left, left. Could it be this hard?

"You have no boyfriend?"

Shida jumped, not realizing Jimmy was standing behind her. "It's not any of your business," Shida said harshly.

"No worries, I take you out," Jimmy said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.



"You?" Shida couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Yes! I treat you like lady, better than those bootie calls," he gestured to her phone.

"I beg your pardon?"

"They just sex. You need man who treat you right."

"You think you have a shot with me?"

"Why not?" Jimmy seemed confused Shida was even doubting it.

Shida stared at him, not sure if the guy was joking.

"You not think pretty enough?" Jimmy asked with all sincerity.

"What!" Shida couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"You pretty enough for me."

"Pretty enough," Shida's voice raised several octaves. Did he think he was doing her a favour?

"Sure! You pretty black girl. But no boyfriend. No boyfriend, no reason not to let me take you for dinner."

Shida folded her arms, aggravated, "Oh yeah? And where would that be— Chinatown?"

Jimmy nodded in agreement. "Why not! Black girl too good for Chinatown?"

Shida started to fire back but stopped. Was he joking? She couldn't tell.

"Is that why you have no boyfriend, you racist?" he added with a grin. This guy had the devil in him. Was he for real? She couldn't decide where to kick him out or let him keep talking.

"Racist! No, I am plenty good enough for Chinatown," Shida was indignant.

"It's a date. Tomorrow, OK. Give you time to unpack and dress pretty."

Shida couldn't help but look down at her sweatpants.

"A date?"

"Yes! Jimmy taking you for nice dinner."

"But a tall black woman with a... short Chinese man..." she faded out, unsure how to finish the sentence. "Aiya! Listen, no one in Chinatown notice you too tall, girl."

"No?" Shida asked, wondering when exactly she had agreed to this date.

"They all be wondering how Jimmy got date with this Nubian Princess," he paused.

Shida started to laugh. "Nubian Princess?"

Jimmy grinned. They both stood there looking at each other. Until eventually Shida smiled, "You're crazy."

"You beautiful," Jimmy said. His words thaw her resistance.

"So just this left." Jimmy showed her Sean's Mandalorian helmet.

"This some kinky sex toy? You Ahsoka?" Jimmy smirked, clearly teasing.

"Where did you find that?"

"In cupboard in bedroom," Jimmy placed the helmet on his head and waggled his head.

Shida blushed, remembering Sean had asked on more than one occasion.

Jimmy spoke, but the helmet muffled it.

"What?" Shida asked.

Jimmy slipped off the helmet, "Hot."

"What did you say?" Shida asked.

"Hot?" Jimmy looked confused.

"No, before that. In the helmet."

"Oh! I found your purse," Jimmy said, holding it for her to see.

"You found my purse!" she said, grabbing his face and kissing him. Jimmy stood there, a huge smile on his face. Shida blushed, deeply embarrassed at her actions.

"I..." Shida was so embarrassed she couldn't get the words out.

Embarrassed, Jimmy grabbed the helmet and started to wrap it in tissue paper. He grabbed a box and tape, "No worry, I no charge for box. Now, helmet safe."

The helmet was a much safer subject to discuss, Shida thought. Perhaps Jimmy would forget the kiss if she discussed the helmet. Jimmy quickly and expertly wrapped the helmet. He made up a box, adding a base layer of styrofoam pebbles and carefully placing the helmet on it. He surrounded the helmet with styrofoam pebbles before adding bubble wrap and closing the lid before taping it shut.

The last time Shida had seen such care and expertise wrapping it was in Bloomingdales at Christmas when she had her mother's scarf wrapped in-store.

"Look," Shida was unsure what to say, "Just, just..." she blurted out the first thing that came to mind, "Throw it away."

Jimmy looked like he had been struck. "Throw away?" his mind obviously not comprehending. "Nooooooooo! Expensive. I know, nephew has many. Sister complain, cost so much."

At least they weren't talking about the kiss, Shida thought to herself. "OK, I don't want it." She thought for a second. Anything to avoid thinking about that kiss, the softness of his lips.

"Why don't you take it? Give it to your nephew." Shida urged. She gestured at the box. It seemed to sit there, accusing her of what she wasn't sure of, but whatever it was made her hot under the collar.

"What!" Jimmy couldn't believe what Shida was saying. "No, too much. This expensive."

"No! Please give it to your nephew. It holds too many bad memories for me."

Jimmy saw the look on Shida's face; he seemed to stop and think about what she said.

"Break up hard, eh?" Jimmy asked.

Shida nodded.

"Aiya! Now I take you much better date, Sister's restaurant." He said with a smile,

showing he was teasing her.

Shida smiled, too. They stood just looking at each other, smiling.

Jimmy asked, "So, Nubian princess, what your name?"

"Shida," she said shyly.

"Rashida and Jimmy. Sound good," Jimmy said and smiled.

"Yeah, it sounds good," Shida said.

Jimmy looked around the room—just a few boxes left.

"I just finish loading, OK? You no go away, OK?" Jimmy asked.

"I'll be here," Shida said. Jimmy loaded his trolley and disappeared out the door.

She stood looking around the apartment. For two years, she had lived here with Sean.

The more she thought about it, the fewer good times she remembered. She wondered why she had stuck it out so long.

Shida stepped out the door and walked down the steps. She stepped out the front door and let it shut behind her. Jimmy pulled the shutter of the van down.

Jimmy turned to find Shida standing there. "Your new apartment. How you get there?"

"The 1 train. From Lincoln Centre."

"How about you ride with me? Be nice to have someone to talk to."

Shida pretended to think about it, "Sure."

"Now, you can't tell everyone you ride with Jimmy. Many women in this job. They get jealous, and Park Avenue sack Jimmy," he teased.



## **Best Present Ever** by Andy Evans

Floating.....

floating.

He clung to that word attempting to avoid the darkness and cold.

Time passed

The darkness eased slightly.

Eyes.....

He opened his eyes and saw thousands of light spots, some of them almost overwhelmingly bright. A thin grey line stretched across his view, remaining still while the spots moved rapidly past him from right to left.

Somehow, he knew they were stars. But why were they moving so fast? Stars move, but only slowly.

He closed his eyes again, then re-opened them.

It came to him, the stars weren't moving....he was moving.

Floating through space.....tumbling.

He concentrated on the fuzzy grey line in front of him, as a black shape came into view; unfocused and blurred, it rapidly slid off to the left. A short time later it was back again.

It was dark, with bright spots, like stars but not stars. It was large, but he knew it should be bigger, he was far away.

He heard sounds. Dull and muffled, but as he listened, the noises slowly became clearer.

He realised they'd been there all along, a hissing noise, and something else.....

voices?

Where were they coming from?

He clung to the voices as he watched the stars and the dark shape pass by, over and over.

A man's voice, sounding urgent, repeating "Hacksaw"

Hacksaw, that sounded familiar.

More time passed.

Everything slowly became clearer as some memories returned. He could remember what had happened at least until a few days ago

'He' was Hacksaw, the leader of an elite unit which deployed against space pirates. He was in an armoured space-suit, which was actually a self contained ship interfacing with his brain. It should be an extension of his body. Information and awareness should be flowing across the screen in front of him.

But none of that was happening.

He had no control, no information. He just floated, twisting in space.

He croaked a response to the voice "Hello" ..... "Can anyone hear me?" Nothing.

The voice repeated "Hacksaw, come in"

The stars moved, and the dark shape slid past, again and again.

Then the voice said something different

"Hacksaw, you were hit with an EMP. You need to reset your suit"

Somehow, he knew that an EMP was an Electro-Magnetic Pulse, a huge charge of electricity which scrambled electronics. There were more memories, flashes of training.

He knew had to touch something with his armoured hand. But he didn't know how to move. And.... it couldn't be that easy, or his enemies would do it to him - reset his armour and render him harmless.

Then, the voice changed, now it was a female "Hacksaw, it's Rattlesnake. Wake up you dumb ass. Reset your suit, hit the switch on your left hip twice, and clench your right fist. You're leaking air. You need to stop it. Come on! "

Hacksaw blinked. He realised he could move the armour by merely moving his body.

He flexed his right hand, clenching his fist. But as he moved his left arm, a blinding pain struck him. He screamed in agony.

But no one heard.

He was alone in the darkness.

He had to do this by himself.

He tensed and readied himself, then moved his left arm again, screaming in agony. He slapped himself twice on his thigh, almost passing out with the pain. At the same time he squeezed his other hand into a fist.

He was screaming.

But, in an instant everything changed, his suit warmed up and a white streak suddenly ran across where the grey line had been before. It disappeared, and the hissing noise stopped. The visor in front of him came alive with symbols, words and numbers, and the pain in his arm eased.

A robotic voice spoke "Hacksaw, well done. With your suit reset, I've repaired the leak in your visor, taken control of your rotation and injected anesthetic and repair nanos into your arm. But you're still suffering a concussion, I'm sending the nanos to your head"

"Who.....who are you?" He spoke, barely a whisper.

"Okaaay, maybe its a bit more serious than I thought. Its me, Talon - your AI"

Another voice broke over the internal speakers - it was the first voice he'd heard, human, and concerned. "Hacksaw.... can you hear me? It's Carbon - are you okay?"

His left arm felt warm now, and he risked another movement, tensing in response to the expected pain, but it never happened. As he moved his own arm he saw the suit respond.

He stopped moving and tried to remember who these people were.

Seconds later, his brain exploded and instantly he went from fuzzy incomprehension to complete and almost overwhelming awareness.

Talon spoke again, now inside his brain. "Hacksaw, your brain functions have returned to normal. The nanos reported repairing serious damage. Are you good?"

He remembered the past few days.

They'd left the trade planet of Aramouth nearly 24 earth hours ago, tracking a suspected pirate ship through jump space. They'd dropped into this system, Daraton, only a few hours before.

"Yep"

With his visor active he had full awareness of every ship and planet in the system. He turned his suit through almost 60 degrees and looked 'down' on the craft floating 'below' him. Excalibur, named after the legendary sword of King Arthur, was a fast, heavily armed patrol ship. He knew Talon was a kernel of the ship's Artificial Intelligence, which also resided in his suit.

The ship and its AI were exactly what his team needed to track down pirates and destroy them.

His team.....

"Knights, Hacksaw - I'm back. Status?"

He could see what was happening from his display but he wanted to hear from them.

Carbon called over the laser comm link "Hey bossman - good to hear you. We've just retrieved Iceman and Dagger - you were all deliberately taken out by an EMP seconds after we announced we were Space Fleet. The pirate is accelerating to Jump speed, he's five minutes away from Jumping. What do you want to do?"

Then Talon spoke again "You all lost power and drifted off. The pirate fired at the others, but missed. You were unlucky, they tagged you with a pulse laser and sent you spinning into the freighter. Banged you up real bad"

"Okay - I'm coming back aboard"



5 minutes later

Hacksaw backed his suit into a slot on the exterior of the hull. A full length access panel opened on the rear of the suit and he simply stepped backwards onto the deck of his ship.

He wore the same blue ship-suit he'd left the ship in hours before, although its sleeve was now almost black from dried blood.

A pulse laser hit, in any other armour he'd have been dead. But his team had the best tech available from the labs orbiting Jupiter. Nearly 200 years ago humanity had moved from its home planet into space, mining the asteroid belt's unimaginable cache of minerals. They'd built huge stations above Jupiter's moons which in turn allowed the building of bigger ships.

The development of Jump Drive, capable of instantly transiting between star systems, had meant that within a century most of humanity had left Earth behind. But the Galactic Government remained based there, with its most highly prized Space Fleet and developmental facilities.

"You got back in one piece" Hacksaw looked up as Rattlesnake strode towards him, concern on her face. She was a raven haired woman, tall and dark skinned. Although today was her 97th birthday, she looked as beautiful as she had 46 years ago when they'd first met.

Longevity treatment was the key to humanity's successful takeover of the stars. Without it, they couldn't have generated enough offspring to populate the huge amount of planets they'd colonised.

She came in close and hugged him, looping an arm behind his neck to pull him in for a kiss. "Those lousy back-stabbing space-scum. Geez, I thought I'd lost you - never do that again, especially on my birthday"

He smiled, a lopsided grin "Yep, that would have been a terrible present...for both of us" They walked, hands linked, enjoying the relaxed peace of a couple who'd been together for many decades.

Hacksaw, as he was known throughout human space, was nearly 105 years old, still with another fifty years of action left in him. Well, perhaps, assuming he didn't end up on the wrong end of a pulse laser again.

They stopped at a doorway and stepped through into the bridge to see the pirate ship framed on the large screen before them. Carbon smiled, and nodded from his seat.

"Bossman" he drawled. "Talon reckons we could have another go at boarding them, or we just take them out"

Hacksaw just looked at Rattlesnake. "Your call?"

Her face was like ice "Talon, kill the scum now"

The AI responded instantly, and dispatched an Ultron torpedo. Seconds later there was a bright flash of light which quickly disappeared.

Rattlesnake smiled "Thanks Hacksaw, that's the best present ever"

# The Missing Saltshaker

by Laura Malin-Curry

"Mum, have you seen the saltshaker?" I asked inquisitively, staring at the empty space in the cupboard next to the pepper shaker. Mum was hanging over the sink, draining away the flavor from the now flavorless vegetables.

"No Macy. Have you checked the table?" she replied, handing me the steaming pot of vegetables.

"It's not there," I said, setting the pot on our old remu dining table. What Mum doesn't know is, I have spent the better part of the day meticulously searching throughout the house for it. Some school may have been skipped. I can definitively say, without a doubt, the saltshaker is missing. Or even worse... kidnapped.

"It's probably in the cupboard next to the pepper shaker," she called from the kitchen.

"Not there either," I replied, sitting down at the table next to my sister, Lydia, and across from my brother, Peter. "I have searched all over the house and can't find it. The saltshaker is missing."

Mum set the curried sausages on the table next to the mashed potatoes and sat down next to Peter. I looked around the table, catching the eyes of each, mum, Lydia and Peter, in turn. Finally, three out of my four suspects have been assembled.

- **Suspect 1:** Mum, is running on a short fuse since dad moved out five and a half months ago. Mum is forever losing things.
- **Suspect 2:** Lydia, my boy-crazed teenage older sister who loves to bake for her not so secrete boyfriend.
- **Suspect 3:** Peter, my little brother who often likes to pretend the saltshaker is a toy rocket ship.

We all sat around the table, eating our dinner. Lydia was going on about some drama from school. Now is the perfect time for me to sprinkle in some questions

about the missing saltshaker.

"Lydia," I said spinning around on my seat to face Lydia. "Did you do any baking for you-know-who recently?" Lydia rolled her green eyes.

"No, why?" she asked.

"Hmm, just asking. You didn't remove the saltshaker from the kitchen after dinner yesterday?"

"Macy," mum snapped. "You'll just have to eat dinner without it, we will find it later."

"We can't have dinner without salt," piped up Peter. He pushed his chair away from the table and crossed his small arms over his chest.

"Don't be silly Peter," said Lydia. "You never a-salt your dinner."

Peter shrugged, pulled his chair back into the table and immediately went back to pushing his peas under his mashed potatoes. Actions of a boy with something to hide.

"Peter," I looked across the table at Peter. He seemed to be lost in thought. "Peter," I said louder. "Did you take to saltshaker after dinner last night to play rocket ships?"

"No." He replied.

"Macy, stop interrogating your brother and sister about the bloody saltshaker." Mum said giving me a stern look. "We will look for it later. Now eat your dinner." Mum reached over and plonked an extra curried sausage on my plate. I felt an aura of saltiness from her. It is certainly something I need note down. I pulled out my notebook containing my notes on the case.

"It's just weird," I said to no person in particular. "The peppershaker was in its usual spot in the cupboard this morning. But there was no trace of the saltshaker. Not even a grain of salt."

"Maybe the saltshaker needed a bit of a break?" Lydia joked looking across the table at mum. Mum rolled her eyes.

"That's impossible," I replied. "The saltshaker and peppershaker are meant to be together. It's criminal they're apart. It would be like Bonnie without Clyde, Bert without Ernie, or Ladybug without Cat Noir. The two are made for each other."

I took a bite out of my curried sausage.

"Ha!" I exclaimed, turning to face mum. "It can't have gone far... because there is salt in these curried sausages!"

Mum and Lydia groaned in unison.

"Don't be silly Macy" Mum said. "I used the salt from the packet for the dinner tonight." She got up, retrieved the packet of salt from the cupboard, and placed it on the table in front of me. "There, now stop with this obsession with the saltshaker, and eat your dinner!"

From the conversation at dinner, I learnt three things:

1. Mum, Lydia and Peter all claim to have no idea where the saltshaker is, or what happened to it.
2. Mum used salt from the bag to make dinner tonight.
3. I am no closer in solving this mystery.

I sat on my bed staring down at my notebook. My leads have dried up. I'll need to speak to my fourth and final suspect, maybe they'll have the key to crack this case wide open. Just as I put my notebook back into my pocket, there was a knock on the front door.

"Macy, there is someone at the door for you," mum called out from the hallway. I leaped off my bed and rushed to the front door. Who could it be? I don't usually get visitors, especially on a school night. Turning into the foyer, I see Dad smiling at me.

- Suspect 4: Dad, a little salty since he moved out five and a half months ago.

"Dad!" I shouted, sprinting over to him. I was immediately sucked into a warm hug. I felt my feet lift off the ground. "Have you come for dessert?" I asked as he lowered me to the ground.

"No, Pumpkin," he replied. Dad reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out something with a small glass barrel and a silver dome head.

"The missing saltshaker!" I exclaimed reaching out for it. The glass felt warm against my cold hand. Found at last. I looked up into his deep brown eyes. "You had it all along?" Dad nodded. I knew it! It had to be one of my suspects. "Hmm...Did it fall

into your bag at dinner last night?" I asked inquisitively. Dad nodded again. Yes, right again! Two for two, maybe I am better at this detective thing than I thought. Looking down at the shaker, I notice the top was shinier than I remembered, and it was filled to the top.

"I hear you have been causing a bit of a, um.. ruckus at dinner over this missing saltshaker?" he said gesturing towards the saltshaker in my hand.

"A ruckus!" I leaped back. "I have been doing no such thing. We had a very serious situation at the Sal household. And I, so far, am the only one taking it seriously." I crossed my arms across my chest. "The poor peppershaker was left all alone in its usual spot in the cupboard last night." I stared straight into his eyes. "All alone and expected to raise baby paprika by herself."

I turned and looked out over the street. The sun was settling behind the far hills, casting a fiery orange aura on the surrounding clouds. Dad sat on the top step and gestured for me to do the same.

"Do you think this is about something more than the missing saltshaker?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" I replied, sitting on the step next to him.

"Well. Sometimes, we misdirect our emotions and feelings onto trivial things to hide what they are truly about."

"I'm don't understand." I said, looking down at my Chuck Taylors.

"I just want you to know," he said, pulling me into an awkward sideways hug. "Even though your mother and I are no longer living under the same roof, we are still a family."

I was taken aback. This was the first time dad spoke about the split. I looked up at him and saw the deep sleep lines around his eyes. Mum has them too.

"Thanks dad," I said, resting my head against his shoulder.

We sat together and watched the sunset. After a while mum came out and told me I needed to finish my homework. I got up and gave dad a hug goodbye. As soon as I closed the front door. I looked down at the cylindrical saltshaker, turned it upside-down and pelted off the price sticker.

# Champion

by Megan Scholtz

"Sanctuary."

"What?"

"Say the word, child. I cannot help unless—"

BANG

The large double doors burst open. Soldiers spill into the atrium, swords drawn and armour gleaming. The boy freezes. The Priestess calmly turns towards the new guests, tucking her hands into wide sleeves.

For a moment all is still.

Heat radiates from the hearth behind the pair; the fire's crackling cutting whip-like through the quiet. Candles sprawl across the steps among small lumps of wax, tiny flames flickering in anticipation. Daylight floats in from a roof aperture high above the scene and columns stand like silent stone sentries between the company and their mark. The boy is sure they hear his pounding heartbeat.

The Captain steps forward, expression dark as he dips into a shallow bow.

"Apologies for the disruption, High Priestess Kamali," his voice booms, "We're just here for the boy, then we'll be on our way."

The boy merely stares, chest heaving.

Guards before him, altar behind. He has nowhere to go; no one to save him.

Priestess Kamali pauses, calculating.

"He claimed sanctuary," she declares.

The guards hesitate, straightening as they look to their captain for direction. The boy echoes the motion.

The Captain narrows his eyes, "I didn't hear it."

"Well I did," she lifts her chin, "Which means you'll have to wait until he leaves."

The Captain's jaw tightens, but his tone remains diplomatic. "We're here on the king's orders--"

The High Priestess's brows rise, indignant, "What is a king's word against a god's?" she sweeps her arms out, smoothly descending a step, "You would have me disgrace Ingni, the Great Protector, in his own hall? Sacrilege! I should report you to the Chief Priest--"

"Now, now, there's no need for that." The Captain says quickly, hands splayed, "I'm sure we can work something out--"

"There's nothing to work out." The Priestess retorts, "The boy has claimed sanctuary and we're obligated to honour it regardless of his alleged crimes. Once he's off the grounds, you can have him, but he's protected here." She nods once in dismissal, tucking her hands back into her sleeves as she turns. "Good day."

The Captain's expression sours. The kings' displeasure would certainly land on his shoulders, but there was no argument to be made. The covenant of sanctuary was sacred.

"You can't hide in here forever, boy." He warns, "You have to come out sooner or later, and when you do, we'll be waiting."

With that he turns and marches out, the guards following behind.

Only once their echoing footsteps fade does the boy collapse onto a step and shudder a sigh.

"Thank you," he breathes.

Priestess Kamali eyes the door warily. "Don't thank me yet. I've only delayed the inevitable." Her attention drifts to him, "What's your name, boy?"

He hesitates.

"Alistair, High Priestess." He relents, gaze dropping. "My friends call me Ali."

The edge of her lip twitches up.



Defender.

Interesting.

"You may call me sister Kamali." she says, "Are you hungry?"

His stomach grumbles as if on cue. He nods tentatively.

The Priestess dips her head, "Good. Let's get you cleaned up and fed, then you can tell me how you got into such trouble with the palace guards."

Alistair shakes his head adamantly, "I don't--"

Sister Kamali raises a hand, "I'm not here to judge, and I certainly won't turn you away now, but I cannot help without the details. So, just start from the beginning and we'll go from there."

Too tired to argue, the boy allows himself to be led through a door to the back rooms. A modest, almost cramped space meets him, with a small kitchen and a few chairs crowded around the table. The Priestess ushers him towards the small washroom and begins preparing a simple broth at the stove.

He returns looking brighter, though dread still clings to his young features. Alistair quietly takes a seat, keeping his hands politely clasped as his gaze drifts around.

The High Priestess gathers meager ingredients into the humble soup and soon a salty tang fills the air. Finally she puts a steaming bowl and small hunk of bread before the boy and settles opposite him.

"When you're ready." she gestures.

He swirls the spoon, hunger turned to nausea, "I don't know what to tell you," he mumbles, "I was working in my uncle's workshop like usual when they came. My aunt answered; she tried to stall but they pushed past her."

Guilt and shame pinch his brow. "I didn't even try to fight, I just-I panicked - slipped out the back and started running, I-" his voice waivers, "I didn't know where else to go." His eyes glisten, "Guardians, I hope they're okay." He catches himself too late; cheeks reddening at the near blasphemy.

Sister Kamali ignores it. "Are you a follower?" she asks evenly.

Alistair sniffs and scratches his chin. "Not officially, or anything, though I've always respected Igni—as I respect all the Guardians," he adds quickly, gaze dropping again, "but I just felt...drawn here. Is that silly?"

She shakes her head gently, "Not at all. Igni's hall is always open." A pause. "How old are you, child?"

"Sixteen, sister."

She tilts her head, "When's your dedication ceremony?"

"Week after next."

"Any inclination?"

He shrugs. "I hadn't decided." He sits back and folds his arms, the food forgotten. "Guess now I don't have to."

"It's a lot to ask at your age; choosing a lifelong affiliation." She affirms.

His gaze lifts, "Did you always want to be a priestess?"

"Not always," sister Kamali admits, "I was a little older than you and studying medicine in the capital. I visited a temple one day and felt a strong presence—a pull I couldn't ignore. Pledged myself to Igni's service then and there; left everything else behind." She smiles softly. "The Guardians work in mysterious ways, sometimes." A beat. "Tell me more about your family."

"My parents are back in Fieldstream. Farmers." Alistair says, "I didn't take to it like my siblings, so they sent me to apprentice under my uncle."

"Are they affiliated?"

He tilts his head, "Pa's Inber, Ma and my older brother are Terron." He shrugs again, "We aren't super devout, honestly. We go to the Temple on holidays, but that's about it."

The edge of her lip curls. Earth and water. Fitting. But no fire.

The boy sits small and vulnerable before her; ordinary by every measure. Then something catches her eye: a glint of metal beneath his tunic.

"What's that around your neck?" she asks.

He blinks and pulls it out, thumbing the medallion. "Just a trinket. I found it by the creek a few weeks ago and cleaned it up. Thought it was kinda cool."

The Priestess' eyes brighten, "Ah, I see now, why you were drawn here," she says knowingly, "You're one of us."

His gaze snaps up, "I'm not a priest--"

Priestess Kamali chuckles, "No, no. Nothing so simple," she says, "That trinket, as you call it, is a Guardian's Mark. They're quite powerful with proper training."

Alistair's eyes widen. "Is this what they're after?" he asks, dumbfounded at how such a small, simple thing could cause such trouble, "They can have it--"

"I'm afraid it's not so easy, child." The Priestess shakes her head, "Once it chooses a welder they cannot be separated." Sister Kamali takes a breath, aware the boy's world is about to become irrevocably changed.

"Have you heard of the Guardians' Champions?"

Alistair nods slowly, "My parents told me stories as a kid...but I thought they're all gone?"

"There haven't been Champions in many years, no, and through history they've been targeted for their power." Kamali confirms, "I'm a member of an order dedicated to protecting them and it seems, my dear, that you've been selected."

"I don't understand," he splutters, "I'm just a kid - a Blacksmith's apprentice, I'm not--"

"Special?" she finishes, and he nods again, "Yes, we've had a few of those."

His brows furrow. A pause.

"Are there others like me?" he breathes.

"When the Champions rise there tend to be four -one for each Guardian." she explains, "We recently received word of Caellum's being found. They're travelling to a safehouse for training as we speak." Kamali stands, "We'll need to leave tonight. I'll begin preparations immediately--"

Alistair darts up, "I can't just go--"

"Nor can you stay," she says firmly, and he flinches. Kamali softens, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Listen to me, child: if the King knows of your new power, others won't be far behind. My

order is not alone in maintaining this knowledge." She explains, trying to balance urgency with care. "I know this must all be frightening, but I need you to trust me."

Alistair stares with wide eyes, all he was and all he could become colliding.

The Priestess' mouth forms a thin line. "If the Guardians are selecting Champions again something must be coming; something big," she says grimly, "And you may be the only ones who can stop it."

# **Catharsis**

by Sarah du Toit

## **Catharsis**

*"The process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions."*

It was cold outside. My breath created clouds with each exhale, and my feet felt the frosty cobblestones, even through the sneakers I wore everywhere. The path in between sleeping households was a familiar one to me, having walked it every night for two months. So, I knew that as soon as I rounded the corner, he'd appear at my side.

As every night before, James wore a long black coat matched with black shoes and dark grey suit pants. He often told me dressing like he was important made him feel the part, even in his simple nine-to-five office job. I always replied in agreement, he did look important, and he was. At least he was to me.

He took my hand, and I felt the chill run along where our skin met. It wasn't unpleasant though, seeing him never was. It was something that brought me a sad type of joy; one that sparked longing to never let him go, no matter the consequences, and happiness that I was able to spend even a minute of my day with him. Small clouds continued to form in front of me, drifting upwards into the night, joining their larger versions in the sky. We used to sit on the porch together on nights like this, pretending to smoke cigars and talking in thick 1970s Boston-mob accents. That felt like years ago, it's funny how long two months can feel. I squeezed his hand, pulling him closer.

"I wish we could live in these moments forever." My whisper came out so softly I was surprised he heard me.

"Me too, Pops."

The reply sounded coarse, as if he wasn't used to talking much anymore, but it still sounded like the most beautiful melody to me. I wanted to record it, replaying my nickname in his voice over and over – I don't remember him ever calling me

Poppy. Back then, I wasn't sure how I felt about my fiancé calling me Pops, a name associated with an old wrinkly man, but he'd reassured me. He said that, being a writer, it was a good thing. It meant I was full of wisdom and fun stories to tell. I would've let him call me anything now, as long as he stayed, as long as he was mine again.

The smell of rain from earlier remained in the air. Inhaling the wet particles stung my nose, and I knew it would be runny in the morning. Eyes the colour of fallen leaves observed me hugging my thin sweater closer, and he sighed a cloudless breath.

"You should really dress warmer, love. I don't want you catching a cold."

I never had to worry about dressing for the weather, he always had a jacket on hand, and I expected him to wrap his around me then, like all the times before. Remembering he wouldn't do that anymore lit a flame in me, a burn spreading from my heart outwards. Fury towards the universe for pulling us apart, and towards him for allowing it, warmed me more than any jacket could have.

"Stop calling me love, it's making it harder for me to move on." The words sounded cruel coming from my mouth. Forcing my eyes up to his, I was startled by how familiar his gaze still was. I still thought of him constantly; when I was happy, sad, or mad. In any and every scenario, he was in the forefront of my mind. A part of me hated it. A part of me didn't.

"And yet," I tried to steady the wobble in my voice. "And yet, I never want you to call me anything else."

James' brow creased as he looked down the dimly lit street. The turning wheels were visible to me – perhaps only to me, others always found it hard to read him like I could.

"Would it be best if we stopped meeting like this?"

His voice bled distaste towards the very thought. I loved that about him; he was always so selfless. Even though he left me, and even though he still loved me, he knew I needed to move on with my life. It wasn't healthy to stay hung up on ghosts of the past, but it was difficult not to be when they kept reappearing.

"I suppose so." A gust carried the sound from my lips and into the universe before I could bury them.

For a heartbeat everything around us froze, afraid he would immediately leave forever. I wanted to erase my words. Replace them. I wanted to say we could meet every second day instead, or only on Sundays. I wanted to do anything to make sure he didn't leave me again. But I stayed quiet, and he remained at my side as we walked, a metal archway above us marking the entrance.

As we neared 'the spot' the edges of his figure blurred, a wet drop running down my cheek. I knew it would be over soon, and I'd be alone again. Was that really what I wanted, to be alone with a James-shaped hole in my soul? The cracks within me split further, my vision becoming even more unfocused as we slowed to a stop.

"Will you still visit me?" The broken voice demolished any restraint left in me.

A rough outline of the gravestone was before me, but I couldn't make out the carvings anymore. All I could do was shake my head up and down – of course I would still visit him.

"I don't want you to leave," I finally whined. "No one can look after me like you do."

My refusal to use the past tense of that final word brought no comfort. He frowned, holding me closer as I cried into his shoulder. The absence of his familiar cologne mixed with coffee only made more tears appear.

"Speak my name, and I will be at your side. I will listen to you scream, and I will hug you whilst you cry." He looked off to the side, his eyes portrayed the same sense of helplessness I felt. "Although you may not see me each time, I promise that you will feel my presence."

Relief ran through me, his words confirming what my heart already believed. I drew a steady breath, preparing myself to open my eyes and let him go – but he was already gone. My body stiffened, ready to fight a surge of sadness that never came. Instead a warmth hugged around me, a reassurance that it would be okay. I pressed my fingers to my lips before placing them on the cold stone, somehow feeling freer to love him, to love his story, and to share it with anyone who was willing to listen.

# **Te Awa Kairangi: birth of a river**

by Nick Cottrell

## **Chapter 1 – river born.**

There was no time before. Rather the river was born over millennia, like the ever-so-slow awakening from a deep and dreamless sleep. Time is measured not by the seasons but by the ages, and summer, spring, autumn, winter merely the flickering heartbeat of the passing years.

So it was for Te Awa Kairangi. A name only given in moments just passed. 'Name'. It had no concept of that which was given. That which identifies it from other tributaries. Indeed its own tributaries had names that collectively wove into its own being. Akatarawa which flowed from where the great warm orb disappeared beyond the hills, Mangaroa from where it rose chasing the dark sky away with its ember-like golden hues, Pākuratahi running alongside through bush and gully, and Whakatīkei from near the great opening.

Te Awa Kairangi had no mother, nor father. It was not born by copulation but by tributaries of wai funnelling between ridges. Over eons, mere seasons to the river, these ridges deepened. They rose towards the flickering sky as Te Awa Kairangi slowly descended, its gape opening wider to become Te Whanganui-a-Tara where its name lost connection. Its 'its-ness' became not its own but rather a different it, with different currents and movements, a salinity favoured by different beings that gravitated through and around it. To Te-Whanganui-a-Tara, Te Awa Kairangi was its most significant tributary and where they met an ever-present mingling of saline and fresh wai left undulating tingles.

For countless flickers of the sky, sweeping moments of heat and drought, repeated beats of frost and gale, Te Awa Kairangi existed. Grown, forged from the land by the ever-running wai that cleaved round stones and pebbles from its edges, that journeyed along its length and formed the meandering turns and gullies as they laid its shifting base. For millenia what was had always been. Its purpose was felt through flickering, fleeting and repeated moments. Ascending tuna, fighting against the spiralling currents towards its tributaries. Darting kotare that speared the surface plunging effortlessly to steal tiny life forms. Rabbles of white karoro and



tarāpunga that loitered noisily and secretive forms that skulked along the edges nipping tiny sips during moments of stillness.

Te Awa Kairangi felt the roots of great flaxes binding its edges, keeping its form, protecting against the earth that would during turbulence be scraped into its flowing waters to dissipate into murkiness, reminding Te Awa Kairangi of its emergence as it was riven through the valley. The tall red heads of the harakeke stood proud through blades of fibrous leaves, like sentinels guarding, protecting.

Thus was born the river. And the river was life. For generations upon generations of tiny beings who stole from it but never wounded, only harmonised. For long and many flickering moments. Always. Ongoing. Repeated.

## **Chapter2. Footsteps in the mud.**

For eons small flitting beings meandered through, in, over and on Te Awa Kairangi's waters. As rocks shifted, as banks crumbled, as the wai receded and rose, the beings moved in and out, like tiny flecks barely noticed, living in synergy with the river.

There came a day, but a heartbeat ago, as the sun flickered overhead as it had done every beat since time began, when a different being emerged. Ta Awa Kairangi felt this one. It moved differently, pulsing with a curious nature. Its voice echoed across the valley, alien and complex, babbling sounds with different pitch and undulating volume. While still small, it was bigger, and moved in groups, with purpose.

When at first its presence was felt, there was caution, as though it did not recognise the currents, the weaving turns. It drank the wai and it moved through, stepping on the rocks like none had before. Te Awa Kairangi felt softness and weight. This was not usual. The forms stood tall, from stone to sky.

Heartbeats later, Te Awa Kairangi felt acrid residue mingling with its wai as smoke settled across its surface. While it did not know smoke it tasted the bitter and acidic tang, sensed the dying roots of felled trees that once bound the earth just on the edge beyond its banks.

As time flashed passed numbers grew and the beings became one with the river. Excited calls of small ones dipping and splashing, the powerful chant of larger ones cutting through its surface on vessels of timber, and others thrusting spears at unsuspecting tuna that had moved with the river for generations.

With each passing beat the beings settled, the smoke lessened, the flax, albeit diminished remained guarding its banks, and a harmony descended between the hills. The beings lived as those had before, taking and living amongst the wai and stealing small beings but always leaving others to continue their journey as had the matuku moana, the karoro and the tuna before them.

### **Chapter 3. Contaminants and concrete.**

There came a moment where something changed, rapidly, forcibly like a heart attack, breaking the natural rhythm. As Te Awa Kairangi quickly grew used to the new beings that lived along its edges, a new presence was felt. This grew heavier, louder, faster and shed skins of foreign elements that mingled with its wai and earth.

It started with more smoke, less trees, a shifting and deadening of the foliage whose roots once bound its edges. Dense plants that lined just beyond its reach were cleared. Noises grew and resounded between the hills, and a heavy layer was spread either side, sandwiching it, encasing it. Unbeknown to Te Awa Kairangi this was concrete, sand and crushed stone that eventually laid lines of heavy unyielding footsteps that pressed down on its very core.

The stones that had once tumbled freely now shifted and gathered against the behemoths that criss-crossed the river. The tiny beings that once dipped in and out grew less, wary and unwelcome, displaced beyond the hills. The beings that had arrived heartbeats ago, now numbered many, different babbles that eventually became lost to a rushing and roaring as heavy large moving forms rushed noisily all around. Those unyielding concrete footprints reverberated with long moving forms, heavy and grubby, leaving residues that filtered through and into the once pristine wai.

Occasionally, between the beats, the numerous forms would steal not tuna, nor crayfish, nor pukeko, but the very stones that lined its bed. Te Awa Kairangi felt a new change occurring. Its once flowing tributaries, Akatarawa, Mangaroa, Pākura-tahi and Whakatīkei, friends since time immeasurable, grew slow and inconsistent. An alien filth permeated the clarity, leaving murkiness from the industries of man. Te Awa Kairangi could not choke, its mouth a mere terminology just given, but had it the ability it would surely have, to rid itself of contaminants that sat heavily through it.

Unnatural elements emerged, mingled with the silent invisible residues, littering as they descended towards its gape, metal bikes, geometric bricks, plastic membranes, and miniscule hard items of materials that did not belong of the valley. Small slips that once came with the passage of storms, became dwarfed by amplified earthworks. The forms cleaved and cut, shaped and layered and encased parts of its bank in a shell of concrete that denied the activities that had for eons been the very motions that born Ta Awa Kairangi from the valley floor.

This happened within the space of a beat. A change, that to any other being would have pierced the heart, an erupting embolism or halting thrombosis that stifled life. But Te Awa Kairangi had weathered the ravages of time. Storms and floods, droughts and slips, born of the battle between earth, sky and water, evaporating heat and freezing frosts.

Unknown to Te Awa Kairangi the forms that had changed it, also held it in high regard. Behaviours changed albeit within a time too fleeting and new to be felt yet. It was the vein of the valley, the thread that bound lives, a guiding force that became the heart of the community.

Te Awa Kairangi had no concept of tomorrow. But the beings, the forms that lived around it did. They knew that to live with the wai, the tiny forms that dipped and darted, the plants that lined its edges, was to live in harmony.

While its shape may have changed, the waters continued to rise and drop, the banks slipped and shifted, the stone continued to tumble from north to south. The river had endured and would do so for countless lives more. A fleeting and skipped heartbeat rendering change would not stop the currents that flowed. Tomorrow Te Awa Kairangi would flow as it had done since the dawn of time, since a trickle meandered though rock, always, ongoing, flowing ever onwards.

# **The Boy and the Bridge**

by Andy Dunn

Tama cut across the school field without looking back. His shoes bit into the grass, damp from last night's rain, and left crooked prints behind him. A bell rang in the distance - sharp, shrill. He kept walking.

He ducked under a wire fence where the mesh sagged low, then slipped into the trees at the edge of Harcourt Park. Leaves clung to his hoodie. A spider web caught his cheek and clung like thread, invisible and annoying. He wiped it away roughly.

The path to the river was quiet. He liked that about it - how it didn't ask questions. No one here cared if he handed in his maths book or talked back in class. No one rolled their eyes when he didn't know the right word for things. Here, the birds spoke in whistles and clicks. Here, he could breathe without thinking too hard.

A tūi landed on a flax stalk a few metres ahead, glossy and fast. It cocked its head, throat twitching. Tama stopped walking. The bird watched him. Then it flew off toward the swing bridge, its flight low and purposeful.

He followed.

The bridge swayed before he stepped on. Wind pushed at the cables. Below, the Hutt River slid by, slate-grey and slow. Tama paused, one foot hovering over the first plank. Something knotted in his gut - not fear, not guilt. Just a feeling, tight and familiar.

He gripped the side rope and stepped on.

Halfway across, he looked down. The river moved steady and patient, like it knew where it was going and didn't need to explain.

That made sense to him.

At the other end, an old man stood in the path, feeding birds with crumbs from a paper bag.

Tama slowed.

The man looked up. Nodded once.

Tama hesitated. Then moved forward.

The old man didn't speak right away. He tossed crumbs to the water's edge, where a few pīwakawaka flitted in and out of the scrub. One landed near his boot. The man smiled -not at Tama, but at the bird - as if they shared a secret.

Tama hovered a few steps back. His shoulders tightened. He looked past the man, toward the trail.

"You gonna tell someone, Koro?" Tama asked, voice low.

The man didn't look at him. "Tell them what?"

"That I'm not at school."

The man brushed crumbs from his palms, slow and deliberate.

"I come here most days," he finally said. "The river's old company. Doesn't talk too much. Just listens."

Tama didn't reply. His hands stayed buried in his hoodie pocket.

The man looked at him then. Pale eyes, kind but weathered, like wind-worn stone. There was something steady in him - like the trees, or the river.

"You feel like you're floating out the edges," he said. "Like no one sees you unless you make a noise."

Tama blinked. His mouth opened, then shut. The birds had gone quiet.

"I didn't—" he started. "You don't even know me."

"Don't need to," the man said. "I've been you."

They stood there in silence. Somewhere across the water, a car screeched. Tama rubbed the inside of his sleeve, fabric worn thin.

"I'm here," the man said, tossing one last crumb. "If you ever feel like being seen."

And with that, he walked toward the track, whistling something old and tuneless.

The birds followed.

Tama stayed where he was, the bridge behind him swaying. He didn't know if he felt heavier or lighter.

Just... noticed.

The next day, Tama didn't mean to go back.

But his feet led him there anyway - past the green shed, down the track behind the rugby posts, through the trees still wet with rain. His hoodie clung to his back, warm and damp.

Koro was already by the river. A cluster of ducks gathered near his feet.

He looked up as Tama approached but didn't say anything.

Tama dropped his bag by a tree and sat on a dry rock, cross-legged, picking at a fraying thread on his sleeve. The silence stretched - not awkward, just easy.

"Missed the tūi this morning," Koro said eventually.

"Saw it near the school gate. Getting into the harakeke," replied Tama.

Koro smiled. "Smart bird."

A breeze lifted Tama's fringe. He brushed it back. The river shimmered in sunlight. A feather drifted past - small, grey, weightless.

"Used to come here with my nan," Koro said. "She'd tell me the river remembers everything. Like it carries our stories under the surface."

"Does it?"

"I reckon it listens. That's enough."

The water changed colour from light green to silver to shadowed blue.

"My foster mum... she's alright," Tama said. "Just, she doesn't get it."

Koro let the words hang in the air.

"She doesn't need to," he said. "Only you do."

Tama picked up a stone, cold and smooth, and flicked it into the river. A ring spread and vanished.

They sat a while longer, saying nothing. Just the river talking, and the bird's overhead.

The following week, Tama showed up most days.

Sometimes he spoke. Sometimes he didn't. Koro never pushed. They fed birds. Skimmed stones. Let the quiet be its own language.

One afternoon, clouds rolled low over Upper Hutt. The air smelled like waiting rain. Tama crossed the bridge with his hood up. Koro was on the carved bench, a thermos beside him, steaming gently.

"You're early," Tama said.

"Old bones feel the cold quicker," Koro replied, patting the space beside him. "E noho."

Tama did. He rested lightly against the bench - not quite relaxed, but closer.

Koro poured tea into a tin mug and handed it over. It smelled of ginger and honey. Tama took a sip. The heat bloomed in his chest.

They watched the water in silence.

"You going to go back?" Koro asked.

Tama's jaw tightened. "Dunno."

"No one says it has to be all or nothing. Maybe just for today."

Tama didn't answer.

"You're not the only one who's ever wanted to run," Koro added. "But sometimes the bravest thing is turning up again."

"Anyway, you can't hang with an old man every day," Koro laughed.

Rain landed on Tama's knee. Another drop on the rim of the tin cup. He looked up at the grey sky and grinned.

He stood and handed back the mug.

"Yeah. Alright then."

He stepped onto the bridge and didn't look back until he reached the other side. Koro raised one hand. Tama didn't wave back. But he paused, let the rain touch his face, and felt something inside him loosen.

Then he turned and walked away.

The school gates looked more imposing than he remembered.

He paused at the field's edge, backpack slung over one shoulder. The bell had already rung, but students still drifted in like slow currents. He could turn back.

But he didn't.

Inside the main office, Miss Ripaki blinked like she'd seen a ghost.

"Ah, Tama. Running late."

"I'm here for class," he said.

She tapped something into her computer. No lecture. Just a printed slip and a quiet, "Welcome back, boy."

In Social Studies, the teacher handed him a worksheet without comment.

Tama tried not to fidget. His leg bounced under the desk. No one paid him much attention. And for once, that felt okay.

By lunch, the knot in his stomach had loosened.

He sat on the edge of the quad, picking at a sandwich from his bag. The sky was clearing now - blue cracking through the clouds in patches. A tūi called from the flax bushes near the fence. Tama looked up, watched its flash of feathers. It tilted its head, sang again, and flew off toward the river.

A quiet tug pulled at his chest.

That afternoon, after school, Tama didn't go home right away. He walked the long way. Down past the netball courts, over the bike track, and toward the river.



Koro wasn't there.

Only the bench, empty but waiting. A small brown feather lay on the seat. Tama picked it up, turned it over in his palm, then tucked it into his pocket.

He didn't stay long. Just enough to feel the breeze on his skin. To hear the river's low murmur. To know that some places keep holding you - even when you're not sitting still.

When he reached the main road again, his steps were lighter.

Not fixed. Not finished.

But beginning.

# By Right of Blood

by Meenakshi Kannan

The Virelun Seers collectively held their breath, their eyes frantically scanning the clock-like maps before them. The palpable tension in the domed room had stripped them of all but one indisputable truth. A true King would emerge once again.

"We must inform the King," a haggard, misshapen old man muttered from beneath his straggly beard. Concerned whispers echoed amongst the group of bald men. "Our duty remains as such, whatever the consequences may be," the old man grunted, dismissing any objections. The Seers drew the hoods of their garnet robes over their heads and filed out of the wooden doors of the ramshackle cottage.

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The Seers were led down the thickly carpeted corridor, proudly adorned in Svalor colours. A rich, golden glow from chandeliers floating above lit their path to the large, glistening oak doors that stood at the end. The guards stationed on either side nodded in acknowledgement, swinging open the towering gates to reveal a polished marble dais upon which sat the celestial throne. A stoic man occupied the throne with an air of easy authority, the astral crown resting haphazardly on his brows, encircling his golden head. Men of various social classes formed a line in the middle of the grand room, seeking his audience.

All eyes turned towards the Seers as they entered the room, stopping a distance behind the line of men. The herald in ornate livery cleared his throat and strode forward, staff in hand. Slamming the butt of the golden pole to the marble floor with a resounding crack, he spoke.

"By command of His Most Sovereign Majesty, King Varyn Zhael of Svalor, I hereby announce the Seers of Vierlun — keepers of time unmanifest, and witnesses to the threads of fate yet unspun."

"It has been long since the garnet shadows last fell upon Svalor. I trust you come bearing truths of what the future holds. At least now may your prophecies find a willing King, Seers of Virelun," King Varyn's lips curled in a predatory welcome as he dismissed all those present with a flick of his wrist. The crowd dispersed in a sea of

whispers and stolen glances, wearily making their way out of the throne room until only the King, his guards, and the Seers remained.

"Speak, Seers of Virelun."

"Your Majesty," the misshapen old seer stepped forward, his head bowed at level with his crooked spine. "There is a message... The heavens — they have spoken. It is time, yet again."

The King's jaw clenched tightly, his lips forming a thin line. "When?"

"Four moons from now."

A proud smile spread across the young King's face. "That's spectacular news, indeed."

"Queen Seralynne—"

"Yes, she is with child. They expect his arrival four moons from now. I suppose the Zhael bloodline will welcome its fourth true King of the millennium, as is fitting."

"Yet another Zhael whose birth is orchestrated by the heavens... Such... wonderful news, indeed, Your Majesty," the Seer's stomach turned, though his voice betrayed no trace of it. Keeping his eyes trained on the marble floor, he spoke calmly, "I believe it is time we take our leave, then, Your Majesty. May the birth of your son bring forth wealth more marvelous than that of those before him."

"You may take your leave on the morrow. After all, your prophecies have found a King most willing," King Varyn smiled, his canines glinting in the golden light trapped within his court. "Show them to their chambers and ensure they are looked after."

The Seers bowed in unison as they were led out by the armoured guards, but the old man's mind lingered on the stars. They had spoken — yes. But not all of them had smiled.

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The old seer paced within the warm chamber he had been granted for the night, sleep evading his grasp. Something tugged at the edge of his senses. He halted. The sacred runes on his arms and face were fading. Heart quickening, he stepped into the pale moonlight seeping through the tall windows. He rolled back the sleeves of his robe, holding out his arms. The runes flared, pulsing hot against his

skin.

Something is wrong.

Reaching into the folds of his robe, he retrieved a small cut of coloured glass and held it to the heavens, catching the moonlight in its edge and turning its reflection upon himself. The light danced across his leathery skin, and his eyes clouded over into milky, moonlit white. Visions surged forth. A child, limp and lifeless. A brilliant light shadowed and shackled in darkness. Then, fire — roaring, vengeful, divine — descending upon the city of starlight. He staggered back, gasping desperately for air. The runes flickered violently before vanishing from his skin entirely — as if the heavens had spoken all they would, and sealed their silence.

"The Zhael heir is not the true King," the old man whispered, grabbing his satchel and making for the door.

The old seer slipped into the watchful shadows of the palace corridors dimly lit by fire sconces that seemed to perpetuate the cold stillness. He moved quietly, each step laced with apprehension. The tips of his fingers traced over an uneven section of wall near the end of the passage — stone worn smooth by generations of cautious, dutibound hands. With a faint groan, the hidden panel gave way, revealing a narrow stairwell that spiraled into darkness. He cast a weary glance over his shoulders before closing the panel and descending into the underbelly of the palace — a forgotten catacomb where silence reigned with time as its prisoner. Kneeling by a hallowed niche in the wall, the seer pulled out a bone tube from his satchel, and with an arthritic hand, unrolled a small strip of parchment. He scrawled:

***The heavens speak in two tongues. Two born beneath the sovereign star — one crowned, the other bound. A divine fire will consume Svalor if the truth remains shackled. Find tomorrow's King.***

He sealed the parchment with light conjured by a foreign tongue, slid it back into the tube, and pushed it into a narrow crevice in the wall. The tube's descent was marked by soft whistling followed by a faint thud.

"They must know," his breaths were laboured. "If I do not return... someone must know."

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Far from the stone spires of Svalor, nestled in the borders of the lowlands,

moonlight fell gently upon a decrepit cottage. Inside, a woman slept fitfully, her hands cradling the curve of her belly. Outside, a withered hag watched the stars with narrowed eyes. Her voice, dry as dead leaves, broke the silence veiling the village.

"The fire-star burns bright tonight," she muttered. "Four moons are left."

She turned her gaze towards the mountains standing sombre in the distance, where the royal citadel lay cloaked in cold indifference.

"There will be no kingdom to rule."

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Back in the palace, King Varyn stood alone in his solar, an imposing presence bathed in moonlight. His unblinking eyes locked onto the fire-star above—the same celestial presence that had guided kings, his ancestors, for millennia. His jaw clenched.

"You saw it too," he murmured.

Behind him, the chamber door opened without ceremony. A man cloaked in Svalor silver stepped forward and bowed low.

"He has left his chamber, Your Majesty," the man spoke matter-of-factly. "We suspect he is headed for the abandoned archives beneath the palace where the Seers used to congregate."

"He won't reach them," Varyn replied coldly. The man bowed before he turned to leave, aware of his new tasking.

"And, Cedric, should he speak to anyone before dawn, slit their throats too." The cloaked man hesitated. "Your Majesty, do you believe the other child will survive the culling?"

"I believe," the King said, turning at last, "that if the heavens will not obey me, I will cage their chosen like any other beast. He will live — barely. Enough to keep the Gods silent, but never enough to rise. The Zhael heir will reign. The Gods will bend. Or burn."

"Find the child. Let the fire-star bear witness. I will forge my own prophecy."

# Where There Ought to Be Love

by Gaynor Mills

To a bystander it's a picturesque scene.

The late afternoon sun filters through leafy trees in a suburban park. A young boy, deep in thought, gently sways on the playground swing. A soft breeze ruffles the long blonde curls that frame his already handsome face.

He himself does not see beauty. He does not see a picturesque scene. His is a dark world. His reality is consumed by fear.

Although only 12 years old, Daniel's mind is that of an adult in many ways - having seen, heard and felt more than any child should. Where there ought to be kindness, there is pain. Where there ought to be laughter, there is sadness. Where there ought to be love, there is shame.

In recent weeks, for reasons unbeknownst to him, the abuse from his father has been escalating, and in turn he's finding it harder to keep his younger siblings safe. He holds a great responsibility to protect them, to shield them from harm when he can. Loving them, and living with the constant fear of losing them, is a never-ending ache he carries in his heart.

People know, that's the thing. Neighbours, family, they're all scared of his dad. Daniel remembers after a particularly brutal attack late last year, he caught his teacher staring at the burns on his arms. When their eyes met her face reddened, she dropped her gaze and never said a word. What little hope Daniel still had at that point disappeared right there.

Even the cops know, having made several visits to the house after calls from neighbours. But every time, denials from mum and easy banter from dad (which doesn't fool the cops of course) means he gets away with it again.

Daniel's given up trying to talk to his mum about this. He doesn't understand that she's trapped in her own misery. Afraid, controlled, incapable of making decisions for herself. She was once a vibrant young woman full of dreams and full of love, but

is now just a shell of her former self. The control his father has over his mother was well and truly embedded by the time Daniel and his sisters came along. They never got to experience the mum she could have, and should have been. Because of this, during the now rare, and mainly one-sided conversations with his mum, Daniel's frustration with her is evident.

She's home now, nursing what's probably a broken toe, after dad stomped on her bare foot when dinner wasn't ready on time last Sunday. She can't go to the doctor though, dad says it will heal on its own in good time - assuming dinner isn't late again.

Questions swim in Daniel's mind. What right does he have to hurt us? Why has no one stood up to him? What happens the day he goes too far?

With the recent increase in violence, the fear and sadness he's carried for most of his life is now being overtaken by anger.

This morning, as Daniel left the house to make the tediously long journey to school, he looked back down the driveway to see his father heading toward the garage, first beer in hand. From past experience, the days that start in this fashion have been some of the darkest his family have suffered. Daniel knows how ugly things will turn by evening, and this fuels his decision to take action.

Somewhere deep in his subconscious lies an awareness that there will be consequences, however the scale is too enormous for him to fully comprehend.

Still on the swing, he vaguely registers the sound of sirens somewhere in the neighbourhood, but pays no great attention. Rising slowly to continue his way home, he absently reaches into his backpack, ensuring the pocketknife he'd stolen from his father's bedside drawer just a few days earlier, is still in his possession.

Daniel moves forward as if in a trance – mind blank, head down as he watches one foot step in front of the other. There's no cleverly thought-out plan here, just a little boy prepared to do what he feels must be done. Nearing home, as he turns the corner into his street, he lifts his head to see the flashing lights of a police car and an ambulance parked outside his house.

His stomach heaves. Fuck, I'm too late. I'm too fucking late!!!! In a blind panic he sprints the rest of the way home.

Bursting through the back door, he finds his mother sitting in stillness at the kitchen table. Her skin is ashen, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. Unable to speak, dreading the worst, Daniel drops into the chair across from her.

Mum can see what Daniel is fearing. "The girls are fine Danny, they're next door" she says, barely above a whisper.

A police officer steps into the doorway. "Daniel? It's bad news I'm sorry son. There's been an accident, and your dad has passed away. It looks like there was a gas leak in the garage. I'm very sorry, both of you, for your loss. We'll be outside if you need anything or have any questions." Neither Daniel nor his mum feel any inclination to respond, as his kind words are overshadowed by the obvious disdain he holds for the newly deceased. Daniel's pretty certain there will be some high-fiving going on back at the station later.

Giving them their privacy, the officer steps back out of the kitchen and proceeds back toward the garage.

Daniel turns his attention back toward his mother as his stomach gradually starts to unknot. Making eye contact, and without speaking, she slowly reaches across the table, taking his hands in hers. He feels a small object, cold and hard, transfer from her palm to his. He recognizes it as the safety clip from the gas bottle valve.

They hold each other's gaze. In this life-changing moment, for the first time that he can recall, he sees hope in her eyes; in his she sees the first flicker of respect.





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