

Two Kittens and a Pig Named Ed by Max West

First Place – Adult Division

I have grudgingly come to accept that there are things I will never be able to understand or explain, such as trigonometry, tax codes, or German opera, to name but a few.

Another was my father. ‘Dad’, actually. I made the mistake of calling him ‘father’ once when I graduated high school.

“You’ve never called me that before so don’t start today just because you’re graduating. We ain’t Catholic and I sure ain’t no priest.”

He could be hard as granite and I never knew what might set him off.

Dad was a fifth-generation farmer. He wasn’t a big-time agronomist that owned a half-million-dollar tractor required to cultivate several thousand acres. His was a Norman Rockwell-like family farm, barely three-hundred acres, and he puttered around on an ancient Ford tractor dutifully rotating crops of corn and soybeans. He always kept a few calves and a couple dozen pigs he fed with corn he grew, then ground himself.

He was all business, and his decisions were made to keep the ledger balanced. Take for example, the story of a pig I named Ed. Born on a February night went the temperature dropped to -14°, Ed was the only pig in the litter that survived. Dad brought him inside and he and Mom diligently bottle fed him through the cold winter. I was just a kid and playfully grunted at him. He seemed to understand, and he grunted back. We were best buddies. Finally, Ed was big enough to join the adult hogs. I fed him and checked on him every day. Everything was fine until I came home from my first day in fourth grade.

It was a terrible day. I stopped by the hog pen, but Ed wasn’t there.

“Ed’s missing,” I cried to Dad in a panic.

“Boy, I sold him. He reached market weight and I got good money for him.”

He saw me tearing up and frowned. “Did you think he was going to stay a pet? Pigs and cows ain’t pets. They’re sources of revenue, like corn and beans. It’s how I put food on the table.”

His callous, matter-of-fact attitude was terrifying. I never completely forgave him.

Physically, he was a beast of a man. At an even six feet, two hundred pounds, he was all gristle and muscle. He was tough, and he made sure everyone knew it.

Example: It was my senior year in high school, and we were baling hay. The bales were the old-style rectangular ones, and the field crew would stack about sixty on a wagon. It would then be pulled up to a sloped grain elevator that ferried the hay to the loft via a slow-moving conveyor belt. Dad always insisted on the hardest job—being up in the loft, pulling the bales off the elevator and stacking them tightly. It was swelteringly hot in that hay loft, with no air movement, and the wasps that were disturbed when the bales got close to the rafters divebombed anyone within reach. Dad didn’t care. It was a badge of honor.

I was on the wagon with two others. We had the easy job: load the bales on the elevator for their slow journey to the top. For some reason, I thought of what Dad had done to Ed a few years before. I started speeding up the delivery. The wagon team went from three bales on the elevator at a time to four. Then five. I jumped down and sped up the elevator’s engine. I was determined to make him cry ‘Uncle’! Bales went faster and faster and I stared at the small opening in the barn siding, high above, expecting to see Dad waving frantically for us to slow down. Instead, he stuck his head out and swirled his arms madly, motioning for us to go faster.

We finished off the wagon with bales loaded end-to-end. When the last disappeared into the darkness, I flipped off the motor and awaited his wrath.

A solid minute passed. Nothing. Finally, he poked his head out and let out a yell. “Now that’s what I call gettin’ it done. Heck—that was fun.”

Like I said, he was a beast of a man.

He was young then, barely fifty years old. But time is unyielding, and the years took their revenge on a life spent turning dirt, slopping pigs, and climbing a silo in the dead of winter to feed cattle. I still cringe when I think of the silo.

He was sixty-two years old and it was a glacial February morning, like the night when Ed was born. Dad was climbing the silo’s narrow shaft when his foot slipped off the door tread. He lost his grip and crashed twenty feet to the concrete chute floor.

Mom called me. “Dad wants to know if you could stop over and feed the cattle. Something came up and we’ve got to run into town for a few minutes.”

“No problem,” I said, surprised at the request but smugly satisfied that he needed my help. It wasn’t until the next day that I found out why. A separated shoulder, four cracked ribs, and a broken arm ended up on the tally sheet. I finished out the winter feeding for him and he didn’t argue, but come spring he was planning on firing up the tractor and doing the planting. His best friend—Tom—was a neighbor down the road, and with his help, we got the planting done before he could try to do it himself.

He thanked Tom.

Two years later, Mom passed away. It was the only time I ever saw him cry and it seemed to take the life out of him. He began to withdraw and for the first time ever, I saw him as the old man he had become. That year, he decided he’d had enough with farming. I lived close, just a few miles away, but he never considered me taking over the farm’s operation.

“You’re an accountant—a pencil-pusher, too soft to handle farming.”

Maybe he was just looking out for me, keeping me away from a hard life. Maybe.

He rented the cropland to someone who agreed to work on the halves—equal sharing of expenses and revenue. Coupled with his small social security monthly stipend, he barely had enough to live on.

By the time he reached eighty, I was surprised he was still with us. His days consisted of short walks around the farm and much longer visits to the sofa where he watched reruns of old TV shows from his youth. The man I remembered as a hulk was gone, a shell of his past self, moored to the sofa and living in the past, just waiting to die.

Then something changed, and like trigonometry, I didn't understand.

I stopped one afternoon in early May to check on him. He was walking slowly out of the barn, his once broad shoulders now slumped.

“What's up Dad?” I asked.

“Some darned feral cat wandered in last week and dropped a couple kittens. They ain't even got their eyes open yet and the Momma cat's done run off.”

“That's a shame,” I replied.

“I'm going to try and feed them by hand,” Dad growled. “They'll be good mousers to keep the barn from getting chewed up.”

“It sounds like a lot of work. You sure you're up to this?”

“Shoot no,” he spat. “I'll have to feed them four—five times a day. At least it ain't freezing like it was when we had that dang pig.”

I started to say something mean, but stopped. “Did you name them?”

“No!” he yelled. “Names is what you give to kids and pets and they ain’t pets. They probably ain’t going to make it anyway but if they do, they’ll live in the barn and survive on their own means.”

I nodded and asked him if he needed anything. Like every other time I asked, he didn’t.

Returning home, I told my wife Beth about Dad’s barn guests.

“I hope he doesn’t get too attached to those kittens,” she said. “He doesn’t strike me as a cat person.”

“Dad doesn’t get attached to anything,” I replied bitterly, remembering Ed.

A week went by and I stopped to check on him again. I knocked loudly, lest he think I was a burglar. Dad had gotten a little paranoid since Mom died and truthfully, I was worried about getting shot.

He opened the door. “Why are you knocking?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled sheepishly. “It seemed like a good idea.”

“Well, it wasn’t,” he grumbled. “Now don’t talk too loudly. The kittens are sleeping, and I don’t want to wake their sorry little butts. I’d have to feed them then and they ain’t due for another hour.”

“You brought them inside?”

“Yep. There was a raccoon prowling around the barn and after feeding the little hairballs I wasn’t about to let it kill them and waste all my work. They can go back to the barn when they get bigger and can fend for themselves. You want to see ’em?”

“Sure,” I stammered, following him into the living room. There in a small wooden box were his invited guests.

“The black and white one is Lucky,” he announced. “Seems like a good name for a cat that wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for me. The all black one is Pookie.”

“I thought you weren’t going to name them,” I laughed, glad that he had.

“But...Pookie...?”

“I changed my mind,” he answered with a scowl. “And I like the name. When I met your Mom, she had a cat named Pookie, so I named the little runt for her.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, embarrassed. I cleared my throat.

Dad nodded his head and turned away briefly before turning to face me again. His eyes were moist.

“I want you to do me a favor,” he said quietly, his demeanor abruptly different. “If something happens to me, I need you and Beth to look after them. They won’t eat much, and I need to know that they’re going to be okay.”

More shock. “Are you all right Dad? Is there something you need to tell me?”

“No!” he roared, back to his old self. “I’m just planning ahead. I ain’t exactly young, in case you ain’t noticed.”

“I’ll talk it over with Beth, but she’s got a cat allergy so they probably will have to stay outside if we take them.”

I stared awkwardly at the kittens who were now awake, their round eyes gazing contentedly between little kitten ears. It reminded me of a Hallmark card.

“They think I’m their MomDad because I bottle feed ’em. Five times a day. But pretty soon, they’ll take their milk off a saucer. A few more weeks and they’ll be eating solid food. They wouldn’t be much trouble,” he announced.

When I got home, I explained the request to my wife.

“No way!” was her response. “I don’t like cats and I certainly don’t want them hacking up all over the house. Besides, cats make me sneeze.”

I let the discussion die a quick death.

Over the next few weeks, Dad’s devotion to Lucky and Pookie grew. When they were ten weeks old, I dropped by unannounced. Dad had just finished feeding them and they dutifully followed him wherever he went. He was their Pied Piper.

“You never told me if you would take them if I need you to,” he reminded me.

I scratched my head, dreading my reply. “Beth’s not too keen on the idea.”

He said nothing, then looked down at the kittens that were rubbing against his ankles and purring loudly. “I don’t know why they like me,” he said softly, his voice cracking. “I should’ve just put ‘em in a bag and dropped ‘em in the creek.”

“You wouldn’t have done that,” I said, hoping I was right.

“See if you can find them a home,” he half-ordered, half-begged.

I nodded my agreement, a lump in my throat.

He sat on his sofa and turned on the TV. An old episode of Gunsmoke was on, and he gently reached for Lucky and Pookie who were valiantly trying to climb up to join him. “A good home.”

The two kittens triumphantly made it onto Dad’s lap, curling into tight little balls of fur, purring contentedly for their MomDad. I watched as he gently stroked them, his wrinkled hands gnarled and scarred from a lifetime of hard labor. Had he evolved into this caring, gentle soul, or had he always been this way, simply choosing to hide his true self behind a blustery façade?

“I’ll do my best to find them a good home,” I replied as I headed for the door.

“Just a second,” he called. “I got something I need to get off my chest. Something you need to know.”

I faced him, dreading the bad news that was surely coming.

His head was down and his voice low. “That pig—Ed. I knew you loved him. You made him into a pet, and I didn’t stop it from happening. Anyhow, I couldn’t bear the thought of you seeing him trucked away so I didn’t tell you I was going to do it. I thought it would be easier the way I did it. I’m sorry. I was...wrong.”

I felt the tears trickle down my cheeks. I was touched by his sincerity, and it was the first time I ever heard him apologize for anything.

“Thanks for telling me. It’s okay. I understand,” I said, my voice cracking.

“Now don’t go getting all gushy with me,” he snarled, but the smile on his face told the true story. His burden had been lifted. So had mine.

I cleared my throat and collected myself. “Don’t worry about Lucky and Pookie. Beth and I will take good care of them if need be.”

Dad went downhill quickly. I visited every day, then just a few weeks after Christmas, he passed. I found him on his sofa, Lucky and Pookie devotedly curled upon his lap. The smile on his face told me he had gone peacefully in his sleep, his little friends keeping him company to the end.

I don’t know how Dad’s last months would have been had that feral cat not wandered in and gifted him those kittens. They gave him purpose at a time when he had none. As for me, they provided a way to heal and forgive.

Pookie and Lucky now live with Beth and me. Inside. She takes an allergy pill every day. They sleep at the end of our bed, and every evening, they crawl up on my lap while we watch TV. I think they see me as their new guardian angel. But there will always be only one MomDad.

A Music Hall Ghost Story by Tiffany Tanner

Second Place – Adult Division

Prologue

Mary Powell stood on the passenger deck of the Moselle as the steamboat pulled away from the Fulton dock. She pulled at the cream-colored bow that so neatly held her brown linen cap in place and thought of the journey before her. She was leaving Cincinnati to try and start a new life in St. Louis with her husband, Thomas. She had dreamed of being a mother, but after two stillborn babies, it was clear that her dream of motherhood was never going to be realized. Worse still, her once loving husband, blamed her for their children's deaths. This move was a feeble attempt to inject life back into their marriage. As this was the fastest ship in Ohio, they would arrive in St. Louis in no time – less than three days, in fact. Today, was April 25, 1838. It's evening now, so we will get there by early morning on April 28th, she thought to herself. This was the last thing that went through Mary's mind before there was an eruption of heat and fire. Mary heard what she thought was booming canon fire as she felt like she was being kicked on all sides of her body from unseen, unrelenting forces into the air and into cold, enveloping darkness and then, nothing....

Present Day

The woman stood in the large auditorium and clearly looked out of place. She craned her neck to gaze at the large, glimmering crystal chandelier that masterfully served as the eye-catching centerpiece to the room. While she was dazzled by the beauty of the chandelier and the lush red seats and gold accents throughout the design of the auditorium, she could not allow this beautiful space to distract her from her current situation. She did not know where she was, how she got here, and most

importantly, who she was. Panic began to overtake her and almost on instinct she tugged on the ribbon that was fastened under her chin. She raised her hands to her head and felt what appeared to be a linen cap. Further assessment of herself, showed that she wore a long, dark brown dress with a modest neckline that had a fullness to the lower part of the sleeves. A thin, camel colored shawl also accompanied the dress. Dark brown fabric slippers with a slight square-toed shape topped off her costume. These seem to fit me, she thought, so why do these items not seem familiar to me?

“Oh, a new arrival, I’s see!” exclaimed a voice from behind her. The woman jumped from being startled unexpectedly. She turned to see who had uttered the exclamation. Before her stood a young boy, maybe about 10, who was simply dressed. He wore black trousers and a white collared shirt. His black shoes had barely any soles and bore multiple scuff marks. The boy clearly did not have parents that could afford much, if he had parents at all, she shamefully thought. He does not really belong in a grand place like this. Though, at this moment, I cannot say whether I do either, the woman considered.

The boy interrupted her thoughts and asked, “Did ya just get ‘ere? Where ya from?”

The woman paused before answering the boy. She looked down at her shoes willing herself to remember anything at all. She felt like a fool standing in front of this young boy about to confess her complete ignorance and confusion. “I-I, guess I did. I do not know. I am not clear on how I got here or from where. Or really where here is. Do you know? And s-sorry. Who are you?” she stammered.

The boy’s eyes lit with mischief. He knowingly nodded his head and said, “Oh, yer one of ‘em. The forgetters. We get ‘em from time ta time. Jus’ show up ‘ere and can’t ‘member thing ‘bout themselves or what happened to ‘em. I’s almost hate ta tell ‘em tha truth of it. Some still ne’er can face it even after they’s know tha truth. Guess we’ll see which type ya are.”

The woman felt herself go white as a ghost. She knew instantly that whatever this boy was alluding to was going to be something life changing. As she prepared to ask the boy her question, she took a deep breath, or thought she did. Wait. Did she? That normal sensation of air filing her lungs was missing. Panicked. She tried again. Still nothing. She started to will herself to pull in air, moving her chest up and down, up and down, her eyes wildly looking around - searching for precious air and help

that was not there. After what seemed like an eternity of this continuous struggle, she clutched her throat and heard a loud cackle. She tried to focus on the origin of the sound and realized that the boy had been laughing. How cruel she thought angrily, as her gaze met his, I am struggling to breathe and he's laughing at me. It was as if he could read her thoughts, because the boy snorted, "If ya notice, ya don't breathe no mo'. Ya look silly right now. Jus' stop wha ya doin'. This is goin' ta be a lot ta take, but ya already dead. Ya and me. We's no longer livin'. Spirits, I's guess is what we is."

The woman was still clutching her throat and gazing at the boy in utter disbelief and terror. Much to her displeasure, though, she realized that once she stopped struggling and ceased any breathing attempts, she was still alive. Or was she? Was what the boy told her true? Was she a spirit? How absurd! Of course she was alive! But then, why was she not breathing? A medical marvel? Yes! That's it! It must be. A temporary pause in the need to breathe. That must be the explanation for this nonsense. But it did not explain my mysterious arrival in this place or my memory loss. She interrupted her thoughts to ask the boy, "So if I am a spirit, why am I here? Why this place? What is this place?"

The boy smiled and said, "Not sure why yer 'ere, but I guess you died 'round 'ere. From what I's can tell, spirits tend ta stick round places where bad things happen. There's like a energy tat sort of holds 'em to tha place. Not all stick, some seem ta need fixin' mo' than oe'rs. Now, it a Music Hall."

"So where did you come from?" She questioned. "Why are you here? How impolite of me, I haven't even asked you your name."

"Me? Name's John Parker and I's come from a orphanage – Cinci'nata Orphan 'sylum. There a bad sick when I's there. I's 'member getting so sick, like my friend, Robert. The last night I's 'member before 'ere, I's got sick all day and I's so tired and thirsty. I's closed my eyes and when I's opened 'em, I's 'ere seeing those giant hanging lights."

"That's terrible. Do you know what happened to your friend?" asked the woman. Sadness crept into the boy's eyes as he whispered, "No. I's ain't seen 'im. Maybe one day. Or maybe it better for 'im that I ne'er see 'im 'ere."

The woman allowed the boy his moment of sadness before quietly asking, "John, I know your

name, but I can't give you mine because I don't know it. I don't know who I am. You're telling me that I'm a spirit and some spirit "forgetter" at that. I can't accept that. I can't accept any of this! Am I supposed to roam this place oblivious of who I am and where I came from?" She collapsed into one of the cushioned red seats next to her but was jarred by the sensation that she didn't feel like she was really sitting in the seat at all. It was more like pretend sitting.

John noticed her reaction and she could see a look of sympathy or maybe even empathy in his eyes. He "sat" next to her and offered, "I's know ya got hit wit a lot. I's sorry for tat. Most times forgettin' only lasts a short time. I's sure ya 'member soon." The woman looked up and smiled weakly at John, wanting to believe his assurances.

The woman thought hard about her life before this place. Looking at her dress she figured she must have been a woman of some status. A woman of lower class would not have been able to afford these clothes, or would they? I don't even know that for sure. She tried to focus more and thought she caught an image of fire, but that thought soon passed and was replaced by a sense of longing. A longing for what, she was unsure, but the feeling became overwhelming. This sense of longing quickly morphed into great sadness. A sadness that she did not know how to handle, since she did not know why she was feeling this way. Yes, she was upset about not knowing the circumstances behind her current situation, or who she was, but this sadness was not related to this. This sadness, she somehow knew, stemmed from her past. While starting to drown in this unexpected wretchedness, she heard a commotion that woke her from her spell of melancholy.

The woman's attention shifted toward the direction of the commotion. She caught sight of a group men and women who were laughing and talking excitedly. Even without knowing her past, she knew that these people were not from her time. Their style of dress was nothing like hers. The women were barely covered, and few were even wearing dresses, if that's what they could be called. She had forgotten that John had been next to her this whole time and turned to him, "What's going on? Who are those people?"

He gave a half chuckle and replied, "Oh 'em. They's the tour folk. Come 'round so often ta see

us spirits.” He raised both hands and made his fingers dance as he said spirits with a bit of a mocking inflection.

Spirit tour? Curious, the woman walked closer to the tour group and John followed. As she approached the group, she noticed a young boy standing by the group, who she intuitively knew was not with the group. The closer she got to this spirit tour group, the more she noticed that it wasn't just their clothing that was different, but they also had a different aura about them. A white aura shone around the group members, while a blue aura seemed to surround John and the young boy standing by the group, who was now grinning at her with a mischievous smile. She turned to John and noted, “That boy smiling at me. He's a spirit, isn't he?”

“Right so. Name's George. He been here 'bout long as me.” John responded. “I's hopin' he not wantin' to stir up trouble now. He like ta do tat. Makes it har' fa me ta make 'im mind.”

Before the woman could ask John about the trouble he meant, the apparent leader of the tour quieted everyone down and began talking. “Most of you probably know a little bit of Cincinnati Music Hall's past and its haunted history. You may have heard about part of the building being built over a potter's field and this being the location of Cincinnati Orphan Asylum during a cholera outbreak in the 1830s.” The woman glanced over at John, who shrugged his shoulders. The tour guide continued, “but you might not know that this place has a connection to the 1838 Moselle steamboat explosion that resulted in the deaths of 150 people. Headed for St. Louis, the Moselle's boilers exploded as it left its port in Cincinnati. Most of those people who died on the Moselle were buried here.”

Moselle. The woman thought to herself. Why does that sound familiar? She thought about what the tour guide said about the Moselle and how it was a result of an explosion. She remembered her earlier vision of fire. She thought again of the Moselle and tried to picture the steamboat with so many hopeful passengers leaving Cincinnati to journey onward and that's when everything came flooding back to her. The planned trip to St. Louis, the hopeless marriage, the stillborn births, the grief – the utter despair she felt - and then the realization of what happened on the steamboat. The suddenness of it all. The fire, the cries, the shouting, and then the black. And then, she was here. But

now, she was here, and she remembered everything. She remembered her name! She turned and looked at John and exclaimed, "I am Mary Powell!"

John smiled, "See. I told ya it come ta ya!"

She could hardly contain her excitement. I am Mary Powell. She thought to herself. I know who I am and where I came from. I don't know why I'm here, but at least I know that much. In her rediscovery of herself, she had almost forgotten about the spirit tour, but was soon reminded of them when she heard a few of them crying out in apparent fear. Mary heard one of them shout, "Something just grabbed me!"

"Me too!" another exclaimed.

Mary's eyes darted from person to person and quickly identified the source of the issue. Without hesitation she shouted, "George! Leave those people alone! Stop pulling on their garments."

George was initially caught off guard by Mary's assertiveness, but then cocked one eyebrow up and spoke defiantly, "Tuh! I does what I want!"

Mary stood her ground and said, "Look, I've had a terrible day and I don't need to be dealing with anymore terrible today. There's no reason to be bothering those people. In fact, in a strange way, I owe those people for helping me, so I'm going to help them now. So, please, leave them alone."

George turned towards the tour group as if ready to recommence with his mischief, but then thought better of it and faced Mary again. "Ok," he conceded, "Since ya asked nicely, I'll leave 'em alone." He backed away from the tour group and almost seemed to be walking towards Mary deferentially.

John, still standing by Mary said, "Gee tat's tha first time he mind so fast. I think ya meant to be 'ere. We's could use some motherin'. I's hate doing it and I's ain't no good at it."

Hearing these words, Mary felt the immense grief from her past ease a bit. "We?" she asked. "Are there more of you?" Almost as in response, eight other children, with the same blue "spirit" aura, appeared before her. She peered out at them and looked from one small, pleading face to the next. As she gazed out at the expectant faces before her, she declared with pure joy, "I am Mary Powell and I am

finally a mother!”

The End/(or The Beginning).

My Mom, My Ward by Laurence Fronk

Third Place – Adult Division

The courtroom is smaller than I imagined, but it still has all the attributes of larger courtrooms I've seen on television. The judge's dais is walnut or mahogany elevated above the courtroom floor. There is an American flag to the left and an Ohio flag to the right. My attorney and I sit at a dark wood table with blue upholstered chairs, ten feet from the dais. There is a wood rail behind us, and my Mom and her Court-appointed attorney sit in the first row of seats. My wife, Susan, sits in the second row. The bailiff approaches our table and says, “The judge will be about ten minutes.”

My attorney briefed me on the proceedings, and although she expects the case to be short and straight forward, I'm ready to answer any possible questions. Waiting, I think back to the struggles and conflicts that brought me to this point. After the death of my stepfather Steve, the harsh reality of my Mom's dementia hit me in the chest like a karate kick. Steve acted as a buffer between Mom and the rest of the world. He downplayed the seriousness of her condition. “It's just a mild cognitive impairment,” he would say, “Nothing serious.”

My full awareness of her dementia started with small things. Mom had trouble using the television remote. To make operating the TV easier, I set up a favorites list for her and set Hallmark as the default channel. One morning she called me and yelled, "It's broke."

"What's broke, Mom?"

“The TV.”

“I’ll come over and take a look.”

When I arrived at her apartment, she walked to the television and cried, “Take it. Get rid of it. It don’t work.”

I picked up the remote and played with the on/off and cable buttons. The television came on, and Mom, wide-eyed, said, "How you do that?"

“Mom, you just pushed the wrong button,” I left it at that, knowing she would never understand an explanation. I also knew I would get future calls to fix the cable.

With time, the issues became severe. I started looking at Mom's mail every day when she was in another room. I shuffled through the papers on her desk. I hated snooping around her apartment, but I had no alternative. Mom refused my help. No, it was more; Mom resented my help. I glanced through her checkbook, relieved she still posted her checks by vendor and amount, even if she didn’t keep a running balance. I scanned the list of recent entries and noticed a \$435.00 check to Spectrum. I found the bill among other papers lying on her desk and determined she missed one payment. Instead of paying for two months, she paid three months. I confronted Mom telling her she paid too much. I may have pushed too hard. With a nasty sarcastic voice, Mom said, "I'm not stupid. I still know two plus two equals four. I don't need your help. You don't know. Just go.”

After the confrontation, I spoke to Mom twice about Power of Attorney. I said I was willing to help her with her money. The response was always the same. "I'm not crazy. I don't need help, my money. You can't have my money. Just go.”

Matters got worse after Mom purchase a new bed and mattress. Her bed sat too high, and her mattress was old. We both were afraid she might fall getting out of bed. Since Mom didn’t

have a credit card, she used her debit card to pay for it. Before heading to her apartment, I told Mom, "We need to go to the bank and transfer money from your savings to your checking account to cover the cost of the bed."

"No. Never had to do it before."

"Mom, you don't have as much money now."

"This place is crazy. I don't like the bank. Take all my money out. You don't know. You not so smart. Take me home now." Mom was silent during the drive to her apartment.

I grabbed the checkbook from the desk and held it up as a prop, "Mom, you have no idea how much money you have. You will overdraw your checking account and get in trouble with the bank. Is that what you want?" raising my voice and tone; something you should never do with someone suffering from dementia. Mom pointed at the door and yelled, "Just go! Don't need you."

Fortunately, I set up online access to her bank accounts the day she opened them. I watched as her checking account balance diminished. It would have been easy for me to transfer the funds online, no one would know it wasn't Mom, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I thought this would teach Mom a lesson, and she would start listening to me.

When minus signs appeared on her account balances, I contacted the bank. The manager said bank clients had a three transaction grace period before it would freeze the debit card. Since I didn't have power of attorney to deal with the issue, I asked the manager about other options. He suggested I contact an attorney or Adult Protective Services.

By the end of the week, the third transaction appeared. The next day I received a frantic call from Mom. "My card. I don't know. Can't Pay."

"Where are you?"

“Store,” the next voice I heard was a stranger, "Hi, this is Grace at Walmart. Your Mom is distraught. Her debit card didn't work. We thought she could be having a stroke; we called the life squad."

"Thank you for helping her. I will be there in ten minutes," I should have transferred the funds. I could have avoided this situation.

Driving into the parking lot, I saw the red and white life squad with lights flashing at the store entrance. Inside, I glanced toward Customer Service and saw the Paramedics. Mom looked up at me and said, "Don't want to go. Take me home. Sweetie, take me home." I was always 'Sweetie' when Mom was desperate for my help.

“She has calmed down, and her vitals are good. There is no physical reason to transport her to the hospital,” one Paramedic said, “We could transport her to the geriatric psyche center?”

“That won't be necessary,” I said, taking her hand, “Mom, let's go home.”

On the way to her apartment, I convinced Mom to stop at the bank to transfer the funds.

Mom couldn't handle her finances, she couldn't handle simple tasks at home, and she shouldn't be driving. I had no legal authority to deal with any of the issues. My entire body was shaking. After months of telling myself things would get better, I called Adult Protective Services and spoke with an investigator. I provided her an overview of Mom's condition and offered specific examples. Her first question was, "Do you have Power of Attorney?" If I had a penny for every time I heard that question, I would have a hundred dollars by now.

“No,” I answered.

“In that case, your only option is Guardianship.”

"I was hoping to avoid that option," I said, in denial such a drastic step was necessary.

"I can e-mail you the forms. Take a look at them and if you have any questions, call me."

I opened the attachment and counted twenty-five forms. I skimmed through each document to familiarize myself with the process. All the forms referred to the person requiring a guardian as the 'Ward.' The title reminded me of Bruce Wayne's ward, Dick Grayson in *Batman*. If I proceeded with this option, my Mom would become my Ward. I hated the term. Mom would always be my Mom. When I finished reviewing each form, I shouted to my wife, "I'm going to need a lawyer."

Fortunately, my attorney knew a knowledgeable and experienced guardianship attorney.

My first meeting with Darleen King was educational. We talked about my Mom, her current state of mind, living conditions, and why I thought she needed a guardian. She described the court process to obtain guardianship and the forms required. She talked in detail about the two items that concerned me the most, the investigation conducted by Adult Protective Services and the Expert Evaluation on Mom's mental capacity.

"For you to be appointed your Mom's Guardian, you will need to prove that she is mentally incompetent based on her dementia. You will need to have an expert. Preferably her doctor completes and signs the court form. In addition to the expert evaluation, the Court will instruct an investigator with Adult Protective Services to meet with your Mom and prepare a report for the judge. We can coordinate that meeting with you."

Mom was due for her annual physical, so I made an appointment with Dr. Conner. I told the nurse I was applying for guardianship, and I had a form for Dr. Conner to complete. I didn't tell Mom about the doctor until the morning of the appointment. I hated the cloak and dagger routine, but there was no alternative. Mom would never understand what I was doing. The small lies and deceit came easier each day.

Dr. Conner had a resident perform the physical exam while he completed the evaluation form. The resident said Mom's vitals were all good, and physically she was doing well. On the way out, a nurse handed me a folder, and inside was the completed form. Dr. Conner found Mom mentally incompetent by reason of severe dementia.

I met the inspector with Adult Protective Services at Mom's door and invited him inside. After I introduced them, I left the apartment and waited outside. The interview lasted fifteen minutes. After the meeting, the inspector and I chatted before I went in to see Mom. She was sitting in her recliner, her face scowled at me defiantly, and her intense grey eyes glared. Mom threw a sheet of paper at me. I picked it up off the floor. It was the introduction letter from the Court of Common Pleas stating the reason for the meeting. Mom had underlined two words – Mentally Incompetent.

The Court Bailiff brought me back to the present, "Hear ye, Hear ye. The Delaware Court of Common Pleas is now in session. The Honorable Robert S. Alexander presiding. Please rise."

"This is a hearing to appoint David P. Tellison, Guardian of the estate and person of Helen B. Montgomery. I have reviewed the paperwork, and we have the Expert Evaluation certifying Mental Incompetence due to dementia and the report from Adult Protective Services. Ms. King, do you or your client have anything to add?"

"No, your Honor."

"I'm not crazy," I hear from behind. I could feel Mom's glare piercing the back of my head.

"It's OK, Helen," her attorney whispers.

"Ms. Wallace, do you or your client have any objections to this application for guardianship?" the judge asks.

“No, your honor.”

"Mr. Tellison, do you understand the Probate Court is the supreme guardian, and the court must approve any action you take regarding your Ward before taking such action?"

“Yes, your Honor.”

“Mr. Tellison, please stand for the oath of guardianship.”

I stand and raise my right hand and read the Oath.

“I, Peter Tellison, Guardian of Helen Montgomery, will faithfully and completely fulfill my duties as Guardian, including the duty:

- To file, and continue to make diligent efforts to file, a true inventory in accordance with the Ohio Revised Code, and report all assets belonging to the estate of my Ward.
- To file timely and accurate reports.
- To file timely and accurate accounts.
- To, at all times, protect my Ward's interests and to make all decisions based on the best interest of my Ward.
- To apply to the Court for authority to expend funds prior to so doing.
- To obey all orders and rules of this Court pertaining to guardianships.”

“Do you solemnly swear?” the judge asks.

“I do,” I lower my arm and turn to face the courtroom; my knees and arms trembling. Susan, is walking up the aisle, mouthing what I think is, "Are you OK?" She holds my left hand.

I look at Mom. I hardly recognize the woman who raised me. Her thin frame, grey hair, and shaky hands reflect the frailty of her age. I am surprised by the tears in her eyes, “are you OK, Mom?”

“You going to jail now?”

“What?” I’m taken aback. Mom thought I was on trial? The gravity of Mom’s dementia takes hold of me. How do I care for someone who lives in a different reality? Taking care of her finances will be the easy part, but how will I deal with her paranoia, fixations, and innate stubbornness? Now that I’m guardian, getting Mom and me the professional help we both need will be a good start.

“No, Mom. I’m not going to jail.”

Mom threw her arms around me, “Oh, sweetie. I’m glad. I worried.”

I take Mom’s hand, “Let’s go home. We’ll stop for ice cream on the way.”

Swept Away - A Short Story by Ingrid Erickson

First Place – Youth Division

A small girl skips through the long grasses that cover the valley. Her braided brown hair flies out behind her as she leaps and spins her way through the meadow. The grasses brush against her flying legs, but she hardly feels them in her exuberance over the beautiful summer day and the freedom that comes with it. The sun shines down on the top of her head and back, and the smile that shines on her face almost equals its brightness.

She twirls in the middle of the field, giggling at the way her homespun dress billows out around her. Eventually, the bright-eyed girl grows so dizzy that she collapses in a heap. Her laughter peals out over the field and she turns over so that she is lying on

her back. The child squints up at the sun, covering her eyes with a small hand.

Eilyn staggers to her feet, the laughter just now wearing off. She races back off and takes a deep breath. The wind whips at her again, tugging stray strands of hair out of her braid and leaving her looking as unkempt as any wild thing. Eilyn reaches up a hand to brush the runaway hair out of her eyes without slowing her run. She closes her eyes and tilts her head back, feeling the sun's blissful warmth on her face.

All of a sudden, the sun is overshadowed, and Eilyn feels fear build in her. Something is wrong; the sun seems to have disappeared. She opens her eyes to see that a dark storm cloud has covered the sun, dimming its shroud of light to nothingness. The meadow is black now, and the wind screams in her ear, no longer playful. Eilyn's breath catches as she skids to a stop just in time.

She peers over the edge of a rugged cliff to see a beach, but the sandy stretch of land is not what keeps her eye. Beyond the beach, waves crash against each other, fighting to stay on top of the black water. Foam sprays almost high enough to reach her, even though her perch on the cliff top is high above the ocean. The rollicking waves captivate Eilyn, and she leans toward them. Snippets of a voice manage to weave their way into her ears. A heavy rain pours out of the sky, so harsh that it feels like something above is hurling it down to Earth.

The sound is almost familiar - it is sweet, sweeter than anything Eilyn had heard in her life. The voice entices her, calls her. Eilyn leans closer to the water, closer to the beautiful voice. A dark shape walks on the waters, but the sky is too dark to make out what the mysterious figure is. It picks up its pace, then disappears into the black.

Eilyn jumps as she feels a hand on her shoulder. She whips around to see a familiar face. Her aunt looks sternly down at her, and Eilyn then realizes what she must look like.

Every part of her is soaked through and her once-tidy braid is a mess, an unkept mass of tangles. Only a few stray wisps of hair escape the aunt's tight bun; she was tidy, as always. The small girl looks up at her aunt, and a small smile escapes from Eilyn. Her aunt's expression does not change, and the disappointment on it crushes the small ray of sunshine on the girl's face.

Eilyn's aunt takes her hand and leads her back across the meadow. The child follows, dragging her bare feet against the wet grasses. The two arrive at a small house after leaving the valley that had been Eilyn's sunny play-place minutes before. Thunder crashes and lightning flashes, splitting the dark sky into fragments. Eilyn doesn't flinch at the noise; her ears are still occupied with the song she had heard on the cliff. It had been enchanting, beautiful, more so than she had ever known. But now it was gone, it left her behind as it traveled to where she could not go. Her aunt's voice breaks into her thoughts, scattering them as quickly as a stray gust of wind would scatter a pile of fallen leaves.

“What were you doing near the cliffs? Time and time again, I've warned you about going near them, Eilyn. Why don't you heed my instruction?” Her voice was questioning yet firm; she expected an answer. Eilyn looks up from the floor to meet her aunt's green eyes and opens her mouth only to close it again. Her aunt nods, prompting her to answer.

“I...” Eilyn longs to tell her aunt about the voice, to tell her everything, how wonderful it all was. She wants to tell her then drag her along to hear the sweet sound with her so that she wouldn’t look tired anymore - so that she wouldn’t glare at her no matter how hard she tried to please her aunt . So that she would be present again, so that she would just be there. But something stops her. It pulls her voice back inside her and prevents her from speaking. Her aunt nods, imploring her to go on with her reply. “I don’t know, Ma’am.”

Her aunt sighs, gets up, and turns around to leave her. Again. Eilyn wanted her mother - her *real* mother. But she was gone, and she was not coming back, because of the thing the adults called the accident. When speaking about this topic, their voices grew hushed and grim; they felt sad. Eilyn feels her voice bubble up inside of her, and she allows it to come. “I won’t do it again! I promise, I’ll stay away from the cliffs!” Eilyn chases after her aunt and clings to her apron with a small hand. “I won’t, I really won’t go again, I promise.” She looks up at her replacement mother’s tired, worn face with glistening eyes. She sobs through it again in a broken voice. “I..I promise.” A tear slides down her cheek and she reaches up her other hand to rub it away. Eilyn forces the voice out of her head, she must obey.

A voice echoes in Eilyn’s head. The voice was back, and Eilyn wanted it. She needed it. It kept coming back, it wouldn’t leave her alone. But the girl doesn’t mind, it stays with her and will not leave, like a faithful hound that refuses to budge from its master’s side, it was a single constant in the whirlwind of the confused girl’s life. Suddenly, she’s on the cliff again, back where she had been the last evening. A

smile pulled at Eilyn's mouth, the sea was her friend. The voice pulled at her, and it felt more solid than before. It felt more real, and Eilyn was ready to find it. She was leaning out over the cliff again, just like before. It is a reliving of her time near the sea, but it was different. The wind whips a little harder and the crashing of the sea hurts Eilyn's ears. She winces at the overload of noise and tries to back away from the cliff, but she can't.

The wind held her there and she couldn't back up. She couldn't do it. Eilyn begins to panic and her heart hammers in her chest. She tries to scream, but her voice is stuck in her throat. The wind pushes, and Eilyn can do nothing to stop it. It shoves her over the edge, and she falls. It doesn't seem to end, the fall. She's pulled down, down, down, into the sea. A wave crashes over her head, then it all disappears.

Eilyn sits bolt upright in her bed, the dream still fresh in her mind. She pulls her knees up to her chest and rocks on the bed, alone. Why wouldn't the dream go away? It had come every night for months now. Whenever she succumbed to sleep it was there, waiting for her. It trapped her mind until the dream was over. The morning is still new and the sun has not risen yet.

Eilyn hastily dresses and pads over to the window on bare feet. There was no whipping wind, no crashing sea. All was safe, and it would stay that way. She walks out the door, closing it carefully so that she does not wake her aunt .

Water droplets that had remained on the grasses through the night from the storm rub against Eilyn's legs, chilling them to the bone. The young girl continues walking, pulled to the beach as if by some unknown force. The events of the day before and the dream are gone, they are swept from her mind.

Eilyn reaches the sandy stretch of land and walks toward the calm ocean that lies before her. Her feet leave prints in the damp sand and the salty breeze gently sweeps her skirt around her legs. It blows her soft brown hair back from her face, timidly playing with it as a small kitten would with a string. Eilyn breathes in and lets the water lap at her toes. She doesn't react to the cold, but her head jerks up as soon as a voice floats over the waves. It is just as beautiful as it was the day before, and a shape steps out of the fog.

The creature resembles a horse, and its sleek black coat shines with water. It tosses its mane, letting it dance on the ocean's breeze. It lowers its head and nickers quietly to the girl standing on the beach. Eilyn walks toward it and places a hand on its neck. Instead of the warmth that a living creature would have, the horse is as cold as the frigid sea itself.

Calmly, Eilyn runs her hand down the black horse's neck, and she smiles. The horse-like creature rears up and brings its front feet down, causing the water to crash around its dark legs. Then, there is nothing there - the girl and horse have disappeared. Only the lapping waves and beach remain, with the wind blowing gently over it all. The sun rises, casting its rays across the beach. Then, and only then, can the footprints of a girl be seen in the sand. But soon those too are washed away by the waves so that no trace of the child, Eilyn, remains.

Willie's Quokka by Ellie Duffy

Second Place – Youth Division

With a flash of bright light, everything goes dark.

I'm pulled into an abyss of darkness...like drowning in an ocean of wet concrete. My lungs fill with it. Flashes of the past day trip across my mind. Me yelling at Mom. Slamming the door on Dad's face. Willie crying about something dumb I said.

I resurface. Blink up at the sky. Clouds rimmed in unnatural pink and an old-fashioned warplane flying overhead. I rub my eyes and draw back. Hold out my...furry paws.

Furry paws?

I roll onto my knees and find myself staring at long clawed feet. My heart stumbles.

What is wrong with my body?

A rumble sounds in the distance and I look around at an empty race track surrounded by large shiny bleachers. The noise grows and the ground begins to shake, bits of pebbles bouncing off the ground.

A line of red light shoots in front of me and morphs into a ribbon tied across the track. I scramble off the track as animals suddenly appear in the stands, and feel the sharp blades of grass against the pads of my palms.

Pads?

I lift them and stare. Poke one sharp nail into it.

My vision blurs and my heart beat is deafening. The crowd of animals erupts into loud cheers—roars and growls and screeches—and I join in with a scream, every part of my body trembling. I dart toward the bleachers and scurry underneath one, the hump of my back brushing against the metal seat above me.

As I sit there, my front paws pressed together into a funny little prayer, the cheering becomes louder as a group of racecars appears. They zoom past my hiding spot in a blur of red, blue, green, and yellow, sending gusts of wind that ruffles my fur.

A fluffy, blue arm appears and sweeps me from my hiding spot. I claw at the grizzly's arm, attempting escape as he carries me to the podium where a small man in a racing suit and helmet is holding a gold trophy.

"You there!" The man points straight at me and as I settle in the grizzly's arms, my animal-whiskers twitch.

What in the world is going on?

Silence descends on the bleachers and as my gaze sweeps over the animals, I see an alligator covered in rainbow spots, a purple and pink giraffe, and a hundred other unnaturally-colored creatures.

I feel like I've just stepped into a cartoon.

The bear holding me marches over, upright, to the little man and drops me into his arms. The grizzly pulls the man's helmet off, a mop of bushy blond hair falling out.

"Willie?" My eyes widen at the sound of my voice, as squeaky as a mouse, but they already feel pretty wide and I poke at one. Realize I have no brows. No lashes. No lids.

Willie smiles so wide his eyes crinkle at the corners. "What's your name?" He strokes my fur and my tense muscles relax a bit.

"Rosie."

Willie's bright smile falters as his gaze drops to the ground. "That's my sister's name. She's in a coma.

We're sitting on the bleachers now, Willie hugging me to his chest. I can't breathe. Can't move. But I remember fighting with my brother and mom. Remember the green pickup. The loud horn as I crossed the street. The sound of screeching tires.

A coma?

"She was kind of mean to me the day she had that accident," Willie's voice cracks, "But I miss her anyway. It's been two weeks. They don't know if she's gonna wake up."

"Oh my god, Willie! Why can't you think about anyone but yourself? Why was I cursed with a stupid little brother?" My chest tightens and my throat closes when I think about the things I said to him before storming from the house.

A voice echoes around the race track. "Willie! Dinnertime."

"One second, Mom!" Willie swipes at the tear slipping down his cheek. Behind him, a door appears. Opens.

As soon as Mom steps through, the scene around us disappears. Turns and morphs and twists into another.

Willie's messy bedroom. Stuffed animals—rainbow colored and looking like cartoons—making a circle around the rug.

I look down at my paws and find them slightly transparent. Ghostly.

Was I a ghost now? A weird animal ghost?

My mom crosses the room and picks Willie up. Then she carries him out the door.

"I'll be back soon," he calls as they disappear down the hall.

As soon as they're out of sight, I dart into the hall. My little animal legs take a very long time to reach my bedroom. The door is ajar and I slip in, hunched over and eyes darting as though I trespassed. I shake myself and stand straight.

It's *my* room.

I bound toward my long wall mirror, take a deep breath, and...

Oh. My. God.

I'm a quokka.

I'm on my back, staring at the ceiling when I hear forks clinking. The low murmur of my family eating dinner.

No. I get to my feet.

This wasn't happening.

I had to convince Mom and Dad I'm me. I'm here. As a quokka.

I hop down the stairs. In the dining room, I see Willie at the table, his face smeared in spaghetti sauce. He waves at me and holds out his plate. "Want some spaghetti?"

"Willie?" Mom asks, "Who are you talking to?"

"The quokka." He points and I stand on my hind legs. But Mom only raises her brows as though unable to see the wild animal right in front of her.

And then a chill runs down my back. And I know...

I've become one of Willie's imaginary friends.

My brother slurps up the last of his spaghetti and hops off his chair. "I'm going to go play with Rosie."

Dad looks at him. "Rosie?"

"Yeah, the quokka." Willie rolls his eyes, picks me up, and carries me up the stairs. From over his shoulder I watch as Mom's face falls and Dad pats her shoulder.

“Are you okay to go tonight?” I hear Dad’s question but not Mom’s answer as Willie shut his bedroom door.

“Go where?” I cringe at my squeaky new voice.

“The hospital to stay with Rosie. She and Dad take turns.”

“Every night?”

Willie nods. “And all day too. They aren’t working right now.”

My face flushes. Mom and Dad got off work to be with me? Why would they do that? After what I said? I basically deserved to be in a coma. Or be an imaginary quokka or whatever.

Willie drops to the floor and smiles. “Wanna play knights?”

I want to tell him it’s me. The real Rosie. But then he’d probably hate me all over again. I smile. “Of course I want to play knights.”

We were immediately sucked into a world of medieval castles, dragons, and a girl named Grace in a princess dress. Grace from his preschool class?

I swallow a giggle. Grace, his preschool crush.

He spent an hour saving her from danger.

“Time for bed,” Dad interrupts our playing.

Willie makes a little tent for me next to his bed. “Don’t tell my sister I stole her stuff when she wakes up. She’d just get really mad.”

Dad watches with dark bags under his eyes. His limbs hanging heavy as he sits on the edge of Willie’s toddler bed. “Do you want to visit your sister at the hospital tomorrow?”

Willie bounces a little and then burrows beneath his blankets. “That would be fun! Wouldn’t that be fun, Rosie?”

Dad glances at the tent where I'm lying. He rubs his hand across his face and shakes his head. "Goodnight," he mumbles and switches off the light on his way out.

My eyes feel sandy, but I hear Dad's voice drifting from his bedroom down the hall. "Don't worry. It's just a new imaginary friend." He's talking about me. Or quokka me. "Yeah, we'll take him to the hospital tomorrow." A pause. "Yes, I miss her too." Long sigh. "Goodnight."

They missed me? Why? I'd been awful to them. I wiggle into a comfortable position, the scent of my blankets reassuring. It would be fine. I'm still me.

Wake up! We're going to go see Rosie today." Crumbs from Willie's half-eaten pop tart spray from his mouth as he shakes me awake.

I hold up my paws. Yep, still paws. "Isn't she unconscious? Why would you want to see her?" Maybe we don't have to go." I did *not* want to see myself in a coma, hooked up to a bunch of beeping machines. Bruised and...oh, my God. What if I was missing body parts?

Willie shrugs and darts from the room. I lick my lips, hopeful. Then I shudder when my tongue flicks fur. Gross.

"Dad said we're visiting my sister no matter what 'the quokka' says," Willie tells me when he reappears. "I'm getting dressed." He goes to his dresser and begins flinging clothes out of the drawer.

The doorbell rings.

"Hey, Mr. Carson." A familiar voice responds in answer to my dad opening the door. I tilt my head. Where have I heard that voice before? "I, uh, heard about Rosie."

My skin prickles when I place it. It's Dave. As in David Bell, cutest boy at school.

I scramble as fast as my little quokka legs can carry me to the banister. There he is. Beautiful and standing in my living room. Talking to my dad. Oh, my gosh...he was talking to my dad! Dave hands over a bouquet of roses. "These are for her. Me—and my friends, of course—just wanted her to know we missed her at school."

I twitch my tail as my father makes the hottest boy at school feel awkward. "Welp, thanks for stopping by," Dad says, "I'll let her know when she wakes up."

"Mr. Carson. I know you—," Dave's voice is drowned out by a green flash and the roar of a dinosaur. The hallway around me melts into a giant forest, a neon T-Rex towering above the trees in the distance.

"No!" I yell. "Willie, I want to go back! I need to hear what Dave said." My heart races and I'm sucked into my brother's imagination. "Willie!" I scream, desperate to see David Bell's beautiful face again.

A black jeep hurtles out of the trees, my brother, wearing a tan safari costume, at the wheel. "Get in!" He glances back at an angry dinosaur roaring and running for us. "We need to hurry before the dinosaur eats us!"

I stomp to the jeep, my jaw clenched. "Take me back home." Heat pours through my veins and my voice is loud. "That boy at the door is very important."

"More important than the dinosaur?" He frowns.

I roll my eyes. "Yes. Way more important than stupid dinosaurs." My words echo through the trees.

Willie fidgets against the leather seat. "Well, I don't want to go home. I want to play dinosaurs."

I clench my fists. “You know what? You only care about yourself and getting whatever you want. Always crying to Mom and Dad because Rosie won’t play with you or whatever. You can’t force people to play with you.” I cross my arms over my chest. Mean little quokka. “All you had to do was let her live her life. And now she’s stuck in a freaking coma. She never even knew if that guy liked her or not and now she’ll never know.”

Willie’s face drops. Tears clump his eyelashes. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Well, you did. It’s your fault, Willie. She never would have been hit by a truck if you hadn’t made her mad that day.”

He chokes on a sob and presses his hand to his mouth as his chest rises and falls beneath his gasps for breath.

My stomach begins to roll and I reach for my brother. “Oh, no. Willie, I’m so—”

Everything begins to change and twist and we’re sitting on my brother’s bed. He’s sobbing. “I didn’t mean it, Willie.” My voice breaks. “I was only—” I’m suddenly shuttled forward and I flail back into the abyss of darkness. The bedroom is a box moving farther into the distance.

“No. Wait!” I reach for my brother but I’m floating through the heavy, wet concrete again. Back into the coma. “Willie!” My voice shakes and heart slows. An echo forms around me. My brother.

“Dad...it’s my fault. I did it. I sent Rosie into a coma. She’s going to die because of me!”

I open my mouth but it’s filled with an invisible liquid that silences me. And then it’s dark.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

My eyes flutter open and I grimace at the bright glow of cool, artificial light. I look over and see Mom sitting on a chair next to me. She has her face in her hands and she's rocking back and forth.

"Mom?" I croak.

Mom's head snaps up and I notice how pale she is. Her hair looks like it hasn't been brushed in days and she's trembling.

"Oh!" She leaps to her feet, "Robert, come quickly. Come!" Her voice shakes as she shouts and she reaches for me. Squeezes my hand.

Dad runs in, followed by what seems like a hundred doctors and nurses who all begin to poke at the machines I'm hooked up to. They talk over one another, flip through charts. But I focus on my parents.

"Hey, kiddo, we missed you." Dad sits on the edge of my bed. He motions and the sea of white coats part. "Come on, buddy. She's awake."

Willie is sitting in the corner, his chair pushed up against the wall. He has his face buried into his knees and he makes a loud sniff. When he peeks up at me, his eyes are red and teary. I reach for him and he takes cautious steps across the room. "I'm sorry, Rosie. It's my fault you were in a coma. I won't bother you again, I promise." His whisper cracks and a tear falls down his cheek.

I hold out my arms. "It's not your fault. I should've been a better sister and not lost my temper over something so stupid." I smile. "I'm sorry. I love you, Willie." I press his fuzzy head against my cheek. "I have a question."

He looks up, his face bright. "What?"

"Did you bring your dinosaurs?"

Willie giggles and runs back to the chair where a blue tote bag dangles. He yanks it and brings it back to my bed. Turns it upside down. Neon-colored dinosaurs fall onto the blanket. As soon as he picks one up, the room blurs out. Spins into a lush green forest. A T-Rex roars and I laugh as I hop into the jeep with my brother. “Let’s have an adventure.”

***A Mouse Story* by Leah Dagenbach**

Third Place – Youth Division

Two mice, Brown Fur and Black Tail, dwelt in the dark attic. The attic of what? Ah, but what *it* was, was far too grand to be comprehended by a rodent. All that was in their world was dusty linoleum foraging ground, pipe pathways, and a cardboard nest with toilet paper shreds. These mice were careful little creatures, adhering to the shadows that so invitingly embraced them, measuring each pawstep to blanket to sound of clicking nail on tile. they reclusively retreated to their safe nest during the day, arranging bedding over and over again and sorting through their food stash.

At night, however, they would cautiously venture from their cardboard haven in the attic, wiggle slickly through the wiry pipes and finally emerge with a wet *pop* out of the broken mudroom faucet. Once safely on the floor, the mice would quickly scurry to the linoleum room, fastidiously harvest the bountiful supply of crumbs, and return to their nest to relieve themselves of their burden. After a couple trips, they would explore, climbing and chewing and having fun until sunrise, when the large feet came and disturbed their cycle. Then they would retire to their home for the rest of day, sleeping, eating, and entertaining themselves by chewing on the wooden ribs that so strenuously supported the roof. The two mice were happy together.

However, one fateful day, while the two mice were exploring, Black Tail discovered something lying in a corner. Beckoning his partner over to share this exciting discovery, they

sniffed the strange device and rubbed against it. It was cold and shiny and gleamed in the moonlight. The reflection mesmerized the two rodents, and it took a few moments until they noticed the smell. Thick and oily, the enticing smell of nut butter wafted through the air and filled the noses of the two excited mice. Brown Fur hesitated, unsure of herself. Her friend could not resist and was driven into a frenzy by the prospect. Taking advantage of her reluctance, Black Tail craned his neck forward and eagerly jumped onto the little platform. The little platform served up a gleaming, tantalizing dollop of heaven, but also served as a trap. So suddenly did the sharp glint of the cold umbrella flash and disappear as it closed upon its unsuspecting prey! The poor victim squeaked alarm, and the other mouse jumped in horror and dashed to the safety of her nest.

That day, Brown Fur lay sleepless, heart pounding, she learned a lesson. She learned the dangers of the curiosity and impulsiveness, and resolved to crush within her. She constructed a new routine, where she only descended to forage what she needed, and not a crumb more. She hid deep in the attic, only coming out to file her teeth when they grew too long for comfort. She laid in her matted nest for long hours, cold and lonely, missing the heartbeat of her fellow companion. She ate less and less each day, preferring to sit in the dark and mourn.

One day, the Brown Fur encountered something new that broke her cycle. She had mouse pups, pink and bald as could be, squirming and writhing like worms in a squeaking, hungry heap. As befuddled as she was, maternal instinct eventually kicked in, and soon there were five sated, sleeping pups underneath an exhausted mother mouse. As she laid on top of them, carefully shifting so as not to disturb them, she couldn't help but notice the subtle heartbeats under her furry breast, beating life into each fragile body, and Brown Fur was flooded with a new warmth.

The pups grew slowly but steadily, and their appetites increased with them. The new mother readily descended again to retrieve food from the lower floor. She was happy again, for she now had something to live for, and she, too, consumed more. Although it was hard to care

for them without a proper father, Brown Fur managed to carry her burden and her pups thrived. As they got older, they stopped growing before maturity. This was because their mother had not consumed enough. They were her first litter, so she did not know what they should look like, but even if she did, she wouldn't have cared.

The pups were strong and healthy despite their size, and soon enough they were jumping out of the box, eyes gleaming and eager to see the world. Brown Fur tried to keep her babies all together, but handling five children is like scooping water with a sieve. They squeaked and tumbled over each other, tails and whiskers twitching restlessly, and it was soon acknowledged that she would have to take them outside. Oh, how desperately she wanted to keep them all safe in the attic, curled up and safe in their dark cardboard burrow! But alas, with each passing day they strayed farther and farther, and it would not be long before they discovered the pipe-hole for themselves.

Before she took them out, she warned her pups to stay hidden, watch her, and keep close. They descended the pipe and emerged, each little mouse wiggling free in uncontained excitement. When they landed on the floor, thin clicks were heard as little pellets of excrement hit the ground. The moon was full and cast a glow through a window as the straying parade of mice scurried by, their black and brown fur tinted a silvery blue. When they reached the linoleum foraging ground, the pups scattered and devoured the crumbs, rolling around and play fighting with each other in the dust for choice bits. The trail of mice waddled back past the window, all but Brown Fur considerably fatter than they were previously. She was relieved when her tired, overfed children collapsed into the nest, safe and sound. They had much to learn still, of course, such as patience and subtility. Even so, they did well, and the mother mouse collapsed comfortably into the nest by her babies. But so great was her relief and weariness, that as she fell asleep, she failed to notice the fine fur lacing the dust that her pups had been so gleefully rolling in.

After several successful foraging trips, Brown Fur was much relaxed and reassured by

the capabilities of her children. They learned to retreat to the shadows and wait til they were safe to consume anything. Still, it was some weeks before they were fully mature, and they still required surveillance. She always watched out for danger as she foraged, and reprimanded those who got too rough or vocal. As often as she could, she tried to reinforce her warnings, so that they would become instinct. A new foraging routine was forged, and every pup was proud to be a part of it. But their favorite part of all was when they all curled up into their nest, full and warm, sharing the contentment of togetherness.

Brown Fur had an internal alarm that woke her right at sundown. This day was no different, and she nudged each of her pups in turn. They were a little over half the size of her, with brown and black fur, soft as silk. They squeaked and shifted sleepily, their tails curling and uncurling. She trotted over to the pipe and began to descend. Brown Fur was confident in her children's ability to make it from the pipe to the sink, and she would get a head start to gather more crumbs. By the time she returned with a mouthful, three of her pups were already on the ground heading purposefully toward the linoleum. The mother squeezed into the pipe with her full mouth and jiggled up the tube. She half expected the other two to come barreling down on her, and was surprised when she safely poured herself out. The attic and the nest were both empty as she deposited her findings onto the ground. She ate an oat and a sugary paper wrapper before turning back around. She was beginning to wonder where her other two pups were. Brown fur heard a shallow clicking and a muffled *thump!* as one of them fell forcefully through the entrance, as if to reassure her and say, *here I am!* She nuzzled her pup briefly before heading back down.

Passing the window, she stretched and shook herself lazily. As she stepped into the kitchen, she was jerked out of her languid, relaxed state as she heard the fast, high squeaking of one of her pups, calling for help. Rushing toward the sound, she saw four looming pillars of delicate white fur, supporting a mottled brown and white body of a cat. Instinctively, she turned her tail and ran. She was halfway to the window before she processed what she was doing,

and she skittered frantically back. Brown Fur could not have done anything anyway, for what is a mouse against a cat? Alas, three pups were taken by the cat, newly risen from kittenhood and on the prowl for any sort of small, delectable critters. The mother mouse returned, distraught, to the attic, where her last two pups stuffed their faces, unaware of what had happened. *They were big enough to fend for themselves*, she thought. In her grief, she hardened herself and nipped at her remaining children, forcing them out. She could not care for them anymore, and she did not want to be reminded of her failure. Her pups tried to turn back, but she bit at them until they finally fled down the pipe. The broken creature collapsed into her nest, and did not get up.

“Hey Mom? Where did you say the fan was?”

“I don’t *know*, somewhere up there!”

Andrew sighed as he waded through the floppy boxes and spiderwebs. He didn’t like the closed, dark space of the attic, and besides, there could be all sorts of rabid creatures up there. Honestly, he preferred the heat. As he swung the dim beam to and fro, he saw a long, squat box marked f an. Bracing his hand against the wall, he stepped over several boxes and tripped over one. Irritably, he turned his flashlight on the offensive box, and his heart froze. Yelling and scrambling to his feet, he stumbled back down the ladder and slammed the attic door shut. The flashlight, forgotten, rolled in lazy circles, until its light finally settled on the stiff, greasy, brown-furred body of a mouse.