

First Place

The Stereo by Hannah Feltz

I was almost there. Blaring rock music filled my ears. Each smash of a cymbal and high-pitched guitar riff shook the car as I continued down the road. I tried to focus on the music, letting the song wash over me and overtake my thoughts.

*I'll tip my hat to the new Constitution
Take a bow for the new revolution*

The Who blasted through the speakers. One of my dad's favorites. I can thank him for my love of classic rock, one that was born after he took me to The Police Reunion Tour for my first concert. I reached for the dial on the speaker, cranking it even louder.

*Smile and grin at the change all around
Pick up my guitar and play just like yesterday*

The distraction of the music would only last so long. I'd be back home soon packing the final boxes of my dad's things into the trunk of my car.

My instinct took over, leading me past rows of naked trees weathered and brittle from the January cold. Glancing out of the window, I saw the entrance to the wooded path I occasionally snuck off to after knabbing some of my dad's beers. He never noticed, until my cousin asked me to grab a whole 6 pack one night. Not even a drop of the first beer had touched my lips when Mrs. Snell, our particularly nosy neighbor, strolled along the path with her dog which looked more like a salon floor after a busy day than an animal. My cousin immediately disappeared into the darkness, leaving me to deal with her wrath. Marching straight to my house, Mrs. Snell relayed to my dad how behavior like this would destroy the integrity of our neighborhood. My dad stood firm, nodding his head and adding sparse comments as she continued her monologue on destructive teenage behavior. After she left, my dad turned to me and said,

“Do you know what my dad said to me when he caught me drinking for the first time?” I shrugged my shoulders, expecting him to launch into mentor mode. He walked over to the fridge, taking two glass bottles of beer from the shelf. “He said I can’t expect you to not drink. But the *least* you can do is ask if you wanted to share a drink with your old man”.

Handing the beer to me, he smiled and clinked our glasses. My dad never treated me like I was some dumb kid. He was patient, slow to anger and guided me with a gentle hand. Returning to reality, I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, forcing back the tears welling behind my eyes.

I pulled my car into the driveway and put it into park. After lifting my hand to the keys in the ignition, I paused. This would be the final time I stepped foot into my childhood home. Packing up the house had consumed all my free time for the past month. It was the last leg in the painstaking months following my dad’s death. I was finishing up the last pages of an article for work when the call came. My dad’s health had been in decline for the past year and had reached a new low after he took a nasty spill in the shower. It was the first time that the thought of him dying crept into my mind before I pushed the eventual outcome deep down, willing it to stay away. The thought came crashing back when I saw the number of the call. Nancy, my dad’s home nurse I hired after the fall, on top of an extensive bathroom renovation.

“Hello?” I answered tentatively.

“Oh sweetie, I’m sorry but he’s gone.”

Words uttered by a woman I barely knew changed my life forever. After thanking Nancy for letting me know, I disconnected the call and promptly slammed the phone onto the table. Clutching my face in my hands, I started to sob. It was the type of sorrow that spread from your chest, sending sharp tingly sensations to the tips of your fingers and bottoms of your feet. The

shaking came next, one that could only be controlled by tightly wrapping my arms around my body in an embrace. I sat like that for a while because I really didn't know what to do next.

Now, here I stood, surrounded by empty rooms and bare walls in a house I didn't recognize anymore. It was strange, being in a familiar place absent of all its physical characteristics. The antique bookshelf I smacked face-first into after a game of tag between my friend and I got too heated was gone. My dad's red leather chair he found in a garage sale during his freshman year of college was gone. He insisted the chair stayed around because it was a durable piece of furniture, somehow surviving the years in a grimy college house, but I knew he really kept the chair around because the year he got it, the Philadelphia Flyers won the Stanley Cup. His favorite chair subsequently used to sit in his favorite spot in the house, the den. I walked across the tiled kitchen floor, taking the four steps down to the room. The carpet was splotchy from old beer stains, ones that happened frequently when my dad watched the games. I could almost picture him standing there, a beer in hand as he hunched over the tv. The glow illuminated his dark brown eyes and wispy hair as he watched the hockey puck travel from the player's sticks.

“GOAL” he would yell, leaping from the chair and stretching out his hand for his infamous post-goal high-five, “Gimme some honey!”

Another wave of heartbreak hit me as I stood lost in the memory.

I made my way to my dad's room, the one he used to share with my mother before stage 4 breast cancer took her just after my 12th birthday. After she died, my dad lost a lot of his light. It took him a while to get that light sparked again. I remembered hearing echoes of his cries travel through the vents into my room. There was the yelling too. The curses at God. The pleas

of help. The raw anger. We had no idea how to fill the gap she left. Family dinners that used to be spent listening to my mom recount all the chaotic events that took place during her nursing shifts turned into silent meals in front of the television. There was no more waking up to her singing ABBA and the Bee Gees on mornings my mom had off from work. Thankfully, the weight of the grief got a bit easier to carry every day. One night, when I couldn't sleep, I joined my dad in the den for his usual late-night movie marathon. We sat in silence for a bit, an unspoken understanding that we were both missing her until he said,

“It hurts like hell every day. And I don't think that's going away anytime soon.” We didn't look at each other as he spoke, our eyes fixated on the screen playing some rerun of a cult classic film. “But at least we know we *both* feel it. We're a team, okay?”

That was the constant reassurance that got us through the heavy nights spent wishing we could just see her one more time. We had each other, never spending a day in pain alone. It felt lonely, to think I have no one to feel the same pain I do now.

All that sat in his room was a dusty stereo set coupled with a box of old CDs. I purposely left these to move last, so I could fill the house with music one more time, playing a last song for my dad. Sifting through the cases, I came across The Smashing Pumpkins, a fan favorite for me and my dad. I remember him playing them for me after I got my heart ripped out of my chest for the first time. It was as good of a choice as any. My dad loved all music. He used to say songs could find the words for every possible feeling. Inserting the CD into the stereo, I made sure the sound was turned to a maximum level. The music boomed through the house, echoing through the hallways and filling even the tightest corners. Without barriers to the sound, the house seemed to shake from the vibrations. I always liked to listen to music from his stereo. It gave an authentic reverberation that iPhones couldn't seem to recreate. Suddenly, I found myself

screaming the lyrics, unleashing the pain I hadn't found the time to release since his death, or didn't know how to release. It was cathartic, a momentary escape from the reality of a world without my dad. Warm tears poured down my cheeks as I punched, kicked and moved to the blended rock music. I let myself stay in this moment as song after song passed. I knew the album would end soon. I'd click the stereo off, causing the house to fall silent again as I packed up his final belongings. I'd return to a semblance of a normal life, getting through days that would never seem to end while fighting through the sting of his absence. But I knew, at the end of the day, I had my memories of him and a collection of his CDs begging to be played.

Second Place

ACD by Martin L. Clock

The phone pulls Jon from a rare, pleasant dream. “Hello?”

“Hi, Pop. You up?” Sara asks.

“I am now.”

A pause, then, “It’s almost noon. You okay?”

“Fine,” Jon pictures the look of concern on his daughter’s face.

“Well, We wanted to see if you’d like to come over for dinner.”

“Can’t tonight kiddo, not feeling too great.” A half-lie. Jon never feels great these days, but a lesser evil than showing up hungover and morose. And the idea of listening to the vapid banter of his son-in-law with a pounding head? Unthinkable.

“Sure you’re okay, Pop?”

“I’m fine,” another lie. “Maybe next weekend?”

“Okay, deal,” and is there relief in his daughter’s voice?

He ends the call and commences another day of early drinking. He forgoes food, having learned that the desired effect of alcohol works faster on an empty stomach. Thus by the evening news he is staring at the TV, bewildered and thoroughly drunk. Sometime after dark he staggers to his bed and blacks out.

Dawn seeps through his vertical blinds in golden light, unwelcome harbinger of another day. Jon squints at this revelation through slitted eyes: glowing bars of radiance that define the cage of this, his solitary confinement. He curses, sits up, swings his feet to the carpet. And it grips him: Cat is gone.

On his lashes he feels the meager dew of half-shed tears. He bends forward, grips his tousle-haired head in his hands, not to pray but rather as though he can by force subdue the pounding pain therein. Yet there is no reprieve from that pain; nor from the unrelenting refrain: Cat is gone. Cat is gone.

Jon shuffles to the kitchen where the outdated coffee maker growls and hisses like some disgruntled little countertop beast. As Jon waits he gets Advil from the cabinet, shakes three tablets into his quaking palm, takes up his stained mug - WORLD'S BEST DAD! - and with a hand on the water tap, pauses. A moment he stands thus, then he crosses to the fridge and retrieves a nearly-spent bottle of Vodka. He pours the last, sad shot into his mug and washes down the pills with that burning sweet liquid.

A memory comes unbidden, as they always do. That first morning without Cat. Then, as now, the aroma of brewing coffee but on that day usurping the funereal, floral stench of flowers. Still dressed in his black suit pants in which he slept, Jon gathered those flowers in their various colors and odors and walked outside and dumped them, vases and all, into the trash bin. How Jon has come to hate that smell! This is a detestation so intense that he will cross the street rather than walk past a house with a blooming bed of roses. And thirteen months later he inaminges he can still smell the ghost-scent of those flowers.

His eyes alight on Cat's mug: nothing special, teal-colored porcelain with a chip in the handle. Yet, the very mug she held on uncounted mornings. It seems impossible to Jon that his wife used that mug on a Tuesday and was forever gone on Wednesday. Slowly he lifts a finger, rests it on the handle; a penitent seeking relief from an empty reliquary.

"Cat," he whispers aloud.

Jon carries his coffee to the sunroom where once they both sat chatting casually, as though time was some benign abstract and not a predatory beast bristling with teeth and claws, crouched and waiting to devour one of them; that earlier Jon blissfully unaware that the days BCD were drawing to a close and ACD would soon fall upon him as Vesuvius fell upon the Pompeians.

Before Cat Died.

After Cat Died.

These designations cleanly divide Jon's life as a widower. His memories bifurcated, a delineation so precise that he can instantly fit anything into either category, thus:.

I read that book BCD.

Or:

That shirt I bought ACD.

The death of Cat is a hinge in his mind where swings a door onto two very different worlds: one sun-bright; one gray and blurred and cold.

At work Jon looks forward to five and going home to a fridge well-stocked with beer. The job used to mean more but now serves only to pay his few bills and keep him in alcohol. He could retire; Cat was smart with their money. But then what? Sit around that house where everywhere his eyes alight there is something to bring Cat to mind? He is convinced that such a daily, hourly stab of sorrow to his heart would kill him.

In those first bleak weeks ACD Jon had considered selling the house, moving somewhere less tainted with memory; considers it still. But he cannot muster more strength than that needed to merely exist.

Sometimes Jon stays sober long enough to go to Sara's for a visit. He does this more from obligation than affection. He loves his daughter of course. Yet something changed after Cat died, as if their mutual loss splintered some unseen yet vital cog in the complex mechanism of their relationship. Cat grieves for her mother, yet that is natural, expected. And Sara seems to handle it well.

Jon's grief seems to possess its own gravity; a black hole that, with the smallest provocation can suck him into an inexorable vortex of psychic pain. Once, waiting at a restaurant drive-thru he found Cat's sunglasses in the cubby. A strand of golden hair was caught in one hinge of those glasses. It shone in the light of that monstrous star above and Jon stared at that gold thread until the person in the car behind him tapped their horn. And early one Saturday, in an unexpected exuberance of energy, Jon cleaned the laundry room. Beneath the dryer he found a sock of Cat's, furred in lint. Jon held that sock in his hand as an archaeologist might grasp some fabled relic. On what mundane laundry day did it separate itself from Cat's basket? He

could not bring himself to dispose of that sock and so dropped it into his own laundry, washed and dried it and stored it with the rest of Cat's neatly-folded clothes. Decency and common sense dictate that he donate his late wife's clothing, but he cannot.

And beyond the physical is the intangible; their anniversary, Cat's birthday, the holidays. These and a hundred, hundred more things, each come to deliver a pinprick wound to total a bed of nails upon which Jon is forced to recline yet never rest.

Get over it.

Move on with your life.

Advice no one has ever voiced to Jon in words, but he knows they think it.

Get over it? Move on? Please, tell me how! I long to do so! I cannot. The depths of my despair are as yet unsounded! Where springs this bottomless, fathomless well of grief? This sorrow, like a dagger of black ice, lodged in my living heart?

He wonders at the magnitude of his grieving. Theirs was no fabled fairytale-worthy union. They met in college and dated casually and after graduation drifted apart, dated other people. And then a few years later, at a mutual friend's Fourth-of-July party, they were reacquainted and something clicked.

The following Spring they married. A year later Sara was born and she would be their only child. And then a typical marriage with its ups and downs; and thus sustained for nearly four decades.

Jon loved Cat deeply but so must many husbands love their wives.

Jon knows a few other widowers. One, his older brother David, married for over forty years when his wife died of cancer. After just seven months David began dating again.

Seven months.

Did David never love his wife as Jon loved Cat? Or does he possess some mental healing capacity that Jon lacks? Is Jon's deep grieving balm or bane?

Jon seeks answers to these grand questions where none of any meaning have even been found: empty bottles and cans.

He blinks in the dark of an unknown hour, lies still, breathes deeply; Cat's scent fills his head. This has happened before and he has pondered it. Where does this aroma come from? The pillowcases and sheets have been laundered many times. Cat's clothes hang in the closet or rest folded in the dresser, but there is no draft to stir from them such a vivid sense. Is some veil between here and heaven briefly parted?

"Cat," Jon whispers into the hollow blackness.

He is a rational man yet Jon believes on such nights that his dead wife visits him. He lays awake a long while, waiting to feel her touch on his bare skin. And still waiting, he sinks again into sleep and dreams of her.

Time heals all wounds? No, not so. But life persists and even the deepest wounds will eventually scar over.

One warm summer Saturday afternoon, Jon carries his cooler out to his backyard and sits in the tree-shade, drinking. To pass the time he observes his neighbors, much as a veteran field biologist might study wildlife:

Two houses down, an elderly man furiously mows his lawn with an ancient push-mower. He is shirtless and his tanned man-breasts waggle under the hot sun. In his teeth he grips a smoldering cigar and smoke billows in his wake, like he is some grass-cutting engine; unholy conglomeration of flesh and machine.

A waif of a young woman walks her two dogs past Jon's fence. They are large dogs and she leans backward as though fighting a gale in reverse while those leashed beasts tug her forward. The dogs seem eager to go along this way as though they didn't walk it yesterday, or every day before that. Or perhaps they did not; perhaps to their hyper canine senses the world is remade each day.

And comes the mail truck, Jon hearing the mousey brake-squeak before it rounds the bend: stop, pause, go. The gray haired mailman who works Saturdays differs from the portly woman of Monday through Friday. He smiles and waves to the dog-walking waif. She lifts a hand from the leashes to wave back and is yanked forward for her trouble.

Next door to Jon there lives an odd woman of middle years. She told him her name once, in a chance encounter at their mutual fenceline, but Jon has since forgotten it. Her back screen door bangs and out she comes, lugging a ladder. It is of the transforming variety and he hears her cursing under her breath as she tries to configure the thing to her present need. For a brief moment Jon considers offering help, but a scientist must never interfere with his subjects. Soon she gets the ladder erect and leaning against her house and then she climbs. She does this

delicately for she is wearing an ankle-length dress, as she is wont to do at all times and in all seasons. She stops a few rungs from the top, reaches her hands into the gutter and extracts a dripping handful of debris, likely composed, Jon surmises, of last autumn's leaves. She drops this sodden, black detritus to plop against her deck. She then descends, slides the ladder over a few feet, and repeats this action. All the while she mutters to herself, this soliloquy as ubiquitous to her nature as the dresses. Jon cracks open a beer and at the pop-hiss noise she looks over her shoulder, spies Jon perched there in his shady observation post, smiles and waves. He smiles and lifts his dripping can in universal greeting. She resumes her maintenance and he, his drinking.

This goes on, Jon observing the everyday activities of his fellow homosapiens. When the empty cans under and around his chair are in number equal to those he loaded into his cooler an uncatalogued time earlier, he heaves himself upright and weaves his way inside to the bathroom, to the fridge, and then to the couch where the TV offers a different kind of observation: a fictionalized, idealized, human existence; all the mysteries of love and life and loss distilled and made palatable for consumption by the masses.

Later Jon wakes to an infomercial, stabs the off button and staggers to his bed.

As fall gives way to winter Jon considers his alcoholism. Like all true alcoholics he had, for logistical reasons (namely, the frequent walks to the restroom) forgone beer for hard liquor. A cheap bottle of vodka can achieve the desired result faster and more efficiently than a case of beer. Yet here's an odd thing: Jon realized that he preferred Beer despite the bathroom trips. Beer, he discovered, offered a slow sinking into the cesspit of his despair rather than the rapid, head-first plunge of Vodka.

Jon knows his existence is self-destructive and for this Cat begins to berate him in his dreams. And, as though conspiring with her mother from the beyond, Sara begins to berate him in his waking hours. Through this double-pronged attack by the two most important women in his life, Jon realizes that he must either change or die.

He also realizes that Sara is more like her mother than he ever realized; birds of a feather in tenacity.

“Pop, I have some news. Make sure to show up this time. Please?”

“I will,” he tells her, and he means it. He misses his daughter. And if he must suffer Nate’s unqualified monologues he will pay that price.

At her condo, Sara pulls her father into a hug, then holds him at arm's length and looks him up and down. “Why are you so skinny?”

“Guess I miss your mom’s cooking,” Jon says and he is startled when this sentence brings nothing more than a small pang of sadness, not even enough to sting his eyes.

“Well, you’ll gain a little back tonight,” Nate says. “Sara is making her famous meatloaf.”

The meal is good, Sara luckily inheriting the cooking gene from Cat and not Jon, and he is surprised to find his conversations with Nate actually interesting.

“Beer?” Nate asks after dinner.

And comes another surprise, to Sara, Nate, but especially to himself, when Jon declines.

Sara shares the news which Jon has already guessed in his head: He is going to be a grandfather.

“If it's a girl, we want to name her Catherine,” she says, her eyes green and bright, so like her mother's, “if that's okay with you?”

“Yes, of course,” Jon says gruffly.

Later, as he drives home, sober at eight at night for the first time in a long while, Jon ponders these changes.

“We're going to be grandparents, Cat,” he whispers aloud. “You're going to be a grandmother. I'm going to be a Grandpa.”

And Jon knows, right there on that dark road, he knows things: Death visits us all and life goes on. And Sara will have a girl and they will call her Catherine.

Cat for short.

Third Place

The Ski Lift by Jill M. Broyles

It was exactly thirty-two degrees, and sunny. The snow would not melt, but eleven-year-old Chandler just might. Bundled in his orange reversible coat, snow pants, ski gloves, goggles, hat, purple neck warmer, sweater, turtleneck, jeans, and long underwear, he was hot. And dangling 25 feet in the air with random strangers was an unwelcome interruption to his fun.

Colorful skiers streaked across the white snow below, like modern art splashed on a canvas. Chandler eyed them gloomily, resting his chin on the cold metal bar, listening to two moms discuss their favorite enchilada recipe. One of the skiers jumped a small mogul—how had he missed that before? He'd be sure to catch that one on his next run.

“I use a low-fat cheese on top or mozzarella to cut down on the greasiness—“

Blah, blah, blah.

“Chandler!” his sister Violet was just two chairs behind. “You'd better not ditch me this time!”

Good luck catching me, Chandler thought.

“You use canned enchilada sauce?”

They were almost to the lift station. They lifted the bar and floated over what looked like a circus performers' net. Chandler pointed his ski tips upward so as not to catch them on the edge of the platform, and soon they were touching down on packed snow on top of the curved ramp. He glided down.

He adjusted his goggles, put a pole in each hand, then pushed off with his legs and arms, gaining speed. Air rushed around him and through him, cooling him down.

“Chaaandleer!” Violet shrieked from above. At thirteen, Violet was too bossy for his taste, but also a very good skier. He'd have to book it if he was to get away from her. He shushed by a dad snowplowing back and forth with his toddler between his skis, then Chandler got into a tuck. The snow hissed quietly under him. He headed straight for the mogul, took a leap off of it, landed shakily, then went back to his tuck. Near the bottom

of the hill he uncurled. The people at the end of the lift line cringed as he came to a stop, spraying them with a blanket of snow.

Violet was only halfway down Cool Canyon in her electric blue coat and black snow pants, but her blonde curly hair was whipping out behind her. She was coming *fast*.

Chandler slid into the singles section of the lift line and waited three minutes. When it was his turn, he skied forward. The chair swung around, then came up behind him and a teenage boy. This boy, like him, did not believe in putting the bar down. They sat in the bliss of independence, legs dangling heavily, chatting about how good they were at skiing. The boy said he was also a professional snowboarder. Chandler told him that he was from Alaska, and had grown up skiing. He didn't know why he said it, but found a new level of respect from the boy. They reached the station and he shushed down the hill again.

On the next ride, he ended up with two girls about Violet's age. One wore a bright pink jacket with black snow-pants, and one wore a yellow and gray jacket with gray snow pants. *Babes*. He told them normally he would be over on the expert hill, but he had to take it easy. He had just cracked three ribs a month ago on his dirt bike. They were surprisingly sympathetic. They lifted the bar, pointed their skis, then skied down the ramp.

"Catch you later!" he waved.

He spotted Violet at the halfway mark on the lift. "You're dead meat!" she yelled as he skied under her. A clacking sound came from above, and a glob of snow landed on his neck. If she hadn't done that, he would have maybe felt sorry for her. He had even been considering slowing down.

It wasn't Violet's fault their mom put her in charge of Chandler while she and their dad went off to another section of the mountain. They were here on a sort of working vacation. His dad worked for IBM, and had come into town for a big meeting. They were supposed to have a casual dinner with one of his bosses tonight, and as he

was bringing his children, Chandler and Violet had been invited to come along. But they were warned that they had better behave.

He shared the next ride with a worn-out mom. Her 3 children were in the chair ahead of them. They turned back and waved mittened hands.

“I see you!” she yelled. “Now turn around and put the bar down!”

After a few minutes she said, “So, where are you from?”

Chandler didn’t know why he said it. It just came out. “Saudi Arabia.”

“Oh, really?” her tone was uncertain.

“Yeah. My dad’s in the oil business, so uh…”

“So, what brings you here?”

“Uh…business trip.”

“Business, huh?” Her eyebrows raised. “What’s it like in Saudi?”

“Hot!” Chandler said. “We have two swimming pools. And lots of servants.”

“Must be nice,” she studied the slope below.

Chandler’s eyes wandered off to the pines. Before long they were putting the bar up. He lifted his skis and went down the ramp again. He sped down the hill, wanting to put quite a bit of distance between him and the lady who thought he lived in Saudi Arabia. On the way he passed the teenage boy who thought he was from Alaska talking with the two girls who thought he had a dirt-bike.

He got in the singles line again. It was better without Violet. If she were there, she would just want to ride up the lift with him all of the time, and that would slow both of them down.

He ended up with two moms again. When they asked him where he was from, the temptation was just too strong.

“I am from Mother Russia,” he said. “My family is musicians.”

“What instruments do you play?” asked one of the moms.

“Violins. Ve all play violins. Zat iz how ve make our money. Earn living.”

“Aww, that’s just so sad,” said the other mom. “What part of Russia?”

“Uh..Siberia.”

“Siberia?”

“Yes. Zat iz vhy ve likes ski.”

At the end of the ride, one of the moms gave him a ten-dollar bill. “Since you don’t have your violin with you. I would have loved to hear you play. I’m sure it is just so beautiful.”

“Zank you,” he said.

He skied down the hill and went straight to the ski lodge, his clunky ski boots making a galumph-galumph noise as he heel-toed across the deck towards the glass door.

At the counter he ordered hot chocolate, chili, and fries. He had just started eating when a familiar voice said, “There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you!”

Violet plopped down in the seat across from him, her cheeks rosy. “Where’d you get the money for all that?”

“Shhh! Quiet!” He didn’t want the moms who thought he was from Russia to see him with his very American sister.

“I’m telling Mom about this and that you’ve been ditching me *all day* if you don’t share,” she said.

He let her have some of his fries.

“And the hot chocolate, too,” she said.

“Go get another cup,” he said. “It’s ewwy to share.”

By the time she had stumbled in her boots over to the counter and back, he had thrown the rest of the hot chocolate down his throat.

“Chandler!” Threats of telling their mother returned.

“I *shared!*” he argued.

Chandler wanted to hit *Walk on the Moon*, an adjacent slope that was a little more advanced, but Violet said, “You go. I’m sticking to Cool Canyon. “

As it was nearing 4:30, Chandler was able to get right on the lift through the

singles line. He ended up on a chair next to a bearded man and his companion, a very pretty younger lady with a long black braid.

This guy would probably be easy to dupe, Spencer thought. Why not tell him he was from Germany? He had learned some German in a sixth grade after-school program, and was pretty good at it.

“Bitte...haben Sie die Zeit?” Chandler pointed to his empty wrist.

The bearded man smiled at him. “Ah. Kommst du aus Deutschland?”

Chandler gulped. “Ja.”

“Es ist halb fünf.”

“Oh,” said Chandler. “Danke.”

“Bitte. Das ist meine Frau.” He gestured toward his companion. “Sie kommt von den Philippinen.”

“Oh. Ja, ja,” said Spencer.

“Aus welcher Region kommst du?” the man raised thick eyebrows.

If he wriggled under the bar, he could jump straight down to the slope. Probably wouldn't get hurt too badly. “Uh...Hamburg. Ja.”

“Ja?”

“Ja.” Chandler strained to see the lift station at the top of the hill.

They stared forward for a long time. Finally it was skis up, then down the ramp. Chandler had never been so glad to get out of there. He spent the last half hour on *Cool Canyon* riding the lift with Violet.

On his last run down, Chandler spotted his mother in her bright red snowsuit. He made a beeline toward her, then all too late realized with whom she was speaking. It was the bearded man and the lady with the long black braid.

His mother smiled and waved at him. “Chandler!”

Chandler got into a tuck and flew past her.

“I don't know what's come over him,” she said as he whizzed by.

Once out of her sight he couldn't stop. He crashed into an orange plastic mesh

fence. Chandler struggled to reattach his skis, then stood up. He took off his jacket, goggles, and hat. He reversed his jacket to the navy side, then stuffed his goggles and hat into his pocket. Finally, he took his purple neck-warmer and put it up around his head like a hat.

He skied back to his mother, who was still talking to the bearded man. “Hi, Mom.”

“There you are, dear. Didn’t I see you fly by a minute ago?”

Chandler shrugged.

“This is Mr. and Mrs. Anderson. Mr. Anderson is Dad’s manager. We’re going out with them to dinner tonight.”

Chandler mumbled a “hello.”

“Guten Tag, mein Herr,” Mr. Anderson’s eyes twinkled. “Wie geht es dir?”

His mom frowned and pursed her lips. She seemed on the edge of asking a question.

“Uh...” Chandler turned scarlet. “Well, uh...nice to meet you. I gotta go find Violet now.” He pushed away with all of his might.

“Auf Wiedersehen!” Mr. Anderson called, bellowing in laughter.

They met the Andersons that evening at an upscale restaurant called Peak Season. Their daughter Charlotte was around Chandler’s age and as pretty as her mother, with long black hair. Her younger brother Luke was nine years old with blue eyes like his father. Chandler clung to Violet who chatted merrily to Charlotte and Luke. She broke the ice expertly, and soon they were all dipping their fingers in melted candle wax and blowing their straw paper at each other.

Mr. Anderson was speaking to his dad about business in an easygoing, confident manner. Chandler’s mother and Mrs. Anderson certainly seemed to be hitting it off. He kept one ear trained on the adults. Thankfully the subject of Chandler’s stunt on the ski lift never surfaced. He exhaled in relief.

Yet when it came time to order dessert, Mr. Anderson said, “And what will young

master Chandler want? Perhaps the German chocolate cake?”

His mother looked at him with raised brows. Charlotte’s sparkling eyes glanced up at him.

Chandler hid his face in the menu. “Uh...I think I’m full.”

Never in his life would he forget the ring of Mr. Anderson’s full-throated laughter.