



The Clermont County Public Library
Short Story Contest
Winners 2024

Contents

First Place: <i>An Incident by the Creek</i> by Jasmine Pettit.....	3
Second Place: <i>Every Minute Counts</i> by Sophia Broyles	9
Third Place: <i>The Alien and the Human</i> by Amelia Landreman.....	14
First Place: <i>Mama</i> by Jillian Broyles	22
Second Place: <i>The Whisper</i> by CherieDawn Haas.....	34
Third Place: <i>Tree Whisperer</i> by Tiffany James	43

First Place: An Incident by the Creek by Jasmine Pettit

“You see that creek over there?” The little girl’s mother gestured to the rapids at the bottom of the hill.

She peered with curiosity and took a step closer to get a better look. Her mother put an arm in front of her. She drawled out a warning loud and clear, then took a long swig of her glass of water. “Never go down to that river. You hear me? There will be dire consequences.”

The little girl looked up and stared curiously at her mother’s drawn face. Despite the woman’s apparent youth, she looked far older than her daughter had ever seen her before.

She squeezed her mother’s hand, eyes trained on the rushing waters below. “I will never go down to that river. You don’t have to worry, Ma.”

Her mother squeezed her hand. “Good.”

She intended to keep her promise, she really did, but sometimes circumstances change. Sometimes push comes to shove. Sometimes you end up breaking a promise you swore to keep on your life and everything you ever held dear.

It was a clear summer day just several months later when she got a tad too close to the river. She had spent the afternoon folding paper cranes with her older brother under the house’s porch until he had to get the week’s groceries. Even when he was gone, she kept folding until her hands cramped up. Subsequently, she went outside to the hill by their home to play in her imagination on her lonesome.

The incident happened on a clear summer day. The weather was good. The clouds were practically frozen in the sky. She hadn't expected for a sudden wind to pick up or for her paper cranes to fly out of her arms all at once. They scattered in every direction simultaneously and she scrambled to retrieve the ones that were still salvageable.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spied a straggler. It danced in the wind, doing backflips over invisible obstacles. It looked so weightless, fluttering gently down. It would have hit the cool grass if not for the sudden gust of wind so strong the little girl had to squint her eyes and bend her knees to root herself into the ground.

When the wind had slowed a bit, she spotted the crane once again, sitting right at the edge of the hill, tilting precariously off.

Everything was so, so still until the next gust of wind came. It knocked the crane off the edge and it pushed her feet into action as she lunged toward the edge.

One foot caught on an unearthed root and a jolt ran up her body as gravity grasped at her from all the wrong angles.

When she landed she was covered in dirt. She pushed herself back onto her feet and brushed off the filth quickly. Her mother would scold her so much later.

Then across the river she saw the crane again. It was dirt coated and a little wet, but still intact otherwise.

She sprinted for it.

One foot in front of the other.

The tips of her fingers just barely grazing the paper.

But just as she managed to touch the crane, it crumbled into a substance finer than sand and scattered in the wind.

The world seemed to flip upside down as tears pricked at her eyes. When she removed her sleeve from her tear-stained face she was no longer by the creek. By all means, it looked and sounded exactly like the creek near her home, but deep down she knew this was not her creek. When she glanced up the hill, her house no longer stood at the top.

So, with no other choice, she turned around and continued further into the forest.

—

A distraught brother returned not ten minutes later to an empty house.

A composed mother returned hours later.

“That girl shouldn’t have gone down to the creek,” she said nonchalantly. Her voice was hoarse.

Many years later a gust of wind blew.

A young woman emerged from the creek, a sob of grief caught in her throat.

She was too late, she realized as she watched the world around her unravel.

—

The girl proceeded down the creek that was not her creek. She walked until her feet went numb, some unspeaking force propelling her forward. The stars' light guided her. The rustling leaves of the trees whispered to her.

Keep going. Don't let her find you.

She walked until the creek dried up and the trees became so close together that they formed a canopy above her.

But she could not walk forever and she eventually lay on the dreamlike soft grass and dozed off.

She heard voices whispering around her, bell-like and light like a firefly's gentle glow. Everything felt warm and fuzzy. She snuggled in closer to something that seemed to envelope her in that welcoming sleepy feeling.

When the girl awoke, the first thing she saw was the beautiful sky. There were *so many* stars. And she could see the pale milky blue trails of something magical in the deep, deep blue above. The sky had never looked so wonderful back home, always coated with thick smog and overpowered by the streetlamps.

The next thing she noticed was the green blanket wrapped around her. In all meanings of the word, it simply looked like the kind of moss you'd find on a rock whilst hiking. But it was so soft and warm and she couldn't help but sink herself deeper into the blanket.

She spotted the creature finally, perched on a rock by the nearby pond. The pond held the same shape as the creek back home, but the water remained stagnant. Under

different circumstances she would've been terrified of the creature. It took on a humanoid figure, but it was far too tall and its angles twisted in all the wrong places.

This was a girl who read more fairytales than her mother read the daily news. She should've been scared, but she was inexplicably drawn to the bluish glow of the creature and the way its long hair sparkled.

"Are you a fairy?" she asked. "A witch? A princess?"

The creature turned its face to her and reality ceased to exist when she got lost in the swirling doe eyes that met hers.

The creature grinned. Not maliciously, but far too wide to be innocent. The tilt of its head was so slight, it might never have even happened.

She was just a lonely girl. Any smile in her direction was friendly.

When the creature stood to its full height and approached the girl she was forced to crane her neck to see. Then it knelt down again and asked in a smooth, bell-like voice, "Can I have your name?"

—

There are tales of a wanderer. She goes by many titles, Star Traveller, Lost Princess. It's impossible to know if you'll ever get the chance to meet her yourself, but everybody knows somebody who, at some point or another, crossed paths with her.

You may get to hear an unworldly story from her, but she may ask if she could have your name.

She can never stay for long, for she knows too much and *something* is always watching.

She often travels with a story-weaver, too tall to be human, but when witnesses try to recall the face of her companion, their memories seem to be lost in a misty haze.

If you ask her why she and the weaver travel and if either will ever settle down, she'll tell you she can not. She wishes to save the worlds.

"Save the worlds from what?"

"People are forgetting," she'll tell you, voice barely above a whisper. "And once we forget, nothing will stop our worlds from unraveling."

Perhaps, she merely is a lost soul with titles too big for her scrawny figure.

For how could she possibly save the worlds when she can't even recall her own name?

Second Place: *Every Minute Counts* by Sophia Broyles

I examine my olive complexion and warm brown eyes in the mirror built into the sunshade of my mother's Fiat. My thick black hair is collected at the nape of my neck in a loose ponytail, and strands hang out, nearly concealing my gold teardrop earrings. I quickly brush the strands back, then close the sunshade and stare out the windshield of the car as it pulls into a crowded parking lot.

My eyes flick to the dash. The bright red letters of the clock stand out: 6:37.

I remark to my mother that we are late again. She glances over with a disapproving expression in the face that matches mine, and reminds me that seven minutes hardly makes a difference.

Calmly, I tell her I know. But inwardly, I think, *Every minute counts*.

She pulls up beside the brightly lit building, and I pull a pair of beat-up skates out of the space near my feet. I cradle them tenderly as I step out of the car. My feet hit the pavement and through them I can feel the beat of the loud music playing inside the concrete building.

I thank my mother for the ride. She nods silently. I know she doesn't approve of me skating, not with my constant dizzy spells, but she takes me, because she knows how much I love it, and how can she deny me my one of my few joys in this world?

I shut the car door and walk the few feet to the end of the line, joining the herds of people headed for the same place, some with skates, some without. Many of the girls my

age wear shorts and crop tops, which are not enough to shelter them from the biting wind. I get some strange looks in my pink hoodie and blue jeans, out of which hang four dollars from a back pocket.

As I wait in line, I look all around me at the others, laughing and chatting, like they haven't a care in the world. People like this will not understand why I don't laugh and chat, too. These people have time to wait. Do I?

Soon I am inside, but still in line. The seconds are ticking away, so I slip on my skates now to save time. When I reach the payment booth, I pull the four dollars from my back pocket and hand them to the lady without a word. She says nothing, either. I'm just another rude customer, she probably figures.

I push through the admission door and the music grows much louder. The warmth of the room hits me instantly. I am standing on carpet, but beyond me is a wooden floor. A roller rink.

My heart beats with the music and I head straight for the floor. I feel like I am flying as I roll swiftly along. This is where I can feel like those people in line, without a care in the world.

Someone taps me on the shoulder and I turn, looking into flecked brown eyes of my best friend. I smile at him, a smile I haven't used much lately. Now my happiness is complete.

The two of us roll on together, and *now* I laugh and chat. He makes me laugh. When I am with him I don't think about the sad things. I don't think about how long I have left to live.

People I know don't understand why I want to see this friend so bad. *Why do you have to see him so often? Can't you wait a week or so?* they wonder. They don't understand what it is about him that makes me so happy, and why it is so urgent for me to see him as much as possible. But they don't know what I know. They don't know about my brain tumor.

I found out about it long ago, but it was only recently I was told how bad my condition was. It was only recently I learned I haven't much time left. It was only recently that things I enjoyed doing, people I enjoyed seeing, became so much more important. I feel like there isn't enough time to live my life. That is why I can not wait a week. Because maybe I don't have one.

People say, *There is always tomorrow*. But that's not always true. Some people don't have a tomorrow.

When I am here, floating on skates, looking into my friend's eyes, laughing at his jokes...I can forget about my cancer. All the sad things fade away. He is my best friend, that's all there is to it. I just like to be with him, skate with him, talk with him.

When they first told me about my tumor, they gave me a choice: stay at the hospital and be administered treatment, possibly leading up to surgery, or just live it out. I chose living it out. More recently, when they discovered just how bad it was, they put on the

pressure for me to take treatment. I held strong in my decision. I would rather die happy, free, and with the people I know and love, than in the hospital, surrounded by those unfamiliar nurses and doctors to whom I am only another patient. And now, as I skate with my best friend, I know it was the right decision. This is where I love to be, what I love to do, and who I love to be with.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and when I pull it out and see my doctor's caller ID, I ignore it. It must be about the scan I had just a week ago, and I don't need more bad news, more pressure to change my mind, right now. Besides, I am with my friend, and every minute counts.

My friend looks at me curiously and asks who was calling. I reply that it was no one.

He doesn't pressure me. That's one of the things I love about him. He knows when to stop asking. But my cancer is the only thing I haven't told him about. I just don't know how to, and I am so afraid it will change things between us. I like things the way they are.

After a while, the rink darkens, and we talk faster, knowing our time is running out. Too soon, the rink is brightening again, and the DJ announces that the skating session is over. My heart sinks as we leave the rink, and the depression begins to settle in once more as we change from our skates to our shoes. We will have to part ways soon.

We walk out to the parking lot, and my friend waits with me until my mother arrives. We say our goodbyes outside the passenger door, and I have to keep the tears in, knowing this could be the last time I will see him. He opens the door for me and I slide onto the seat. He waves as we pull away.

My mom looks over at me and inquires how my time was. I try to smile, telling her it was good, and thanking her again for bringing me. I am about to say more when my phone rings. It is my doctor again.

I answer it, and it immediately links to the car. His voice comes over the speaker. There is an urgency in his voice as he tell me he has the results from my scan. I swallow hard, waiting.

My ears tingle as he speaks. Did I hear...receding? My tumor...getting smaller...disappearing? My mother's car veers sharply off the road and comes to a halt. We sit there, staring at each other in silence. My mind races, but a seed of hope is sprouting inside me. It has always been there, but now it is growing, flourishing. It is very abnormal, he expresses, and I can hear in his voice that he is unnerved by it. He says he will tell me more when he can. I thank him with few words and tell him goodbye. My throat is too constricted to say more.

I need some air. I step out of the car, and my mother does also. We stare at each other for a few seconds, tears of joy shining in our eyes. Then we embrace, holding each other tight for a while, the tears flowing from our eyes. We are speechless with inexpressible joy.

It is a miracle.

Raising Awareness for Brain Cancer

Third Place: *The Alien and the Human* by Amelia Landreman

Ten...nine...eight...seven... Okay, this is taking too long. BLAST OFF!

The rocket engine started. Clouds of smoke rapidly formed as the *Astraeus 7* launched into the sky, people watching in wonder below. The captain, Dylan Organzo, sat in the rocket seat, preparing for the g-force to overtake him. As it started up, he willed his mind to think of something else. "Good-bye, street. Good-bye family. Good-bye Earth," he thought. Before he knew it, he was feeling the extreme relief that felt like having a weight lifted off his chest.

He marveled at the stars outside his window while he also tried to deal with the newness of being weightless. Dylan watched out the window at Earth as it grew smaller and smaller. Somewhere down there (he hadn't been too good at geography in school) his family was waving good-bye. He wondered if he would ever see them again. Where he was going, it was out on the edge of the rocky planets.

He was going to Mars.

Dylan prepared for boredom in his seven-month flight. Inside one of his backpacks were books, his private journal, plenty of pencils, and many more things. He wondered how much his daughter, Lavender, would've changed after he got back to Earth. Would she even recognize him? Would she have developed different interests that he didn't even understand? All of this kept him wondering for about a week. For the next several weeks, he tried his best to keep all of his belongings from floating around in the rocket ship.

THWACK! "Ow!" Dylan exclaimed. A very thick book had just flown at his head from out of nowhere. "Computer, how much longer until we reach Mars?" he asked. "Twelve

more weeks.” The computer answered in a mechanical voice. Dylan sighed. This was a one-man mission, and it was probably the most boring one in all of history. He sat down and strapped himself to the bed to read the very thick book that had hit him on the head. Sometimes being weightless was annoying.

Taking showers wasn’t that difficult in space. All Dylan had to do was get a squeeze pouch full of hot water and soap, get a towel, squeeze it on the towel, and start wiping. “Maybe I should take showers like this at home,” he thought. “It’s much easier and reduces the water bill.” It was around a week later when he first saw Mars. “Finally!” Dylan exclaimed, jumping for joy, but banging his head on the ceiling. “Ow.”

He started gathering his stuff and preparing for when he’d have to direct the ship for landing. This was his biggest moment...

“Dylan Organzo, Dylan Organzo, are you there, Dylan?”

“Roger that, Houston,” Dylan replied.

“We talked about this,” NASA said. “You’re not being featured in a children’s book.”

“But do we know that for sure?” Dylan replied mysteriously.

“Focus, Dylan.”

“Okay.”

“We’re all rooting for you,” NASA said.

There were cheers in the background as they spoke. Dylan thought he could hear his daughter in the background shouting, "I love you, Daddy!" When he landed, a plume of red dust rose and stayed adrift for a minute before settling back to the ground.

"The *Astraeus 7* has landed," Dylan triumphantly confirmed. The radio exploded with the sound of cheering. He had done it! He was the first person on Mars! Dylan set to work on the task of putting on his spacesuit so he could venture around on Mars. When that ordeal was done, he was finally able to step out of the place he'd been cooped up in for seven months.

Even though he'd seen the surface of Mars plenty of times on Google search and at the training center of NASA, it was still a once in a lifetime experience looking over at the red tinted land that stretched out before him.

He felt a little sad at seeing the sight because of the theory that Mars had once looked a lot like Earth. Maybe there had even been life, long ago. Dylan sighed, and then reminded himself that he was here for a reason. Dylan was about to pick up a rock, when he heard a noise behind him. It sounded like a slooshing noise, similar to when cars drove through a puddle of partially melted snow. *Sloosh, sloosh, sloosh...*

Dylan slowly turned around, still in the position of bending down to pick up a rock, and found himself facing a creature.

It's kind of hard to put words to it because of the abnormality of the organism. It was around two feet tall, with clear skin, and it gave the odd sensation of water just floating there in a blobby shape. But blobs of water don't have an eye or a definite shape to them.

They also don't speak with a voice that sounds like gurgling. Well, maybe they do.

ANYway...

"AHHHHHH!!!!!!" Dylan shouted. Now, you might think he was being a weenie or something, but think how YOU would react if you saw a creature like the one that was just described. You'd probably freak out.

In response to Dylan's shouting, the blobby one-eyed creature gurgled questioningly. It was probably just asking if Dylan was okay. Its voice sounded just like water going down a stream. It had the shape similar to a slug, but stubbier and more plump. It had one huge eye and tiny little limbs that were hanging at the front of its body, similar to a praying mantis. They stared at each other while Dylan gathered his wits.

"Okay. There's an alien staring at me that has somehow evaded NASA's rovers since 1997, and actually speaks and moves," he thought in admiration at the alien's intelligence.

Dylan got out his phone and turned on Google translate. He pressed the speaker button and got the alien to gurgle into the speaker. It actually translated! Dylan had no idea how Google knew the language, but he was glad anyway. Here's what the alien had said:

"Hello. I am Picotee of the Clearwaters. We have been evading your contraptions ever since they have started landing here. We've been here ever since the beginning of time and take pride in our secrecy. We have been studying your planet the same as you've been studying ours. Yet we know a lot more about you than you do us. What's your name?"

This was a lot for Dylan to take in, and he just stood there, reading what the alien had spoken over and over again until Picotee threw a rock at him.

“Ow!” Dylan said. Picotee was unusually strong. Picotee was about to throw another rock when Dylan handed him his phone for him to read. In the Gurgle language, as Dylan called it, his words translated into a series of waves, the same as you would read on a heart monitor. He laughed at the words that he was reading, for Dylan told about how dumb he felt about being spied on by the Clearwaters.

They went on like this for a few minutes, filling each other in on various aspects of one another’s lives. Picotee informed Dylan of his language’s name, (it was actually called the Gurgle language) and Dylan told of his family back down on Earth. Picotee told of his age, (100, still very young for a Clearwater) and Dylan informed Picotee of his age. (46. Picotee laughed and told him he would still be a mere child if he were a Clearwater.)

Then Picotee asked if Dylan would like to see his home. Dylan obliged, not wanting to be rude. Then Picotee did something Dylan thought was really dumb. He jumped into a crater. Dylan hesitantly followed, but then remembered that Mars gravity was only 38% of Earths so duh, he would have almost zero chance of being hurt. After realizing this, he jumped into the crater, feeling a little bit foolish. When Dylan landed, he looked around in amazement. There were waterfalls and rivers everywhere, plateaus where oddly shaped houses were built on, and plants everywhere. In the rivers, hanging over the plateaus, and there was lush moss that Dylan and Picotee were walking on.

Picotee said something into Dylan’s phone and gave it to him. “You mustn’t tell anyone about this place. If you did, then our home would be destroyed. We’ve watched lush forests on your home planet vanish because of humans. We’ve watched species slowly die out. We’ve seen everything.”

Dylan promised that he wouldn't tell a single soul. The Clearwaters were very welcoming and told Dylan he could take off that ridiculous thing he was wearing. He did tentatively, and discovered that the mini atmosphere down there was more fresh than back down at Earth. Picotee introduced Dylan to his family, and it was later translated that Picotee's mom, Azure, told him that the ecosystem here was well cared for by Clearwaters that were specialized in the field of botany. Azure led them into one of the homes, thankfully big enough for Dylan to fit inside, and prepared a delicious meal of wild fungi salad. Dylan averted his eyes every time one of the Clearwaters took a bite because you could see them chewing it up. It was really gross.

Dylan walked around with Picotee for a while, showing him all there was to see down below the surface of Mars. After a little while, Dylan asked and translated why Picotee had revealed himself to him. Picotee answered by the phone that there was no specific reason, and that he just wanted to see a human up close. Dylan was relieved that it wasn't for a slightly awkward reason. Picotee later on wanted to see what Dylan's life was like. Dylan took out his phone and went into his photo gallery. He scrolled through them, showing Picotee many of the aspects of his life.

Picotee commented on how chubby 'baby humans' as he called them were. Dylan had to agree with him, as Lavender had been a chunk when she was first born. They had gone through the whole album before Dylan remembered he had to leave to go back to Earth in the morning. "I have to go, Picotee." Dylan said into his phone. "I have to rest up. I'll be leaving in the morning to go back to Earth." Picotee read the phone and spoke into it.

“You can stay here. My mother would be overjoyed to have a guest. She’s weird in that way.” Dylan chuckled and told Picotee that his mother was the same way.

That night, Dylan slept on the most comfortable bed he’d ever slept on. It was super fluffy moss, but not so fluffy that you’d suffocate in it. He fell asleep almost immediately and found that it was one of the most restful nights he’d ever had. Dylan bade good-bye to all of the Clearwaters, and even got a little teary when saying good-bye to Picotee. Picotee spoke into the phone and here’s what it said:

“I hope we will remember each other for now and always. Good-bye.”

Picotee embraced his leg and Dylan stooped down to hug him. Picotee motioned for his phone. Dylan handed it to him and Picotee pulled on his pant leg to pull him down.

Picotee swiped on his phone and went into his photo album. Dylan made a mental note to install a password on his phone. Picotee flipped the camera around on Dylan’s phone and took a picture. Picotee hugged Dylan again and this time Dylan got a good amount of tears in his eyes. He bade a final good-bye to the Clearwaters and put his spacesuit back on.

He trekked back up to the rocket ship, the Clearwaters following. As he climbed in, Dylan turned to look at Picotee. He was sitting there, staring at him. He smiled and waved his tiny limb. Dylan waved back and smiled too.

Right at that moment, NASA contacted him. “Are you ready for launch, Dylan?” one of the people asked.

“Yeah. I think I am,” Dylan said, still staring out the window.

“Is everything alright?” NASA asked.

“Yup,” Dylan said. “I’m just taking in the scene one last time.”

The scene of all the Clearwaters smiling and waving good-bye. Once the rocket was in the air, Dylan got out his private journal, strapped himself to his bed, and started to write.

“On my first and only day on Mars, I ran into the last thing that anyone would expect...”

First Place: *Mama* by Jillian Broyles

Part One:

Aysel cast the letter to the floor.

“What does he say?” her husband leaned against the yellow tile.

“He is not coming home until one month from now. And...” she sighed, “he is bringing someone to meet us. A girl!”

“A *girl*?” said Gül. “Without parents?”

“American!” Aysel waved her hand. She hunched over the small formica-chrome table in the kitchen, pouring tea from the Samovar.

“I send him many pictures of girls, *many* recommendations, and he does not accept one.”

“Now Aysel,” said Gül. “Times change. You know Emre—how modern he is. Always too smart. But his heart’s honest.”

“He is breaking *mine*!” Aysel replaced the samovar to the gas stove.

“Let him be *himself*.”

Aysel pulled a blue handkerchief from her pocket. “Always too busy to visit. He doesn’t love me.”

“He *does*,” Gül insisted. “Look on the bright side. Our son is coming home. He *wants* to see us.”

“My blood’s blackening.”

“Stop it,” said Gül.

“What will the neighbors think?”

"We are *not* telling *any* of the neighbors."

"They'll know."

Gül sighed. "Who cares?"

Part Two:

"She will not like *your* food. That's certain," Aysel's oldest friend, Fatima, advised.

Aysel bristled. Fatima usually got under her skin. "Our food? Why not? Our region has *best* food. Everyone says I am good cook."

"Yes," said Fatima. "But she is American. She has had all the world's food."

Aysel wrung her handkerchief. "Well then? What will I make?"

Fatima shook her head. "I don't know. Let me think." She leaned back in her chair, arms crossed over her green housecoat, finger to her lips. Fatima had a lovely daughter exactly Emre's age. It would have been so easy. All the parents approved. Aysel felt a pang of guilt that Emre was so stubborn. "I think..."

"Yes?" Aysel leaned forward.

"I think...maybe...she is homesick. Maybe you make American food."

"*American* food?"

Fatima nodded slowly at first, then more vigorously. "I have a cookbook."

After returning home, Aysel shut herself in the bedroom. She thumbed through the cookbook. Aysel received good marks in school for English. But that was long ago. She studied a picture of a golden food with concentric circles. "Ma-ca-roni and Cheese," she pronounced. She wrinkled her nose. Too complicated. She turned the page, her eyes lighting on another dish. A soup with ground beef and onion. "Chi-li." Yes. She would make this. But she needed a special appliance for it.

She begged Gül. “We have money. *Please!* Use our dowry money for Emre. Likely he won’t need it *now.*”

“Enough,” said Gül. “He could date this girl and then go back to a nice Azeri girl.”

“No one will want him,” she frowned. “Anyway, I want the device. It will make a good impression.”

“So now you *want* the American girl?”

“If it is our only way to make peace with our son, I will take American girl.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” he said.

Aysel needled him about the special appliance all month.

One day he came home late. “I searched every bazaar, but finally...” He pulled a heavy box with the words “*Crock Pot*” into the apartment.

‘Oh my love,” Aysel wrapped her arms around him.

“Yes, yes. I know. I’m the best.”

Part Three:

Erica gripped the seat back as the train lurched to a stop, her stomach roiling. She had to get something in it soon before it lost the bread and black tea she had devoured in the dark at five a.m. A candy bar lay in her purse, but on an empty stomach? She’d get a headache.

It had been three cruel days since seeing Emre. He had gone to a conference in Baku to appeal for funding, and would meet her in Sumgait. It was the first they had been apart since he declared his love. She hated to be without him. Cried the first night he was gone. *Just one short taxi ride. Then I’ll see my love.*

Outside the station, she bought yellow carnations for his mother. She had been in the country for six months, traveling to different villages, proud that she knew not to go to a house empty-handed. Emre was one of the doctors on the medical team. He was tall and dark, but without the usual leering confidence that most of the men—both U.S. military and foreign—displayed. His intelligent eyes focused on work, and barely took notice of her. What drew her most? He treated the children as people. Listened with more than a stethoscope. Played soccer with them. Let them win.

The taxi ride was jerky. *Still. Better than the train.* She smelled the flowers, repeating the phrases she had learned. Many told her she had good pronunciation, and she hoped to win Emre's parents' affection. No one cooked like his mother, Emre said. She could use some of that cooking now. She loved Azeri food, having sampled several dishes. She'd ask his mother to teach her. Except...maybe Emre should teach her. Erica's mom had been one to serve crackers and cottage cheese for dinner, or worse—when called to a realty appointment—leave Erica and her sister to scour the fridge.

Now her beloved loomed into view. She told the taxi driver to stop. Before she could get the money out of her purse, Emre leaned in and paid the fare. That was so like him.

He folded her in his embrace, kissing her, then put his forehead to hers. "How are you?"

"Nervous," she said.

"It is candy. Mama will love you," he insisted. They had not gone more than a few paces when he grabbed the flowers from her hand. "No, no no. Never give Mama these!"

"Why not?" she frowned.

"They're yellow!"

“So?”

“Yellow means you wish to be parted.”

Erica gulped.

“It is sweet of you,” he said, but threw them in a trashcan.

Erica turned to watch them drop. “But...what will I give her?”

Emre grabbed her hand. “Nothing. Mama will understand.”

They entered the breezeway of an old apartment building. Emre turned to look at her. “Rest before the steps.” He reached out to smooth her hair, which had been tossed around in the wind. “You are so beautiful.”

“You like my outfit?” She was wearing a loose white blouse and a black skirt.

“It’s a little short,” Emre said, “But *I* like it.”

She pulled her skirt down past her knees. “It’s the only thing that fits now. Besides scrubs.”

Emre stuck out his bottom lip. “I’m sorry.”

“Do you think she’ll know?”

He shrugged and grimaced. “No?”

Part Four

The day before Emre’s visit, Aysel lived in the kitchen. She prepared all of his favorites: stuffed grape leaves, yogurt soup, and Plov, a rice dish with beef, chestnuts, prunes and apricots. The morning of their arrival, she bought bread, chocolates, and baklava. Then she purchased additional items that Gül would complain about. But she had

made up her mind. She would be as welcoming as possible. She made the chili, putting it all in the crock pot and turning it to low.

Gül watched her with an interested frown. “Is that all?”

“Is all.”

Aysel arranged her hair into a high coif, then made her face look as pleasant as possible. She drew a deep breath as she looked in the mirror. She was older. Fine lines appeared around her eyes and the folds of her lids seemed to stick together. Where did time go? Emre was born, then she blinked. Their only child was fading away.

It took effort to compose herself when the door knocker sounded. Gül opened it at once. Aysel followed slowly. The girl next to her son was tall, and had kind, sparkling eyes, especially when she looked at Emre. Aysel liked her immediately.

Part Five

Erica embraced “Eye-sell”, allowing her to kiss her cheek. Was she really old enough to be Emre’s mom? Women certainly knew how to retain their beauty in this country.

She removed her shoes. The colorful slippers they provided were still in the package, and two sizes too small. A small, eyes-down, *cooking* wife. That’s what they wanted for him.

She embraced and kissed his father, “Gool,” and felt for Emre’s hand, warm and reassuring. But though his mother smiled, her eyes flashed alarm. Did she glance at Erica’s belly? Erica blushed.

They sat on the sofa. His mother brought out tea, fruit preserves, a bowl of chocolates, and a bowl of...chips? And Cheetos? Emre’s eyes were wide.

"You like?" Aysel asked.

"Yes. I like." Erica put some chips and cheetos on her plate, and some in her mouth.

"I didn't know you could find these here."

Aysel ducked into a room and returned quickly. "And we have!" She held up a four-pack of toilet paper.

"Mama," Emre said in a chiding voice.

"Aysel!" Gül reprimanded.

Aysel stuffed the package behind an armoire, frowning.

"Ehm. Your name is fruit," said Gül.

"Hmm?"

Gül blushed and said something to his son in Azeri.

"He wants to tell you that your name is like our word for apricot," Emre squeezed her hand.

"Oh," Erica nodded and smiled.

Silence ensued. Aysel poured tea. Erica put a sugar cube in her cheek and drank the tea, as she had seen them do in the villages.

Emre coughed.

Erica quickly spit the sugar cube into her hand then thunked it in her tea.

Aysel and Gül excused themselves to check on the food.

"Can I do anything to help?" Erica called out.

Emre put a firm hand on her knee.

"Kitchen is small," said Aysel.

"I am looking forward to it, Mama!" called Emre.

“What did I do?” Erica asked when they were out of earshot.

“Mama thinks it’s unrefined to leave the sugar cube sticking out in your cheek like that,” Emre explained.

“Oh,” she scarfed more chips.

“And try not to point your heel towards them.”

“Point my heel towards them? I wasn’t!”

“You were when you crossed your legs,” Emre put an arm around her shoulder, then kissed her cheek. He kept his mouth by her ear. “And whatever you do, *don’t* offer to help in the kitchen.”

“But that’s rude!” she said.

“Exactly!”

Part Six

“I *like* her,” said Gül.

“The chili!” said Aysel. It was still and lifeless in the crockpot.

“The what?”

“It’s called *chili*. It’s not cooking! It’s cold!” Aysel checked the plug and the dial.

“It’s too late,” said Gül.

“No!” Aysel insisted. She searched and found her old pressure cooker. She lit the gas stove.

Gül helped her pour the chili. “Will it work?”

“Without fail! Why did I never think of it?”

“I don’t know. I purchased that contraption and then *you* bought *toilet paper* of all things, and had to *show it* to the guest!”

“I’m *sorry*,” she said.

“Stop pointing out our differences!” he said.

“Okay, okay!”

Each of them sat in their chair opposite the sofa. Erica squirmed, crossing and uncrossing her legs, then finally putting her feet on the floor. “Oh!” She reached into her purse. “Here,” she held out a candy bar. Aysel wasn’t sure if it was meant for her or Gül, until the girl said in Azeri, “For you.”

“Oh,” said Aysel. She thanked her in her native tongue, smiling. She held the candy bar, unsure what to do with it. Emre hung his head.

“So, you are career woman,” said Aysel. Gül glared at her.

Emre looked up. “Oh, yes, Mama. She’s an excellent nurse.”

Gül rose and went to stand behind Aysel, putting his hands on her shoulders. “This is *best nurse!*”

Erica blushed. “I’d like to be a mother too some day,” she glanced at Emre. “I’m sure you are a wonderful mother. Emre’s told me all about your cooking. I can’t wait to taste it.”

Aysel gulped. “You like *Azeri* food?”

“I *love* it,” said Erica. “My favorite is Plov.”

Aysel bolted up. “Please excuse.”

Gül followed her. “What’s wrong?”

She pulled out her largest pot. “I will make the Plov.”

“Mama,” Emre called from the sitting room. “Mama, Papa. Please come back. We have some news.”

Aysel and Gül met eyes with stunned expressions. The pressure cooker ticked like a clock.

“My eyes do not drink water,” said Aysel. “Something is up.”

“Be calm,” said Gül. “Coming!”

Aysel dumped the Plov from the fridge into the pot, poured in oil, covered it, and turned up the flame. But her feet froze. Gül pulled her arm. “Let’s go!”

Staunchly she marched into the living room.

Erica and Emre were holding—almost *wringing*—each other’s hands.

“Wait,” said Aysel.

Erica and Emre looked up with wide eyes.

“I will check food.” She left the room.

Gül followed again. “What *are* you doing?”

“I told you what I am doing,” she lifted the lid and stirred the Plov. It had started to stick.

“Stop being a baby! Go *out* there!”

“*You* go out there!” she said.

Gül looked over his shoulder. “Aysel, I am not leaving this kitchen without you.”

“If you think I want to hear my son tell me he is never coming home again...that he will marry this American girl and our grandchildren will be separated from us by an ocean, grow up playing video games and eating chips and Cheetos and using toilet paper—”

Emre and Erica stood in the doorway.

“We can hear you, Mama. Or at least *I* can. I’m glad Erica didn’t understand that. If you won’t come out, I’ll tell you here.” As Emre reached his arm around Erica, a loud boom echoed through the kitchen. Something hit Aysel in the back, and she went down face forward. Erica screamed.

“Mama!” Emre shouted. Both Erica and Emre were at her side. They lifted her and carried her to the couch. She noted the tender way in which Emre spoke his commands to Erica. The way she responded. With respect. Admiration.

“Mama? Are you alright? I don’t have my bag. Where are you wounded?”

“I’m not!”

“But you’re covered in...what is it?”

“Chili,” Gül said.

“What?”

“Chili. For Erica.” Aysel explained about the crockpot.

Erica covered her mouth. Tears came to her eyes. “You did that? For *me*?”

Emre regarded Aysel with wonder. “Oh, Mama,” he shook his head. “But now will you listen?”

Aysel drew a deep breath. She nodded.

“Erica and I are married. We didn’t want to wait for a big wedding. We did it while we were away, and she’s expecting your first grandchild. You don’t have to worry about us moving to the states. We’re committed to our work.”

“And I love Azerbaijan...Mama,” said Erica.

Aysel sat up. Emre was married? He wasn’t going to move to America? And she was going to have a grandchild? And Erica called her...*Mama*?

She covered her face, and cried.

Second Place: *The Whisper* by CherieDawn Haas

No one told Victoria that her cedar-lined wonderland of a playground was a 19th-century cemetery. It was just her backyard, a place where she spent countless hours playing hide-and-seek with squirrels or gathering acorns and leaves to make nature mandalas on the stones that had fallen and laid flat on the earth. It was a quiet place, with only the occasional romantic sound of a train passing along the track at the bottom of the ridge. With their house sitting out of view of the cemetery, it was like a retreat into nature.

Her father taught her how to plant daffodils to bloom in spring, black-eyed Susans in summer, mums in fall. And so it was their garden, also. Victoria's mother, Sarah, would sit on a concrete bench—the only “new” addition to the old space, and write poetry. Being so far away from the nearest Kentucky town, it gave them something to do. As Victoria grew into an adolescent and learned about the cemetery, she developed a logical concept of why she felt it was a sacred space.

When Victoria's father died one summer, Sarah was caught in a whirlwind of funeral arrangements, paperwork, grief. Victoria, at 15, retreated to the cemetery more than ever, finding comfort by laying her face against the cool moss, staring across the rows of stones that her father had spent years setting back upright, polishing, caring for. She felt if she stayed there long enough tracing her finger across a long-forgotten name and date, she would become a stone herself and maybe he would return and care for her again.

It was on such a day as this, the wind blowing everywhere beyond the cedars but not within. Victoria was lying on her side across the bench with dried tears, watching two

crows have a lengthy discussion about whether or not the hawk should be granted air space. The wind wound itself through the cedar trunks and rustled her hair. She felt a chill on her neck just before she heard a whisper that could only be her father's voice: *I'm always with you.*

Victoria stiffened, goosebumps rose across her arms. She stared straight ahead, seeing more details than her eyes had ever noticed—every shape and color of every leaf, pine needle, stone, blade of grass. She strained to hear everything—the new absence of wind, distant blue jays, and the crows continuing as if nothing had happened. Not wanting to lose the moment, she jolted upright and looked around. “Dad?”

Nothing, and yet everything around her. She never wanted to leave the bench again and vowed to stay there as much as possible.

Sarah noticed that Victoria was spending more time in the cemetery, too much time; it was macabre. She was a young lady and needed friends, to do things like go to the movies; anything that was normal. Plus, with only one income Sarah couldn't keep up with the payments on their home and land. Once it was listed, the property—beautiful and secluded as it was (the closest building to their property was a factory down near the Licking River)—sold immediately, and Sarah moved Victoria closer to her high school.

She was proud of her daughter for keeping her grades up and even joining an after-school adventure club. It kept her busy and Sarah was able to continue to deal with her own grief, believing her daughter was handling it better.

Except, the extracurricular activity wasn't so much a club as it was an excuse for Victoria to find her way back to the cemetery. She ached to hear her father's voice again, to maybe even see him. She knew his spirit was there. Sarah was so caught up in her own world that it was an easy fib for Victoria. She packed her own after-school snacks and used maps to find her childhood playground. It was an hour's walk through woods, across the railroad bridge, across the back lot of a factory that was known for their kind outreach of hiring ex-prisoners of petty crimes, and then another short hike up the hill onto the ridge. She accessed it from the back to avoid the new owners. Victoria thought the worst that could happen was that they'd tell her to leave or call her mom. Surely her dad was waiting for her to return, and so it was worth the risk.

And so it went through her high school years. The new owners rarely came to the cemetery; Victoria could tell because even though their flowers still bloomed, the grass and weeds began to fill in the open spaces. The crows and squirrels still visited with her and she could feel her father's spirit but, no matter how much she listened and even begged him, especially when she'd had a bad day, he was silent.

In her senior year, she met a guy in her Chemistry class; his nickname was Toast. By the end of spring, he was in love with her, and she was in love with him and they wanted to share everything; their joys and frustrations, french fries and playlists. Victoria invited Toast for a special hiking trip to secretly introduce him to her father. She was excited to get Toast's approval and acceptance and to know for sure if he was the one. She knew her father would give her a sign somehow.

Putting on his hiking boots, Toast was game for the Spring adventure. Victoria was unlike any girl he had ever met; he was attracted to her intelligence, her love of nature, and her strange obsession with death and spirits. Having grown up in a strict Christian house, he had never watched a horror movie until he met her and so she introduced him to an entirely new genre. He liked sitting next to her and squeezing her shoulder or sliding his hand down to her waist when a nightmare-inducing scene came up.

They met in the school parking lot and ventured into the first section of woods. Victoria was in high spirits and Toast was in a good mood, too. He had never done anything like this before; had always played by all the rules and so it felt exhilarating, until they came to the railroad bridge. Victoria continued walking in a straight line toward it.

“We’re not going to cross that, are we?” Toast asked.

“Silly, it’s the only way to get across,” she said. “Don’t worry. I know the daily train schedule. It only takes a few minutes to get across, so we’re good for now. Just don’t look down.”

Toast didn’t understand why she would take that kind of risk. He didn’t know that a daughter’s love for her father could drive her to do anything to seek that love. Victoria knew, and it was so logical in her mind that she never questioned the journey at hand if it meant a chance of hearing her father’s voice again.

When factory came into view—*the* factory, Toast asked, “Victoria, isn’t it dangerous for you to come here by yourself?”

“I’m just passing through,” she said. “They can’t even see us back here.”

“Only if you’re camouflaged, but even then they could see a person walking through the trees. You shouldn’t do this alone.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I’ve been doing this for years.”

The factory safely passed, they came to the bottom of the hill that led straight to her target. Toast frowned at the “No Trespassing” signs, noting there were multiple versions nailed to trees. Otherwise, he kept his eyes on Victoria, stepping where she stepped, ducking under branches, until she said, “We’re here.”

Toast paused and looked around them. A bench sat under a tree and he noticed random rocks sticking out of the ground in uneven rows. “What is this place?”

“It’s where I grew up,” Victoria said, seeing it through someone else’s eyes for the first time. “Well, I mean I grew up in a house over that hill. This was where I played all the time. It’s an old cemetery, from the 1800s. See, these are headstones—you have to look into the weeds for some of them now. I planted those daffodils next to your feet.” She stopped, realizing it was the most she had spoken out loud in the space since her mother sold it. It felt like an assault on the sounds of nature.

“This is creepy,” Toast said, stepping back from the flowers. “Am I standing on somebody’s grave?”

“Uh, maybe. Some of them have sunk in because the earth is always shifting over time. You okay? You look pale.”

“We’re in a graveyard, in the middle of nowhere. The sun’s going to go down before we can find our way out. No, I’m not okay. What’s the matter with you?”

Here it was, the first time she shared this place with anyone and instead of a sense of awe, there was rejection. The “matter” was that she trusted the wrong person; she misjudged Toast or she was too caught up in the idea of sharing something so special with someone for the first time. She didn’t need her father’s voice, but she wanted his reassurance and comfort more than anything then and she knew it wouldn’t come with Toast there.

“Why don’t you leave,” she said, a statement rather than a question.

“I don’t want to go all the way back alone,” he said, then added, “And I can’t leave you here by yourself. What if, what if ...”

“I’ve been coming here solo longer than you’ve been driving,” she said. “Go.”

He took a couple of steps back. “Are you sure?”

“Sun’s going down,” she said in a song-like tone.

Turning to go, he tripped over a fallen branch, scrambled to stand back up and said, “Freak!” He then took off in a jog down the hill toward the railroad tracks.

Victoria watched until he disappeared into the woods and she could only hear her old friends, the crows and squirrels. She asked the cedars, “Dad, are you here? I need you.” The wind softly blew and as she watched the tips of the treetops sway, she noticed the first star appearing in the sky. “I guess not,” she said, lowering her gaze to the ground.

She made her way down the path, following the familiar markers—a hollow oak with a wide base, a trickle of a creek, a boulder that jutted out from the ground. The railroad came

into view and she stepped up onto the rail, walking it like a balance beam toward the bridge as dusk set in. It wasn't fair that her father died and left her and her mother by themselves. It wasn't fair that they had to sell their home. It wasn't fair that no one would understand her or, if she told them about his voice, believe her. She felt more alone than ever, even more so when she came to the factory.

Two men were standing, smoking something at the edge of the parking lot, and noticed her when a reflective patch on her backpack purse caught their eye.

"Hey, what are you doing over there?" One of them asked. He was short and round, and wore a trucker ballcap.

She had never been noticed there before, even when larger groups were on break. She sped up her pace.

"I'm talking to you," he said. "You gotta be careful out there at night, walking alone."

Victoria mentally built a strategy to use her thumbs to gauge their eyes and her fist to punch their throats if needed.

"He's right, you know," the taller, thinner man said. "Lots of weirdos out there."

They laughed, and the short one said, "I'm standing with one right now."

The tall one agreed and by the time they finished giggling, Victoria disappeared from their sight.

The bridge came into view, illuminated by moonlight. She paused before crossing, looking down toward the Licking River. She had never been nervous about crossing the

bridge, but she was still on “danger alert” after the factory incident. Not knowing when the next evening train would come, she decided she would have to build up her gall and make a run for it. Any second could be the right—or wrong—one.

She put her hand on the bridge itself, then hugged the post with her forehead against it. “I miss you,” she said.

A crow began calling out nearby, closer than one would normally get to a person, even Victoria. She looked at it, and it looked at her, then flew toward her, landing on the tracks.

“What?” She asked.

The crow hopped closer, within a yard of her feet. Victoria laughed, “What are you doing, you crazy thing?”

The crow began walking, its body rocking side to side as they do when stepping. It looked back toward Victoria, then continued.

“Oh my God, you want me to follow you,” she said. She followed the bird toward and then into the overgrowth along the tracks and found herself caught. The crow flew away, leaving her stuck; the more she moved, the more she was entangled in thin branches covered in tiny thorns that were the perfect size for gripping into fabric. It was what her father had always called a wait-a-minute bush. She struggled to free herself, but it was difficult to see which branch was grabbing her where.

She was on the verge of removing her clothes to get away from the thorns when a growing roar warned of a train approaching at full speed. It was visible in a blink. She paused in stillness, watching it, then feeling it go by. Her pulse raced with the realization

that she would've been stuck on the bridge if it wasn't for the crow and the wait-a-minute bush, which began to release her. She shook in the after-train silence, then felt goosebumps and the same chill on her neck that she had years before, and she knew before she understood that it was the last time she would have to trek to the cemetery, when her father whispered, "I'm always *with you.*"

Third Place: *Tree Whisperer* by Tiffany James

“Oh, stop being so dramatic,” I told the tree.

She stood pale and shapely against the sky, bare limbs swaying gently, twigs tipped with buds as red as her name. She was not in a welcoming mood.

As a child, adults had patted me on the head and smiled at my ‘active imagination’ when I asked why a particular tree was angry or sad. Once I grew up, people called me a tree-hugging dirt-worshiper, and I stopped talking about it.

Then I met Lucy in forestry school. We became best friends practically at first sight. People called us the double L’s, Lucy and Lea. Lucy shared my love of trees like no one I’d ever met before, and I became convinced that she understood them like I did. Right up until graduation night.

My throwline, a string with a small weighted ball on the end, made a slithery sound as I pulled it across the forest floor. The jumbled brown leaves were rimmed in shining white from the morning frost, and they exuded that intoxicating leaf-mold smell: the scent of nature turning the death and waste of shed leaves into the perfect medium for new life.

I lobbed my throwball in a beautiful parabola, on a perfect path to go over the branch I’d been aiming for. At the last moment the tree swayed to the right, and my throwball bounced off with a *thunk*.

“This is for your own good,” I yelled.

Trees don't understand the words of human speech, but they can get the feelings behind it. Tree emotions are bigger than human ones, more spread out, much slower. I pressed my hand against the cold, smooth bark of the maple. She was resentful, and under that, afraid. If I found any infected limbs, I'd have to remove them. If her heartwood was infected badly enough, she would be destroyed to prevent further spread of the disease that was sweeping across the country.

"It will be okay," I told her, my voice gentle. But of course, it might not be, and she knew it.

Eventually I got my pilot line set, and used it to pull up my multicolored 24-strand rope. I tied my friction hitch and attached my pulley and carabiners, then shimmied into my climbing harness and clipped onto the rope. Time to begin my ascent.

The distant trill of birdsong and the *shhh* of wind through branches ornamented the quiet of the woods. The sky was a cloudless cornflower blue, the winter sun a bright silver orb. I relaxed, enjoying the perfect peace I only felt up here in the canopy.

Then, I saw it. A small limb, discolored with a purple-black blotch. My heart skipped a beat. I'd heard about the disease from other arborists, seen pictures, but this was the first time I'd seen it in person. If it was already here, how far had the disease spread? The tree, sensing my agitation, swayed, and I had no choice but to sway with her.

"Calm down. It's only a little branch. You'll be fine."

The rest of the tree was, luckily, free of disease. I wedged my foot on a branch and pulled my handsaw, a curved blade almost as long as my arm, from its scabbard. Sawdust

flew as I cut through the branch. The limb dropped to the ground, sticking upright in the dirt like a newly planted tree.

“Brave girl,” I told the tree, not that trees understand the concept of bravery.

Back on the ground, I examined the cut branch. I’d caught it early, but the disease spread fast. There was no telling how far it had gotten in the rest of the woods, not until I climbed more trees. And that took time.

I gnawed my lower lip. Thus far, I’d avoided touching the diseased wood. The sickness was so new, scientists weren’t sure how it spread yet. I didn’t want to become a vector. Plus, it felt... wrong. But what if I could touch it and form a connection to the same disease in other trees, locating all the infected individuals in minutes instead of weeks?

The forest moaned in a gust of wind, the trees waving their branches as though to get my attention. If the disease spread fast enough, this entire grove of trees might be lost. That was not going to happen, not if I could do anything to stop it. I reached out my index finger, and pressed it to the dark splotch.

Wild hunger coursed through me like a jolt of electricity, sharp and sizzling, burning me. I was surrounded by a gourmet feast, and it was begging me to sink my jaws in, to rip and consume until there was nothing left. Some of the food had already been claimed, which only drove me on with greater urgency. I must feed, feed, FEED.

The branch fell from my nerveless fingers.

A fast food restaurant was the closest place I could find. I washed my hands in the dingy bathroom, using huge globs of blue soap. I rinsed, then washed again. I finished off

with hand sanitizer, spreading the chilly liquid to each finger, to every line and curve of my hand.

I usually avoided fast food joints. Lucy and I had loved hitting McD's to top off late nights, so they always made me think of her. But I needed something to fill the pit that had opened in my stomach. I ordered a double burger and fries, then supersized it and got a bucket-sized coke. I chugged it all down, food and drink, sitting in the driver's seat of my beat up but trusty Toyota Corolla. Somehow, I still felt empty afterwards.

Back in my apartment I went to bed early, tossing and turning until I eventually slept.

My cell phone's ringtone woke me, but I ignored the call. There was a terrible ache in my belly. I staggered out of bed, and the scene through my bleary eyes made me gasp.

Cereal boxes were scattered across my apartment floor, their plastic bags lying ripped amongst flattened chip bags and empty cans of soup and green beans. The fridge door was ajar. I hurried to it, but there was no food left inside. The capless milk jug lay on its side, surrounded by the remains of cucumber and blueberry packages. Even the ketchup and mayonnaise containers were empty. My stomach screamed with hunger. My phone rang again.

The chain lock on my front door was securely in place. The window was blocked by my houseplant collection. No one had forced entry to my apartment. There was no one here but me.

I ran to the bathroom, sure I needed to puke, but nothing would come out. I looked up at myself in the mirror, and something on my exposed arm caught my eye. My left hand and arm, from fingertip to elbow, was covered in a blotchy, purple-black mark.

My phone rang again and I numbly swiped the answer button, noticing 37 missed calls as I did so. Before I could even say hello, a once-familiar voice yelled out.

“Finally! Why did you touch it??”

“Lucy?” The shock of her voice shoved away my terrible hunger and fear.

“Have you touched anything alive since you were infected?” She demanded.

“I-what?”

“Don’t touch anything. Where are you?”

I gave her my address, too stunned to question her.

“Don’t touch ANYTHING,” she said, and hung up.

I sat on the edge of my bed, staring at the blotch on my arm. My stomach screamed for sustenance, but there was nothing left to eat. Nothing to do but think. And before I could stop it, the old familiar reel of memories began to play.

Graduation night with Lucy. Far too many drinks. I spilled my secret. Lucy went silent, and my hopeful trust stumbled. She walked out without a word. Sent a clipped text the next morning, saying she was moving out. She never explained anything, and I was too hurt to ask. That had been three years ago.

Sudden pounding on the door made me jump. I ran to undo the lock with my right hand, and swung open the door to reveal Lucy. Her long hair was gone, cut into a bob that looked retro and cute, but her face was exactly how I remembered.

My eyes blurred. Her harsh expression wavered, but then she locked her jaw and hardened her eyes. Her gaze roved over my wrecked apartment. She looked more resigned than surprised.

“Why did you touch it?” She asked. “It doesn’t matter,” she answered herself. “Come on.”

She spun on her heel. I yanked on my coat and stumbled after her. She got into her mint green Prius, the one she’d been so excited to buy in our Junior year, and I slid onto the cold leather of the passenger seat. The backup beep started as she reversed, and we were on our way.

Thick silence filled the air like smoke. I wanted to ask Lucy how she’d been, what she’d been doing, why she had walked out of my life. But I didn’t think she’d answer any of that.

“How did you know I touched it?” I asked instead.

Lucy didn’t take her eyes from the road. Her fingers twitched on the wheel, restless in their moss-green gloves.

“It has to do with mycorrhizae,” she finally said. I stared at her blankly. “The symbiotic relationship formed between tree roots and certain fungus—”

“I know what mycorrhizae are,” I interrupted her. “But how did you know...” A thought was forming in my mind, wonderful and heart breaking.

“You feel things, don’t you,” I said. “But not from trees like I do. From mycorrhizae.”

She didn’t answer. But I knew. And with the knowledge, all the happiness at seeing Lucy again, all the acceptance that our falling out had somehow been my fault, dropped from me like a rotten branch in a gale.

“You’re like me. But you acted like I was a freak. Why did you never say a word? Why did you leave?” I was yelling, tears spilling down my face.

Lucy glanced at me at last, and her face crumpled. Her hands jerked as though she wanted to reach out to me, and the Prius jerked with her. She righted the car, and took several shaky breaths.

“I’m really, really sorry,” she said, her face screwed up tight. “And I know you won’t want to hear this, but we don’t have time for that now.”

“I’ve waited three years!”

Lucy shot an anguished glance at me, then pulled off one glove and held up her hand. It was covered in a black-purple splotch.

Anger still boiled inside me, but I managed to turn down the heat enough to keep it from spilling out.

“It can infect people,” I said.

Lucy shook her head, her eyes flicking between the road and my face.

“Not most people. Only... Only people like us.”

I wanted to focus on her last words, but my stomach cramped with hunger, and I knew our past wasn't the most urgent thing right now.

“How do we get rid of it?”

“I haven't figured that out yet,” Lucy said, looking relieved that I wasn't pursuing our personal issues. Or maybe just that I was no longer yelling.

“It's some kind of cross between a fungus and a parasite,” she went on. “I've been studying it, trying to work out a solution. That's how I got infected. I wasn't careful enough.”

We parked in the same gravel pullout I'd used the day before, and I followed Lucy into the woods. We went towards the site where I'd sensed the heart of the infection when I'd touched the blight.

“What now?” I asked, my question coming out accusing. Lucy looked at me, her eyes bright. She didn't know. She thought I could figure it out. My gut cramped, convinced I hadn't eaten in weeks.

I closed my eyes, blocking out her face and all the emotions it caused. I ignored the raging hunger as best I could, and focused on the trees. They were loud (for trees), but they weren't screaming in despair. They were practical, warning others of the disease that had infected them. All the maples around us were infected. Or, almost all of them. There was

one small tree that felt healthy. I went to the oldest tree in the group, knelt at its roots, and leaned my forehead against the bole. I framed my question in a way I hoped the tree would understand.

The answer was long, slow, roundabout. But it came.

I went to the small uninfected tree. It was so much younger than the others, easier to understand, but difficult to get to focus. Finally, I coaxed out the information I needed. I described the compounds to Lucy, and she made furious notes on her phone, exclaiming the names of chemicals I'd never heard of. I slumped to the ground, exhausted and still starving.

The drive back to my apartment was silent. Lucy parked, and we both stared straight ahead.

"I'll send the antidote as soon as I've put it together and tested it," she said. She was staring at the steering wheel, tracing the stitching.

"Fine," I said. I got out and snapped the door shut, walking away so fast I was almost running.

"Lea!"

I didn't want to stop, but my body turned back to her as though someone else was driving it.

"I'm sorry," Lucy said. "I could explain about my parents, how they reacted when I told them about the mycorrhizae... but that wouldn't make what I did to you okay. I've

regretted it every day, thought about calling you every day, but I knew I could never make it up to you.”

She was saying everything I’d wanted. But it was too late.

“You’re right,” I said, and she looked hopeful for a moment. “You can’t ever make it up to me.”

Some vindictive part of me wanted to leave it at that, to make her feel a tiny part of what I’d gone through. She couldn’t fix three years of pain in one night, couldn’t expect me to trust her again.

Her face fell. Her stupid, adorable face that looked so pitiful when she was sad. Silence stretched between us, thick as molasses, and her eyes welled up. Why do I have to be such a sucker?

“You can’t fix the friendship we had,” I went on at last. “But maybe we can start over.”

The smile that lit her face made my throat tighten, but I wasn’t done yet.

“I will, however, require a peace offering.”

“Anything!”

“Take me to the Golden Arches, and buy me McEverything.”

She laughed, a startled burst of mirth, and I found myself laughing with her. It was the first time I’d really laughed, loud and silly and breath-stealing, in three years.