



EVERYONE HAS A STORY...

Unleash yours!

CLERMONT COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

SHORT STORY CONTEST

Teen Winners

First Place

The Circle by Olivia Cook

As many saplings do, I spend much of my time thinking. I grow on the edge of a forest made up of many different trees. After my first few years I knew them all well. The Maple, Hickory, and I speak often. But my favorite to talk with is Grandmother; she's an Oak like me. We understand each other.

The humans, however, I do not understand.

I meet the ones who wear moccasins first. Then come the others, they dress in fancy coats.

The men in coats label the others as Indians or savages; the others only call themselves humans. Battles between these groups never seem to end. At first it was mostly tricks and skirmishes. I've come to realize the papers they sign mean nothing; they are full of promises that will never be upheld.

Not long after comes death. The men in fancy coats with their guns, careless about the blood they spill. The men in moccasins desperately doing all they can to protect their people, it isn't enough.

Word spreads quickly through the rest of the forest, who sees more than I can, that both groups attack each other. Neither care who they attack as long as it's their enemy. Women and children end up caught in the crossfire. I feel sorry for them. This isn't their fight, and still they pay with blood.

People often build campfires beside the forest. I have seen the men in fancy coats gather around, enjoying whatever food they can find. Grandmother tells me that they don't

remember the times when food was scarce and the moccasin men helped to keep them alive with trades and knowledge.

Those in fancy coats speak with each other, tell jokes, and sometimes even sing. Those who wear moccasins do the same. The more I see these humans, the more I realize how similar their lives are. It seems that only their minds differ.

“Grandmother?” I ask one day, as we stare at the field in front of us. A particularly bloody battle had just taken place; bodies from both sides are still lying on the field.

“Yes, my child?”

“Why do the humans kill each other?”

“No tree has ever understood the ways of humanity. Perhaps they see themselves as different.”

“But they are not.”

A light breeze blows, rustling my leaves. Grandmother sighs, “I know little one, but they don’t seem to understand that. There will always be bad and good with humans.”

She tells me of the great feats she has seen humans do. She has seen them come together to create communities and families. I only hope I will see this one day.

I hear gunshots ring out from not far away. Battle cries follow not long after.

Years pass. The men dressed in moccasins and fancy coats have not fought for a long time. The men in fancy coats act as if they’ve won. I suppose they have in a way. Crushing the spirits of the moccasin men and forcing them from their homes. This should be enough for them. But it seems that humans do not rest.

Their latest quarrel comes from the belief that some should be free while others are slaves. The same as before; I see no difference between either group.

The forest I rest in allows me to see some fleeing from their masters. They go north. Some make it, many don't. I only ever see what happens to those who don't.

I try to talk with the humans. To make them understand what they cannot seem to get, that they are killing their own kind.

"It is no use Grandmother. They do not listen!"

"They cannot understand you, my child. We are nothing more than objects to them."

"I would not wish harm on the Maple simply because she looks different. Or on the Hickory, because he thinks differently from us," I say angrily. A gust of wind blows at the man who sits on a horse, commanding those below him. He almost falls, cursing the wind all the while. As if he has it so bad, as if he isn't about to send people back to a life they did nothing to deserve.

"It is the way of their lives." Grandmother says softly. 'The way of their lives' is not a good enough answer for me.

Tonight is cold. My leaves float to the forest floor one by one; it is the same with the other trees. Darkness covers everything as it does each night. But something is different.

I see the light from a small lantern. It is held by a tall man. His hair is brown like the dead leaves resting on the forest's floor. It's slicked to his head in a neat manner. Still he looks tired. He holds a blanket around his shoulders, covering a blue uniform. I've learned that it means he believes those different from him should be free.

He stops when he sees another man who, in my opinion, is more of a boy. He is shorter than the man in the blue coat, but he has the same long limbs. His hair is untidy beyond belief.

And this one doesn't bother to hide the old gray jacket which he wears. He doesn't believe the same as the tall man.

"Thomas, brother, it's been awhile." The man in blue says. The other crosses his arms, "What'd you want to tell me?"

"I wanted to give you another chance to think about what you're fighting for. How wrong it is." I agree with what this one says. The one in gray scoffs, "How many times do I have to tell you? They aren't *like* us." I hear grandmother's leaves rustle. She mutters something under her breath.

After a few minutes of the man and boy exchanging words; the brother in blue sticks out his hand. "Tomorrow it'll be a mercy if we don't see each other. Best of luck." The brother in gray grabs his hand, pulling him into a short hug.

"Best of luck."

As they turn to leave, one calls out, "Only a little while longer, you and me will be back home with ma and that big dinner that's waiting for us." The other laughs, "I'll see you then."

In their own odd way the brothers show the love they still have for each other; despite being on opposite sides of a war.

The battle the brothers knew to be coming takes place only a few days later. Most trees I speak with believe only the men in blue deserve to live. Hickory often brings up the point that they are fighting for what is right. I do not agree with him. One may have a more admirable cause, yet they are both still willing to kill.

In all the years that have passed humanity proves to me they cannot respect each other's right to life or liberty.

Grandmother tells me this is how it has been through all of time, and how it will continue to be.

I see both brothers one last time. One gets carried off on a stretcher towards that dinner they spoke of. The other is left on the abandoned battlefield. The boy with untidy hair won't be going home.

Humans continue to prove one thing to me: whatever good Grandmother once spoke to me about does not exist. Humans cannot be anything other than killers for their own greedy reasons. They are bound to destroy themselves, and the world will be better for it.

It seems that humans could not settle with destroying themselves. They took most of my forest with them. The animals were driven out and the trees were cut down. I am one of the few left. It became lonely when Grandmother was taken. The sun never shines as brightly and the air is not the same. Now I spend my days watching the people, for lack of anything else to do. It's been many years since I've seen war, yet humans still find new ways to disappoint.

A man points a gun at another man. It's not like the moccasins and fancy coats, it's not like the blue and gray uniforms.

They dress the same.

They speak the same.

They look the *same*.

I do not understand why he pulls the trigger. I do not wish to watch as the other man hits the ground and the ambulance drives him away. Or as the man's family sets up a memorial in the same spot he fell.

Two lives are over, many more ruined. *Why?*

I shut my eyes, never wanting to open them again. I have grown sick of humanity.

Something slams into me. Causing me to open my eyes for the first time in years. The sun shines, bouncing off the windows in the buildings around me. The colors of the world seem brighter, taking me back to my time as a sapling. When the world was so full of life and I hadn't seen so much death.

A young girl sits at the base of my trunk. 'Sits' is not the right word, she was forced there. She keeps her hands up to protect herself from a group of girls.

"Why don't you guys just leave me alone, I didn't do anything." The girl says. She reminds me of the men dressed in moccasins. I worry for her, I know they are children. But children are just as capable as those who teach them.

A tall girl with neatly braided red hair grabs the bag from her. Mocking the pattern detailed on it. That pattern is so similar to those made by the people I saw so long ago.

"Hey! Just give it back." A boy walks up, sticking his hand out for the stolen bag. The girl with red hair scoffs,

"Why should I?"

"Because it's the right thing to do."

"The right thing isn't very fun, now is it?"

"And this is?" The boy gestures to the girl sitting next to me. She bites her lip, holding back whatever emotions she feels.

The tall girl tilts her head forward. "Go ahead and *make me* give it back. How pathetic will it be when you punch a girl." Her friends behind her laugh. I don't see how it is funny.

The boy reaches out and grabs the bag, pulling it away from the tall girl. She doesn't resist. I'm not sure what she was expecting, but it wasn't this. Not being brave enough to back up her cruel words; she scowls and leads her friends away.

The boy turns around and helps up the young girl, handing her bag back to her. She smiles, "Thank you, they've been doing that for weeks."

"You don't deserve that."

"She deserved to get punched."

"Maybe she did. But isn't violence just a circle? I mean once it begins, someone needs to stop it." the boy says with a smile. The girl raises an eyebrow in question.

He continues to explain. "Someone probably hurt her. So she hurts you, it makes her cool. It hides whatever she feels. Then one day you hurt someone else to cover up what you feel."

"I don't want to hurt someone else."

"You wanted to hurt her."

The girl looks down, nodding. The boy pulls his hand out of his pocket. "My name is Samuel." She shakes his hand. "I'm Tallulah."

Something is created. Something new and hopeful. It may not seem like much, but anything could be everything. I understand what Grandmother told me about all those years ago. When humans come together to create, they can do great things.

Humanity is unkind, it is inconsiderate, it destroys. But humanity as one does not define each individual. As Samuel said, it's all much like a circle. The violence will continue, but so will

the people who do their best to stop it. As long as those people exist, maybe, just maybe, it will all be okay.

Second Place

Freckled by Audrey Barno

Lila sat at the back of the school bus, her head leaning against the cool glass of the window. She watched the rain streak down the tinted glass, blurring the world outside. Her fiery red hair framed her pale face, and the freckles that dotted her cheeks and nose seemed to burn brighter against the muted backdrop of the rainy morning.

“Carrot top!” a voice called out from the middle of the bus, slicing through her thoughts like a knife. Lila flinched but didn’t turn around. She focused instead on the rhythmic sound of the windshield wipers, hoping it would drown out the teasing laughter that surrounded her.

“Is it true your freckles connect to form a map of nowhere?” another voice jeered, sending another wave of giggles through the bus.

Lila clenched her fists, her nails pressing crescents into her palms. It was always like this. Ever since the first day of sixth grade, her classmates had found a million ways to make her feel like the odd man out. She had learned to endure it in silence, but every word stuck to her like burrs, refusing to shake loose.

The bus pulled up to West Clermont Middle School, and Lila grabbed her backpack, hurrying off as fast as she could. She kept her head down, avoiding eye contact with anyone who might throw another insult her way. The hallways were already alive with chatter and the squeak of sneakers on linoleum as she made her way to her locker.

“Hey, Freckles,” a boy sneered as she twisted the combination lock. She ignored him, biting the inside of her cheek to keep her from screaming back at him. When the lock finally clicked open, she yanked the door and buried her face in the safety of her books.

Her first class of the day was English. Normally, she looked forward to the subject. Writing was one of the few things that brought her joy. But today, the thought of sharing anything personal with her classmates filled her with dread. Mrs. Mantella, their teacher, had been talking all week about a creative writing assignment.

“All right, class,” Mrs. Mantella began, her warm voice cutting through the chatter. “Today, we’re starting our personal narrative essays. I want you to write about a moment that changed how you see yourself. It can be big or small, but it should be meaningful.”

Lila stared at the blank page in front of her. A moment that changed how she saw herself? She had plenty of those, but none she wanted to share. Around her, her classmates whispered and scribbled; their laughter punctuating the quiet moments. Lila glanced at the clock, counting the seconds until the bell rang.

By lunchtime, the rain had stopped, leaving the sky overcast and dreary. Lila sat at the far end of the cafeteria, nibbling at the edges of her tuna fish sandwich. She had perfected the skill of being invisible during lunch. She chose a seat where nobody would spot her, at the peanut free

table. This method had a disadvantage, Lila loved peanut butter sandwiches, but never got to eat them for lunch.

Today, she pulled out her sketchpad, letting the familiar motion of her pencil calm her nerves. She doodled swirls and flowers, her mind wandering.

“Hey, Lila,” a soft voice interrupted her thoughts. Startled, she looked up to see Emma, a girl from her science class. Emma had a quiet kindness about her, always willing to help others without being asked.

“Hi,” Lila replied cautiously, unsure of what Emma wanted.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” Emma asked, gesturing to the seat across from her.

Lila hesitated, then shook her head. “No, go ahead.”

Emma smiled and set her tray down. “Your drawing is really good. Do you do that a lot?”

Lila shrugged, unsure how to respond. “Sometimes. It’s just something to do.”

“Well, it’s beautiful,” Emma said sincerely.

Lila felt a small warmth bloom in her chest. Compliments were a rare currency in her life, and she wasn’t sure how to spend this one. “Thanks,” she mumbled, tucking her sketchpad into her bag.

The two ate in a comfortable silence for a few minutes before Emma spoke again. “So, have you started your essay for English yet?”

Lila shook her head. “I don’t know what to write about.”

“Me neither,” Emma admitted. “But Mrs. Anders said it doesn’t have to be perfect. It just has to be real.”

Lila thought about that for the rest of the day.

When she got home, she sat at her desk, staring at her notebook. What was real? The teasing, the stares, the way her freckles made her feel like a walking target—that was all real. But so was the quiet joy she felt when she sketched in her room, or the flicker of hope from Emma’s kind words. Maybe she could write about that.

She started slow; her pencil moving hesitantly across the page. But as the words began to flow, she felt lighter. She wrote about how her freckles made her feel different, but also about how they made her unique. She wrote about her love of drawing, how it helped her see beauty in the small details of the world. She wrote about Emma, and how one person’s kindness could change everything.

By the time she finished, the sun had set, and her room was bathed in the soft glow of her desk lamp. She read her essay aloud to herself, her voice trembling but steady. It wasn’t perfect, but it was real.

The next day, Lila handed in her essay with a mixture of excitement and fear. When Mrs. Anders called on her to read it aloud, her heart pounded in her chest. She wanted to say no, to hide behind the safety of her desk. But something in her urged her to stand.

She walked to the front of the class, clutching her paper tightly. Her voice shook as she began, but as the words spilled out, she found a rhythm. She spoke about the pain of being different, the joy of finding something she loved, and the power of a single act of kindness.

The room grew quiet, her classmates hanging on every word. When she finished, there was a moment of silence before Emma started clapping. Slowly, others joined in.

Lila's cheeks burned, but this time it wasn't from shame. It was from something new—something she hadn't felt in a long time. It was pride.

In that moment, Lila realized that her freckles, her hair, her art, and her voice were all parts of who she was. And who she was—freckles and all—was enough.

Third Place

The Tale of the Golden Strings by Maya Carter

Once upon a time, in a quaint village on the eastern border of Italy, there lived a talented musician. He would make do with his poor, homemade instruments, never being able to afford more than strings on plastic. But the young man was content with what he owned. For he was overly pleased at the form of art he himself created from nothing but garbage. The strings were never capable of singing a song so heavenly, but the man's talent was sufficient enough to provide himself with one bountiful meal each day. Small crowds would form every now and then, and donate coins to the poor fellow. He cherished every bite of food he got, always thanking his good Lord for providing it. One day, the man was strumming his most loved possession, when a group of men approached him. The sky had grown dark as light mist sprayed the atmosphere. The men had just wandered out of the local bar, and were clearly very drunk. Their idiocy and clumsiness were rather obvious to the gentle man, so he did the only thing that he knew to try to calm them down. His olive hands strummed and picked; his fingers dancing intrigue patterns upon the stings. The sound was so glorious that the drunk men became infuriated with jealousy at his great gift. In their fury, they snatched the musician's guitar from his grasp. Strumming it far too rough, and smacking it hard against the brick walls. The musician shrieked at the horrifying sight, but he could do nothing more than watch as they tore his instrument to pieces, leaving him completely and utterly alone with the shattered bits. He inhaled a deep breath, to push out the desire to sob at the sight. And instead, gathered the tragic pieces and carried them to the tent, which he had always lived in. The musician attempted to place the scrambled pieces back into

order, but only grew fairly weary at his endeavor. He then fell into a deep slumber, the dreams taking their stand to keep the man company throughout the night.

The man was back on the streets of Italy again, his broken guitar still scattered like dandelions in the early spring breeze. The man was once again distraught by the ghastly sight. He was just about to repeat his former routine, when a woman strolled in. But she was not any normal lady; she was glowing magnificently. There had never before existed such a creature so glorious. Her white, granite skin did not hold a single imperfection. The way she ambled to his side was unheard of. Each step that the woman took was flawlessly perfect. Her curling, blond hair looked as if she washed it in the sun itself, each curl entwined to perfection. The man gazed into her deep, emerald eyes—finding himself lost amongst their transfixing beauty.

“I have something for you.” She spoke.

Her innocent voice was richer than honey itself. It poured from her scarlet lips in such a way that anyone would be in awe with the enchantress. The radiance that beamed from her person was unheard of, and only grew to her inhumanly attractiveness. The man waited, as patient as ever before, for the glorious being to explain herself. He was intrigued farther than imaginable to what was to come. The radiant woman held out a small pouch, and then withdrew a magnificent guitar. It glowed spectacularly in the sun’s ever-brightening light. The instrument was nothing that the poor man had ever witnessed in his life. The strings, dipped in pure liquid gold, were radiant. The body, carved thoroughly in intricate patterns and designs. He took the delicate beauty into his rough, trembling hands, and began to play the most breathtaking song the musician had ever played. The birds ceased to chirp, watching their competition with

admiration; the sun finally returned into the dim-lighted sky just to listen to the sweet melody. The crowds began to swarm around him, and grew substantially larger with each and every note. Everywhere the man surveyed, people were tossing money and gold. Their jewelry was unclasped, and thrown to the musician. Even their own children were offered to the man who possessed the bewitching guitar. It grew into an uproar of commotion. But the man did not wish for the attention that he was receiving—in fact, he loathed it to a great extent. And so, he let his weary fingers take a rest while he spoke to his admirers. Everyone stood, frozen in time, when this happened. Then, they only began to throw yet more goods and possessions to the talented man, hoping that in return, he would continue to play his heavenly music. But the musician simply rose to his feet and stated,

“Please, stop, you generous and foolish people! I have not earned your praise and money. But you should instead be complimenting the magnificent enchantress, who carries the sun’s power upon her own person.”

But the crowd would not listen to the man, for they had looked everywhere, whence he spoke of such a being, and found no creature described so wondrously. Even the man himself could not find the woman for a second time. But he would still not reject the gifts, for he knew to whom they rightfully belonged. He pleaded the mob, enclosed upon him, to stop this foolishness, and to just enjoy the beauty of his music. But they refused to do so. And so, the man lifted his newly acquired magical guitar high above his head, and let it come plummeting down to the cold earth to meet its death. It shattered into a million tragic pieces. The man was grieved beyond all griefs for his loss, but he still knew that he made the right choice. The people who had

been praising him only moments before, now turned their backs in disgust, seeing the homeless man for who he truly was without his glorious instrument. They seized their children—money—jewelry—, and disappeared into the bustling village. The man was left alone, once again, broken and poor in the dirty streets. Then suddenly, a brilliant light shown all around, and the enchanting woman returned.

“You chose to destroy your gift, rather than take the crowd’s applause. Why is this?” She spoke, her bewitching voice smooth and even.

The dazzling light blinded the man, but he just continued to stare at the glorious angel.

“It didn’t rightfully belong to me.” The man sighed, letting his face drop down to the earth in shame, like a star plummeting down from the heavens themselves.

“Very well.” Was her only response.

And the man awoke. It took him quite a while to sort out what was reality, and what was not, after his bizarre dream. But as he rose from the ground, on which he slept every single night, he spotted the guitar. The enchanting one from his dreams, sitting as perfect as ever, leaned up against the side of his pitiful tent. It’s golden strings still glowing in little blazes of light, trying to imitate the sun itself. He stumbled to his feet, taken aback by its presence. The musician thought for him to still be in some sort of deep sleep, dreaming peacefully. He retracted a trembling hand to reach for the rich parchment, dangling elegantly from the guitar’s neck.

—•—

You made the right choice. Don't break this one.

- The Sun -

—•—

And that ends the tale of the talented musician who got everything that he ever wanted in life, for only pleasing the sun herself.