

overture

literary magazine



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fantasy & illusion
april 2012

OVERTURE

FANTASY & ILLUSION; APRIL 2012

This is *Overture Literary Magazine*, a new pursuit led by the San Jose Youth Advisory Council of District 1 to expand writing, art, and imagination within the Miller Middle School community. Join us as we share the creativity of students by publishing their work in a monthly magazine, distributed to San Jose City constituents.

In musical terms, an overture is an orchestral composition forming the prelude or introduction to a musical piece. Much like an overture in music, this creative writing program will serve as an introduction to the landscapes of creativity, self-expression, and imagination.

Overture strives to inspire imagination, foster literary and artistic talent, and promote creative growth by teaching middle school students how to develop their own creative writing or art styles through mediums not offered at their own schools.

April's theme of "Fantasy & Illusion" reflects the deception and fantastical nature of April Fool's Day. This month, a lighthearted theme was chosen in order to urge our staff members to write and draw in a style contrasting with the tone they typically choose to portray. In doing so, we hope to encourage the *Overture* staff members to reflect on the theme of appearances versus reality, which is prevalent and nearly universal in the present day.

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Roses in the Rain

Hi. It's me.

I'm sure that you don't really want to associate with me right now, but I need to talk to you. It's about what you were telling me a few days ago. You know, when we were watering the school's roses.

I remember always complaining about having to tend to them every day after school. After all, why were we the ones who had to take care of the flowers? I really didn't understand the passion that some people felt for gardening. I suppose it was because I was never committed enough to raise and nurture plants.

You liked it, though, didn't you? I always saw you smiling to yourself when you thought I wasn't looking. It was like you were made for it, the way you seemed to glow as you made sure none of the roses were drying up or wilting before their time. The roses suited you so well.

You know, it's not safe to stay in the rain without an umbrella. It's easy to catch a cold. I was worried when I found you standing alone the park last week during that thunderstorm, clad in nothing but a white sundress. Your eyelids were closed as if you were sleeping, your face relaxed into its usual serene expression. With each passing minute, you seemed to grow more beautiful as more drops sprinkled onto your porcelain skin, like water on a windshield. Why wouldn't you wipe it off? When water was obstructing my vision on a rainy day, I wanted it out of my way and gone forever.

It made no sense.

Even now, I'm not quite sure why you declined when I offered you my umbrella. Weren't you cold? I know I was, even underneath all those layers. Did something happen? You just stared at me intently, saying, "I don't want a shield anymore."

I was confused, but I didn't try to further convince you. You were always the smart one, getting A's when I got C's, so I just assumed that you knew what you were doing. Only now do I understand what you were trying to say.

There was also that time when Kevin broke up with me. I was a wreck, wasn't I? You put your arms around me, cradling me like a child, and told me that it was going to be alright. Whenever I was feeling helpless and broken, you were there to help me. You were always so beautiful, strong, compassionate, and talented. My tears seemed to make you shine.

I made sure to never show any sign of weakness in front of you ever again.

So while you were sprinkling water on the roses, I focused my gaze on the droplets that had settled on each petal. They somehow made the flowers look so much prettier, even though they looked like teardrops. They reminded me of you. So I turned away and instead watched the other flowers, the ones that had not yet been watered today. They were lovely, but felt like nothing compared to the ones that glittered with hundreds of tiny specks of water.

I'll tell you the truth: I didn't like taking care of the roses because I loathed seeing those roses with water on them. They reminded me of you. After all, you were that rose with the water drops, always outshining the rest of us when our tears came to you.

"You know, you don't need an umbrella when it rains," I heard you say. "Water is life. What's the point in shielding yourself from life?"

I shielded myself from life because life was also death. Rain made you catch a cold. Rain knocked down power lines. Rain caused floods. Rain hurts you, just like life. "Because it's painful," I said stiffly.

You simply giggled. “That’s no excuse. There’s no happiness without sadness, no success without pain. You can’t expect to enjoy life without facing the bitterness it brings you.”

Listening to your words irritated me. How would you know that life had any sort of bitterness? The thought of you suffering almost made me laugh. I’m not sure what came over me when I spat, “I guess that your life must be pretty bland, huh?”

“What do you mean?” You looked at me, confusion in your radiant blue eyes. Maybe I was sick of watering the stupid plants, or maybe it was your little speech about life. Either way, I had found myself strangely angered.

“You can’t expect to enjoy life without facing the bitterness it brings you.’ What sort of bitterness do *you* face every day?” I snapped. “Life is all sugar and spice for a perfect person like you who has everything going for her.”

Even now, I’m not sure why I was so upset. After all, you were supposed to be my best friend. The one who would always volunteer to perform a skit with me in front of the class no matter how ridiculous it was. The one who always fell back from the front of the class to run with me, the slowpoke. The one who helped me gather up the courage to achieve so much more than what I ever thought I could. The image of perfection that I always tried to grasp.

I could hear the sound of your watering pail tip over, spilling the remaining water onto the roses like a broken dam. It was silent for a period of time when you smiled.

“I guess I haven’t,” you said quietly. “It’s not like I’ve been staying up past midnight every night trying to memorize my textbooks and going over my homework multiple times. I don’t force myself to do five hundred sit-ups, run five miles on my treadmill, and do two-hundred-and-fifty push-ups every day. My room isn’t full of broken pencils and crumpled papers, and my trashcan isn’t overflowing with tissues.” I found that my mouth couldn’t form any words. You stared at me for a minute before saying, “I wanted to be something that others looked up to. Now I know it was all for nothing. After all, it only made me look disgusting.”

What scared me the most was the fact that you were smiling as you said it. When you turned and walked away, I had reached out my hand and grabbed at the air. My fingers tried to hold onto you, but it was no use. At that moment, you were nothing more than a twisted image, a mirage that was always out of reach. Now, it was gone completely.

That’s why I’m standing here now, telling you this. Back then I realized that you weren’t just some flawless fantasy that I wanted to grasp. You were a person, too. If only I realized that you, too, could feel pain.

But you were stronger than I was. You chose to embrace the pain rather than cower away and hate it, like me. After all, without water, a rose would not only cease to shine; it would also dry up and die.

I guess I’m trying to apologize. I hated you for trying to be good, without even seeing what hurt you faced in the process.

I’m sorry.

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I’ve sort of matured now. Now I understand that the girl I’ve hated so long never really existed, as she was only a mask that hid the real you.

Behind every cloudy sky and rainy day is the sun. Now that the grey rain clouds have passed, the sun that we cherished so much may be able to shine once more.

Do you think we could try again?

RAKSHA NARASIMHAN; GRADE 6

A Risk Worth Taking

"I knew this would never work," grumbled a construction worker to a fellow worker as it was announced that work on the bridge would not be continued. "Who cares about reaching the land on the other side of this wretched canyon, anyway?" The other worker shrugged and heaved a bag over his shoulder.

"We are terribly sorry for any inconveniences this may cause," the lead builder was saying. "But the bridge we have been working on has been flimsy and unstable, and it will never be able to support the weight of even a single human. Another construction worker pulled out a sign that read: UNSTABLE-DO NOT CROSS and firmly planted it into the ground in front of the bridge with that of an explorer wedging a flag into land he had just discovered, so it would be clearly visible to anyone passing by the canyon.

~ ~ ~

It was almost midnight, and a terrible storm was raging. It was raining fast and hard, and you could hear the repeated pounding of the precipitation on the soil near Bottomless Canyon. The thunder roared endlessly. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck- right at the UNSTABLE- DO NOT CROSS sign in front of the bridge, incinerating the pole holding the sign up and burying the sign in the mud...

"We're almost there," Taylor announced. "Race you to the canyon!"

I started sprinting although my legs were aching from the long hike, my auburn hair whipping around in the air. Even though I had a head start, my best friend was soon right beside me. I wasn't even beginning to feel tired. Finally, the canyon came into sight, and we collapsed into a heap of giggles in front of it.

"Let's see the canyon," I said, slipping my hand into my camera's loop. But Taylor was way ahead of me, walking dangerously close to the deep gorge. "Wait for me!" I jogged up to her.

"There's a bridge!" Taylor gasped. I looked at the canyon and realized she was right. But this wasn't a sturdy, hard bridge. It looked really unstable, the kind you see in movies where people fall off of to their doom. I peered down into the bottomless ravine.

"Okay, Tay," I said in a high-pitched voice that I did not know to be mine. "I really think we should leave now. Come on." Again, Taylor was one step ahead of me. She was about to put her foot on the bridge, almost in a trance, when I yanked her away. "What are you *doing?*" I said almost hysterically. "Let's GO!"

My friend slipped her arm out of my grasp and turned her face towards me. Her warm toffee brown eyes were ablaze with excitement. "Come on, Kate. Don't be such a scaredy-cat. I really want to see the other side. You know no one's set foot on it for years because of the canyon. They haven't even been able to see it because there's a weird mist that blocks it from view!" Usually Taylor's curious, fearless manner calmed me down, but right now, it freaked me out even more. Besides, they had sent a plane across the canyon, and once it entered the mist, the systems tracking it all shut down.

"Planes have disappeared and never come back from the land across the canyon, Tay! This is- this is *insane!*" I sputtered. "You can't do this! I won't let you!" The last thing I needed was to lose someone else.

I expected her to get annoyed, but she just laughed. "There's a bridge for a reason, Kate. Whoever built it would want to make it steady," she said. "Just because they use an unstable bridge a lot in scary

movies doesn't mean it's real. It's just to add more suspense. And, I mean, just imagine it. "Taylor White and Kate Levesque, the first explorers to cross the bridge across Bottomless Canyon", she said in a reporter's voice, picking up a stick and holding it like a microphone. I sighed. I knew she was right, but I just couldn't calm down completely.

"Fine," I grumbled. "On one condition. You have to tie this rope around you. I'll hold the other end, just in case the bridge collapses." I pulled out a bundle of thick rope from my backpack. Taylor always joked that I was prepared for anything. It *was* true. She rolled her eyes and tied one end of the rope around her waist.

"Okay, I'm going now." She proceeded onto the bridge and calmly walked five feet of the way before turning around to face me. I saw her freckled face melt into a triumphant grin.

"See? It's fine," she said.

"Don't jinx it," I said, smiling back in spite of myself.

I raised my foot to step on the first plank of the old bridge. As I looked down to make sure I was stepping onto the second rung, my eyes caught a glint of white in the ground. It was poking out of the dirt. I cleared away the dirt burying it and pulled it out of the ground. My eyes widened in horror as I read the sign, which said: UNSTABLE- DO NOT CROSS. I tried screaming out to my best friend, but I could barely manage a squeal through the lump in my throat. It was eerily quiet. I could hear my heart was thumping so violently, it felt as if it was trying to leap out of my chest.

Then many things happened at once. The first rung of the bridge that I had been about to step on unfastened and flew down. I was unprepared, and as Taylor fell, the rope jerked me down along with her. Luckily, I managed to grab on to the top of the cliff with my rope-free hand. My camera fell off of my wrist and disappeared down the ravine. I never heard it hit the bottom.

"Let go of the rope!" Taylor shouted. I hated to do it, but she was right. It was the only way I could climb back up again. I let the thick beige cord slip from my fingers. She was hanging from what looked like a rope ladder. Not like the ones you find in a playground, though, where if you fell, you could try again. Here, you only got one chance. I saw her futile attempts to climb up the ladder. *Snap*. The other end of the bridge unfastened, and it fell down the gorge. Fortunately, she had managed to grab on to a piece of the cliff, but Taylor had slid down even more.

"Try climbing up the cliff!" I yelled, though, I didn't see how she would manage, as she was having a lot of trouble staying where she was. Now I wished with all my heart that I didn't let go of the rope. I saw Taylor's face contorted with an expression I had never associated with her-fear. Her eyes were wide as saucers, and her trembling was clearly visible even from a distance.

Was this really how her life was going to end?

I staggered backward and clutched my head as painful memories swarmed into my head. I saw the scene of the car crash, the flashing red and blue lights and whooping sirens, the terrified ten-year-old in pink pajamas with the defiant face that was me. I saw the bland face of the officer, with his thin mouth and crooked nose, trying to convince a stubborn kid that her parents were gone and would never come back. I saw everyone dressed in black and two coffins being lowered into the ground. I remembered convincing myself that my parents were not gone, that they would come back to me. In actuality, I still believed my parents would return now, half a year after their supposed "deaths."

Another piercing scream cut through my thoughts. Taylor was slowly sliding down the cliff. There wasn't much time left. I knew what I had to do. I resolved not to look down, and walked backwards slowly. This was insane, I know. But she was my best friend. This was a risk worth taking.

I took a deep breath and wiped my tears off my chalk-white face. I channeled all of the despair and hopelessness I was feeling and converted it into determination to save Taylor. Then I charged forward like a bull at top speed. I didn't care, nor did I pay attention to the drop below me, so deep that if I fell, it would probably take a long time for me to hit the bottom. I knew I would need a superhuman jump to cross this steep ravine.

The moment I became airborne, time slowed down. I realized something. My parents were not coming back to this world. But Taylor *was* here, with me. I had to stop living my life as an illusion, and I had to stop thinking that my parents had never died. It was time for me to accept the fact that they were gone. I had to stop lingering in my past and pull myself back into the present, where it was Taylor that mattered.

After the longest ten seconds of my life, my hand finally connected with rock close to the top of the treacherous cliff, and I did not look down into the gorge that might claim my and Taylor's life. *I* was close enough to the top to climb up, but where was she?

Uh oh. The piece of rock I was hanging on to for dear life started to crumble. Now I was starting to panic even more. I reached my right hand up and closed it around the top of the cliff, and flailed my other hand wildly, groping for another rock to hold on to. Finally, my hand connected with something. Not the cliff. It was warmer, and much too soft. I did not dare believe it until I looked down and saw a pair of big, glassy brown eyes filled to the brim with tears of joy.

I hoisted her up and together we set foot on the lush green grass of the gorgeous land across the canyon. It was filled with chirping birds that flew around, singing their songs. Waterfalls cascaded downward and formed flowing, unpolluted rivers. It was all so peaceful and beautiful that it seemed like a fairytale. I laid myself down on the soft ground and closed my eyes, inhaling the sweet, dulcet air.

Finally, I could forget about all my worries. All I wanted to do in this perfect world was relax.

Shades of Gray

I wandered through the stone-colored halls of the school building, among other students dressed in drab clothes. Even the light filtering through the large windows looked gloomy. My skin was numb; I couldn't feel any impact whenever someone brushed past me. Voices were dull and muted in my ears and the memory of the words died before my brain could process them.

I wish I could tell you how this happened to me, but I really don't know myself. I went to bed, eyes and ears functioning properly. The next day *-poof!*—my world turned into a black-and-white photograph. A silent movie, only without the music and funny sound effects.

A student in front of me opened the classroom door and I slipped in after him. I heard some faint shuffling noises that might have been the sound of thirty-two pairs of shoes on a dusty carpet. My classmates were talking, laughing. No one looked my way. At least, almost no one. A couple of the kids glanced in my direction with an expression people generally wouldn't classify normal middle school students with.

Sadness.

They never looked directly at me, just at my desk, the chair, the area where my backpack usually went. They never came up and talked to me, even though we knew each other since elementary school.

They were my friends.

After my life turned black and white, I tried to continue my friendship with them. Obviously, it did not work. I couldn't understand them and they just completely ignored me. Were they ignoring me on purpose or did they actually not know I was there? I tried waving, cutting into conversations, dancing, and yelling in their faces. They never return my calls and my text messages remained unanswered.

I finally had to give up and accept the fact that I was now invisible.

After school, when I reach my house, I would encounter a shameful obstacle: the door.

For some reason, my parents never answer the door when I knock anymore. Plus, I always forget my keys.

Even with that knowledge, I checked the door anyway. I ended up climbing through the window.

The room I landed in was filled with boxes. Cardboard boxes filled with books, framed photographs, stuffed animals, clothing. A desk clean of schoolwork and textbooks stood in the corner near a window. The matching chair had been packed away long ago. In another corner, a bed. Instead of sheets, more boxes covered the mattress.

Some nights, I would see my parents crying in this room. They would be sitting on my box-covered bed. My father would be holding my mother, and my mother would be holding my first stuffed animal; a pink, lop-eared rabbit. I would try to comfort them, even though I knew they couldn't feel, see, or hear me. Before, my parents never cried. I'm not sure why they would cry like that now.

My friends, too. They seemed awfully depressed for a few weeks after I packed my bags and left reality. But now, they've moved on.

It's like I've disappeared off the face of the Earth. Maybe I'm dead. Am I dead?

One Time

The hesitant gray cast down over me like a cloud.

Well, more like the entire city. It wasn't much of a surprise with the way things had been going lately. Everything was a mess. I couldn't find any inspiration for my work, and the excessive rain wasn't helping either. It was all too gloomy. My eyes slowly wandered to what could be made out as the Golden Gate. It could even be seen through the fog, just like the bright "Ghirardelli" sign. The fog seemed to only roll in, and I could barely see the next few feet in front of me. My feet moved a few steps ahead, and then stopped—only to collapse onto the nearby square of dew-covered grass.

I had let my thoughts slowly slide away, and looked around. I then closed my eyes, focusing in on the world, when I heard a noise sounding like someone crying. It was a slight, weeping sound. I turned my head, looking for the sound, but the only place I could think to look was the alley close by. I walked to the alley, slowly and cautiously, unsure if dealing with whatever happened was what I really wanted to do.

My fingers trailed the brick walls, feeling every unusual groove. I looked around, taking in parts of the city I had seen before, finding a woman huddled in the alley. Her eyes flickered up, revealing her tear-stained cheeks, the fear in her eyes, her quivering lips, and the agony she had been in. Her hands rubbed against each other in a violent motion. I carefully moved to her, kneeling beside her, and placed my hand on her shoulder. She winced at the touch, like it hurt her, but she didn't mind if my hand stayed. Her head drooped down, looking down at the covered object in her arms. I finally recognized what it was.

It was a child. Its small body was wrapped in blankets as an attempt at protection from the unnatural winds. I gasped, seeing its blue lips, pale skin, and too cold cheeks. It took me a moment to realize what was going on, seeing the child was just unexpected. Finally stumbling out of my shock, I instinctively covered my mouth with my glove-covered hands. I stumbled back, looking into her eyes again. Her eyes had enough depth, telling everyone anything about her, and yet an icy cover shielded her feelings if they weren't already given. I turned, leaving the alley. My head was clouded with little sense of clearing. It was a jumble of emotions, the baby, the mom, everything. I couldn't wrap my head around it, and knew at this rate I never would. I was too overwhelmed to react, maybe that's why I never left the house—to avoid situations where I would be stuck and a jumble of emotions.

I had never seen anything like that; it felt like a mistake, but I knew it wasn't. It had seemed to be all so real—it was an illusion cast. An illusion I really hadn't wanted to see. Reality hit quick, and I wasn't ready to see that. Maybe that's why it was called an illusion, it was only a perception, one defined only by the one who sees it.

A Sob that Brought Happiness

“Sparrowwing! Hurry up! We need to attend the flock meeting!” Doveheart called to her sister.

“Coming, Doveheart!” The reply floated through the thick trees of the ancient oak forest the sisters had been spinning in. Doveheart gripped the handle of her woven basket that her friend Nightingale had made for her from moonbeam thread, and blinked her ice-blue eyes in the sunlight filtered through oak branches. The basket was filled with softly glowing water-thread.

Doveheart, Sparrowwing, and Nightingale were part of the Tribe of Bird-People. When a bird-person touched their right hand to their left shoulder, they became a bird. To return to human form, the bird touched its left wing to its chest. The Bird-People were also exceptional producers of cloth. The spinners, like Doveheart and Sparrowwing, hand-spun fine, silk-like threads out of moonbeams, sun-rays, water, wind, clouds, and mist. Weavers, like Nightingale, wove the thread into cloth on wooden looms. Then the seamstresses and tailors took the cloth and made robes, gowns, and tunics. Doveheart was wearing a silvery moonbeam gown under a light cloak of dove feathers. Sparrowwing was clothed in a tunic of moonbeam and a cloak of light brown sparrow feathers.

“Sparrowwing?” Doveheart called to her younger sister again.

“Keep your feathers on, sister! I told you I’m coming!” Sparrowwing appeared with her basket full of cloud-thread. Her light brown hair was straggling from its knot at the nape of her neck. You could not tell the two were sisters; they looked and acted nothing alike. Sparrowwing was lively, cheerful, and had a boisterous spirit. She had nut-brown eyes and slightly tanned skin. Doveheart was quiet, kind, and rather shy. She had black hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. Both had recently joined the ranks of the weavers, spinners, and seamstresses and tailors. They had been apprentices to their mother and aunt and had been known as Dovefeather and Sparrowfeather. Doveheart was remembering the spinner ceremony where they had been given their spinner names—Doveheart and Sparrowwing. She smiled as she recalled how proud she had been, and how Sparrowwing had literally been shooting sparks in excitement.

“Doveheart?” Sparrowwing waved her basket in front of her sister’s face, jolting Doveheart back to the present.

“Let’s go now,” Doveheart blinked her eyes and started down the sandy path.

~ ~ ~

At the meeting, Doveheart and Sparrowwing were allowed to share their opinions on the predicaments the flock was in.

“We need something easier to spin with! Using our hands is as difficult as catching a fox,” a spinner remarked. There were murmurs of agreement.

“We need something like the looms that the weavers have,” Doveheart said.

“Yes, we do!” chimed Sparrowwing.

“Our looms aren’t easy to use either,” warned Nightingale.

“I didn’t say we needed looms, I said we needed something like them,” Doveheart replied hotly. “We just need something to keep the fibers wrapped tightly.”

“Maybe a stick?” Sparrowwing suggested.

“It’s worth a try,” Eagleflight decided. “Hawkfeather, please go fetch some writing supplies. A couple wax-covered tablets, some ink, and some writing quills, please.”

Hawkfeather quickly returned with the things Eagleflight had asked for and the leading bird began drawing. He picked up the tablet he had been drawing on. It showed a stick, thin at one end and thick at the other.

“Would this work? You tie the fibers onto the thick end and twist the fibers around the stick,” he asked.

“Let’s try it first. Could someone please go find some sticks like the one Eagleflight drew on the tablet? At least a dozen, please,” a spinner said. Sparrowwing changed into bird form and took flight. When she returned, she carried fourteen of those sticks. Doveheart tried it, but the stick didn’t hold that much thread and it frequently unraveled the fibers.

“It’s hopeless. We’ll have to continue using our hands and twisting the fibers together,” Doveheart murmured to Sparrowwing as she eyed her blistered, red hands.

“No! We cannot give up hope,” Eagleflight, who had heard Doveheart, declared. “You spinners cannot go one with those hands. Doveheart, for someone so young, your hands look like they belong to a bird a hundred summers old!”

Doveheart turned away from her leader. For once in her life, she didn’t believe him.

~ ~ ~

That night in her nest lined with feathers and soft grass, Doveheart thought she heard someone weeping. She carefully took her feather cloak from its hook and wrapped its softness around her. She crept outside and listened again. There was someone crying. It sounded like a young girl. Doveheart cautiously followed the sound until she was past the borders of the Bird-People. In a small forest glade, a young human girl sat crying. She held a wooden stick with a spinning half-circle strung on it. There was a basket of woolen thread next to her. It was not of good quality; it was knobby and bumpy. The girl seemed to be crying because of the bad thread.

“What ails you at this time of night?” Doveheart blurted out.

“Who speaks?” the girl stood up, startled.

“I did,” Doveheart stepped into view. “What is wrong, maiden?”

“My thread!” the young girl wailed, clearly upset.

“I will teach you to spin strong, good thread if you teach me to make something to spin with. My people use our hands to twist the fibers into thread and our hands,” Doveheart showed the girl her blistered hands. “My name is Doveheart. I live with the Bird-People.”

“My name is Maura. I am a human. Are bird-people half-bird and half-people?”

“Close. We can change into birds by doing this,” Doveheart pressed her hand to her shoulder and changed into a small dove with softly shimmering feathers. She changed back and looked at Maura’s astonished face. “Can you teach me how to make something to spin with?”

“Certainly. Come sit by me and I will show you,” Maura patted the ground next to her. She taught Doveheart how to make and use a spindle.

“See here, you simply take a straight, smooth stick—oh! We don’t have anything to carve with! You need to carve a spindle; you can’t just use a stick.” Maura explained.

“That is fine, I can carve wood easily with my hands,” Doveheart assured her.

“Can you carve something like this?” Maura picked up her own olive wood spindle.

“Certainly...” Doveheart took up the stick and quickly turned it into a spindle.

“Perfect!” Maura exclaimed. She taught Doveheart how to hold the spindle carefully, then to knot the thread, then to carefully spin the thread.

“It is a wonder!” Doveheart said, looking at the wooden spindle. “Now our spinners no longer have to use their hands to spin! A miracle! Now, in return, I must teach you to spin good thread. However, instead of using your sheep fur, I will use moonbeams.”

“How?” Maura looked mystified.

“Like this,” Doveheart pulled down strands of moonlight and a shower of moon dust fell to the earth and glowed with a silvery light. She took the spindle, and with her new skill, taught Maura to spin thread of excellent quality. She showed how to pinch the thread tightly so it did not end up knotted and loose.

“If you ever need more moonbeams or sunrays or anything, come here and call my name,” Doveheart said as the sun was rising. “The sun is coming up. I have to go. See you, sometime, Maura!”

“Good-bye, Doveheart. Thank you so much!”

“Thank *you*. My people will be glad to not use hands anymore! Thank you, Maura!”

~ ~ ~

Doveheart shook Sparrowwing awake.

“What is it, sister?” Sparrowwing mumbled sleepily.

“Just wake up, you lazy bird! You know that the early bird catches the worm.”

“Fine, just stop shaking me,” Sparrowwing sat up and rubbed her brown eyes. Still half-asleep, she pushed off some bits of feather and grass. “Why did you wake me up when the sun is only peeking out over the mountain?”

“Get up first. I mean, change into your tunic, comb your hair, wash your face, and drink a glass full of dew before I splash some on your face,” Doveheart ordered as she nudged Sparrowwing.

“Fine, just quit it!” Sparrowwing grumbled and did as told.

When she returned, she demanded, “What is going on, Doveheart?”

“Well, last night I heard someone crying...” Doveheart told about her night past the borders, and pulled out the wooden spindle.

“Amazing!” Sparrowwing snatched the spindle, examining it carefully. “How does it work? How does it spin fibers into thread?”

“Like this...” Doveheart pulled some sunrays from the sky and spun them into a glistening, shimmering golden thread.

“Astounding!” Sparrowwing pulled Doveheart to Eagleflight’s nest and knocked on the rock near the entrance.

“Come in!” was the reply.

Doveheart and Sparrowwing entered, and Doveheart showed their leader how to use a spindle. His reaction was similar to Sparrowwings: full of gasps and approving exclamations. Eagleflight called a tribe meeting, and Doveheart once again demonstrated the “wonders and miracles” of the spindle. It was immediately put to use, and it became the creator of soft and thick thread.

The Demise of Lord Neiku

My name is Natalie. I didn't want to be a part of this, but I had no choice. My best friend was killed in the end, and seven others almost died too. I don't really know how this happened. All I do know is that there is an evil monster named Lord Neiku, and he was trying to kill the rest of the magicians on Earth. There was only nine left, including me, Maria, my best friend, and several others. It started on a sunny afternoon.

It was afterschool, and Maria was looking not very clean. Her breath smelled horrible, her body odor was incredibly stinky, and her face looked purple and blue. I was almost sure that this wasn't her. That day, she had been acting not like herself at all. Usually, she was nice and friendly, an awesome extrovert. But on that day, she had been quiet, not speaking at all. When she did speak, it was always insulting someone. When the bell rang, I had to gather up my courage and walk home with her.

"Scram," was her immediate reply when she saw me coming. She was trembling all over.

I should have noticed right away. Her fingernails were growing yellow and long at an alarming pace. I was oblivious to all that, and instead, I kept on trying to talk to her.

"How was your school day?" I asked, out of ideas.

Then, I finally noticed, and when I did, I screamed so loud that the entire world must have heard. Her arm had become green with scales all over. This was not the real Maria. This was a monster that must have kidnapped her. I ran away and hid. After I caught my breath, I peered out. The monster had completed its transformation, and I almost threw up. It had green and purple scales, and the odor it was giving off smelled like year-old milk combined with the smelliest socks anyone will ever find. It waved its hand to create a black portal, and stepped in. I was shocked, and the first thing I did was run home...

When I came home, I saw a translucent appearance of a monster that looked exactly like the one that had taken the shape of Maria. I closed my eyes and screamed, and when I opened my eyes, it was gone. *Trick of the light*, I kept telling myself. I wanted to call the police to tell them about everything I had witnessed, but I soon decided against it. For the rest of the day, I was always seeing the monster's appearance, and I bit hard on my lip to not scream. The worst came at night.

As soon as I closed the light, the monster came again. Before I could turn on the light, it pointed it at me. I froze, unable to move, but still conscious about my surroundings. The monster created a portal, and took me with it.

I was amazed at what was on the other side. There were thousands of monsters that were just like the one that took Maria's shape and the one that captured me. In the middle, there was one that was the size of a two-story building. I saw Maria tied to a pole, and she had a mad expression on her face. Next to her were several others (the magicians) that were also tied to a pole. Soon, I was forced to join them.

"What's going on here?" I demanded.

"QUIET!!!" the huge monster screamed. He conversed quietly with his minions.

We were released from the sticks a few hours later, and taken quickly to a room. The huge monster peered at me, and frowned in disgust. The door closed immediately.

Maria introduced me to each of the magicians. Lucy was the oldest of all of us, tall and blonde. Minnie was the youngest, and the least experienced. We made friends quickly. The others

were Sam, Eve, Leila, and Pattie, short for Patricia. She then told me a bit about the problem we were in.

The huge revolting monster was Lord Neiku. Maria walked over to me. She told me a bit about the predicament we were in. Apparently, they had already fought Lord Neiku a lot of times already.

“I’ll teach you how to use your magic. First, think of an element, fire, water, wind, or earth. The powers that we use come to us from the Key, which is a power source from inside the Earth, which we call the core. You need to imagine that you are extracting your element from the core to your hand. The final step is to use all your might to push that energy out and to your target.”

I chose water, and I followed the steps. When I finished the final step, I managed a trickle of water, and I was panting.

We did this a few more times, and I felt like jelly. I couldn’t move, and my head was dizzy.

“Be careful about the amount of magic you channel from the Key, because if you summon too much, you won’t be able to take it, and you’ll die. Your magic will go to the core.”

Maria trained me for a long time, but I wasn’t as tired as before. I was getting the hang of it! Then, I remembered about our mortal world, and I panicked.

“What happens if our parents notice our disappearance?” I asked.

Maria paused a minute, then said “I guess I’ll create a double for you. It’s hard, because instead of summoning one element, you have to summon all four, and then think of the object or person you are going to clone. This may come in handy sometime, but only when you are experienced enough to handle the power.”

After a few days of training, and stuck in the room, all eight of us were tired, and uncomfortable in the small room. The room was made of special material, so we couldn’t bust through. When what felt like a week passed, Lord Neiku finally opened the door.

“IT’S THE FINAL BATTLE!” Maria yelled.

She immediately fired a gust of wind at him. Lord Neiku flew to the wall, and fired ice at Lucy. Lucy quickly summoned earth to create a shield. I squirted fire at all of the servants coming, and they disappeared into dust, but more quickly came. Lucy, being the second most experienced, came to Maria’s side, and battled Lord Neiku. The rest of us were guarding them by attacking the servants. When all of the servants were destroyed, I was horrified to see Lucy on the ground groaning in pain, and Maria sweating. Lord Neiku wasn’t coping well, but still better than Lucy and Maria. Minnie went to heal Lucy, because she was good at channeling powers to heal. The rest of us went to help Maria. Lord Neiku immediately fired an enormous tornado, and he swirled it around. I was expecting it, so I had earth power already summoned and ready to create a shield. My shield was only big enough to protect Maria, the person next to me, and me. The rest of the magicians were scattered to the floor.

Maria pushed me to the wall, and glared at Lord Neiku. Suddenly, Lord Neiku unleashed a powerful stream of icicles at Maria. She had no time to defend herself, and was on the ground. Maria stood up shakily, and she summoned a big ball of orange flames. I started making a shield around her and all of us. Everyone joined in. Lord Neiku tried as hard as he could, but seven magicians still held him out. Maria’s fireball had grown to the same size as Lord Neiku, and getting bigger. We were all sweating, but Maria’s entire outfit was wet. When the fireball finally reached to the size of three houses, she unleashed it. Lord Neiku was turned into ashes immediately. I had a feeling that she didn’t survive, with all that power used.

When it was over, I crept to Maria. She was lying completely still. I checked her pulse. There was none. I put my hand to her chest. It was still. My guess was correct. She had taken too much power for her body to handle it.

“No... no...” I murmured. I sobbed mournfully.

Lucy, Sam, Minnie, Leila, Eve, and Pattie were watching. I could see tears in their eyes. I started digging a hole with my hands, not with magic, for magic had killed my best friend. The others saw, and started helping. After an hour, the hole was big enough to place Maria's corpse. We buried her. None of us spoke a word for the entire time.

When we finished, we sat together, around Maria's final resting place. It was nighttime by then. I stared up at the sky, and a shooting star passed us.

"It's Maria's soul," I whispered.

For a while, we just sat there, and said nothing. Although the others hadn't known Maria for very long, they knew she had died to save them and all of the inhabitants of Earth.

"She was a brilliant hero, and it is so tragic that she had to die so young," Lucy murmured.

We stood up, and stared at the ashes of Lord Neiku. I took a handful of it, and sprinkled it over Maria's grave. The others did the same.

We said our goodbyes and summoned wind to blow us back home. I went to Maria's house to tell her parents, but I decided not to. Instead, I summoned all four elements, and thought of Maria's smiling face, and her personality, her courage, everything about her, and created a replica of her. The replica moved around, and nodded to signal that it was ok, and could handle everything.

The effort had drained my energy, so I trudged on home. I climbed through the window, and found the replica of me that Maria had created. When it saw me, it dissolved, and I climbed into bed. I channeled a bit of water and earth power to heal my scratches.

The bed felt comfortable, after weeks of being in the cold stony room. However comfy it was, I couldn't sleep. I went over the day's events. After a while, I succumbed to sleep...

For the next few months, I couldn't be near the Maria replica, for it switched on the painful memories. When I finally couldn't take it anymore, I started to converse with the replica.

However painful the past was, always move on to the future. Maria's death was a traumatic event, and I still have nightmares about it, but that was the past. A year later, I invited all seven of us magicians to say a final goodbye to Maria. We arrived there, and brought flowers and an official tombstone for Maria. That was the last time we went there. Lord Neiku was defeated, and Earth was free from his evil.

The Mergirl Squirmed With Anticipation

The mergirl squirmed with anticipation. Normally she was a quiet, cautious Mer, but today was different. She could hardly *wait* to go to explore the surface!

It was true that she loved living in the coral reefs of the Caribbean Sea. She could play among a wide diversity of life in a beautiful aquatic wonderland. However, that did not stop her from wondering what the surface was like.

She had often looked up, hoping to see something on the surface, only to see a pulsing light. She longed to know what the source was. Her tutor, Peter, had told her once before that it was the sun, but he said he couldn't explain what it looked like. It was impossible to describe if you hadn't been to the surface yet, he said. She often wondered what the sun looked like. Moreover, when Peter taught about the land creatures, she just desired to see the top even more. She was especially interested into the humans. However, Peter had warned her that while some of them were very nice, some were also very mean.

So of course she was delighted when her father said she could visit the surface regularly. He said it was a birthday gift.

Yesterday had been her sixth birthday, and it was very nice. She got a new pet, a fish named May. Then, after the grand birthday feast, her father had given his gift – as well as a pair of fake legs so she could walk on land.

She tried to pay attention to her lessons, but her mind kept wandering away. What did feathers feel like? Was the sun alive? Why couldn't fish breathe above the surface? Perhaps she could become win a science award for figuring out a way for fish to breathe above the surface?

She pictured herself in front of a happy crowd. An important-looking adult Mer was saying, "and now, without further ado, for inventing a way for fish to breathe above water, we will proudly present the Important Scientific Discovery Award to—"

"ROSE PEARL MARIE COWRIESHINE!"

She looked up. It was Peter, and his face had turned a most interesting shade of purple, as if the oxygen had stopped coming to his head.

"Have you been paying attention at ALL?!"

She shook her head sorrowfully.

"Well, now, let me tell you something, Rose Pearl. I—" then he stop abruptly, sighed, shook his head, and let me off early.

The mergirl was thrilled. Finally she could go off and explore!

She swam straight up, passing sharks, whales, dolphins, schools of fish, coral, even merfolk doing their business. All of them stopped and gazed at her in wonder (except for the coral, of course). She laughed and smiled at them. They smiled waved back (except for the schools and the coral).

The pulsing light – er, the sun – was getting closer and brighter. She might have to shield her eyes soon.

When she finally got to the surface, she suddenly understood why Peter had said the sun was impossible to describe; it was just so amazing! Her eyes could not seem to process what she was looking at. So she started with the sun.

The sun looked like a round ball, and appeared to hang in the air. It seemed to be a pale yellow, almost white, but the sun was so bright that her eyes hurt from looking at it for just a moment.

Then there was the sky. The sky was part of the atmosphere. Peter said that during the night, you could see space, which was even more beautiful than the sky. But she could not imagine something more beautiful.

The sky was a pretty shade of blue; it was lighter than the ocean. She searched for the common cloud, which was puffy and white, but she did not see any. Instead, the sky was streaked with irregular white stripes.

“How strange,” she said to herself. She would have to ask Peter about it later.

Soon she came close enough to see the shoreline. What she saw was a shocking surprise!

Peter had taught her that there were many types of beaches. For example, there were rocky beaches, beaches made of hardened molten lava, and beaches made of sand – the same grains that covered the ocean. Some beaches were dirty and filled with people. Others were quiet, serene, and clean. This beach was a noisy, dirty, and crowded sandy beach!

It was true that the reefs were teeming with life, but it was never crowded! She began to wonder why she had ever wanted to come here. First, the water was filthy. Second, there were bags and trash in the sand. Third, there was messy human food that was attracting bugs and birds.

Human food *couldn't* be good for them! Also, the poor critters might be shooed away! Sure enough, people were chasing the birds away and trying to swat the bugs. The mergirl felt sorry for them – and mad at the humans. They were just trying to survive! *Surely* these humans, who seemed as if they had plenty to eat, could spare a little food for them. Besides, it was cruel to try to kill the bugs.

The Mer made it a rule not to hurt any living creature if they could help it, and *this* Rose Pearl definitely believed their rules. She shook her head. These humans did not seem very nice. She had hoped to make friends with some of them, but she did not want cruel friends. It seemed as though wanting something is sometimes better than getting it.

“However, some of them must be nice,” she told herself. Finally, she decided that she would give humans a few more chances.

“But today? I think I’ll make my friends underwater,” she said, smiling.

The Water Lily

Peyton placed a hand over her growling stomach, her body exhausted from hunger. Stuck in a room of starving, scrawny children, she was hoping that the soup kitchen would receive a food donation. That week, she had heard rumors that someone had donated a whole basket of vegetables and fifteen loaves of bread. On Sunday, they would have a feast.

When Peyton woke up that Sunday morning, her back aching from another painful night of sleeping on the cold tile floor with her older brother, Roland, she immediately clasped her hands together and prayed. Fortunately, as she found out later that day, the rumors were true.

Peyton's eyes swept across the room, and, as always, her gaze finally lingered on the little African-American girl who always huddled in a small ball in the corner. Peyton had noticed that she could read, which was amazing, considering how young she was and that she had never gone to school. She was bright and clever, but was withdrawn and almost never spoke. At four or five, she was probably the youngest there who was in their situation. *No one so young should have to bear this responsibility. No one so..... vulnerable.*

But, of course, this was the kind of thing that happened in a homeless shelter.

After Peyton's father who was the only one in their family who had a job, died in a car accident, her family went into serious debt and soon was broke. Their financial problems became so that Peyton had briefly considered stealing, but she didn't have the courage or heartlessness to even pickpocket a few coins from someone's lost purse. Even though moving to the shelter had helped save money, Peyton often worried that her and Roland would have to drop out of school.

Suddenly, even though her thoughts were far off and distant, Peyton remembered the little girl's name. Lily. It was a name laced with the beauty and freshness of a nymphaea, floating tranquilly in the sunlit water of a pond. Nymphaea-a water lily. There were a lot in the pond near the house Peyton lived in before they sold it. Just at the mere memory, Peyton felt a strong longing for her old life.

"Peyton? Hey, Peyton!" Someone was painfully nudging her shoulder. It was Candace, a short blond girl whom Peyton sometimes talked with. "What's wrong with you? They're serving dinner! Food!"

Peyton was suddenly aware of all the chaos around her. Running kids streamed out of the doorway into the soup kitchen, the thought of a warm dinner pushing them forward. Amazed that she had not noticed this, Peyton got up and followed Candace into the wild throng.

All the kids, after receiving their plastic plates, ran into the shelter's tiny cafeteria, and started to eat. The plates were small, but were heaped with large servings of salad and bread. Peyton fit her slight body in the corner of the room, next to Candace and her friend, Dae. She had no choice- all the tables were taken up.

Peyton thought they were good company, but they weren't exactly what she considered friends. Peyton remembered her old best friend, Angela Kellum. Stubborn, reckless, insensitive, encouraging, and a bit rebellious. They made an unlikely pair, the unruly, disobedient one and the quiet, meek one. Nevertheless, they were inseparable.

But Peyton had lost Angela along with the house, though. After Peyton and her family moved into the shelter, Peyton never saw Angela again. Not at school, nor in the park, which was their usual meeting place. She was either avoiding Peyton or was just gone.

Peyton sighed contentedly. This was the first filling dinner she'd had in three months. Feeling relaxed, she leaned her elbow onto the window above her and gazed out at the falling snow.

A couple walked by, and suddenly a hush fell over Candace and Dae. Peyton turned her head and noticed that they were teary-eyed.

Peyton stared at the couple again. A hood was drawn over the man's head, and the woman's head was bowed so low it seemed to droop. They were crying, their falling tears glinting like silver against the violet sky behind them. The growing darkness obscured their faces, and the only thing visible was their fiery red hair-which was vaguely familiar, although Peyton couldn't place how.

Candace sniffed, and mopped her eyes with a napkin. Dae consolingly wrapped her arm around her.

Peyton let out a barely contained whisper. "What?"

Candace put a finger to her lips, shushing Peyton. When the couple finally walked out of sight, Dae started to explain.

"That couple...they had a daughter. She had leukemia," she began. "And-and-" Dae stumbled, her voice taken over by emotion.

"She was in the hospital for almost three months," Candace continued for her. "The doctors said it was hopeless..."

"And it was," Dae finished dramatically.

Peyton raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

"She died last week," Dae sighed. "We don't even know her name, but it was sad."

"How do you know all this?" Peyton asked wonderingly.

"We know a girl back at the hospital." Right after Candace spoke, a monotonous voice blared loudly throughout the cafeteria.

"The cafeteria is now closing. Please exit immediately and return to your dorms."

Back in Peyton's family's dorm, it took an hour to finally fall into a fitful slumber; with the memories of Angela, the plight of poor Lily, and the familiar red hair haunting her mind, it was not an easy task.

The next morning, just after sunrise, a nagging feeling of discomfort forced Peyton to rise early. Peyton's mother and Roland were still asleep, oblivious to the world. Peyton suspiciously scrutinized the room. What had woken her up?

A hint of white on the dark flooring caught Peyton's eye. An envelope? *They had mail?* In utter disbelief, Peyton crawled over to where the envelope lay, the smooth white paper looking too clean amidst the dirty room. Maybe, just, maybe....it was approval of Peyton's mother's job application? Could she have gotten a job?

We're saved. We're saved! Peyton's fingers were numb from the cold and slow with fatigue as they fumbled, ripping the sticky paper apart. A lone, hand-written note slowly drifted out from the gaping hole she had torn open. Peyton felt a stab of disappointment and frustration - yet another promising dream had been broken like glass. Would they ever get out of here?

Peyton's eyes wandered over to the note again. It couldn't be a rejection letter, either. Then what? Peyton grabbed the slashed envelope and tried to read the distorted return address.

"Stephanie...and.... Ia-Ian Kellum," Peyton read with difficulty. "*Kellum*," she repeated, her eyes widening with recognition.

So! Angela hadn't forgotten her after all. She had probably been busy, that's all.... But Peyton felt doubtful. Angela wasn't the sort of person who forgot her best friend just because of.... other things.

Growing nervous, Peyton snatched the note from where it lay beside her.

Dear Peyton,

Do you remember us? Angela's parents? We have something important to tell you. You might be wondering if Angela has forgotten you or not. Angela would never, ever, forget you, Peyton. Nor would we. We have been hiding something from you all these years. Angela was diagnosed with leukemia when she was eight. We've tried various treatments but nothing's seemed to help. Just after you moved to the shelter, we had to take Angela to the hospital.

We're so sorry, Peyton. We should have told you earlier. And now it's too late...We invested ten thousand dollars in Angela's treatment, but since, well, it's done now, we'd like to give the money to you. We didn't want to keep it, and you, being Angela's best friend, were the most suitable person we could give it to. There is a check enclosed in the envelope along with this note.

We hope this will help your family.

*With love,
Stephanie and Ian Kellum, Angela Kellum's Parents*

A sheen of slick sweat covered Peyton's palms, the note slipping out of her loose grasp. She sat there, trying to contemplate the shocking information.

Angela....was....dead?

No! Peyton couldn't believe it-that that laughing, cheerful face was now bloodless and ashen, lifeless eyes no longer twinkling with that mischievous spark. Just thinking about it, Peyton involuntarily let out her first choky sob.

Wait ... there was a check in the envelope, wasn't there? Peyton found it in the envelope, stuck down near the bottom. There it was- crisp and fresh, "ten thousand" written in dark, black ink. Peyton's face hardened with contempt as she stuffed the check in her pocket, not wanting to see it. Throat tight with tears, Peyton contained a wail.

That familiar red hair...the mournful couple...who had a daughter with leukemia...they were Angela's parents!

Peyton gripped the windowsill for support, her knees starting to buckle. Outside the window, next to the snow clad road, was the pond with the water lilies. Now the water lilies were gone, but they thrived, growing in abundance in the summer. Angela loved to come here, and this was the only place where she was calm, almost peaceful. Peyton saw the ghost of her image, sitting on the large rock that was surrounded by ferns, serenely smiling at everything around her. Peyton's eyes started to pool with tears again. How could she be so near, yet so far?

"Peyton?" Peyton swiftly turned, frantically scooping up the envelope and note in her hands. Peyton's mother stared concernedly at Peyton's scarlet, blotchy face. "Anything wro-"

"No!" Peyton interrupted, quickly wiping the tears from her cheeks. "Not at all!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Peyton shrieked hysterically, losing whatever composure she had left and uncontrollably bursting into tears again, making no efforts to hide it. Fleeing from the room as fast as she could and ignoring her mother's screams, she dashed down the hallway and sought refuge, finally hiding in the supply closet. After an hour of lamenting miserably, she finally succumbed to her aching hunger pangs and pulled herself together. She arrived in the cafeteria just in time for breakfast.

Peyton inconspicuously dabbed her eyes with a napkin and avoided her mother and brother. An insignificant and gloomy corner, far from the vicinity of the noisy congregation, was appealing.

Unfortunately, just as Peyton was about to sit down, Candace saw her and dragged her over to her group.

“Hey,” the girls said brightly when they saw Peyton.

“Hello,” Peyton grumbled sullenly in reply.

“Looks like you didn’t sleep,” Candace joked, and Dae laughed.

Dae leaned in towards Peyton slyly. “You see that little girl behind you?” she whispered conspiratorially. Peyton turned around and followed Dae’s pointing finger- and saw Lily, the girl she had always marveled.

“So?” Peyton asked, now curious.

“Her mother is very ill, according to her doctors. If you’re wondering how I know this, I heard them talking near her doorway. The doctors don’t think she’ll survive. The girl will become an orphan, and she might even have to move out of the shelter..”

“Her mother’s going to die?” Peyton asked, horrified.

Dae naively shrugged her shoulders. “I guess, yeah.”

Peyton bit her lip, distressed. How could this be happening? Was there some way to save poor Lily? Peyton felt a nagging poking at her thigh, and dug her hand in her pocket.

The check. Ten thousand dollars. Peyton drew in a sharp breath. What if...

Lily couldn’t just be left to dry, like Angela died without Peyton knowing. The feeling of guilt that was muddling her senses couldn’t go away...no matter how many times Peyton assured herself that she couldn’t have done anything, anyways. Here was another girl who enthralled Peyton with her brilliance and wit, her unique insight of life. Another enigma, like Angela, whom Peyton could never understand. Lily’s life would crumble without her mother.

Peyton suddenly stood up... an idea. Discarding her food, she sprinted for the hallway, clutching the check in her hand. Peyton had no idea where she was going- she was being guided by her feet into a part of the shelter she’d never been in before. Still, her legs pumped with a vigor that ran through her veins and drove her tired body on. She skidded to a halt at a table with a map of the shelter. According to the map, she was running towards Dorm 31B, the residence of..... Annie and Lily Cooper.

That has to be the Lily I know, Peyton thought desperately. *I hope.*

Peyton raced the remaining distance, feeling, for some reason, like she had little time. When she saw solemn men decked in white stride out of a door, she knew she had found the right dorm. *Quick, Peyton, quick.*

“Wait!” Peyton cried just as the last man was about to swing the door shut. The doctor peered at Peyton knowingly, opened the door for her, and motioned her inside. “Say your goodbyes now, kid. You might not have another chance.”

The man’s words both disgusted and terrified Peyton, but she dismissed them, telling herself that it didn’t matter.

A middle-aged woman was bundled in blankets in the bed.

Annie Cooper questioningly raised her eyebrows as Peyton stood by her side, as if in vigil.

“And who might you be?” Her voice had a faint English accent, but it was cracked and weak.

“Peyton Peterson. I’m an, um, friend of Lily’s.”

“What?” A voice came from the doorway. “Did someone say my name?” Lily, looking smaller than ever, stood by the doorway and held a glass of milk that Peyton assumed was for Mrs. Cooper. “Aren’t you Peyton?”

“Yes,” Peyton stumbled, taken aback. “I’m here because...I wanted to give you something.”

Lily squinted at her warily. She ran to the other side of Mrs. Cooper, an urgent spring in her step and handed her the glass. "Drink," she commanded in a motherly tone, as Mrs. Cooper reluctantly took a sip.

"I got this...check. Ten thousand dollars," Peyton continued cautiously, and Mrs. Cooper and Lily glanced at her, interested.

"Lucky you," Mrs. Cooper congratulated, and Peyton could not detect any envy in her voice. This was immediately followed by a severe coughing fit, and Lily clasped her mother's hand protectively, the panic prominent on her face.

"Oh, I'm fine," Mrs. Cooper rasped, not assuring either Lily or Peyton in the least. "Just fine. Peyton, do continue."

"Well... I just decided that you need the money more than I do."

Mrs. Cooper gasped hoarsely, and Lily let go of her mother's hand, startled. "You don't mean that, do you?"

Peyton nodded, growing confident. "I do."

"But...you don't even know us!" Lily protested.

Peyton ducked her head, embarrassed, and blushed. "I've been watching you ever since I arrived here, Lily," she admitted quietly. "You deserve every last cent of that ten thousand dollars."

Lily's face was, at first, blank. "But-but-". At a loss for words, she finally buried her head in her arms and took in deep breaths, her body heaving.. Tears of what could only be either sorrow or joy, maybe both, ran down Mrs. Cooper's cheeks. "You can't do that, dear. I won't accept- no, I won't! Think about yourself, and your poor family, and don't think about us, dear..." Her words became muffled as raucous sobs racked her body.

Peyton remained unaffected by their tears. She reached for Mrs. Cooper's stiff hand, warming it in her own, and closed Mrs. Cooper's fingers around the check.

"I can't repay our debt to you in any way possible," Mrs. Cooper said, unable to tear her eyes away from Peyton, ignoring the enormous amount of money that she held in her hand. "I can't evade death," she observed, and Lily started to weep, "so it will not help me. But this will help Lily. She can go to school and have a decent life. Thank you, Peyton. We can't express our extreme gratitude in words."

Lily slowly lumbered towards Peyton, her head lowered. Then, she did something completely unexpected, and threw herself onto Peyton in a hug. "Thank you," she murmured softly in her ear, her arms wrapped around Peyton's neck.

Peyton kissed the top of her head. "You're welcome." And out of the Cooper's window, Peyton saw the water lily pond. And right there, sitting on that rock that jutted out over the waters, was Angela.

She smiled merrily, nodding her approval.

Milestone for the Ages

READ THE FIRST TWO INSTALLMENTS OF “MILESTONE FOR THE AGES” IN THE FEBRUARY AND MARCH ISSUES OF *OVERTURE!*

Dean walked across the small scrap of cement and mud that was the lawn of his shelter. Now that he received a great amount of money from the boxing match and athletics award, he thought that he could afford to try to get a job. He rode across town on his rusty bike and looked for any store, company, or shop that had a need for a position. After two weeks of disappointing searching, Dean jumped with joy. There it was. In the front of a large building was a sign that bore the words “In Need of Employees.” Dean whooped in happiness and bolted through the glass doors and into the front desk. He felt a titanic of waves of emotions rush at him. There was hope, anxiety, fear, and nervousness that overwhelmed Dean. It was a relatively grand building, with marble slabs making up the walls or floor and colorful carpets and furniture setting the scene.

Dean asked a man with a gray suit behind a computer, “Uh... May I apply for an open job here?” The desk clerk looked up from his monitor, and gave Dean a quick scan. He said, “Hmm, have you had any work experience in the past?” Dean shook his head. “What is it that you think your specialty is? This is a big company, that sells computer technology.” Dean thought for a brief second, and then panicked. What is it that he was good at that does anything with computers? He, as a person that lived in the streets for ninety percent of his life, never even touched one before. Dean opened his mouth, and out came a mumble. The man narrowed his eyes, and said, “Sorry, didn’t quite hear that.” Dean cleared his throat and squeezed the words, “Well, is it okay if you could test me for anything?” The man gave him a piercing look with his aqua blue eyes. The man smiled, “Follow me.”

Dean stumbled behind the man into a glass-enclosed room. The man laid out a sheet of paper in front of him. “Okay, here are the open spots.” Dean read the paper. It showed the spots of janitor: 2; engineer: 1; business manager: 3. Dean quickly scanned it again and again. Janitor. Maybe he could be that. It would tough work, mopping and cleaning. Engineer. No way. He did not know how to even operate a very simple computer. Business manager. This job had a pay of \$1,000 a week. There was no way, and he meant no way that could happen. He did not know how to control the people under him, and he was bad with business matters. He had to choose to try out for one. But, there it was. Like a glowing feather falling through empty space, there was hope and fantasy meshed into a basket. There was a chance, slimmer than a human hair, that he could be a business manager. But, he pushed that thought away. There was not a chance. Dean said, “I would like to apply for... janitor.” The man gave Dean an inquisitive look. He told Dean, “Okay, I will speak to the janitor management, wait here.” The man left.

Dean sat there for five minutes, but it seemed like two hours. He felt sweat form at the back of his neck and the bridge of his nose. The anxiety was killing him. Finally, the man came back and proclaimed, “I’m sorry, the spots were taken. There is only one job left, with one spot, business manager.” Dean’s heart skipped a beat, and he closed his eyes. There it was again, the feather glistening with hope. Dean said, “Okay, I will try out.” It may have been the craziest sentence that came out of his mouth, but there was a fantasized strip of hope.

Two weeks later, Dean biked back to the computer company. The man was waiting for him, “Hello, Dean. I have not introduced myself yet. My name is Howard. Follow me.” Dean quickly jumped off his bike and followed Howard. They once again were in the cooled marble room.

Howard gestured forward, and Dean found himself tripping into a large, circular room. He could not help but gawk at the computers and fancy statues and decorations. It seemed very professional.

“OK. Here is how we start. We quiz you, and you get some hands-on experience. This is a weeklong course. It... begins now.” Howard pushed a packet of papers and handed Dean a ballpoint pen. Dean looked at the questions, and began writing...

Dean looked at the first question. It was, “If you had three men you had to apply for jobs, and one was good at computers, the other good at cleaning, and the third excels at sales, where would you place them?” Dean scrawled his answer. After two hours, Dean finished the packet. Howard scanned the sheet and smiled. Dean let out a sigh of relief, and closed his eyes. “OK, good. Come back here tomorrow... Good day to you.”

After the entire long and vigorous course, Dean finished. Howard strode to him and proclaimed, “Well, the results were filed in, and it seems that you have natural talent at this job. You will begin work, tomorrow.” Howard smiled and walked away. Dean literally froze. He swallowed. He did it. Dean jumped like a spring and hooted in the air. He dashed to his bike and rode into the sunset, as this was the final thing that would change his life... forever.

ARTWORK

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