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OVERTURE

SPRING 2017 | TREES AND TOWERS

Dear Reader,

Our 2017 Spring Issue theme of “Trees and Towers” evokes deep consideration of what it truly means to be human, about the balance between pushing of technological frontiers and pausing to appreciate our simply beautiful beginnings.

Let us take you through the development of mankind. Explore our past, along with its age of glory, nobility and warfare. Delve into our future with a futuristic tale of man-made machines.

But as you do so, we implore you to not lose sight of our connection to the world of nature--the roots that unify us all, the roots from which the human race originated.



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Crackers

Polly looked up towards the ceiling, eyes glistening with excitement. “Polly’s heard dat in sum place up dere, Polly could git crackers anytime she wanted.”

From his overstuffed chair, her owner glared at her in response. His face was set in an unwelcoming gaze—eyes squinted and forehead wrinkled, as if questioning Polly’s sanity. “Bless your soul, Polly. Where ya gitting all dese wacky ideas? Yer crackers,” he continued, with his hands placed sternly on his hips, “come from me!”

Polly, overcome with disappointment, dipped her head to the dingy bottom of her cage. “But nunna dese crackers are gud enuf for Polly!” she thought to herself. “Imma gonna go up dere and git summah dem crackers mahself!” She then watched as her owner waddled away with a cup of day-old coffee in his hand, muttering “that darned ungrateful burd” under his breath.

On another dreary day, Polly woke to the creaking hinges of an open cage door and the cool wind whistling through an open window. Her owner was nowhere in sight. Seeing the opportunity lying before her, she felt her little heart beating with exhilaration. With the flap of her wings and an excited squawk, Polly flew out the door, sped through the window, and found herself soaring, for the first time in her entire life, in the bold blue sky, a shade she’d never seen before.

A rush of freedom surged through her body as Polly glanced at the honking cars beneath her. Under the glare of the sun, they gleamed radiantly in colors of metallic red, rusty brown, hues she’d never thought existed before. The hum of so many tiny humans shouting and laughing was a new kind of music to Polly’s ears.

The vehicles were becoming smaller and smaller, and the car-honking sounds were becoming so faint that everything almost sounded as quiet as the afternoons she spent alone in her cage. She saw the layout of the land: winding little lines of roads, specks of color that were little human-dwellings, and seas of greenery. She burst through layers of clouds, feeling the refreshing drops of water vapor soak her feathers. As she looked down, she suddenly realized the air was getting thinner—that she could no longer breathe! Polly’s wings trembled and faltered as her vision darkened at the edges. She narrowed her eyes in a measly attempt to regain clear vision, and saw the most crunchiest cracker she had ever seen, golden brown, crumbs drifting in the air. The tips of her wings brushed its edge, but it was still just out of her reach...

Meanwhile, her owner had come back home to an empty cage with the door swinging open. “Heavens to Betsy, where’s Polly?!?” he cried, heart plunging to his guts.

He bolted outside in desperation, repeatedly yelling to the blinding sky, unaware of the gawking bystanders, “Polly? Polly! Polly? Crackers! I’ve got yer crackers!! Come back!! I’m sorry!” And then all of a sudden, just when he was about to give up hope, a gleaming shape fell from the sky with a resonant crash.

Change

“Moving,” I yelled, “What do you mean moving!”

I felt the anger boiling inside my body—I was ready to explode any second now.

“Chris, we’ve been through this before,” my mother sighed, with a hint of exasperation in her voice.

“When your father gets a big opportunity, we have to adapt to new changes,” she explained, “I would have thought you have been grateful for this.”

“But I’ve never been to a *school* before,” I argued back.

I loved everything about Maine—it’s majestic mountains, its climate, the trees, our house, and so much more. But most of all, the thought of going to a school in Los Angeles scared me. There was always that fear nagging be in the back of my head—what would people think of me? Would I make any friends? How about if I made a complete fool out of myself? I had been home-schooled almost my entire life. Sure, I had friends, even though I didn’t go to school, but I never knew what it was like to actually be in a school environment.

“Well I’m excited,” snapped my big sister Suzie.

Suzie was the exact definition of a goody-two-shoes—she always agreed with my parents, attended high school, and was the kind of girl that always sucked up to her teachers. Ugh. In a few days, we had packed our bags, and before we knew it, were in a plane to Los Angeles. I was about to embark on a new adventure—or enter by biggest nightmare.

“Here we are!” my dad’s voice echoed across the walls of our new house.

I guess I could say it was a nice house. It was quite large and white, with an emerald green door with stained glass windows. There was a large living room, a spacious kitchen, and four bedrooms, one of them which had a cute little balcony with French windows. It smelled heavily of paint, and the backyard was extremely large with lots of grass, a table, and a basketball hoop left from the previous owners of this house. Although it was a beautiful house, I just didn’t get the same homey feel I got in our small house in Maine.

“Yes, we finally get our own rooms!” exclaimed Suzie.

“Don’t you ever miss Maine—and the life we left there?” I questioned. Suzie hesitated for a moment.

“Eh,” she replied.

“Chris, Suzie, it’s time to shop for school supplies! School’s tomorrow!” echoed the voice of my mother across eerie walls of our new home.

I was restless the entire night, thinking about what could happen. When morning rolled around, I felt my stomach in knots. Hesitantly, I climbed out of bed, brushed my teeth, changed, and wolfed down a piece of toast. Checking my watch, I climbed into our minivan and in a few minutes, I had arrived at Creekside Junior High School. It was a large school painted in white and red, with images of a cubs displayed all around the walls—the school mascot. There was a large sign that said in bright gold letters: Welcome New Students, but it only made me even more nervous.

“You’re going to be just fine, honey,” my mom assured me.

I rolled my eyes and lied, “Mom, it’s middle school, I think I can take care of myself!”

I stepped out of the car and glanced at my schedule. It said: Period 1: Science(Room 11).I walked up the stone steps—each step the knot in my stomach got tighter and tighter. I put on a brave face, but on the inside, I was an emotional wreck.

“Here I go,” I whispered to myself.

I opened the school doors and stepped into the hallway. It was as if time stopped. Everything became silent, and all the kids' heads whipped around, their eyes glued to my face. I gulped, taking steps towards my classroom. Room 8, Room 9, Room 10, where was it? I turned the corner and was face to face to a boy I had never seen before. He was wearing a worn out t-shirt with the words 'Creekside Junior High' etched across it and blue jeans. He had black hair and brown eyes, and was leaning against the wall of my next classroom.

"Sup, I'm Joe," the new boy introduced.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Chris." I managed to stammer out.

"You're the new kid, right? C'mon, I'll show you around."

And so they day progressed, and I got to know Joe really well. He was an extremely friendly person, and I even let him copy all my answers in math class. He chose me to work with him in group activities, and I already felt myself fitting in. Once I got home, I was dying to tell my mom about how much fun I had.

"So, Chris, how was your first day of actual school?" asked my mom, with a quiver in her voice.

My eyes lit up as I enthusiastically responded, "It was so fun, I even made a new friend named Joe! This year is going to be awesome!"

"Great to hear, Chris," she noted, "Is that the boy who was asking you about the homework after school?"

"Yeah, he might not be the smartest in my classes, but he is a great friend," I said.

The next day, I was so excited, I told my mom she didn't have to drive me to school.

"Okay, as long as you be careful when crossing the street." she had told me.

As I arrived to school, I checked my watch. It was 8:15, I had five minutes left. I strolled over to the wall near the basketball courts, and waited there till the bell. I checked my backpack—Dang it, I forgot my water bottle—I thought to myself. I got up to walk to the water fountain and suddenly skidded in my tracks. I had just heard my name being thrown out. I quickly backtracked and put my back against the wall, my ear pressed, so I could hear what people were saying.

"Why do you even talk to him?" hissed an unfamiliar voice.

"Yeah, he's never even been to a school before." said a more high-pitched, but also unfamiliar voice.

"It's not like that I would ever be his friend, he's just a really smart kid that I use to get answers for homework," another voice said.

That voice did sound familiar. I heard the people walking towards my direction, so I turned my back and pretended to be texting. As soon as they passed me, I turned around to see the gossipers. Although they were not facing me, one of the backpacks did have a name written across it with sharpie: Joe Hawkins.

Ding-ding-ding! It was time to get to class. I felt my face turn hotter than the sun, and my eyes were literally about to burst out of my eye sockets. So much had happened in five minutes. Did I seriously just hear what I heard? The rest of the day, I completely ignored Joe, and decided to sit on opposite sides of the classroom from him. When ever he came up to talk to me, I clicked my tongue and turned away from him.

At the end of the day he snapped, "Fine—be that way—freak."

A rush of emotions overcame me. I tried to say something and open my mouth, but no sound came out. I gulped, and ran home sprinting-as fast as I could.

"How was school today?" my mom questioned.

"I hate school, I never want to go ever again!" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

"Chris, can we talk?" she asked.

"No!"

I threw off my backpack and stomped upstairs to my room, slamming the door behind me. I sighed and buried my face into my pillow. Oh, the pillow It was one of the few things I got to take with me from Maine to LA. Its soft and worn out covers engulfed me in a hug, I let the coolness flow through my body. How things could change so fast. I just wished so badly that I could just change my life and be living in Maine again.

Lifting my head out of my covers, I gazed out at the windows of the California hills. Perched on our redwood tree lay a small caterpillar, an ugly one I could call it. It was plain and brown and shriveled, wrapping itself across the tree branch as if it was doing the boogie. I instantly imagined myself as the caterpillar, being such a tiny and meek creature in a big and dangerous environment. What could I do to get myself out of this situation?

The next day, I repeatedly told my mom I did not want to go to school, and even faked being sick, but she eventually forced me to go. As I walked up the steps of the school, I tried to not to go near the usual place where Joe and his friends talked, but I couldn't resist. I put my back to the wall and started walking left, one ear inclined to the noise that was going on behind the wall. I didn't catch everything, but I did hear this, "You're such a dummy! Never mess with me again! Imbecile!" I quickly turned my head to see what was happening.

There was a large crowd gathered around two kids who I could not see. One was much larger than the other, and the other kid was about my height. The large kid resembled a demon. He had spiky, gruff blond hair, yellow teeth that reeked of dog droppings, and piercing brown eyes. Ironically he was wearing a shirt that said Be Nice, and ripped jeans that exposed scratched knees with bruises.

"How dare you ignore and ridicule me for that new kid. I thought we were cool!" a loud voice yelled.

"Well, we're not friends anymore anyway" the other voice stammered.

I craned my head to see where the other voice was coming from, and as I expected, it was Joe. How come he always got himself into sticky situations?

"Never mess with Rob" one person in the crowd whispered.

So the bully's name was Rob. I narrowed my eyes towards Rob. He took a step forward, growling like a wolf bloodthirsty for prey.

"When I am finished with you..." he started saying. I gulped. Joe was anything but a friend to me, but should I really let someone like him get tortured and humiliated in front of 100 people? Was it the right thing to do, or should I just stand there and watch the entertainment like everybody else?

My heart suddenly started beating a million miles per second, pounding out of my chest. My head was going back and forth—should I stand up to him, or should I not? Should I? Or Not? I felt my legs wobbling and my palms getting sweaty. I bit my lip, and my throat tightened up. Was I really going to stand by and watch a classmate get bullied? My hands started clenching into fists, my eyes were bulging. Don't say it, don't say it Chris, but I couldn't keep it within myself. I pushed my way through the crowd and uttered those four words I had been dying to say.

"Get away from him!"

Everyone in the crowd turned to look at me, a few people gasping. Someone started whispering something about me, but I didn't care.

"Are you really that insecure about yourself that you gain happiness from others' sufferings? Why do you have to take out your anger on all of us? Yes, I know what it's like to be through tough situations that you don't want to be in," I said, thinking about how tough my life was and then continued, "I know what it's like to be the new kid at school, because my family's always moving. But unlike you, I don't spread the negativity around to everyone around me—I'm not a bully."

Rob took a step forward, the crowd immediately parted ways, making way for him. As he walked closer, I had the feeling that he was going to knock my head out or throw me across the

school. This is the end for me, I thought. To my surprise, Rob walked up to me and stuck out his large hand. Hesitantly, I shook it.

“We’re cool” he said, and just like that, he walked away, with his friends following him. Instantly, the whole crowd rose to their feet, cheering for me.

A boy walked up to me and said, “Hi, I’m Jake. Nice to meet you. Wanna come hang at my house after school?”

“Sure” I said excitedly. “I mean, that’s cool,” I corrected myself. “Great,” he replied. Ding-ding-ding! The bell for first period rang.

“Hey, Chris,” I turned around to face Joe.

“I’m really sorry for calling you a freak and using you. Truthfully, I think you would make a great friend.” he apologized.

“It’s fine,” I said, “Thanks for sticking up for me. Oh no, we gotta hurry before we’ll be late!”

When I reached class, my teacher, Ms. Scares, called me to the side to have a chat. I prayed that I wasn’t getting suspended.

“Chris,” she said, “I want to compliment you for being an upstander and finding it in your heart to defend someone who you may not have been on good terms with. I think you’re a great kid, an exemplary role model, and a smart student. If you need anything, feel free to tell me.”

“Okay, thanks,” I replied.

And so a month passed. Then two months. Then three. Eventually, I got used to my new glamorized life. Whenever I walked to school, or tried something new at home, I felt something... different. It was an unexplainable feeling that I could not put into words. I just felt this positive and optimistic energy attached to me and flowing around me, and life suddenly started to glow brighter and have a purpose. I couldn’t believe that I was still that same little boy scared to death of moving to a new place, now a confident young man excited to tackle any challenge that was thrown at him.

One day, I was sitting in my room, gazing out through the window, taking in the beautiful California view. Suddenly, something caught my eye. Perched on a tree branch was a colorful butterfly, with streaks of blue, yellow, and green. It was flying gracefully, with confidence, letting its wings embrace the winds. Somehow it seemed oddly...familiar. Had I seen it before?

No, I told myself, that’s impossible. There are millions of butterflies in the world. Then why did I seem to recognize it, I pondered in my head. Instantly, I thought of that small brown caterpillar struggling to climb the tree branch.

My eyes widened in shock. Could it be? The butterfly lifted its wings and flew off into the distance. Going, going, gone. Not too long ago it was a tiny caterpillar, scared to take a risk. Now, it had finally become what it always wanted to become.

“It changed,” I whispered.

“It changed for the better.

The Android II

The last time you encountered Simone, she had been assigned to a primitive star system to gather information for her planets plans of universal slavery. But now, more troubling matters are on her core processor; The emotion-filled android, and the strange engineer who seemed to be hiding something and Simone was caught in the middle of it all.

She was huddled in fetal position and could do nothing.

Her sensors were picking up his every move, from the way Hom'mon's footsteps were precise and strode proudly, his confidence echoing with each step, to how tightly he clutched the tool, a menacing wrench. He was muttering moody and dark words under his breath, and all Simone could make out was "blasted androids". Simone's processor were pulling up every outcome and plastering them on her vision. Most involved some sort of dismemberment occurring very soon.

"I'll fix you now," he growled. Defenseless, all Simone could do was squeeze her eyes shut. The footsteps clanged against the metal floors, louder and louder, and were crumbling her audio sensors into dust. The steel wrench hit metal with a core-shaking *clang*. He clamped the apparatus on and twisted. The bolt screamed and screeched in agony, Hom'mon swore, and Simone was certain he was wrenching her arm off.

But her nerves didn't snap off, and there were no blinking warning on her vision informing her of a missing limb.

Simone's eyelids receded upward, letting the light pierce her optobionics. Currently, Hom'mon was struggling immensely while trying to screw off a small nut on the walls to replace with a rusted bolt. Simone's core processor decreased the pace at which it analysed, and her nerves loosened. Still crunched up in a ball, she scrolled through the basic news feeds, trying to distract herself from the man repairing the spaceship.

"You're pathetic." Hom'mon's throaty voice echoed in the small chamber, feeling constrained and boiling. Understanding she was in hibernation, he continued. "Something is wrong with your personality chip. I run your stats every day. Your processor doesn't work properly, you're continuously shutting off your data stream, you move in ways contrary to ways an android should move. I've seen it all before. You have feelings like us Cibus. You know what that makes you?" His hot breath clouded in front of Simone's "*Dangerous*." Simone heard an scoff coming from directly in front of her. "Why do you think I'm here? Because of your ilk, and what you've done!" A loud ding-sounded from the overhead speakers, but Hom'mon chose to ignore it, rounding on Simone again. "It's bad enough that normal androids are so complacent and willing and do whatever their master asks them too, but one's with feelings? Undescribable. Androids are not worth *feelings*."

Simone had been shoved around long enough for the past few weeks to realize how this man's temper flared as easily as a igneous, mounds of dirt that spewed out magma from Teteleon's core. And each time he scorned her, her core processor became closer and closer for erupting her own little mountain of fury and flames.

The small beeps were getting louder and louder.

She felt something collide into her calf, and her nerves jolted. "I should dump you off at the next garbage chute, that's what. Don't need any faulty androids." His rough hands shot out, clutching the scruff of her neck. Simone let out a pleading cry, or at least tried to--she was permanently on mute. He started dragging her limp form, paying no mind to the unbearable screeching of her metal foot on metal ground. Then, something rammed into the portside, causing the podship to swing wildly to the right. Hom'mon dropped her body with a crash and ran towards the cockpit.

Simone soon linked herself up with the ship's sensors, an ability found in all androids. The view outside the spaceship filled her vision. Boulders ten times the size of the shuttle were floating all over space, rocketing past debris from rocks and broken machinery. *The Sea of the Unliving*, her interface told her. *A treacherous asteroid field notorious for the deaths of nearly 8,000 living things over its existence. Flying through it is strongly urged against; the odds of escaping alive are 1 to 9,635.*

Simone balked at the data. With the ship on auto pilot, they had no chance.

Harried footsteps echoed in Simone's audio sensor as Hom'mon rushed towards her. He didn't know how to fly the ship. He fumbled for her power switch, located at the base of her neck, and pressed it. Simone exited hibernation and felt like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon- groggy, crumpled, yet exhilaratingly free. The basic start-up functions through her processor, but she pushed the data to a side; more pressing matters were at hand.

"AI, ID14Z-" Simone barreled past the engineer and into the cockpit, flight skills downloading in her interface. Linking again with the ship, she collapsed into the seat. A space rock was looming in front on the visor. Grabbing the handles, she pulled them downward, letting the ship soar above the asteroid, but grazing another above her.

Hom'mon screamed in terror. "You're not EVEN FLYING RIGHT?! WHAT KIND OF-" Simone shot her hand out, shoving him into the seat next to her. *Safety first.* She was one with the ship, in perfect awareness of her surroundings. She was the gentle smooth flyer that the ship was, easily slipping between rocks and debris, a graceful dancer weaving and bobbing.

Simone swerved right to avoid a particularly large boulder that would have knocked off the port wing.

Her processor calculated that the best way to get out of this was to fly up and away. But obstructing her path were several large boulders. Fan kicking in, she accelerated into one asteroid while punching in the code for the laser guns. Hom'mon screamed, but a moment later, the planetoid shattered and the podship zoomed through the debris. A cunning smile slipped over Simone's face.

After the same pattern of obliterating and slipping through the remains, Simone slumped into the chair, having found her way out of the asteroid field. She stayed connected to the ship, though; she liked being in control.

All she could hear from the engineer were his shuddering breaths and mumbled prayers. Finally he whispered out tentative words. "Well," he started, "I guess you aren't useless after all." He cleared his throat as Simone turned to him, noting his twiddling fingers. "Now, hibernation." he reached for the switch at her neck.

Simone's fury was settling in the bottom of her core processor, as the strange new feeling, mixed with a haughty pride, swam in her abdomen. She just saved his skin, and he was still thinking he was above her, still thinking he could control her. *I can be different.* She was different, unique, not *useless*. She was an android--she loathed the term *useless*. She deserved a voice; she would not let this unintelligent excuse for a Cibus speak for her. *I will be different.*

Simone snapped off a panel on her neck and started to punch in the code to activate her speech. Hom'mon slapped her hand away. "Your speech module. No. No way am I turning that thing on. ID14Z26, go to the back room and enter hibernation." He grabbed her wrist and yanked her up. "Immediately."

Her programming obeyed; her mind did not. In seconds, her interface halted her feet from moving, so she was a stiff statue in the middle of the pilot dock. She stiltedly turned on one foot and dropped herself in the pilot's chair. She mimicked the director when he was in a dangerous mood; arms crossed, one leg propped over the other, and a stern frown on his face. *Oh, you are going to regret this.*

"Oh please, what are you going to do about it? In this relationship, I am the master and you are the servant, now..." His voice faltered away, glancing nervously at Simone's fingertips flying over the controls. "Stop. Stop, what are you doing...?"

Simone was delighting in the fact that her engineer was now a melting puddle of babbling words. A smile crept up her lips and spread all across her face. She tilted her head to feign a look of innocence, and oddly, an image of Alida's blurred in her vision. Ignoring it, her hands receded from the control board. The podship paused, then plummeted into the rocks below.

"AAUGHHH!! MAKE IT STOP!!" Hom'mon dove for the controls, but Simone pushed him away. His hip collided with the armchair and he hissed in pain. Simone pried open the panel again, but he wrangled her wrist away, with one hand on the steering wheel.

Something hit the top of the ship, and Hom'mon screamed. "FINE!" He punched in the code--which Simone actually had no idea what it was. She felt something inside of her bloom, as gears turned and machinery rumbled in her body.

"Better," she whispered. Her first words made her shudder. Her voice was sleek and deep, like the velvet robes of the wealthy. Simone nearly forgot that they were tumbling to her doom. Grappling the handles, she bobbed and weaved until they were soaring miles above the asteroid field.

"I am far from useless. I hope you soon take notice of that." But the engineer didn't reply, just curled up into a ball, not unlike Simone in hibernation. Simone didn't understand why he wouldn't respond; all she had done was make a point.

She left him to sulk; her footsteps clipped on the smooth metal as she wandered into the galley. She tugged on a strand of hair follicles as she studied the image in front of her; Alida's burning smile. Simone shook slightly, feeling for the first time that day, that she had gone too far in her attempt to stake her independence.

She needed to figure out what she had to do. She didn't trust Hom'mon, and she didn't trust her mission. And Alida was another pretty piece in her intergalactic puzzle.

She thought about analyzing Hom'mon's face again, but a bright green light blinked in the side of her vision, distracting her.

Looking out the small window, she saw several spheres orbiting a bright star. All were some mix of reds and browns. Except a planet of ceruleans and virescence, with gauzy clouds that wrapped around it like a blanket.

The pale green text simply stated: *You have arrived.*

The Soluna system was right in front of her eyes.

From A Bully's Point of View

I always knew that I was different from everybody else. Not in the freaky "I am a monster" way, but as in I was completely different.

I gradually realized that I didn't like many things that others did - I hated the way that they talked, they walked, and even the way they smiled.

It wouldn't have been a problem if I had just kept silent about what I disliked, but I could never hold back.

"Haley." I remember I had said, trying to be cheerful, but in truth, my heart sank when I saw her.

"Alyssa!" she had screamed, hugging me after the long summer.

She had then laughed and twirled around. "It's been too long!"

I remember frowning at her, not bothering to hide it.

"Alyssa?" Haley asked, worriedly.

"I mean, I've been nice all these year, but that laugh annoys me to no end!" I finally told her what I had to wanted to say for ages. I began to rant. It's disgusting! It sounds like a dog trying to sing!" I exclaimed, making her jump.

"What? Do you actually think that?" Haley looked self-conscious.

"Just...don't laugh in front of me, okay?" I said rudely, not sure where all if this was coming from. I regretted it as I saw her eyes flash with hurt, but how could I say I'm sorry if it was true?

Haley had stared at me for the longest time, her eyes welling up, before she had run off, sniffling.

That was how I had lost one of my friends. And it just kept on happening. I would make a sassy remark on what they wore, or what they did, and they would stop being friends with me. They knew that I wasn't teasing them - I actually meant it. I didn't ever mean to be like this at the start, but then it just came flooding out.

I knew they always expected me to come and apologize, but I had pride. I felt like I was justified in what I was saying. Shouldn't they be the ones apologizing? To me?

Finally, I was down to one friend--Tia, who had stuck with me ever since I had friends, to when I found the pleasure in other people's pain. I was well aware everyone was trying to persuade her to leave me because of how bad of a person I was, but she was loyal and stuck by me--even when I insulted her. She was always quite shy and reserved, and let me push her around a lot.

"Tia, your hair looks like a literal bird's nest! Wait, no, it looks worse," I laughed at my own joke.

But for once, Tia wasn't going to play along.

"Does it now? Well, it's too bad I don't care for your opinion," she said quietly. I stared at her in shock. To think she would actually talk back to me! No one had ever done that.

"Tia, you take that back--" I started to say angrily, before she cut me off.

"*Listen* to me! I am so sick of you saying what you please! I'm not doing this anymore! You made us so insecure about ourselves! You make us believe in a lie! You're a liar! You've become a - a - a bully!" Tia screamed hysterically.

"That's the best you can come up with? *Bully*?" I chuckled slightly.

"That word carries more weight than you think." Tia walked off calmly, quite a change from when she was screeching like a deranged monkey.

I started to think about that. Obviously, I was a bully. But that was *just* a word. Why did I care? But maybe it was because it was the first time I realized I had become so cold.

I guess Haley was the start of my bullying career, and Tia made it official. I even got a new name from the other kids at school. *A - lie -ssa*. Creative, huh? Apparently, it was made when Tia stood up to me and told me that I was a liar.

I've only ever read books from the point of the bullied--where the "victim" stands up to the bully and they live happily ever after. Never, not once, was it about the *bully's* struggles, what happens to the bully. What would happen to me?

I didn't stop bullying people. In fact, after Tia, I began to bully more, and started to enjoy it. My insults could make people cry in the first second. Nothing anyone did would stop me. My parents didn't even care when they got reports sent home. I was bitter, but happy that I could keep on bullying; it was something that came naturally, like a talent.

Maybe this was supposed to end with me apologizing and everyone forgiving me dancing in a circle with flowers strewn everywhere. But it didn't. I kept bullying people, people kept relying on each other to help them, and I was all alone.

Of course, I brought this all upon myself. But while it was my fault, I couldn't help it. It was a instinct to hurt people, something natural to make people feel pain.

Are bullies born, or made? Because in my case, I was never hurt to the point that I felt the need to hurt others. It was built in me - from the day I was born - and will always be there.

Gone

I don't want it to happen this time. It can't. Not when I finally earned a respectable position in my school. Not when my mom told me last month that it wouldn't happen again.

It's moving day. Every month, our family moves. I used to ask my parents about it, but they would always have an answer that didn't make sense like "It's for your own good," or "It's for everyone's well being", so I stopped asking all together.

"Paige!" My mom calls from downstairs.

"Coming!" I shout back. I stare at my empty bedroom that I will probably never see again. I look at every detail of it. The scratched hardwood floors, the chipped windowsill. But then, I notice something I haven't seen before. In the corner, there's something round and slimy that very much resembles an eye.

I look at it closer and realize it is an eye. It has a shocking green iris and it's swerving around to match my every move.

"Paige!" Her voice is more frantic now. I don't reply. It is a crazy idea, but I feel my mom knows something about it. She seems so rushed, and she was always so secretive.

I am not someone who easily gets disgusted, but the eyeball is definitely a perfect example of an exception of that. It keeps staring at me, and I find myself not being able to look away. I hear pounding footsteps on the stairs. I blink and am pulled away from reality.

I am in the same room, which I can tell because the peeling wallpaper from ages ago has the same pattern. But now I notice that the wallpaper looks brighter, and isn't peeling at all. I don't hear my mom's voice anymore. Instead, I hear kids playing outside, and people are downstairs in the kitchen.

People always say that I have a wild imagination, but it's kind of hard to imagine everything that just happened. I know that it's all real, but I can't understand why. Suddenly, I hear a knock on my door, and the door opens.

"Hello, I'm Kandy," a girl says. I look at her, and realize she has the same green eyes as the eyeball in my room, but she seems to be around nine years old.

"Where am I?" I ask her.

"You," she tells me, "are at the House of Happiness."

"I'm at the what?" I say, confused.

"Well," she says, "Her official name is Wendy, but nobody calls her that."

"Anyways, would you like a brochure?"

She offers me a bright green brochure that talks about how the House of Happiness is the best place for Wilds. "Wilds are people like you," she tells me, "who can communicate with animals."

"Umm, you must have gotten the wrong person, because I can't exactly speak to animals."

"Trust me," she says, "The House of Happiness has been changing to look like every house you moved to for the past twelve years." I study her again, thinking she must be older, but she still looks about nine years.

"And you only get your powers once you turn thirteen."

"But my birthday is tomorrow," I tell her.

"I know," she says, "and I will let Ms. Wild herself explain."

I allow myself to be led away by her, wondering what I got myself into.

TO BE CONTINUED

Lost

I woke up, my body lying on the cold, damp, ground beside a sparkling stream. My head was throbbing badly, and soon, my heart caught up with it. I tried to lift myself but heavy hearted, I plopped back down. Slowly, a name began to drift into my mind. A...Aza...Azalia? I murmured the name to myself, cherishing every syllable. Something hot erupted in my stomach, and for the first time in a long time, I smiled. Azalia. That was me. The fact that I now knew my name gave me the strength to heave myself off the ground. I took in my new surroundings—rolling green hills and a crystal-like stream that was gushing cold water in small ripples. Looking even higher, I could see ginormous, snowy, mountains that seemed to touch the cloudless blue sky. I stared down at the water, at my reflection, the image contorted with white foam. Sea colored, blue-green eyes. Matted, dirty, long brown hair that ended in golden-tinted curlicues. Skin as pale as skim-milk that looked like it could shatter into pieces the moment something touched it. But inside, I knew that I wasn't as delicate as I looked. As I continued to focus my gaze on my reflection, I saw something gleaming on my throat. I reached out a fragile hand to it. As I did, it accidentally fell out, into my palm. The necklace had a circular pendant with intricate designs of squares, diamonds, and triangles as a border. In the center, there was a mysterious looking turquoise substance that seemed not to glow, but to radiate light and warmth. I immediately felt a special connection to the pendant. Who was I?, Why was I here?, Where was I?

A good 100 miles away, a young girl around the same age as Azalia was going through the same kind of confusion-except under completely different circumstances....

I awoke to find myself suspended in some sort of giant bubble- more like a dome, actually, surrounded by sea-green...Huh? What was I in? More importantly, where was I? Maybe it was some sort of device that gave me oxygen underwater. Wait... UNDERWATER??? Okay, now I was really, really confused. I took a deep breath and decided to observe my surroundings. I had never seen this sort of terrain in...where did I come from??? I racked my brains....Siberia? No, that wasn't right... Switzerland? I said the word, the familiar syllables rolling off my tongue easily. As soon I had had uttered it, I felt snippets of my life come back. A rush of memories came flooding into my mind. Fertile green hills. Snow capped mountains. Icy white streams with delicate bridges crossing over. I stood in shock, tears forming in my eyes, and my knees buckling. What if I would never go back? My heart ached and I wept. Then I stood up and wiped away my tears, a newfound courage blossoming up inside me. I would get back to Switzerland, no matter what it took. I attempted to ground myself by wildly kicking my legs. It worked. I slowly floated downwards, breathing hard. That was when I realized how tired I was. But something caught my eye. I gathered up the strength to bubble-walk towards it. More memories flooded through my mind I bent down and saw that it was a big shard of mirror. Inside I saw a girl with big, brown, eyes and short, floating blond hair that was unbelievably straight. She had light, peach-colored skin. With a start, I realized that the girl was me. A name slipped into my mind-L Lola?... no, that didn't seem correct... Lara. . That was my name. My heart silently rejoiced. I knew who I was! I looked around, at my new surroundings. I sucked in my breath as I took in the beautiful, glistening environment around me. A shining, golden palace with a teardrop-shaped top. Complex labyrinths were surrounding the castle. There were artistically cut

emerald-green bushes in many shapes. Where was I? I had only heard of a place like this in a book. But it couldn't be—could it? It would make sense... wouldn't it? Was I in... Atlantis?

Memories

When I jerked awake, all I saw were the shadows around me— and I could feel them on my tongue, tasting of blood, sharp and deadly as steel.

I gasped, throat aching with the intake of air, trying to unclog my throat—to no avail.

Where was I?

Despite the heat and the sweat that stuck my shirt to me, I curled myself into a ball, arms and legs and bones creaking with every little movement, as a sense of fright I did not understand locked clammy hands onto my heart. I focused on the rumble of wheels on gravel and sand outside and watched the shadows, trying to breath away the fear and calm my heart, eyes tracing their slow dance across the wooden walls— the wooden walls of a prison wagon.

Ever so slowly, against my will, images began crashing over me, one after another, like the waves of an ocean— a now faraway ocean, I told myself—, the saltwater tasting like the cold, bitter tears sloshing in my head and rolling down my cheeks. Suddenly, the shadows lost their appeal... and my mind turned inwards, to the pictures I wish I could forget... yet also keep.

These were the proof of my failure, of letting down my family and driving us all down that path to inevitable doom. Most of us have already reached it. Perhaps it was all rainbows and butterflies. Or perhaps there would be nothing darkness and pain waiting for me. I would've deserved it.

I wouldn't know. I wasn't there. But I was close. So, so close. So close that if I stood a little more on my tiptoes, I'd see the end of that road, the awaiting void.

I was so close. And so was my brother.

He was so young, so innocent. He hadn't been able to enjoy his journey down that road. And now he's near the end. Just like me.

My brother.

Oh skies. Where is he?

I sprang to my feet, shackles clanking— shackles I've already stopped noticing—, eyes desperately searching. There was the barred window I'd spent hours at, screaming for mercy, screaming out of anger and guilt.

There was the door, mere lines on thick walls. That was where I'd entered in this place. That was also where *they* would enter.

But where was my brother? I'd heard him wailing before... before I'd fallen asleep.

Where was he now? What did they do to him?

My heart dropped into the bottom of my feet and I started banging on the walls as far as my arms could reach, choking on helplessness and tears, trying to find my way out, to find my way to my little brother. I knew he was here. I'd heard him on the other side of the wall.

Nothing. No answer.

Oh skies. No.

"What did you do to him?" I shrieked, grabbing the bars and putting my face to the window, trying to find them, to find answers. "What did you do to him?"

"She's awake again," a cold voice said, sounding slightly irritated. "Go deal with her."

Cold fear froze me.

But the rage that sparked at that voice, that stupid voice belonging to a stupid person, melted the ice and I spun around as the door opened, revealing a flash of farmland before the hulking shape of the Second blocked it out.

He had changed out of his armor into the clothes of merchants— but I knew that beneath all the disguise was still a murderer who would kill me without a second thought.

"What's up with you?" he snarled. "Screaming will not help you with the Commandant."

“What did you do with my brother,” I force out, ignoring him, my tongue dead as I stared into those bleak eyes. It was not a question. It was a command— a command I was in no position to make.

His eyes flashed with exasperation, but he did not say anything else. Instead, he listened to something while spinning a knife in his hand, eyes watching my every movement.

I pressed myself against the farthest wall at the sight of the, watching every rotation of the streak of deadly silver.

“He stopped crying a few hours ago. I don’t know what happened to him, but we can’t stop to check, so we’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

And then he was gone and I was left, once again, with my thoughts.

I’m so sorry, I wanted to tell my brother.

But for what? For not doing what I did faster? For not saving our family that fateful day?

That day.

I was already losing details, but there are some things that would haunt me for the rest of my life— however short that may be. I could still hear the desperation in my father’s voice as he stood in between me and death, fighting until his last breath. I could still remember the lifelessness of my sister in my arms, cold and heavy, still see the red dripping down the blade. I could still remember the pleading in the voice of my mother as she called my name, not as a farewell but as a plea for help. I’d turned my back on her and walked away, sacrificing my freedom in hopes that someone else better than me could have it. Walked away from my mother— my mother who was left behind to clean up the ashes of a family that once was.

But what I couldn’t remember was the warmth of my parents, the laughter of my siblings. I couldn’t remember what my own laughter sounded like.

I’ve lost them.

Two tectonic plates tore apart and an earthquake exploded into life, sending tremor after tremor through me. A huge wave surged up, a wave of ugly, polluted red and leering brown, and crashed, shaking the world. Maybe the prison wagon was shaking. Or maybe *I* was shaking.

I didn’t know.

And I didn’t care.

One, I counted as the wall of water rose and fell again, taking what it wanted and leaving what it didn’t.

Another.

I tried to control my breathing, force everything away, stop these stupid tears that won’t change a thing.

But those thoughts kept coming. If only I’d been a bit braver, offered myself up earlier; my family would still be alive and my baby brother would not be on his way to training to fight in someone else’s wars— wars that did not affect him. If only I hadn’t turned away and left my mother and brother so vulnerable, so tempting. If only I’d decided faster. If only I was nothing special.

If only.

I hate those two words.

Images of the future rose up alongside the those of the past— the horrible, unchangeable past. My youngest brother, covered in blood that was not his own, as cruel and heartless as his mentors.

Perhaps he’d hate me for standing by when they took us. I wouldn’t blame him if he did.

Memories and imagination mingle together to form a storm in my mind.

I wanted it gone. I wanted it all *gone*. I wanted the light that has been taken away so long ago, the sun that would break through the storm clouds.

But I didn’t want to let go of the voices that called to me from the dark clouds, or the faces illuminated by the lightning. No, however malignant that storm was, I welcomed it for the reminder

of the meaning of my life, for the reminder of the promise I made to my family, and for the light from the lightning that holds the crushing, lethal demons of grief at bay.

I mustn't forget my shattering world, mustn't let go of the important pieces, even if there was an unforgiving chasm opening up below me.

For my family, I will rebuild that world and create a better one. For the naïve girl I once was, for the life I had lost, for the lives that were lost, I will rebuild it. Even if it means tearing myself apart in the process.

OVERTURE

This is *Overture Literary Magazine*, a pursuit by Miller Middle School and Lynbrook High School 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.

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.

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