

Short story contest 2021

Pondicherry New Delhi Marseille Rome Milan Varna Hong Kong
Dubai Tokyo Phnom Penh Kuala Lumpur Jakarta Johannesburg

High School

Version non anonymisée

Elwyn Jones (Johannesburg)

L-2021-1

After the Battle

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because of the things I had seen the day before.

The images kept flashing through my mind: the blood and dust, the last pleading look in the eyes of the young man I killed, men screaming as they fell to the ground in agony, and others falling silently with the life gone from their bodies.

When I left my home to go to war, I didn't imagine that I'd see the men I knew get cut down right next to me, or that I'd see men I had once thought of as brave break down and start whimpering in fear, or others who I had once described as good or kind doing some of the most terrible things in the madness of battle. When I was marching alongside my friends and people I had grown up with, I thought of war as a place to gain glory and riches, a chance for fame, to become remembered as a legendary hero. How wrong I was.

Eventually, I couldn't stand it anymore and crawled out of my tent. Without thinking, I slowly made my way to where dawn's first light began to illuminate the now silent field. Now that the battle was over, the adrenalin and excitement had faded, and only the horror remained. I stood, one of the few signs of life in a valley full of death, and looked around. In every direction were the lifeless corpses of those who had once been men, most lying in the same position they had fallen in when their lives had been ripped from their bodies. Some of the men I had known but most were strangers, now decorating the field of Mars like a tattered carpet. The vicious variety of wounds was terrible to see, but the faces were the worst. Forever frozen in their last expression were young faces and old faces, grizzled faces and soft faces, bearded and shaven, brown eyed, blue eyed or green eyed, but all lifeless.

Who had these people left behind? Who had lost a son, husband, brother, father or friend? Who had suddenly had their world irreversibly changed? Each of these men had had hopes and dreams, likes and dislikes, enemies and friends. Who knows what they could have brought the world?

We were told that this had been a victory, but it didn't feel like one. What did I come here for? Why did these men come here? To come and kill men we had never met before, men who were just like us in so many ways, for a cause that we had no real interest in. We had been the disposable tools for the political goals of some noble who had never even been near the fighting.

I turned back to where my living companions were just starting to wake up, and I slowly made my way back to camp, thinking to myself: Maybe the dead were the lucky ones.

Marwa Ghaibouche (Marseille)

L-2021-2

First Day of School

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn, and though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because it was my first day of school. I was a student in a world-famous school, the pride of my family. In the beginning, I was so happy to finally study there, it had always been my dream to join this school, I thought it would be the most amazing experience of my life. But I was wrong...

On my first day, nothing bad happened, well, as a matter of fact nothing good happened either. I first saw the school: it was a huge and impressive castle surrounded by a thick forest, far from everything. This day, I met the most despicable person ever, the principal. He was very tall, muscular, bald, with an evil look.

The first thing he told me was "welcome to hell," in a deep and stressful voice.

I had a bad feeling...

Anyway, as I joined the school during the year, he introduced me to the other students, all wearing the same boring black uniform. When I first saw them, I should have known that I must leave this place, I should have listened to the voice inside me that told me this was a bad idea, I should have understood that their frightened look and their hateful behavior towards me was a warning...

The director then asked one of the students to show me around. Nothing significant, just a regular school, the main building with the classrooms, the lunchroom... But then, he showed me a sinister, damaged and filthy building, away from the others, at the edge of the forest. I asked what this building was, and he told me that it was the dorms. The place I'm going to sleep for the next few years.

The same day, I started class. Everything went great except that every single teacher was very weird, like they had not slept for three years, like they had no soul. When the night came, I discovered my bed, a hideous bed. This night I didn't sleep, I first thought it was because it was a new environment for me, but I quickly realized that something was wrong...

Maybe it was the strange noises that kept repeating throughout the night, as if someone was being strangled in his sleep, or maybe it was the uncomfortable and unexplained feeling of being watched. I couldn't tell.

The following days were pretty similar, always this strange feeling, always this inexplicable fear... However, I noticed something very disturbing: every day, a student disappeared. There was no explanation, no one seemed to mind, they were all acting as if it was normal. However, they always came back three days later.

I had no idea what was going on and I had no friends to talk about it. They were not hostile anymore; they were more like... dead inside.

Soon, I became like them, everything seemed so bland, boring and depressing. The classes became a torture, the never-ending speeches became needles in my ears, the food became tasteless... My life became unbearable. It was this place. This place made me lose my will to live, like it did to the others. I don't know why or how, but something was going on, something strange, something wrong.

Each morning, I woke up early to prepare myself for what was to come and each morning, my life became even more of a nightmare.

This particular morning, I felt like I had been there for years, but it was only the thirteenth morning. I realized that I had no memory of my life before school, and this since the first day of school. In only thirteen days, all of this happened. I couldn't bear it anymore. I couldn't live anymore. I had to end it all at any rate.

This day, in class, I had the impression that everyone knew it, everyone was staring at me, I think some even said goodbye...

When the sun went down, I acted like I was going to sleep, like every night, like nothing will ever happen.

I hid a knife under my bed, to do it when I am ready.

But, I couldn't. I couldn't just end my life like this, I gave up trying to kill myself. Thinking of it was a thing, but doing it was too hard.

In the darkest part of the night, I woke up, panicked. My heart was beating so hard, I thought it was going to explode, I was sweating so much. However, when I first opened my eyes, all I saw was red. A bright red. A blood red. What I saw then was horrifying, unbelievable...

Some humanoid monster, with what seemed to be a goat's head and legs was there, right next to me. The sight of my limbs spread out on the grounds was the most unbearable part. He did it. He did what I wasn't able to do. He freed me. I first thought it was a dream, but it was all real.

My heart began to beat more slowly, I relaxed, it was finally over.

It was the most peaceful moment of my life, the warm blood on my body, my mind freed...

I was leaving but at least, I was not suffering anymore, I was happy. It was until he spoke... This voice. The same voice that had welcomed me... I started to think about what he told me first, why students disappeared and reappeared...

Three days later, I woke up. It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn, and though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because it was my first day of school. I was a student in a world-famous school, the pride of my family...

Enya Diwakar (New Delhi)

L-2021-3

Outside, A World of Monsters

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because I turned sixteen today, and was ready to leave Titanium City. All the remaining Children of the world lived here. This was the only place we knew. This was our home.

The world outside Titanium City is crawling with monsters, Mother always said. She never told us what kind of monsters. Probably that's why very few left the walls after they turned sixteen. She wasn't our actual mother, but she was the one who raised us; the Children trusted her. She still remains a mystery to me. But I have more important things to take care of. I can't wait to get out of here. I can't wait to discover what awaits Outside.

At the exit gate stood six armed soldiers. To my surprise, Mother was standing there too, as if she knew I was going to leave today. I pulled the silver tag off my neck and placed it gently in her hands. This was the last time I'll see her, I thought to myself. She smiled at me. She wore her usual indifferent but loving expression, but today, she looked like she was grieving. I looked into her pale eyes one last time before she told me to beware of the monsters. The monsters feed on your humanity. She said. Protect your brain and your heart. Those are the monsters' favourite parts. Keep that in mind. She smiled, which was rare. I wish you luck. I said my final goodbye and walked out. The large titanium gate slammed shut behind me with a deafening boom, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the darkness.

I pictured Mother's face and tried to memorise it. But I had already started to forget. The surety I had within the walls of Titanium City had somehow vanished. It was still dark, and a thin milky fog enveloped me and my surroundings. I looked back and the titanium walls stood tall, like an intimidating barrier between the Outside and the comfortable life inside the city. I had to get it together.

Go back inside. Move. You have legs, now put them to use. You made a mistake. You won't be subjected to Mother's rules. You don't know what you're doing. This is a death wish. You brought this upon yourself. My knees gave in and I fell, the gravel digging into my skin like blunt blades. Back in Titanium City, the ground was smooth. Before I knew it, my trousers were soaked in blood. I had no safety here. I had no mother. I had no reassurance from the titanium walls. I had... nothing. I didn't expect it to hurt that much. Tears rolled down my cheeks without warning. The taste of salt, sweat and failure. My vision was clouded by the fog, the tears, the thought of sitting

helplessly in front of a fortified safe haven to which I can never return. This wasn't the time for regret. That's when I heard the shuffling sound. I looked around frantically, but it was no use. The darkness and the fog weren't helping.

Monsters, I thought to myself. Monsters, the ones Mother told us about. This is it. This is how I end. As I braced myself, I felt a seemingly human hand on my shoulder. When I looked up, I saw a man in his late twenties smiling down at me. I couldn't shake away the feeling of being regarded as something to pity. I asked him what he was doing near the walls, and he said that he was looking out for any newcomers he could take under his wing, and save from the monsters. When I asked him what the monsters were like, he said that no one can ever know. They come in all shapes and sizes. The amused look in his eye was unmistakable. Regardless, I felt the warm glow of the rising sun on my cheeks, and my tears were drying. Without the walls covering up the sky, the sunrise looked beautiful. The man told me more about the Outside. The reason why people chose to go outside was because they wanted to see the monsters Mother always told them about. Those who fear the monsters stay in Titanium City. Those driven by curiosity chose to leave and discover the monsters for themselves. I felt much wiser after listening to the man's words. But I stopped right in my tracks after watching the man pull out a knife. He pointed it at me, smiling menacingly. Moments later, I heard a loud bang. The man fell forward, a bullet hole in his back. All around me people were fighting, beating each other up until they were black and blue. That's when I realised it - they were all fighting among themselves to decide who preys on me. The Outside world was a bloodbath.

Red. Red. Red.

My vision blurred, and as I brought my hand to my chest, I noticed a blade. It was right above my heart. I opened my mouth but no sound came out. A few others appeared and grabbed my wrists and my ankles. I tried to wriggle out of their grip, but my body ached, my skin burned, my eyes stung, the smell of blood in the air made me sick. The woman in front of me peeled off my flesh bit by bit with her blade. I let out a guttural shriek, as I writhed and twisted. She smiled in the most monstrous way, and placed my torn flesh on her tongue, and cackled. I grabbed my head, and in my last moments of consciousness, I remembered Mother's words.

Protect your brain and your heart. Those are the monsters' favourite parts.

Humans are the only ones monstrous enough to enjoy the suffering of others.

This was the secret of the Outside.

Marina Nomikos (Varna)

L-2021-4

Justice

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because I had received a particular message at 4:30am, even if it was still more night than morning. The message was sent from my work partner Samuel. We'd been working together since I first started working as a criminal investigator, two years ago. I'd been interested in investigating crimes for quite a long time.

At first it wasn't easy, having to see all these unfortunate people. It still breaks my heart seeing all these grieving families, destroyed by the loss of their loved ones. They remind me of my family, grieving over my beautiful sister. My sister, who suffered from injustice, who we lost at a young age. She was too young. I was too young. Why is it that the good people suffer the most? my fifteen-year-old-self thought Why is life so unfair? I wanted to see the bad guys get arrested and pay for their crimes. Unfortunately, the death of my beloved sister is a mystery to this day. This is the main reason I started studying criminology, I wanted to bring justice.

That morning, Samuel sent me a message to tell me someone was reported missing and that I should immediately go to the station. 'Valeria Castillo; come A.S.A.P'.

It was a man, Gilbert Connor, around 45 years old. No kids. No wife. Both his parents had passed away. I knew him...not personally, of course, but he was a well-known man. Gilbert was the owner of a big company, everywhere in England. He was well-known but not well-liked. People respected him because they feared him. He had a lot of power because he was rich, and American. A lot of people tried to stop him and show the world the man he really is, but failed, and it backfired. Gilbert had been accused of a lot of ugly things but had never been punished for them; he always managed to find a way out.

The police told us he had been missing for 9 days.

"Why are we finding out about this now- at 5 in the morning? It has been 9 days; couldn't it wait until tomorrow?" asked Samuel angrily - he isn't known for being a morning person.

An officer explained that from Mr. Connor's company they had asked the police not to tell anyone. No need to alarm people until he came back, but something changed their minds. That same morning, a young man called the police to tell them his dog had found something in the forest and that it smelled rotten. A body! I thought. The police had already started digging when we arrived at the forest. It was one of those

cold mornings, where I could feel that something wasn't right. Last night's storm had left some damage.

We were in the middle of the forest, and the sun was nowhere to be seen. A cold breeze made me shiver.

After hours of digging and investigating someone from the team screamed. "We found something!" Everyone ran over the hole. Turns out it was only a dead animal, a fox probably. All these hours of hard work for nothing! Everyone was furious, it was a dead end! We went back to the station because there was no need to dig more.

A week passed and we were back where we started. Only one thing changed; we were sure Mr. Connor wasn't coming back. Gilbert Connor's lies started coming to the surface and no one could do anything about them and "Connor Industries" was failing. People were discovering who this filthy man really was and no one was scared of him-He was nowhere to be seen. The case was still open but, in the meantime, we started working on other issues.

"They won't find anything else," I told Samuel one morning.

He looked at me with a surprised look on his face.

"I just know," I replied and continued my research.

That night, it was raining again. I was riding my bike, a white flower in my hand, going in the direction of the forest. I left my black bike in the entrance of this mysterious place. It was around 11 pm. I made sure no one was following me. The moonlight was the only source of light there. I could feel the rain pouring on my face, I pushed my already wet dark brown hair away from my it and put my hood on. I started walking into the dark forest, the only noise was the crackling of the leaves and the rain pouring on me. A storm was approaching. I stopped. In front of me, there was a hole. The same hole we found the fox in. The same hole where we thought Gabriel Connor's body was lying.

I put the white flower on the pile of dirt. Mr. Connor's body was in fact lying there, under the poor fox, but when the police team saw the animal, they never thought there was an actual human body a few meters deeper.

Gilbert Connor murdered my sister and many more, but no one ever listened to me. I brought justice. It wasn't my intention at first, to kill the man. I just wanted to hear him admit all his crimes. When he did it, I was so hurt. My whole life, I'd been wanting to take my revenge and the time had finally come. I was relieved.

Being a crime investigator means paying attention to the details, it requires critical thinking and problem solving as well as written or oral communication skills. You learn about crimes, how to solve them. You start thinking like a criminal. It also shows you how to be a perfect criminal if you think like an investigator. I am both.

Félicie de Maricourt (Jakarta)

L-2021-5

Alizia

WINNER: BEST SHORT STORY 2021

WINNER: BEST WRITTEN 2021

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because the sound of hooves trampling the ground behind me was unrelenting. I had been riding all night. My horse was exhausted. If I did not lose these pursuers now with this veil of darkness masking me, a fight would be inevitable in the light of dawn. A fight I knew I would not survive. Instinctively, I pressed my heels deeper into my horse's flanks, but with little result as we were already galloping full speed. Fear clutched my stomach; I was outnumbered and running out of time. In this obscurity, it was impossible to see much of my surroundings. Sound was my only guide. Looking up to the sky, I knew I had exactly ten minutes before the sun would rise. These were going to be the last ten minutes of my life... I quickly sent a prayer to the gods, or whoever was out there. Thoughts were running wild in my head, but none of them were reassuring. I had no solution. I had no advantages over my enemies, only the darkness that would dissipate soon. All of this would have been for nothing.

The sound of gushing water up ahead brought me out of my thoughts. A river. This was my saving grace.

"Where did she go?" growled one of my pursuers in the distance. "We had her! She can't have gone far!" Their voices echoed away, slowly turning into whispers; murmurs that I could almost forget.

The first rays of sun had breached through the night's mask. Dawn was here, but it was no longer fear I felt. No, it was satisfaction. Finally, I let out a sigh of relief, I was safe. Silhouettes were now visible, and the one of a ghost rider must have taken aback my pursuers. With every second that passed, the gap between us increased as I was carried away by the river, no longer my horse. I had left him behind the moment his hooves had crashed into the water creating a cacophony as he galloped

at full speed. I had used that deafening noise to cover up the sound of my fall when I plunged into the river.

As my mind ran through a series of potential solutions a few moments earlier, I had realised that the only way to escape alive was to leave my horse and let my pursuers continue to follow him. Although I had darkness at the time to conceal me, I had known that the sound of me falling from my mount and hitting the hard ground would have alerted them. In addition, that fall would have injured me, preventing me from hiding further. The other solution wasn't much better as stopping my stallion to slip away quietly would have also signaled them, since they would hear that my horse was no longer advancing. Sound was just as much their ally as it was mine.

The river had been a blessing, not only did it cover up my fall, but it was now gently carrying me away. In addition, if my pursuers came back with hounds, the water would mask all traces of me.

Although it is said that water has memory, I don't know if it recalls the bitter tang of my blood as it rinsed it away or my screams as I gasped for air while my head was locked in place by coarse hands... It might not, but I certainly do. Endless nights of torture had taught me to hold my tongue, but my scars still tell a story I cannot hide. I had become one of them, or so I had thought. The bandits I had grown up with had always pushed me to my limit until I had mastered all the skills to perfection: lying, stealing, killing, torturing, and many more dreadful things. To the point where I had become better than most, and those actions were now my second nature. I had even been appointed second in command to one of the most notorious bandits. The lesser ones had once looked at me with fear in their eyes, but that fear had vanished, turning into eagerness at the thought of my death, ordered by the leader. All of them had chased me throughout the night. The hands that had once fed me, now stabbed me in the back because I finally knew it all. I was too dangerous with this knowledge and better off dead. This truth laid in the palm of my hand, revealed by the object I had stolen.

I had stolen a dragon egg -rare and worth a lot of gold. Every egg is destined for only one master, but many are willing to buy them. Hence the reason I had gotten into this predicament. Only once the master and the egg have come in contact does their bond kindle and the egg hatch. This process takes a few days and starts with the dragon engraving their master's name onto the shell. Few have ever witnessed this, but legend says a soft light glows from those cracks. The mystique behind these creatures lays partly on who their masters are: descendants of the royal family. Dragons are the rulers of the wild, and their masters are the rulers of the empire.

I finally mustered the nerve to glance once more at the stolen egg. The engraved letters shone every time my fingers lingered over them, feeling the bumpy etches. I

knew that they did not lie. These letters that spelled an unfamiliar name... Alizia... A name I had never been called, yet belonged to none other than me.

Alizia... the name of the stolen princess.

Celestien Mezzera (Rome)

L-2021-6

Too Early for Goodbyes

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because I was meeting someone. Not just anyone though. This person was special, special in an indescribable kind of way. She helped me chase away the unbearable sadness surrounding me. She made it possible for me to appreciate and cherish the simple fact of being alive, to be able to breathe, love and live.

Some people said she didn't exist, that she was just the fruit of my wild imagination. Sometimes, I couldn't help but agree with them. Because you see, every time I met up with her, I always ended up fast asleep in some street, in a suspicious looking alley or even inside a garbage container filled with smelly old fish. Don't ask me how I got there, because I have no idea. I couldn't help but wonder if my encounters with my special friend were just a dream.

My mother even forbade me to see her. Like everyone else in our village she had never seen the girl, and she feared that the next time I would end up asleep somewhere, something terrible might happen to me. I didn't allow her fears to get to me though.

I opened my window — my mother had locked me inside — and slipped into the night. Fresh air immediately kissed my overheated cheeks. I breathed it in deeply and went my way. The village looked so peaceful with the stars and the moon shining upon it. In a few hours the streets would be filled with the happy chatter of women, the deep voices of men and the noises coming from setting up the market. Just a few more hours and the streets would be submerged by that horrible smell of fish. Unsurprisingly, the villagers main source of income was fishing, meaning that I would be stuck with this lingering stank of rotten fish until graduation. I must say that eventually I will miss the people here, my family, the wind and seagulls, but most importantly, my dear friend.

When I reached the coast, I took off my shoes and walked into the cool sand. I was thinking about how I met her.

Not so long ago, I lost my grandmother. Well, more than a grandma, she was my best friend. I told her everything and she told me everything. I spent more time with her than with anyone else in my family. We were absolutely inseparable. Until the day she had a heart attack and fell off the stairs. Our village hospital did everything it could, but it wasn't enough. My grandma never hugged me, never talked to me, never smiled at me, never looked at me again. I cried for weeks, locking myself in my room, barely eating. This is when Luna came along.

That afternoon, I was still wrapped up in bed when I heard soft TICK-TICK-TICKs on my window. I looked down and saw a most peculiar looking girl of approximately my age. She wore a large feathered hat with long and heavy robes from the 30's. But instead of repulsion, I immediately felt deeply connected to her. For the first time in weeks I talked...to a complete stranger. Yet it felt like I had known her my entire life. "What's your name?" I asked. "Luna. And yours?". "I'm Selenia". And that's when our friendship began. From then on, she visited me everyday. We would talk about my loss, our lives, precious memories, until I finally dared to leave my room and step out into the open. My family looked at me with their mouths and eyes wide open. My little brother even drooled on the floor. It was quite a disgusting view, if you ask me. I smiled broadly, ignored them and opened the front door. Everyone in the street stopped and stared at me. Without any warning, they all jumped on me into a bone crushing embrace. They threw me into the air, cheering happily and bellowing my name.

The following days, I went out with Luna almost every day, often against my mother's will.

And now I ended up here. On the coast, surrounded by steep and dangerous cliffs. I advanced barefoot on the slippery stones, until I reached a huge rock. It had an opening only my friend and I knew off. This was our secret meeting point. I carefully entered the dark cave, searching for Luna. I wanted to thank her for everything she had done for me and was going to ask her if she could remain by my side always. But when I spotted her in the shadows of the stony walls, my words died on my lips. She had a sad smile on her face. "Selenia. I'm glad you could make it. I need to tell you something." Don't ! I wanted to scream. Don't say it ! My heart was beating frantically in my chest. "It is time for me to leave. You have found joy again and can now go on without me. Keep your light shining for me and for your grandma. Farewell, my dearest Selenia." She turned around and slowly walked away. "Luna!" I screamed, my tongue finally loosening. I reached out for her, but she had vanished into thin air. Nothing more than an illusion. Tears silently ran down my cheeks and I fell fast asleep.

When I woke up, the streets were filled with noisy people and stinky fish. I ran home and locked myself into my room once again. Suddenly, there was a soft knock on the door. "Can I come in?" my mother asked. She entered the room and showed me a

photograph of my grandmother, when she was my age. I stared and stared at the picture. Luna! It was Luna! I smiled to myself. Tears of joy were filling my eyes. Maybe I hadn't imagined it all after all...

Léna Colle-Le Tri (Hong Kong)

L-2021-7

Four White Walls

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because I couldn't stop thinking about you. Yes, you. Somehow it's always you. You haunt me in every possible way, I see you, your memory beside me as if you never left. You are like a shadow following my every step, my every thought. How can you be so far, yet so close ? How can you seem so real, but everytime I try to reach for you, you disappear ? Why am I even talking to you right now ? You are only made of moonlight and the depths of my bleeding heart. At least, that's what the doctor says.

I can't breathe... I'm suffocating in this body that doesn't belong in a world without you in it. Because the reality is, since you left, I am nothing more than an empty shell wandering in the dark, purposeless. How can the pain be so strong, that it numbs everything else ? You took a part of my soul with you that day. So yes, I lay awake at night, staring at the four white walls surrounding me. All the days look the same. All the days are the same. Even the quiet chirping of the small birds in the huge garden of this white prison, make me wish that I could be like them. I would want to fly far far away and never come back. The wind flowing through my hair makes me feel less and less alive, like dust that could fly away and nobody would even notice. Maybe I could join you there ? Somewhere in the clouds ?

Sometimes, I convince myself that if I jump from this window I could slowly leave this place, this world and end up somewhere where the sun would shine in my face, with you lying next to me, smiling. But the bars at my window stop me from jumping and the feeling goes away. I am left curled up in a corner, screaming without anyone hearing me. I shout my pain and despair but all my tears have dried up a long time ago.

Don't look at me like that ! I know what you're thinking. You wouldn't want me to think like that, yes, the doctor says that too. But if you really cared, then why did you leave me ? You said together, always, ever and forever. They took me away, you know ? They took me to a place where I am trapped between these walls whiter and emptier than my soul. Their talking goes right through me, they're telling me I'm crazy, but am I ? Please answer me ! You keep looking at me, you're the only person I see, the only one that listens, the only person I ever trusted and loved. My reflection only shows me a broken being, paler than death itself, with the eyes colder than two stones staring at something only I can see. But you only stand behind me with a sad look. I could swear I could hear you whisper in my ear to come with you. I wish you could be gone, I wish I could blink and you would disappear but I am trapped in these four white walls where my thoughts and memory slowly melt and blend together.

I want this suffering to end. I want me to end. And today, I will join you, somewhere up there.
Autopsy report : Patient X, 27 years old, psychiatric hospital of Sussex, severe dementia, committed suicide on the 26th of March 1948. Her loved one whom she believed lost, arrived just a few days later at the facility, after being captive during the war.

Aedhan Doutriaux (Tokyo)

L-2021-8

Heartache

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because I felt an urge, a strong feeling of necessity, to wake up and to walk around my and my wife's appartement, knowing that this place was now full of a fatal memory, memory that I couldn't share to anyone, that I had to keep to myself, to prevent its darkness from escaping my mind. It was almost morning, and yet I was awake, wandering around my place, craving for something that I couldn't quite comprehend (this was a lie, I knew it). To understand this need, I thought that I would wake up for good by taking a shower, getting rid of the haze that is inherent to the rise from sleep, and that acts as a smoke to one's mind. The silent was ubiquitous, it was still dark after all, and the water pouring from the shower on my body and on the bath broke this tranquility, as it broke the mist that clouded my thoughts and made clearer the intents that raised me from my slumber. I understood that it was time. The sky was calling me, and it wasn't the kind of call you could ignore. Fully awake, I got out of the shower, got dressed, and stared that the sky from my window. Its call was getting louder, and I felt that I was getting dragged upwards, towards it. I understood what I had to do. Like an invisible hand, my angel was guiding me. I went out of our appartement and slowly went upstairs on the roof, seeking for the angels that would take me. I could now feel the fresh breeze of morning, and the tickles of the first rays of sunlight on my figure, that made a giant shadow out of me that could've devoured me entirely. I was scared, scared that this dark mass behind me would take my paradise away. My heartbeat started to accelerate, and my breath got faster and faster. I knew I had to make a move fast, or my past, and the shadow, wouldn't let me leave the mortal realm and would forever block my access to my nirvana, forcing on me a long existence of meaningless acts and futile days.

It was time, the only time in fact, the only time where I could reach the sky, so I stretched my hands towards the sky, and started to ascend. What I saw during the next few seconds was beautiful. It was to tell the truth the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I saw my old house, with its garden and blue door, and with the big windows of my room. My parents were there, waving at me, and my dog was running towards me, with a bone in his mouth. I saw the school from my childhood, where I build so many things, and met so many people. They were there as well as a matter of fact, waving at me with a big smile on their face. I could identify each and every one of them, and it made me happy to see that they were all doing well. My university followed, with its huge grey walls and windows, looking like a prison. I took a glance at Mr. Sarmel, the monster as we used to call him. We hated him for the amount of work he gave us, but only now, I realized how much he had done for me, for them, and how much we learned. He prepared us for our adult life, and for that I thank him from all my heart. Then, there was second home, the Septention training camp, and my other family, my teammates, who were getting ready for worlds finals, our dream. They were focused, and

their sight made me smile, I could recall all our efforts, and all the hardships we faced before finally winning the worlds championship in 2017 against T2, and of course, this unexplainable feeling that took control of our body, with in front of us the crowd cheering and singing and crying. And then, there she was, Elise, my other half, my bride, the women with whom I spent my entire life. She was wearing the dress of our wedding, her beauty was breath taking, and her smile made my heart melt. She was standing there, on top of the clouds, her hands reaching for mine. She was the angel, I knew it, and I reached out for her grasp. As my hand touched her, my entire body felt heavy, and darkness overwrote my mind. Everything crumbled. I saw once again my wife, but the sight wasn't quite as pleasant as before. It was dreadful, the essence of horror itself, the purest most absolute form of terror. My wife was there, lying aside of me in the car, but, unlike me, her eyes weren't full of this light that is characteristic of the living. She was dead, blood was flooding from her body, and I was standing there, helpless, not able to move, paralyzed from the end of my feet to the top of my head. I couldn't save her. Just like this, the euphoria transformed into a nightmare, and my soul went from salvation to self-annihilation. It was time, but reality caught me... too late. It wasn't paradise that was awaiting me, but hell, and the only thing that I would get from this leap wasn't faith, it was death. Death, absolute destruction, my existence, erased from the surface of the earth. Then, for one second, I felt the cold ground on my face, and the second after, it was over. No more thoughts, no more sadness, no more regret, nothing. It was the end, I ceased to exist, and my soul vanished. Death wasn't a liberation, it was nothing. On the other end, there was just emptiness, and the last echo of my soul, the heartache.

Blanche Battistella (Dubai)

L-2021-9

Sakina

WINNER: MOST ORIGINAL 2021

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because the muezzin reminded me that it was time for prayers. Even at five o'clock in the morning, the sound of bullets echoed constantly in my head. Voices of women howled in the distance. Children were crying so hard there were no more tears left to shed. My name is Sakina, Sakina Aziz. My parents gave me this name because it means "peace" in Arabic. I find it rather ironic given the circumstances that affect my country. I am said to be a resourceful, helpful and caring seventeen year old girl. It's understandable when you're the eldest of three siblings.

The month of October ends a hot and dry season which gives way to a cool and pleasant one. This is my favorite time of the year. Baghdad seems to come back to life ; its blue shutters open again, the children run through the streets, happy to no longer have to endure 50 degree heat. Women meet in the souk where the smell of spices reigns and buy the most beautiful fabrics made of the finest silks, as well as jewelry that dazzles the eyes. However, this year was different from the others. It's been a month since America declared war on Iraq. My father was delighted with the news. He kept telling me that the Americans were bringing democracy, security and peace with them and would put an end to this dictatorship that had been ruling our country for almost twenty-five years.

On October 12th 2003, as I had finished my prayers, my mother rushed into my room. I understood through her panicked eyes that the situation was serious. A rumor had spread in the city claiming that the American forces had entered Baghdad with the use of prohibited weapons. My mother quickly began to pack up some clothes and family pictures in a large canvas bag. Dumbfounded, I understood that it was time for us to leave. Forgive me, I mean escape; leaving is a choice. I had suspected that, one way or another, this day would arrive. I just did not know it was going to be so sudden. I was overwhelmed with sorrow by the idea of leaving the city where I had grown up. Tears didn't even have time to come to my eyes as I found myself walking down the stairs of our house holding my little sister Jiya and her twin brother Ehsaan by the hands. Their eyes seemed lost, they couldn't understand what

was going on. The thought that they had only known Baghdad for six years broke my heart.

The streets of my neighborhood were empty. The beautiful capital, once an emblem of culture and artistic creativity, has turned into a ghost town. Panic reigned in these deserted streets. The sound of bullets was endless, as if they were talking to each other. No sooner had I set foot in the street that I saw an American tank park in front of my house. A group of soldiers forced their way. I was petrified. It all happened so quickly. It was with utter shock that I discovered that it was my father they were embarking. Why? Why him?! I heard my mom screaming and Ehsaan and Jiya crying behind me. I could not get rid of the image of these foreigners, who had come in the name of democracy, capturing my father with such violence. Unfortunately it was too late. "Sakina hurry up !" cried my mother, "quickly !" Behind me, a truck full of fleeing people was waiting for us. The truck was leaving for Syria, for Tartus, a coastal town in the West where my mother's sister lives. My eyes could not detach themselves from the American tank which was gradually moving towards the horizon. "I will miss you Baba". I burst into tears and quickly got into the truck to join my mother, my brother and my sister.

In the truck no one dared say a word. Some women wept in silence. Children kept on asking where they were going, why were they leaving. Heinous war, I hate you. The pain of not being able to say goodbye to my father haunted me. He, who wanted peace, security and democracy. I hope that, maybe one day, his wishes will be fulfilled. Through the window, I looked at the landscape. It was perhaps the last time I would see my city or maybe the last time I would see my country. If only I had known that, this day, was the day that the battle of Baghdad started.

After three days on the road, we finally arrived in Syria. We were lucky because we were able to avoid all the complications, even if at some moments we had it rough. The most important thing was that we arrived safe and sound. Tartus is different from Baghdad ; it is more peaceful, more serene. The inhabitants do not have the dynamism and madness that was characteristic of Bagdadians. No, they are calmer. It was the first time we saw the sea. Jiya and Ehsaan were starry-eyed and laughed every time they saw a wave. Seeing them laugh filled me with happiness. For a few moments, I did not think of Baghdad, I did not think of those American soldiers taking my father away, I did not think of the sweet heat of the Iraqi Spring nor the smell of spices in the souks. As I watched the sun set towards the horizon, I still had hope. You never know what the future holds.

Pradeepa Arumugam (Pondicherry)

L-2021-10

I Somehow Lived

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because I was so thrilled about my first day as the headmaster of Pathuman Higher secondary school. Thus, I prepared myself and composed an idiomatic speech that would make everyone in the audience want to support the wellbeing of this faculty.

This job has been my dream ever since I transferred to Mathukai higher secondary school when I was 15 , on account of my dad's transfer. That is exactly where I met this wonderful and inspiring woman, Rani Muthulakshmi Ammal, the headmaster of Mathukai higher secondary school when I first joined. She really helped me out at my worst.

Later in the morning, everyone on the premises presented themselves and welcomed me with warmest greetings and admired my enthusiastic briefing. For a moment there, everything was perfectly alright as planned, until I witnessed this one man who captivated my very attention. Becoming agitated and nervous in the heat of a situation, I suddenly was devastated and petrified by the sight of him. I heard my very own heartbeat that made me feel like it was about to explode out of fear. I felt each and every muscle in my body trembling.

Glaring at him, I gradually got lost in my deepest thoughts. Owing to the fact that some incidents, even the small ones, can change one's life forever, thus I intended to question myself about how some people don't feel guilty nor give a thought about their misdeeds that could hurt and unfairly burden others.

Suddenly, that man's heavy and slow footstep was coming towards me. Furthermore, he proudly presented himself hence, all my fears turned into rage and anger. Therefore, I requested him for a brief personnel meeting, outside the room, to address him my concerns.

I had always wondered about this incident...Will I ever be able to face him again? What will I do if that situation ever occurs? I never thought that this day would surprisingly happen on my very important day.

But somehow, this silent and convenient place made me feel secured. I was not surrounded by judgemental people. Thus I managed to gather some courage to force him to face what I had been going through all alone.

“ You taught at Thamarai middle school right? ” ratified Aadhira.

“ Yes ma’am !” he responded her lordly, showing great self esteem. .

Aadhira reapproached him with eyes filled with grief-stricken and inconsolable melancholy and asked : “ History professor Devalingam in 5th standard? You used to drive a black motorbike isn’t it?”

“Certainly ma’am. How do you know ? Who told you ?” replied bewildered Muthulingam.

“I know you, but there is no chance that you would remember me, You probably would have forgotten many girls like me.” alleged Aadhira streakin rage and frustration.

“I...”

Aadhira suddenly Interrupted him and shrieked : “ You have taught very well your students are you aware of that ? During your class hours... After your class....with them sitting on your lap, you inappropriately touch them without their consent, exposing them to things way too early in their lives. Let them struggle with a deeply set experience that cannot be reversed. Without even thinking about how this incident would still influence them, even in their adult life, How they are fighting within themselves over the years to overcome it !” declared her struggles well and aptly with the stored tears which continued to flow and the sobs wracked her body barely allowing a breath to be drawn.

I felt enlightened and relieved after spilling out all my worries to someone other than Muthulakshmi amma. All taking a deep breath, I took a slight look at his face and I was suddenly very furious and outbusting when I saw his eyes. It looked like he was frightened and scared rather than feeling guilty for his bad intentions. The eyes, they never lie, It is like a mirror of the person’s feelings. Besides, what I just felt through his eyes was not guilty but fear. Fear of getting caught, fear of losing his homage and honor, fear of losing his family. In one word, He feared this World. Instantaneously, he fled away. I did not know that It would be our last meeting.

Ottavia Colombo (Milan)

L-2021-11

Eye of the Storm

It was almost morning, the darkest part of the night just before dawn. And though the sun wasn't up yet, I was because... hospitals didn't really fall asleep, did they?

It had been a quiet night. No car accidents, no code reds. No new patients in intensive care. Just the ones already struggling with their lives, their breathing sagged and their eyes slowly blurring, not able to talk, not able to do anything other than barely surviving. It was excruciating.

I had reached the doctor's restroom like a nomad looking for an oasis in the middle of the desert. I had washed my hands with mechanical movements for the fourteenth time only in the last couple of hours, feeling the callouses and the dried skin. And then, I had just paused. My night shift was almost over, I had told myself, grasping the edges of the sink. But this, this pandemic that had become a hurricane, was just getting started.

I looked outside the window, contemplating the city that would be soon awakened by the first sunrays. Milan spread under me like a multitude of sleepy fireflies, blending the marks of what this city had been over the centuries with the numerous skyscrapers now rising up to the sky. Slowly calming my breath under my mask, I thought about all the people that were out there. People struggling to live, to be safe, to have a roof over their heads. Young and old people struggling to pay rent, to accept their solitude or even just to find a moment of peace amid all of this chaos. I had taken care of all of my patients as much as I could but still, sometimes it wasn't enough. Remembering that, no matter how bad it got, there were still people out there that were going to survive was an anchor. In and out of this hospital, there were people that could still be saved. People worth fighting for. People that counted on us, on me, to be there when nobody ever was.

I smiled back at the reflection in the mirror. It depicted a young woman, with dark shadows under her eyes and red signs around her mask but with an iron will that showed anytime she took a scalpel. And even if the world was spinning around me, even if I was breaking down again, even if it was too much to take all the time, I knew I'd keep going. And that, as long as there were people wearing scrubs with the will to save others, I would never be alone.

The dim, yellow light of the restroom flickered. An alarm started ringing on my phone, an eloquent sign of someone in need. I rushed out of the restroom, my white gown flying behind me.

The first sunlights appeared in the sky above, in the clear air of dawn. After all, it was a beautiful day to save lives.