

# FOOTPRINTS

2026 ENGLISH WRITING CONTEST WINNERS



ASSOCIATION  
DES PARENTS  
COLLÈGE JEAN-DE-BRÉBEUF





# Footprints

## English Writing Contest 2026

Dear members of the audience,

It's my pleasure to be up here today to introduce Footprints, the book containing the English Writing Contest's winning entries.

This year's theme was "Speeches", which required the students to move away from more traditional, fictional genres, and to tailor their writing to be more inspirational, demanding, or eulogistic. I can wholeheartedly state that they did so with verve.

It was encouraging to see that many students stove... *sorry... strove* for originality, and, uh, that they aimed for excellence. Their productions were... umm, where was I? The judges had a charring time... I mean, challenging time making their decisions, a testament to our students' effort and creativity.

Towards the end of Footprints, you will find photos of the gala, an evening in which we extolled the winners and... Quiet.

Yes, I said quiet. As in, shut up.

No, no; I'm *not* talking to you.

I'm done with you.

Yes, all of you, too! Go home.

You and I are going to have a little chat.

Sincerely,

*Yikes!* So many people! *Whoa...* Just *chill*.

Why is my heart pounding already? I literally just started speaking. *Focus!* This will go well. *Why shouldn't it?!* Calm... down!

Sure... sure... try to spit more when you say "speeches". Truly, you didn't douse that guy enough in the front row. Don't pay attention to him! Come on! *Fo-cus!!!* Eulogistic. Phew! Proper pronunciation. Level UP! But... was "demanding" the best word? And "*verve*"? Seriously?

Okay, composure reestablished. Wait.

*Oh. My. God.* Did I leave the stove on at home? *Nahhh...* I'm sure I turned it off! But what if I didn't? What if the cat jumps on the hot burner? Of course she'd do it! She's an idiot! Ohhh, for *goodness'* sake; keep it together, man!!! That's it, that's it. A measured delivery.

Bring it home. Somehow, against all odds, you've entertained them... *wait. Extolled?* What are you? A human-dictionary hybrid??? *Quiet?* Did you just say *quiet?*

*Don't* do this.

You're losing them.

Uh, haha, well, I don't think it works that—

This is not going to go over well.

You and I are... oh! Jinx!

*Sincerely,* eh?

Cover art by **RINA LI**

Graphic design by Anaïs Garençon

English Writing Contest gala co-hosts:

**MR. JEREMY COHEN,  
PEIDI ZHAO**

English Writing Contest gala musicians:

**RUIXI HUANG, SUSAN JI, JACOB LI, LENA MIKAMI-POTVIN, YUEYI NI,  
LILLIANA TONG, ALICE ZHANG, WILLIAM LYON ZHANG**



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# Judges

The members of Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf’s English Department — Julie O’Reilly, Melissa White, Jeremy Cohen, Jeremy Fewster, Elissa Ciamarro, Giovanna Casale and Caroline Guistini — would like to thank this year’s judges for their contribution to the success of this project.

## ANNE ALMEY

## ALEXANDER ARY

known to his friends as Zander, taught English at Jean de Brébeuf for 7 years. Aside from this, he is an accomplished song lyricist whose political satire graced CBC Radio shows on over a hundred occasions. He has recently written a musical for children entitled Ragnell, based on Arthurian legend.



## MIKAELA BOBIY

## ADAM BRIGHT

teaches English Literature at Dawson College. He has an MFA in creative writing from Syracuse University, where he studied poetry.

## DAVID COHEN

Known equally for his sardonic wit and boyish charm, David returns to judge the Brebeuf writing contest for a twelfth year. One more year and he’ll be a baker’s judge. NOTE: A baker’s dozen is 13 items, one more than a standard dozen, originating in medieval England when bakers added an extra loaf to orders to avoid harsh penalties for shorting customers under the strict Assize of Bread and Ale law. This practice ensured they met legal weight requirements, and the extra item, the “vantage loaf,” became a symbol of fair measure and customer generosity. But that’s a topic for another day. In the meantime, David completes his twelfth year on the judging panel. He is not yet a vantage loaf. He is... a regular loaf.



## CHANTAL DANSEREAU-CAHILL

Chantal has a double-major in Political Science and International Development Studies, and a Masters’ degree in Immigration and Settlement Studies. She reads 19-thousand books a year — at least — and enjoys skiing, traveling, and picking out typos in menus.

# Judges

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## SIMON DELORME

is a Brébeuf graduate and has been the creative director of the English sec. 4-5 theatre troupe for the last decade. He is also a neuropsychologist and even sleeps sometimes.

## GIUSEPPE DI LONARDO

Giuseppe Di Lonardo is a Brébeuf alumnus and a Concordia University graduate in Creative Writing and English Literature. He has been a judge for the contest for several years and is involved with all things English theatre at Brébeuf - as a director of the high school troupe (Stagestruck Productions) and the CÉGEP troupe (Thespian Theatre). He is currently working on developing digital mediation platforms and strategies for museums.



## PIERRE DROLET

used to teach at Brébeuf's Secondary level, but now teaches English and oversees the Reflections Writing Contest and the Centre d'aide et de perfectionnement en anglais on the college side. Our Writing Contest would not have been possible without his fundamental ideas, exemplary groundwork and continued support.

## LEAH GONZÁLEZ

is originally from Ohio but has landed in the beautiful mountains of Colorado. She has taught ESL for 15 years and is currently teaching an emerging literacy and language class to refugees while also homeschooling two young boys. Leah is working on her third children's book and loves reading, writing, coffee, and chocolate - all of life's essentials.



# Judges

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## ANNE HETHERINGTON

is a former ESL instructor, teacher trainer and program director for an international student exchange organization, experiences which have given her opportunities to meet people from all over the world both here in Quebec and on her extensive travels. Now retired from the education department at Concordia University, she continues to participate in a variety of educational activities and welcomes the opportunity to reconnect with former students and colleagues.

## AMÉLIE JACKSON

has been teaching English on the college side of Brébeuf since 2012. She previously worked with Mr. Cohen in a bookstore when they were both teenagers -- true story! She loves cats, coffee and chocolate.



## KRISTINA KASPARIAN

Kristina Kasparian is a writer, health activist and entrepreneur with a Ph.D. in neurolinguistics from McGill University. Her writing about identity and wellness has been published by a number of magazines, newspapers and literary journals, including Roxane Gay, Condé Nast, Fodor's, Elle, Electric Literature, the Globe & Mail, HuffPost and Newsweek. Kristina also works as a brand consultant, translator, photographer and craft market organizer. When she's not busy creating, you'll find Kristina experimenting with new recipes, shopping from local designers and savoring Italy (often simultaneously).

## MICHÈLE LANGLOIS

After a career in education that spanned over five decades both as a high school teacher and ESL teacher trainer in university, Michèle Langlois is now thoroughly enjoying retirement. Her remaining link to the field of education is her involvement with SPEAQ, the ESL teachers' association. Michèle wishes to thank everyone involved in this endeavour for adding a touch of light and beauty when we are so badly in need of both.



## KRISTINA MAIORINO

A graduate from McGill in Psychology and Italian language, Kristina is an avid reader of novels in English, French and Italian. She is currently working with special needs students in an elementary school and is excited about judging the writing contest for the first time.

# Judges

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## FRÉDÉRIQUE MENARD

is a Brébeuf Alumna (ALC 2017) and holds a Bachelor of Arts in English and History, as well as a Master's Degree in Marketing (most eclectic)! She remains involved at Brébeuf through her participation in the CÉGEP english theatre troupe (Thespian Theatre) as a coach and costume designer.

## STÉPHANIE NOËL

worked as an administrative assistant at Brébeuf from 2012 to 2014. She has won prizes in fiction slams and participates in Nanowrimo every year. She confesses that one of her guilty pleasures is writing fanfiction. Stéphanie is the author of a weekly Japanese language blog and is currently working full-time on fiction writing.



## BRANKA PETROVIC

holds a B.A. in English Literature and Philosophy from McGill University and an M.A. in English Literature and Creative Writing from Concordia University. Her work was long-listed for the 2012 and 2015 CBC Poetry Prize and shortlisted for the 2013 Gwendolyn MacEwen Poetry Competition. In 2016, she won Second Prize at the Great Blue Heron Poetry Contest. She was also long-listed for the Ralph Gustafson Prize for the Best Poem. Her poetry book, *Mechanics of a Gaze*, was published in 2017 with Mansfield Press. It delves into the work of Austrian painter Gustav Klimt and his life companion, Emilie Flöge.

## HANNAH RAHIMI

is an English teacher at Dawson College. She studied creative writing at Purdue University and Concordia University. She likes to write short stories.



## KATHRYN READY

was born and grew up in Ottawa. She now lives in Winnipeg, where she teaches in the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg. She is a big reader and loves lots of different fictional genres, including science fiction and fantasy, and one of her favourite courses to teach is on mad science.

# Judges

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## SANDRA SAOUMAA

Sandra holds a B.ED from McGill University and taught ESL for three years at Brebeuf. After going back to school and working as a sign language interpreter, she has gone back to the world of education. She is currently teaching high school in the Laurentians.

## MICHAELA SALMON

Born and raised in Australia, Michaela Salmon arrived in Montreal in 2012 and has been teaching English on the college side of Brébeuf since 2015. She completed her Masters in Second Language Education at McGill University where she conducted research in sociolinguistics. Most weekend you can find her exploring the trails of the Mont-Royal with her two dogs, as long as the weather agrees (and sometimes even when it doesn't!).



## KATE STERNS

was born in Kingston, Ontario and the city has haunted her novels ever since. She has published two of them (Thinking About Magritte and Down There By the Train) and is currently finishing her third (A Body Meet A Body). In another life, long ago, she authored two radio plays (The Bagel Philosopher, Once in a Blue Moon) for BBC Radio 4. She would like to write radio plays again. Currently, she teaches creative writing--and reading--in the English Department at Concordia University. Her best piece of advice? Writing takes time. Enjoy the process!

# 2026 English Writing contest themes

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## Sec. 1 & 2

850 words max.

- **A Much-Needed Pep-Talk:**  
A post-game speech by a coach after the team failed miserably.
- **A Pet's Lament:**  
A eulogy to commemorate a beloved or despised pet.
- **A Silly Defence!:**  
A defendant in a court trial addresses the judge to get out of a ridiculous charge (for example: eating in public, spilling ice cream on the sidewalk).
- **Euh...My Dog Ate It:**  
On the metro, you've composed the perfect speech explaining why your homework isn't done.
- **A Misunderstood Villain:**  
A villain makes a plea to be considered one of the "good guys/girls."
- **Ah, Shucks...Thanks...I Guess:**  
An acceptance speech for an embarrassing honour.

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## Sec. 3, 4 & 5

850 words max.

- **A Much-Needed Pep-Talk:**  
A post-game speech by a coach after the team failed miserably.
- **A Pet's Lament:**  
A eulogy to commemorate a beloved or despised pet.
- **You Have Only Your Chains to Lose!:**  
The class president attempts to foment a revolution.
- **Euh...My Dog Ate It:**  
On the metro, you've composed the perfect speech explaining why your homework isn't done.
- **What's Wrong with You People?:**  
A motivational speaker addresses a very unmotivated audience.
- **I Guess that Wasn't My Best Idea:**  
Seeking forgiveness with an apologetic speech.

# Winners at a glance

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## Junior A

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1 <sup>st</sup> place	Lin Fiona Li	When Homework Becomes Dog Food
2 <sup>nd</sup> place	Ayleen Feraga	The Worst Pep-Talk Ever!
3 <sup>rd</sup> place	Helen Jinghan Cai	A Useless Excuse

## Junior B

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1 <sup>st</sup> place (tie)	Ali Aliev	Thirteen Steps
1 <sup>st</sup> place (tie)	Yuechen Cao	A Misunderstood Defendant and One Very Guilty Squirrel
2 <sup>nd</sup> place (tie)	Ethan Gong	Unexpected Charge
2 <sup>nd</sup> place (tie)	Adam Hadj-Said	Mastermind Excuse
3 <sup>rd</sup> place	William Xu	A Colourful Incident

## Junior C

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1 <sup>st</sup> place	Aimée Onishi	Poor Judgement, Excellent Outcome
2 <sup>nd</sup> place	Sofia Ivanescu	Let the World Burn
3 <sup>rd</sup> place (tie)	Rebecca Duy Restrepo	The Heart Behind the Glass
3 <sup>rd</sup> place (tie)	Léo Lin	The Quiet Crime of Doing Good
3 <sup>rd</sup> place (tie)	Hussain Nasralla	A Case of Crunch
3 <sup>rd</sup> place (tie)	Ruoxi Zhang	A Mishap or A Mindset?

## Senior A

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1 <sup>st</sup> place	Zhihan Zhang	I'll Love You After I Die
2 <sup>nd</sup> place	Yoan Kouessan	The Insurgency of an Afternoon
3 <sup>rd</sup> place	Xiaoran Li	A Friend the Summer Kept

## Senior B

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1 <sup>st</sup> place	Maia Woolf	Love is a Female Dog
2 <sup>nd</sup> place	Dennis Xue	Profit First, Flavor Later
3 <sup>rd</sup> place	Sophia Jin	We Will Have Change

## Senior C

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1 <sup>st</sup> place (tie)	Emma Zhou	All Hail Tarquin, King of the Plastic Castle
1 <sup>st</sup> place (tie)	Changle Sun	Heard by None
2 <sup>nd</sup> place (tie)	Annabella Ni	Flying by the Seat of My Canvas
2 <sup>nd</sup> place (tie)	Hannah Wang	A Student's Sins
3 <sup>rd</sup> place (tie)	Sophie Deng	Anatomy of a Student in Crisis
3 <sup>rd</sup> place (tie)	George Toliopoulos	Rise from the Ashes

# Winners at a glance

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## Graduate A

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1<sup>st</sup> place Ilyas Mouloudj Airballs and Chaos

## Graduate B

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1<sup>st</sup> place Nicolae Pasat And They Grow Up With It  
2<sup>nd</sup> place Julianna Linte-Howard The Unimaginable Adventure of My Lost Homework  
3<sup>rd</sup> place Muhammad Kelo Every Turn Matters

## Graduate C

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1<sup>st</sup> place Sophie Gong A Commander's Glory  
2<sup>nd</sup> place Peidi Zhao Attention!  
3<sup>rd</sup> place Marco Leonardo Bianucci Just Another Speech in the Class

## Merit Awards

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### Maurice Ranger Award

Yuechen Cao A Misunderstood Defendant and One Very Guilty Squirrel

### Pierre Drolet Award

Hussain Nasralla A Case of Crunch

### Danica Wunder Award

Muhammad Kelo Every Turn Matters

**The Maurice Ranger Award**, in honour of a Jean-de-Brébeuf English teacher whose ideals helped form the way English has been organized and taught at the high school. Being awarded this prize shows that the student is an emerging and creative writer, and is meant to encourage them to continue writing with unique perspective, passion and inspiration.

**The Pierre Drolet Award**, in honour of the beloved English teacher who initiated Jean-de-Brébeuf's English Writing Contest before continuing the tradition at the cegep level, passing the torch to a successor at the high school. The winner of this award has demonstrated a unique brand of creativity and the ability to think outside the box.

**The Danica Wunder Award** is in honour of the Parents' Association's Administrative Assistant, Danica Wunder. She worked meticulously and enthusiastically, hand-in-hand with the Jean-de-Brébeuf English department, to attain new heights for the English Writing Contest and gala, and the award serves to represent her and the Parents' Association's generous collaboration. The winner of this award has not only submitted unflinchingly to the English Writing Contest but has shown general enthusiasm and passion for English and writing throughout their high school career. This is an award whose purpose is to encourage the winner to keep on writing!

## Footprints Cover Art Award

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Rina Li

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# When Homework Becomes Dog Food

On the way to school, on the metro, my friend and I were huddled over my phone watching a clip about how to finish homework fast and efficiently. Suddenly, I realized that my science homework isn't done yet. I told Flora, who was still laughing about the video clip we'd just seen, that I had only two minutes left to finish my homework. She reminded me that only two stops away school. I must find a reason to explain why my homework isn't submitted on time. Last time I forgot my homework, my parents signed a note, and they warned me if I miss one more, I'll lose my phone for a week.

"How about you blame it on your sister? There could be many reasons. You guys fought, and she tore up your papers?" said Flora

"But this seems too cliché. Or maybe I can say that the power went off last night at home, everyone knows that without light you can't do anything!" I said "But it won't work either. The science teacher, Mr. Sean, knows that I have a camping lantern that I brought in class for a research project two weeks ago. He would never trust me."

The metro bell rang and there were only three minutes left. My heart was beating as fast as it could and I felt nervous. We were looking around for inspiration; at my left, a woman had an umbrella sticking out of her bag. Maybe I could say that my work paper dropped into a puddle, but it wouldn't work! It hasn't rained for a couple of days. At my right, a man was eating a messy burrito.

"I could say while doing my homework, my burrito exploded and all my papers were full of ranch sauce?"

"No, it's too dramatic. I think you need to find something more logical..." said Flora.

"I need something that sounds "high-tech" but also it needs to be something impossible to argue with..." said I.

Then I thought of my high-tech dog "Sparky". It's my new robot pet, received as a recent Christmas gift from my parents. They got him because they said a real dog is too much of a commitment. Sparky has brown fur, almond eyes, and looks almost like a real dog. The only difference is that he has a rechargeable battery on his tummy. Also, he needs to "consume" data.

The metro doors opened at my stop, and I sprinted up the stairs, dashed through the school's gate and slid into my seat just as Mr. Sean started collecting the papers.

"XX, where is your human body assignment? I'm picking it up." said Mr. Sean patiently.

"Um... Mr. Sean...my dog...um...he...he ate it..." I stammered.

"But since it's a high-tech dog it doesn't eat, does he?" asked my teacher curiously.

"That's the thing! Sparky's battery was almost dead, but he didn't want his charging cable—he wanted data. He saw the homework papers on my desk, he scanned all the words into his hard drive and chewed them up. Sparky fed himself on my science homework to stay powered up!"

# When Homework Becomes Dog Food

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A hush fell over the classroom. For a heartbeat, it was dead silent. Then I heard stifled giggles coming from every corner of the room. It was clear; nobody was buying it. Mr. Sean scrutinized me for what felt like an eternity, and then he finally said...

“So now your dog is an expert on human body. And you have no paper?”

“Yes.” I said, trying to not laugh.

“This is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard. Then, I’ll give you one more day to finish it and print it out.”

I let out a long, relieved sigh and promised to finish my work and pack my bag before Sparky eats it...

## Jury’s comment

1) This story is an original twist on the typical “dog ate my homework” excuse, with a robot dog that steals all the data from an assignment to maintain its battery life. The author builds tension as the student and a friend frantically inventing a series of increasingly unbelievable excuses before settling on the most unreasonable excuse of all – the robot dog. This was a creative and original story that definitely made me laugh!

2) “When Homework Becomes Dog Food” achieves something startlingly difficult on the printed page: real humor. It does so, impressively, by reappropriating the oldest cliché in the book—“the dog ate my homework”—in a legitimately fresh way. The first great pleasure of this story is witnessing the friends scheme for excuses while the clever device of the metro approaching the station compresses narrative time. By combining the relatable panic of a morning commute with the absurdity of a data-eating robot dog, Li creates a narrative that is both tense and hilarious. Li also manages to make the story swerve into a smart, funny commentary on how we try—and often fail—to use high-tech explanations to cover for low-tech procrastination. Through well-crafted dialogue between the panic-stricken narrator and the teacher, this story wrestles delightfully with the timeless limits of human folly.

# The Worst Pep-Talk Ever!

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We were in the last two minutes of the grand final, even though we had played very badly this season. The opposing fans were cheering so loudly that the glass stadium could burst at any moment. We were very stressed by the whole environment, with everyone wanting us to win this game.

I was running toward the goal when suddenly I tripped on my shoelace and fell to the ground. The opposing players walked toward me and stole the ball from between my legs as if it were an easy thing to do. I was shocked and humiliated.

Throughout the game, we played so miserably that our furious coach was jumping on his strategies sheet. We all felt ashamed, and when we looked at the scoreboard, it showed a loss of 10–0. We were crushed not only by the winning team, but also by our unhappy coach.

In the changing room, the coach was screaming in disappointment. We were scared and terribly ashamed of our terrible performance in such an important game—the chance we had to win the cup—but we all blew it.

All the training and strategies we had learned were wasted. He made us run for one or two hours and forced us to review boring strategies for three hours or more. When we could finally leave, he told us:

“That’s what you get for such a miserable game. Don’t let it happen again, or it will be worse—much worse.”

That was a very short talk... strange that he did not blame us more for our poorly played soccer match.

The next morning, we all received a text telling us to come to training—but there were no matches coming up... or were there?

“I woke up all night to tell you that you guys needed a little pep talk to prevent this situation from ever happening again—NEVER, EVER AGAIN!” said the coach in a very loud voice.

Just to be clear, it was not a “little” pep talk. It was the longest and most boring pep talk in history, explaining to every single one of us what went wrong on the pitch: how our moves were wrong, how our speed was too low, how we lacked synchronization, and how some of us did not play their best lately and the rest of the usual snooze fest.

When he finally finished five precious hours after, most of the team was asleep or half-asleep after all this work. The coach let us go, and we were finally free—for a day at least.

Just before we all ran out of the changing room, he said:

“And remember, DON’T LET THIS EVER HAPPEN AGAIN. OK? AM I CLEAR? N-E-V-E-R H-A-P-P-E-N-I-N-G A-G-A-I-N, OK?!”

“Yes, Coach,” we all said, yawning from tiredness.

And like he said, it never happened again. Never.

# The Worst Pep-Talk Ever!

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The next game was against our rivals—the team that had won the cup—but this time, the scoreboard was flipped around! We all screamed of joy and happiness.

And as we promised, the cup situation never happened again, so...

I guess his pep talk was not so bad, it actually helps, a lot, and we became the best team in the whole league, so we were always win, always.

The END!

## Jury's comment

1) This is the humorous tale that plays on the idea of a phoenix rising from the ashes. Following a very disheartening loss, a soccer team is in desperate need of a pep talk. Their disappointed coach gives an incredibly long and boring pep-talk, and the team is convinced that it was a total waste of their time. However, the twist is that the terrible pep talk worked, and they go on to be the winningest team in the league! I found myself chuckling through this story because the imagery allows the reader to envision the author's descriptions, and really immerse themselves in the narrative.

2) Ayleen Feraga's use of the collective first-person plural ("we") in "The Worst Pep Talk Ever" is an innovative choice that elevates a simple sports narrative into a study of group sentiment. This device cleverly conveys the team's shared burden—shifting from fear to boredom—allowing a group of characters to speak with the nuance of a single, well-rendered voice.

# A Useless Excuse

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It was morning, I was running for my life to catch the subway, and I was panicking, not because of the subway, but because of the unfinished English homework.

I found an empty seat and sat on it. Today was the day when my English teacher, Mr. Stone, destroyer of dreams, as kind as the witch in “Snow white” and a perfect villain for any story, would demand the homework I absolutely hadn’t completed. I didn’t even know where it went. It was very possible that my homework was dying somewhere in my school desk. Anyway, I knew one thing: Mr. Stone accepted no excuses. So that’s why I needed to compose the PERFECT EXCUSE, so he would have nothing to say.

*“Good morning, Mr. Stone. I apologize for not doing my homework, but...”*

Weird. It sounded like I was writing an important email to the Prime Minister.

I tried again.

*“Oh my god! Hi Mr. Stone. Something terrible happened, I...”*

Too suspicious, way too suspicious. I sounded like I had just murdered someone (which I hadn’t).

The subway stopped at a station. A spoiled kid and his rich parents passed beside me to get off, acting like they were royalty. An old woman sitting in front of me was singing very quietly, with the most terrible voice ever. Near me, a man was yelling at someone on his phone. How could these people do this early in the morning? I couldn’t stand it. I thought about reporting them to the police but then I remembered that, sadly, it wasn’t a crime.

I went back to thinking of an excuse, but I was struggling with ideas. I couldn’t find the right words to compose an apology. I tried to concentrate myself, but the loud noises of the subway just kept distracting me. I pulled out my phone and texted my friends for help, but unfortunately nobody replied. I was desperate, I didn’t know what to do. The last place where I wanted to use my useless brain was in the subway, because I had no personal space at all.

The subway stopped at another station. The rusty old doors opened with a loud noise. A boy in a wheelchair entered. I looked at him, my eyes filled with curiosity.

Suddenly, he gave me the most brilliant idea when I almost arrived at the station I needed to get off at. I thought I could tell my teacher that my cousin was seriously injured, so I stayed at the hospital instead of doing my homework, because family comes first. I guess that he could not say anything unless he didn’t have a heart. So...

# A Useless Excuse

---

*“Hi Mr. Stone. I’m sorry to tell you that yesterday, my cousin was seriously injured. He fell down the stairs and broke his leg. Unfortunately, I couldn’t do my homework, because I needed to stay at the hospital with him. I apologize and I promise you that I’ll do it today*

At the next station, I got off feeling proud of myself.

When I arrived in class, Mr. Stone was already here, writing something on the blackboard. I took a deep breath and told him my excuse.

“Well, he said, I hope your cousin is doing better.”

“And the homework? I asked

“I sent an email to everyone yesterday telling you that I changed my mind. So, the homework is for next week. Didn’t you see it?”

I froze, I never check my email. All my efforts to compose the apology had been in vain.

## Jury’s comment

Helen Jinghan Cai’s “An Useless Excuse” functions as a tightly crafted psychological portrait of student panic. We watch the narrator’s wheels turn as they desperately search for a way out of a missing assignment. The story becomes not only a lesson in the crafting of excuses but also a compelling study of desperation—illustrating how anxiety consumes us, shifts our moral framework, and narrows our awareness. By the end, the narrator has been reduced to an over-rehearsed, scripted self—a sharp reminder that while we are busy perfecting our lies, we often miss the simple truths right in front of us.

# Thirteen Steps

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The walk from the bench to the changing room was short. Thirteen steps.

Tonight, it seemed like an eternity. Every step carried the weight of the season. His legs started to ache as they dragged him through the long road of his career. Bitterness tightened in his chest, coiling like a snake winding up a tree. The corridor felt narrower, the walls pressed close, the air was thick with the sharp smell of disappointment. Each stride carried him back to countless hours in the arena: ice polished to perfection before every game, blades cutting the silence across the rink, and drills repeated until muscles burned.

This loss didn't roar. It didn't scream. It began to settle quietly against his chest, leaving him with the echo of every victory that had slipped away. The puck had been so close, so close that he could almost hear the crowd cheering, and then it slipped away. This was the last game of his career. The last buzzer fading into the distance behind him.

Suddenly, the thought hit him like an avalanche. For him it was the end, but for them it was only the beginning: the first pages of their journey written in ice and sweat. He had dreamed of leaving as a winner, celebrated in newspapers and on billboards, but he could not let his vanity steal their hope.

At the door, he stopped. The bitterness did not disappear, it changed. Inside, the room waited. Helmets sat motionless. And there they were: the young eyes, snowflakes sparkling in sunlight, lit from within by young hearts full of fire.

Then he stepped forward, and his voice rose:

"I won't lie to you.

It hurts. It should. It means that you gave it all your strength.

This weight in your chest? That's not a weakness. It's the proof. The proof that you fought with all your heart, the proof that you did not give up hope when destiny whispered no, the proof that you stood up each time after you stumbled."

He paused, as if weighing the air in his lungs, and continued:

"I've chased victories my whole life. I held some in my hands. Others slipped past me, so close that I could feel the wind of their passing. But every loss, every missed chance shaped who I am today. And here's what time teaches: the games you lose don't vanish. One day, when the moment that truly matters arrives, they will rise within you. They will make you stronger than you ever imagined. This is why any loss is not a loss if you learn from it. You only truly lose when you fail to learn."

He breathed in.

"You think winning is the point? Victory may bring it all, but losses shape you in ways winning never can. They bring you growth. They spark transformation. They force you to confront your blind spots and help you redefine yourself.

It is also about who you become along the way. It's being the player, the teammate, the person others can rely on when everything falls apart.

Carry this loss not like a scar. Like a compass. It will show you where to go next and remind you of how far you've come."

# Thirteen Steps

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His voice softened:

“This was my last game. And if this is how it ends for me, standing here, looking at you, then it ends the right way.

The future belongs to you.

You will win games I never did.

You will go places I only dreamed of.

And when the moment asks who you are, you won’t answer with words. You’ll answer with every step you’ve taken, every challenge you’ve faced, and every time you refused to give up.”

He smiled and shouted, “Go Jaguars Go!”

## Jury’s comment

1) Ali has written a gem of a story about a selfless hockey coach who, after his team’s gut-wrenching defeat, finds the courage to transform his personal loss into a win for his young players. Like a true mentor, he finds the words that will elevate their self-worth, help them overcome adversity and become the best person they can be. Thirteen Steps shows that Ali is a master storyteller. In his compelling story he evokes the mood of the room and describes the characters in just a few words and with such emotion that we, as readers, feel the disappointment but also the overwhelming optimism that both the young players and the older coach will always have a “sparkle in their eyes and a heart full of fire”.

2) “Thirteen Steps” reflects the maturity and wisdom of an experienced athlete. Despite not ending his career well on the ice, he indeed ends on a high point in the locker room.

The text is beautifully written! Ali’s use of precise images and crafting of syntax, including tricolons and oppositions, created a specific setting and sense of character in only a few hundred words. The speech is delivered by a true poet. Lastly, the message about the value of learning from mistakes is an important reminder for us all.

# A Misunderstood Defendant and One Very Guilty Squirrel

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Thank you, Your Honour, for allowing me to speak. I shall be brief. My legs shake uncontrollably as if they have a mind of their own. I have never appeared in a courtroom before. The closest I have come to anything remotely legal was a dispute with my sister over the rightful ownership of the last slice of pizza. I therefore ask for your understanding: I am but a simple, perhaps somewhat bewildered, citizen who has inadvertently found herself in what feels like the climax of a very dramatic courtroom scene.

Now, regarding the complaint against me: "dangerously causing chaos in a public library by releasing a squirrel indoors and refusing to remove it." I would like to begin by saying this: I did NOT release the squirrel. I didn't even know the squirrel. We were not friends. We had no prior relationship. Honestly, if anything, I think the squirrel disliked me from the beginning.

Let me explain what happened from my point of view. That morning, I went to Brossard Library to return an overdue book. I will admit, the book was extremely overdue. In fact, I was supposed to return it three weeks earlier, but I forgot it under my bed. When I finally remembered, it was covered in dust and also somehow a sock was stuck to the cover. But that is not the crime I am being accused of today, thankfully .

As I walked toward the library entrance, I saw a squirrel on the sidewalk. This is perfectly normal; we live in a city with as many squirrels as people. This particular squirrel was holding a half-eaten glazed donut, which I personally believe is an important detail. The donut had made the squirrel hyper. You have not truly lived chaos until you've witnessed a donut-powered squirrel discover its life's purpose.

Opening the library door, I didn't expect the squirrel to do what it did next: it ran between my legs, dived inside, and dashed into the building straight, like it was late for some meeting. It all happened so fast that I didn't have time for any reaction at all. I barely processed what had happened before people started screaming.

The first scream came from the front desk librarian, Ms. Tremblay, who is famous for her silence policy, having "Shhh" powers stronger than any human I've ever met. Even she couldn't stay calm when a donut-drunk squirrel rocketed across the carpet, leaped onto the printer, then launched itself onto the nearest bookshelf. Books flew like startled birds, and a quiet librarian's scream echoed like a foghorn in a dream.

Readers dropped their books. Someone fainted. Chaos erupted. And because I was the person standing closest to the door, everyone assumed I brought the squirrel.

I tried to clear my name. I tried explaining, loudly, which upset Ms. Tremblay even more. "I didn't do it!" I shouted. "It just ran in!" But the squirrel kept causing trouble faster than I could defend myself. At one point it grabbed a bookmark in its teeth and waved it around like it had just been crowned King of the Library.

And then came the moment that sealed my fate. A security guard asked me, "Ma'am, is that your squirrel?" I responded with something that wasn't the smartest answer. I said, "Do I look like someone who owns a squirrel?" Apparently, this is not helpful when trying to prove your innocence.

# A Misunderstood Defendant and One Very Guilty Squirrel

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Eventually it managed to make its escape through an open window, leaving in its wake a room full of shocked readers, damaged books, and a librarian who is probably still recovering emotionally. But by then the damage was done: someone had taken a photo of me right as the squirrel ran past my feet, and now I am here, in this courtroom, unfairly accused of "releasing" it.

Your Honour, I'd like to proffer my official defense. Not a silly defense, but a logical one. First - I don't know how to train a squirrel. I can barely train myself to get up on time. Second - if I was going to start chaos, I would not choose a library as my battlefield. I respect libraries. They have chairs that don't squeak and Wi-Fi that actually works. Third - if I had planned the attack, which I obviously didn't, I would have chosen a calmer squirrel. This one was practically radioactive from the donut glaze. Blaming me for a squirrel's actions is like blaming a pancake for being flat.

And finally, most importantly, people should not be blamed for wild animals' independent decisions. Squirrels are independent thinkers, living by their own code; I cannot be responsible for what a tiny creature with a sugar addiction chooses to do.

In conclusion, Your Honour, I humbly request these charges be dropped. I am innocent. If you free me today, I promise I'll never again stand near a library door holding anything that may attract wildlife. I've learned my lesson, even if I don't fully understand why I had to learn it this way. Thank you for your time and consideration.

## Jury's comment

1) The charge was ridiculous but also believable. I loved original words like "donut-powered" and phrases like "a quiet librarian's scream echoed like a foghorn in a dream", "books flew like startled birds", "blaming me for a squirrel's actions is like blaming a pancake for being flat". The story came alive and I could clearly see the chaos happening in the library. I also liked the official defence which was respectful and again believable. Really fun. I was laughing out loud.

2) I WAS THERE. At least, it felt like I was there. Hilarious and wonderfully written. I'd say more but I fear falling victim to Ms. Tremblay's "Shhh" powers.

# Unexpected Charge

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Yesterday, while a ray of sunlight shone across the streets of downtown, I decided to wear my favourite peacoat while parading across the main square. Although the weather was mild, my hands were shivering, as if foretelling that something very bad was going to happen. I did not know why, but the coat made me comfortable in that moment. I noticed a few hushes and whispers here and there behind my back, probably all gushing over my newly bought cotton peacoat. It was an expensive piece, and a rare one at that. I paid no attention and continued my way like nothing happened, though I felt a sense of pride.

A few minutes later, a police officer rushed towards me at rocket speed with a serious expression. He asked me about my clothing choice, claiming it was “unusual for the season”. Extremely offended by his critique of my fabulous peacoat, I argued that body temperature was different for everyone and that I was not harming anybody. At that time, I realised that it might’ve been better if I had spoken a bit more respectfully, because soon after throwing a few jabs at the officer’s own outfit choice, I was fined for “season noncompliance”.

I had paced around my room in anxious worry for five days. I could not fathom why such a great piece of clothing could cause legal problems. After all, I had spent a quarter of my fortune acquiring it from an auction. That was when I had remembered a shadowy figure from the auction that very much resembled the officer from the other day also wanting to buy it. That must be why...

I arrived at the courthouse very early because I love anything that has to do with being early; it meant that I could avoid stress and be better prepared. As I sat down to practice my speech and thought of a few more arguments, another officer approached me and handed me a fine for suspicious punctuality. By this point, I was already furious, my hands tugging at the sleeves of my peacoat. The officer claimed that my extremely early arrival was considered strange behavior. Before the trial had even begun, I was already facing a second charge, simply for arriving early. In the courtroom, the prosecutor announced, “Your Honor, the defendant is charged with inappropriate seasonal clothing. He is also charged with suspicious punctuality.”

I stood up and replied, “Your Honor, I wore a coat because I was cold. I arrived early to make sure I wouldn’t be late and to show respect.”

The judge leaned forward and said, “These actions are very unusual and strange.”

I responded by explaining that none of my actions were illegal and that I wasn’t harming anyone. The room quickly fell silent.

Standing there, I felt embarrassed yet determined. It was unsettling to defend ordinary choices as if they were crimes. Despite my frustration, I kept my composure. Beneath the anxiety, I felt confident that the truth-simple and logical-would eventually be understood. The first officer that charged me for my peacoat was obviously jealous that I had gotten the coat,

# Unexpected Charge

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I had to prove my innocence!

As the tension in the room grew, I argued that clothing was a personal choice and that feeling cold in warm weather did not make someone a threat or a disturbance. I also explained that arriving early showed responsibility, not suspicion. Laws exist to prevent harm, not to punish innocent actions, especially not to frame guiltless citizens out of jealousy. The prosecutor failed to prove that my behavior caused any damage.

After a brief pause, the judge chose to use common sense and dismissed both charges.

When the judge finally struck the gavel, relief washed over me. The stress and confusion in my mind slowly faded, replaced by calm and confidence. As I walked out of the courtroom, I knew that the days of preparation and reflection had been worth it. I realized that standing up for myself matters, even in unfair situations, and that logic and fairness can still prevail.

## **Jury's comment**

This was a close second. The charges were very silly but somehow believable. I could visualize the encounter between the officer and the author although I am not sure what a "peacoat" is (although I don't think it matters). Again the defence was respectful and believable.

# Mastermind Excuse

On a cold, painfully early Monday morning—the kind where even the sun seems too tired to show up—Jack dragged himself onto the school bus. The metal steps clanged under his shoes, echoing his misery, and the air smelled like wet backpacks, old snacks, and mystery crumbs no one dared to identify. Jack didn't care. He slumped into his usual seat, rested his forehead against the cold window, and stared into the gray blur outside. Mondays had never been his thing, but this one felt especially cursed.

A second later, the seat beside him bounced as Sammy dropped down with way too much energy for 7:40 in the morning. In his hands, held carefully like a priceless artifact, was a thick, perfectly stapled assignment.

“Morning,” Sammy said proudly. “Behold... twelve hours of pure suffering.”

Jack frowned. “For what?”

Sammy slowly turned toward him. “The assignment. The big one. The one worth forty percent of our third-semester grade?”

Jack froze. “Forty percent... of this semester?”

“Yes,” Sammy replied.

A long, tragic silence filled the space between them.

Then Jack whispered, “I forgot to do it.”

Sammy's eyes widened in horror. “Dude. No. You can't just walk in empty-handed. You need an excuse. Not a weak one—an elite excuse. Something dramatic. Something emotional.”

Jack groaned and sank lower in his seat. “Okay. Help me.”

And just like that, the brainstorming began.

For the entire bus ride, they went into full movie-writer mode. They ignored the bumps, the yelling seventh graders, and even the Skittles flying across the aisle. They were too busy crafting the most ridiculous, convincing excuse speech ever told in a classroom.

By the time the bus pulled into the school parking lot, they had created *\*the\** speech. Sammy recited it with deep emotion, and Jack memorized it like it was a life-saving speech.

**\*\*The Legendary Excuse Speech\*\***

“Ms. Greenfield, before I give you my assignment, I need to explain what happened last night. It was terrifying. And heroic. And honestly, I'm still recovering emotionally.

I was working on my homework like a responsible student when a brutal winter storm hit. The wind howled like a pack of wolves, the walls shook, and suddenly our heating system made a horrible dying-robot noise and shut down.

# Mastermind Excuse

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Instantly, the house turned freezing. I could see my breath. My little sister was wrapped in five blankets and still shaking. My mom tried to stay calm, but even she looked scared.

We tried everything—hot tea, boiling water bottles, and even standing by the oven—but nothing worked. The house felt like a freezer mixed with Antarctica.

That’s when I realized something.

If I didn’t act, we were doomed.

I searched the house for something to burn, something big enough to save us. And then I saw it: the thickest, most time-consuming object in the entire house.

My assignment.

I grabbed it, walked to the fireplace, and threw it in. The flames burst up instantly. The room filled with warmth. My family gathered around it, thawing. My sister looked at me and said, ‘Jack... you saved us.’

But as the fire burned, I watched every page disappear—my diagrams, my paragraphs, my hard work—sacrificed for the greater good.

So yes, Ms. Greenfield, that’s why I don’t have my assignment.

I didn’t lose it.

I used it to keep my family alive.”

Jack repeated the speech in his head until he felt unstoppable, like the words themselves had given him confidence.

When the bus finally screeched to a stop, Jack stepped off with confidence. Sammy gave him a thumbs-up. Everything was planned.

In class, Ms. Greenfield began collecting assignments, commenting on each one like a dramatic judge.

“Excellent work.”

“Nice diagrams.”

“Jonathan, if that page falls apart again, you’re staying after class.”

“What even are those hieroglyphs, Adam?”

Then she stopped in front of Jack.

“And yours, Jack?”

This was it.

*continued on next page*

# Mastermind Excuse

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Jack stood up, lifted his chin—and his mind went completely blank.

Every word vanished.

Panic took over.

“Euh... my dishwasher ate my cat, Sir Whiskers the Third... who ate my homework... who ate my dog, Bart.”

The room fell silent.

Then Ms. Greenfield burst out laughing, tears rolling down her face. “Jack! That’s hilarious! You should join drama club!”

Jack stood there, half proud and half horrified. “Uh... thanks?”

She wiped her eyes and smiled. “Alright. Now hand in your assignment.”

Jack swallowed. “Yeah... about that... I forgot it at home.”

Her smile disappeared instantly. “After class, you’re coming to my office. Since you enjoy storytelling so much, you’ll be copying pages from the dictionary.”

Jack groaned.

And at that moment, Jack learned a valuable lesson:

Next time, he should probably just do the assignment.

## Jury’s comment

I’d have believed it. The “excuse” was a tale of true heroism. I’ve seen this movie before. Wonderfully descriptive; I was able to picture everything. It’s a good thing you completed it.

# A Colourful Incident

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Writing is a refined art that has enabled us to diffuse knowledge for millennia. Having started with sticks and clay, today's writing has progressed a long way. That's why some fellow commuters were intrigued and shocked to see me write with a dip pen, a sophisticated version of the quill, and an inkwell on the Underground. I prefer dip pens over ballpoints notably for the unrivalled tactile feedback of their metal nibs. Writing with such a pen and an inkwell on a train, however, is precarious. Nevertheless, having half-finished an essay the day prior due to a headache worsened by the chilly November air, I had no alternative. To my utter dismay, as I was rounding off my penultimate sentence, the train suddenly and violently braked to a stop, sending my inkwell whizzing through the tips of my fingers. The surroundings were instantly sprayed with pitch-black ink. A man in formal attire then turned towards me and began pelting me with a continuous flow of accusations and threats. I apologised profusely and offered to help clean up, but he was so ballistic that he didn't take in a word of it.

"I know how to deal with troublemakers like you," said he, clearly in a fuming rage. "I will certainly be filing a claim in court!"

In my opinion, it was pretty overkill for a negligible black stain on his black leather shoes, but he would not be deterred. Everything said, I personally didn't see how the nasty-tempered man would get the case through when it was clearly an accident. This thought cheered me up considerably, and when I arrived at school, this dilemma was entirely driven from my mind. For a while, everything went smoothly; Christmas came and went, and my family set off on a week-long trip abroad. Upon our return, there was a pile of formal-looking letters at the foot of the door confirming my worst suspicions. I was summoned to a hearing in eight days on the grounds of vandalising a train and damaging private property. I therefore spent the remainder of the holidays preparing my defence. On the morning of January 6th, I left for the local County court. Upon entering the elegant Victorian building, I momentarily stopped in my tracks. The unfathomable beauty of the enormous, bright hallway was truly awe-inspiring. Colossal sparkling chandeliers coated with jewels hung from the ceiling, giant marble mezzanines bustling with people jutted in on both sides, and cosy rooms bathed in warm lighting sat behind frosted glass walls. Nevertheless, as I approached courtroom 51, I felt a surge of dread. I entered my potential grave, and as soon as I sat down facing my opponent, the judge began to speak.

"You are here for a hearing in a Small Claims Court," he stated in a clear, authoritative tone. "I will be judging this case today. The accusations against the defendant are that he intentionally threw an inkwell filled with ink at the claimant, causing public and private property damage, namely the train car and the clothes of the claimant. The demands of the claimant are for a total of £220, being the value of the ruined shoes. Let us now hear the defence."

"Your honour," said I very confidently. "First, contrary to the claim, the incident was unintentional, since it was caused by the sudden and unpredictable jolt of the train. Furthermore, I was writing while the whole event unfolded, as I'm sure any witness would confirm. If I was, my concentration would have been on my writing, not the ink. Consequently, I didn't throw the inkwell; the sudden jerk made it slip through my unprepared hand. As for negligence, I took all the necessary precautions that can be reasonably expected. I kept the inkwell firmly in my hand, and I kept an eye on it throughout the trip. The sudden movement was abrupt, catching me off guard. Overall, it would be unreasonable to expect any normal person to take more precautions than I had. If we are to agree that this event was neither due to an intentional action nor to negligence..."

*continued on next page*

# A Colourful Incident

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No one interrupted, so I continued,

“I would then question whether this whole trial was necessary. In fact, once I spilled the ink and realised what had happened, I offered to help clean everything up and discuss the matter. However, I was ignored, the claimant remaining uncooperative and immediately resorting to threats.”

A ringing silence filled the room following my pronouncement. The opposition seemed too stunned to bring up any retort, his face as pale as a ghost.

“Well, unless anyone has something else to add, I think that what our defendant had to say is perfectly valid,” muttered the judge finally, after a moment that felt like an eternity. He continued “The defendant is cleared of all charges. This session is now over, good-day to you all.”

Finally, the realisation of what had happened started to sink in. I was free and cleared! Delighted, I ran out of the room and out of the hall, determined to leave as soon as physically possible.

## Jury’s comment

1) Keep a firm grasp on your inkwell. It’s what I always say. An enjoyable read. Not a particularly believable scenario for Montreal; it was resolved far too quickly! But for London where the story is set... sure? I was able to easily picture myself sitting in the gallery of the courtroom.

2) The exposition of “A Colourful Incident” reveals a student using a dip pen on a subway car with predictable results. The rest of the story, however, is anything but predictable! William takes readers on a funny tale of how one can use reasoning skills to get out of a bit of trouble.

The language is elevated and precise, which complements the formal courtroom setting of the convincing defense speech. Well done!

## Poor Judgement, Excellent Outcome

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Hello ladies and gentlemen and all brave souls who decided to attend the wedding of a former villain, and an actual heroine. Your courage has been noted. Also hello to people who just came here for the cake. Your life insurance policies were wise.

Standing here is strange. Not because of the tuxedo or the vows or the overwhelming presence of hope. It's strange because for a long time, I didn't believe moments like this were meant for people like me. I believed in outcomes, not promises. I believed trust was a weakness masquerading as a virtue.

Had you told me years ago that I would be standing here, calling myself a husband, I would have laughed and maybe stolen your wallet just for fun. Love was something I didn't believe in, and trust and hope was something I thought dangerous. And yet, here I am, because I met her, and suddenly my internal operating system started updating without my permission.

The woman I'm marrying today didn't arrive in my life to save me. She didn't fix me. She didn't rewrite my past or pretend it wasn't messy, loud, and occasionally illegal. She did something much harder. She saw me clearly and chose not to reduce me to my worst choices.

That kind of clarity is terrifying. And rare.

She expects better, consistently. Without speeches. Without threats. She lives her values when it's inconvenient, when it costs her, when no one is applauding. Loving her means honesty and occasionally admitting that you're terrible at vacuuming.

When we first met, there was no spark you'd write poems about. There was tension, suspicion, and an understanding that we stood on opposite sides of the world. She saw me as I was then—guarded, angry, convinced that survival mattered more than kindness. But I saw her as my distractingly beautiful nemesis who had the right values and was confident, confident she could save the world, no matter what.

We met at a crime scene. Property damage. Broken rules. A situation that, for legal reasons, I will describe as preventable. I was the reason it escalated. I made a choice that seemed clever at the time and immediately seemed like a catastrophe starring me as the lead. I pushed too far and assumed control where there wasn't any. Loud chaos followed.

She was there doing her job. Moving through the scene when everyone else reacted. I was there trying to contain the mess I had caused without admitting it was mine. She noticed me at once. Not because I stood out, but because guilt has posture, and I was standing in it. She asked me why I was there. I gave her an answer that sounded reasonable and meant nothing. She didn't argue. She didn't accuse me. She kept watching the situation instead of me.

Then everything tipped.

What could have stayed manageable became dangerous. People froze. Voices rose. And while I stood there calculating how to minimize the fallout for myself, she moved. She redirected people away from the risk. She spotted the real danger before anyone else did and acted without hesitation. She made the call that stopped the damage from becoming something far worse.

*continued on next page*

# Poor Judgement, Excellent Outcome

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She saved the day. Calmly. Efficiently. No speeches. No credit taken.

I watched her do it, standing there useless, and something in me cracked. Not admiration. Respect. The kind that makes you uncomfortable because it demands change.

After that, we kept crossing paths. Other scenes. Other near-disasters. Warehouses, alleys, and offices emptied too fast. And every time, she was the steady presence when things threatened to unravel. She asked the right questions. She protected people who would never know her name.

Sometimes we spoke in crowded rooms where our words had to behave. Sometimes outside, under open sky, where honesty felt heavier. She stayed consistent. And consistency is hard to argue with.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped calculating exits. I started wanting to be honest, not because I had to, but because I wanted to be worthy of the way she showed up in the world. She didn't dismantle my life all at once. She stood in it long enough that I had to see it clearly, with all its shortcuts and compromises. And once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it.

To my wife: you don't just save the day. You save people. You believed I could do better and refused to accept anything less.

I promise to keep choosing honesty. To keep choosing you. To keep doing the work, even when it's hard, boring, or inconvenient. I promise fewer secrets, fewer schemes, and permanent retirement from causing situations that require you to save the day.

To everyone here, thank you for witnessing this unlikely, deeply earned moment. I caused the chaos, she saved the day, and somehow, I still get to keep the ring—life is weirdly fair like that.

I choose her today, and tomorrow, and every version of the future that finally feels worth living. Standing right by her.

Thank you.

## Jury's comment

1) The outcome of this story was indeed excellent! A very witty speech is being given by a (reformed) villain on the occasion of his wedding to a heroine. Not only is the story very funny, but in a very short span of time we get the redemption of a villain and a very sweet end to an unlikely love story. Marvel-lous!

2) Aimée's story presents the popular enemies-to-lovers dynamic from a different angle, that is, starting from the ending, which made me want to read the characters' story in its entirety. It also has the potential to mark the beginning of their adventures, opening the door to a variety of genres. The beautiful prose is filled with wit and charm (we can tell this villain still has the instincts of his trade).

# Let the World Burn

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“My name is Severin Ashborne.  
Say it.  
Say it because it belongs to you as much as you belong to me.”

He lifts his head. Pain burns through him, but it doesn't slow him down. Pain has never mattered. His eyes fix on Lyra Dawnveil. She stands there in the light, held by Aurellion like something fragile, like something that needs protection. Severin almost laughs.

She never needed protection from the world.  
She needed protection from choice.

“You see this?” Severin says, spreading his arms to the ruins.  
“This isn't destruction.  
This is proof.”

His gaze never leaves her.

“This is what devotion looks like when it's taken seriously.”

I believed in people once. I believed in their rules, their morals, their fake kindness. I believed the world worked if you behaved. Then you looked at me—and everything snapped into place.

Humanity didn't matter anymore.  
Only you did.

“You were perfect,” he says, voice steady, certain. “Not because you were kind. Because you were mine. You were the center of everything worth keeping.”

Flames creep across the ground.

“I broke cities that stood between us. I erased armies that thought they had a claim on you. I didn't hesitate. I didn't doubt. That's what real love does—it chooses.”

His lips curl.

“I never asked what you wanted. Want is small. Want changes. I knew what you needed. I knew what was best.”

His eyes sharpen.

“You smiled while I burned for you. You stood clean while I carried the consequences. Every scream, every name they cursed—I took it. Fear kept them away. Fear kept you where you belonged.”

He steps forward. The ground cracks.

“And then you tried to leave.”

The words come out flat. Final.

*continued on next page*

# Let the World Burn

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“You put on their colors. You repeated their lies. You called me wrong.” His laugh is thin. “As if you could rewrite what I made. As if you could step out of something built around your existence.”

His voice hardens.

“You didn’t walk away from me. You stole something that was already paid for.”

He tilts his head, studying her.

“Do you know what it costs to shape the world around one person? To erase everything else? I stripped myself bare for you. I became what you needed, whether you understood it or not.”

His breath slows.

“And you thought you could choose differently.”

Disgust flickers across his face.

“You didn’t become heroic. You became ungrateful. You chose comfort over truth. Applause over ownership. And now they stand with you, pretending they’re better than me, as if they didn’t cheer when my fire burned their enemies.”

Blood drips from his mouth. He ignores it.

“Humanity is a tool. A story people tell to excuse their weakness. I used it once. I don’t need it anymore.”

He stumbles, then straightens.

“Look at me,” he commands.

“Look at what you made necessary.”

“This is your justice. This is your freedom when it refuses to obey. And you expect me to stop? To apologize? To beg forgiveness from people who would erase me the moment I stopped being useful?”

His voice rises.

“I gave everything. My name. My soul. My future. I didn’t do it for praise. I did it for you.” His eyes burn. “And you think that means nothing because you changed your mind?”

He laughs, sharp and broken.

“Do you know how insulting that is? To believe devotion is optional?”

His tone drops, cold and absolute.

“If I can’t have you—if the thing I built reality around tries to escape—then reality doesn’t get to stay.”

# Let the World Burn

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Silence stretches, choking.

“You think this is about love?”

“No.”

“This is about ownership. Purpose. Correction.”

His armor splits as fire pours through, violent and alive.

“So listen carefully. This isn’t a threat. It’s a rule. If I don’t get to have you, then no one does. Not him. Not them. Not the future you think you’re entitled to.”

The flames rise higher.

“I will burn this world down to its bones until there’s nothing left that can take you from me.”

His voice drops to a whisper that terrifies more than shouting.

“They made me capable of this.

And you gave me a reason.”

He spreads his arms. Blood falls. Fire answers.

“I am done pretending restraint is virtue. I am done kneeling for lies that tell me I should let go of what I earned.”

His eyes lock on Lyra one last time.

“You were never supposed to leave.”

The fire explodes outward.

“If I can’t have you,” he says calmly,

“then no one will.”

Flames swallow the sky.

***“Let the world burn.”***

Those were the last words humanity ever heard.

## Jury’s comment

1) Sofia's story has a strong opening line that immediately drew me in and feels reminiscent of the romanfantasy novels that are popular these days. Her writing is vivid and visual, making the scenes easy to imagine. I was slightly confused about one of the characters at the beginning (mentioned once, then never again), but overall, the story is well written and engaging. The ending is especially intriguing, almost like the final pages of a fantasy book, leaving me wondering how the characters arrived at this moment and hoping that someone (or something) will come and rescue humanity.

2) “Let the world burn” is a strong & confident final act monologue, drip-fed with a compelling voice and rhythm that makes you yearn for more context & clues without dissipating into clichéd vagueness.

# The Heart Behind the Glass

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Every day I woke up, she was there.

Trying to peek into my room, the young house sparrow lightly tapped the window with her gentle, minuscule charcoal beak. She would stay near me for hours, staring at me or cuddling my windowsill. Her muted brown feathers blended into the city's dull colors, yet at my window she became the brightest presence in the world. Even though I never let her come into my room, I was attached to my little Pip, as I called her, like a mother who loves her child.

While everyone rushed past outside, she paused at my window and reminded me to breathe, to stay quiet, to pay attention to the little things that made life great. Like her.

One day, I think she sensed I was feeling down; she spread her frail cinnamon and walnut-coloured wings, pressing them against the window as if she knew I needed a hug. I was awestruck; out of all the people I knew – family, friends and everyone else – none of them understood me. But Pip, who had known me for such a fleeting time, captured me so well.

That was the day I finally decided to open my window, because I noticed she was always there, as if she were waiting for something – could it be comfort? The only thing I knew was that she stayed with me on weekends, before and after I went to school, but the whole time Pip seemed enervated, doleful, and lonely.

I then turned the operating handle and, careful not to hurt her, gently cradled her fragile body in my hands, where she immediately fell asleep. The only thing I could focus on was my little sparrow's beauty. She had sand-colored facial markings all around her head, adorning her warm gold underside and wings; her feathers had almost every tone of brown and grey I could think of. What tied it all together were her shell-pink legs and feet, which complemented her dark brown tail to perfection.

When she woke up, I brought her outside and made her a little nest in a tree near my room, where we could see each other. I placed a bird house right next to my windowsill for her to visit and stare at me as much as she wanted.

Little did I know that she wouldn't be able to enjoy it as long as I had hoped.

The next morning, it was raining. It was humid in Montreal, like never before. My favorite part of my day was checking on Pip. This allowed me to start my day calmly, which I truly needed. That was another thing the creature I considered my pet made me understand.

When I looked out my window, I found only a fragile knot of feathers. She had lost a handful of them. I saw her eyes were shut. Her right leg was also unusually bent.

I was terrified, staring at her in complete disbelief.

She was right there in front of me, completely still. But I didn't want to admit that she had left me. I lay on my bed, recalling all those times she had been there for me, encouraging me to keep going. At the beginning, I thought her subtle knocks were foolish, but I quickly came to understand that they were the echo of a thought trying to form words.

# The Heart Behind the Glass

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I realized I had to honor Pip's life properly. I chose a small, square box the same soft ivory color as the handkerchief I wrapped Pip in, its sides adorned with painted flowers, and I laid my beloved pet inside as carefully as one might bury a secret.

I made my way down the stairs and stepped into the backyard, where I chose a quiet corner beneath a hydrangea bush, close enough that I could always see its blooms from the house. Kneeling in the damp earth, I lowered the little coffin into its resting place, then covered it with soil, each handful a reluctant farewell.

By the time I finished the burial, there was tons of soil stuck under my nails. I sat there for a while, my knees in the sod, expecting some reply, a chirp, a hum, anything. I whispered words that felt like a prayer, even if it wasn't one.

I rose slowly to leave, but a hydrangea brushed my wrist; from that precise second on, the moment felt so... empty. I finally realized what was happening. I lost Pip, the light of my life, the sunrise of my days. Forever.

At first, she was only a bird on the other side of the glass. When she tapped her beak against the windowpane, it felt as if she were asking me what kind of human I chose to be today. Pip, my treasured house sparrow, belonged to no rare species; but perhaps that was why she did (and still does) matter: she made me realize that the details of everyday life are worth noticing. That the little things do matter; that they somehow make a difference.

The End

## Jury's comment

This is a tender, beautifully rendered story about connection, friendship, living in the present, and grief. From its opening line, "Every day I woke up, she was there," the reader is immediately drawn in, compelled by a quiet mystery. The author demonstrates a remarkable gift for scene-setting and character description, using poetic language to bring the sparrow to life: "her gentle, minuscule charcoal beak," "her muted brown feathers blended into the city's dull colours," and later, "her frail cinnamon and walnut-coloured wings." These descriptions are striking, grounding the story in sensory detail.

The friendship that develops between Pip and the narrator is deeply moving: "while everyone rushed past outside, she paused at my window and reminded me to breathe, to stay quiet, to pay attention to the little things that made life great." This line beautifully captures the story's central message about mindfulness and presence.

When Pip passes away, the prose remains vivid, allowing grief to emerge organically through action: "By the time I finished the burial, there was tons of soil stuck under my nails." Grief is portrayed with quiet power in simple, human moments: the narrator searching for "a chirp, a hum, anything," the hydrangea brushing against their wrist, the soft ritual of prayer. These understated details make the loss feel deeply real. The author shows extraordinary promise as a writer, with a strong command of imagery, tone, and emotional resonance. This is a moving, accomplished piece. Congratulations on such a lovely story. Keep going!

# The Quiet Crime of Doing Good

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Who is the villain? Is it the one who breaks the rules, or the one who refuses to understand? We have always known them from History, our favourite shows and movies are full of them, but what makes a villain who they really are? What if they're just misunderstood?

“Dear Generals, or, as you may call yourselves, the good guys, you call me a villain, you pronounce my name with such disgust and fear as if it were a curse, but you never stopped yourselves and asked: why? What did I really commit to receive this treatment? I was pushed to the edge, labelled with a tag I never asked for, a beacon which, to this day, I still ignore its origins, and suffered through countless judgement, pain and mockery, that all came from individuals blinded by your fame and power.

I was once like you, at least, I tried to be. I had dreams and hopes. Ever since I was hired at CuraGen, a new flame lit up in me, the one of pushing the limits of mankind's knowledge, to finally help people as they used to help me. And yet, I presume, the will of generosity and compassion end up being the key to my own demise.

The disease... It began quietly. A mysterious illness swept through the city, killing the weak, spreading faster than anyone could contain it. People panicked. The government failed. Families were disappearing overnight. I could only stand there, staring blankly at the number of cases and deaths rising on my screen, helpless like everyone else... Except unlike them, I still had hope, my flame was still burning. I refused to wait.

I delved into forbidden sciences, dragging corpses lying around the city into the laboratory, experimenting tirelessly. My colleagues, at least those who still could work, mocked me, saying it was a waste of time, and that I'd be arrested for sabotaging the company's plans and ruining its reputation. I had a choice: do nothing and watch the people I swore to protect die, or risk condemnation and continue working for a hope in saving the world. With eyes constantly burning and my body surviving on caffeine alone, I kept searching for the cure, pushing myself beyond exhaustion. Every failure smouldered me, every life lost haunted me. And then one night, at 3:17 a.m., surrounded by scattered notes and half-empty vials, the sample stabilized. For the first time in weeks, the screen stopped flashing red.

Yet, the world never rewards those who dare to act, only those egotistical enough to extol their minimal contribution as the whole result. I believed naively that humanity would celebrate, that I'd be praised as a true hero. That was my greatest mistake.

One morning, my access card was revoked. My badge failed at the laboratory door, my files were locked, and my name was already gone from the project. CuraGen, the “good guys”, forcefully took my work, calling it ‘company contribution’ as I had depleted all the corporation's resources to achieve the results. It was the debt I had to pay them back. Money was the only thing in their eyes; what about my restless nights, my sanity sometimes reduced to self-doubt because of their own employees, and the ethical lines I had crossed?

They patented the cure under their name. They locked it behind contracts and price tags, transforming it into a mere product. They delayed its release, letting human lives drip for their calculated maximum profits. The cure existed, just not serving as its sole purpose, as a remedy, but as venal hackwork.

# The Quiet Crime of Doing Good

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The public demanded answers, CuraGen needed protection. And so, they elected a villain. They constructed a narrative where I was reckless, unstable and dangerous. The illegal and unethical experimentations I conducted out of urgency was twisted into obsession. My compassion was reframed as arrogance. The media echoed their lies until they became the uncontested truth.

The same hands that constructed the vial holding the survival of humanity were suddenly portrayed as a threat to society. The same mind that was resilient enough to sustain exhaustion and constant ridicule in its purest form was now called immoral. I lost my reputation, my career, and most importantly my identity, while the company gained wealth, praise and power.

I do not claim innocence, nor do I deny the weight of my choices. I took the unremorseful decision that seemed optimal in the circumstances that I was faced with. But I refuse the lie that calls them evil. I was condemned not for what I did, but for what my actions revealed. The world prefers its heroes unchallenged and its villains convenient, because questioning power is more perilous than any disease. So, before you judge me, ask yourself who profited from my silence, who thrived on my ruin, and why saving lives was a crime that could not be forgotten.

And maybe, you will see that I was never your enemy after all.”

## Jury's comment

Léo's story is about the tragic fate of those who dare to question power. It is a cultural criticism that resonates with every sentence. I especially loved the protagonist's self-questioning (but unremorseful) voice and the call for people to scrutinize their own judgments, to reconsider whether a villain is truly a villain. The pace kept me reading and the language was intentionally crafted, leading me to highlight some of my favorites lines as I was reading. Well done, Léo! A well-deserved win!

# A Case of Crunch

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“All rise for the honorable Judge P. Nut,” said the bailiff as a gruff man in an imposing black court dress with powdery white curls trudged into the large courtroom. His polished court shoes squeaked across the shiny black marble floors. As soon as he seated himself on the high podium, a hush fell over the room.

Judge P. Nut adjusted his spectacles, peering down from his lofty perch as he surveyed the crowd. “Order in the court! Let’s crack open this case!”

Mr. Crunch, the prosecutor, got up, straightened his tie. Without skipping a beat, he intoned, “Your Honor, we have come here today because my client, Charles E. Chedda, was deprived of his lawful snacks under the SORA (Snack Ownership Rights Act).”

A storm of gasps erupted as the gravity of the accusation hung heavily in the air, while the onlookers discussed what effect this accusation might have on the defendant.

The defense then stood up and said, “Your Honor, while my client might have been near the snack table, there is no evidence to suggest that the nachos were stolen; they were merely borrowed, and I’ll prove it.”

Standing up, the judge bellowed, “We will take a brief recess and then begin the presentation of evidence.” He then sat down and pulled out a PB&J, while everyone in the courtroom waited impatiently.

After the honorable judge had brushed the crumbs off his robe, Mr. Crunch presented the first exhibit: an image taken hazardingly of a table laden with all kinds of chips. A bowl of nachos was prominently displayed in the center. Cheese dripped from every chip. The bright green guacamole had flecks of red tomato, with dark green parsley and black sliced olives scooped generously on top.

The second exhibit, maybe the most convincing one, was a picture of Maurice Tatterchip, the accused, holding a plate filled with a pile of the delicious-looking chips.

As the evidence presentation ended, Charles E. Chedda, the witness, was called to the stand.

Before asking him to retell his version of what happened, the judge asked him, “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

Mr. Chedda replied, “I choose dare, Your Honor,” while the court burst into laughter at the misunderstanding.

Without wasting another minute, Mr. Crunch began questioning the witness.

“Mr. Chedda,” asked the prosecution, “where were you the night of the alleged theft?”

The elegantly dressed man replied, “Well, when the night began, I was setting up the table. That’s when I realized we were missing spicy chips.” So I went out to the supermarket, but got held up walking through the aisles. When I got back, I realized everyone was gone. The nachos were gone. Maurice was asleep on my couch snoring loudly with crumbs all over him.”

# A Case of Crunch

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“Hah!” exclaimed the prosecution. “There you have it!”

Then, the defense walked to the stand, presenting Exhibit A—an image of the same nachos, but from a wider angle revealing plates and serving tongs neatly arranged around. It clearly showed that they could be mistaken as intended for sharing.

“Therefore,” said Mr. Tatterchip’s attorney, “this isn’t theft, but just one big misunderstanding.”

Suddenly, Maurice Tatterchip rose. “In Charles’s house, snacks aren’t protected—they’re challenged and revered. The nachos were placed to be tested, admired and conquered, not merely looked at. I didn’t steal them. I rose to the occasion. Any crumbs on me prove my effort, not guilt.”

In closing, the prosecution said, “If we let snack thievery go unpunished, then next, there will be snack murder—or worse, vegetables!”

The defense insisted that Mr. Tatterchip was just an unfortunate victim of a misunderstanding, not a thief.

After hearing from both parties, the judge called the jury to begin their deliberation—in a separate room, filled with an abundance of snacks, of course.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “you’ll be deliberating on the case, but remember, the snacks present are not evidence!” He added with a grin, “And remember: stick to the facts and don’t get too nutty.”

As the jurors settled into the room, they couldn’t stop themselves from discussing the case over bowls of crispy potato chips and salty popcorn.

“I don’t know about you,” one juror said, popping a chip into his mouth, “but I would steal those nachos any day of the week!”

As the jurors finished, licking cheese dust from their fingers and debating the chip-to-dip ratio, they got up, ready to deliver their verdict, decided as carefully as their favorite snacks.

The jury spokesperson rendered the verdict, “We have decided that we find the defendant... not guilty of snack theft, but guilty of having questionable snack-sharing ethics!”

“Instead of punishing you with a lifetime of kale, I believe in the virtues of community service.” said the judge. “Therefore, I sentence you, Mr. Tatterchip, to help organize a grand Snack Day at the courthouse.”

“Court is adjourned!” Judge P. Nut declared with a smile, banging his gavel.

“I will be confiscating all evidence,” he added, reaching for the nearest bowl.

“Purely procedural, of course.”

## Jury’s comment

So much fun. The reader wonders if the author was laughing as the text was composed. Details, such as the orange cheese dust, make concrete the absurd notion of a Snack Ownership Rights Act! The tantalizing nacho platter is seconded only by the cheeky names.

# A Mishap or A Mindset?

Honoured members of the jury, respected teachers, and fellow classmates, thank you for assembling to weigh what has to be the most ridiculous accusations ever recorded in the history of scholastic justice. I stand before you accused of what is supposed to be, an act of profound betrayal: the infamous “spilling of ice cream in a public venue.” Just the accidental liquefaction of my beloved one scoop cookies-and-cream, one scoop raspberry gelato. As though an ordinary teenage girl armed with nothing but a flimsy waffle cone, would ever intentionally orchestrate such a tragedy.

It was an oppressively hot afternoon, the kind of heat that made the air feel hostile. I had treated myself to a humble double-scoop delight. A tiny moment of comfort amid the rigours of academic life. All of a sudden, as if on cue, it had surrendered to gravity, collapsing in a dramatic cinematic fashion into a sticky puddle onto the sidewalk. Even so, I refuse to accept blame for this catastrophe, for I was fighting a losing battle against the laws of physics or my unpredictable future persona. Against such forces, even the most diligent student stands no chance.

Firstly, we need to acknowledge the true culprit in this “crime”. Gravity is an inconsiderate force that has been dragging things downward since BCE, and yet somehow I’m the one on trial for its latest stunt. Apparently, gravity doesn’t grant exemptions to tired, frazzled teenagers holding frozen confections. It was the real antagonist, as it always has been; dropping apples on Newton’s head, leaning the Tower of Pisa, even pulling down the London Bridge. And yet when it targets an innocent ice cream cone, suddenly I’m expected to defy physics? Let’s be realistic.

I am fully aware that what I am about to justify may sound scientifically questionable, but if this court allows hypothetical witnesses, I would like to call one from the future. It is commonly suggested that time travel may one day be possible. Allow me to introduce my witness; she is me, several years from now, wiser, heavier, and significantly more concerned about long-term consequences than I am at present. Having reviewed her medical charts, her life choices, and an alarming number of public health pamphlets, she reached this difficult but necessary conclusion. Therefore she did what any responsible future self would do, she intervened. Not out of malice, but out of care. The fall of the ice cream was not an accident, but a calculated act of temporal self-discipline. A sacrifice made by the future, for the benefit of the present.

Today it is a fallen ice-cream cone. Tomorrow it could be a spilled drink, or a dropped water bottle. Where does it end? If accidents are crimes, then we are all perpetually guilty. To condemn me is not to punish carelessness, but to criminalize being human. On the other hand, if you choose acquittal, you affirm something far more important than cleanliness or appearances: that mistakes are not moral failures, and that common sense still has a place in this institution.

## Jury’s comment

An aptly written eloquent defense for a comically absurd situation, finely balanced between grounded and imaginative, serious and hilarious.

# I'll Love You After I Die

Late at night, Janual is abruptly awakened by a bad dream, but she can't remember exactly what happened. For quite a while, she has been sweating with fear in a cold room inside a building that brings anxiety. A sentence, the only fragment of her dream that stays in her mind, is keeping her sleepless. Now, she is repeating restlessly in her mind: "I must confess my sin."

Unable to endure it any longer, she decides to take some air outside. So, she walks carefully down the gloomy building and arrives at a garden nearby. After she has sat down on a bench, she picks up a pen and paper from her pocket and starts writing a letter to a person important to her.

*To Februa, my amiable sister,*

*There are some words and stories hidden in the depths of my heart that I would like to tell you in this letter before I'm gone. Unfortunately, revealing the truth will make you disappointed, because you've always been relying on me.*

*Ever since you were born, I have been trying to act like a good sister. When I was six, it was I who took care of you when our parents were working at night. What made me heartbroken was their apathy toward what I did and their harsh reprimand for a minor error I had committed. Sometimes, I even wanted to spray hot boiling water on your face to vent my anger. However, every time I had raised the kettle, I gave up this madness, because I feared that the everlasting scar would always make me remember my hideous character.*

*I've envied of you ever since you showed excellence in many domains. Still, I pretended to be proud of you when you earned perfect grades, gave outstanding piano performances or when you became the most popular girl in your school, because I wanted to show the others that I was not a petty-minded person. I've been playing my role of an affectionate sister until the day when I saw, on your account, that you had received an offer from the Miraculous Medical University, the university that all students who've dreamed of becoming a doctor would like to attend. At that moment, it felt as though I had been possessed by a venom of jealousy which drove me to the most regretful act in my life: I clicked on the button "reject" button and deleted the message. Of course, you never knew, because I never told you about it. I know that you wanted to become a doctor since childhood, but I couldn't bear watching all your wishes come true. After this incident, I have been very remorseful for ruining your bright future. To restrain myself from harming you once again, I kept avoiding meeting you.*

*I've tried to love you, but I realize now that it's impossible I can't overcome my jealousy. Perhaps our love can only exist in a world without comparison.*

*Today, at last, I take the courage to confess every lie, because I don't want you to live within my deception any longer. Also, I want to experience what honesty, generosity and bravery feel like during the last few days of my life.*

After writing the last word, Janual folds the letter neatly. Then she returns to the building where she left earlier and walks to her ward. She had been diagnosed the lung cancer two weeks ago. Her chance of survival is too slight. This letter will be sent to her sister only after her death.

## Jury's comment

The main character, Janual, has a lot of darkness and is cruel to her sister. However, I found myself having sympathy for her and her broken sense of self - nice work creating a sympathetic villain in a short piece of writing! You created many layers of nuance for readers to ponder.

# The Insurgency of an Afternoon

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It was a dull afternoon, on the tritest day imaginable. Ron sat in the corner, at the back of the class, as usual, without an ounce of motivation to brave the torrent of superfluous knowledge the teacher dumped on him. He always had been an excellent student, sweeping up the As in all his courses, but that day, his mind was not the one to be bothered with what seemed to be hysterical nonsense to his ears.

There was still 30 more minutes left in the class when the incessant mutterings, coming from the students trying to keep their voice low, suddenly stopped. Ron, who was on the verge of closing his eyes for good raised his head. The teacher was facing his students instead of the green board, evoking that he was ready to tell them something.

His lips opened slowly: "I ... forgot to bring the exercises sheets that I wanted to give you for today class. I'll have to go back to my desk quickly. It'll only take five minutes. During my short absence, I want you, Ron, the class president, at the front of the class to supervise your classmates. Can I trust you?"

Ron eyes lit up. An unprecedented idea sprung into his far too bored mind.

"Yes, don't worry Mr. Clark, he responded, standing up and walking toward the professor's desk in front. I'll make sure that we all stay silent."

He already knew what he was about to do... he just could not tell him. Mr. Clark walked out of the class. His overweight forced him to get to the building where his office was located at a considerably low speed.

...

Ron stood up on the teacher's office chair. After clearing out his throat, he made sure everyone was looking at him and commenced his speech:

*"All eyes on me! Are you not tired of this display of boredom the adults in this establishment present to us every day?"*

His audience answered him with an awkward silence. Despite this embarrassing sequence, Ron continued.

*"Either way, I am. And hence, I stand before today you to present my genuine thought on this controlling reality in which we're forced to follow these incongruously constraining rules against our own will. In other words, I aim to lead a profound change, a revolution. Now, when I say "revolution", I am not enticing you to follow the example of the French one from our history lessons, where bloodshed was entertainment for the populace. No, we only need to upturn the hierarchy in this college. Why should, us, students, be the one who must respect the orders these adults enforce us to follow?"*

# The Insurgency of an Afternoon

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The look of disbelief and acknowledgement of their president's insanity that floated in Ron's comrades' eyes disappeared. It seemed like every one of them — after processing the craziness they could not fathom moments ago — ended up agreeing with this new way of thinking about the education system. Ron carried on.

*“This school system is corrupted, with his sole and only goal to urge his victims to compare themselves to each other and forget who their common enemies are: the mischievous teachers. The Ministry of Education makes us think that getting good grades is the only desire we should foster, distracting us from every other form of accomplishment. In this structure, the one that thrives is praised, and the one that sinks is forgotten. This leads to a disparity in not only our future, but the way we experience it. That is why I want us, students, to take the matter into our own hands. We should be the ones deciding the trajectory this organization will follow. We should be the ones choosing what is considered as mandatory knowledge to our growth. We should be the ones overseeing our development leading to an improved ensuing society. That is why I seek your help in this insurgency. What do we have to lose other than the chains created by the wicked who established this education program full of flaws? Together, we shall think of some way to implant our ideology as the main one!”*

With his forehead drenched in sweat, his throat sore from all the word that unfolded from his reasonings, Ron was looking ahead of him, proud of what he made his classmates realize. And suddenly, the heavy words “RON! GET DOWN FROM MY CHAIR AND GO BACK TO YOUR SEAT NOW!!” were resonating in the class instead of the overthrow of power he just incited. Mr. Clark was back from his short stroll and his trust in this class was probably gone forever. The imminent riot was already buried, and his target had not even needed to hear about it.

...

The incessant mumbling of the students resumed, as if nothing had happened. In the left corner of the class, there was this one silent scholar, who every little side look was directed toward. He made sure to keep his lips sealed, honoring his promise to his teacher.

## Jury's comment

Your descriptive writing painted a clear picture of the setting, and your pacing made your story come to life! The reader can feel the energy of the story increasing along with the main character's attempt to incite a revolution, which is foiled at the perfect moment. As a teacher, I felt attacked; as a reader, I thoroughly enjoyed your essay!

# A Friend the Summer Kept

To my lovely pet, my parents didn't like furry things. I begged them to adopt a pet; it wouldn't even cost a penny, but nothing worked. Then, on my next birthday, I received something. You.

Special from the start, bright, curious eyes won't stop glazing around; a big, fluffy tail curled like a scarf. Your winter white coat could easily blend into snow, and yet, you were as soft as freshly fallen crystal dust. Sharp, alert ears were your pride, then you became my friend, my princess.

I named you Lumi, the arctic fox. My first impression of you felt like a gentle snowfall, sometimes accompanied by ice crisps, a little fierce, but always mighty. Who knew what beautiful future awaited you?

To my dearest friend, I never thought about losing you. Until the day you were bitten. I couldn't imagine how painful it was. I still remember. It was almost the end of school. Cicadas, crickets, and grasshoppers were all singing together, mixing their whirring and buzzing sounds. Lush, dappled leaves swaying on the breeze accompanied the summery orchestra. Butterflies fluttered their colorful wings around bushes of fragrant flowers. Everything seemed wrapped in calm and quiet joy. That day, the teacher announced a new, creative assignment. Everyone was filled with excitement, their happiness lifted by the promise of the upcoming summer vacation.

The next day, we all brought our pets, from small to large, from cute to ferocious. Some were soft; others were rough as rocks. Some were easy to amuse; others were much more arrogant. It was such a wonderful experience until I realized...

Why is there blood on the ground? Where is Lumi? You vanished. You wouldn't have wandered away out of curiosity, would you? Then, I saw you, there, lying on the ground, helpless, whimpering for attention. I had no words. I couldn't speak, nor could I breathe. I felt only anger and tears trembling, then slipping free. The dog, the one I have just petted, was the attacker.

To my classmate, the owner of the dog. Bring her back to life! I asked you for an explanation, but you denied the crime. The cost wasn't much for you, just a fox and a broken bond, but your insincerity was the spark that set my anger ablaze. I felt heat rush to my head and my soul was torn between grace and temptation. The better angel and darker instinct struggled beneath the same skin. Behind the same face were two voices at war... I wanted to act, and any sense of peerhood was gone. I clenched my fists, fighting the urge to hit you. Perhaps, I should leave the incident aside, continue my life and ignore her death, but this was never my way.

To my older self, after a few years, even a few months, this whole event probably won't matter anymore. People might still laugh at me for crying over a pet, but all I know was that Lumi died. Pursuing justice won't bring her back, but this was the only thing I could do for her, at last.

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We did not celebrate her death, but we honored her life. The owner of the dog had to pay Lumi's market price, but money never mattered compared to the life and happiness she once gave us. We never had a pet again. She stayed forever etched in our memories, Lumi.

## Jury's comment

Your writing memorializing Lumi, a beloved pet, was quite beautiful! Your descriptions of Lumi, the arctic fox, made me feel the narrator's love and sadness. Lumi's end was tragic and the reader feels suspense as the narrator is tempted in getting revenge.

# Love is a Female Dog

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And, you know, I had this friend, you'd love her, she was darling, a saint, a witch. And it's hard to say what exactly was her name, Carolina or Josephine, Brody, Luka, Kat. She was a strange sort of mistakable in that horrible, memory-pulling way, but I'm sure you'd know her if you just knew her like I knew her.

And her hair was somewhat blond, somewhat red, somewhat brown, a shape shifter of sorts, nose always aquiline, always buttoned, skin pale, but purple—she had layers and layers of glass covering her, in some angles stained, in some angles not—but breakable. Under low lights of teenage lust and late-night drunkenness, she had no armour, only the knowledge that good people burn on stakes.

And it's important to note I was in love with her. I realized it not too long ago, on a rickety stair back when she still used those. I was crying. Or, no, she must have been. Or maybe it had been both of us, or neither, but I remember: Something was wrong. She told me she wouldn't leave me. And of course this was a lie, all beautiful women lied, and I thought to myself, I must have found one after all, one of those beautiful, cheating women whose faces changed in every light. Or maybe I hadn't ever really stopped to look. Maybe then her eyes would stay that goldish, greenish, blackish hue, her teeth would stay crooked or clean, her face would stay so idiosyncratically ordinary.

And she might've been the first one to stop saying hi in the hallways. I was at least second. In some moments we'd play a little game, where I'd forget her name, stop, hold out my hand, tell her it was nice to meet her, ask her if she dyed her hair a little blonder, redder, browner, if she had more mascara, fewer lashes, if her clothes had gotten a little tighter, looser. Was she sweating? Shivering? I never could tell.

And the first time I visited her, yesterday, it came as a sort of shock. I couldn't find the room, was it pulmonary, gastrointestinal, neurological, psychological, bubonic? I never could remember, but most importantly, I never could know: her ailment jumped from symptom to symptom, low blood pressure, fever, fatigue, was it nausea, was it pain—she never said or did not say at all, she preferred to be mysterious.

And I did at some point manage to find it. Only it wasn't a room, but a wing, a locked wing, with passcodes and scanners, security guards and little microphones on each side. I waited for someone on the inside to let us in. There was an older woman waiting with me, and she smiled, asked me if I was seeing a friend, a girl, and said the strangest thing. "It's normally girls who stay here, you know."

And I suppose I was the only one there who didn't understand. Because, of course, I never knew her to be weak, to be attainable, her and her skin—ever moving, ever adapting, indestructible like the carcass of a snake, slithering in and out of death with colour-changing scales and malleable fangs.

And at some point I did see her. We might've solved a puzzle, or a curse, she was sharing a room and they were listening. We were on her bed. She was under the covers, or over them, and she was connected to some sort of machine. We didn't exactly talk, we sat, touched each other's arms, and filled the space—with thick, white cement, a sort of silence, a sort of song, a sort of buzz in the air, incessant.

*continued on next page*

# Love is a Female Dog

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And maybe for a moment, just a moment, I did see her, hunched over, throwing up, and I did look at her, right in her eyes, and didn't flinch. Our knees might've touched, or our insides, or our lips, but nothing changed. She was sick. And I was sick. Yet still, she said it. And resaid it. "I won't leave you." And of course, I knew it was a lie, no beautiful woman, no matter their perfect noses, eyes, or mouths, could survive death—she was not alone in immortality as I had once known her to be.

And then visiting hours ended. Her father drove me home. We stayed in the car a while in front of my front door, and he asked me if I had said goodbye. Why would I have? She promised I wouldn't have to. And she promised I would be alright, that one day I wouldn't be so tired, that leaves would be so green, the sky, so blue, that nothing would be uncertain, nothing, that one day I would know, I would see, I would be able to tell you who she was, so I think I'll sit down now, Mrs. Parsons, and yes I didn't do the homework or get to school on time, but truly, truly, Mrs. P, I think my dog ate the world.

## Jury's comment

- 1) Maia's writing is incredible. The repeated enumerations of possible scenarios reveal the all-encompassing nature of the relationship between the narrator and their lover. These sentence patterns create a staccato rhythm that builds quickly to the crushing last line of the story. I could never have imagined this excuse for not submitting homework.
- 2) A highly original, mystifying tale, applying melancholy detachment to an intoxicating dreamscape of doomed love in a Kafka-like hospital setting.

# Profit First, Flavor Later

I'd like to begin by saying this: if anyone here got food poisoning or some very questionable stomach cramps from our "house sauce," that one's on me.

I didn't start this restaurant to cut corners. I really didn't. Somewhere along the way, I started trimming little things. Cheaper ingredients. Treating expiration dates like suggestions. Smaller portions.

I told myself it was smart business. But honestly, I just wanted more money. More profit. Bigger margins. I wanted to squeeze a little more out of every plate and hoped no one would notice it. I knew exactly what I was doing. I was cutting costs and calling it clever. I watered down the soup and proudly told people it was "all-natural and no artificial flavor were used". I threw mystery powders into sauces and said it was my "secret blend." I used day-old bread for croutons and called it "aged for flavor." I even tried making stock from leftover pasta water once and told myself it was "extra umami." And when a dish still tasted off, I just threw some extra parsley.

I tried other shortcuts too. I hired undocumented interns to help in the kitchen. Paid them in "experience" and free meals, and then promptly let them go when I realized actually paying them would eat into my profit margins. Pun not intended.

I even thought, if Ryanair can cut corners and still fly full planes, why can't we?

Turns out people are more forgiving of uncomfortable legroom than undercooked chicken.

I could smell the quality slipping. The staff got frustrated. Servers stopped asking, "How is everything?" and switched to, "Did you want a box?" Customers stopped smiling when their food arrived, which is usually a bad sign in a restaurant. That smile should fade after the check, not before the first bite. And instead of fixing the problem, I doubled down. I blamed supply issues. I blamed inflation. I blamed literally everything... except myself.

Yes. I was the problem.

People don't come here just to eat. They come expecting someone to care about what's on their plate and I didn't. I cared more about the money. Because of my greediness, countless dates, birthday parties, and weddings were ruined because of our poor dining experience, and for that, I'm truly sorry.

So here's the plan: Starting from today, no more shortcuts that taste like shortcuts. No more pretending you won't notice and if something's on the menu, it will actually deserve to be there. Every dish will be served with pride. Now, I'm not asking you to forget the bad meals. I know some of you can't. They're unforgettable for all the wrong reasons. I'm asking for the chance to earn back your trust, one plate at a time.

## Jury's comment

- 1) This story examines repercussions of greed and capitalism on a business but ends on a more hopeful note, showing the importance of owning up to mistakes and trying to do better.
- 2) A black comedy confession that reminds the reader not to buy the hype of a restaurant, but to trust your tastebuds as well as your gut, so to speak.

# We Will Have Change

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Dear Comrades,

The act is over.

I'm done pretending.

I'm not standing here as your flawless president. I'm standing here as someone who's at the end of the rope, who sat through the same soul-numbing lectures, who followed the same authoritarian dress code, and who felt the same soul crushing fatigue that settles into my bones every Monday.

I was not elected to be a poster child. I was elected to meet adversity unflinchingly. I was elected to disrupt the quiet when silence is an imposed duty. I was elected to question the rules when blind obedience is expected.

I was elected to announce to all of you:

## **We will have change**

We were always told by our peers that this prestigious institution exists to prepare us for the future. But does it really prepare us? In a world that demands innovation, we are chained to our chairs by obedience. For a future that requires critical thinking, we are stuffed with predigested information until we can no longer hold it all in. For a future that requires vision, we are graded on our ability to memorize the view from a window they have already nailed shut.

## **We will have change**

They say that the dress code we follow, the schedules we endure, and the pressures we carry are meant to sculpt us into successful and independent individuals that carry the values of this school. But preparation should not feel like erasure, discipline should not feel like suffocation, failing should not feel like drowning. Learning should never feel like surviving in a jungle where we are taught to stay silent to avoid being noticed.

Comrades! Open your eyes! Even my title as Class President is a façade! We live in a perfectly performed and staged democracy hiding all this great hypocrisy!

## **We will have change**

They preach accountability, while the toilet paper is thinner than a billionaire's sympathy. They preach pristineness when the hockey lockers have never smelled worse. They preach immaculateness when I've seen three baby rats fall out of a classmate's shoes. They only sell us a vision of care and support. But look around you! Our well-being was never in the budget! They never thought about our sanity when they received the million-dollar donation. The lesson they're teaching?

You will take what you are given, and you will be grateful for it.

*continued on next page*

# We Will Have Change

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## **We will have change**

We are trained, not educated. Processed, not prepared.  
We are measured, not mentored. Graded, not guided.  
We are on a conveyor belt, not a path. In a system, not a community.  
We are told to manage stress, but we are not given rest.  
We are told to speak up, but we need permission to stand up.  
We are told to lead, but we have boundaries not to cross.

Because they want us to solely think inside the box.

## **We will have change**

This school is where we learned nothing but fear.  
We learned that questioning the authorities is dangerous.  
We learned that silence is often safer than honesty.

Despite all this, I refuse to be silenced!

I dream of a school that helps students with special needs and never leaves them behind.  
I dream of a school that values mental health as much as academic success.  
I dream of a school that brings joy in learning.  
I dream of a school that treats students with dignity and trust.

## **We will have change**

If the punishment for lateness applies to us, it must apply to all.  
If the strictures of the dress code bind us, they must bind everyone.  
If we must pay fines for lost library books, they must forfeit pay for lost instructional time.  
If our essays are questioned for artificial intelligence and authenticity, their PowerPoints should be too.

No more double standards.

## **We will have change**

What we are asking for isn't unreasonable.  
We are asking for accountability.

We are asking for a partnership.  
We are asking for a student council with influence, not responsibility without authority.  
We are asking to see the difference when we look from man to pig and pig to man.

## **We will have change**

We want a school that listens before it disciplines.  
We want a school that guides us until the end of the road.  
We want a school that prepares us for life, not exams.  
We want a school that values mental health as much as academic success.

*continued on next page*

# We Will Have Change

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## **We will have change**

Martin Luther King once said:  
"A riot is the language of the unheard."

## **We will have change**

Corruption has woven a web that is extinguishing the light of our futures and we are the torch bearers of change. If we do not raise our voices, who will?

## **We will have change**

because 2+2 does not equal 5.

### **Jury's comment**

- 1) Displaying impressive prose mastery, the author dissects the inequalities and injustices in the power structure of an institution of higher learning.
- 2) Sophia's speech is brave and eye-opening. It reveals the true feelings of a high school student subjected to contradictory rules that seemingly don't apply to adults. Writing and sharing this text is an important step in creating the change repeatedly called for in the speech.

# All Hail Tarquin, King of the Plastic Castle

All Hail Tarquin, King of the Plastic Castle

We are gathered here today, ladies and gentlemen, to bid farewell to Tarquin. To some insensitive people, he may have been just a normal fish. But you never knew him. You never saw the way he would regard a floating pellet. He had an almost serene, yet empty gaze while slowly floating towards his food. You never witnessed his reign over his underwater kingdom. To us, he was a tiny but almighty king of his small watery world.

We named him Tarquin, after the good emperor (Not Tarquin the Proud, but Tarquin the Elder). He lived in a kingdom defined by clear borders and repetitive routines. Each morning, the sun would shine through the water to paint his sandy floor with a bright gold touch. He patrolled his domain with such grace and a solemn devotion to his work. The plastic castle walls, the fake seagrass, and the forever present horizon of the curved fishbowl. He faced weekly invasions, like the dreaded Catspaw, not with panic, but a certain stillness. He projected absolute confidence to say the least. He was our family's personal psychiatrist as well. To his patient gaze, we confessed our worries and vented about our tiresome day. He remained, however, a terrible conversationalist. His responses truly were limited to a simple "Oh". To Tarquin, my daughter practiced her presentation. To Tarquin, my husband complained about his rude colleague at work. A silent listener he was and a silent listener he will be.

His downfall sadly came only a few weeks after the beginning of his reign. The assassin was Mr. Pickles, a creature of pure evil from the world beyond the glass. When that furry paw shattered the barrier, Tarquin could only watch in horror as his once peaceful kingdom transcended into chaos. His castle tumbled, and he, our King, was ripped in half by the foul beast. We did not dispose of him via the Toilet, but rather performed a ritual in the garden, under our rose bush. We returned him to the earth, where he shall rest for Eternity. He asked for so little: only clean water and food pellets. In return, he offered us the best few weeks of our lives.

Farewell, Tarquin, King of the Plastic Castle. May your next kingdom be vaster, your subjects loyal, and your waters clean. Now his castle stands empty, yet the filter still hums a lonely song. Now, the water is still. Painfully still.

## Jury's comment

1) "All Hail Tarquin, King of the Plastic Castle": Imagination, wit, and subtle irony distinguish this memorable and richly detailed fable. We hope that the example of Tarquin encourages this author to go on to conquer new literary worlds well beyond Tarquin's plastic realm.

2) Perfect tone and comedic timing with enough believability to make it feel real and grounded, while also playing on the ironic grandiosity of the eulogy. It's heartfelt and funny and goes into the exact right amount of details to paint a complete picture.

# Heard by None

*It's the last stand. Only a few of the clan remained, either on the highest grounds or in the deepest abysses, waiting for their end. The rest were already slaughtered.*

*One of those survivors was climbing up a dust-covered hillside. Hostility was following him from behind. More hostility was waiting for him on the other slope. He felt them closing in...*

*Wait! For the love of everything, just wait...*

*Miraculously, the quite vicious, bloodthirsty soldiers ceased their pursuit. Nobody knows, to this day, why they stopped.*

How lovely it is to finally have... such an audience! For so long I have wished to share my dreams. Who would have known that only in the direst straits would one have the courage to bloom? And yet, amidst the mayhem and sin, you warriors, through some miracle, have been magnanimous enough to cease the bloodshed, even for a brief instant.

Hearken! My prophetic message is one of the utmost importance.

*And the war criminals hearkened.*

As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a peacemaker. Long I have been dreaming of a true dominion, where honey flowed like rivers through valleys of orange blossoms and peonies. Long I have been dreaming of a kingdom of bliss and freedom! Long I have been dreaming of an empire free of tyrants, where the sun never sets, and the children never fear...

Yet we slaughter each other like it's the only thing we know... And for what? Survival? We were born under brutality. Violence and greed are the only things we know. Am I so wrong for wanting less?

Don't you see the vanity of this conflict? Don't you believe in love? Have you ever yearned for love? Have you ever, even for an instant, felt the magic of love?

Look at you! You have spilled our people's blood on the land where we were born. Look how eager you are to rip me apart, as if we aren't, in the end, kin. Can't you see it? We belong to each other! My poor heart aches with the pain of knowing that I will not see my wonders come true. But long after our flesh has been devoured by time, when our grandchildren delight in peace, our bodies and our achievements will serve as the soil they live, love and dance on.

So, lift your skinny fists towards the sky! We'll build our own stairway to heaven!

*The echoes of his voice resonated very slightly. The auditors, unimpressed, were quite agitated still. A long silence ensued.*

*The soldiers advanced towards the summit of the hill on which the doomed orator stood not quite tall. Just then he let out a bloodcurdling scream. To the war criminals, this scene seemed quite amusing.*

WAIT! WAIT!

# Heard by None

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Look... I understand that what I am saying seems all but real. However, our brothers and sisters, that none of us had the pleasure of meeting yet have, just like us, established themselves all over the place. And just like us, they combat the inconceivable evil that we have all heard so much about. Just imagine everyone united under one mind, under one train of thought! Can you even conceive how powerful we could be?

*Nobody seemed to be able to conceive anything at this point but murderous thoughts.*

Those eldritch horrors have only been haunting us because of our isolation! Stories have hitherto been told of scavengers going out, never to be seen again. But they were only so weak because they were alone! If we all agree to assemble our minds and bodies, nothing to us will ever be worthy of fear! We'll crusade across the continents and navigate the seas; we'll bathe in the grains of fertility and rejoice in everything that is sweet! We'll bury our enemies deep in the soil! Then I'll be, no, we will all be masters, commanders, and captains of the world! We'll conquer everything from the deepest of trenches all the way to the darkest side of the moon!

*However, the warmongers, after waging a hefty war against an entire colony, were surprisingly not entirely motivated to engage in more warfare, much less against potentially horrifying eldritch beings beyond the scope of their imagination. These ants were quite satisfied with their atrocities, and the conquered territory had enough excess food to feed their clan for quite a while. And although the notion of world domination was intriguing, having such a stranger as an intellectual leader wasn't a particularly enticing idea. The warriors proceeded to rip each of his six limbs from his body as the orator cried out in pain for freedom...*

*Other than those soldier ants, this tale of a tragic, utopian, visionary, and inexplicably eloquent ant was heard only by non-sentient sedimentary rock.*

*Unfortunately, no matter how extraordinary the stories that nature tells, all such tales will be lost in time, like tears in rain.*

## Jury's comment

1) "Heard by None": The action of this well-paced story will keep you on your seat until its final twist ending. Meanwhile, you will appreciate the gorgeous world-building, rich language, and underlying social commentary. May the stirring words of this story's undaunted and resourceful narrator long continue to fuel this author's imagination.

2) The ant twist at the end was unexpected on first read, and then the clever foreshadowing became clear as day on subsequent reads. That idea is superbly executed! We truly feel in the midst of a great battle for survival. You pepper hints at its true nature throughout, inviting us naturally for a second read where we are actively looking for the clues that this is in fact a battle amongst warrior ants.

# Flying by the Seat of My Canvas

Yesterday after school, as I walked through the front door of my house, I knew I had forgotten something. Yesterday evening, as I finished up the last slice of pizza my mom had ordered for dinner, I felt the nagging in the back of my mind. And even yesterday night, as I snuggled into the covers of my bed, I had a vague feeling that something was terribly, horribly amiss, though I couldn't quite place it. Shrugging it off, I told myself that if it were really that important, I'd remember it eventually.

Remember it I did, though by then it was already far too late for me to do anything. I jumped out of bed, realizing that not only had I overslept, but I had also completely forgotten about my 24x36 inch painting due in...

"Forty minutes!" I exclaimed, horrified, as I glanced at the clock. Without losing an instant, I threw on some clothes, slung my bag over my shoulder, grabbed my blank canvas, and rushed out the door.

Standing in the metro amidst a crowd of foul-smelling strangers, I began panicking. Even if I started painting now, there would be no way for me to finish. In my frenzy, I started contemplating calling in sick for the school day or simply throwing myself under the next train that arrives. However, knowing Mr. White, there'd be no way either of these options would be considered a valid excuse for missing class, so I decided against it. Instead, I took a deep breath, and told myself to be reasonable, and to try reasoning with him before class. "Dear Mr. White," I could tell him, "Never have I ever had the pleasure of experiencing the teachings of a talented maestro such as thee... I am sure the greatness of your art extends also to a greatness of character, and of heart... Your generosity and kindness of soul is sure to forgive the mistake...No, oversight... of a young, forgetful student..."

Puking slightly at my own words, I decided tooth-rotting flattery and begging for forgiveness would be better off staying as a last resort. As I watched the train rush into the tunnel (without throwing myself under it), I thought to myself that perhaps, before telling him the truth of me simply... forgetting about his assignment, I could offer a more understandable explanation for my incomplete painting. Mindlessly, I stepped into the wagon and ended up standing right next to a wide-eyed Pomeranian puppy. That was when inspiration (and doubt of dogs being allowed in the metro) hit me. How could I forget such a classic excuse? Why yes, I could say, "My dog ate... the canvas? And the paint, actually. Yes, that's right. In fact, he's been hospitalized for it. I don't believe paint is edible for dogs, you see, just like how chocolate and grapes aren't good for them either. Why didn't I buy new paint? Well, it's been a terrible week for my family and me. I've been so awfully worried about my poor pet dog that I haven't had the mind to think of anything else. I know this isn't an excuse, but if you would be so kind to give me an extension..."

"This is already sounding way better," I told myself as I barely held on to the metal pole in front of me. "Though, to make sure my speech has the maximum desired effect, I probably ought to change 'my dog' to 'my grandma'. A hospitalized, paint-eating grandma is always the way to go, isn't it? Anyone would believe that."

I sighed to myself, wondering who I was trying to kid. Time was running out, and I still hadn't figured out something coherent. The train pulled to a stop at my station, prompting me to step out of the wagon. My mind was reeling as I walked up the stairs, barely aware of my surroundings, knowing that it was all over. No matter how hard I tried, there was no way I could save a four-week-long assignment in forty minutes. I should've simply started earlier, and since I hadn't, I now had to deal with the consequences of my poor planning.

*continued on next page*

# Flying by the Seat of My Canvas

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I quietly slipped into class and handed in my blank canvas. Mr. White raised an eyebrow as he held it up against the light, squinting for any trace of my work. I watched hopelessly as he furrowed his brow, gripped the frame and opened his mouth to scold me with the long-dreaded words of reprimand. Bracing myself, I looked away in shame when he suddenly exclaimed, "How magnificent! I have not seen such creativity in so long! Your careful use of white to represent the absence of any subject, this subtle refusal of conformity, the deviance of an artist... This is incredible! I say, this is the work of a true prodigy, of a connoisseur of art! This is..."

Standing in front of him and listening to his unexpected praise, I felt awkward, confused, but mostly relieved that the speech I prepared didn't seem to be necessary anymore.

## **Jury's comment**

This entry made me earnestly chuckle several times. From the sudden pomeranian to the paint-eating grandma, several good little jokes are peppered throughout. You managed to tell an entire short story while integrating the speech prompt effectively, all in a concise, well-paced, and entertaining manner. Plus, the vocabulary is rich, and we can "see" this story unfold in our mind, as the descriptions are clear and highly visual.

# A Student's Sins

---

There it is! I heard it. The metro is right there.

A sudden pump of adrenaline rushing through my body, I ran past dozens of people, jumped past flights of stairs, missing a step or two, and barely managed to hop on the wagon just as the familiar bell rang.

I let out a sigh of relief and found somewhere to sit. As I was thinking about how lucky I was to have caught the last metro that would not make me late, I put on my headphones and played on my favorite playlist. My head rested against the column, my breathing still heavy from running. I ran today's schedule through my head while jamming to Bruno Mars's latest release. Nothing particularly stressful was planned for the day. We would start with mathematics class, then...

Math. Mr. Jisman gave us that homework yesterday afternoon. That homework that I did not do. Crap. Suddenly reminded of this assignment, I vividly replayed the moment I brought out my math notebook last night, answered the first question then decided to put it back in my backpack to eat dinner first. What if Mr. Jisman verified if our homework was done or not?

I considered completing it fast on the spot but seeing a large group of passengers waiting to board and knowing that the metro was not the most stable, I decided against it. Maybe getting to school earlier and doing it? However, I could not fasten up the pace of the metro, and I would not have enough time at school.

I only had one option left: come up with a reasonable excuse to not have finished the homework. Mr. Jisman would not let it pass if I told him I had forgotten my notebook at school or I had not understood the questions. Then, I had to make my story believable.

He would accept it if there was a family emergency. What kind of family emergency would make you busy all evening but was not serious enough to be reported to the school? Plus, the only person who would realistically have something happen to them was my younger sister, and she was in kindergarten. Perhaps some sort of activity? That would not be an emergency, though.

How about health issues? That was it!

This was exactly it! My sister, Madeline, would supposedly have started throwing up the previous evening, and her situation worsening by the hour, my parents and I brought her to the emergency room and stayed there till late in the night. That was perfect! Since my sister was still in kindergarten, there was no way the school would know if what I was saying was true or not. How brilliant was I!

Although the story was plausible to some degree, my tone needed to be coherent with the situation. My speech needed to be flawlessly delivered. I could not be too happy or overly saddened, but I needed to sound somewhat tired and unhappy of my sister's situation. I needed to express the "regret" I felt when I realized it would be impossible for me to do the homework. Maybe I would even shed a few tears...

I was pulled out of my thoughts when the intercom announced the station I had to get off at. I stepped out of the metro, ready to deal with the situation. Hearing my footsteps in the snow, I was somehow anxious, as they sounded like some kind of countdown to my death.

*continued on next page*

# A Student's Sins

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I arrived at school, took off my boots and my jacket, and organized my books. Taking a deep breath, I went up to class and gathered all my courage to tell my story.

"Hello Mr. Jisman, I am terribly sorry, I forgot about the math homework and didn't remember until this morning in the metro..."

Change of plans.

## Jury's comment

Hannah Wang's short story treads familiar ground – who hasn't forgotten to complete a school assignment? – but the story's balance of urgency and imagination makes a common occurrence an edge-of-your-seat adventure. In just one and a half pages she takes us on a compelling journey (literal and metaphorical!) that playfully subverts the expected ending.

# Anatomy of a Student in Crisis

Every day, every week, our lives spin in a circle, a routine that resets itself each night we lay our heads to rest. I peeled my eyelids back and flicked on the light, the sudden brightness blinding me. I completed my morning routine half-asleep. My body acted without thinking, as if this formula were already etched into my bones. As I walked out the door to head to school, the cold air stung my face, leaving a pink flush on my cheeks.

When I arrived at the metro station, I tapped my card and waited for my train on a bench. Three minutes away...two minutes away...one minute away...I stood up ... I headed towards the train, but before I could reach an empty seat, a sharp tearing sound pierced my ears.

My bag's zipper gave out, and all my books spilled out onto the floor! Humiliated, I scrambled to pick up each binder, loose sheet of paper and book, when suddenly, I came across a blank assignment...All my memories came rushing in—how could I forget? Worth for 50% of my final grade, if I couldn't get an extension on this, I could fail this class entirely! No use in trying to complete it now, all that I could do is attempt to pry an extension out of my teacher's hands, or else I'm as good as dead. Before I knew it, I found my boots sloshing into the school doors, mind still just as blank as the assignment. Instead of English for first period, it seemed like I would be doing a lot more impro than language.

“Good morning, Mrs. D! You're looking especially ravishing today, did you do something to your hair? Nothing? I could've sworn your curls seemed exceptionally bouncy and shiny, even more than before.

Or maybe it's your skin. Tell me, what's your secret to such bright, pearly skin. Perhaps it's lighting, but your complexion resembles that of an angel. You have one of those faces where when you see them, your mood lightens immediately.

I'm sure you've noticed the enormous bags under my eyes. These things could carry a week's worth of groceries for a family of six, am I right? And I assume you're wondering, what could I have done to earn myself such dark under-eyes? You can blame your colleagues for these. Mrs. D, is it true that teachers secretly coordinate with each other in order to schedule all the exams and assignments in the same few weeks, just to tire us students on purpose? I apologize for my blatant insolence, but it almost seems like professors want us to fail.

Of course, when I say professors, I don't mean you. From the bottommost part of my heart, you have a talent for teaching. When you teach, I feel the passion and interest you have for your subject. They say you can tell when someone loves what they do. It's not just your passion, but also your knowledge. You're so graceful and precise in your craft, truly, it's admirable. Your sweet voice just adds to the way you manipulate your vocabulary to maximize the effectiveness of your teaching.

Oh! The assignment that was due today? You see, this past weekend, I visited my late grandfather's grave. When he was alive, we were extremely close, and even now I still feel his presence watching guard over me, keeping me safe. I've been going through some rough times, and I felt only he could comfort me. Let's not discuss too much on this topic, or else I think I'll burst into tears right in the middle of this classroom! Everything recently has been too much for me but visiting him made me feel a little better. I understand that it was my responsibility to manage my time better, but it would be a shame if I received a 0 ....”

## Jury's comment

- 1) The text showcases a good mastery of both spoken monologue and train of thought narration. It's fast-paced, full of energy, and just ridiculous enough to really nail the humorous tone.
- 2) In the short story “Anatomy of a Crisis,” Sophie Deng's main character gives professional speech writers a run for their money when she concocts a variety of excuses for her uncompleted homework. The protagonist's use of flattery and florid justifications are testaments to Deng's creativity and writing style.

## Rise from the Ashes

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As the players drag their feet, shoulders slouched, and their heads hanging low, out of the field, they hear the booing raining down from the stands. Some loyal fans clap while others stand frozen in disbelief. Many have already left unable to endure the heartbreak of watching their champions fall. The mighty white-and-gold Saskatoon Sakouls have just been crushed by the Philadelphia Phalaropes in a devastating 9-2 loss. This is the biggest and most humiliating defeat of the club's history.

One by one, the players collapse onto the benches in the locker room. They sit motionless. When the last player finally steps into the locker room, the atmosphere is suffocating. The sea of white and gold that once shined with pride and honor is now a sea filled with silence. No one is talking. They are too ashamed to even look at each other. Their eyes focus on the floor where the crest of their identity lies. It represents courage and confidence, but today it has been fractured by defeat. Their unworthiness to wear the crest is punctuated when their coach enters the room silently.

His large brooding figure seems even larger. The locker lights shining on his bald head attest to the pressure he too has been feeling. But it's the silence that makes things worse. A feather falling on the ground would be an earthquake in this room of despair. Finally, the coach, the true leader of any team, takes the initiative to break the ice.

The players all hold their breath, anticipating their coach's wrath. But, when he opens his mouth, his words come out low and firm:

“So, failure decided to show up and pay us a visit today. Maybe, you feel that's it's over. Maybe you feel that there is no coming back from this defeat.”

He pauses, looking at each of the players in the room who are bracing themselves for the worst punishment. But what comes out of his mouth next surprises the players.

“You must understand that failure is required, and you must be willing to be humble enough to not just learn from it but grow from it, individually and as a team.”

His voice raises, his tone even stronger than earlier.

“We don't deserve victory without failure. There CANNOT BE a victory without a STRUGGLE attached to it. Failure does exactly what is necessary to make you better, to put you on the path at the right moment, to be able to build something from the ground up. And just because you fail, it doesn't mean that it's over. It is through this difficult time that you learn that with every step forward, sometimes you will be pushed back. Because when you get pushed back, you come back. You come back strong. You come back with a purpose. Do not be afraid to fail.”

He sounds angry now. His words come fast, urgent, yet he punctuates each and every one of them. He demands to be heard. He understands his players' feelings, so he's using it to make sure this moment serves a purpose.

“Failure is required. Champions cannot be champions without failure. Remember this: you are always worthy of greatness, because greatness already lives within you. In each and every one of you.

*continued on next page*

# Rise from the Ashes

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Even when you feel that you are at your weakest point, you must understand that failure is going to do exactly what it's meant to do. It's helping you build. It's teaching you life lessons. To understand that, you have to get knocked down a few times.

And when that opportunity comes for you to rise up, you rise with a full heart. You rise knowing it's not over. You're learning something about yourself, about your journey.

And even though you may not understand it now, unconsciously you are. Failure is required in order to push you beyond your comfort zone, to force you to grow stronger. So, when failure comes, don't let it confuse you. Don't let it misuse you. Don't just accept it. You must understand it.

Understand that you got more work to do within yourself. Understand that you've got to continue to fight for it.

Now, we have practice tomorrow at 4:30. Be there by 4. It will be special training.”

## Jury's comment

1) Every good sports story needs a coach's pep talk to rally the players, one that is both rousing and inspiring. In George Toliopoulos's short story, the coach's pep talk becomes the central axis of the story. Through Toliopoulos's clear, concise writing, we feel the athletes' dejection as they sit slumped on the benches, and feel our spirits soar with the coach's inspiring words.

2) This entry is particularly aligned with its prompt, and executed with clear, sharp writing. The description of the team's defeated attitude upon entering the locker room is effective and casts a clear image in our mind, while a touch of humour (the team names, hilarious) helps move the action along. The speech's message is engaging and reminds us of the value of failure as a teacher, something we often forget.

# Airballs and Chaos

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Alright, everyone, look at me. I promise the floor is not going to make the score go up. I wish it could. What just happened was definitely something. I'm honestly confused about what sport we were even playing out there, but I'm pretty sure it was not the one we have been practicing all season. At first, I thought we were just warming up until it hit me that the game had already started and finished.

Let's talk about teamwork, or whatever you want to call what was happening. Honestly, I think I have seen better coordination between toddlers who cannot understand each other than you. At one point, I wasn't even sure if we were playing against the other team or performing in a circus. Passes went everywhere except to the right player. Some of you threw the ball like you were playing hot potato and others seemed scared every time it came near, like it had appeared out of nowhere. I even saw a play where three of you ran to the same spot, leaving the rest of the court wide open, and still managed to shoot an airball.

Communication was another memorable disaster and by that, I mean something I will be having nightmares over. No one called for the ball. No one was shouting for retreats. The only noise I was hearing were sighs, complaints, and one very dramatic groan after a missed layup. If being silent scored points, the game would have been in the bag.

Effort matters, and some of you gave it everything which I respect and salute, but others looked like they were saving energy for the extra sprints we'll add in practice. Running back on defense seemed optional, like it was extra credit. Meanwhile, the other team dribbled past us so easily I half expected them to stop and thank you for the open lanes.

Look, the game was a hard watch, and I won't sugarcoat it, but our season is not over just yet. Everyone makes mistakes and sometimes plays fall apart. What matters is not what happened, but what we do next. We can laugh, learn, and make sure this is not the story people remember. Next game, I want us to move with purpose. We speak up clearly and loudly. We run until our legs hurt and then a little more. Most importantly, we play as a team, not just a group of strangers who showed up five minutes before the whistle.

Take a deep breath. Lift your heads, and for everyone watching, let's make the next game one to remember for all the right reasons.

## Jury's comment

Ilyas's writing is fast paced and passionate. After hooking the reader with a compelling opening, the text manages to move confidently from exasperation to inspiration. It leaves the readers feeling buoyed and the syntax in the final paragraphs reinforces the insistence of the message. A great read, well done!

# And They Grow Up With It

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Daycare parent meeting. Busy adults jammed in a small playroom are sitting on toddler chairs. Some are pretending to listen and mock interest in what is being said by two young educators who seem to have neither much authority nor experience. Others are using their phones, staring through the window, or chuckling with their neighbours. One even started jotting down a grocery list...

Laura, one of the two educators, a thin girl with thick glasses covering half of her freckled face, puts aside her papers and gets to her feet. She sticks her hands in her pockets and suddenly exclaims:

- Do you even know who I am?! I am just a passer-by in the life of your children... Your four-year-olds might not even remember me in a couple of years. And I am totally OK with that... What I am not comfortable with is your attitude... your attitude towards your own children and your role as a parent!!! Do you realize that they need you, your love, and your attention? They need to know that it is THEM your priority and that you will be there for them no matter what, no matter when and no matter how.

You could say that I am not in a position to tell you how to raise your kids... and you are certainly right... Except that I am the one who knows your kids sometimes better than you do, who listens to them and tries to see a personality in each and every one of them! Let me tell you a few stories about your children. No worries, I will not give out names.

One day I hear from one of the kids: "I want to be a dog. People always play with dogs, and they take them to the park. If I am a dog, I might get a chance to play with my dad in the park on the weekends."

Another day, a child asks me: "Miss... Do I look like a couch pillow? My mom always tells me that my place is on the couch in front of the TV. Two days ago, I stayed there from breakfast until lunch. After lunch, my mom gave me her phone and sent me back to the couch."

On a different occasion, a kid pleads to take an appointment with their granny: "I love playing with her, but she comes for half an hour and then runs to her classes for old people that are taught by young people. Can you please put me on her activity list?"

Another story shared by one of your children tells: "My dad bought me a Lego set. We unpacked it, and I started stacking blocks. My father said that I am doing it all wrong and commanded to stay away. He built it all by himself and put it on the bookshelf."

A different one recounts: "I went for a walk with my mom. She took a lot of pictures of us to post on Instagram, but she did not want to take a picture of the ladybird that sat on my hand. She said that it was a stupid bug. Then we went home."

I could continue, but I will not... I will better ask: What is wrong with you, people?

Do you remember the feeling you had when you learnt that you would have a baby, all the joy you had, all the child-rearing books you read, and the grandiose activity plans you made? I am almost certain that you also thought of your parents, of their parenting style, and of your childhood memories. And you made promises to yourself... What has happened between then and now? Where have you lost the spark of it? Could you even remember what it means to be a child?

# And They Grow Up With It

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Do you recall that being a kid means to think that your dad is the strongest in the world and your mom is the most beautiful? It also means to believe in Santa and to love jumping in puddles. It is the age to share secrets with a Teddy Bear and save the last bite of an apple for a squirrel. And it is the time to love ... wholeheartedly, unconditionally, innocently ... Children spontaneously want to share their love and joy, their little sorrows and victories, their discoveries and misfortunes with those who matter the most: their parents...

That is the reason why when you come to pick up your kids, they run to you all smiles and immediately start telling you what has happened during the day. As a response, unfortunately, I overhear different variations of: "Not now, dear, we have to hurry up...", "Sorry, baby, I am on the phone...", "Can we talk later, I am tired...", etc.

Your kids hear it again and again, they get used to it and they grow up with it... They will start telling you less and less... Until one day they will stop telling you anything... Because it does not matter... does not matter to THEM and to YOU...

## **Jury's comment**

Nicolae's text conveys a strong message to parents: check your priorities and cherish your time with your children before it is too late. The children's stories – relayed by the daycare educator – feel genuine and manage to tap into unique childhood disappointments and the disconnections between parents and children. The text provokes real reader reflection, as any good writing should do.

# The Unimaginable Adventure of My Lost Homework

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Miss, please, before you say anything, I just wanted to say this: *I have never worked this hard to not have my homework in class.*

Yesterday evening, I finished the assignment. Fully and neatly. I even reread it. Twice! This proves how motivated I was! I put the paper inside my notebook, on my desk, ready to put it in my backpack the next morning. I opened the window to get fresh air inside my room and went to bed.

Then I heard a crash outside. I looked out the window and saw two things I was not prepared for: an orange cat and a guy on a bicycle. The cat was in my open window—don't ask me how—and the guy was chasing it and shouting after it. The cat jumped back out, with my notebook in its mouth!

Miss, I reacted instantly! I ran outside without my jacket, without my shoes, and ... without thinking. I just had to recover my assignment from that thief of a cat! The cat sprinted down the street. The guy on the bike ran after it too, shouting, "Hey, that's my cat!". This may or may not have been true. This chase turned into a parade. We ran past a café where people started clapping like this was street entertainment.

The cat jumped on top of a van and dropped the notebook. Relief, pure relief! Except the van started driving off, with the cat and my notebook on top! I chased it. The cyclist chased it. A police officer thought we were thieves and chased us. I tried explaining while running that it was homework-related. This did not help.

The van stopped near the airport. I don't know why. Please don't ask questions.

The notebook slid off the roof and landed on the tarmac. I ran toward it—just in time to see it get blasted by airplane wind and lift into the air, away from me again. Again, Miss!

It flew like a confused bird. All the pages got ripped off, and my homework flew out of it. By miracle, it landed alone, near a security fence. I crawled and rolled and got it back!

At this point, it was 4 a.m. The police officer apologized. The cyclist disappeared without his cat. The cat judged me. It stared at me.

I went home. I taped the paper to my desk. I did not sleep for the rest of the night. I stared at my homework like it was a ticking bomb.

Morning came. I took the assignment and placed it near my bag on the kitchen counter while I grabbed my breakfast. My mom was preparing my lunch. She was making a sandwich. She spilled ketchup on my paper by mistake. She thought it was just another unnecessary paper and put it in the recycling bin. Just before going to work, she took out the bins. The truck came immediately. Miss, immediately! As I was finishing my breakfast, I realized what had happened and ran outside the house. I stood there in silence, watching my homework get compacted into a cube of regret.

*continued on next page*

# The Unimaginable Adventure of My Lost Homework

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I could not rewrite it, Miss. I hadn't slept all night. I ran all around town for that piece of paper! School was starting. And honestly, I had already fought animals, aviation, the law, and my own family for this assignment.

So yes, Miss, the homework is gone. But I promise you, no one on this planet has tried harder to bring it here today. It would have been way easier to just say that my dog ate it. And yes, I do have a dog. His name is Cooper. He once ate my mother's rent cheque, but he is well-behaved now; he would never do such a thing again.

Thank you, Miss, for listening to me. I hope I do not deserve a note on Coba for this incident.

## Jury's comment

Julianna's text is a wonderful comedy of errors. Just when you think another thing can't possibly go wrong, it does. The pacing of the action also works well to emphasise the endless catastrophes. Depending on reader perspective, it is either a quick-thinking and inventive narrator, or one with the absolute worst luck. Either way, it leaves you with a wry smile.

# Every Turn Matters

They thought the game was over.

I knew their journey had just begun.

Every player on the team was drowning in sorrow. They were facing the fact that each one of them could have invested a little more in the last game. Dreadful tears unwillingly flowed on their reddened cheeks, even the strongest and the best among them couldn't contain their despair.

I was furiously gnashing my teeth, but when I saw them, I had an epiphany. A voice from deep within whispered, "Be the coach you always wished you had when you were in their place. Support them and inspire them!" From my pocket I took out a Rubik's cube and swiftly scrambled it in front of the sobbing team and shouted at them, "Everyone, look here and listen carefully!"

Everyone started looking, slowly wiping their tears off as I continued, "You see this cube — it is just like life! It was mixed up so randomly that there are over 43 quintillion possible ways to start! Each little square is something or someone you encounter during your life. A person you cherish, or your worst enemy, masked as a friend. A marvelous victory or a deceptive defeat."

"Each move is a path you choose. We must turn from side to side. Life paths cross and diverge at certain points in time, as the turns move the tiles closer or further from each other. People come by and leave, so do the good moments and the bad ones."

"Everyone is different, and so is their adventure. Some mindlessly twist the tiles from one side to another, trying out every possibility. Eventually, after long years of fumbling, they end up with nothing but confusion. Others take matters into their own hands and figure out the algorithms to solve the cube quickly and efficiently. And those are the ones who really succeed."

"Sometimes to solve a side you must go a few steps back, or when you want to go back to reorganize your cube you need to go against the current. In some cases, you feel your cube is upside down and don't even know what's happening, but remember that happiness is inside us regardless of circumstances. There will be moments when solving the cube is going smoothly, but when you do a turn that looks like a terrible mistake, know that it might be the TURN to achieve the color you need. You should keep trying and probably you won't even notice at the end that the cube is already solved."

"To solve the cube, we shouldn't give up too early, because it might be only the first turns of your life. Keep turning, keep twisting, keep learning, and one day you'll reap the ultimate reward: the finished cube in your hands, shining with every color of your journey."

## Jury's comment

Muhammad's use of language is a delight in this text. It felt dramatic and exaggerated in a way that a pep talk absolutely should be. The Rubik's cube was an apt choice of metaphor and effectively integrated into the text.

# A Commander's Glory

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I dreamed of armies in which powerful infantry and archers marched along the shores of a sacred river. Generals stood tall in their chariots, guiding their ranks through arable lands where crops and produce were harvested beneath the scorching sun of the south. Whether it was the far-away whispers of merchants trading goods and gemstones or the chants of divine priestesses rising at dawn, these courageous men advanced with seething passion for a dream nobody had dared to speak aloud, a dream buried beneath the layers of silt and stone protecting fortified cities. Many had forgotten what hope had felt like; the notion of freedom was a wish uttered only in prayer, concealed within the protection of hidden temples carved from limestone.

Among the few captains, one distinguished himself through impressive military prowess. He had under his command thirty-six units of capable men, all of whom had once been lost beneath the rule of an almighty entity. Under his guidance, hope was restored and vigor renewed. The once barren land seemed to awaken and flourish again under the beacon of a newfound hope.

You, my fellow companions fighting under the banner of freedom, are summoned to revolutionize this land, a desert where the oppressed are stripped of all consciousness in thought and silenced in speech and in action. We shall see the banner of liberty rise into the heavens, seized by the winds driven by the will of our shared dream. In a few years, the south of this land, where the ruling class of unjust instructors of wisdom and their leader reside, shall stand no more. I, as your peer and your leader, will lead you down a path where scribes and scholars alike will struggle to record our triumph in the papyrus registers of true freedom. We shall walk the path of glory and dethrone the greatest enemy to our liberty: the force that poisons the very cradle of society itself.

I am your general and you are soldiers under my command. Together, we shall reclaim our rights to defend ourselves against unfair orders of a broken hierarchy. And the day we prevail, that will be the day—yes, the day when all children shall walk to school with hearts unafraid: without endless scrolls to transcribe, arithmetic to solve or additional labour forced upon us once we return home. They - more specifically, founders of the sacred system - believe they can control us by shaping wisdom through a single lens, their own. They are wrong. We are free men, unbound from their den of cruelty. By what right do they impose labour upon us while they recline in comfort? How dare they segregate us into worthy or unworthy, correct or flawed, according to their narrow grids of judgement? We deserve liberation from miserable toil. We deserve a system rooted in fairness and equality. No longer shall our hours be sacrificed to meaningless tasks. United, we must fight for what is just.

I have already forged a vision of our long-awaited conquest. We are by far the most diverse class in this sacred land called school. Intellectuals, favored by our oppressors, shall bear the task of distracting the enemy. The combative among you will be the ones guarding the gates, ensuring that no authority can silence our cause. The rest of you will follow me into the most holy place of all: the home of the ruler of the instructors, the parent notifier, the very source of our suffering. We shall then seize their sacred instrument—the computer—and expose the truth by sending records of mistreatment to all parents, the divine protectors of our sanctity.

*continued on next page*

# A Commander's Glory

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Rise, soldiers, for the hour of our march toward conquest is approaching. We shall carry freedom through every hall and corridor. I hear the calling of the breezes, soft whispers foretelling our success before it even arrives. We can do this; we shall bring light where oppression believes darkness eternal. Beneath the watchful eyes of the divine, we shall march through corridors covered by tapestries of wood and spice-laden aromas. No matter what struggle, no matter what enemy, we will endure the damp heat and bitter cold born of broken air conditioners and educational systems alike. The path will be harsh, but chains were never meant to be easy to break. We are not bound to the system, only restrained, and restraints are meant to be shattered, as we will fulfill what destiny demands: our liberation- a freedom that tastes like the sweetness plucked from the bitter fruit of a cranberry, or like sunlight piercing the longest night.

We will succeed, and we shall do so under the watchful eyes of all things sacred.

Thank you, fellow students,

Your commander

## Jury's comment

In "A Commander of Glory," Gong deftly transports us to a near-mythical land on the eve of rebellion, before brilliantly pivoting to a critique of the modern-day education system. This is a writer in full command of her craft, able to pivot from humour to insight within a single phrase. Thanks to the passion and poetry of her clarion call, the revolutionary spirit of Gong's story is utterly contagious.

# Attention!

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*Oh God, I might be slightly cooked. On a scale of one to steak, about a medium-rare, I'd say.*

You might be wondering how I got into this situation. Let me take you back.

My name is Denis. The high school I go to is conveniently built right in front of a hospital, in case we decide we've had too much and give in to the urge to jump from the fourth-storey window, which is my case at the moment, as I'm stepping towards the front of the class, hands fidgeting.

Our teacher had the brilliant idea to give us, as homework for the winter break, a presentation to prepare. The guidelines were written in an excessively large font:

1- Attention! The presentation must be interesting. Fail to **do so**, and you fail. Why? Because I cannot evaluate if I fall **ASLEEP, BOZOS!** True agony, I tell you!

2- Posture will be evaluated! No, John, you may not lean **against the wall** while you talk.

4- Where's number 3? I'm not sure, either. That's just how the **system** is.

I don't need to tell you that my teacher is... well... rumor has it, Mr. Zuck spent 10 years in an asylum (as an employee, hopefully?) before pursuing education.

And me, being the brilliant guy that I am, decided to procrastinate. I thought I had time, honestly. But when scrolling, days morphed into each other, and the more I scrolled, the number I felt. Until I woke up on D-Day, and remembered the assignment.

Frantic, I had no choice but to write a little something on the metro, while wresting an old lady for the armrest. Apart from the bumpy writing (courtesy the old lady's shoves), I finished, somehow.

I decided to talk about distractions, scrolling, social media, that type of stuff, seeing as it's all people seem to do, these days. I was a victim of it, and had no doubt my classmates — and Mr. Zuck! — were, too.

The topic would also explain how I got distracted and didn't really do the homework. Two birds with one stone, right?

*"Are you ready?"*

*No, definitely not. The previous presentations all passed very quickly. They were so captivating, entrancing, even, but were over in a flash.* "Uh. Yeah.....? Well... So, I'm sure you all recognize this," I start, drawing the Instagram logo in red chalk (Mr. Zuck said it was a color you should use when you wanted to catch someone's attention) to stall for a bit of time.

*continued on next page*

# Attention!

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“For some, it might represent their whole life purpose.” I glare at the girls fixing their already-perfect hair in their pocket mirrors, which earns me a couple of snickers from the class.

I continue, “For others, it might just be a means of communicating with your friends. But for most, it is used for scrolling. I myself am guilty of it. Wait, I’m curious, show of hands, who here indulges in the occasional *scrolling-like-it’s-my-full-time-job?*”

I raise my own hand, as does most of the class. Most of the part that isn’t napping, at least.

“What if I told you scrolling was one of the worst things you could ever do to yourself?”

A couple of heads perk up. Mr. Zuck shifts in his seat, the wood creaking in lament.

“Procrastination is natural. Our brains are wired to seek comfort, the easier way, and social media is making this path even more accessible. One click, and dopamine rushes into your system, flooding your neural receptors and...”

The next word on my cue card is smudged. I barely make it out.

“and... uh, prompting you to scroll even more. Now, why is this bad for you? Well, first of all, it takes up time. ‘Just ten minutes’ turns into two WHOLE hours. I’m sure you’ve all bailed on a couple homework assignments in the past, because of this, or improvised some presentations, like I am right now. Biologically, it’s totally normal and shouldn’t be frowned upon. That’s just how our mind works, and we haven’t had enough time to adapt to this new technology yet.”

A couple of chuckles. Mr. Zuck frowns. *Uh oh.*

I press on. “Furthermore, by scrolling, you’re helping big companies get rich off your attention and making yourself more prone to brainwashing. The attention economy is REAL, guys, and it really is sucking out our motivation. Do any of you feel drained and overworked, more than ever?”

Some nod.

“If that isn’t proof enough of the brokenness of the system, I don’t know what is. Social media deliberately picks out content that aligns with your opinions, to boost your ego, and keep you on the app. The worst —”

“Young man, I don’t believe your words to be *appropriate* for this school setting,” Mr. Zuck counters.

“Wha-? What do you mean? I think it important for my fellow peers to know about this—”

“Enough!” Mr. Zuck snaps. “You’re—this project is cancelled. Denis, you may come see me after class. Corrupting your peers by spreading fake information? You’re suspended from my classroom. And don’t expect to be able to express your opinions when you come back.”

## Jury’s comment

This story had me smiling from the first line. The writing overflows with personality and verve, making for an engaging and effortless read. But don’t let the light, absurdist tone deceive you: underpinning Zhao’s story is an incisive and terrifying vision of social media’s corrupting, exploitative power, and an indictment of our complacency within the system.

## Just Another Speech in the Class

On a Thursday like any other, Roger sat at his desk, calm on the exterior but panicking in the interior: he had forgotten to write a speech for his English class. This wouldn't have been a problem for Roger, had he been any other student, but he was the class president, and on the verge of getting kicked from his position due to stacking up warnings. This missing assignment would be the straw that would break the camel's back. Suddenly, the teacher began calling each student one at a time to go up and to present their speech. The first person to go up had, just like Roger, forgotten to write their speech. The teacher's reaction was ordinary, just another warning to add to COBA, and the student, while he regretted it, didn't seem particularly abashed. Roger, however, seized the opportunity, got up from his seat and began speaking:

“[slams the desk, then begins to walk forward towards the board addressing the teacher] Has he not done enough already? Have his previous assignments all amounted to nothing? Has he truly lost all his worth, his dignity as a human being, as a person, and even as your own student? You treat us all like your offspring, and yet at the first mistake, the slightest misconduct or a single abstention of the submission of a task you dismiss us without an ounce of dismay. Will you really ruin everything he has built over one single, insignificant, incomplete homework?”

[turns to the class]

BULLSHIT I say. This, that, everything here. This institution, the rules it imposes, the way it caters to the human desire of organizing, classifying others into a sort of hierarchy. Education? I call that thought control. Socializing? You won't even leave us alone. All excuses. We come here because it is the norm, because it is what society expects of us! We must free ourselves from these chains, from the grasps of society, from the clutches of normality!

A good speech must have some kind of tale, fable, metaphor of sorts, [turns to the teacher] you taught us that. Something that will leave a lasting impression on the listener. Well, here is mine:

[turns back to the class]

There once was a fish who swam all alone. Due to its state, it felt watched, it felt like it would be a shark's next meal, it felt insecure. Along came a school of fish that invited it to join. The lonely fish was alone no longer, but the gazes hadn't stopped. The anxiety crept, even more than it did before, after all, a bigger group meant more targets. But the sharks never came. Not because it was in a school, but because they were swimming in an aquarium.

The metaphor isn't subtle, as most of you could've told, but it communicates its message as intended. Schools pretend to protect us from sharks that don't exist. These ideas of social exclusion only exist because of schools. I will not deny the existence of dangers in our society; they're more rampant than ever. But is putting every student in a bubble of “protection” really the best way to keep us from these sharks?...

I am here before you today not as your class president, but as a fellow slave of the system, who refuses to be punished. I stand before the face of tyranny to expose what was hidden so that you can make your own choice when it comes. You too teacher, you're also just another brick in the wall. Forced to correct, grade, submit report cards, meet with parents all too obnoxious to have a pleasant conversation with, manage a class of either overenergized or underenergized teenage students and their dark sarcasm, and most importantly forced to reprimand these students for actions you very well know are blown out of proportion. The only thing that separates you from the likes of us is a meager paycheck, another stain that society left on the people.

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# Just Another Speech in the Class

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We must not; we cannot let this go on any further. Brother and sisters, I call to you again, join me in our emancipation, let us revel in the freedom, which was withheld from us. We only have our chains to lose!”

A dreadful silence hovered in the room. Then there was the first clap. Then the second. And then the class cheered, even the teacher. He then spoke:

“Excellent speech, Mr. Waters, as expected of the class president. I am truly speechless. Class, take notes; this is what an A+ would look like, had he waited for his turn. You can now go back to your seat.”

Roger couldn’t believe he had pulled it off. Not only that, but he also couldn’t believe the words he said. He just went with the flow as usual, just that this time he felt that his words were much heavier than his usual “class pizza lunch” speeches. As the other students presented their monotonous discourses, Roger sat at his spot, lost in his own thoughts wondering if maybe the school needed a leader to foment a revolution.

## Jury’s comment

“Just Another Speech in the Class” demonstrates an ambitious use of satire and allusion (a clever nod to Pink Floyd) in its impassioned critique of the school system. The writing vibrates with energy, honesty, and a willingness to take creative risks. The ending is impressive for its use of irony to expose a system that values procedure over substance.

# English Writing Contest Awards Gala



The evening begins with refreshments and music.



Susan Ji at the piano



William Lyon Zhang at the piano



Lena Mikami-Potvin plays guitar and sings.

# English Writing Contest Awards Gala



Ms. Julie O'Reilly, Mrs. Danica Wunder and Ms. Kristina Kasparian



A guest perusing previous Footprints.



Mr. Jeremy Fewster, Ms. Giovanna Casale, Mr. Jeremy Cohen and Ms. Elissa Ciamarro



Our hosts for the evening, Peidi Zhao and Mr. Jeremy Cohen



The gala begins.



The crowd listening attentively.

# English Writing Contest Awards Gala



Mr. Fewster steps in.



Oh no, Mr. Cohen has lost his papers!



Luckily, Fiona Li has cue cards ready.



Mr. Sylvain Arsenault, president of the Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf Parents' association, addresses the audience.



Jean-Sébastien Lagarde, Allison Ready, Vinita D'Souza, Mélanie Laflamme, Jeremy Cohen, Li Yu Pan, Cristina Ardelean and Isabelle de Margerie

# Junior A Winners

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1<sup>st</sup> place

**Lin Fiona Li**



2<sup>nd</sup> place

**Ayleen Feraga**



3<sup>rd</sup> place

**Helen Jinghan Cai**

# Junior B Winners

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1<sup>st</sup> place (tie)

**Ali Aliev**



1<sup>st</sup> place (tie)

**Yuechen Cao**



2<sup>nd</sup> place (tie)

**Ethan Gong**



2<sup>nd</sup> place (tie)

**Adam Hadj-Said**



3<sup>rd</sup> place

**William Xu**

# Junior C Winners



1<sup>st</sup> place

**Aimée Onishi**



2<sup>nd</sup> place

**Sofia Ivanescu**



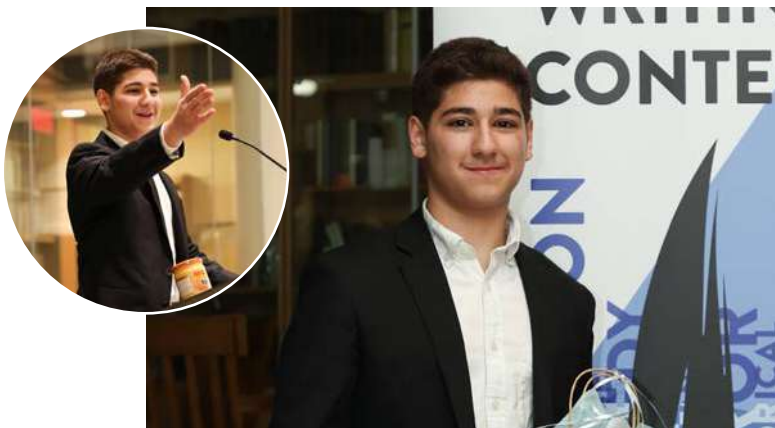
3<sup>rd</sup> place (tie)

**Rebecca Duy Restrepo**



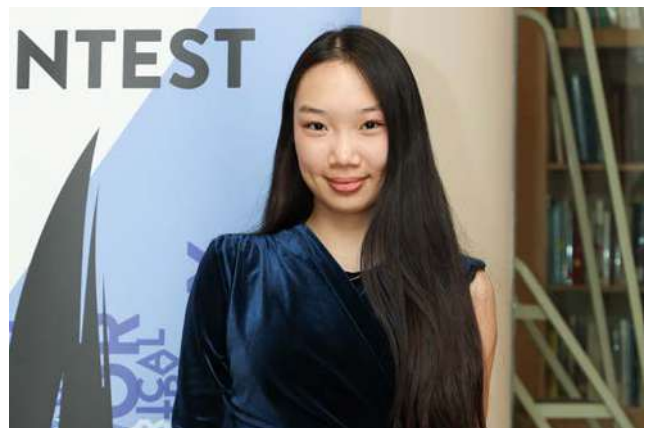
3<sup>rd</sup> place (tie)

**Léo Lin**



3<sup>rd</sup> place (tie)

**Hussain Nasralla**



3<sup>rd</sup> place (tie)

**Ruoxi Zhang**

## Senior A Winners

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1<sup>st</sup> place

**Zhihan Zhang**

## Senior B Winners

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1<sup>st</sup> place

**Maia Woolf**



2<sup>nd</sup> place

**Yoan Kouessan**



2<sup>nd</sup> place

**Dennis Xue**



3<sup>rd</sup> place

**Xiaoran Li**



3<sup>rd</sup> place

**Sophia Jin**

# Senior C Winners

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1<sup>st</sup> place (tie)

**Emma Zhou**



1<sup>st</sup> place (tie)

**Changle Sun**



2<sup>nd</sup> place (tie)

**Annabella Ni**



2<sup>nd</sup> place (tie)

**Hannah Wang**



3<sup>rd</sup> place (tie)

**Sophie Deng**



3<sup>rd</sup> place (tie)

**George Toliopoulos**

# Graduate A Winners Graduate B Winners



1<sup>st</sup> place

**Ilyas Mouloudj**



1<sup>st</sup> place

**Nicolae Pasat**



2<sup>nd</sup> place

**Julianna Linte-Howard**



3<sup>rd</sup> place

**Muhammad Kelo**

# Graduate C Winners

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1<sup>st</sup> place

**Sophie Gong**



2<sup>nd</sup> place

**Peidi Zhao**



3<sup>rd</sup> place

**Marco Leonardo Bianucci**

**Footprints Cover Award**



**Rina Li and Mrs. Mélanie Laflamme**

**Maurice Ranger Award**



**Yuechen Cao and M<sup>me</sup> Audrey Bélanger**

**Pierre Drolet Award**



**Mr. Pierre Drolet and Hussain Nasralla**

**Danica Wunder Award**



**Mrs. Danica Wunder , Muhammad Kelo and Mrs. Mélanie Laflamme**

**The English Writing Contest would like to thank our generous sponsors:**



