

# 2018



## Lakefly Writers *Conference*

# Writing Contest Winners

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# POETRY

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## Back to the Duplex with a Newly Single Friend By Paul Walter

Keeping pace down the hall with the cryptic clock tick,  
we cross the front-door threshold,  
with a wedding-gift breadmaker serving as a doorstep,  
and finally cram the last load into the rented moving truck.  
Sandwiched between woven couch cushions  
and stacks of faded t-shirts is a green desk lamp  
and a steel Ikea bowl, scratched in circles from the whisk  
that used to mix soda bread and sourdough,  
but now looks like a Van Gogh,  
a stainless steel "Wheatfield with Crows."

Bouncing on stained suspension seats,  
I look to the lawn; 3 yellow swings clack  
back and forth like a Newton's Cradle,  
and dandelion stems sway like dismembered legs  
of centipedes found dead in the basement hot tub.  
As the engine starts, I ask my brother-in-law,  
"Weren't you supposed to empty the pool?"  
With a sigh, he pops out and approaches the blue vinyl.  
Pulling a dated Cross pen from his pocket,  
he sends six quick stabs through the grassy side  
before dropping the pen next to three solitary toadstools  
and returning to heft back into the driver's seat.

Soon, we're headed 94 Eastbound, Moorland toward downtown,  
that's downtown Tosa, near Pizzeria Piccolo,  
In a rented U Haul emblazoned with "Venture Across America #83"  
Michigan's 37-Acre Mushroom: "Did you know...  
the Humongous Fungus (*armillaria gallica*) in Crystal Falls  
weighs 11 tons, spans 37 acres, and is a single organism?"



At the duplex, we unlatch, slide up the door  
and watch some crystal hit the floor.  
Calvin heads in to grab a dustpan and broom,  
and I can't help worrying about that lone mushroom.  
Who has always been a flawed but fun guy.

**Author Biography:**

*For the past 6 years, Paul Walter, a teacher in Slinger, WI and member of the Fox Valley Writing Project Leadership Team, has facilitated a young authors' camp. During that time, his camp and his campers' works have been featured on/in 88.9 Radio Milwaukee, OnMilwaukee.com, and **Wisconsin Outdoor News**. After helping many students get their pieces published, Paul's eager to pursue his own writing paths. Following earning a Graduate Certificate in Creative Writing through UW Oshkosh, Paul's first poem publication was in a chapbook of pieces from presenters at the Wisconsin State Reading Association 2017 Convention.*

**A Dead Mother's Child**  
**By Jodie Arnold**



*My health's in decline, it's all your fault.* This is what I read at 6 a.m.  
when I wake in a house I'm not welcome in. *You want me to die,* you say.

*If you could get your life together and stop embarrassing me. The family.*  
*You change men like I change underwear. What are you, retarded?* You say.

I remember being 11 and asking why you interrupted me all the time.  
Why I couldn't finish a thought without them becoming your thoughts.

You didn't let me finish my question. You called me a monster and grounded me.  
I sat in my room and stared at crumbling plaster. I dug out more with a blue ink pen.

The plaster was a white scab in my closet and I wondered if there was a tunnel underneath.  
I imagined the Underground Railroad went right through Gilman Street. Freedom.

I gave that up and started changing my name. Requesting catalogs, free samples.  
Anything I could get mailed to the house in disguise. That was proof I was no longer me.

Of course, you found those and put a stop to that. *What are you, retarded?* You said.  
*That's not your name. Go outside and play. Stop writing shit in that notebook. Be normal.*

There was a minute during college, when we were both fat and collecting Beanie Babies,  
and I thought that was the magic right there. Stay fat. Pursue overpriced plush.

But I did the opposite and rejected you. Rejected food. Flesh disappears easy in youth.  
I became your doll and you liked that too. *Isn't she pretty* you asked everyone we met.

*She shops in the children's section at Target*, you'd brag. And I'd fold my arms over my chest,  
and press against my ribs. Make sure I could still feel them bony against my jacket. Success.

Then I sat through open meetings and read the Big Book and got healthy and suddenly  
I was no longer something you could show off. I was normal and that wasn't good either.

I got pregnant on accident with the wrong man. You refused our wedding but embraced  
my unborn babies like we'd been best friends our whole lives. I fell for it again.

Twice divorced, my boys growing and here we are. I'm useless to you.  
If I were a horse, you'd put me down. You'd have someone else do it.

I imagine you there in your house filled with dying plants and outdated crafts and  
piles of laundry and fabric and cases of Ginger Ale. Home shopping in the background.

You're talking with a friend. You're telling them how I've killed you. Slowly.  
No one will argue because no one can talk in your world. You'll live forever.

#### **Author Biography:**

Jodie Arnold is a second-year creative writing graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She writes poetry, plays, creative non-fiction, and has been published in **Volume One** and **Twig**. She draws comics for a local Eau Claire-based zine, *Fanboy*, and is a poetry reader for Barstow & Grand, a Eau Claire-based literary journal. She is the organizer of the “#MeToo: A Live Literary Event” series, performed at the Volume One Gallery. She has six-year-old twin boys and thinks ELO is the world's most perfect band.

**Eater of Pain**  
**By Richanda Grant**

Feed me steak, rubbed with salt,  
dry aged and seared in oil, hint of red,  
rimmed with a pale bark of fat.  
In my mouth the promise of grease  
becomes the job that is a clock,  
standing water in the basement,  
a bone set crooked, aching in winter.  
I swallow without chewing and it goes down.

The crème brûlée cracks  
underneath the small spoon,  
caramel crust giving way  
to soft custard. The burn of sugar.  
That is the parking ticket, the cancer  
returned, bedroom door shutting,  
ashes of the family dog on the mantel.  
I chew without swallowing and it goes down.

Bite back of sharp cheddar, a cherry's dark  
press of flesh, the easy give of bread.  
Wine sweeps across like a curtain, soft and sure.  
That is the second miscarriage, the tree struck  
by lightning, the ex remarried, shattered  
cell phone screen.  
I chew and chew and swallow and swallow,  
and it goes down.



**Author Biography:**

*Richanda Grant is a lifelong Wisconsinite who has lived in Wausau, Green Bay, Madison, and Sun Prairie. She received her BA from UW-Madison, where she furthered her love of writing. She currently works as an assistant at a law firm in downtown Madison. In her free time, she travels, writes, goes for runs, and reads as many books as she can. She writes at [www.rishenda.com](http://www.rishenda.com).*

# FLASH FICTION

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## Battleground By Gail Sosinsky



"Fifth is clear," the radio crackled in Kevin's ear. Tommy was on point today on the floor above. Kevin was glad he didn't have fifth. The higher you went, the greater the danger.

Kevin swept the hallway with his flashlight and snugged his rifle against his side. Bozo, the bomb sniffing chocolate lab, followed routine, nosing the pattern she'd been trained to follow. She looked bored. Kevin took comfort from that.

There'd been a report of an infiltration during the night. More than two weeks without problems anywhere in the state, but a bomb up in Akron two days ago had shaken the fragile calm. This morning's warning call had been the first in this district for almost two months.

"Third's clear," the radio crackled. Lindsay had third. She was a nervous type, but thorough.

Mickey reported from second with a nervous laugh, and Kelly cleared first.

Kevin checked a janitor's closet. Swept his light through a private bathroom. Nothing so far.

"What's happening, Garcia?" The sergeant's voice growled across the speaker. "Is there trouble?"

Angel Garcia was a trouble magnet. If anything was going to happen, Angel would be at the epicenter. Kevin caught himself holding his breath.

"No, sir," Garcia answered. "Just a rat moving around. Fourth is secure. You can bring 'em in."

"Hold on a minute," the sergeant replied. "Porter? Anything?"

Bozo had finished her sweep and returned to heel, leaning against Kevin's leg. He let his hand stroke her broad forehead.

"You can let 'em in, Sarge," Kevin said, finishing his sweep. "Kindergarten is clear, too." He secured the rifle in the biometric safe and pulled out his lesson plans.

### **Author Biography**

*Gail Sosinsky lives in Madison. A former English instructor, she now works as an insurance counselor for Medicare recipients. Her work has appeared in such varied venues as the Wisconsin Poets' Calendar, **Sword and Sorceress XVI** and **America West Airlines Magazine**. She owns one small cat, one giant goldfish and a plethora of books.*

**The Gift**  
**By Nancy Sweetland**



Sarah stood at the window of her empty house and watched the moving van pull away through brittle fall sunshine. It was a brisk, shining day, the same kind of day she'd met Arthur so long ago, the kind it had been when they'd said the vows he'd so quickly reduced to mere words . . .

She stretched her neck and shrugged her shoulders to loosen her complaining muscles. The house was sold, the furniture and clothes were on their way to Ohio, and the kids were waiting for her at Esther's. It had been hectic, but everything was done now.

Well, not quite everything. There was still the box.

Sarah put on her coat, pulling her long taffy hair from under the collar. She tossed her chin. No use thinking of the past.

No matter now the succession of women, flaunted openly with sticky love-notes left for her to find. No matter now this last five-year affair with Loretta, a frazzle-haired blond who had no further aspiration than to adore Arthur openly and wait for him to come to her. "I want you forever," she had written on a slushy, sentimental Hallmark card branded with her lipstick kiss. Sarah remembered the nausea that gorged her throat when she'd found the card under their bed.

Why hadn't she divorced him? Stupid pride, stupid religion. Now Arthur's reckless driving had ended it all.

She picked up the box, one last thing to deliver before shaking off years of unhappiness and beginning a new life back in Ohio.

Sarah stopped in front of the dingy apartment house, hoping Loretta would be home. She didn't want to just leave the box on the step.

The door opened warily. Sarah surveyed the frizzy hair caught in dozens of tight pink curlers, the ratty bathrobe chenille sprouting strings here and there, the blue shadow smeared around both eyes.

"Yeah?" Then, "Oh! You!"

Once more Sarah was astounded at her late husband's taste in companionship. "I brought you something."

"*You* brought *me* something?" Loretta's eyes narrowed. "Really?"

"From Arthur. A going-away present."

The blue eyes widened. "Really? You mean he left me something?"

"Well—sort of. See for yourself. Here." Sarah handed Loretta the shiny brown box.

Loretta sucked in her breath. "Do you know what it is?"

"I didn't open it."

Loretta cradled the box in both arms and two tears slithered over the blue smudges. "God, I'm so sorry he's gone." She sniffed and wiped her nose on her bathrobe sleeve. "Well—thanks."

Sarah raised one hand in acknowledgment and turned away. As she walked toward her car she lifted



her chin to meet her future even as tears welled up in her eyes.

Then she reached into her pocket and fingered the slick label she had stripped from the shiny brown box:

"The Cremated Remains of Arthur C. Bruce, 1978 - 2017"

**Author Biography:**

*Nancy Sweetland has been writing since she received her first rejection slip at age 13 and was determined to become a published writer. She is the author of seven picture books, a chapter book mystery for young readers, many short stories for juveniles and adults, three adult romances, "The Door to Love," "Wannabe" and "The House on the Dunes." "The Perfect Suspect," "The Spa Murders," and "The Virgin Murders" are available with other mysteries and short stories on Amazon.com. She lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin and loves to hear from readers. She can be contacted on [nancysweetland@gmail.com](mailto:nancysweetland@gmail.com).*



**The Trestle**

**By Stephen S. Raap**

As the moon reached its pinnacle, sixteen-year-old Lucy Roesener knelt into a fresh snow drift alongside the trestle. Her shivering body rocked against an unceasing wind. The trestle's girders filtered the moon's rays in bands of shadow and light, alternately revealing and hiding her tear-stained face as she moved.

Lucy's tunnel escape from Dachau had been successful. Now, if only she hadn't missed the weekly train to Munich. There, she could let the underground know of the impending danger to President Roosevelt.

Dachau's reputation as the camp from which no one had escaped was due in no small part to Commandant Fritz Kulicki's marksmanship, which he practiced on fleeing prisoners who emerged from the not-so-secret tunnel—but only after trailing them for varying distances, depending upon his mood.

Indeed, Kulicki's expertise with a rifle had become known to der Fuhrer himself. Kulicki had earlier been summoned to meet with Hitler in Munich, and that meeting day had nearly arrived. Rumor had it that Kulicki would be picked to be the assassin of President Roosevelt. The assassination would occur during secret peace talks the following week in Munich.

The trouble with rumors is they tend to spread.

This night, Kulicki was feeling quite robust, some hours earlier having had his way with one of the more pleasant-looking prisoners.

Kulicki's subsequent energy had caused him to trail this escapee farther than he had ever allowed a prisoner to flee. Now that the prisoner had stopped at the trestle head, Kulicki brought his rifle into position.

Through his rifle's scope, he could clearly see the prisoner's back moving, though his target's head was out of view. That was okay. Kulicki could wait.

Lucy lowered her head even further out of the wind. She soon heard the oncoming train's whistle, confirming for her that she hadn't been too late in arriving. She remained in place, muscles tightening in anticipation.

In less than a minute, the train was upon her. Lucy sprang up and began running alongside the train, her face fully illuminated in the moonlight.

Kulicki also heard the train's whistle, and gripping his rifle, he narrowed his focus on his prey. The prisoner's head was still not in view, but as the train traversed the rickety trestle, he knew that the climax of the hunt had nearly arrived.

Suddenly, the prisoner jumped up and began running with the train. Kulicki followed the face of the escapee through his rifle's scope, refocusing now to clearly see that this prisoner was the girl who had not struggled or cried beneath him, earlier that evening.

As the girl leapt for the rungs of the fifth car's ladder, Kulicki squeezed the trigger.

At breakfast the next morning one of the senior officers stopped chewing his eggs and asked Kulicki, "So, the record of our camp, it is intact?"

Kulicki replied, "The record. It still stands."

Just outside Munich the following day, Lucy Roesener bit off a piece of bread, and waited for her compatriots to arrive.

#### **Author Biography:**

*Steve Raap is a former marketing writer, having retired from Renaissance Learning in Wisconsin Rapids in 2015. Steve worked for 35 companies over his lifetime. As a 16-year-old high school student, he began his career working as a full-time cameraman at WCEE-TV in Rockford, Illinois. He graduated from Beloit College in 1976, earning a B.A. in English Composition. As far as he knows, he is the only Beloit College student to complete the required four-year coursework in two years. His latest book is Beautiful Glue, a collection of his freelance columns written for the Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune from 2004-2015.*

# JEAN NELSON SHORT STORY

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**Archie Applies for a Job**  
**By David Gold**

Knappquardt Funeral Parlor and Cremation Service



**JEAN NELSON SHORT STORY**

## Personal Information

**Date** : Time is a construct.

**First Name** : Archibald. (Preferred: Archie.)

**Last Name** : Portsmouth. Pronounced like "Port's Mother" or "Mother of Port." I'd rather not talk about it.

**Present Address** : You mean home, don't you? Such a question! Where do you get off? What is home? I wouldn't know. I thought the word "transient" meant something different until, as a young man, I told my folks that I couldn't understand why the Gala, a seedy motel near our little house on the corner of Fifth and Squalor would imply "men wearing pantyhose welcome." Yeah, it sounds crude, but aren't all young men a little unhinged at early pubescence? There was a time when thought I had a big vocabulary. There was a time when I thought this mattered. I mean, I consumed books like a fucking vacuum as a kid, so you'd think I could figure out how to define the word "home." You want to know what I learned? Home is supposed to be "inside" or some New Age touchy-feely bullshit. I guess we're all nomads, transients, potential squatters. We're all guests at the Gala, and some of us are more welcome than others.

**Best Phone to Reach Me** : I've got a little flip phone with a couple games and no Google.

**Email Address** : \_\_\_\_@\_\_\_\_.\_\_\_\_

**Are you at least 18 years of age?** Oh, boy. I've seen some shit.

**Do you have a valid driver's license?** It came with the wallet.

**Job applying for:** I hope you've heard of Portsmouth Parlor. We were ranked the third best pizza joint in Chicago. A couple in the countdown aren't even Chicago anymore; they've got franchises in Wisconsin. We made ours in a brick oven. Our specialty was fresh sausage and stewed tomatoes. Carrying them over to a family's table, I'd tilt my ear down and listen to the crackling pig fat spit its own eulogy, and I'd wonder if loneliness is the same as death. My very last pizza was when I decided to handle your cremations.

**Date Available** : Whenever the next body drops, but perhaps I've said too much?

**Income Expected:** I'm thinking \$500 per job.

**Minimum Income Required:** I'm not asking for much. Give me a warm room where I can sleep this winter and we're good. Internet would help. This is going to sound like I didn't do my research, but do crematoriums have WiFi?

**Employment Preference:** Full-Time | Part Time | Temporary | No preference\*

**Available Housing:** Your funeral home looks nice in the ads.

**Are you willing to work overtime?** Yes\* | No

**Do you have any relatives employed at this company?** Yes\* No

**If yes, who?** I knew a couple of your clients. Maybe relevant.

**Have you ever filed an application with us before? If yes, when?** No, but I have a question: do you really get enough applications to warrant a response to that?

**How did you hear about this position?** A little bird told me. I love birds, especially ducks. They always seem to be drifting with the weather, you know? The first frost arrives and they book it for wherever it's warm.

### **Record of Employment**

**1.Current/Most Recent Employer:** Theodore LeMains, also known as "Dead-Hands Ted".

**Company Name:** Ted's Taxidermy. Home of the Snuffer Stuffer Extraordinaires.

**May we contact?** Sure, but it won't be easy. Ted's hands are less than functional these days.

**Telephone:** Off-grid. You'd have been lucky to find the bastard's shop.

**Your Starting Position:** He put me in charge of tanning the hides.

**Months in Last Position:** Deer season.

**Address:** Transient.

**Dates Employed (MM/YYYY):** From 09/2015 to 12/2015

**Rate of Pay: Start** – \$145 per full mount. **End** – Some ridiculous figure. I still can't shake off the smell of deer brains, so I suppose I earned it.

**Supervisor's Name & Title :** Oh, he was a good man as well. Charles Cottonmouth. I called him "Two Buck Chuck" because he told every customer the same goddamn story about killing two deer with the same bullet. Every. Damn. Customer. He became so inflamed, so impassioned, that nobody ever caught on to his bullshit but me.

**Reason for Leaving:** "Creative differences."

**Your Duties:** My hands weren't the steadiest when I began taxidermy, so Ted put me in charge of brain-tanning the deer hides, which became a source of pride for his shop. He told me once that a brain would only ever be big enough to tan its owner's hide. Apparently, he heard it from Ed Gein.

### **2.Next Previous Employer**

**Company Name:** Portsmouth Parlor.

**May we contact?** Yes, but Pops doesn't talk much these days. You need to tread lightly around him.

**Telephone:** Pops is a bit of a Luddite. Besides, we're not exactly on speaking terms.

**Your Starting Position :** I was "Pieface Pete, the Pizza Pirate": a short-lived mascot for Portsmouth. Who'd have thought a clown dressed as a pirate would scare so many kids? But then, I was a sneaky bastard. I'd creep behind a birthday girl's chair, then leap out of the shadows, brandishing and waving my scabbard with a mighty "YEARRRRRRRGH!"

**Months in Last Position:** The best five years a brick-oven pizza pirate could ever ask for.

**Address:** Permanently closed.

**Dates Employed:** From 09/2010 to 09/2015 (MM/YYYY)

**Rate of Pay: Start** - \$9 per hour. **End** – \$20 per pizza.

**Supervisor's Name & Title :** Louis "Pops" Portsmouth, Pizza Czar.

**Reason for Leaving:** I started off pirating pizza, right? Then all of a sudden I was at the brick

oven, baking them for sale to the Chicago elite. It's like Robin Hood, but in reverse. I couldn't live with myself, but I do miss that sausage. It's really a shame that ma hated pork.

**Your Duties:** We've covered this. Pizza pirate. Pizza artist.

### **Education**

**High School Name:** Oakwood High. Our mascot was the Screaming Tree.

**Did you Graduate?** Barely.

#### **College/Technical School #1**

**Name:** Jimbo's Clown College | Major/Courses: Pirate imitation

**Last Year Completed:** Graduate level.

**Did you Graduate?** You should've seen the ceremony. What a circus!

**Degree/Certificate:** Master of Science – Pirate Imitation.

#### **College/Technical School #2 :**

**Name:** Ted's Deer Camp Major/Courses: Brain Tanning.

**Last Year Completed:** I was an excellent student. Brain tanning was a breeze once I learned to let the brains sit on the skin long enough without touching them.

**Did you Graduate?** Proudly.

**Degree/Certificate:** Licensed Taxidermist Certificate.

### **Skills and Qualifications**

Please indicate your proficiency in the following:

**Personal Computers:** I break them.

**Software Skills:** Somewhere, there's a spreadsheet I made with every variety of pizza that Portsmouth's ever conjured in the kitchen, along with how many of each were sold since I started baking them. It's not a long list.

**List additional skills and qualifications:** When I was fourteen years old, I went camping with my Ma. She taught me how to use tinder and flint with dry leaves and some twigs to build a fire, since it was late fall; you know how awful those October forest nights get. When our stomachs rumbled like the New Madrid Fault Line, we snagged and grilled a rabbit. That first encounter with death jangled the shit out of my nerves, so I focused intently on the fire: its crackle and pop; its many colors, from smoldering, burnt orange to the halo of cool blue blooming at the edges. There was power here. I felt like Prometheus, man! And there was my Ma, tearing into this rabbit. She taught me how to survive in some very ugly ways, but that fire! There's real beauty in the tools that we use.

### **References**

#### **Reference #1**

**Name: Company:**

**Address: Telephone:**

Reference #2

**Name: Company:**

**Address: Telephone:**

Reference #3

Name: Company:

Address: Telephone:

**Other information**

**Have you ever been convicted of a crime? Yes \* No**

**If Yes, please give the date(s) and details:** Convicted, sure; but I won't take the fall for Pop's death. Aw, man, when Pops and I pulled into the parking lot that morning, I watched his heart break in slow motion: First, his eyes fused themselves shut. He couldn't bear watching his own empire turn to ash and dust. Then, his knuckles dug into his chest like he wanted to tear out his insides. I dove out the car, screaming at him to pump his brakes, but that only jarred him out of his daydream: his foot hit the wrong pedal and he sped right into the building, flames and all. Some call it "self-immolation"; I call it "waking a sleepwalker." Ma just stood there, shaking that angry head of hers in disgust when a few sparks caught the hair surrounding his bald spot and started a grease fire, and that was when he screamed. He could only do so for less than fifteen seconds before the fire reached his gas tank. Lucky bastard; he didn't have to suffer too long.

I watched a man touch the floor of Hell when he saw his building crumble and lost the rest of his hair, but then, I saw him enter that eternal peace of our collective destinies.

Please feel free to call if you have any other questions. And if you need a eulogist, even better!

## **AUTHORIZATION**

By submitting this application, I acknowledge that the company may obtain a consumer report (driving record) as part of its pre-employment background investigation and/or during the course of my employment, if I am hired.

### **Author Biography:**

*David Gold lives in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, without any pets. He recently completed his Master of Arts in English with a thesis focusing on the intersections between mental health discourse, personal narratives, and rhetoric/writing studies. On a good day, he dreams of vintage high-end record players and babbles incoherently about the humanities to his patient, lovely girlfriend until she falls asleep. Don't ask him about the bad days.*



Three months ago, my shrink said in clinical terms, I was *in the basement*, so I rented a garden apartment. I thought it was funny. She wasn't amused. She said depression wasn't anything to take lightly and offered me free samples of Prozac. I told her I preferred the basement. It's quiet here without those thoughts to make me crazy. I told her there was less of me to analyze that way.

Sometimes I think I expend more energy avoiding her questions than I would just answering them. She asked me if I drank, and I told her I never touch the stuff. She asked me if I ever tried recreational drugs and I told her the only recreation I get was walking to the refrigerator. She never asked about the butter keeper.

I have six vials of morphine hidden in there for safe keeping. Just in case. They look nothing like butter, I'd never accidentally spread morphine on my toast in the morning. Sometimes I lie in bed and wonder how the cold liquid would feel, wandering through my veins. I wonder what I would do with those last sweet minutes. And then I force myself to think about something else, like the smell of roses or the feel of cotton sheets.

I've slept in his sleeping bag for nearly a year. It used to smell like him, like aftershave and a bit of mustiness from our garage. We used to have a garage. Now I have a garden apartment and a dirty flannel sleeping bag.

Last week, I told my shrink about the morphine. She asked if I had a plan. I told her that sometimes, I sit on the kitchen floor and draw up cc's into the syringe and squirt it back into the little vial. They have those self-healing rubber tops. Once I dragged the sharp point of the needle across the vein at my wrist, watched as it left tiny droplets of clear liquid, watched as my blood jumped up in excitement, knowing that there was only a thin layer of skin between us and him.

She asked me if I wanted to die and I told her *no*. She asked me if I would put the morphine in the freezer, told me that she would sleep better knowing that I would at least have some thawing time to think things through.

I told her that was a lot of alliteration for one sentence.

I didn't tell her, however, about the word. Those six reassuring vials with their flat gray tops, all lined up carefully that night, crossing the letter *T* written on my kitchen floor.

*DON'T*

Without much food in the apartment, the rest of the word was mostly those pre-packaged butter pats and ketchup released from its foil packets. The apostrophe was a dried petal off the rose.

I had kept the rose after the funeral, carried it with me all that day, smelling it and touching its velvety petals. When I pulled it from the grave spray, one of the thorns punctured my finger, bleeding red the same color as the petals. Now they were brittle, nearly black. I thought maybe my blood had turned black also. I thought maybe if I kept the rose long enough, he'd come back. That apostrophe said otherwise.

I gathered up the vials then and lined them up in the empty freezer. I put the small box of leftover syringes and sharps in there, too. The missing vials made the *T* not really a letter anymore. I crawled into our sleeping bag with something sticky on the bottom of my foot. It smelled like ketchup.

It wasn't the only kitchen floor note I'd received. I lost track of time in those early days, just strung from therapy session to therapy session. She had me make lists of things to do, had me bring them to our appointments. Some days I'd add *wear shoes* and *brush teeth*. She laughed and said it was fine for me to add those things, that they were important and quite significant. The hours spent with her were the only thing that got me out of bed.

She gave me a journal and said it would be even better than list making. I told her I'd try anything once. Each night, I'd crawl into his sleeping bag and write. I didn't use a light. I just let the words trail off the page. Sometimes I just scribbled, feeling the paper shred beneath my pen. The next night, I would simply write around the holes torn in the page.

It was one of the nights spent with the journal that the second word appeared.

When I can't sleep, I crawl up on the kitchen counter and put my feet in the sink. I run the hot water and open the cottage windows that look out at the garden. My landlord has roses planted. From the sink, I can see the night sky, imagining each star was someone loved and missed, and he the largest of them all. I know that my missing is bigger than anything else in this world.

That particular night, as I crossed the floor in the dark, something stuck to the bottom of my foot. Not in a little way, like a piece of gum or scrambled egg, but in a huge way. I jumped up onto the counter and scraped off a thin piece of orange cheese.

I didn't wonder about how that slice of cheese had ended up on my floor, instead, I was angry at my therapist for insisting I stop at the store on the way home and at least buy food with some protein.

I had told her grilled cheese was his favorite.

Now there it was, stuck to my foot in the dark kitchen where he never lived. I ran the water, settling my feet into the empty sink and rested my forehead against the cool glass of the window. It was windy and overcast. After tears and hot water filled the sink, I did wonder about how the cheese got to the floor. I had cooked when I came home, setting the table as you would for communion. I spread the paper napkin, cut the sandwich into tiny bites, filled his coffee mug with milk. I knelt then on the floor, selecting one bite at a time, chewing once for each month he'd been gone. I washed it down with the milk, sacred sips from a cup I held with both hands.

I crawled under the sleeping bag and forced myself to keep it all down.

Empty, I drained the sink and dried my feet on paper towel. It was then, with both feet dangling off the cupboard, that I noticed there was more cheese on the floor. I flipped on the small light over the kitchen sink and slid off the counter.

Cheese and bread had been torn and bent to make curving segments of the word that ran crosswise across the kitchen.

### *HURT*

And it did hurt, eating that sandwich, something he loved so much. I forced it upon myself. I could have just gone to bed without food, without that additional pain, but instead I ate, each bit lodged on a sob, each exhalation pressing my knees further into the linoleum floor. It did hurt and I was glad it was acknowledged, even if it was only by cheese slices and the crust of cheap white bread.



I never liked thunderstorms, but we liked them together. With each flash of lightning, we'd slip a piece of chocolate in our mouths, wait for the inevitable rumble of thunder. By the time it was over, the chocolate had melted, filling us with a sense of well-being.

My therapist warned me that day of the forecast, so I stopped on the way home and bought a bag of chocolate chips. I left most of the groceries still in the paper bag on the counter and crawled into bed. Therapy days were always exhausting.

And I dreamed of him, healthy and alive, we were walking door to door in some neighborhood I wasn't familiar with. He carried a small backpack and when it came time for him to leave, he handed it to me.

"I'll miss you most," he said, and he turned and walked off down the sterile street. I stood, holding the soft nylon bag, hearing the rumble of thunder in the distance. He got farther and farther away in the dream and I got more and more angry. Just as the first bright lightening struck, I ripped open the bag, and there, loose, in the very bottom, were chocolate chips.

The clap of thunder made me sit up straight in bed, my hands empty. *How could he?* I was tired of waking up alone, tired of plodding through the days. With the second bolt of lightening, I tore back the covers and stomped out to the kitchen. Fear of thunderstorms was the least of my emotions.

My chocolate chips were lined up neatly on the floor, dark against the light linoleum and with the next flash from the storm, I made out their shape.

**YELL**

So I did. The glass shook in the window frames, the dishes chattered on their shelves. Standing in the center of the room, I yelled until my throat was raw, barely hearing myself over the storm. My anger and the storm receded together and I slumped against the cupboard, sliding down to the floor. It became dark and quiet then, the soft rain pattered against the window and the tears made plopping sounds on my pajamas. I chose a single bit of chocolate from the *L* nearest me and stood it upright on my tongue. Humming to myself, I felt it melt and soothe my throat. I lay on the floor then, to be close to the chocolate chips.

It was the smell of grape jelly that woke me up, but it was the light from the refrigerator that got me out of bed. Still only partially unpacked, I grabbed the white candlestick lamp from the packing crate and edged my way into the kitchen.

There, on the floor, lit only by the light of the refrigerator was my apple. Anger displaced fear and I yelled, "Hey. That's a Honey Crisp! I paid \$2.29 a pound for those!" My voice startled him, and he dropped the stalk of celery. I jumped up on the counter, the ceramic tiles cold against my bare feet.

"I have a lamp!" I yelled, the cord scraping behind me. Edging past my laptop, I knocked over the vase scattering shards of glass and dark rose petals across the counter. He blinked, surprised by the sudden noise but continued nudging the stalk of celery into place.

I jumped the span across the cabinets, landing firmly next to the sink. Without the refrigerator door to block my view, I got a full look at my nemesis. He was the largest rat I'd ever seen, at least two pounds, his coat gleamed in the light, his black eyes sharp and alert. It's also when I realized that part of what he'd done was to glob grape jelly in stylized patterns between the celery and three broken eggs.

"What are you doing?" My voice angry and loud in the dark kitchen. The rat scratched behind his ear with one pink foot and looked around like possibly I was talking to someone else. I teetered on the narrow part in front of the sink, the lamp cord swinging towards the floor.

“Look what you’ve done!” He shifted positions then, sitting on his hind quarters and admiring his handiwork. I moved into the last final stretch of countertop. I wanted to beat him silly with my lamp.

The absurdity of the situation hadn’t registered with me yet. I was standing on my kitchen counter in my new flannel cat pajamas, armed with a lamp, and yelling at an enormous rat. The drone of the refrigerator compressor kicking in helped focus my thoughts.

That was when I realized he was the one spelling words on my floor.

I sat then on the countertop, my feet and lamp cord dangling. “I don’t understand,” I told him. He looked towards the scrawl on the floor and back at me.

### *CARE*

“I don’t *care*,” I yelled, “except about the mess you’ve made.” Satisfied, the rat meandered off under the kitchen table and disappeared through a gap between the wall and the trim board.

After scrubbing the mess off the floor, I returned to bed but couldn’t sleep. My mind busy with the pieces of this puzzle, I considered that maybe all rats could spell and I had just always been unaware. I fluffed my pillow and spun on my side, comforted by the idea of calling an exterminator first thing in the morning.

“You’re going to *what*?”

“Bait him with this poison – they quite like the taste – and he will crawl off somewhere until his stomach explodes. I’ll also set a few spring-traps, snaps their necks instantly although it does make a bit of a noise in the middle of the night.”

I watched as the exterminator tucked a packet of poison behind the table near the French doors.

“What did you say he was eating?”

“Grape jelly. Celery. My Honeycrisp apple.”

“Odd choice, but they’re not too choosy.” He dug some well-used traps from his bag, lining them up on my small kitchen table. I backed a little farther away, feeling the cold edge of the tile counter through my shirt.

“I’ll use grape jelly to bait the traps. I recommend you take up all your food, store it away where he can’t get at it.”

“He can open the refrigerator.”

“So you said. Are you sure you didn’t leave the door ajar? Forget a bit of food out on the counter? Rats don’t weigh more than a pound or so and generally aren’t that clever.”

Rubbing my temples with both hands, I said, “I think I may have an exceptional rat.”

After he left, I went around and collected up all the poison packets, sealed them up tight in a plastic bag and put them on the top shelf of the cupboard. I sprung the traps, breaking several pencils and a spatula before utilizing the handle of my broom. Those I bagged and set outside the back door, after rinsing off the grape jelly.

The next morning, I got the last message arranged with marshmallows and a frozen bag of tater tots.

### *LIVE*

I would, I knew. And maybe with some effort, I’d even learn to like it again. I sat at the desk then, picking a stray shard of glass from the keyboard of my laptop, I googled *common brown rat* while dialing my

therapist's number.

We had a few more things to talk about.

**Author Biography:**

*Peg Rousar-Thompson believes writing can fix most of the world's problems. She's spent countless hours organizing writing groups in her community, volunteering as a Municipal Liaison for NaNoWriMo, planning writing retreats and teaching creativity classes. She serves as editor for Left of the Lake Magazine and is currently working to establish them as a small press.*

*Her work has appeared in **Epitaphs**, **Buffalo Woman's Vision**, and **Bereavement Magazine**. Her short story, *Truth Lies at the Bottom of a Well* was included in the collaborative project, **Pandora's Box**.*

*And she writes every day because she can't not.*



**The Coyotes**  
**By Jill Kiesow**

**JEAN NELSON SHORT STORY**

"There are coyotes," Celeste said, pawing her husband until he awoke.

"Huh," he muttered. It was just something to say to avoid a fight, to acknowledge he'd heard her voice, not that he'd listened to the words. "What time is it?" He rolled over so his back was toward her.

"Just ten o'clock."

"Feels later."

"There are coyotes. In the orchard," she said, urgency in her voice now. She needed him to understand the rarity of their serenade on his own land. "Sounds like a lot of them."

"They better stay out of the berry patch." As usual, he mistook what she was saying.

"What harm could they do in the middle of winter? They're just singing. Don't you hear them?"

*Snore.*

"I don't know why I even bother." Celeste scowled at his back, and curled up one lip in a weak snarl. She breathed deeply, in and out, and relaxed, glad he was out of it. This was a gift to her alone. It was to her the wild dogs sang. It was her own throat, not his, that tightened in silent song, her lips that formed an "O" along with them. It was she, not he, who knew the struggle of making oneself heard in cold darkness.

Outside, the animals again pierced the night with song. Celeste sat up in bed and held her breath, frozen in awe and fear like every other alert creature who heard the eerie highs and lows of the pack's own language.

In that moment, with coyote song in her ears, she was the rabbit trembling in her burrow, the owl hungrily eyeing the movement of voles tunneling under the snow. She was the piled snow and the frozen dirt under rough and chapped paws. She was the dormant root of the grass that would again grow thick and lush in a sunny meadow, in which summer coyotes would roll and teach their young to pounce on the hapless rabbit who ventured too far from her warren.

Confined in thick socks, Celeste's feet itched and burned, and twitched under the quilts. Her own wild spirit rose up, up. Her nose flared in the clean, stale bedroom, smelling paint, fabric softener, all things human and suddenly unbearable.

Her feet pushed and poked, and found their way out; bare skin dropped onto the cold wood floor. Shivering, she draped a quilt over her shoulders.

She stepped into her warm boots, then ran to the back door, unlocked it, and turned the knob. She pictured them outside, thrusting whiskered snouts into the cold night air, testing the wind, searching out birdseed, compost, frozen carrion. She heard movement in their song. She had to hurry. Her lungs filled with the power of winter starlight as she headed toward the orchard, the door closing quietly behind her.

Celeste stopped at the big, heavy livestock gate. As gently as she could, so it wouldn't shift and rattle, she leaned against the cold metal gate, quilt gathered around her like a dog's ruff. She shivered and wrapped her arms tighter around herself.

She almost smiled, but it was too solemn of a rite, this holy gathering of magical creatures: part modern dog, part antiquity, part madness. These resourceful individuals were those tricky enough to escape man's reach but still feed on his land and take advantage of his backbreaking work. *Opportunistic bastards*, her husband and neighbors called them. *Miracles of nature*, Celeste would counter, clearing her throat and forcing herself to stand taller under their disapproving glares.

When she heard them howling at a distance she always pictured them draped in cloaks of stars, and dancing – twisting and twirling through the stubble of cut cornfields under a watery moon, crowns of goldenrod on their heads that were thick with course fur. Now as she stared through the darkness, she saw the sobering reality.

Their coats were thin and ratty, their bodies scrawny. All their energy went toward scraping cold dirt with their strong claws and snow-swollen pads, foraging for icy, rotten McIntosh and the mousy creatures that huddled under the dead grass close to the trees.

Celeste stood there, leaning against the gate until the cold metal leached heat from her and began to warm. The moon rose higher and provided more light, and her eyes continued to adjust. She breathed in the tingle of cold and a faint feral canine smell. She could hear them padding around and crunching on the snow, disrupting the night little more than autumn leaves in descent. Breathing, listening, she closed her eyes, wished for magic, and opened her heart. *Breathe*, the moon whispered. *Breathe in their rhythm*.

The wild dogs came together, drawn in by some cue she couldn't hear. They left off foraging and gathered under the oldest apple tree on the property. Celeste strained her eyes, trying to see more clearly through distance and darkness. Nudged by a force outside herself, she gave up the human need to witness and closed her eyes. She let go of herself, let her spirit be free to merge with theirs. She embraced the calm darkness behind closed lids. Later, she wouldn't recall when she again opened her eyes.

One coyote had risen up onto her hind legs. She lifted her forelegs into the air, curtsied, and began to step, slowly, rhythmically, to the right. The clouds shifted and the orchard filled with dazzling moonlight from Mother Nature's chandelier over this magical ballroom in the trees. There, among the gnarled old apple trees with their matronly arms outstretched, one by one, each coyote raised up onto her hind legs, bowed, formed a circle paw to paw, and began to dance, then leap and twirl, with moonlight hanging on their coats like cream. The ring of coyotes moved sunwise, lifting their legs, kicking out their feet, swaying – all the while singing.

As they circled, faster and faster, one of the animals veered out, closer to Celeste than the others, and winked at her. They ended their song and all took a bow before dropping back to all fours, grinning and scampering off.

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Back in her bed, warm and snug, Celeste's feet burned, this time as they warmed and nestled into a thick nest of blankets. She pulled the covers over her head to warm her face, then snuggled close to her husband's back, taking his warmth. Smiling, Celeste slept until long after the sun was up.

Upon waking, her first impulse was to jump out of bed, grab her chore coat, and check the snow in the orchard for paw prints. But no, she stopped herself. Just in case. If the snow was undisturbed, she didn't want to know. She wanted to remember them just as they were.

Her husband rose and greeted her with a kiss and coffee in bed. "Good morning sleepy head. You were so restless last night. What was up?" he asked.

"There were coyotes," she said. "You missed them."

### **Author Biography**

*Jill Kiesow has pieces in **The Matador Review**, **Ariel Chart**, **Tuck Magazine**, **Lunch Ticket**, and more. She's currently seeking a publisher for her novel. She is a vegan and animal advocate, has worked at a shelter, and volunteers for a dog rescue. She and her husband, precocious toddler, rescued cats, adopted shelter dogs, and foster dogs live in rural Wisconsin. Read more at [www.jillkiesow.com](http://www.jillkiesow.com) and <https://www.facebook.com/jillmkiesow/>*

# SHORT STORY CONTEST FOR TEENS

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## The Song of the Forgotten By Elizabeth Back



### SHORT STORY CONTEST FOR TEENS

I had always enjoyed living in a port city. It was wonderful being able to see the ocean every day from the small window in my cottage. The smell of salt and fish on the air every morning waking me up as I walked to the market. I would go out again every day after my chores and walk on the docks next to the towering ships. The voices of sailors filling my ears and birds swooping low in front of my eyes. The waves crashed against the beach and the massive ships bobbed slightly with them. Each sight and sound captivated my senses; so much so that I didn't notice the rat bound off the deck of one of the nearby ships and scurry across my bare foot.

A round bellied man with a thick bushy beard laughed heartily as he tossed a few coins onto the merchants wooden counter.

"I'll have three of your best slabs!" he bellowed to the small man behind the counter. The merchant brought forth three large fish wrapped in paper, he smiled.

I tore my eyes away and began to run back home, gripping the cloth covered loaf of bread. My feet smacked against the cobblestone path and I turned my head for a moment to look back at the bearded man. He was boarding the tallest ship in the harbor. I wish I could have examined the ships more.

\*\*\*\*\*

I gently pushed open the door to our cottage and was greeted with the sound of my younger sister, still a newborn, crying in my mother's arms. Before I could say anything to her, my little brother had run up and thrown his arms around me.

"Jasper!" he cried with delight.

"Good afternoon, Micha. I hope you've been helping mother like I asked you to."

He nodded happily and grinned up at me. Mother looked up from watching my sister, who grew sluggish in her arms.

"Close the door Jasper, haven't you heard the talk of a sickness being spread?"

I shut the door and stepped forward, taking the sleeping baby, bouncing her as I spoke.

"What illness?" I questioned, not fully interested. I should have been more interested.

"I heard talk of a ship pulling into harbor and the men on it were already dead and bloated. The men who were still alive were spitting blood and had boils all over them," she shuddered. "I don't want you exploring near those ships anymore Jasper. You go to the market in the morning and that's all, do you understand?"

"Yes mother." I had said this without truly listening. Of course I wasn't going to heed my worrisome mother's ridiculous warnings. Now I see just how foolish that was.

\*\*\*\*\*

Five days after my mother warned me about the ships, and two days after my last visit on the docks, I woke drenched in sweat. I felt hot to the touch, but like there was a blanket of snow wrapped around my whole body. As I tried to sit up I began coughing and hacking, attracting the attention of my mother and father.

My mother rushed worriedly to my side. She laid her soft hand on my forehead and shared a frightened look with my father. He gave me a crooked smile and took my mother out of the room with him. I lay there, ice in my veins and flames on my skin for the day. Nothing from the market was brought home that day.

The next morning I woken by the sun peeking through the small window. I attempted to sit up, but I felt such a great pressure on my chest that I couldn't. My hand was heavy as I wiped the sweat from my brow. I rested my hand on the back on my neck and froze. There was a large bump beneath my hairline. I shivered with horror. This was exactly what my mother had feared. Fever, chills, large growths under the skin, and eventually...death. Once one person was infected, the sickness would spread like a great fire engulfing everything in its path.

As I grew more ill each day my parents became more frantic. My mother, in her attempts to heal me, had noticed that I could no longer keep food down. I would spit up the teas, the soups, the herbal medicines. Her eyes grew dark and heavy as she accepted what was happening to me. She kissed my forehead and ran out of the room to find my father. They left me alone, Trembling with fright, in the house, taking my siblings with them to be far, far, away from me and my sickness. Two hours later I heard the front door opening and my father talking to someone in hushed whispers.

The door to my room slowly creaked open to reveal a tall, leather clad figure in a large bird-like mask. Fear gripped my heart as the creature approached. I tried weakly to push myself further away from it. It held its gloved hand up, in a tacit offer of peace. It tried to convince me that it would do no harm, but the iron grip on my stomach did not lessen. It gripped a plain wooden cane in its left hand. Perhaps I had sinned and god was punishing me by giving me this cursed pestilence. He brought this creature to my home with its cane for beating my sinful body. I should have helped my mother more, I should have listened to my father, I should have done my daily prayers on time. My heart was racing as the figure grew closer and I wheezed out rapid breaths of panic. It knelt down to look me in the eye through the holes in its great leather mask. My vision began to grow blurry and I could see nothing but light and a large dark spot. It lifted my arm with the cane, tilted it's head, and glided out of the room. The next thing I heard was my mothers choked sob. My eyes slid closed in exhaustion.

I never woke up the next morning. My parents mourned the loss of their child, taken by god far too young. My siblings cried out for me, but their cries merely floated through my vacant head. I saw and heard all of this, not from my mortal body, but from somewhere else above it all. I listen now in confusion.

I do not know where I am supposed to go, or what I am supposed to do, so I stay and watch. Over the course of two days I see my family and others in our small town fleeing the place we all once called home to get away from the infection. I see strange people approaching the small, ramshackled house. I watch as three people wrap my cold limp body in a sheet. I watch through teary eyes as they carry me to the graveyard behind the church. They carry me past my beloved church, and to a large hole in the ground. They throw me onto others. Those who have been, cursed, plagued, with this illness have also been tossed into that dirty hole to rot. My hands are shaking with rage. How could my family, my own flesh and blood, do this to me? All the others in that grave, how could their families do that to them? They let us rot on the inside until we were left as nothing but shells; now they are letting us rot and be eaten by worms and maggots in that pit.

As my body is tossed in the sheet slips off the face of someone lying awkwardly underneath me. I contemplate all the wrong that has been done to me. I think of my sister who is too young to remember me by the time she has grown up. I think too of my brother, oh my dear brother, how he will cry and mourn his loss of me. As a tear slips down my hollow face I feel the weight of another persons hand on my shoulder. I turn my head and see people gathered around my spirit on the wet cobblestone street. I recognize faces of those in the crowd. The big bellied, bearded, sailor that I saw on the docks; the merchant that sold him the fish; the woman and her son who lived across the street from me; other sailors; the man folded oddly underneath my body in the pit that has been collectively forgotten by the townsfolk. They don't want to acknowledge the stench

stench of infection wafting off our bodies. We are the people this town has chosen to ignore; we are the forgotten. The man who has his hand rested gently, comfortingly, on my shoulder gives me a silent nod. I turn away slowly from the scene in the graveyard and walk with them towards a bright spot on the horizon. As I leave my family, my home, the life I have always known, I hear voices joining together to sing a joyous melody.

### **Author Biography**

*Elizabeth Back is a fourteen year old freshman in Williams Bay. She has always had a passion for creating new worlds and characters in her head, and she eventually turned this passion into writing. She believes that she can always better her writing and therefore is always challenging herself and searching for new techniques. She hopes to gain new confidence through sharing her stories with others.*

### **Miss Elegance By Liberty Stevens**



Avery blinked his eyes and sat bolt upright. His eyes must be deceiving him!  
But no—even on second glance, the little bed really did stand empty. She was gone! His queenly little dog had never run away before.  
“Where is she?” Avery wondered in alarm, springing out of bed. “She’s always here to greet me first thing!”  
She had been there last night, when Avery slipped under the cool sheets and fell asleep as he did every night—his head on his pillow, facing his dog as moonlight streamed in on them both.  
Avery bounded down the stairs three at a time, glancing up and down the hall and hooting with all his might, “Eleasa! Yoo-hoo! Eleasa!”  
But no shining brown dog with her tail wagging elegantly leaped into view, her ears held erect, looking straight up at her young master as if to say, “I’m listening! I never stopped!”  
Bursting into the kitchen, Avery gasped, “Mom! Mom! Eleasa’s gone!”  
“Calm down, Avery,” Mom smiled compassionately, expertly flipping another pancake. It joined the rest in sizzling deliciously. The delectable aroma of blueberry-banana pancakes—Avery’s favorite—filled the kitchen. “She can’t have gone far. Just check around the place, you’ll find her. Then come back in for breakfast. We’re having your favorite pancakes and peanut butter,” she tempted him, watching him keenly. But Avery wasn’t interested.  
He was an ordinary boy, and that meant he was perpetually hungry. But not today. Today he didn’t even notice the tantalizing fragrance of frying pancakes.  
Avery threw open the front door and raced outside, shouting, “Eleasa! Eleasa!”  
Mom cried, “Put some shoes on!” But Avery was already gone.  
He hardly noticed the cool dew meeting his bare feet with each hurried step, nor the crisp autumn air of dawn.  
“Eleasa!”



His boyish cries filled his father's farm, echoing back from every slope.

"Eleasa!"

He didn't have to worry about prematurely waking neighbors, for their nearest neighbor lived on the other side of the woods between the cornfield and the swamp.

In less time than it took his mother to put the next batch of pancakes on to fry, Avery had circled the house twice, calling anxiously for his beloved dog as quickly as he could gasp out her name.

Under the old maple in the side yard, bursting with the fierce crimson of the season, Avery came to a breathless halt and listened, his keen eyes quickly scanning the yard.

"*She's nowhere near,*" Avery decided, "*or else she'd come running.*"

He heaved desperate breaths under the tree and glanced at the big, orange sun rising above the cornfield, tinting the sky with a bold violet about the color of Abby's hair.

Avery didn't hesitate from a reluctance to brave the world in his bare feet and pajamas. Indeed, he stood poised to follow Eleasa to the ends of the earth. He only wondered where to look next.

Pausing for but a brief moment, he broke into an even quicker run and struck out for the barn.

"*Maybe she wanted to hang out with the other four-leggers awhile,*" he thought fleetingly, but before he reached the faded-red doors, he knew she wouldn't be here. Eleasa was dignified. She willingly accompanied her master among lowlier species, such as cows, pigs, and chickens (and especially cats), but she would never visit them of her own accord. They were no chums.

"Dad!" Avery burst into the barn, where his father was already at work, clad in ashen gray overalls and prodigally mud-caked boots. "Eleasa's gone!"

"I heard you hollering the whole way here," Dad grinned. "Well, she's probably around. Haven't seen her in here, though." He swept his damp locks from his brow with the back of his enormous hand. "I'm sure you'll find her, son. Better hurry," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "or I'll eat your breakfast. I'm extra hungry this morning."

Eleasa had not appeared, and Avery didn't wait another moment. Nothing mattered now—not school, not shoes, not even breakfast. Eleasa was gone, and he was bound and determined to find her.

He tore out of the barn like a flash of lightning and bolted up the grassy slope toward the cornfield.

"Get some shoes on!" Dad called after him, suddenly noticing his son's feet, wet with dew and covered with bits of grass and dirt, realizing his son's intention to run all over the farm.

But Avery was already gone.

"Oh well," Dad chuckled, turning back to the hens. "Bare feet never killed anybody."

"Eleasa!" Avery yelled the entire way up to the cornfield, where he caught himself against the wooden fence, panting for breath. "Eleasa!"

But the cornfield was enormous.

"*If she's on the far side, she won't even hear me calling,*" he thought desperately, grabbing the wooden rail and nimbly vaulting himself over the fence. He felt the wet, soft dirt squish under his heels and between his toes—soft and springy compared to the unforgiving pavement of the driveway.

Avery stood and stared into the corn as if he were trying to bore a peep-hole through all the long rows of yellowing stalks, now taller than himself and laden with a bountiful harvest.

He didn't see the cornstalks, however. He didn't see the field mice scurrying around under him, fleeing from his unwelcome intrusion. He didn't even see the thick husks, bursting with the sticky silk in which the precious corn was bundled.

A different scene was before him now. Avery's mind flew back in time—back to a similar autumn morning three years ago. That was when he first met her.

He'd been getting ready for school. His mother had been setting the table for breakfast. Dad was in the barn. Abby ran up and down the stairs wailing, "Where's my other Mickey Mouse sock? Who has my Mickey Mouse sock?"

Somehow, above all of the cheerful, ordinary bustle of the house, Avery managed to hear a strange sound outside.

He'd poked his head out the door, expecting to see his father pottering about with something on the porch—but it wasn't Dad at all.

"Mom!" he whooped above his sister's pleas, "Mom, there's a dog out here!"

Soon the three of them were gathered around the front steps, looking at the poor, half-starved creature, breakfast forgotten.

She had been much younger then, but every bit as dignified and elegant as they had seen her ever since. Though dirty and half-starved, she carried herself with grace. Avery well-remembered the exhilaration he felt at that moment. Finally—the dog he'd always wanted had walked right up and practically knocked at the front door!

"We can't turn her away," he pleaded, turning to his father, who had just come up. "She'll starve!"

She had struck all of them as the most elegant dog they had ever seen. She never whined, never begged, and always stood perfectly erect.

When he was allowed to keep her, Avery tried to come up with an elegant name, too. It was Abby who came up with Eleasa.

And Eleasa she had been ever since. Always dignified and proper. Ever alert and fearless.

She carried herself with a sort of canine pride none of them had seen before. So, naturally, Avery was proud of her, too. When it was just the two of them together, he liked to call her Miss Elegance. It seemed so natural.

Suddenly Avery felt a tickle on his hand.

A curious, long-legged spider was scuttling up his arm. Avery flicked the arachnid off and snapped back to the present. He saw the corn again. And the mice. And the rising sun. The bus would be by in no time.

"If I were Eleasa, where would I go?" he cried to the skies.

His eyes wandered to the woods, and the next instant he was back across the fence, flying in a new direction.

"Of course!" he shouted. "Eleasa likes the woods as much as I do!"

"Eleasa!" he called again as he panted up the broken, rocky slope to the forest. He nimbly leaped among the deposited stones, and they flew by beneath him too quickly to be seen. The wind lashed through his unruly hair until he looked like Abby when she stood below a high-power hand dryer and let her hair blow all over her face.

In almost no time he had reached the fringe of the forest, where the wind was considerably less intrusive. Avery ducked inside the tunnel without a pause.

The tunnel was his and Eleasa's. They had undertaken the project together the summer after she joined the family.

Several pairs of jeans and months of faithful trailblazing later, their round tunnel was finally finished—the most practical way into the dense patch of untamed woods. The tunnel looked more like an enchanted fairyland passage than anything else. Green tree boughs eerily overarched it and thick underbrush sprang up on both sides to form a round, dry hollow stretching to the ethereal. Mosses and ferns peeped out around the dusty, trampled ground before the opening.

Boy and dog had run through it together times beyond count—wading in the pool, damming up the stream, hunting squirrels, treeing raccoons, escaping from pirates, scaling towers, hunting dragons, and slipping through Indian territory without being seen.

Diving inside and running along bent over nearly double, Avery continued choking out her name.

"*Eleasa, Eleasa, Eleasa,*" he repeated hoarsely, as brambles tore at his pajamas and rebellious branches lashed out at his face and neck. He couldn't guess what twigs and thorns his feet were picking up.

He could hardly feel them. All he could feel was strong desperation to find her. “*I’m coming for you, Eleasa.*”

Avery finally reached the end of the tunnel. He’d never gone through it so quickly before, but he scarcely noticed now. Painfully straightening, he looked all around and hooted, “Eleasa! Where are you? Eleeeeeeasa!” He paused and strained, listening as he had never before listened in school. It was so hushed, so silent—there was not even an echo in that stifling forest.

But the next instant there rang out a sharp bark from somewhere quite close. Avery’s heart jumped. It just had to be Eleasa—no other dog possessed such a serene, confident call.

Avery whipped his head around in the direction of the sound. His heart jumped again, higher than before.

There she was—just as brown and pretty as ever, with those large, dark, loyal eyes and pink-golden collar and noble bearing, head held high. Though one foreleg was propped in an unnatural position, she lay as proud and erect as ever.

Avery saw her pitiful condition and threw himself down screaming, “Eleasa!” He swept her into his arms, taking care not to disturb her injured leg, and told her all about his search for her. Smart dog that she was, she really seemed to understand his sad story and broken heart, now and then howling sympathetically between listening with wide, solemn brown eyes.

As he hugged her close, the world forgotten, Avery glanced down at his feet. The bottom of his pajama pants were torn to shreds, revealing his bare feet and ankles—and what a sight they were! Both feet were streaked with torn skin, blood, and gashes—some mere scratches, while others were deep, ugly, and filled with dirt. But they had carried him all the way to Eleasa. And now they would carry both of them home.

Avery stood up and carefully lifted his injured dog.

“Well, Miss Elegance,” he smiled regretfully down at her, “you’ve brung me a long ways. Now I’m gonna take you home.”

Eleasa nuzzled his cheek and gave an affectionate bark.

Avery stooped and dove into the tunnel again, homeward bound, clasping Eleasa as though he would never let go of her. Now his pancakes could be eaten, the bus could come, and he could even get his shoes on. The world was a glorious place again.

### **Author Biography**

*A country girl at heart, Liberty Stevens has lived in five states and visited even more, but has now established residence (apparently) for good in Appleton, Wisconsin. She believes 18 is a good age to stop making cross-country relocations and settle down some place nice. She’s been writing ever since she can remember, but intends to get serious about publishing. She graduated on her 16th birthday, having been homeschooled from day one. If she could do anything, she’d either raise (at least) five boys on a farm in the country, bake specialty muffins, or write books.*



**SHORT STORY CONTEST FOR TEENS**

*"Cassandra, don't move!"*

This is one of the only phrases ever spoken to me. I was stuck in a small cube that provided me with everything I needed to survive. I had been stuck there for as long as I could remember. Every day, I would ask why no one was allowed to move out of this square, and every day, I was met with silence. But now I was old enough to figure out an answer myself. Picking up my small bag, I walked to the edge of my square, knowing what was coming next.

"Cassandra, don't move!" Jess, the woman in the square to my left, warned.

"Why?" I asked, as I always did. "What's the big deal?"

As usual, I was met with silence.

Then, I said something that I never had before.

"If you won't tell me, then I'll leave my square, and find out myself, since you all refuse to leave yours."

"Cassandra—"

"Please, just tell me!" I begged. "I've spent my entire life trapped here, not knowing anything. I want answers...please, that's all I'm asking for."

Jess sighed. "Perhaps when you're a little older..."

"But how much older?" I let out a sigh. "A day? A month? A year? Longer than that? I don't want to be disrespectful, but I am sick of being left in the dark. If you won't tell me what's going on, then I'm going to leave this square and find out on my own!"

Jess sighed again. "Sit down, Cass"

I threw my bag down, and sat, deciding to give her one chance to explain things. Jess took a long, drawn-out breath before beginning, "It all started when two inventors got into an argument. Their names were Terrence Malone and Gregory Istle. They both were competing for Top Inventor Award, and when Gregory won, Terrence was determined to take revenge—and prove how much better he was. And so Terrence set off and went missing for four years.

"Then he returned, and requested the usage of 32 people that had supported Gregory. There were some arguments, but eventually Terrence won. No one knew what Terrence had up his sleeve, only that it couldn't be good. And so those thirty-two people went, due to the fact that they had no choice, and were never seen again. People started going missing, and no one knew what was going on. Then, when I became one of the missing, I found out everything.

"Terrence's revenge was a game. It was a people-sized chess board, and he was using actual people for players. The people he took were either the people who supported Gregory, or anyone who was related to them. The chess game would go on and on, and whenever the players were taken, instead of being killed, they were brought to a cube. When a player is taken in chess, it's supposed to die, but these squares was a buffer between a fallen player and death. If anyone was to leave his square, the buffer would be gone, and death would immediately fall upon that person.

“And while most everyone here remembers, the creators decided to wipe your memory when you came here because you were so young.”

“We were all chess pieces?” I asked in disbelief, motioning towards the other people stuck in squares when I said “we”.

Jess nodded. “Kings and Queens, Knights and Rooks, Bishops and Castles—we were indeed.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” I scoffed, picking up my bag once more and sauntering to the edge of my square.

“Cassandra, you wanted to know,” Jess said.

“I wanted to know the truth,” I corrected.

“Cass, this is the truth, I promise you!”

I began to step out of my cube.

“Cassandra, don’t move!”

“I’m sorry,” I turned to Jess, “but I need to know the truth, and this is the only way I know how.”

“Cass, how else can you explain all of this? What other reason would we stay here? Bored out of our minds?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “But that’s why I’m going...to find out.”

Taking a deep breath, I slowly stepped out of my square.

Nothing happened...

“See, Jess? I’m fine,” I said, walking further away from the square.

But I had spoken too soon. Right then, flames surrounded me. The flames showed me a scene:

There I was. Playing right before my eyes, I saw myself.

“*Queen to E5*,” a commanding voice ordered.

I saw myself being forced to walk over to the square. At the next player’s turn, he brought his knight to E5, which hovered over me and threw me off the board. I saw myself falling...and falling...until I landed in that square that I had spent what seemed like forever in. And now flames rose higher over me, now completely enclosing me. Through the flames, I caught a glimpse of Jess’s sad and worried face.

“I’m sorry, Jess!” I tried to shout, but my voice failed me.

Jess’s face was the last thing I saw before I felt the flames burning into my skin. I screamed in agony until I was no more than ash.

### **Author Biography**

*Elizabeth Keller was born in China, and is a current resident of the USA. She lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin with her two parents, four older sisters, and three cats. Elizabeth is fourteen, in 8th grade, and is homeschooled, though takes some classes online. She enjoys swimming and track and field, and loves to read and write. She also enjoys hanging with her family and friends, singing, acting, and caramel frappuccinos.*

