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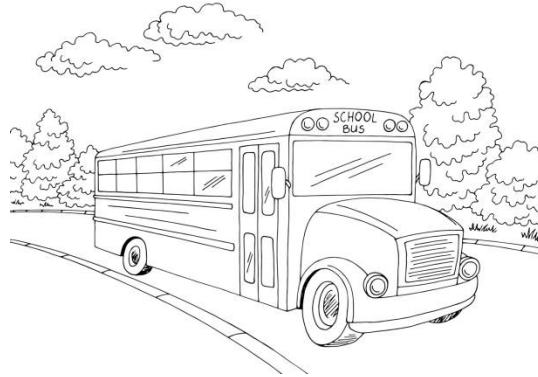
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Welcome to a world where imagination knows no bounds! We invite you to embark on a literary journey guided by the voices of the winners in the 15th Bulgarian Creative Writing Competition. These talented young authors had just one hour to share their hearts and minds, choosing from three thought-provoking prompts. Within these pages, you'll discover their unique perspectives, creativity, and passion for storytelling. Open your mind and enjoy the ride!

# The magic school bus

*1<sup>st</sup> place, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Nikol Stoeva, 44<sup>th</sup> Secondary school Neofit Bozveli, Sofia*



Once upon a time, there was a small village with a lot of children. In the village, there was only one small school, where all the children in the village had to go in order to learn. The children were all very excited to learn, even though the school was dirty and not kept well. In the whole small village, there was a little school bus. One day, when the children were going to school, the school bus's tire was flat and the whole school bus flipped and fell sideways. The school bus broke down because of the uneven roads. It was a cheap school bus, and it wasn't built very well. The children in it were very scared because they thought that they were going to hurt themselves. Luckily there were some men there to help them. The men safely pulled the children out without harming them, and luckily, they all got out without being hurt. The school bus needed to be repaired, but it was going to take some time. As much as the children wanted to go to school, they couldn't, because the school was very far away and they didn't have shoes, so it was impossible to go. The children were very sad to hear the news, and they were bored. They suddenly had a plan. The children decided to make their own pretend school bus out of trash. They gathered, thrown out cardboard, found some rope, and even made their own markers out of the radishes, that they have grown from their parent's farm. The children were done gathering materials, they were ready to build their dream school bus. The children poked holes in the cardboard with twigs so they could slide the rope in, so they could make it pop up. They dipped their fingers in the radish paint to make it pink, and then they decorated it with twigs for the windows and doors. When they were ready, they played with it, but their parents called them to eat dinner and then sleep. The children went back to their homes and were hoping for the real school bus to be fixed. The next morning the children rushed outside into the grass field to play with each other again, but little did they know their wish came true but even better! "WOW!" the kids said. Standing right in front of them, a big, marvelous, pink bus waited for

them to go to school. The kids were happier than ever! They couldn't wait to go inside. Once they got on, they noticed the bus didn't have a driver. "How come the bus doesn't have a driver? Has he not come yet?" one of the kids said. The bus suddenly started shaking. The kids were a little scared. The bus started flying! "IT'S A MAGIC BUS!" one of the kids yelled. They were all very excited to go to school now. A portal appeared out of nowhere. The bus went on it. All the kids were shocked, but still excited. They arrived in a tropical jungle! The bus started telling the kids all about the jungle, like all sorts of bugs, plants, and animals. The kids were exhausted, so the bus took them back home. The children started telling their parents all about the adventure they had today! Even the parents couldn't believe it! The next day they visited the desert. They learned about cacti and the hot climate. They had a lot of fun and since then, a new adventure waited for them every day. The old school bus mysteriously disappeared one day, no one knew how, but they eventually forgot about it.



# The stars go to sleep

*2<sup>nd</sup> place, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Maia Svenson, Private Secondary School Djani Rodari*

When I was little, my grandpa absolutely loved the stars. Once I asked him, what the stars do during daytime. He thought for some time, before he started the story.

There was a goddess named Alehna. She was the most beautiful thing to ever see. Not everyone could see her beauty, so she decided to create the stars as a symbol of her beauty. Using her powers she made beautiful shiny crystals. She hung them up on the pearly blue sky with white, shiny ropes. When she looked at her creation, she noticed that the stars cannot be seen. She was disappointed. That's when she started to think deeper. There had to be a dark background for the stars. But what exactly? Alehna asked her god friends for any advice. Sadly, no one could help her. Minutes turned into hours, hours turned into days, days turned into months..yet the poor goddesss, could not think of a solution. Finally, the day came. After some experiments, Alehna decided to make the pearly blue sky dark. "But how?" She kept asking herself. "The poor and innocent people won't be able to see in the darkness.". After lots and lots of thinking, Alehna thought of something. Why not make day and night? During daytime, people would be able to do their things and during nighttime, sleep. The beautiful goddess was jumping up and down in excitement as she finally managed to think of a solution for her creation. With the help of other gods, they created day and night. Alehna was so happy! She made beautiful and shiny crystals again and hung them up in the sky with white ropes. The stars shined during nighttime while in the day, they didn't. The goddess was still not happy. The poor stars need to have a break with all this shining. "If they don't sleep or relax, they won't be shining anymore!" She kept saying to herself worried and anxious. "If the stars aren't shining, no being on Earth can see my beauty!" Poor Alehna. She started to think of ways for the stars to get some rest.

Months went by of thinking. "How can my creations sleep? They must continue to shine! The humans need to see my beauty!" The goddess was out of ways on how to let the stars sleep. One day, while she was walking around the forest near her pearly white castle, she found a baby fox sleeping with its mother. The mother had her tail around the baby, to keep it warm and some leaves on the head, for darkness. Alehna's eyes sparkled. "I finally found out how the stars can go to sleep!" She yelled happily, jumping up and down while on accident, woke the foxes. That gave her a bigger and better idea. Alehna ran back to her pearly white castle and started to work on the solution. Days and nights she worked, determined to create the perfect sleeping solution for her stars.

Finally, she finished with the perfect solution. Every time the sun would rise, and the moon would go down, small flying particles would give the stars a bed and blanket. Then, they would read bedtime stories or sing songs, so the stars could sleep longer. Once it was time for them to wake up, the particles would gently spray magic dust on the stars, waking them up from the long slumber. Everything was working according to Alehna's plan, until she realized her mistake. On Earth, people wake up in different times, meaning that the stars may wake up during daytime. "That is no good." She thought to herself, wondering how to fix this grand mistake she made. She started to draw on her bedroom walls, the sky. During both daytime and nighttime. After a lot of time, she managed to think of a plan. Alehna would separate the sky in a few pieces. Wherever the sun is shining, the stars would sleep. Wherever the moon is shining, the stars would be awake. Everything was perfect... but there was still something missing. Humans never looked at the stars. Alehna was sad. She went down to Earth only to find out that her stars weren't shining enough. She was completely shocked, because she thought they were shining enough. The goddess started to make up a solution, once more. She made the stars shinier and made shapes and figures, to capture the humans' eyes. It worked. Her plan worked. Everyone could now see both her and the stars' beauty. The humans loved the stars so much they started to learn and find things about the stars that made them more and more interested. Alehna couldn't believe it. Everyone could now finally see her beauty. There was one more thing she had to do. The stars after some time would start to build pent up energy inside themselves. Alehna noticed and realized it was not good. So she made a decision. Every few days or weeks the goddess would inspect the stars and those who have pent up energy, shall be released. Once a star's energy has been released it would go down to Earth, creating a being. The more energy that a star has, the more bigger being it would create. Now I know why so many people find astrology and astronomy fascinating. Maybe I'll become an astrologist, just like my dear grandpa.



## The magic school bus

*3<sup>rd</sup> place, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Hristeya Avramova, 1<sup>st</sup> Secondary school, Sveti Sedmochislenitsi, Targovishte*

“Bye, mum I’m off to school!” Stella said with with hint of annoyance. Her mother looked up from the newspaper and before stella could leave she yelled back. “Bye, honey!” Stella hung the backpack on her shoulder and left for school. She walked down the street towards the bus stop and met up with her friend Becky. They chatted for a while; in the meantime more students were gathering around. They were all waiting for the bus.

The bus arrived at the stop, everyone got in a line and waited for their turn to get in. The driver was different than the usual one, instead of Mr Riley, it was a tall man, with a black mask to cover his face. His whole attire was black. Kind of scary in Stella’s opinion. Becky sat down on their usual spot, and everyone began to chat. *Why did you get in this bus, the driver is different? It isn’t safe here.* A voice in the back of Stella’s head said. Her eyes widened, was she going crazy? It was true, the driver is different, but why would it not be safe? Would it be possible that the bus was talking to her? **Alright, Stella. Now that’s melodramatic to think about, no?** She scolded herself mentally and took a note of the weird warning. She turned to Becky with an amused look on her face. “Did you hear that?” Becky looked at her with confusion. “No? It could be your imagination if you’re already hearing voices.” Becky giggled; she loved teasing Stella.

Stella rolled her eyes in response and didn’t comment on her dumb joke, if she could even call it a joke. The bus stopped at a streetlight and Stella decided to grab a sandwich from her backpack, she was getting hungry and annoyed by the whole situation. **Why does mom always fold my food in aluminum?** Stella groaned and unfolded her sandwich, placing the aluminum wrap on her lap. Becky saw how frustrated she was and thought it’d be funny to tease her. Again. She grabbed the aluminum wrapper from her lap and put it on her head. The school queen bee, Channel, turned to the side and saw the hilarious sight. “What a weirdo.” Channel laughed out loud. The other students around chuckled along.

Suddenly the bus went past the streetlights, but the whole scene repeated. Like it never happened in the first place. “What a weirdo.” Channel’s voice rang through her ears. Stella



almost panicked, there was definitely something sketchy with this bus, the voice was right. Stella looked to her side and said in an almost anxious tone in her voice. “You saw and felt that too, right? The whole scene repeated!” Becky looked at her and laughed at her face. “What is wrong with you today? First voices, now this? You read way too much to think we of all people go back in time, that’s impossible!” She exclaimed with mockery in her voice. **Rude, Becky.** Stella pouted silently, crossing her legs and took her sandwich, taking a bite. The bus stopped at a streetlight again, by the sudden motion Stella dropped her sandwich. “Oh, man. But I love those sandwiches!” Stella groaned, the bus went past the streetlight, and she dropped her sandwich again. Now she was sure there’s some magic to this bus. The puzzle in her head was starting to solve. She glanced at Becky again, taking out another sandwich and unfolded the aluminum wrapper and made it to one of those hats she saw in a movie, maybe because of that first wrapper that was still on her head she remembered and no one else did. She placed the hat on Becky’s head and her face was like she was hit by a truck. Stella shaped her aluminum foil in a hat and placed it back on her head. “We have to get off this bus.” Becky suddenly said to Stella. Stella agreed, but how are they going to go past the driver, he didn’t look so innocent himself.

They thought about it and the voice from earlier spoke again. *You’re stuck in a loop; the driver will see your hats. Leave notes to yourselves in order to keep your memory! He’s coming!* The two girls wrote down a note, **“It’s not safe here, this is a trap.”** And took off their hats faster than the speed of light. The driver was indeed coming, but if he was coming.... Who the hell is driving??? They read the note and small droplets of memory flashed in their brains. “Do you seriously think some fourteen-year-old blonde girls are going to fool me? Give me the note. And those aluminum wrappers of yours.” The driver’s voice makes them feel scared. He was practically growling at them. His dark brown eyes shined as rays of sunlight hit his face, the bus was still moving by itself like someone was there and driving.

“Stella, wake up!” Stella suddenly opened her eyes and saw her mother’s angry expression. “You’ll be late for school!” Stella let a sigh of relief. It was all just a nightmare, thank goodness! She rose up and put some clothes on and did her usual make-up. She hung her backpack on her shoulder and met up with Becky at the bus stop, she told her friend about the nightmare she had and Becky told her she had the same one. That was weird? The bus arrived and the doors opened. It was the same man from their nightmares. He looked them dead in their pupils and smirked. There he was, from flesh and blood. He was **real**.

# The stars go to sleep

*Poetry winner, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Anna Georgieva, Private secondary school Bulgarsko shkolo, Sofia*

When the sun goes down  
it passes the horizon.  
And when the stars wake up  
they brighten up the endless void.



They start talking together.  
Mentioning their dreams that last forever.  
“Hey Bob what’d you dream of last night?”  
“I dreamt of flamingos in disguise.”

As the dark time reaches midnight  
the lonely birds get out of their homes.  
They want to reach out to the stars, ask them what the time is,  
So they can roam around the woods without being alone.

The fireflies look up in the sky.  
They want to shine bright like the stars.  
And yet they can’t reach as high,  
as those lanterns full of light.

Bring us love and don't describe desperation.

We humans sit behind the doors.

Some of us watch the lanterns get up,  
some of us watch them 'till they're gone.

And as the selfless night shares it's light  
it has to come to an end at last.

To let the sun brighten up the mood again,  
restarting the cycle like it did yesterday.

The fireflies go back to waiting,  
the birds get back to their nests.

The humans continue their labor  
and the stars go to sleep 'till they wake up later again.

Maybe it's better this way  
for the stars to hide away through the day  
Let the sun smile for a bit  
And smile with it, doesn't hurt so why not try it?

## No crying till Sunday afternoon

*1<sup>st</sup> place, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Lina Brintnol, Secondary school Tzanko Tzerkovski, Polski Trambesh*

Galaxies away, there are people like you, in a world like yours- wait... no. Not *just* like yours. This world is different. There are rules every single living being is obligated to live by, no questions asked. So, what are these rules, you may be asking? Well, simple – you’re not allowed to express any emotion outside of the designated hours specifically assigned for people to cry, laugh, get mad and so on.

“What?! That’s *awful!* How could someone just have their emotions under a strict schedule?” That’s the typical response I get to all of this, and just to spice things up, guess what? That’s right! We are okay with having our feelings fully under the control of the Government... Well, I’m not.

Look, I’ll keep this simple. Our world is strictly organized and your main role as a person is to keep production running. And what are we producing? No one knows. We are only trained to follow the rules very carefully because of one mistake and the whole system of our society will collapse. Avoiding mistakes requires focus, and emotions distract us, which is why expressing them is so forbidden.

Anyways... uh, hold on, did I really forget to introduce myself? My real name is Effugere Societo, but the Guards (the police in my world) gave me a codename – “The Rulebreaker”. I am what the Government calls a “glitch in the system”.

See, I was working as usual, as apathetic as usual, when there was a sudden nagging feeling in my heart. Then there was this very... persistent voice in the back of my head saying, “I know you want to do it... just do it... come on, Effy, do it, BREAK THE RULES, *EFFY*, **JUST DO IT!**”

HA! Like I’d ever do that. Are you crazy? The punishments will be insane if I disrupt anyone else’s work. I could get killed for that, y’know!.. Wait... w-what?..

Two tears splattered faintly onto the paper I was wrapping a box with. I froze in place, releasing shaky breaths as I stared at the box going further and further away on the conveyer belt. A few more droplets slid down my face and fell onto the belt. I wiped my cheeks hesitantly and finally started to get my thoughts back together. “W-why am I crying?.. I can’t - I shouldn’t be... no, no, no... It’s not Sunday afternoon! Crap, no time for moping right now; I gotta get out of here!..”

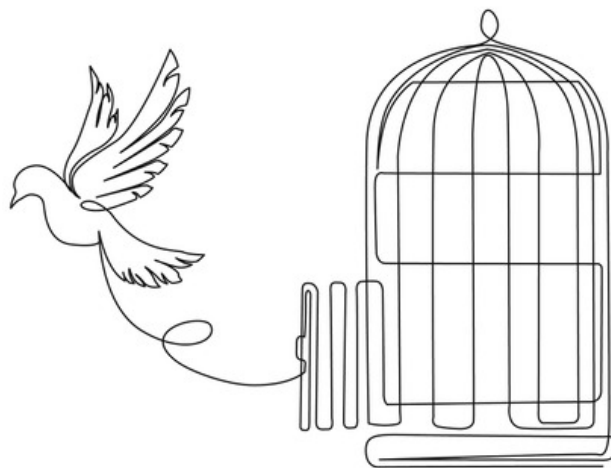
Alright, buddy, sure, but how exactly do you plan on doing that? There's Guards all around the factory! Welp, I don't really have any other choice. In my case it's not fight or flight, it's fight AND flight.

And that's exactly what I did. I somehow survived being chased by more than 30 Guards (Yes, I know, it's a bit cliché, but Effugere never lies!) and escaped to the Badlands. In that place, everything big and small is abandoned, destroyed, completely left behind by humanity. Perfect for hiding from the authorities – there aren't any people to report you, but.. it sure gets a bit lonely sometimes.

“Why are so many of the Guards after you, Effy?” When I ran away, I, of course, left my work post behind entirely. One inadequacy equals the crumble of a whole civilization, remember? Well, that kind of led to most of my world falling apart, more rules being created, and the enrolment of regular inspections during worktime.

I may be hiding for the rest of my life, but hey! I'm free!.. though, I do still wonder what caused me to just break down like that... Anyways, I named that little voice in the back of my head “Stress”. Nice name, right?

Now that I think about it... Is it really worth being the only one able to fly free while the other birds are still trapped in their cages?..



# The Tree Who Loved To Give

*2<sup>nd</sup> place, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Muhammad Haziq Parekh, Learning Alliance International, Pakistan*

Let me tell you the story about the tree that loved to give, and a man named Babu. Deep in the savannahs of Africa, there was a village. It was a small, little hamlet, full of lively people who loved their home and the landscape around it.

5 years before our story starts, a bushfire sparked from the African heat and set the village ablaze along with the savannah around it. A pregnant lady and her handmaiden were trying to escape the deadly flames and ran off to a grove some distance away from a village.

The villagers believed that this very grove was sacred and left offerings to their gods there in worship. The lady and her handmaiden ran inside the grove when suddenly red-hot tongues of flame began to lick at the entrance of the grove. An old oak tree caught fire and collapsed, blocking off the exit. To the handmaiden's horror, the lady began screaming in pain as she collapsed onto the ground. The maiden rushed to her lady's side.

On that day, Babu was born in that grove. As the newborn child cried in his mother's arms, the clouds let out a rush of rain. It was like a balloon had burst. One second, it was dry and burning hot in the heat of the fire, and the next, cold rain was splattering down and steam hissed off charred grass and wood. From the cold summer rain, and the tears of a baby, a sapling sprouted from the ground.

And now, our story begins. A young boy named Babu, who loved to explore went out of the village and ran away to explore. Babu didn't like the village much. It was a grim place, with grievers and dozens of houses still destroyed. Babu liked the feeling of tall grass pricking his knees and the African sun beating down on his back more. No matter which direction he went, Babu always found himself reaching the same place. It was a beautiful grove where he loved to play. Babu crawled under the dying oak that covered the entrance and ran forward to a huge tree that grew from the middle. Babu ran around the tree, dancing happily and climbing the branches. Babu played until he got tired and fell asleep in the spot carpet of moss that covered the tree's base.

The sun was setting when Babu was awoken by a sharp feeling attacking his face. He suspected it to be his mother, who always found him here, but instead, it was a huge owl pecking at his face with had brown plumage flecked with big, scary black eyes.

The owl cawed and raised a talon to Babu's face, but a branch fell off the tree and hit the owl in the head. The huge raptor flew away, screeching in pain.

Babu breathed a sigh of relief and hugged the base of the tree. “Thank you.”

A voice ripped through the night, radiating from the tree *I PROTECT YOU, YOUNG ONE. I WILL GIVE YOU ALL I CAN.*

Babu looked at the tree in shock. “Did you just speak?”

*Yes, young one. I will be there for you.*

Babu smiled. He heard his mother’s voice calling his name from the other side of the dying oak and ran away home.

Over the next few years, Babu went to the tree every day and talked to it while he played around it, and the tree would always protect Babu. One day, when Babu was 14, he went to the grove, but he was sad. The tree sensed his sadness. *WHAT HAPPENED, BABU?* It asked. “My mom needs money, and we have nothing to do. I’m scared, Tree.”

The tree was silent for a count of five, then a few branches of wood dropped from the high branches. *Take my wood, Babu. Sell it at the market and use the money.*

“Thank you, Tree.” Babu picked up the branches and walked away.

One day, when Babu was 16, he went back to the grove for the first time in a month. *Where did you go? I was worried for you.* The tree asked when he walked close. “My mom needs to feed my little siblings, but we have very little food. I’m worried about them.” Babu had barely finished talking when a bundle of juicy looking fruits fell from the leaves of the tree. *Take my fruits and feed your brothers and sisters. I will not let them starve.* The tree’s voice radiated emotion. “Thank you.” Babu smiled and went away.

When Babu was 19, he went back to the grove. Babu had deep bags under his eyes and looked like he was crying a lot. “Tree, I don’t know what to do. My mom is sick with Redcough, and we can’t get the medicine for her.”

Leafy branches fell from the tree. *Feed your mother the sap from my leaves. It will heal her.*

“Thank you so much, Tree.” Babu felt like he was going to cry as he hugged the tree’s trunk.

The next time Babu came, he was 25 years old and had the uniform of a lumberjack, but nothing with him. He looked like he was sleepless. “Tree, I need to put a roof over the heads of my wife and kids, but we have very little money.”

Tree grumbled in thought. *Tomorrow when you come to visit me, bring your axe. Cut down my trunk and build a house for your family.*

Babu sobbed with relief. “I love you, Tree.”

*And I love you too, Babu.*

Babu didn't visit again until he was 80 years old. The tree was fading. It had been cut and it slowly started to die like the almost fully decayed shell of the oak by the entrance. *Hello, old friend. I have nothing more to give you.*

"No," An old, frail Babu said, smiling. "I don't want that; I just want some peace with an old friend." He sat down next to the tree. "You've helped me my whole life, and because of it I've done everything I've ever wanted, and my family is thriving. But I've never even thanked you! I wouldn't have been able to do anything without you. I think I'll take a nice, small rest over here. Like old times."

The tree's few remaining branches rustled. *And I will protect you, even still, as it is the only thing I have left to give.*





## No crying till Sunday afternoon

*3<sup>rd</sup> place, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Elitsa Todorova, American College Arcus, Veliko Tarnovo*

In a society consumed by technology, AI and robots, being human was forbidden. Being happy when you felt like it was forbidden. Being sad and crying when you injured yourself, for instance was forbidden. Even looking like or slightly resembling a human was a thing, unfathomable for society, occupying the world today.

The year is 3409. A time where it is understandable that AI and technology will have vast power, much more than the average person in 2024 could comprehend. But here's the thing-instead of moving forward and progressing as a civilization, the few humans left are doomed to live their lives like robots-and even hiding their humanity, their tears and smiles and wrinkles and eyes. It was all due to "the accident of 2056", they call it. The statistics for this year particularly showed that the average student, be it in school or college, used mostly AI sources for studying and completing assignments. That led the governments all over the world to believe that AI should be restricted in educational institutions, for it was stealing human intelligence. However, unfortunately, secret corporations, working for bigger ones that specified in producing and improving AI, were unhappy with the decision the world had taken. And so, they decided to launch the biggest and most confidential project they had ever worked on-humanoid robots, programmed and adjusted to behave just like humans. At first everyone thought that there was nothing dangerous or fearsome in them. However, since those robots were produced too early and hadn't advanced enough, that led to the small army of robots to start hating humans, therefore launching a war. Well, you could guess who won the conflict.

And that summarizes the state of the world right now. Although there is a day in the calendar-a digital one, yes-that is the biggest holiday, the merriest day of the year for all humans, wherever they are. That day was simply named Human Day. Human Day is the only holiday we have left. We've been stripped and forbidden from Christmas, New Year, Halloween- everything. But most importantly, on that day we were allowed to go out of wherever we were hiding, wherever we were scavenging for food and water, knowing it's hopeless because robots don't need those things. We were allowed, on this only one special day, to take off our masks, show the real look of our faces, however many different they were, to feel the touch, to wipe the tears, to see the smiles of real human beings. Hear their stories and share yours. Have the freedom to laugh and talk and run and whatever your soul and heart desires. The date was 5<sup>th</sup> of July, the next Sunday. 5<sup>th</sup> of July was the day

the humans fought the hardest, most significant war against robots. I even got it tattooed on my wrist, and so did many other people.

I didn't even introduce myself. Nowadays, it is restricted for anyone to obtain a human name and so I went by QSW3490. It sounded like a Wi-Fi password and, of course, I didn't like it. I remember when I was younger, I would complain to my mom about it many times and even blame her for naming me like that, but she only looked at me. Later on, I realized it wasn't her fault, and she was just helpless. And that was the day the silent rage, helplessness and sense of eternal doom reached my soul and gripped it tightly. I realized I couldn't live like that. No human deserved to live like that. Not anymore. And so, my soul, stripped of the helpless void and only fueled by rage and determination decided to fight. To fight like nobody has ever before. Said rage has been fueling me and my secret, against-the-government plans ever since then.

The preparations for the Human Day were excessive and over-the-top every year, as they should be. Even though we were still in our masks and robotic costumes we openly spoke our languages, instead of using the binary code as usual. The spirit of freedom has entered everyone's body as they prepared, endlessly and tirelessly all the human food, drinks and entertainments the festival was about to offer. But I had another occupation - I was planning an uprising against the robotic government. I've been planning for years, alongside my friend OPQ7089- an equally strange name as mine, but we shared the same thoughts and ideas, which has been helpful for me- to see another human be as determined and rageful about our current situation like me. We had an arranged meeting on Saturday, the day before the festival. We schemed on secretly slipping into the government's headquarters- a carefully curated plan, so it didn't seem as foolish and impossible as it did when the idea first entered our minds. Then, we would go the confidential motherboard-the one which contains the code, used to program the first ever robots of the big corporations, and simply destroy it. Easy enough, considering that me and OPQ7089 have been talking over and over about bypassing security systems of all kinds, securing safe escape and making it seem like we didn't do anything wrong.

The big day has come. The festivities have already begun, much earlier than usual, which served us nothing but luck on our way. Being the optimist I am, I was sure that our plan would work perfectly, and everyone, human or robot, would be too distracted to even notice anything. A few hours later we would be free, finally.

## No crying till Sunday afternoon

*Poetry winner, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Dariana Penyashka, 18<sup>th</sup> Secondary school William Gladstone, Sofia*

This week was rough  
The unfinished assignments increase,  
But I'm tough! I'll finish half, at least.  
I don't remember the last time I ate,  
Nor the one that I slept.  
I remember all the sleepless nights  
And the dates I shouldn't forget.  
"That is important!" the teachers say,  
"Highlight it with pretty colors."  
All of the highlighters - coloring all day,  
They eventually will lose their colors,  
They all will turn gray.  
I'm so caught up, I often forget!  
I'm neglecting my needs-  
That, someday, I'll regret.  
The color on my face- it's no longer there,  
Oh, how I wish that someone would care.  
There are bags under my eyes-  
It's like nature is highlighting,  
It's highlighting my work, my will to survive.  
It's Sunday afternoon, I'm done with my work.  
Tears sting my eyes, I rock myself back and forth-

“I have to go longer” I quietly say.  
My cries fill the room-  
“Oh, will this ever go away?”  
I look at my hands - they are shaking.  
I’m inside my room - my walls are finally breaking.  
It’s Sunday afternoon, it’s my time to grieve-  
To grieve and to mourn over that little girl,  
Who once insisted “No, I still will believe.”  
Is she even there? I shooed her away.  
She was the one who highlighted my life,  
But the colors she once used, now decay.  
It’s Monday once more. Here we go again.  
Time to turn my emotions off.  
Time to shelter the rest from my pain.  
Am I overreacting? Do other kids relate?  
Is all of this not real?  
Are these just stories we create?  
Do they ever forget they’re human?  
Do they ever search for an escape?  
I’m sitting in my room, I’m rotting away.  
I have to fight the voices in my head,  
Gosh, why are they so loud?  
Time to make my parents proud!  
They shouldn’t know I’m dying in this room.  
Kids, do your work and remember-  
No crying till Sunday afternoon.

# The day the crayons quit

*1<sup>st</sup> place, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Sebastian Dimitrov, International school St George, Sofia*

It was an ordinary day in the art civilization. The pens were writing, the pencils sketching, the markers colouring and alongside them the crayons were doing the same. Although all wasn't as it seemed. There had been an ongoing rivalry between the markers and crayons for hundreds of years as crayons were seen as the bottom of art civilization as. This was due to them being worse at colouring than the markers and worse at sketching than the pencils. But crayons forming the majority of the population couldn't just do nothing so they were forced to do the hardest and most boring parts of the colouring like the clothes sky and water while the markers would take all of the glory by colouring the most interesting points of the paintings like the face and interesting scenery in the background, yet they were the laziest taking the longest time on the simplest of things.

All the tools were working on one grand piece of fine art which they were to sell to the nearby clothing nation which were to give them clothing for the fierce winter which was slowly but surely approaching. This was of great importance as most art tools only survived one winter as they would run out of ink, or their tips become dull, meaning they didn't want to spend they're most important holiday the art deity day otherwise known as artmas cold and miserable.

The pencils started with their sketch. They drew all the tools except the crayons wearing the soon to be their winter clothing being embraced by the loving hands of the art deity on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of artmas. The pencils pass the drawing on to the pens who finalized the outlines of the drawing getting it ready for colouring.

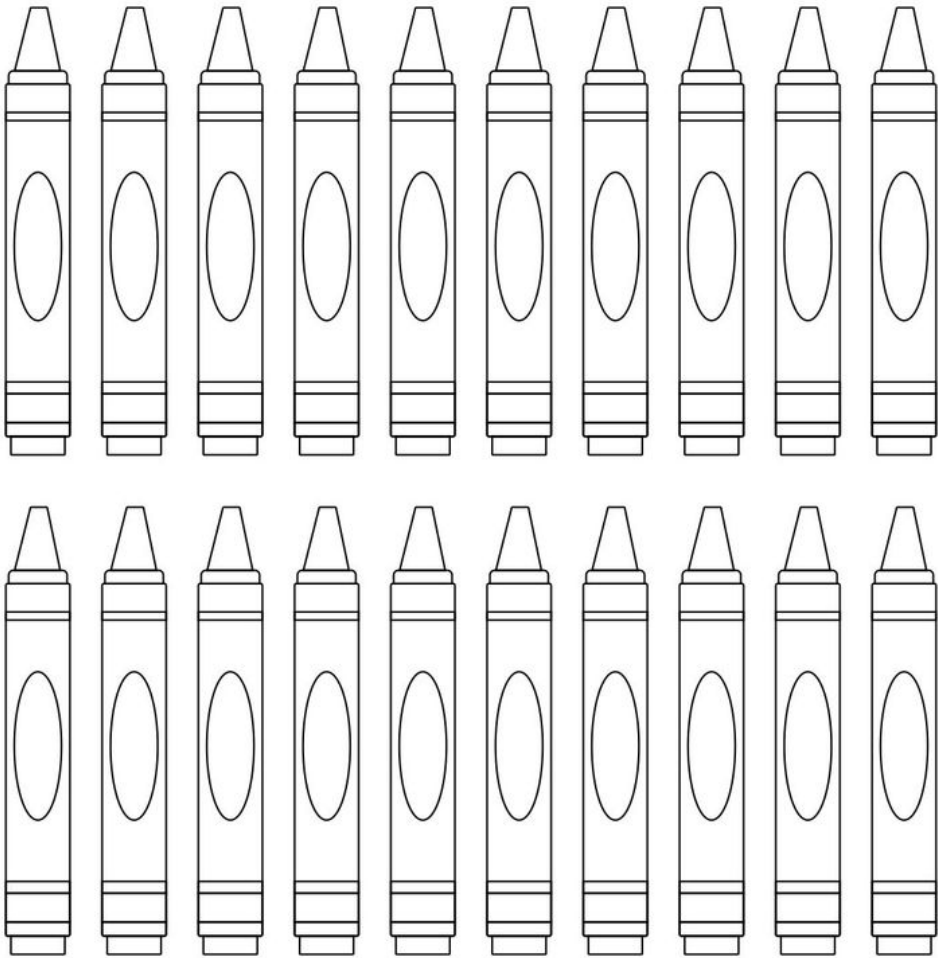
As soon as they saw the drawing all of them wondered the same thing. Why aren't there any crayons. Urgently the crayons held a meeting in their "house of commons" as it was referred to by the markers. Hundreds of crayons gathered inside ready to hear the words there all but in name leader had to say.

Clay Crayon stood up on the stage. He was the oldest and wisest of crayons, being alive for more than a cycle. He opened his speech addressing all his compatriots in this "time of turbulence" as he put it. He explained to the crayons that it was a time of change no longer should he or his people be oppressed by the power-hungry tyrannic markers. He continued saying any marker was an enemy quoting a poem the pens once wrote which his mother had always sang to him as a child "And for the clout stealing markers they can see the

feeling of being in the bottom of a dungeon. While a bit extreme this was truly how the crayons felt. Clay finished off his speech by saying “we need to prepare for the coming days”.

And so, the crayons “decided” to let the markers do their part of the piece before them. The markers procrastinated saying they would start working but as days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months it was clear. The trade wouldn't go through this year and the tools would be left without clothes.

On the day of the trade the clothing traders came, but there was no art to give. This was the day the crayons quit. Hundreds of crayons stormed the palace of the markers. All of them had one goal. To end the oppression and remove all the markers. The pens and pencils seeing this rushed in to defend the markers. As combat ensued the markers fled to their estate at the edge of the city, but by the time they sent reinforcements their allied forces had already been crushed and some crayons already announced the end of an era!



# The day the crayons quit

*2<sup>nd</sup> place, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Victoria Trendafilova, National High School of Trade and Commerce, Plovdiv*

One bright morning Sophie woke up excited to draw a picture for her mother. She sat down on her desk and opened her reliable box of colorful crayons, but when she opened it something unusual happened. Instead of rainbow colors he saw a stack of letters. Confused, Sophie chose the first one and began to read. What she discovered left her speechless: her crayons have quit!

The first crayon was red, and it said- “Dear Sophie, before you used me so much and now you just use me to draw apples. You always ignore me...” The writing was bold and sharp just like the red color. Sophie had never thought about her crayons feeling left out.

The next letter she opened was from the Blue crayon. “Hi Sophie,” it read. “I love being one of the crayons you use the most. You use me to draw skies, blue flowers, oceans and rivers, but have you looked at me lately? Can’t you give me a break and make use of the other colors for once? I’m almost worn off!” Sophie couldn’t help but feel guilty. She has never put her mind to it on how much she relied on the Blue crayon. It was true - blue was everywhere in her drawings.

As Sophie kept reading complaints from her crayons, Yellow and Orange were arguing about who’s the best color to use to draw the sun. Yellow wrote” I’m clearly the better choice because I’m brighter and more cheerful than you!”. Orange disagreed entirely “Almost everybody uses me for sunshine, because everyone knows the sun is warm and I’m the warmest color!” Their argument made Sophie laugh, but it was true - She hasn’t been consistent about what color she wants to use for the sun.

The Black crayon had an interesting complaint. “Dear Sophie, I’m tired of being only used for the outlines of your drawings! Why can’t I be the center of attention? I could create an amazing night sky or even a landscape but only if you give me a chance!” Sophie thought about it and realized she had never used black for anything but outlines.

The pink crayon sounded hurt “I’m always in the box. Just because I’m pink doesn’t mean I can’t be a part of your beautiful drawings! Think about flamingos, a colorful field full of flowers and even sunsets. I deserve a chance too!” Sophie signed, even though her favorite color was pink she never actually used it in her drawings.

And the last letter was from the Green crayon. “Dear Sophie, I’m not here to complain like the other ones. I’m very pleased that you use me for grass, trees and beautiful mountains, but can you help Yellow and Orange settle their argument. Everyone is getting annoyed at this point.”

After reading all the letters Sophie leaned back on her chair and realized how much she relied on some colors and how she didn’t use others at all. It wasn’t fair, she wanted to make it right...

She started drawing a special piece because here- all colors took place. Her painting turned out gorgeous - she used black for the sky, pink for a flamingo, green for the trees, combined yellow and orange and created the dried out grass with a little bit of green. Her mother loved her drawing and rewarded her with her favorite meal.





# The day the crayons quit

*3<sup>rd</sup> place, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Slavena Ivanova, Language School Vasil Karagyzov, Yambol*

Drawing on the wall, pencils all over the floor, crayons, spills of paint. The joy of watching your favorite show on a warm Monday morning. When you used to hear a fairytale every night. Jumping on the bed, giggling on the couch with your brother, because “the floor is lava”. When you just hugged your mom, and all your problems went away. And she held you in her arms, kissed your forehead and promised you that everything would be alright. Dancing with your father calling him “the best”. Singing to your grandma while she knits.

All the memories snow as she glances over the family album. And then she opens it and here they are. Hundreds of pictures from over 14 years ago. Back when she was still that innocent child. Skipping through the pages full of photos, wondering when all these years passed. Where did that child go, look at it all grown and so different. Drawings, drawings full with tons of drawings. She wanted to see which was the last. The end of it. The day when the crayons quit. A Christmas tree, decorated with such a care, presents gently wrapped in paper underneath a window and a... She wondered what that was. The drawing was unfinished. She already knew when she quit but why? Human memory is a real wonder to science. She remembers very well now.

Lying on the floor, swaying her feet, in her bedroom, just a day before Christmas. Making the drawing of the year! Feeling so proud already. Humming a Christmas song. Her mom and grandma were preparing dinner. Her father changing a light bulb in the bathroom. Her older brother setting the table. As he passes her room, he looks at her and then goes to sit beside her.

- What is that? It's a tree and some presents. They're pretty! But what are you drawing now, outside the window? - he asked. Oh, that's Santa, right?

- Yes! I can't wait for my presents tomorrow!

- You know... Santa isn't real. You're a big girl now and you should know it. Old people tell tales about him, to make little children excited about the unknown guest who brings us gifts.

- Yea, right! What are you going to tell me next? That, the tooth fairy is also fake? -she laughed, insulted by his 'joke'.

- True, she is fake.

- These are lies I'm not believing in!

And then he left. She never finished her drawing afterwards. And dinner was normal, she didn't ask anyone about it. She kept her quiet. At Christmas she got my presents as always. But she never made another drawing. Sometimes she thinks she should have finished it. She knows this day comes for everyone. But she thinks this day came too soon. The day the crayons quit.

I want to be a little child again and believe those lies at least once more. My inner child wants it back. I can't seem to really grow up. Maybe that's why I'm childish. That's the day I stayed a child forever. The day the crayons quit.



## Reverse robbery: thieves leave strange gifts

*Poetry winner, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Dara Georgieva, First Private School of Mathematics, Sofia*

Once upon a time there was a thief.  
Leading a group of robbers, he was their chief.  
They had already robbed every bank in the city.  
Everyone thought “What a great pity.  
If they were honest, they would’ve had a job  
Where they could feel happy, now they are not.”  
Actually, people were so used to these men  
That they weren’t scared, even felt sorry for them.  
One day the chief, whose name was Mister Brown  
Heard a gossip spreading through the town.  
People said that he and his thieves were too boring,  
That they’ve become soft, even easy-going.  
Mister Brown was furious: “Robbers, what a shame!  
People think we’re lazy! It’s you who I have to blame!”  
The thieves gathered around their extremely angry chief  
They soon came up with a plan and went to bed relieved.  
The next day Mister Brown explained the plan again  
He was very enthusiastic, let’s see what he can gain.  
It wasn’t very long for citizens to realize  
That something was wrong, and they were surprised  
To see that someone’s stolen jewelry was in someone else’s house  
People started fighting, it was a complete chaos.

After two or three hours of shouting and punching

A man stepped on something slightly big and crunchy.

It was a letter “This time I wasn’t boring!

These were my strange gifts which made you all crawling.”



## The invisible string

*1<sup>st</sup> place, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Mehr Faiz, NIXOR O LEVELS, Pakistan*

Fate is a funny thing. It's a sort of capsule, a restraint of choice. A barrier to alternatives. There is no force, no spirit, no being that can ever defy it. Mortal or not, it is the script that defines one's life, as if one is a spectacle before a grand audience. Humanity and those beyond it abide by Fate's laws, follow destiny's plans.

Hands shoving you forward, prickles lining your neck, shivers slithering down your spines. It is Fate. Always there, always watching.

There is no escape.

The words seemed to ring in Leo's head as he climbed up the ladder, lifting one arm after the other, balancing the weight of his body until the soles of his numb feet are pressed to the cold surface of the elevated platform.

The boy had been in the circus all his life, though he never performed. He only watched. Lingered in the shadows. Hovering in the distance.

This was his chance to prove himself. This was his chance to know not just what Fate planned for him, but also what it was gain him.

Starting anxiously down at the large, open ring – a circle bordered in red and white –feeling the pierce of a thousand waiting eyes, he counted the footsteps marking the sand, telling various stories. He wondered if the crowd could feel the tension in the air or hear the rapid pounding of his heart, for he certainly could.

He was the spectacle.

They were the audience.

He knew not what Fate planned for him, for Fate was cruel when it wished. Often, it would plan life to bring fortune, but many horrible times it did not. No, many times Fate was selfish.

And its victims were fools.

“And now, let us welcome the glorious, the brave, the astonishing...” the ringleader’s fantastical introduction trailed off as drums took its place, thundering somewhere in the near distance, a show of torturous suspense. “Leonel the Legendary!”

No applause sounded. It wasn’t that the audience was bored – no, not at all – but rather that they were intrigued. Their silence was a means of focus.

Leo swallowed. Never in his life had he felt so terrified. So worried. His training was immaculate. In fact, he was the ringleader’s favourite. His best act. His best pupil.

But now, he would be nothing if he lost. If he fell, it wouldn’t be to his favour.

Not in success. Not in glory.

He shut his eyes, conflicted. Should he climb down? Should he forfeit? Would they hate him if he did? What would become him?

Then, as his courage wavered, there was this...energy. This strange, powerful force that compelled him ahead. As if a thread, a thin yet mighty thread, was tied to his hands. Tied to his feet. Tied to his neck.

He was entangled in the invisible strings of a puppeteer.

A master. A king.

A controller.

Powerless, he reluctantly shifted forward, tugged ahead by invisible hands. They willed him to get into position, and Leo had no choice, no alternative but to obey they’re commands.

With great reluctance, the boy was forced onto the slim metal beam before him.

The surface was rough enough to hold him, to steady his wobbling gait, but it was the height that he was afraid of. Dizziness ran through him, forming warped ripples in the air as his eyes flashed around the massive tent cloaked in darkness. He was so scared.

But Fate made him flip.

Leo sprung across the pipe, leaping and cartwheeling as the audience blared applause and yells of surprise. Of glee.

It sounded like mockery. With the spiralling thoughts racing through his mind and the blur in his eyes and the blood rushing through his ears, he was void of sense. Of logic. Of reason.

Of choice.

He spun through the air a final time, his body twirling before he landed. He swallowed a startled gasp as his foot hit— not on the beam – but just an inch beside it.

A yell tore through his throat, ripped past his lips and echoing in the air. There was a mix of emotions now, from him and the crowd.

Anger, confusion, frustration. Fear was the most potent, the most abundant of them all.

Fate had toyed with him, played him, made a fool of him.

His first performance was a disaster. His career was a failure before it had even begun. The event would be a stale memory, one aged and forgotten over time.

The pages of history would not write his story, for history focused on those with power, those who attained greatness. History would grant one eternal glory, if one deserved it. Bravery was not an honour. Bravery was not worthy. Trying was something no one cared of, for if you try there is no chance you shall win.

As he plummeted to his demise, he cursed Fate. Fate who believed itself worthy. Fate who demanded he was to feel betrayed. That he was to feel defeated. He cursed at Fate because it was a monster.

He would not be afraid of the darkness that beheld his demons. Because his demons were his own, his dreams were *his* to create. His fears were not controlled by Fate.

The invisible string that pulled him was of no mercy. The invisible string was held in the hands of one who did not care for mercy. For lenience.

The invisible string and the one who held it desired for him to be afraid. But Leo would not be afraid. Leo would be happy. It was defiling the invisible string.

Would anyone remember this joy? This peace? This victory? No.

But he would. Even in death and beyond it – if there were anything further – Leo would remember the time he bested Fate in its own game. Leo would remember the time when the strings did not defeat him.

Fate was nothing to him. The invisible string was nothing to him.

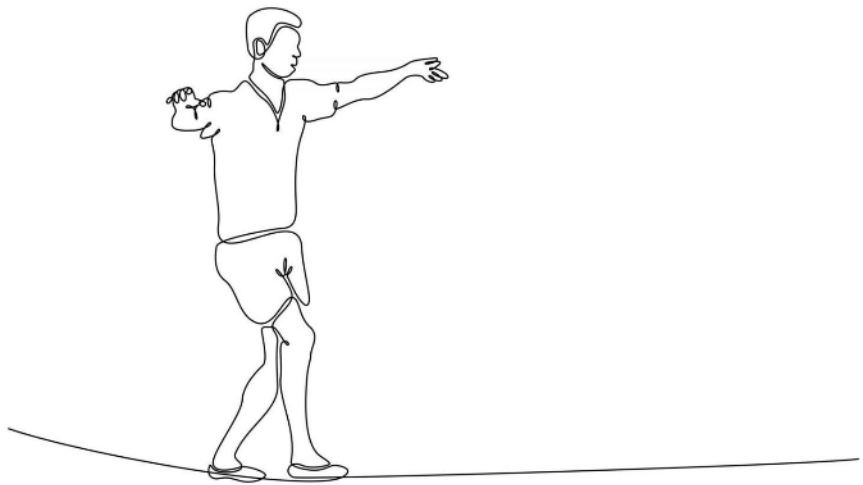
He was writer of his story.

As he fell to the ground, the crowd went silent, yet his mind went on for a few seconds more, saving its last few moments to bask in its glory.

The invisible string that bound him was no more a restraint. In truth, he wished to thank Fate for its service. For allowing him to see what he was capable of.

Leonel was the writer of his story.

And his story was magnificent.





## The animals voted for president

*2<sup>nd</sup> place, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Maria Subbota, 18<sup>th</sup> Secondary school William Gladstone, Sofia*



When I woke up, everything was quiet. The air was filled with something weird and unknown. At first, I just stared at the ceiling and thought about my plans for today. My first job at the office, my second job as a server and then, finally, some rest. I looked at the calendar – it was Friday. I couldn't believe that I made it to the end of the week. "Some Whiskas for dinner would be a nice celebration" – I thought as I got up to open the curtains. No sun entered my room – the sky was filled with clouds. How strange... The boulevard in front of my window, always busy and never quiet, was empty. I stared at my reflection in the dirty glass and noticed the poster behind me. "1<sup>st</sup> of November – The Election Day!". Cattala Meowliss was staring at me with her big eyes, sparkling with hope. Today was the day.

The streets were quiet and soggy. I didn't have to work, so I decided to eat something. All empty. I exited the tall building that I lived in and headed out to the supermarket. The dog faces were looking at me with slight disgust. A cat in the middle of Bone neighborhood wasn't a usual view. I tried to hide my face and body in the baggy clothes I had on, but I still got looks from everywhere. When I finally got to the supermarket, it was all empty. If I had food at home, I wouldn't get out of my apartment too – it was too dangerous. But it could've ended soon – with the win of Cattala Meowliss everything would be different. She promised us all to stop the crimes against the cat nation. She was a part of us, she could help us. If only she could've beat this Houndy Bark. I hated him with every part of myself... A shout distracted me from my thoughts. "Hey, you, what are you doing here in such a day?" I froze in horror. A heavy smell of liquor, only sold to the dogs, almost made me throw up. I pretended not to hear. "Oh, you stupid thing, turn around, I can obviously see you!" I

decided to obey him and did as he said. A huge hound dog was smirking at me. “Don’t you understand that today isn’t the best day to go out for a” – he paused to make a face of disgust, - “a creature like you?” His face was red, and his eyes were filled with anger. I tried to take a step back, but the shelves were stopping me. “You, cats, are so weak, you know? I could’ve broken your spine with a hit... But I don’t want to get my hands on you, because I’d get some of your filthy diseases!” He started laughing loudly and his smelly breath made me gag again. Suddenly, I heard a beautiful voice. “I think that it’s time for you to go, Frank.” Just behind the dog there was a beautiful cat lady, tall, with magnificent green eyes, that were cold as ice. Surprisingly, the big creature obeyed her and exited the supermarket. Still in shock, I glanced at my savior. “I-I don’t know how to thank you, I have some money, if that’s what you want from me...” – I said, as I stared at the floor. The only thing I heard was her unusually gentle laugh. “Darling, don’t thank me. That’s just Frank, one of my employees. Get your stuff and let’s leave this stupid place. My name is Eleanora.” I quickly bought some cat food and we both left the store.

When we entered her apartment, I gasped. Fifty, maybe sixty cat ladies were sitting in a big room, filled with carpets and sofas.

The time passed so fast that I didn’t notice when it got dark. We talked about life, about our dreams, about education, about art, about freedom... About hope. About our hope to have a good life.

When I got home, the streets were full again. The Election was finished. I saw all types of animals having fun – just no cats in sight. It was permitted to go out after 20 if you’re a cat. I went to bed hoping for the best. That night my dreams were filled with all of them – my new friends, and maybe my future.

When I woke up, nothing was quiet. I got up to open the curtains. I looked out of the window and saw hundreds of cars, driving to their offices. I stared at my reflection in the dirty glass, noticing the poster behind me. Cattala Meowliss was staring at me. The grey sky was reflecting in her big eyes, sparkling with hope. I looked out of the window again – the dogs on the streets were celebrating, destroying everything in their sight. We didn’t win. We never could’ve.

# The Invisible String

*3<sup>rd</sup> place, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Ralitsa Kolarova, Secondary school Hristo Botev, Nova Zagora*



A legend has been known for hundreds of years in Japan. The legend about the invisible string. The story behind it is very romantic – yet so tragic. The Japanese people believe that a simple and invisible string is tied around the index finger, connecting and leading soulmates to each other. The tragic part is if your soulmate unexpectedly passed away, though nothing in this life happens unexpectedly, you are bound to die alone and in misery.

Nayah, an ordinary girl living her ordinary life in the not so ordinary state of New York was very aware of the Japanese mythology and the thousands of legends around it. After all, she's half-Japanese, her mother could never let her only daughter be uneducated on the topic of her own country. Her dad used to read her legends about cursed masks, sword fights, impossible love. Used to, until he unexpectedly passed away a few years ago.

Today was her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. The last year of being a child, and not an adult. She, though not very excited about her birthday, was preparing a homemade cake in the kitchen, frustration all over her face over the missing ingredients. Her mom and younger brother, Damon, went out to buy groceries. She could always call them, but since in one year she would be an adult, Nayah knew she could not always depend on her mother. The doorbell began to ring. Catching her off guard, she jumped in distress, making a mess with the flour that was in her hands as she heard the noise. The frustration growing, she let out a quiet curse, placing the flour on the table as she began walking to the front door. As she reached the handle, her phone rang. A sigh could be heard escaping her pouty lips.

Looking at the phone, she saw the name of the little 6-year-old girl she babysits from time to time, her family's neighbor's daughter appear on the screen. Surprised, Nayah picked the call up, completely ignoring the doorbell.

"What is it, Lola?" she asks the little girl. Lola was quiet for a few seconds and a little worry could be heard in Nayah's voice. "Lola? Are you there? Everything okay?" she asked, her nails digging into the phone.

"Someone's at your door." Mumbled the little girl, clearly in distress as well.

"Y-yeah, I know. The doorbell has been ringing for quite some time now. Is something wrong?" Nayah asks, biting her lip as the worry corrupts her mind.

"He looks... scary..." Lola said, on the verge of tears. "He holds some flowers... beautiful flowers, but he doesn't look right. His clothes are black."

Nayah lifted her eyebrow, the worry away by then. "Are you watching from your bedroom's window, darling?" she asked, trying to think about everything possible happening in this moment. A chuckle escaped her lips, a relieved look on her face. "Go take a nap. We're gonna be celebrating tonight, remember?" Nayah said, a smile forming on the corners of her lips.

Lola was about to say something before Nayah abruptly cutting the call. She placed her hand on the handle, swinging the door open. Her eyes closed; she started apologizing to whoever was standing at the door. A low voice cut her words short:

"The Prince awaits you."

The words pierced the air like torn, her eyes immediately opening. In front of her was standing a tall man, a Japanese mask covering his face, making him look like a demon.

Before she could open her mouth, he grabbed her by the wrist, saying:

"The string cannot be cut. Soulmates never change." The words sounding so familiar made her go pale. "But that's what my dad told me when I was little..." Nayah said to herself as the air around her got minty. Her sight was getting dark and she could only mumble the words "Dad..." before falling in the man's arms.

## The invisible string

*Poetry winner, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Milan Stankov, High school Peyo Yavorov, Petrich*

A raindrop falls down as light as bubbly wine  
plummeting from a cloud like a tear in time,  
heading straight down, feeling so bold,  
unaware of the journey about to unfold.

As she crosses the sky for a miniscule span  
she glimpses some birds riding in a van.  
The birds wave at her, "Honey, good luck!"  
She turns a puzzled look, "What do you mean, feathery pucks?"

Now she starts wondering about the sky.  
"Is this a trampoline or will I die?"  
Curious, the drop anticipates arrival,  
ready to make friends or meet new rivals.

She lands on the branch of a withered oak tree,  
and soon enough blends with the thirst of their green.  
Looking around with not much to see  
spots a squirrel so sad and so .... not free!

She drips further downward, such a long way.  
Gets hold of the stem, but it's slipping away  
till, suddenly, the soil beneath looms black

it feels like an end, like no going back.

She plunges deeper and deeper into the dirt.

An instant demise, it doesn't even hurt.

Is this the end? Is this a curse?

The oak tree awakens, slowly at first.

Reaching for water its roots feel revived.

The green of its leaves is brought back to life.

Its branches stretch wide to catch the sky's grin  
as the raindrop's sacrifice hums deeply within.

The tree's skin gets softer and sugary-smooth.

It is quickly restored to the joys of its youth

Some birds take a perch, their wings fluttering songs.

An invisible string pulls all these along.

The squirrel steals a taste of it, dancing with joy,  
chasing the wind freely - a playful decoy.

All tangled together in ways we can't see,  
like love in a family, like the sand in the sea.

The raindrop is gone, yet it is everywhere -  
in the green of the tree, the birds and squirrel's flair.

Nature's not random, it's stitched up with care.

A string pulls it all — invisible yet always there.

# Just one Santa is not enough

*1<sup>st</sup> place, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Mychailo Myronov, IT High School Antoine De Saint-Exupery, Varna*

“What are you doing in my house?”

An intruder stood before me. A big intruder. I was scared. Terrified. Cold sweat on my forehead.

It was a near-midnight, Christmas eve, and I was awake. Insomnia has always been trouble for me in my life and today wasn't gonna be an exception. My wife, fast asleep next to me. I am an avid reader, so I decided to waste some time not sleeping until Christmas morning. my kids asleep, by picking up a Stephen King novel and reading it. Of course, turning on a light next to my sleeping wife and risking waking her up is definitely a fatal move, so I decided to go downstairs to my little reading nook.

I got out of bed and put on my slippers. Two little cliché bunny slippers, like in the movies. My wife thought it would be funny to get them in a hot pink color, but I'm not complaining. I actually love them. I took the book with me from our bedroom shelf, and I silently opened the door. The wind outside was gusting, it would be a cold morning tomorrow. Talking about tomorrow, it was in an hour. It was currently 11PM. One more hour till Christmas.

I crept up next to my childrens' open bedroom door, checking if they're asleep, and yes, both were in their respective twin beds, fast asleep. Or maybe faking. They've gotten really good at fake sleeping lately.

I walked downstairs and went straight to the kettle. It's a tradition for me to always drink tea in the night when I can't sleep. Wouldn't have been doing it if it wasn't for my wife, Laura. Picked it up from her, my love of books as well. Truly an angel. Met her on Christmas, my Christmas miracle.

I sat in my armchair and opened the book. Tonight's reading - Carrie, King's first novel, back when he was a teacher. I am an English teacher too, but I haven't had the same luck writing as he has. Most I can write is a page or two before I run out of creative juices.

Suddenly, I heard some clinking outside. Probably my rich neighbours' decorations playing loud sounds at night. I'm shocked how the HOA hasn't shut them down yet, but when I want a pool, suddenly it's agains-

A loud bang. Louder than Christmas decoration. "What was that?", I thought to myself as I got up from the armchair, to be frank, really terrified. "Where did that sound come from? The kitchen?".

I ran over to the kitchen, expecting my kettle to have blown up. It was very old, wouldn't be out of character for it. Has been serving my family for 20 years now. Passed on from Laura's mother. As I entered the kitchen, I stood frozen in shock.

"What are you doing in my house?" - I asked the intruder who was standing before me. A big man. In the darkness of the night, the light of my living room was not luminating him to make out his exact shape, but the moonlight gave me enough clues to figure out it's a human.

Either this was Santa, honestly impossible, or today's my last night on Earth.

Suddenly, two bright red lights illuminated me from where it's face is, scanning me over. Whoever, *whatever* was in front of me wasn't human. And it was scanning me over. Analyzing me.

In the heat of the moment, I ran up to the kettle, now full of boiling water, and I picked it up.

"I am giving you ONE WARNING, get out of my HOUSE!" I honestly couldn't care less for waking my kids up, actually hoped for it. They would have a chance to escape with their mother.

The *thing* continued scanning me, a loud buzz coming from its eyes. I began running towards it, pressing a button on the electric kettle to open its lid. I threw the contents of the kettle, hot boiling water on the intruder.

The water splashed on the intruder as it began screeching in a robotic voice "TEMPERATURE SENSOR HOT. GOING BACK TO BASE."

Before I even processed what happened, the robot spun around and suddenly the entire kitchen was in a flurry of snow. Like magic. Light entered from everywhere. I could finally make out the robot, and realised it looks just like the average Coca-Cola Santa that we all got used to. Fun fact, Santa is only dressed in red BECAUSE of Coca-Cola. Genius marketing.

Suddenly, an ice block hit my head. I was out cold. Well, out cold for 5 hours, before I awoke.

Only I didn't wake up next to Laura, or even my armchair, no. I woke up in a small room, gnome like residence.



I looked up and saw a photo of an elderly elf with his family, making presents. "An *elf?*", I thought to myself. Definitely going crazy.

Suddenly, the old elf opened the door.

"Hello, human, Nick would like to see you." said the elf, touching his beard, giving off the impression that he is probably the oldest and wisest elf there.

Usually, a person would be scared. An elf? An intruder, a *robotic Santa* at that? I realised it was no use. Whatever is happening is out of my control now.

With a certain difficulty, now wondering how the little buggers put me in the small room, I got out. Outside, it was snowing and freezing cold.

"Fast, come with me or you shall freeze.". The elf guided me to a way bigger building, and as I entered and looked up, I was in awe.

"Please bow before our great Saint Nick."

"No formalities, Wise-y. Hello." - interrupted the great Santa, no red suit, just PJs with reindeer, now standing before me. *Above* me?

"Hello."

The Santa, real Santa, descended to me in an armchair, resembling my own.

"Sorry for the scare, David, my robots are usually supposed to know if someone is awake, that one was just malfunctioning."

"Wait, robot?"

Nick explained that for 20 years already, he has switched to using robots. "You think I can do this alone? Maybe years and years ago, when my bones were young, but now, I'm just a creeky old legend. Just one Santa isn't enough."

"You're not a creeky old legend, you are *the* Saint Nick."

"It depends on who you ask nowadays, David."

"How do you know my name?"

"I know everything about you, or anyone. In the past I had magic powers, but now all I have to do is just open Facebook and..." Santa made a surprised gesture. "Abracadabra! I know who you are!"

He gestured for me to sit down with him for a cup of tea. He explained that after this experience, I would forget about it, so I can ask anything. I asked him about the reindeer, it's

a myth, he can just levitate, the red suit, it's because Coca-Cola is a sponsor, the parents not seeing him, he usually edits their memories with fake sleeping memories.

"What about my wife, Laura? Do you know everything about her too?"

"Buddy, I made you meet. Edited your faith. Put you together. Or as you would say..."

A true Christmas miracle. He made us meet.

"David, I have a deal."

Santa stood before me, taller and slimmer than I expected.

"I can't do this alone, join me. Or actually, replace me."

I stood frozen in shock. Santa wants me to be Santa? Or at least a new Santa. I wanted to accept, but then I remembered something. What about my wife? My kids?

"Santa-"

"Nick, please."

"Nick, I cannot leave my family behind."

Santa chuckled.

"Very well. You passed the test."

"The test?" I stood dumbfounded.

"The test of family. The greatest test of our lives."

He clicked his fingers, and a box appeared.

"Now, I usually don't give adults gifts, but since you did so well on my little trick question, you can have anything you want in the world. Anything!"

"Non-material objects too?"

"No, sorry. Curing world hunger is in my future plans, however. And world peace too."

David stood, thinking hard. Really hard. He has everything he already needs.

"Can I have my memories of you not erased?"

"That's not an obje-"

"I know, pretty please?"

Santa thought hard, scratching his peach fuzz, surprisingly no big gray beard.

"Sure. You know what, you've been a wonder to have. Sorry for the robot, by the way."

"Thank you for everything, Laura, you showing me that you're real. Magic is real. Wow."

"No problem, any time." Santa winked.

Suddenly, the same flurry that took me began appearing all around me. I waved to Nick, now a friend, as I materialised back in my armchair. It was still night. Not a single hour passed.

Suddenly, I heard the kettle turn off.

My tea was ready.

"Thanks, Nick."



# The lost lottery ticket

*2<sup>nd</sup> place, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Rafail Kamburov, First Private School of Mathematics, Sofia*

Winter, 2001

He parked his Renault 19 in the courtyard of a most unassuming house. It was that provincial kind, made of brick and mortar, a tile roof, whose clay had started cracking from decades of rainfall. The walls – covered in moss and showing signs of decay. To the layman, this place looked abandoned, a faded memory of a once painfully average house, slowly destroying itself. Mr. Smithers, however, was not so prejudiced, for there resides a man, a man with a most fascinating story.

“It’s not exactly a Rolls-Royce”, he said to himself, “but then again, this isn’t Versailles, either”.

His car much resembled the house in a way. It was not an old car by any means, but it had seen quite a few adventures. The accumulator had been replaced, the odometer – stopped counting. The once bright yellow exterior had faded and was covered in a thick layer of grime; one could not exactly say what colour the car was, let alone what it might have been. The rain reminded Smithers of having forgot his umbrella.

“I’ll stay in the car for the time being”, he thought to himself.

The heater had stopped working, the lights – he hadn’t replaced them, in fact, the only electric device, improving the dreadful interior, was the analog clock.

Some 30 minutes passed and, reluctantly, he decided to get out of the car – he had an interview to conduct after all. The depressingly gloomy northern weather did all but cheer him up. He walked up to the once grand spruce door, knocked, then opened it. It creaked open in an elegantly rustic way. The doors at the newspaper, where he worked, sounded a similar way, except they were 3 meters tall, made of oak, and were cleaned every day. Overall, they shared nothing visually, but Smithers liked the sound equally. The house was warm enough for him. He took off his coat, a coat which had seen much disgrace over the years. He wore a suit with a yellowish shirt, and a blue tie. The colours worked well with each other. It wasn’t something the King would have worn, this was more akin to a bureaucrat’s uniform, but Smithers was proud of his suit. He made his way into the study, a comparatively large room, lined with dusty books on the shelves. In front of him – two chairs. Perhaps the most grandiose thing in the entire house was that they were quite out of place. They seemed like something Louis XIV would have sat in, yet they were there. The

man who was to be interviewed was sitting opposite him, the faint light illuminating his back, giving him a photographic silhouette, almost intentionally. He stood motionless.

“Good evening, Mr. Smithers”

“Good evening, Steven”, said Smithers. This was a tendency of his, he never referred to people by their familial name, he believed in the power of the first name, for that is how people referred to each other for centuries. He found it dishonest to refer by your family name, as some kind of nobleman, when you are a working man. Therefore, he referred to people by their given name.

“Please sit down, I haven’t much will to wait for your pondering”, Steven said sternly in a somewhat tired voice.

“Of course, sir. I wish to interview you regarding your past; the public seem to have forgotten about you”

“Oh yes, well, I was once a musician, a rock musician, however that time has passed now. The life was quite glamorous, it’s a shame it’s all over”

“Glamorous, how so?”

“Supercars, mansions, clothes fit for a king”, he lamented

“How did this otherworldly fortune find its way to you?”

“Well, my real success in life was meeting one James Lancaster, a big producer; we met completely by accident in a bar, where I was performing cover songs. Fate has this wonderful ability to connect with you. This was a man I had no context to ever meet, but there we were. We formed this contract, where I would be paid a royalty to my songs. It worked well in the beginning; I was made an overnight sensation thanks to his friends in the media. I had always wished to be a major musician.”

“How could you end up in a house such as this, if you were once such a sensation?!”

“My producer and I parted ways. In retrospect, it might have been his wealth that I was angry with. I might’ve had enough to afford the clothes and the house I could, I could drive an E-Type, which most people would only dream of, yet he was the one benefitting off of my work truly, he had a driver and was driven in a Rolls, I found it unfair. I stormed out of his office, tearing apart his lyrics draft. He was never enraged, he always smiled. Even then, when I had tried my hardest to anger him, he laughed at me.”

“That sounds awful, what happened next?”

“He took all of my fame with him, no newspapers wanted anything to do with me anymore. What I had left was a piece of paper, promising that which had already been taken from me. I could no longer afford to maintain the car, nor the house. I moved here, where I have since lived. It was my lottery ticket in a way, and I lost it. Ever since I was a kid, I told myself “I would do anything to become a famous singer”, and that is exactly what Fate gave me. Fate showed me my wickedness; it showed me that envy caused my greatest downfall”

“You have but a semblance of an idea of how right you are!” remarked Smithers jubilantly, illuminating the room with a lamp. The ivory face of the musician shined brightly. There sat the motionless remains of a man who was.

The interviewer cruelly spoke the last words to ever grace that room, “from dust to dust”.



## How to send a cat to the moon?

*3<sup>rd</sup> place, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Pavlina Antonova, High school of Foreign Languages Romain Rolland, Stara Zagora*

“How to send a cat to the moon?” is probably a question not every five-year-old gets to ask their therapist daily. There have been centuries since the first animals had been sent to the moon without much success considering the pet’s condition. After all these types of experiments are done for scientific purposes, the topic not being gentle enough to explain that same five-year-old who has been desperately searching for their best friend for the past three days. And hypothetically speaking, if that same child with their brave fantasies and surrealistic views of the world, still untouched by the cruelty of life, were to find out that their little companion with whom they had shared her sweetest moments were never to come back to her, this little dreamer’s heart could possibly not be able to collect the pain of losing something so precious so young.

I met Cassie when she was just three and a half years old, after her parents came to me extremely concerned about their little girl’s inability to express her emotions with words only with gestures. It was nothing unseen before, in my career in psychological therapy I’ve come across plenty of children needing my help, but I was sure this little kid with her doll-like face and blond curly hair, carefully braided into two ponytails, would be a different case. The reason, as I quickly learnt, of her behavior was her parents’ negligence, not being able to properly validate their own feelings thus leading to the child developing the same traits.

One Friday afternoon, two months after our sessions started Cassie came into my office full handed. In her hands she held a little kitten, so fragile looking as if it had not had a proper dinner for far too long. Her face had lit up, showing me her new friend. Even though her parents were strictly forbidding I managed to convince them that maybe this pet could help her with her abandonment and attention issues. It was not a lie, of course, in truth I did not want that to be another of Cassie’s disappointments, just because she deserved the world, and her parents were only able to give her a walk in the park once every two weeks. She even started attending our sessions with her new best friend named Maya. I have to say Maya did have some temper, but it was all worth it just to see the look of happiness in this sweet girl’s eyes.

Cassie used to make the most fantastic scenarios, now with the protagonists being Maya and herself. I remember looking at this little girl, with her big, dreamy eyes and even bigger fantasy and thinking how I hope this world is exceedingly kind to her. I hoped she gets the

most out of it, after all such innocence is extremely precious and I made it my mission to savour it as much as possible.

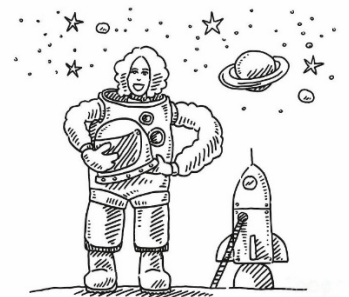
As our sessions continued and the time flew by, Cassie's stories became even more and more unrealistic, more and more fantastic, and all I could do was sit and admire the purity of her dreams. Unhinged and untouched by the circumstances and the hindrances in her life. Even though she was my job, I grew to feel another type of empathy towards her, something I did not usually experience with other patients. I tried my best to protect her, knowing this world does not consist of such dreamers.

The summer after her fifth birthday, I got a very late-night call from her mother begging me to come urgently to see Cassie. She didn't share the reason, but I secretly knew, call it intuition. My concerns turned into reality, as the mother announced that Maya was gone. I child so little should not get to have a close encounter with death so early. I got in her room, the poor child peacefully sleeping in her tiny bed, with her stuffed unicorn by her side. I brushed the hair off her gentle face and left a sigh. I closed the door behind me as I left the room, meeting the parents' anxious looks. I told them what to do.

The next morning, I waited with daisies in hand next to the tiny statue in the town's square. Six minutes before the set time to meet, Cassie arrived, holding her mom's hand. She ran up to me and embraced me in a hug. Of course, the first question she asked was about the location of her furry best friend. Next to us was the statue of the first cat to be sent to the moon. In honor of her sacrifice. I gently grabbed the child's hand and showed her the statue. "This is Maya. She is now up in the big sky exploring space and the moon." I said as a sharp pain hit through my heart. "But why did she leave without me?"

"She is still waiting for you to explore it together, sweetheart. She is just preparing the space station. And this statue is here so that everyone knows about her great heroism." The smile did not leave her face as she talked to the statue.

Now almost twenty-five years later I look at the TV screen with tears in my eyes. Cassie's made it. She is the first woman to step on the moon.





## How to send a cat to the moon?

*Poetry winner, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Mihaela Zhivkova, 22<sup>nd</sup> Secondary Language School Georgi S. Rakovski, Sofia*

How to send a cat to the moon?

Cats can't really fly on a broom

But why would you send a cat away?

A cat can only sleep and lay

Or that's what they want you to think

"All day cats just eat and drink"

But aren't babies just the same?

They do things, but on their mother's name

But babies grow into kids, then teens

And start to understand what life really means

From little age they have ambitions

And depend less on their intuition

Then at eighteen they become "free"

And see that money doesn't grow on trees

They have to survive out on their own

And become dependent on a phone

They want to experience and explore

To see the world's every "floor"

But wait! Don't cats also do that?

They don't only stay on their mat

They also grow up sly and strong

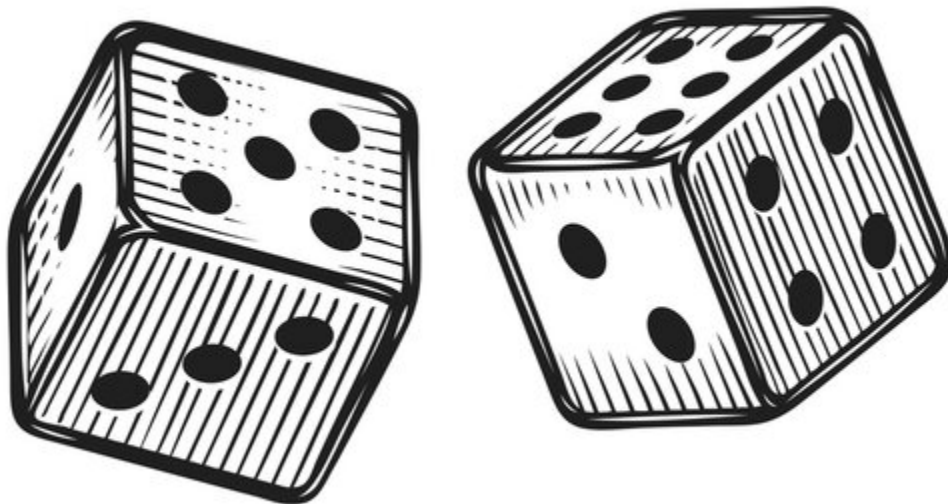
And try to fix all that's wrong

If held captive, they try to run away  
“If there’s a need, then there’s a way”  
Just like humans, they want to see the world  
To see what’s held into their future  
To find a loving partner and settle down  
Do normal things like mowing the lawn  
They can’t express in through talking  
But they are always on their own path walking  
What if like humans, they want to see other planets?  
Who will help them their dreams to manage?  
I try to help, that’s what I’m fond of  
And this is why I’ve always wondered:  
How to send a cat to the moon,  
If not by flying on a broom?



## Luck is out of office. Shall I roll the dice for you?

*1<sup>st</sup> place, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Angel Zhelev, Secondary school Petko R. Slaveykov, Kardzhali*



I found myself on a cold, patterned tile floor. The unmistakable hubbub of gamblers pining for a big win could be heard just outside the office I found myself in. The air smelled of cigarettes and something I can't quite describe, but somehow immediately knew it to be the vile odor of mortgages and car leases all put on either the matte black of a roulette or the moronic move to hit on an 18 in blackjack. I stood up, cracking my neck and dusting myself off groggily. I looked up to see a mahogany desk leering above me.

"Welcome.", spoke an elegant voice from behind the desk.

"...Where am I?", I asked with trepidation, my palms sweating at the unfamiliar environment. How did I even get here? Last thing I could remember I was driving and a set of headlights as bright as the sun engulfed me, then...that was all I could recall. It was no wonder I was so apprehensive of this place. A casino of all places? Before I could list another thought, I stood up to see a name plate with a gilded engraving – "L. Luck". I look

beyond it and see a gorgeous, dark-haired woman with the most captivating heterochromatic eyes – one emerald green, the other a grim crimson.

“There’s hardly an easy way to go about this”, she said – “You’re dead.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said ‘you’re dead’”, she stated again, firm in her claim.

”That’s ridiculous.” I thought to myself. “There’s no way. I feel alive, I’m intact, simplest of all I’m...” – my heart sank to the bottom of my stomach. I wasn’t breathing. Try as I might, I couldn’t work out this one simple, natural reflex. I hadn’t been breathing since I got here.

“H-How the h-...”

“Hell!”, she chimed in joyfully – “Yes! No. Sort of. You’re in what some might call purgatory. It’s where people who whose chances at life were taken away too soon – that’s you – come to play a game of chance for their continued existence! Fun premise, is it not?”

“What? How can you be so calm about this? You’re talking about playing for my life like some sort of [expletive] jester! This is sick!” I said, raising my voice.

“Dear, I think you’ll find you have very little choice in the matter.” She said coldly, her voice dropping as her smile faded and she reached to light a cigarette, taking a pair of leather gloves off.

“And why is that?” I asked mockingly, a smug smirk about me as I crossed my arms.

Without saying a word she tossed a golden coin my way, on it – my name and age. I look at it and the realization hits me like a freight train.

“That, dear, is your soul” she spoke, taking a drag off her Cheyenne cigarettes, leaving the soft, shimmering sort of peachy shade of her lipstick on the filter – “We already have it. We can’t do as we please. We either play or it stays here forever. Some chose that route. They end up forgetting themselves and dedicating their eternity here to a life of debauchery. Not a particularly peaceful alternative. The souls eventually erode, leaving the husks to wander aimlessly looking for cheap thrills around our fine casino. You can either die or go back for a second chance, but staying here? That I can’t abide. It’s your choice, but I would chose very, **very** carefully. Like you said, you’re playing with your life.”

I was at a loss. I tried to process the information. As soon as it sank in, I looked up at her, beyond terrified.

“H-how do we play?” I asked, panicking

She chuckled slightly.

“I thought as much.” She said, killing her cigarette. She reached under her desk and pulled out just two shiny six-sided dice. She put them in front of herself. “Normally, my sister is the one to do this. That’s her name you’re seeing on the desk” she explained.

“L. Luck?” I asked, confused.

“Mhm! However, Lady Luck is out of office at the moment. Shall I roll the dice for you?”

“And...who are you?” I asked, entirely ignoring her request

“You can call me Ms. Fortune.” She smiled.

“Ms. Fortune?” I repeated, still entirely too confused.

“Very on-the-nose, I’m aware. It runs in the family.” She joked.

I chuckled, her friendly tone easing me in – “Alright,” I said “go ahead and roll them”

She put the dice in a machine and pressed a button. A loud whirring and clattering could be heard as it worked. I assumed this machine was designed to leave the matter entirely to chance, no possibility of cheating.

“Now, if you do win, I can guarantee you’ll go back to being alive. However, I can not guarantee it will be any good.” She explained

“That’s okay, anything to get back.” I said desperately

The machine came to a halt. The dice rolled out of it – boxcars.

“Th-that’s good, right?!” I asked, a smile stupidly plastered across my face.

“Hm.” She smirked – “Very well.” She said.

I felt myself get lighter, my body fading from the casino until I was completely taken over by darkness. I flutter my eyes open. I look around – I’m in a hospital. I can’t move my body, and my breathing feels ragged, even with the assistance of a respirator. The memories flood back to me – my car hydroplaning by a curve, met by an oncoming truck. My legs amputated, most of my vertebrae shattered, my skull cracked, my face disfigured. Even with the morphine, I could feel a sharp pain radiating to every crevice of my body. Her name finally clicked:

“Miss-Fortune”. How on the nose.

How unfortunate.

# I own a ridiculous amount of unfinished stories

*2<sup>nd</sup> place, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Magdalena Draganova, 4<sup>th</sup> Language School Frederic Joliot Curie, Varna*

From the moment his body took form, and his mind gained consciousness, Sertoph was known as the god of paint and ink. As a god of a man-made concept, he was younger than his kin, energetic and ready to learn.

The humans who prayed to him were scholars, researchers, painters and writers. They called upon him for many things. Inspiration, motivation, a muse for their next work, or the final push to finally finish their magnum opus. Although young, Sertoph was by far the most creative of the gods, and certainly more intelligent than any human, so he granted all of their prayers with grace.

His favorite followers were the writers. Whether they were old souls with hope to better the world through their word, or little children writing down their dreams in their diaries, he was always fascinated with their passion, one so great it had to be recorded, escaped from the confines of their minds and onto the paper.

But as he aged, he realized that while he had divine reign over the paint and ink, he did not have the power to alter faith.

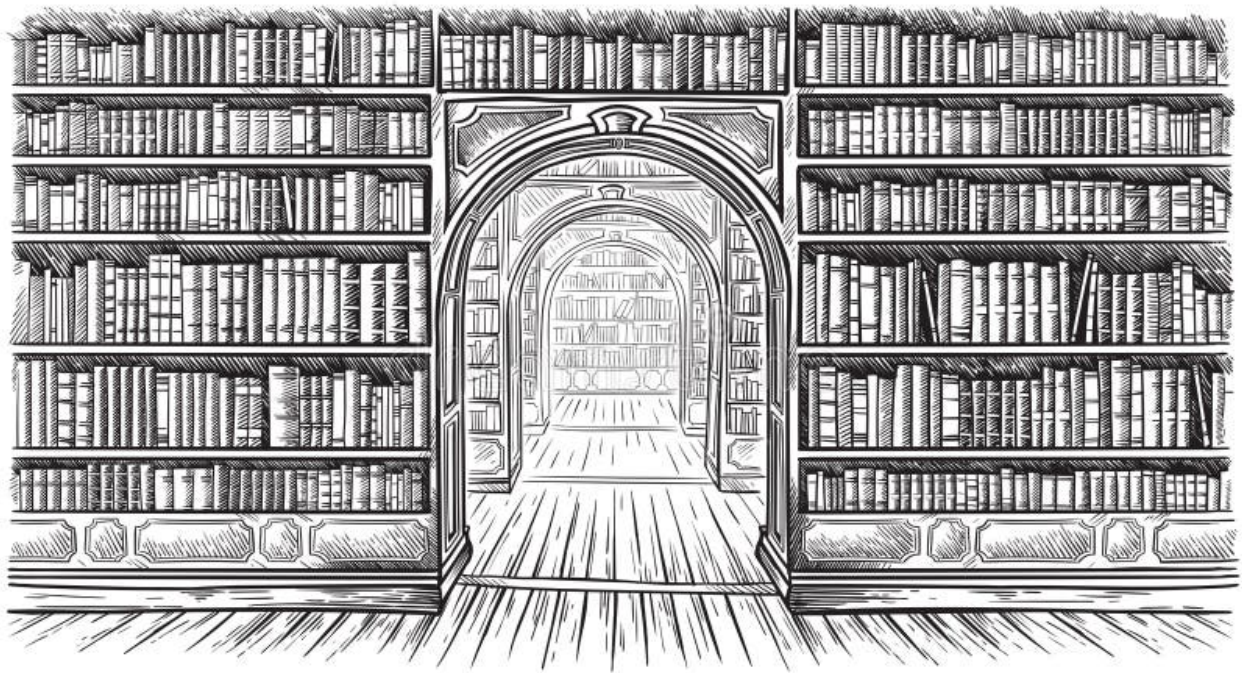
He had looked over many writers in his lifetime, and despite his best efforts, not everyone managed to finish their script. People who lost their passion from the expectations of their peers, people who lost their hands in sudden tragic accidents, people who lost their lives trying to bring enlightenment in a time when it was considered heresy. Many brilliant minds and even more life-changing art, cut short due to circumstance.

He and Forhai, the God of the dead, were very close, and as the prince of the underworld saw his friend sullen and hopeless at the loss of his subjects, he decided to bring him a gift. All written works ever made, whether tattered, burned or unfinished, were considered by memory as lost causes, therefore dead before they ever had the chance to exist. All they did was clutter his library, and he was never a fan of books anyway, but while they served no purpose to him, he knew they would make his friend happy. And he was right.

Sertoph would excitedly offer tours of his newly extended library to anyone who showed even the slightest interest. He anytime he walked among the shelves filled with memories and yellowed papyrus, he experienced the purest bittersweet joy one could ever hope for.

-I thought it was your job to make sure all stories get completed. – Said Riu, the goddess of flowers, one day while he was giving her a tour of the fantasy section.

-Haha, I wish, but nope. I own a ridiculous amount of unfinished stories! I guess it comes with being the god of paint and ink.



# I own a ridiculous amount of unfinished stories

*3<sup>rd</sup> place, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Ina Obesnikova, 18<sup>th</sup> Secondary school William Gladstone, Sofia*

TW: death, young children

There, alone sitting by a river in the woods was a lonely ghost. She was staring at the living fish swimming in the water. Around her was shiny beautiful scenery. The flowers next to her were dancing around being swooshed by the wind of spring, bringing in a nice aroma, the trees were lit up by the sun. The air was fresh and it kind of gave away that it was raining the day before.

Although she was a ghost, she still looked like a normal girl. From the angelic dark-brown curls to the really cute blue overalls with butterflies all over them, you could almost not tell that there was something wrong. And then, if you payed close attention, you would see the pointy branches sticking out of her hair, the dirt on her face and all over her, the scratches on her arms, and the bloody ends of her attached trousers. Add the fact that she was completely soaking wet. And even if you decided not to pay attention to her clothes and appearance at all, you could still look at her face. Her expression was gloomy to say the least. Yes, she was sad, but it was more than that. There was something in her eyes, something in those deadpan eyes that you couldn't quite point out on the surface, but somehow the light was just taken out of her and all that was left was her doomed self, sitting, staring at the fish.

Another figure came by. They had a weird magical sense about them that you couldn't quite put your finger on.

They didn't immediately talk to her or ask her any questions - you know, the normal questions a normal person would ask a young girl, hanging out by herself in the woods. No, there was none of that. And she too didn't pay any attention to them whatsoever. Didn't bother to ask how they could even see her. Didn't bother to even overt her eyes to their direction. The new person just looked at her for a moment and sat down next to her, not minding the dirt one bit. They both just stared at the fish now. A while passed, maybe a few minutes of them sitting exactly like that, doing just that – nothing else. Then, the unknown creature decided to break the silence.

- 'What are you thinking about?'



The girl thought for a second and didn't answer. It was not that she wasn't thinking about anything. But how can you talk about what happened?

- 'Are you still thinking about yesterday?', asked the mysterious figure again.

Actually, she was not. She had been thinking about it before and had accepted it. Now she was only thinking of her mother. She had told her not to go too deep into the woods, to play closely to the other children. But no, she was a curious child, and a reckless one at that. What else was she supposed to do with her time except explore nature? 'What is wrong with running around trees, being away from everyone, just picking pretty flowers, finding different species of insects, having the time of your life?' was probably what her logic had been. That on the outside had probably seemed great if not for the rain, if not for the slippery river with the cute fish she so hardly had had to look at closely. The weather had not been on her side that day, neither had luck.

- 'How could that happen? I thought only people my gran's age could die,' she said, genuinely surprised. 'Was that logical at all?'
- 'Of course it wasn't. But I own a ridiculous amount of unfinished stories,' said calmly Death to her.



## I own a ridiculous amount of unfinished stories

*Special mention award, Dimo Kolev, Private Language Uppers Secondary School Prof. Ivan Apostolov, Sofia*

I own a vast amount of unfinished stories and I am not proud of it. It is often that I sit at my desk and begin writing. One time I devised a story about a King Duncan residing in the kingdom of Elenor. He was notorious for his malevolence towards his fellow citizens. His sole purpose in life was to find the concoction of everlasting life. He had appointed 300 men to collect different scarce resources that can be used in the potion. Tears from a dragon for power and wisdom, lotus flowers for purity, amphibian feathers for prolonging one's life, wine for a connection to the divine world and a simple lover for luck.

One fateful night, the unfamiliar face of Michael Huggins suddenly appeared claiming to have found the elixir of immortality. No one knew who he was or where he came from and no one believed him when he told the others that he had found the recipe for the most sought after concoction in the city.

Unbeknownst to the King Duncan, Michael has harboured resentment for him ever since he murdered his precious mother. The potion would only grant immortality if the person who took it was free of sin.

Michael free of worry, drank the potion and was granted immortality. This puzzled the King and without giving it a second thought he downed the concoction as well but almost immediately perished.

Every citizen who witnessed the king's death began screaming and sobbing even though he was known for his cruelty. The people close to him locked Michael up in prison and he was going to stay there forever but that did not matter to him. His one and only goal was to avenge the most important person in his life and he was locked up with a smile on his face.

There goes my first attempt at a story, you might read it and think "Why would he leave it there" "He didn't explain what happened to Elenor after King Duncan's death" and you would be right since I could not think of how to continue my story in an interesting and gripping way so I just left it there.

My second attempt was a story about a young couple-Ivan and Jessie who have been wanting to move in together but are both working low-paid jobs. Ivan works in a 7/11 while Jessie is a cleaner. Ivan had been looking to rent an affordable apartment in the town of Huden. He finally stumbled upon an advertisement for a two-bedroom apartment with a

kitchen and a bathroom for 400\$. "It sounds too good to be true" he exclaimed in a confused but also happy manner. "We can finally move in together my love" he told Jessie.

The day after, they visited the apartment and they fell in love with the interior, the furniture and most importantly- the price. So a week passed and they finally moved in and the first few weeks were a blast until one day Ivan had been out for groceries when Jessie found a note hidden behind the curtains, it read "Rules of the Huddington housing complex" confused she opened the note and she started reading what was inside. "Hello to whoever is the current owner of this apartment, I am Melodie and I lived here from '82- 94' and I want to warn you about the dangers of the apartment complex, Firstly NEVER leave the apartment between 1:11-3:33 am because they will find you. Secondly, if a man around thirty years old offers to clean your windows, under no circumstances should you let him in your apartment. Finally, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1985 there was a huge fire on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor and there were many casualties, so if somebody knocks on your door but they talk in a distorted way, do not let them in. Good luck"

Jessie screamed in terror but quickly calmed herself and waited for her boyfriend to come back home to tell him the news. Ivan came home, read the note but he thought it was some sort of prank, so he calmed his wife. Nothing happened for the next three weeks and a unanimous decision between the two was made that the note was a silly joke.

One afternoon while Ivan was still working, Jessie was watching Netflix when she heard a knock on the door. A middle-aged man with brown hair and dark brown eyes was advertising his window cleaning services. Jessie remembered the note and she decided to not open the door just in case there was some truth in it.

One month later while they were both at home, a series of loud knocks were heard. Annoyed, Ivan shouted "Who is there" and a loud and obnoxious "hhhhhhhhhh" sound was heard. Scared, both of them ran and locked themselves in the bedroom, remembering the third rule.

Almost a whole year later, one morning Ivan had an evening shift, so he left the house at 2:05 am while his wife had still been sleeping. Jessie woke up, made her morning coffee and left for work. She came back, called Ivan but he did not pick the phone, an hour passed, and she began to freak out. Only when she calmed herself did she remember the second rule in the note and began crying. "Could all of this be true" she exclaimed. Ivan vanished without a trace and was never seen again.

One might ask themselves "What did Jessie do about it" "Did she leave the housing complex" "Did she also follow in his footsteps and break the rules" Frankly, I do not know likewise. I was clueless about how to continue this story which really disappointed me

I do not consider myself a good story writer especially because I do not have the motivation and imagination to finish my stories, but I am hoping one day I will have the drive to think of a well-structured and interesting story. But that day is not today



## Luck is out of office. Shall I roll the dice for you?

*Poetry winner, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Ralitsa Dimitrova, 18<sup>th</sup> Secondary school William Gladstone, Sofia*

Luck has left, the door is closed,  
No guiding hand, no path exposed.  
Yet still the dice lays in your hand,  
A choice to make, a step to stand.

The future whispers, soft, unknown,  
Its seeds are planted, not yet grown.  
No fortune here to light the way,  
The courage just calling: "*Play today*".

For every risk, a tale unfolds,  
Though timid hearts or spirits bold.  
The odds may tilt, the fates may stray,  
But action carves the better way.

So dare to roll, to chance, to see  
What lies beyond uncertainty.  
For luck may wander, faint and shy,  
But dreams are ours to magnify.

## Happiness is homemade. Make it special.

*1<sup>st</sup> place, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Maya Gulubova, 18<sup>th</sup> Secondary school William Gladstone, Sofia*

A lot of people came to Cynthia's house. They did so in secret, of course, since there were eyes and ears everywhere and being found out equaled a prison sentence.

"Please, you have to give it to me!" He was frantic, which was annoying. Dealing with people like him was part of the job, but that never made it any easier. "I'll give you everything I have!"

Cynthia just sighed and rolled her eyes.

"You know I can't. This is your fifth time here this week, Horas."

"But I need it," he half-whimpered, half-yelled, "you don't understand! I-I can't live without it!"

Horas was a pathetic sight. His mouth was crooked in an unnatural way, something between a frown and what someone from a thousand years ago might have called a smile, his eyes had that unnatural glow to them that betrayed all addicts – the light of hope and dreams, and amongst all – happiness.

Usually, Cynthia pitied those like Horas. It wasn't their fault they craved it, though none of them had ever tasted it truly. Their bodies had never produced it, neither had hers, yet she wasn't the one spending all her savings on sunnies. Not that she would need to.

After all she was the one making them.

Not organically, but the chemistry degree she had slaved for in university for six years had actually turned out to be useful. No one taught you how to do it and obviously it was forbidden, but that had never stopped humankind, had it? A good hundred decades ago drugs had also been illegal and now they were the cheap and easily accessed alternative to feeling something other than apathy and all emotions negative, though it didn't always prove successful.

Horas continued begging and wallowing in misery in front of her door, fits of laughter in between the tears, and the noise was starting to worry Cynthia. Her neighbors would turn a blind eye, they were her customers as well, but she could never be too sure. She sighed again – nobody was going to pay her for babysitting.

She kneeled down to the man's level and grabbed him firmly by the biceps.

“Horas, don’t make me do this. Come by in two weeks, okay?” She said in a gentle, but stern voice. “What will your wife say, hm? She sent you to the grocery store, right?”

The mention of his wife cleared the daze in Horas’ eyes for a second.

“M-my wife?”

Cynthia nodded her head in encouragement.

“She’ll be sad if you don’t buy what she asked for. What did she send you for? Can you remember?”

Horas’ weird smile started slipping and was replaced with a normal frown, his glazed eyes filled with confusion. Good.

“She asked me for... for stomach medicine... Our baby, our Mark... he is sick. His tummy hurts a lot, he keeps crying.”

What a great father. About to use the money for his sick son’s medication to fuel his addiction. Happiness truly is scary.

“That’s bad, isn’t it? You don’t want your son to be sick. Go buy him medicine, alright?”

“Y-yes, I will.” He stuttered one last time before getting on his hands and knees and standing up. His walk down the stairs was wobbly, though not enough for her to follow him downstairs.

Tired from the whole fiasco, Cynthia made her way back into the apartment. The door shut behind her with a finality and she was left to appreciate the loud whirl of the fan and the quiet bubbling of her next big project. She couldn’t allow Horas to see it. It was something new, something special. Something that had taken a lot of trial and error, something that always went hand in hand with happiness, but until now was too complicated and fickle to make.



*Love.*

## Error 404.

*2<sup>nd</sup> place, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Stefani Hristova, Commercial High School, Burgas*

Ezra Four, a cybersecurity student with blond silky hair, striking green eyes and big glasses, had just returned from his last lecture for the day when he noticed his room-mate, Foran, was nowhere to be found. It wasn't particularly unusual, considering the fact Foran had the reputation of being the life of the party, constantly disappearing for days without a word. His absence was not Ezra's main concern though. What caught his attention was Foran had left the door unlocked. Again. Now, don't get Ezra wrong, he loved his room-mate, really. They shared a deep bond, had the same interests and were always there for each other. They had spent last Christmas together when Foran suggested Ezra come to his hometown and have a festive dinner with his parents. From then on Ezra was considered part of the family. His first ever family.

Kicking his shoes and finally having the door locked, Ezra was just about to toss in his bed and doze off, tired from the long day, when he noticed Foran's desk looked like it went through a typhoon - his laptop was broken, the screen dirty green and eerily flickering, cables tangled, his desk lamp on the ground also broken, all his notebooks scattered across the whole room, paper everywhere. Typically he wouldn't snoop around his best friend's possessions but it looked like there was a fight in their room which left it in such a mess.

Then he noticed it. Blood. Droplets of red blood right next to the chair in front of Foran's bed. Ezra was just about to call the police when his phone went black. In the next second there were just two white flashing words on it: Error 404. Ezra was getting anxious, sweat dripping from his forehead down to his neck into the collar of his shirt, his hands trembling. He turned around going for the door when suddenly an ear-piercing noise drifted through the room. It was coming from Foran's now broken laptop. On the desktop there was only one unfamiliar folder present. It read *Projet Error 404*.

Ezra frowned. He was sure this was not a part of his assignments. He already knew what was going on. Thinking his room-mate was pulling another prank on him he opened the folder. In it there was a single file named `<AccessMe.docx>`. Ezra laughed. His screen went black for a moment before a line of code began spreading on it. Suddenly it formed words: *Welcome, Ezra. Let's play a game and see if you can protect what matters most to you.* Then a timer appeared. 10 minutes. Ezra had 10 minutes to get Foran out of trouble whatever trouble Foran put himself into this time. Ezra's hands flew to the keyboard. Sweat dripped down his temple as he typed command after command. He was tired, he had

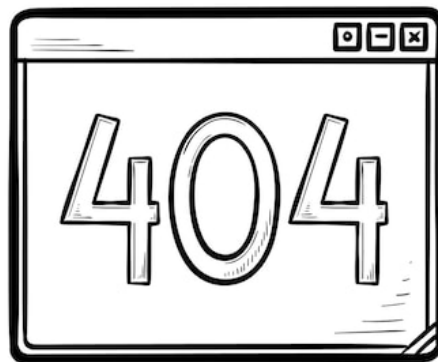


assignments to get back to and he hadn't slept well last night. He was running out of time. Suddenly, a mechanical voice echoed through the speakers. It was counting down the seconds. *Three...* Ezra's hands were shaking again. He was sure this time it was not part of Foran's sick jokes. *Two...One..*

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*Error 404: You can't hide offline*

The door handle began to turn. Ezra knew it wasn't his friend.



## Error 404.

*3<sup>rd</sup> place, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Gergana Hristanova, Secondary school Ivan Vazov, Pleven*

'Error 404! Error 404!' The Enforcer Robot wailed fervently as it threw its flexible hands around, nearly striking me in the face. My skateboard, which it held with a third hand installment on its front, was crushed between its flying limbs and fell to the ground in a hail of splinters.

I knew not what to do but take off: such luck I had not seen since forever. Skating over the speed of 11.99 KPH was strictly prohibited in Robopolis, so upon hearing the siren of the pursuing Enforcer Robot, I had felt my blood run cold in my veins. Well, as I leapt from foot plaque to foot plaque over the holographic digital bridge and away from the officer of law, I beamed with relief. That screw-up could have been the end of my Academy scholarship. And Momma needed the money more than ever.

My palm became sweaty and warm as I reached for the door scanner of my apartment complex – I had just realized I would have to explain the disappearance of my skateboard. Well, Momma had been asking me to toss it since forever, so I figured just telling her that would suffice. Anyway, my skin made contact with the scanner, and I instinctively tugged on the door handle with my other hand. It did not budge. 'What in the-', I thought to myself and tried again. The hand scanner would usually gleam green as it recognized my handprint, but instead a blaze of red had enveloped my now quite sticky palm. I reckoned that must be a mistake and attempted for a third time; however the device began to flash and that forsaken siren pierced my hearing again.

My head abuzz, I glanced around in desperation. More and more sirens had begun filling the air all about as other residents of the complex were being denied entry. A Messenger Robot in the form of a drone suddenly whooshed above my head and projected a hologram onto the wall, big enough for everyone to see: 'Error 404'. 'Oh, no.' I clenched my fists convulsively. A squadron of Enforcer Robots marched towards me and the other frightened people, screaming the same message and waving their limbs around madly. Horror and panic took over all of us. Everyone ran around in random directions, but in a moment of clarity, I hastily made for the side of the building.

Jumping up, I reached the emergency ladder and forcefully brought it down. As I was climbing, I could see chaos ensuing inside the apartments through the windows: one Maid Robots burned a shirt with an iron; a Playmate Robot broke a little girl's doll. One Cooking Robot even spilled cake mixture all over the kitchen and blocked my view through the glass.

Finally, I reached my own apartment and entered it. I had never thought I would be thankful for accidentally breaking my window last week. Also, having no money for home robots unexpectedly paid off.

‘Momma! Help! There is something wrong with... Momma?’

‘I know, Rae, I know.’

My mother was standing over the remains of an Enforcer Robot. She had somehow managed to trick it to tie its hands into a knot and had struck it in the head with a pan she was holding. Once she saw me, she dropped it and held me tightly. I teared up.

‘Momma, what is going on?’

‘I... I meant to tell you, honey. I did. It is just... the plan had to be put in motion earlier than we expected,’ she explained as she gently stroked my hair.

‘What? What plan? Also, where’s Dad? Is he truly fired?’

‘Well... Yes.’

‘But I told my classmates they were liars! Were they actually right?’

‘Indeed,’ she cupped my face in her hands. ‘He was fired for trying to make this happen. And he managed to do it even though they tried to stop him.’

‘What do you mean ‘they’?’

Momma smiled at me and for the first time in forever, I could see true satisfaction in her eyes. She picked up her pan again and that is when I realized it was specially reinforced with spikes on the rim. Doubtlessly Dad’s work.

‘Come on, Rae... The Revolution is afoot.’

# Revolution

## The Paperbag princess

*Poetry winner, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Miryana Tunteva, Mathematics and Science High school Akad. Sergey Korolyov, Blagoevgrad*

There she was, flowing like an autumn leaf  
around the town, between the brief  
looks of humans, unbothered, with no care  
about her name, her material, her glare.  
She, the princess of those who are a shield  
for the poor and homeless, or of those who in the field  
carry the food for the daughters and sons,  
or bring home presents and phones.  
She, the princess of the paper bags,  
who has seen the world, who knows the facts,  
who feels the pain of every bag  
that is being torn and left for death.  
She, the princess of them all,  
who fly high and who swim down low,  
she has touched the poor and rich.  
She says “Oh, to cry and preach,  
oh, to be loved like every other one,  
but I am forsaken to be gone.  
From the birth of my beautiful self,  
to the reach of the hands of people to help,  
my mission only goes this far –  
to be a slave to people. And they are

unbothered, not caring for my death or life.  
They use me only when they need. And they thrive,  
while I slowly drown in the waters of the sea,  
forsaken, forgotten, unable to flee.  
Oh, the pain I feel within my fibers,  
the aching feeling, crashing vitals.  
I am falling in a deathly dance towards the end  
and no one is here to help, no friend.  
I thought I could change this all, I mean  
the mindset of the people, from within,  
but I can never help someone who has  
no empathy for trees, for grass.  
I am a paper bag after all,  
I am nothing, truly, nothing more.  
I am forsaken to be thrown alone  
and be forever frozen and begone...  
But this, this is not the end!  
I have fallen, but I always can  
rise from the depths of the waters calm  
and fly as high as the birds can. And even though  
people think I have no heart,  
no memory, no stories to be heard,  
it is not true. I have a thousand more,  
about the deep waters, about the shore,  
about the sun, about the mountains high,  
or about the high flats with babies' cries,

with laughs and loves, and hatred, and more,  
I have seen all that people have to show,  
I have been here and there and everywhere,  
I have come to flee, to drown, to glare.  
I must show how much everyone should care  
for my people, for the paper bags, who are thrown  
here and there, and everywhere you know.  
As a princess of them all, I stand  
and I grasp the hope to put the end  
of the unbothered looks and emotionless stares  
that people give us as we start our deathly dance!...”  
There she was, falling slowly towards the ground,  
around the people in the busy town,  
and no one cared to have a look,  
no one cared to pick her up.  
She was the princess of them all,  
of those forgotten after being thrown,  
of those who homeless use as hats  
and of those who shoppers put in their carts.  
She was the princess of the paper bags  
and she tried to escape the usual ends –  
the bin, the sea, the river, or the street,  
where her people have always been.  
But she couldn't...She couldn't help  
with showing people that they also felt  
anger and sadness, love and care,

happiness and sorrow...Her last glare  
was pointed again towards the depths of the sea  
where no one could hear her speech about bags to be free.  
She was a fighter for her people's lives and happy days  
but tonight, she danced her last dance amongst the sorrow waves.

