

# Pure in Heart

## Stories

A Literary Magazine for Families



Issue #11

April 2026



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A Literary Magazine for Families

**Issue #11 | April 2026**

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PURE IN HEART STORIES

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Cover art: *At the Fish Ladder* by Heather Dickinson, page 99.

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## HOW TO READ THIS ISSUE

Use the color tabs to find the recommended age group for each poem and story. The tabs are a guide for which age group might appreciate a poem or story best.

-  Ages 6+
-  Ages 8+
-  Ages 10+
-  Ages 12+

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# Letter from the Editors

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Well, Resurrection Day has come and gone (though it remains in our hearts), spring is in the air, summer is just around the corner, the sun is shining, baby birds are singing – which means ... (*drumroll*) ... it's time for the newest issue of *Pure in Heart*!

Our little magazine has been growing in the number of readers and writers who want to glorify God, and it shows. In our **11th issue**, we have a smorgasbord of creative work by kids, teenagers, students, teachers, parents, and writers and artists of all ages and backgrounds. We have a new, two-part saga of our favorite red-headed heroine (Beatrix), a recipe that will change the way you make scrambled eggs forever, poems that will touch your heart, make you smile, and urge you to be a blessing to others, stories that will make you laugh, maybe make you tear-up, and some that will kindle joyful warmth in your heart ... and there's so much more! There's even a fun drawing game that will get the whole family laughing around the table (we know from experience).

Well, what are you waiting for? Get reading!

Last thing: we hope you enjoy this issue. But more than that, we hope that you are *blessed* by it and that the Lord Jesus uses the words and art of these talented creatives to draw you closer to Him.

May God bless you and keep you,

*Veronica McDonald & Mia McDonald*

# Creation



by Pat Severin

Many many years ago,  
before the world began,  
our perfect God, Creator, had  
a very special plan.

He said, "I'll make a perfect world  
and everything that's in it!"  
You see, God can do anything.  
His power has no limit!

In six short days, God made our world,  
stood back and said, "That's great!"  
When that was done He made a man  
and woman for his mate.

They lived within this perfect place  
with fruit trees, flowers, and plants,  
and every kind of animal  
from elephants to ants.

He told them, "You may eat the fruit  
of every tree, but *that* one.  
Take just one bite, and you will find  
that it will be your last one."

That tree produced such luscious fruit  
the two could not resist.  
Besides a talking devil snake  
said, "Come on, I insist!"

“I promise you, one little taste  
and you’ll be just like God!  
That’s why He doesn’t want you to,”  
and gave a devilish nod.

The woman took one little bite  
and then the man did, too.  
The minute that they took that bite,  
the two of them both knew.

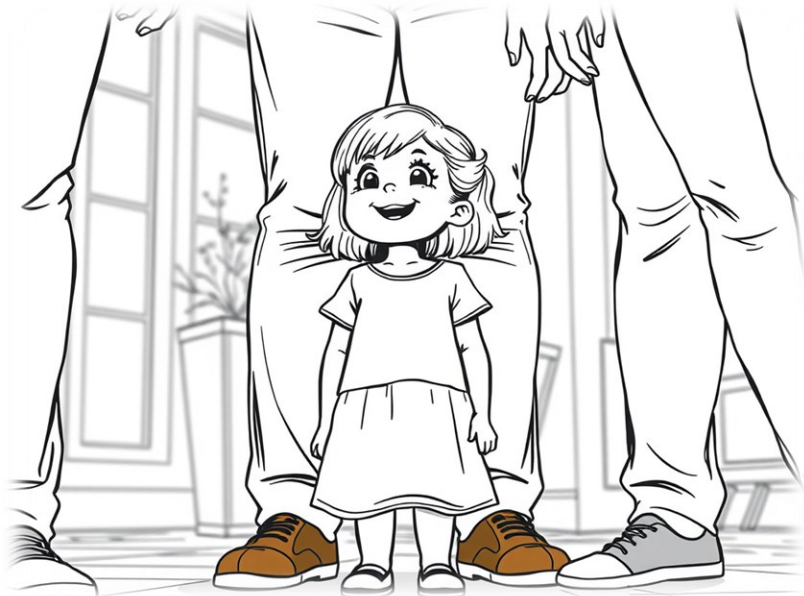
They both felt guilty instantly  
that when God called their names,  
they hid from Him (as if they could)  
because they felt ashamed.

That day, God’s perfect world was changed.  
Temptation had its cost  
because when sin finds its way in,  
perfection will be lost.



# Nora's World

by Pat Severin



Her parents named her Nora Ann, Nora Ann McLawler,  
but no one called her Nora Ann, that wasn't what they'd call her.  
That baby girl was nearly two and, yes, was pretty little.  
Her nickname fit her, oh, so well. She'd hear it and she'd giggle.

Right from the day she learned to walk, they called her by this name,  
and little Nora liked it, too — no other quite the same.  
She came up to a grown-up's knees and that's the reason why  
to everyone, this girl was known as Little Nora Knee-High!

Yes, Little Nora Knee-High was small as she could be;  
in fact, her world was pretty strange, as far as she could see.  
Each morning when the sun came up, she'd jump right out of bed,  
run down the hall to Bobby's room, and poke him in the head.

“Boppy, Boppy, get up, come! Come and play today!  
You gotta come, the sun is out! Come now, Boppy. Play!”  
So, brother Bobby slowly stands upon the cold wood floor  
and says, “Oh, yikes, that floor is cold! Go out and close the door!”

So, Nora leaves so he can change, but struggles with the door.  
The doorknob’s hard for her to turn. “Boppy, help me more!”  
She goes into the kitchen where her mom is making coffee.  
Her dad is heading to the store, her sister shouts, “Buy toffee!”

Her grandma and her grandpa are both sitting at the table.  
Grandpa reads the paper while her grandma eats a bagel.  
But in this sea of people, little Nora sees just knees –  
bony, chubby, smooth or rough, that’s all that Nora sees!

A world of knees and wandering legs for her to dodge and bump.  
Some come with bruises, dimples, too, some even have a lump!  
But Nora’s used to what she sees, her world’s a different place  
with only knees to talk to – a far cry from a face!

But Nora knows whose knees are whose and says she doesn’t mind.  
That may seem weird, but not to her; yes, Nora does just fine.  
Her mama’s knees are pink and soft, and Dad’s are tanned and brown.  
Bobby’s knees are bruised and scabbed, the toughest knees in town!

Mr. Smith, the mailman, wears pants that have blue stripes.  
Pastor Thompson hides his knees beneath a gown of white.  
The gardener has two dirty knees from kneeling on the ground ...  
Tom next door, when he’s in shorts, the hairiest knees around!

Aunt Bertha’s knees are squishy – Nora sees them ‘neath her dress –  
but Nora says for pinkest knees, her sister’s knees are best.  
Her grandma’s knees are wrinkly, and so are Grandpa’s knees.  
Though Nora’s taller than the dog, she’s sure his knees have *fleas*!

Little Nora Knee-High may be small as she can be,  
but she'll grow up and see the world the same as you and me.  
Just for now, her view's okay. "Be careful, Nora, please!  
'Cause life's a little dangerous when all you see are knees!"

---

Read about **Pat Severin** on page 174.

# Summer

## by Polina Moys



“Summer is here!  
Hooray, hooray!”  
Kids of all ages  
Happily say.



The school year is over,  
We're ready for fun!  
Summer awaits us  
With ocean, beach, sun.

What is the plan?  
A day on the shore,  
Games, roller coasters,  
And so much more!

Hiking and fishing,  
Setting a tent,  
Swimming and sleeping  
To one's heart's content.

Tanned and refreshed,  
We're ready for school.  
Summer vacation  
Was fast, yet so cool!

---

Read about **Polina Moys** on page 173.

# Hide-n-Go Seek



by Jason Kirk Bartley



When I was a little boy,  
about the age of five or six,  
I'd hide my eyes, and count to twenty,  
giving the other little boys and girls time to hide —  
I always gave them plenty.  
Promising and trying not to peek,  
which was a cardinal sin,  
they all scattered right when I told them,  
“When!”  
Some went north, some south,  
some east, and west,  
some ran with their hands covering their mouths, trying to hide;  
each one thought their hiding spot was the best.  
They giggled as they tried to hide  
where they would not be spied and not be found.  
They tried to hide away from the barking hound.  
Some were easy to find, but others were hard  
because they broke the rules and went outside the yard.

My big yard had many tall trees ...  
I thought I just heard someone sneeze!  
I used my instinct and natural skills  
of listening for any giggles  
behind the trees,  
and I moved slowly as if I were in  
the tortoise and the hare race,  
searching for a peeking face,  
to no avail!  
I knew this yard very well ...  
So, I searched and searched behind the shed  
'cause I heard some rustling of the leaves up ahead.  
Someone took off sprinting and fled,  
giving up his hiding spot up ahead!  
I went the other way,  
trying to guard my haven of rest.  
He darted for the base;  
I hurdled an old wheelbarrow in the way – I tried my best,  
hoping to tag him on this day, as I was in a foot race.  
Then others began to reveal themselves ...  
they were like Ewoks in *Star Wars* among the trees.  
They all took off running toward the base.  
I had to decide which one to tag;  
I had to save some face.  
But there's always that one who trips and falls –  
easy prey for me on this day.  
Whoever was tagged became "it,"  
'till shadows ruled the yard and it became moonlit.  
Then a child's dad or mom would call them home,  
until I was standing all alone.  
So I'd give it up for another day,  
'till they'd want to gather again and play.

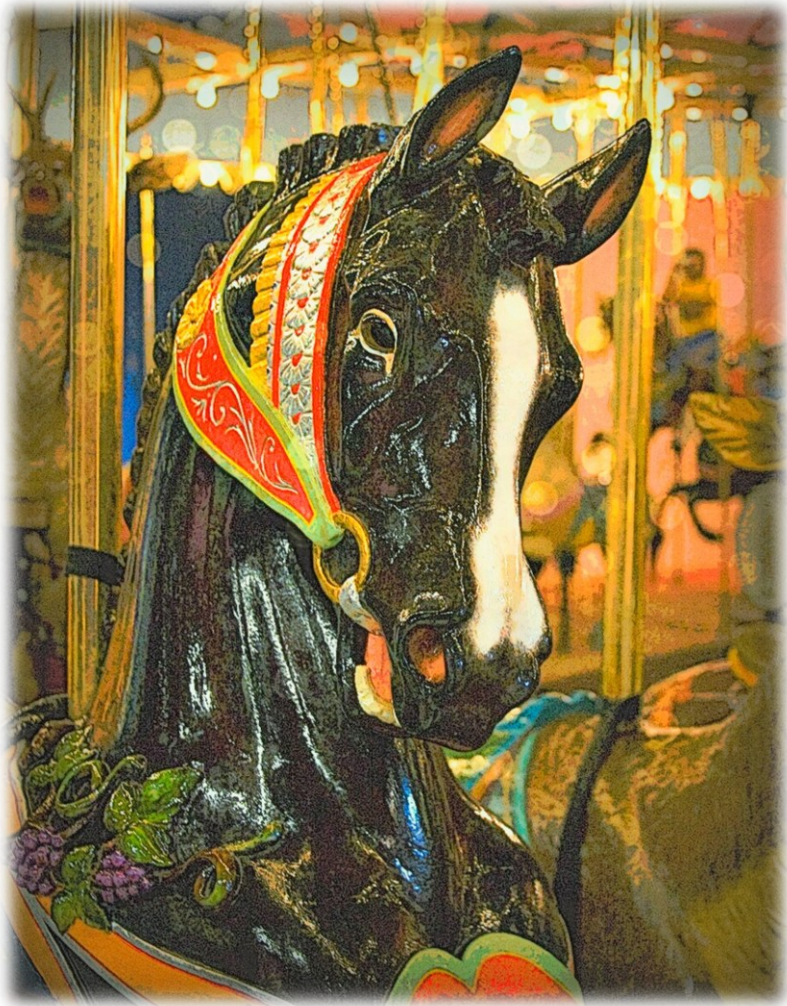
# The Merry-Go-Round



by Jason Kirk Bartley

I could hear the happy music,  
as the festival was back in town.  
Out of every ride, the best I had found  
was the carousel that goes 'round and 'round,  
while some of the horses go up and down,  
alternating to the sound  
of the beautiful music.  
I wanted to ride the black stallion,  
but I had to wait for my turn ...  
Sharing and good morals  
need to be better learned.  
Colored lights ran,  
blinking up and down,  
as all the horses went in a circle  
going up and down.  
On top of the ride, sticking out his tongue  
was a giant face of a clown  
with a great big smile!  
Finally, my chance to ride  
was here after a while.  
I mounted the black stallion,  
just like the Lone Ranger.  
Holding tight to the pole  
kept me from danger.  
It was as if I were riding a real horse of mine!  
I kicked his sides, up and down he went,  
'till it came to a pause ...  
My money had been spent.  
The black stallion and the horses

would be here for a few more days  
to allow kids to just be kids  
and let their imaginations run away.



---

Read about **Jason Kirk Bartley** on page 171.

# Water



by **Bella Morin (age 13)**

Water

Chilly, Cold

Swimming, jumping, splashing

Kids have fun playing

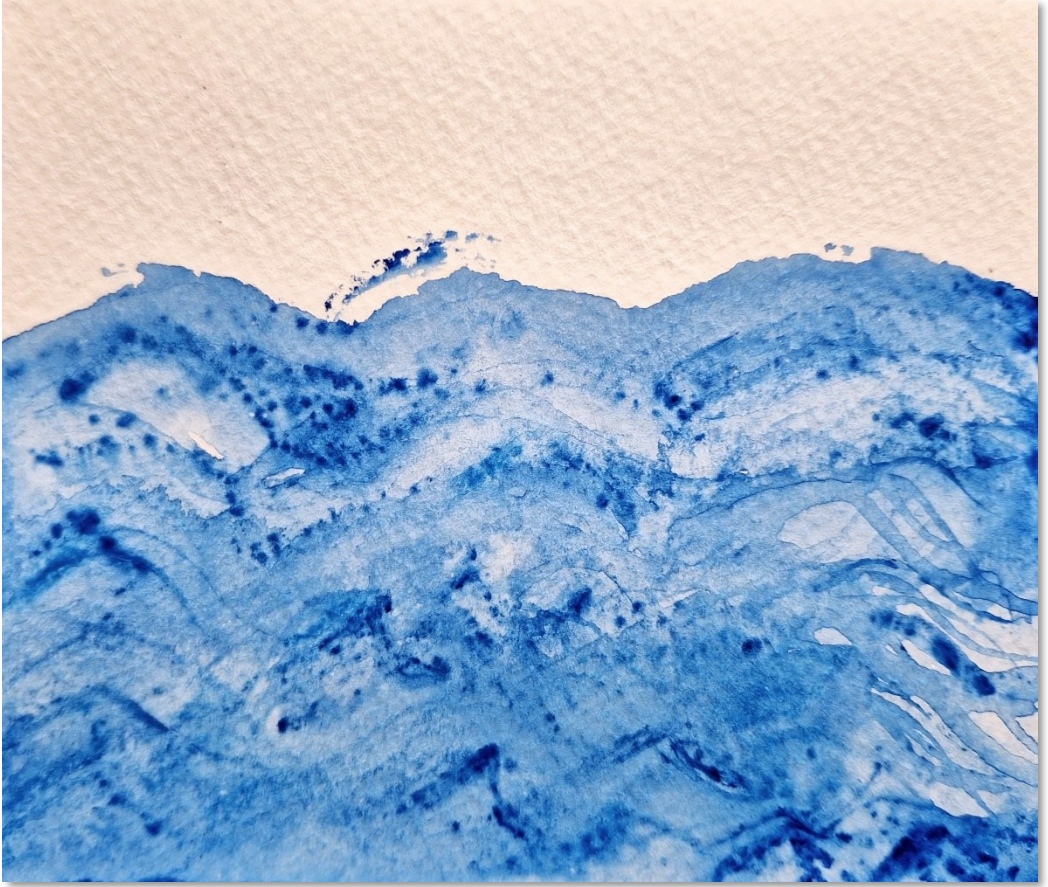
Pool



Light and Salt  
by Tiffany Nicole Fletcher



*Oceans*  
by Tiffany Nicole Fletcher



---

Read about **Tiffany Nicole Fletcher** on page 171.

# The Lord's Ensemble

## by Jonathan S. Harris



The Lord's piano plays a song,  
while ours has broken keys.  
His melody is so above,  
it brings us to our knees.

We try our best to play along,  
but our fingers just freeze.  
If we just try to play with love,  
then He will be so pleased.



---

Read about **Jonathan S. Harris** on page 172.

# Three Donkeys



by **Marcia N. Lynch**

Three donkeys met in heaven —  
Their new home of joy and mirth,  
And each one told what happened  
While they lived upon the earth.

The first donkey then lifted  
Up his head and told his plight,  
“Balaam was my master  
But he didn’t do what’s right.  
An angel stood before me  
To block us on the path.  
But Balaam took his stick  
And hit me in his wrath.  
Then God opened my mouth —  
Yes! My words were written down!  
I talked and scolded him  
For treating me so foul.  
I saved him from the curse  
That he was going to make,  
And people speak of me,  
a talking donkey, to this day!”

The second told the journey  
Of young Isaac and his father:  
“I carried all the wood for them.  
We walked to mount Moriah.  
I saw Isaac and wondered,  
Where’s the lamb, the sacrifice?  
They went alone to offer

That which only God provides.  
When young Isaac returned  
I stomped and brayed with such delight!  
To see that he was spared  
And now could live a ransomed life.”

The third donkey was thoughtful  
And he whispered to the rest,  
“My journey was quite different,  
But I think it was the best.  
Lord Jesus borrowed me  
And my little foal.  
We marched into Jerusalem —  
But that isn’t all!  
The crowds came all around us  
Laying palm leaves at my feet.  
They shouted loud Hosannas  
To the One who set them free!

“You saved your master Balaam,”  
The donkey told the first,  
“From cursing God’s elect,  
And keeping them from hurt.

“You saw the young boy Isaac  
Saved from his father’s knife,  
But my Master is the One  
Who promises new life.”

The three donkeys were quiet,  
And amazed at God’s strange plan  
To use such humble creatures  
To save the likes of man.

Each one had a purpose;  
They recounted all their tracks.  
Could this be why donkeys  
Wear a cross upon their backs?



Artwork by *Marcia N. Lynch*.

---

Read about **Marcia N. Lynch** on page 173.

# Ode to a Mother

## by Polina Moys



A mom is kind and elegant,  
I think we all agree.  
The word itself is beautiful,  
The sweetest melody.

A mom is wise and graceful,  
We love her very much.  
She knows what to say and do  
And adds her gentle touch.

Her ways are soothing and serene,  
They chase the tears away.  
Her smile is like a ray of sun  
That always makes my day.

A mom's immensely happy  
When we succeed in life.  
If hard times hit, she comforts, heals,  
And helps us through the strife.

On Mother's Day we honor  
All moms who are God-sent.  
Their love is true and loyal  
And shines without end.



# Both Pluses and Minuses

by **Kataleigha Walsh** (age 11)



You know when your day goes totally wrong and then the next is perfectly good?  
What is that called?

I call it my plus day and my minus day.  
Both help us learn what to do right and what we did wrong.

To me, I say, they both tell a story, but the main character is you!  
It's true.

So when you have a plus day and a minus day, write it down and tell it to someone close.

---

**Kataleigha Walsh** enjoys nature, cold weather, sports, and art (drawing, literary, and performing). She's in middle school.

# Five Haiku Poems



by Sean Wild



People are sleeping  
cats got into the catnip  
wide-eyed and silly

Kids are riding bikes  
on a path through the open field  
I am riding too

Frogs croak by the pond  
still water reflects the sky  
red birds fly above

It is raining now  
grass is growing quietly  
I have stepped in mud

The house is shaking  
not from the strength of the wind  
the joy of laughter

---

Read about **Sean Wild** on page 174.

# Advice on TV News: Pick Up Small Children

by Cleo Griffith

Yes, please do this when a mountain lion is near.  
A lion in town means it is hungry.  
That little child may look like lunch.

Also, do not run away.  
Perhaps the lion only wants to play  
and sees that movement as invitation  
to a fine wrestle on the park grass.

Stand tall and noisy – yell and wave,  
no, not motions toward you – toward the cat!  
Pretend you are a big person, not five feet tall,  
and that your squeaky voice is a foghorn.

If you have food with you, do not try to bribe.  
This might insult the lion, who, after-all, IS a lion!  
Remember, this is a solitary animal who does not like  
company when dining, unless the company is the dinner.

Most of all,  
pick up small children  
who might be inclined to run towards the intruder, calling  
“here, kitty, kitty, kitty ...”



---

Read about **Cleo Griffith** on page 172.

# The Pond Skater

by Marcia N. Lynch



Artwork by Marcia N. Lynch.

I cannot wear a backpack  
The weight would sink me down  
A hungry fish could eat me  
Before I even drowned.

So, take my buggy burdens, LORD  
And carry them for me  
So I can walk on water  
Just like Jesus on the sea.

With slender legs of faith, I'll scoot  
Upon the thin meniscus  
Reminding all the human folk  
Of God, Who walked here with us.

# Turtle Crossing

## by Stacey Longo Graham



Vibrations scare me.  
You're slower than molasses.  
Lawnmower must yield.

Just let me help you.  
I'm going to wait in here.  
There, all better now.

Sun is setting soon.  
Green stalks lie scattered in lawn.  
I'll look one more time.

Did you make it home?  
You're faster than you let on.  
Turtles like my yard.



---

Read about **Stacey Longo Graham** on page 172.

# Fine Looking Day Angel



by Denise Landry

Are angels needed on fine looking days?  
Yes – for even the nicest days can turn on a dime.

No matter the language they speak,  
No matter the form they take,  
Any angelic help is welcome on days like these.

A hot summer sun hits my waking eyes.  
Its warmth stirs a need for an outing.  
I tell my brother let's go to the rapids,  
let's picnic, let's enjoy the day.

In Quebec, where French and English share the air,  
we head out –  
me in my four-wheeled chair,  
my brother walking besides,  
rolling along life's rocky path,  
thinking I am secure.

Then a wheel loosens.  
It falls.  
I tip.

My brother scoops me up as the chair collapses.  
He sets me gently under a shady tree.

No phone.  
No tools.  
No way to fix the chair.

No way home.

We curse the chair.

We think.

We wait.

Then suddenly —

a cycling angel appears.

« Besoin d'aide? » she asks.

My brother lets out a panicked, “Yes!”

He gestures for a wrench.

She nods, turns, and glides away —  
crossing the street as if carried.

Moments later she returns,

wrench in hand,

like a small miracle on two wheels.

My brother fixes the wheel.

We thank her with all the gratitude we have.

She smiles and says, « Bonne journée, »  
before riding off,

and we never see our angel again.

Are angels needed on fine looking days?

Yes — for days that turn on a dime.

I am grateful, always,

for any angelic help

that comes on the bad days

and the fine looking ones of my life.



---

Read about **Denise Landry** on page 172.

# That Heavenly Car



by Cleo Griffith

Since I was a child of eight,  
I've been reading of the great  
flying car that everyone  
will have (they say it's nearly done),  
and year by year, for over eighty,  
I have scanned the broad sky nightly,  
but nevermore does this car show  
to us who wait here down below —  
but hark! there's yet more current news  
that shortly now we will all cruise  
from driveway up into the sky,  
that treat is coming by and by,  
but by the time it will arrive,  
I doubt that I shall be alive,  
but maybe when I reach that gate  
of heaven, therein will await  
the magic of that car supreme,  
the flying car of life-long dream.



Don't touch the butterfly ...  
by Nasta Martyn



... and you know that cats hide secrets  
by Nasta Martyn



---

Read about **Nasta Martyn** on page 173.

# Ode to Soup



by **P.T.K. Vasquez**

Glimmering molten broth,  
orangey-carrot flakes;  
salt and pepper  
dancing together –  
a symphony for the taste.

Pungent ivory garlic,  
celery, green and crisp;  
carmine tomatoes and  
starchy potatoes –  
a glorious thing to sip.



---

Read about **P.T.K. Vasquez** on page 174.

# Deeper Well

by **Kyler Littlejohn**

The world has shallow cups,  
bright, loud, easy to spill.  
They sparkle in the sun  
and leave you thirsty still.

But there is a deeper well  
hidden past the hill,  
where quiet roots keep holding on  
and restless winds grow still.

You have to walk a little farther,  
you have to choose the narrow way,  
lower down your bucket  
when the easy waters sway.

It isn't always shining.  
It isn't always wide.  
But goodness gathers slowly there  
where truer things abide.

Drink deep —  
Past fear, past doubt, past noise.  
The water tastes like courage.  
It tastes like joy.

And when the dark comes creeping  
with its clever, thirsty spell,  
your heart will not run dry —  
it found a deeper well.



---

Read about **Kyler Littlejohn** on page 173.

# Four Random Thoughts About Food



by Rachel Michelle Collier



Mr. Bean is like a beanpole.

Or he is like a long bean.

He certainly has all the qualities of a **string bean**:

For one, he is a bit stringy.

For two, he does not have good taste.

For three, he has the personality of a bean.

For four, he seems a bit overcooked, as he is often limpid  
and without much color.

\*

## **Bratwurst**

is a type of tasty sausage.

And sausages, of course,

do not come from horses,  
for that would be the worstest,  
for humans and for horses  
(especially for horses).

\*

I think that the forbidden fruit  
just might have been an **apricot**.  
And that then there was likely snot,  
since Eve and Adam likely cried  
when God sent them into the hot,  
    outside of the cool of His garden,  
    to live among the thorns and briars.

\*

**Garlic and onions.**

*Smell:* Bad enough to ward off vampires, as usual.

*Preparation:* You will cry and gag through the whole debacle.

*Taste once thoroughly cooked:* Will take you to the moon.

*Advisement:* Eat it. But eat *a lot* ONLY if you'd like to lose  
    both friends and enemies

for a day or two.

And this concludes my random thoughts on food.

# Sun Parallax



by Rachel Michelle Collier



Son up.  
The Lord is shining.  
The Lord is awake and active.  
The Son is up.

*Good morning, Buffy, says Mack.*  
*Good morning, Mack, says Buffy.*  
*The sun is rising! says Buffy.*  
*The sun is up, yawns Mack, dreamily.*

*Good morning, Buffy, says Mack.*  
*Good morning, Mack, says Buffy.*  
*The sun is up! says Buffy.*  
*The Son is up, says Mack, happily.*

*Good morning, Buffy, says Mack.*  
*Good morning, Mack, replies Buffy.*  
*“The Son is up ...” sings Buffy.*

“The Son is risen,” sings Mack, “indeed.”

Buenos días, says Mack.

And good morning to you! says Buffy, then —

Oh no! It's storming outside!

The sun always rises, says Mack, quietly.

Amen, and amen, and amen to that,

Buffy says, all soft, pondering.

The sun is down.

Sun down.

A storm is brewing on the Western front.

The LORD is stirring on the Eastern front.

Goodnight, Buffy, says Mack.

Goodnight, Mack, says Buffy.

May the Lord protect you in your dreams, she adds.

There is light in the darkness, Mack says, faithfully.

Good morning, Buffy, says Mack.

Good morning, Mack! exclaims Buffy.

THE SUN IS UP! she shouts.

Yes, the Son is up, Mack yawns —

Yes, the sun is up, Mack yawns, dreamily.

---

\* Inspired by the educational book series *Sun Up* by Margaret Early.

---

Read about **Rachel Michelle Collier** on page 171.

# The Calling



written by Alexa Zielkowski at age 11



Hear the voices calling,  
Calling from above.  
Hear the voices calling,  
Kindness, difference, and love.

A new trend has occurred,  
It has swept all the nation.  
It consists of violence, anger,  
And new protestations.  
But this is not the right  
Solving declaration.

If you listen close, listen right,  
You can hear the voices calling day and night.  
Pleading for a change,  
Something to occur.  
What we need right now is to love one another.

Together, every sister and brother.

It starts with you; you can join the change.  
Take moving, humble steps.  
There is no need to restrain.

Be different, be kind,  
Take a stand.  
There's no need to be fierce,  
We'll stand hand-in-hand.  
And though it may take time and work,  
We all must take a moment to listen.

Hear the voices calling,  
Calling from above.  
Hear the voices calling,  
Kindness, difference, and love.

---

**Alexa** was a prolific writer who enjoyed reading, spending time with friends, and being out in nature. She was devoted to spreading kindness and love to all those around her and was fascinated by the mind and how we perceive the world.

# He Rode a Borrowed Burro



by Marcia N. Lynch

He rode a borrowed burro,  
A colt with stuttered gait.  
Stepping over palm leaves,  
He marched on to His fate.  
Not a strutting stallion,  
Announced with horn and song,  
But with loud hosannas  
The grateful joined the throng.  
Like a child's puppet show  
Imitates what's true,  
They knew this was not make-believe,  
Their King was marching through.  
Shedding cloaks, they carpeted  
His path to sin's defeat,  
As prideful hearts must all bow down  
And fall beneath His feet.  
Did they know that this parade,  
With shouts of "Blessed is He!"  
Would echo praise in heaven  
For all eternity?



# I Climbed a Cliff



by Catherine Cruz (age 17)

I climbed a cliff and looked out on the view  
I spoke your name so all the winds would know you  
I reached my hand up and touched a cloud  
It came away moist – I laughed aloud.

I sat down on that clifftop and stared before me  
And from my queen's seat as far as the eye could see  
I saw green trees, arms up in prayer or lament –  
I saw all nature, and, captivated, was silent.

An hour I let such wonders hold me down  
And then I remembered there was such a thing as a town  
So I arose, newly thankful for what nature gave and meant –  
I turned and disappeared – I'd started my descent.

Now I'm down and back in my home place  
Now I'm back with brighter eyes and cleaner face  
Perhaps they can feel sad, wish for hate and sin –  
But I've been washed anew, more happy than I've been.



# Storms



by Paul Kaddis (age 15)



Water droplets  
Fall around  
Splashing upon the dirty ground  
Clouds gathering first tightly  
Before raindrops drop lightly  
Then suddenly rain  
Began to burst  
And the land became immersed  
Lightning was sure to follow  
Striking patterns  
Of orange yellow  
Gusty winds  
Thunder roaring  
Creation seeks protection  
From the pouring  
Alerts blare of mass flooding  
Sending cars  
Quickly running  
But suddenly it slowed and stopped  
All the rain no longer dropped  
The sun shone its rays  
Lasting through  
To another day

# Howling Winds

by Paul Kaddis (age 15)



The wind blows  
Whistles and whines  
Twists and turns  
All leaves and vines  
It trembles and shakes  
Every living thing  
Ground, mountains, seas and lakes  
Swift and slow  
High and low  
Short or long  
Weak or strong  
Hardly any sound  
Unleashed and unbound  
It creeps through cracks  
No holding back  
Unseen to our eyes  
Gusts dance, quickly fly  
They beautifully glide through many chimes  
Casting all sorts of pleasing cries  
At times  
The gale  
Is at rest  
Others drift  
In violent protest  
Suddenly the wind dies down  
Only to be carried to a new town

# From Luke 10 and Psalm 119:2

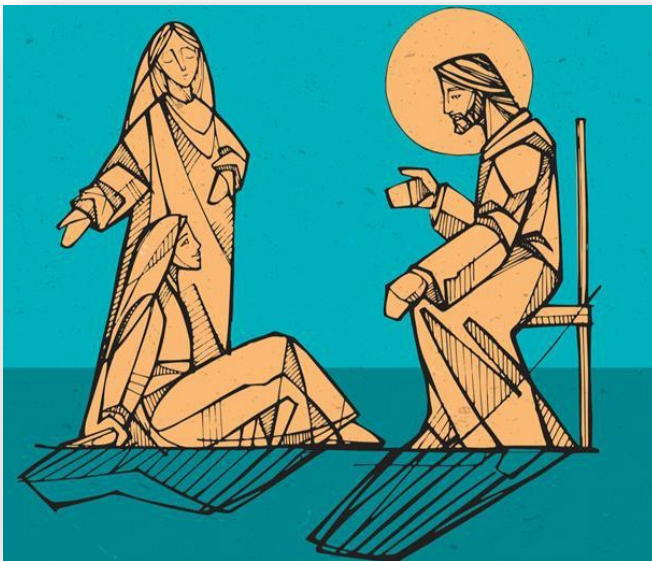


by **Timothy Horne**

Martha's flaw  
To rush and worry  
By tasks consumed;  
Not dear Mary,

Who at the feet  
Of Jesus stayed.  
By doing so,  
Wisdom displayed.

For blessed are they  
Who choose the part  
Of seeking God  
With all their heart



---

Read about **Timothy Horne** on page 172.

# David Before the Stone



by Abraham Aondoana

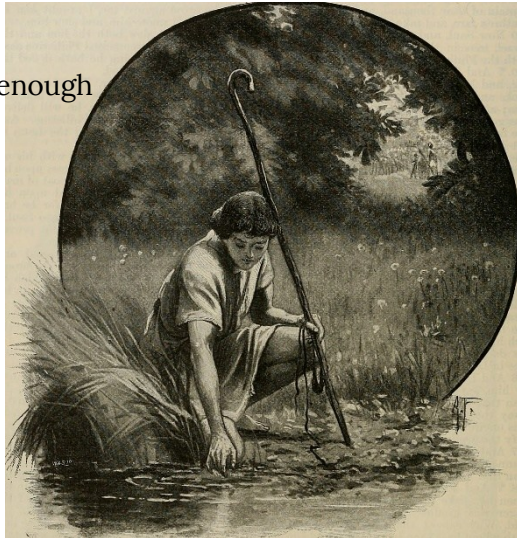
Before the stone,  
before the shout,  
and before the giant got to know it,  
David stood small  
inside a very big fear.

The armor didn't fit.  
The doubt did.

And so he thought of friendly conquests —  
a lion turned away,  
a bear convinced to leave,  
God's voice steady  
when everything else shook.

Faith didn't make him taller.  
It made him truer.

And sometimes that's enough  
to change the ending.



# Psalm for the Kid Who Feels Small



by **Abraham Aondoana**

God,  
you made ants  
and oceans  
and stars that won't fit  
inside my questions.

You see me  
even when I feel  
like a pencil mark  
lost in the margin.



If I am small,  
then let me be useful —  
a light in a hallway,  
a hand that helps,  
a voice that tells the truth  
even when it shakes.

You call me by name.  
That makes me  
bigger than fear.

Amen.

---

Read about **Abraham Aondoana** on page 171.

# Wildflowers in Beautiful Landscapes

by **Bella Morin (age 13)**

Beautiful poppies and wildflowers  
full of color  
grow in desert landscapes  
on a chilly morning.  
Vivid orange flowers blossom  
in the cooler spring months  
after the rains.

The tall prickly Joshua trees  
make a faded shadow,  
as I search for western bluebirds.  
The long, silky grass brushes  
up against me, as I listen  
to the birds chirp.  
I stop to enjoy a sandwich.





## Perennial



by Jude Nixon (age 16)

Springtime comes, violets peek  
Veiled in purple robes  
Blossom up, year after year  
Bringing smiles, renewing hope.

Roses red, like scarlet blood  
Every spring reborn  
A symbol of unending love  
Wrapped in a crown of thorns.

Jesus comes to the cross  
Veiled in purple robes  
Nailed to the cross of Calvary  
Rescues us, renews our hope.

There He shed scarlet blood  
To let us be reborn  
A symbol of unending love  
Wrapped in a crown of thorns.

Violets wilt, and roses die  
Jesus died that day  
To save the world from its sins  
But will dead they stay?

No! Up from the ground, violets  
sprout  
And roses bloom from seeds so small  
Jesus too rose from his grave!  
Why? Cause he's a perennial!

# Stained Glass Window

by Jude Nixon (age 16)



Pieces of broken glass  
Jagged, rough, and stained  
Possessed no beauty on their own  
But yet, they were claimed.

For someone put them together  
The jagged, the rough, the stained  
Creating a work of art  
Raised to a window frame.

The light shines through the window  
Making stains, colors of life  
A kaleidoscope of those transformed  
Made beautiful by the light.

The stained glass tells a story  
Of the one who made it new.  
The stained glass shares its journey  
A journey I share too.

I was lost and broken  
Jagged, rough, and stained  
Possessing no beauty on my own  
And yet, I am claimed.

By the one who put me together  
Who saved me from bitter sin  
Who's creating a work of art  
Since I was raised to life in Him.

His light is shining through me  
His light can shine through you  
He transforms all stains to beauty  
Gives hope and makes us new.

---

**Jude Nixon** is a 16-year-old who loves using God's creation and beauty as inspiration for his poetry. He lives in Ohio with his parents and two brothers and enjoys writing, painting, running, and playing guitar and piano. To God be all the glory! "Therefore, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" – 1 Corinthians 10:31

# Spring

by Olivia Kaddis (age 12)



With spring comes bright flowers that grow in vibrant colors.

Follow the windy breeze to their bed  
where a delicious fragrance fills the air.

The birds chirp a joyful song as they dance among the roses.  
The bees snuggle up in the silky flower petals and drink the smooth nectar.

The worms crunch on the crisp leaves.

The sun laughs at the jokes of the sunflowers.

The flowers hug each other so the wind doesn't take them away.

The wind grows colder and the sun waves goodbye.

Alas, for night has come and all merrymaking dies away to a gentle sleep.

The moon and the stars sing a lullaby and say,

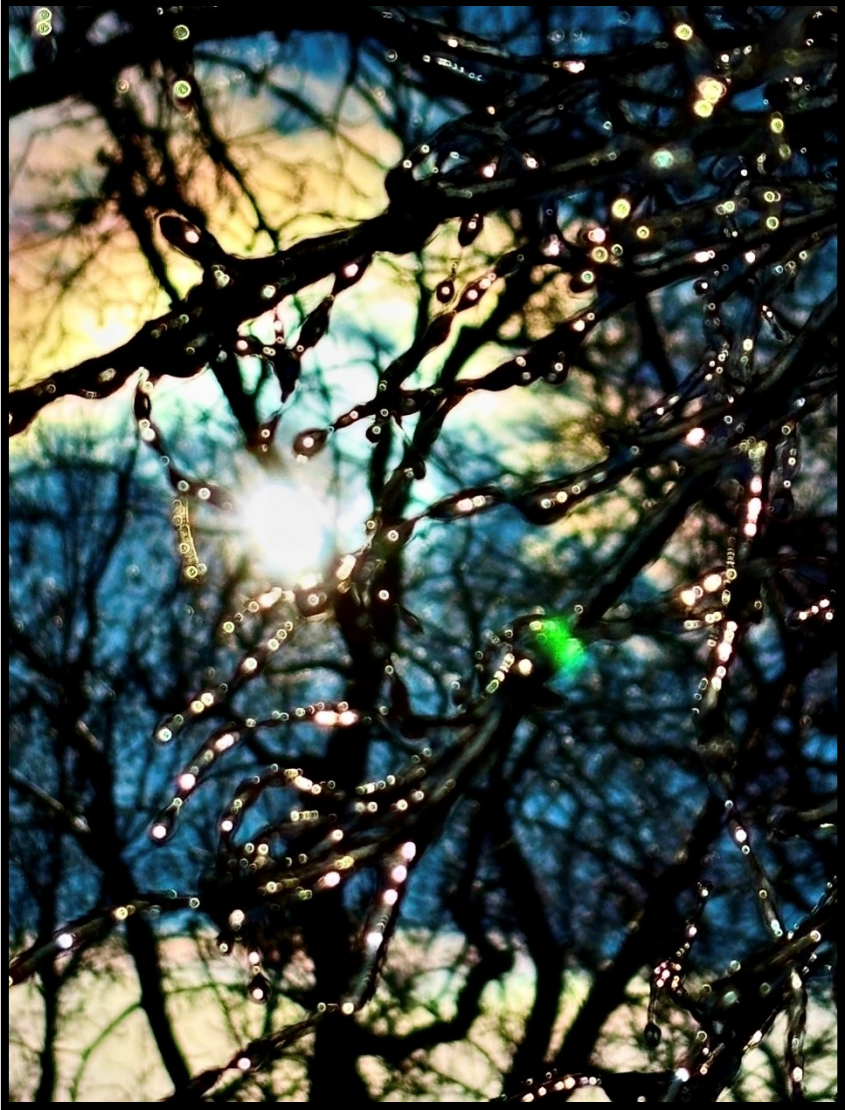
*"Good night flowers, see you tomorrow."*



*I Have Hidden Your Word in My Heart*  
by Mark Paalman



The Son is the Radiance of God's Glory  
by Mark Paalman



---

Read about **Mark Paalman** on page 173.

# A Rainy Day in May



by P.T.K. Vasquez

Watery diamonds on magnolia leaves  
reflecting the pearl-laden sky;  
behold a world of breathing green  
like nectar to the eye.

Damp and quiet and vernal,  
and the mountains in rhinestone dress;  
rabbits feast in white meadows  
while the harsh sun is at rest.

Limbs dance to the breeze's song,  
stirred by its kindly voice;  
under a sweet ivory sky  
the world finds pause to rejoice.



# It is time to return to the woods ■

by **Roslyn Weaver**

It is time to return to the woods,  
to ascend the high places, and *listen* ...

To quiet a heart, draw in air,  
still a mind, and *listen* ...

Voice of wind

caressing the trees, a whisper of leaves

Laughter of fire

cackling and crackling, a hiss and a wheeze

Song of lake

lapping the shore, a longing call

Melody of earth

secreting its creatures, a rustle and roar

Can you stop?

Can you still?

Can you hear?

It is time to return to the woods and *listen*



---

Read about **Roslyn Weaver** on page 174.

# Fav Color

by Rachel Michelle Collier

- Change your pants, said her auntie, sighing.
- Black is cool, I look cool though, Dancey spoke.
- I don't care, change your pants, put some bright ones on,  
hurry up, now we're late, now we're late.

:(

Late is cool, we'll look cool, Dancey almost said –  
– Don't you dare, don't you say it, her auntie warned.  
Dancey changed into jeans, tiptoed past her aunt,  
eased into the car,  
strapped her seatbelt on,  
(auntie didn't glance),  
as she thought, *Bright is boooo, late is cool.*

:/

– We are here. Make some friends. And try to smile this time?  
Dancey slunk out the car ... covered by her door ...  
– You wore black, didn't you -? all black *anyway!*  
Dancey whispered, – Black is cool! I look cool  
though, *right???*

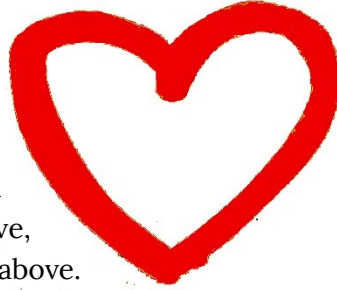
:|

– Punishment for a week, said her aunt,  
You will clean the whole house, *and* you'll cook.  
*Hmmm ... Mop. Rubber boots. Rubber gloves. Apron. Broom.*  
*Ours are black! I'll take selfies! I'll look cool,* Dancey thought,  
*I'll look cool.*

;)

# Heartfelt God

by Ashley Hughes



You bore and carried all my sin,  
and still my heart feels every pin  
that pierced the flesh of holy Love,  
the spotless Lamb from Heaven above.

A Father blameless, undefiled,  
who gave His Son for hearts so wild.  
For this torn world, so lost, so far,  
You sent to us the Morning Star.

Yet still You stand, forever near,  
unchanged by doubt, unmoved by fear.  
Faithful to every word You speak,  
strong for the weary, kind to the weak.

You are here now, and always will be  
My God, my life I give to Thee.

---

Read about **Ashley Hughes** on page 172.

# Waves of Time

by Selah Cross (age 16)



Under the hand of the ceaseless wave  
A shell sweeps to and fro,  
With jagged edge the white-pearled cave  
Is caught in the deafening flow.

Turned and lifted, thrown and tossed,  
Rolled through sand and sea  
By grains the sharpened edge is lost,  
Refined unceasingly.

Thus in the sway of the grinding tide  
The shell shines soft and bright:  
Unblemished, smooth on every side:  
Perfect, pure, and white.

And so in the hand of the passing days  
As the years and seasons flow,  
I'm cast and rolled in the narrow ways,  
My edges sharp with woe.

By joy and grief, by hope and fear  
I'm lifted, thrown, and tossed,  
By rolling wave of year on year,  
By rain, by sun, by frost.

And so at last, beneath time's tide  
May I be smooth and bright,  
Cleansed of stains on every side:  
Pure, unblemished white.



# Treasure



by Selah Cross (age 16)

The spreading fingers of the mind  
Sift through the floods of thought to find  
Amidst the crude old stones of earth  
The treasures high of holy worth.

Oh mind, be vigilant to see  
To hold, to keep in memory  
Those thoughts that shine with truth's pure light  
Amidst the shadowed shroud of night.

Hold fast these things, the fair, the good,  
Oh high and kingly brotherhood:  
Thoughts of depth and beauty true,  
Of worthiness and bright value.

For these will shape the hands they fill,  
With godliness the mind instill  
And make a beacon high and clear  
As are the thoughts close harbored here.

# Spring



by **Henri Meraz (age 12)**

The atmosphere of spring comes with observing the greenery swaying swiftly with the wind through every lawn on a partly sunny and chilly morning.

From beautiful-smelling, bright purple lavender to half-grown sunflowers, there is an odd but nice smell of fresh cut grass as birds all around sing a symphony.

In the afternoon, kids play and laugh under the hot, yellow sun with a stable temperature. Cars cautiously move down an old, cracked street.

Streetlamps light up the grey pavement as the dark of night overcomes the day. Crickets chirp. Stars align while one gazes up at the dark blue evening sky.



# Loving Your Neighbor



by Abraham Aondoana

Start with listening.  
Not waiting your turn —  
*listening.*

When someone is hard to love,  
remember:  
stones are heavy  
until water keeps showing up.

Forgive once.  
Then again.  
Then ask God  
for the strength  
to mean it.

Love is not loud.  
It doesn't need a spotlight.  
It shows up early,  
stays late,  
and leaves the door unlocked.

This is how the world  
gets softer —  
one brave heart  
at a time.



# Rainbow



by Pearl E. Gaston (age 12)

A transparent reminder of God's changeless love  
And a promise to not flood the earth once again.

A mixing and mingling of sunshine and rain  
A union of colors in vibrant and gray.

God's promise unfolding in visible form  
A joy after rain when the sun peeks its head  
Out from the shroud of gray clouds  
And surveys the damp landscape  
With still rushing hope  
To transform the damp landscape  
Into gardens of joy.



# Stargazing



by Pearl E. Gaston (age 12)

To sit upon a roof and gaze  
Or in a field where stars amaze  
Is something that a king might envy  
That awe-inspiring sight.

A sky of stars and galaxies  
Is where I roam in fancies  
The canvas of the Great Creative  
God who made the earth.

A sight that all may look upon  
But very few may see.  
It makes me feel quite small sometimes  
It's so much bigger than me.

# Eternal Hope



by Pearl E. Gaston (age 12)

We have our hope in Jesus Christ and His redeeming grace.  
He came to live and sinless died.  
For our debts He paid the price.

The third day after, on glorious morn,  
He rose from out the grave.  
Defeating death with mighty power,  
His followers to save.

Soon after rose He, to the sky  
To be in heaven once more.  
And one sweet day, He'll come again,  
His children to take to be with Him in perfect state  
And live forevermore.

# Spring in the Farmer's Field



by **Abhinav Vennapureddy (age 12)**

The frost retreats as the morning sun warms the Farmer's Almanac soil,  
Ending the winter's quiet and the season of cold.  
Green shoots of barley and wheat start to sprout,  
Through the damp earth that was frozen and bare.

The tractor awakens with a rhythmic, low hum,  
Signaling the labor of months yet to come.  
Pink blossoms of apple and cherry take flight,  
In a soft, fragrant snow of the purest white.

Cows find footing on the hillsides of green,  
Life stirs and flourishes on every side —  
A farm showered upon golden light,  
Under California skies so clear and bright.



May Apples  
by Marcia N. Lynch





Artwork by Tiffany Nicole Fletcher

# jokes

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**Q:** What kind of cellphone did Delilah use?

**A:** She used a Samson (Samsung).

---

**Caleb Scheurwater** (age 12) is from Ontario, Canada. He's in grade 7, and his interests are history, boats, and anything with wheels 😊

# The Garden of Second Chances



by Hayley Archer (age 13)

---



**R**osie walked down the driveway to her new home with her backpack fastened tight. She carefully followed behind Ms. Kate. Ms. Kate was helping Rosie find a forever home through adoptive services. Rosie tugged down the pink shirt that Ms. Kate had given her. Pink was Rosie's favorite color, and she loved this shirt with all her heart.

Rosie was nine years old and kind to everyone she met. Though she was born an orphan, she always dreamed and hoped of having her own family – a mother and father to call her own.

Rosie took a deep breath as Ms. Kate rang the doorbell.

“This family is great, Rosie. I truly think you will love them,” Ms. Kate told her.

Rosie nodded and took a deep breath

A tall woman opened the big doors with a smile. “Hi, you must be Rosie! Come right on inside!” she said. “My name is Julie.”

Rosie’s eyes grew big as she looked around. The ceiling seemed to be endlessly tall. There was a chandelier overflowing with diamonds. The smell of lavender filled the house. It seemed as if Rosie had fallen into a dream, and she was lost in her thoughts. This was the prettiest house she had ever seen. It had beautiful, large bay windows leading out to the backyard. A pretty painting of two ballerinas in white caught Rosie’s eyes. The girls in the painting looked Rosie’s age.

“Jim, where are you? Come downstairs and meet Rosie,” said Julie.

Rosie watched as an important and busy-looking man came down the marble steps. “Rosie! Welcome! We’re so happy to have you here, Julie and I have been counting down the days,” he said.

“Thank you,” Rosie replied. Could Jim and Julie be like a mother and father to her? The thought was overwhelming.

“Would you like to see your room?” asked Julie.

Rosie nodded.

“I’d better get going,” said Ms. Kate as she gave Rosie a hug. “Rosie dear, I’ll see you in a week.”

“Goodbye and thank you!” said Rosie.

Ms. Kate headed out the door.

Rosie walked up the stairs and counted the steps in her head. Down the hallway, Julie opened a door. “I hope you like pink,” she said. The room was painted light pink, and the bed set was pink too. There was a dollhouse in the corner, and a bookcase filled with books. Rosie couldn’t believe this beautiful room was all hers.

“Do you like your room?” Jim asked. “We do hope you’ll be happy here. Julie and I have been praying for a child to join our family, and we believe you are the answer to our prayers, Rosie.”

Rosie hugged Julie and said, “I love it.” Julie looked at Jim and gave a sigh of relief.

“Let’s give her time to get unpacked and settled in,” Jim said.

“Of course,” replied Julie.

Rosie took out her stuffed animal dog, Hazel. She carefully placed her backpack in the closet. Next, she sat down on the bed and hugged Hazel tightly. She looked over at the shelf again, where a book was sitting. As the curious nine-year-old she was, she walked towards the bookshelf.

Rosie flipped to the first page carefully. “Dedicated to Rosie,” the page read.

Further down the page, she read, “Love, Julie and Jim.” Rosie had never seen such a big book before in her life! She decided she’d come back to read it later. She wanted to find her new family.

“Hello?” Rosie called out as she peeked outside her door. She slowly went down the marble steps searching for Jim and Julie. She looked outside the big bay windows to the willow trees in the garden. There was Julie seated on a bench below the tree. Rosie went outside to talk to her.

“Hi Rosie! You can come sit by me. Isn’t today a beautiful day?” Julie asked.

Rosie nodded. “Yes! Your home is so nice.”

“It’s your home now, too,” Julie told her.

“May I ask you a question. What was that giant book on my shelf?” asked Rosie.

Julie’s eyes sparkled. “The Bible? It’s God’s love story to us — how He sent His Son Jesus to rescue us and make us part of His family. I’d love to read it with you,” she said.

Rosie couldn’t wait for Julie to read to her. She skipped back inside, carefully picked up the Bible, and brought it back to the garden bench. They began reading together. All of this was new to Rosie. Julie read aloud how God created everything — the sea and sky, animals and humans, and called it all good. Rosie looked around the garden as she listened. The flowers were just beginning to bloom. The sky was a deep blue. The branches of the willow tree gently swayed in the wind.

Rosie couldn't help but think the God who made all this was good. She wanted to learn more about God's plan for her life. She had dealt with heavy loss, but God had brought her to this new, beautiful place with Julie and Jim. Rosie looked back at her new home. Rosie couldn't help but believe Julie and Jim loved her and cared for her, even though they had just met.

This was her new family. Julie and Jim were going to be her forever parents.

That night, Rosie thought about the Bible and placed it on the nightstand by her bed. Rosie prayed she'd get to stay with Jim and Julie. She thanked God for bringing her here and asked to learn more about Him. Rosie fell asleep with Hazel in her arms, dreaming of a bright future.

---

**Hayley Archer** is a 7th-grade student at a Christian school who attends Gospel Community Church. She loves playing sports and writing in her free time. She also loves spending time with her friends and family.

# The Valentine's Day Thief



by Faith Morin (age 11)

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I just got home from my Nana's house with a bag full of my class Valentines that had candy in them. Since my school party wasn't until a week later, I stored everything under my bed in my bedroom. When it was time to go to bed two hours later, I brushed my teeth, got my PJ's on, and went to sleep. At twelve AM, I saw the unimaginable in the dark!

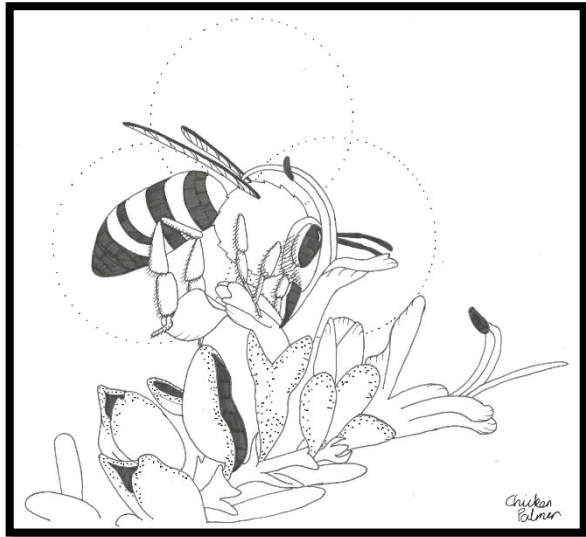
Someone or something was on the floor, ripping open one of the Valentine's Day gifts! I jolted out of bed and followed it into another room. Was it one of my dogs? Did a raccoon sneak in when my mom left the back door open? I smelled something, but couldn't figure out what it was. As I got closer, the smell got stronger and was unpleasant!

Soon I got near enough to see it was one of my family members trying to get the candy! My Nana Sue has a big sweet tooth and will eat anything sweet, like lollipops and gummies! She was the midnight culprit all along!



King Parrot by  
Chicken Palmer

Australian Native Honey Bee  
by Chicken Palmer



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Read about **Chicken Palmer** on page 173.

# Butterfly



written by Alexa Zielkowski at age 13

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**G**reat Uncle Jimmy had always been somewhat of a mystery

to me. We were never too close, never too far apart. His mood was hardly ever cold and serious, nor humorous and bubbly. Yet, he taught me something very important. Sometimes you don't have to understand something to appreciate its beauty, and sometimes beauty never dies.

When I was very small, Great Uncle Jimmy worked part-time at the zoo. We could always find him in the butterfly garden. I remember traveling across the zoo on a hot day many years ago. My clumsy little feet in my clunky shoes slapped against the sidewalk as I walked with my sister and parents. The sun shone steadily from up above, bathing us in a warm splash of golden light, and causing little beads of sweat to collect just below my bangs. The air was sweet, but I wiped the saltwater sweat off of my brow with a rather unpleasant expression etched onto my face.

Although beautiful and bright, the heat was beginning to wear on me, and my legs ached with every step. Yet, excitement kept me trudging forward as I thought about seeing Uncle Jimmy at the garden full of butterflies.

We continued our journey across the zoo, which was lined with exhibits on all sides, each one decorated with vegetation and each one displaying yet another foreign creature. All the ones we passed lured me closer with interest, but we had a final destination to reach, and I did my best to keep up with my family. Finally, after what seemed like a marathon of hiking in the summer sun and a whole Noah's Ark full of mysterious animal friends, we arrived at a large building with a magnificent domed glass ceiling. Eager to escape the blistering outside temperatures, I raced to the entrance.

Once we arrived at the butterfly exhibit, we quickly found Uncle Jimmy. We greeted him politely, and he did the same. Uncle Jimmy's gray mustache wiggled atop his lip like a furry caterpillar when he spoke. The small crinkles at the corners of his eyes made me smile. Soon after we had said our hellos, Uncle Jimmy began to show us around.

All around me, luscious plants bloomed. Flowers of all shades of orange, pink, and purple speckled brilliant green bushes. Large stones decorated the garden, and a clean turquoise pool ran through the whole room. Best of all were the vibrant butterflies dancing through the air in a spectacular rainbow of spirited little creatures. Out of all the critters I had seen so far that day, these were by far the most enchanting. I wanted so badly for one to land on me, but the gentle little things seemed to always keep a distance from my clumsy toddler hands. Uncle Jimmy, however, had no trouble getting a lovely, velvet blue colored butterfly to land softly on his mustache. It seemed to almost kiss his cheek. I giggled at the sight, but was truly amazed at how peaceful the

butterfly looked. It was as if the garden radiated happiness, and Uncle Jimmy was the source.

At family gatherings, he talked with the adults and was gentle around the kids. For my birthday, he would always send a card. I was familiar with bits and pieces of his past, yet I never got to know him too well. Rather, I observed his manners from a distance, as I had the alluring butterflies. As he aged, his memory began to fade. Slowly, he drifted away from reality and became lost in a more foggy sort of world. His mind was not as sharp as it used to be, his body not as strong. But even as he began to fly off to other lands, his colors never faded. I never did fully understand him; I never did capture him in my palm. What did happen was greater than that. When he finally lifted off and flew away on a journey all of his own, I realized what he truly was. He was a butterfly – gentle, strong, beautiful, spirited.

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Read about **Alexa Zielkowski** on page 49.

# Never Forsaken

by Ellie Johnson (age 17)

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**A** cold wind blew through the alleyway where nine-year-old Ellen and her little brother Samuel huddled together for warmth. They didn't have anyone to care for them, so they lived on the streets. Ellen shivered and tried to adjust the old, ragged blanket to cover them both better.

This woke up Samuel. "Hungee, Eh-win." He cuddled closer. He was only two years old and didn't understand why he couldn't have any food.

Ellen wrapped her arms tightly around her brother and tried to comfort him. "I know Sammy. We'll look for food tomorrow, alright? Go to sleep now."

The next morning, Ellen woke from a fitful sleep with a rumbling belly. She stretched and yawned, then helped Samuel climb up on her back so that she could carry him through the

busy streets of Bristol, England. Her bare feet slapped against the cobblestone streets as she made her way to a small restaurant nearby. She crept into the alley behind the building and set Samuel down. Carefully, she climbed on top of a broken crate and pulled the lid off the nearest trash bin. Right on top sat an apple core and half a loaf of bread with some blue fuzz growing on it. That didn't bother Ellen. She snatched up the food and hopped down. "Look, Sammy! We got food!"

Her little brother looked up from where he was playing with a bottle cork. "I want some Eh-win. I want some!"

Ellen led Samuel to a corner of the alley and sat down, pulling him to her lap. She then divided the food with him. It didn't taste good, but they were too hungry to notice. They ate as fast as they could.

Before they had time to finish, Ellen noticed someone coming towards them, carrying a blanket. She gasped. That was her blanket! Then she saw who was carrying it.

It was Arthur.

Arthur was about fifteen or sixteen, and he loved bullying the younger street children. He swaggered up to Ellen and Samuel and smirked. "Look what I found," he said, holding up the blanket. "I think I'll keep it. It looks very warm and cozy."

Tears sprang into Ellen's eyes. "That's ours, Arthur. Please give it back!"

“Nope!” He grinned. “Finders keepers.” He lunged forward, grabbed their remaining bread, then ran off, laughing as he went.

Samuel started wailing. “I want my bread!”

Ellen tried to comfort him, but she was crying too. She didn’t know what to do. Her mama had died when she was seven, but she still remembered some of the things that her mama had told her.

“Jesus is always with us, Ellen,” she had said. “We can always pray to Him when we’re sad or lonely.”

“Dear Jesus,” she said, “Please help us to find food. And please let Arthur not be so mean. Amen.”

Ellen sniffed, wiped her eyes, and picked up Samuel. “Come on, Sammy. Let’s go see if we can find some more food.”

The two made their way down the street, but after a little while, Ellen got tired and decided to stop for a rest. She crept into an alley, where they would be out of the way, and sat down. She set Samuel down next to her and found him something to play with. She leaned her head back to rest against the wall behind her and closed her eyes. The chill of the shaded alley made her shiver, reminding her that they didn’t have a blanket anymore.

Footsteps drew close to the mouth of the alley. She opened her eyes and pulled back. Whoever it was, she doubted they’d be nice. She saw two men, both of whom were dressed very nicely for the area of the city they were in. They appeared to be talking about something that annoyed them.

“It’s ridiculous,” she heard one man say. “What does that Müller man think he’s doing? England has plenty of workhouses for orphans, but this man thinks that’s not good enough for them!”

“And,” added the other man, “he says he’s not going to ask anyone for money. He’s going to trust God for all their needs.”

“Why, of all the crazy things I’ve heard lately, this is the worst. Who will work in the workhouses if this man succeeds?” the first man asked.

“Why, you can’t possibly think he will succeed, do you?” The second man looked shocked. “It can’t possibly work, and he will realize that soon. He has already started two orphanages, but they won’t last long. Mark my words.”

Ellen’s breath caught in her throat. She snatched up Samuel and ran to the men. “Please, sir,” she said, addressing the first man. “Could you tell me where the orphanage is?” Hope filled her heart as she waited for his response.

The man looked down at her with disgust. “Tell you where it is? Certainly not. If you need to go somewhere, go to the workhouse. That’s the only place for someone like you. Now go away before I get the constable.”

Ellen retrieved Samuel and then walked slowly away, tears trickling down her face. She passed by several buildings and stopped in front of a shop. “Maybe someone in there knows where the orphanage is,” she told Samuel.

The bottom of the door scraped the floor as she carefully pushed it open. Inside were shelves full of things to buy, from sacks of flour to bolts of fabric, and everything in between. The shop itself was in some disrepair. Ellen's feet kicked up dust on the not-so-clean floor, most of the shelves weren't very straight, and she thought she saw several mice scamper away as she walked by. She picked her way to the counter, where an older man stood unpacking a box.

"Excuse me, sir," Ellen said hesitantly.

"Eh? What are you doing here, girl? It doesn't look like you plan on buying anything," he said, noting her ragged dress and bare feet.

"No, sir," she replied. "I just wanted to ask if you know where the new orphanage is."

"New orphanage? Oh, you mean the one that George Müller's starting?"

"Yes, sir!" Ellen's eyes brightened.

"Sorry, Lass, I don't know. I suppose it were in the papers, but I don't read. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, sir." Ellen turned and walked out, pulling the door shut behind her. She set Samuel down and let him walk for a bit to give herself a break.

They had only gone a few blocks when a crash from behind a nearby building caused her to stop.

“Help! Please! Somebody!” a voice cried out, but no one seemed to notice. The hustle and bustle of the street nearly drowned it out completely. Even Ellen, who had nowhere to go and nothing to be distracted by, could barely hear the desperate plea for help.

She circled around the building, looking for the source of the cries, Samuel trotting by her heels. Finally, when she came to the back of the building, she saw a pile of stacked crates that had fallen into a heap. Ellen could see a boy’s feet trapped underneath one of the boxes, the rest of him hidden by the crates. “Someone please help me!” the voice shouted again.

Ellen recognized the voice, but she couldn’t quite place it. She left Samuel sitting at the bottom of the pile and climbed the pile, trying to see who it was. “Don’t worry, I can help you!” she called to the person. She shoved several crates aside, revealing the scared face of Arthur the bully.

“Please help me out!” he said again, struggling to move. He hadn’t recognized her.

“Arthur?” Ellen shoved another crate aside. “What happened?” she asked.

“I was climbing, and the pile fell down,” he replied, clearly frustrated. Then he looked at her more closely and realized who she was. “Wait, you’re Ellen, the kid I, uh ...” He trailed off, embarrassed.

His comment reminded her of the fear and disappointment she had felt that morning after Arthur had stolen from them.

“You should just leave him here,” a little voice in her head told her. “He doesn’t deserve your help.”

Ellen slowly climbed down from the pile.

“Wait! Ellen, come back!” Arthur was desperate.

“You stole from me this morning, Arthur,” she replied bitterly. “Why should I help you?”

“Ellen! I’m sorry! Please come back.”

She didn’t reply. Instead, she picked up Sammy and walked slowly away.

That was when her conscience started pricking her. “You should go back. You need to help him,” it told her.

“No!” the other voice said, “He deserves this.”

Then she thought of a verse her father had always quoted to her. It had been his favorite. “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

That made her stop and think. Did God really want her to forgive Arthur and help him get out?

The verse kept playing in her mind over and over. “Forgiving one another ... as God in Christ forgave you.”

“But I just can’t forgive him!” she said to Samuel.

“God in Christ forgave you ... Be kind to one another ...”

“But —”

*“God forgave you ... forgive one another.”*

Ellen sighed, turned, and walked back over to the pile. She set Samuel down and climbed the pile again. She shoved several crates aside, again revealing Arthur.

He looked up at her with surprise. “Ellen?”

Ellen looked straight at the bigger boy. “I really don’t want to do this, Arthur. I really just want to leave you here, but Jesus says to forgive because He forgives me, and I don’t want to disobey Him.”

“So,” Arthur began, “You’re going to help me anyway?”

“Yes.” Ellen sighed, then grabbed two smaller boxes and threw them out of the way, releasing his arms.

With his hands free, Arthur was able to help Ellen move the rest of the boxes out of the way. Soon, he was out of the pile. Sheepishly, he reached into his pocket, pulled out something, and handed it to her. “Here,” he said. “I hadn’t finished that bread I took from you this morning. I’m sorry I took it. Could you forgive me?”

Ellen took the bread and gave it to Sammy. “I forgive you.”

Arthur began to walk away, but then seemed to remember something and ran back. “Hey!” he called to Ellen. “Have you

heard about the new orphanages someone named George Müller started?”

Ellen spun around. “Yes! Do you know where it is?”

Arthur grinned. “Sure do.”

“Could you tell me where it is?” Ellen asked breathlessly.

“I can do better than that. I can take you there.” Arthur replied, setting off down the street. “Follow me!”

Ellen snatched up Sammy and ran after Arthur, marveling at how he had changed. He led her along the streets of Bristol for several minutes until they finally ended up in front of two buildings. Happy, clean children were playing in an open space next to the buildings.

Arthur turned to her. “Well, this is it. Thanks again for helping me.” He began to walk away.

“But aren’t you going to come too?” she asked.

“Nope. Can’t,” he replied over his shoulder. “They don’t have room for older boys yet. And besides, I still have my mother. We’ll make do.” He disappeared around a corner.

Suddenly, Ellen was afraid. “What if they don’t want us?” she asked Sammy. “Maybe they don’t have room for us either.” She hesitated, then turned to leave.

The door to one of the orphanages opened, and a man stepped out. He noticed her and walked over. “Can I help you?” he asked kindly.

Ellen looked down shyly. “Does ... Does Mr. Müller have room for us?”

The man smiled. “I’m Mr. Müller, and right now we have two spots left. Would you like to live here?”

Ellen gasped. “Oh, yes, please!”

George Müller gently picked up Sammy and led Ellen into the building. “Welcome home.”

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**Ellie Johnson** is a teen writer seeking to share God’s light and redemption through stories. Besides writing, she enjoys reading, gardening, and crafting, all while drinking ridiculous amounts of tea!



*At the Fish Ladder*  
by Heather Dickinson

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Read about **Heather Dickinson** on page 171.



Lily Watercolor  
created by Alexa Zielkowski at age 15

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Read about **Alexa Zielkowski** on page 49.

# The Light That Breaks Through ■ the Darkness

by Sydney Riley (age 15)

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*“M*aya, follow Me, and you will never walk in

*darkness. You, my daughter, will have the Light that leads to life.”*  
The Stranger smiled gently at her, overflowing her with a sense of hope. He held out His hand, beckoning her to take it.

Maya looked into His face, which seemed to be radiating light. His words echoed in her mind. “Follow Me.”

“I will,” she whispered. Then more confidently. “I will!”

As she took His hand, a flicker of joy ignited in her. The sensation grew until tears of gladness spilled down her face, and Maya felt her heart brimming as it had never done before. She gasped, overwhelmed with the presence of this Man. Who was He? What did He want with her? The questions spilled out.

*The Man laughed kindly.*

*“You will soon see. Go, meet the woman named Anne in the marketplace. She will help you.”*

*This said, the Stranger’s image faded away, although the sound of His voice still lingered.*

Maya awoke, breathing hard. It was morning, and the warm breeze wafted in through the open window.

“It was just a dream,” she told herself. Maya tried to shake off the feeling that this strange encounter wasn’t just a dream. The warmth of the Man’s touch tingled her fingers, and the feeling of peace that she had felt in his presence was still there. She shook her head, it couldn’t be possible! Now she was certain. There was no doubt in her mind that it had been real.

Maya usually began the day by praying to Allah, but something about it now seemed wrong. She wondered if it had anything to do with this mysterious experience. Even her mother noticed something different in her daughter as the family sat down for the morning meal. Maya, always the first to speak, seemed more thoughtful. Her mother dismissed it as lack of sleep and instructed that Maya’s sisters would gather water while Maya went to the market for that day’s supply of food.

This was her chance! Maya’s heart quickened as she maneuvered through the crowded booths. Women in brightly colored garments selling jewelry lured in buyers with the colorful, polished stones, and a shopkeeper shouted out the price of his bananas. Politely refusing the offers, Maya pushed through the sea of people, her eyes darting back and forth in

search of this woman whom she had been told about. A man was selling maize, and she stopped. It was a decent price.

“I’ll be back,” she promised, pointing at his stand.

The booth owner nodded at her, then turned his attention to another customer who was trying to bargain with him.

The sweet smell of ripe mangos filled her nose, and she breathed deeply of the wonderful aroma as she passed the fruit stand. Up ahead, a white woman wearing foreign clothes seemed to be waiting for someone. Maya’s heart skipped a beat. This was the woman she was looking for! She was unsure how she knew this, but she felt confident that she was the one. This woman, Anne, had the answers to her questions. She was waiting for her, Maya! As she drew nearer, the woman turned and, noticing Maya studying her, she smiled. The same brightness that had lit up the eyes of the Man in her dream was in this woman, too. Maya’s lips drew up in a shy grin. Without knowing why, she ran into the woman’s open arms, as if they were old friends.

Anne hugged the young girl tightly, she raised her eyes up to the sky to thank her Father. “Welcome, my child. I knew you would come,” she whispered into Maya’s hair.

Maya felt more loved than she had ever felt in her whole life, and at that moment, she knew that her life was never going to be the same.

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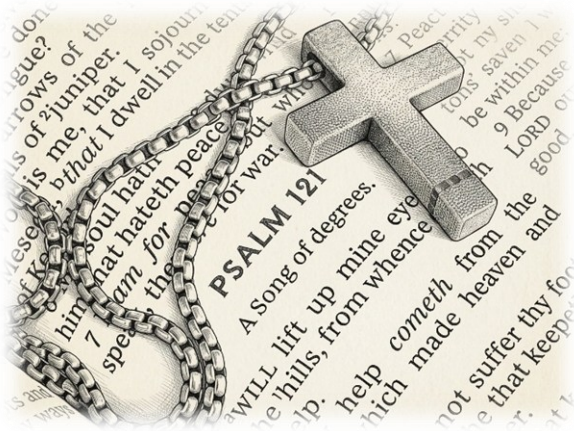
**Sydney** is in ninth grade and lives in a small town in Texas. She has been writing for over six years and enjoys relaxing in her hammock to brainstorm new story ideas.

# Converted



by Aniya Fisher (age 13)

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**T**here was one day that I could never forget: September 6, 2023. A day too cold to do anyone any good, yet the air was still warmer than the friend who lay in the casket. That day, we all stood around his casket, crying and saying our goodbyes. There were mutters about how he went too young, how he went to a better place, and that we'd all see him there one day. The only thing I wondered was why he was taken so soon.

“Honey, please come out of your room; brooding won’t do you any good.” My mother called out from downstairs.

I slowly got up and went downstairs, taking my time on the steps. When I got downstairs, there was already breakfast on the table. I sat down in front of a plate of eggs and bacon.

“Are you almost ready for school?” Mother asked.

I bit into a piece of bacon, “Yeah, I just need to get my bag.”

I sat and ate in silence with my mom watching me. After a few seconds, she left up the stairs, presumably to get my backpack. I was finished eating by the time she came back downstairs, with my bag and my coat.

“Here, Honey, put this on, so you don’t get cold,” she handed me the jacket.

I took the jacket and put it on, then put the backpack on. I walked out the door and waited for the bus. About five minutes later, it pulled up and I got on. After finding a seat to myself, I put on my headphones, ready to drown out the world, but the world had other plans for me.

“So whatcha listening to?” a kid asked, while hanging his body over the seat in front, a necklace dangling from his neck.

“Nothing yet,” I say, my finger hovering over a song.

“Well, what are you going to listen to?” he asked.

“It’s not really any of your business, is it?” I ask, though it sounds more like a statement than a question.

There was silence for a few minutes till the kid sat back in his own seat, correctly.

I stared out the window and put my playlist on shuffle. We finally got to school, and I got off the bus as soon as possible. The kid followed behind me, but I decided to ignore him.

I went to my first class, History, which had to be my least favorite. I sat in my seat and waited for the bell to ring.

“Listen up, class,” Mr. Maxwell announced to the class. “We have a new student today, so treat him with respect.”

I looked up at the kid; it was the same one from the bus. I held back a groan. I didn’t want this kid in my class.

“Hey, I’m Matthew.” He stood awkwardly at the front of the room, then sat in the closest empty seat, which just so happened to be right next to me.

I looked closer at his necklace; it was a cross. Great, he’s probably just another one of those Christians. History was long and painful, but was finally over. The rest of the day went without any issues. At the end of the day, I opened my locker. That’s when Matthew came up behind me.

“So, who’s that?” he asked, pointing to a picture in my locker.

I roll my eyes at him, not wanting to be on this subject, but answered anyways.

“That’s my friend ... or he was my friend.”

“What’s his name?” Matthew asked, interested.

“Peter,” I answered quickly.

“So why is he not your friend anymore?” Matthew questioned again.

Gosh, does this kid not know how to back off?

“Because he died!” I say, slamming my locker shut and heading to the bus.

With no surprise, Matthew followed me, probably because he was also a bus rider, but still, he didn’t have to follow me all the time. Shortly after, I got onto the bus finding an empty seat, but of course Matthew had to sit next to me.

“You know my name, but I don’t know yours,” Matthew states.

This was obviously him trying to get my name, to try and be my friend, but I didn’t want any more friends, not anymore. But if I didn’t want him to keep bugging me, I might as well just answer him.

“It’s James,” I reply at last.

He smiles. “Nice to meet you, James.”

I point to his cross necklace. “So why do you wear that?” I ask plainly, deciding to make some conversation.

“Oh, this is a cross.”

I roll my eyes again. “Yes, I know it’s a cross. I meant, why do you wear it? You’re going to get bullied for wearing it anyways.”

“It’s because I believe in it, well, in God, which is Christianity,” he fidgets with his cross.

“And you’ll get bullied sooner or later,” I state.

“Yeah, well, I’ll forgive them if they do.”

I raise an eyebrow at that.

“You’ll ... forgive them?” I ask, my voice filled with confusion.

“Yeah,” Matthew answers, then sees the look on my face. “God tells us to forgive, and we try to be like God, well, we as in Christians, but I also try to be like God; everyone deserves to be forgiven.”

I give him another look, “But isn’t it hard to forgive people and not get mad at them?”

“I mean, of course it’s hard, no one said it was going to be easy, but I know God has it all figured out.”

“So what, God tells y’all something and you do it?” I ask, kind of sarcastically.

“He tells us in his Word.”

“His Word?” I ask again.

“Yeah, the Bible.” Matthew pulls out a leather-covered book with Bible written on the front, and in small letters under it, “ESV.”

“ESV?” I read to myself.

Another question, if I were him, I'd be annoyed by all the questions I'm asking, though I find it weird that he hasn't told me to be quiet or to figure it out myself.

"It's the English Standard Version." He paused for a few seconds, then continued, "You can have it."

He puts the book in my hand, and it's heavier than I thought it was going to be.

"You're giving it to me?"

"Yep," he replies.

"Why?" I flip through the pages quickly.

"So, you can read it and see for yourself."

The bus pulls to a stop, and he gets out, waving me goodbye. I stare at the book in my hands for a few minutes, then shove it into my bag. After I get home, I go straight to my room, ignoring my mother who was cooking dinner. I place the Bible on my bed and stare at it for a few minutes. I open it to the first page, a place to put your name, and I keep slowly flipping through it till I get to the actual first page. My eyes scan the first few lines, something about God and something about the earth. I guess I was staring at it longer than expected because my mom knocked on my door, startling me.

"What Mom?" I ask, looking up from the Bible.

“It’s time to eat,” she says, opening my door slightly.

I put down the Bible and head downstairs.

A long while had passed since I’d left the Bible. It was now sitting on my shelf, collecting dust. I’d been talking to Matthew more; he seemed like a good guy. Always letting stuff roll off his back.

But today I didn’t go to school, I sat in my bed, door closed. My mom closed it this morning; we both knew why. It was September 6th. That day, the day life had started to go downhill.

I stared at the shelf, the Bible staring menacingly back at me. I got up and grabbed it. Not like I had anything else to lose. It opened to Psalms 34. I read the chapter, then read it again. The verse that really stuck out was verse 18, which mentioned something about how God saves the brokenhearted. I wondered why I felt like this, why I had to feel like this. I was almost tempted to yell out and ask him why, but my neighbors didn’t need another reason to think I was crazy. The thing is, I did something I thought I’d never do, and it was odd. I put my hands together and prayed. I kind of knew what I was doing; Matthew prayed a lot, whether it was before lunch or on the way home. I’ve seen him do it loads of times, so I tried to copy that.

“God, if you can hear me, please help me,” I called out. At the time, it felt weird.

I sat there for a few minutes, not understanding what that was supposed to do, though I did feel a little better now. I flipped

through my Bible again till I saw something shiny on the front page, so obviously I turned to look at it. It was a simple, silver cross. Like the one Matthew wore. He must have left it in here. I thought about giving it back, but hesitated. I put it on. It looked nice enough on me as someone who never wore any jewelry.

The day went by quickly, and I was back in school again. Matthew had commented on my necklace. Soon enough, I was going to church, Matthew's church, which he dragged me to, and going to this thing called "youth group." I got baptized, and years later even got married to the love of my life.

Something I had realized was that Matthew had always been there, but not just Matthew, God was there too. Of course, not physically, but I could always feel his presence, like when I was about to make the wrong decision. But especially when I missed Peter. I still miss him now, but every time I feel this way, I just open my Bible to Psalms 34. I now know that God has it all in his plans; all I needed was a push in the right direction, and Matthew gave me just that.

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**Aniya Fisher** is a 13-year-old girl in Indiana who goes to a Christian school. In her free time, she likes to read books, try out for new things, and hang out with her friends. She goes to youth group on Wednesday and helps with the little kids on Sundays.

# The Path Ahead



by Kris Flynn

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**I**t's mid-July when I walk along the forest path with my two friends. The air is humid, and my skin is sticky with sweat. We have never walked this deep into the woods before. The path is almost completely covered with pinecones, so much so that I couldn't tell that roots crisscrossed the path until I tripped over one. I fell forward and braced for impact on the hard, damp ground. My palms stung, but I was otherwise okay.

My friend on my right asked if I was alright. I nodded silently. He outstretched his hand to help me up. I took his help and slowly lifted myself. My other friend on my left exclaimed sharply, "You wouldn't have tripped if you weren't so unaware of your surroundings." I didn't appreciate his unhelpful comment, but I said nothing in return. We began to walk again.

Many hours go by as we continue on the path. I begin to feel a sense of *déjà vu* as I notice that no matter how far we go into

the forest, the surroundings of the path look exactly the same. I wondered if I was the only one of us to take note of this. There were never any branching paths, only the one path going forward, so we couldn't have backtracked. I didn't bother stating my discovery as it seemed like neither of my friends was in the mood to deliberate. We continued walking onward.

The sun was beginning to set, and what little I could see of the sky was like a gemstone of topaz. Even in my current situation, I could admire the beauty of the moment. My friend on my left abruptly halted. My other friend and I came to a stop a few steps ahead in response. A few seconds lapsed as I looked over my shoulder, looking back at my friend inquisitively. His head hung low, as if he were staring at his shoes. I instinctively looked down at my own shoes in the now-fading glow of the setting sun. My once bright white sneakers were now covered with thick, grayish, murky mud.

I looked up and found my voice. "What's going on?"

My friend slowly raised his head upward. Immediately, I noticed a scowl on his face. "What's going on?!" he posed my question angrily back at me. "We are far from home, have no provisions, and have no idea where our destination even is! That's what's going on."

We all stood in silence together.

*Why is he so angry?* I thought to myself. Was it because he was scared? I wouldn't blame him for feeling that way. After all, we've been walking for many days with no clear direction but forward. I wasn't scared, but admittedly, I was full of anxiety, wondering just what was ahead.

Suddenly, my angry friend threw his hands over his head in frustration. “That’s it, I’m done,” he blustered aloud. “I’m going back.”

My other friend spoke up, sounding really concerned, “You can’t head back, there’s nothing back there for us!”

The angry friend, all in one motion, twisted around and sarcastically stated, “Watch me,” and started back along the path we had come. That was the last time I saw him.

I could tell my other friend was feeling scared for our friend who had left. So was I. But neither of us made any motion to turn around to follow him, for we knew that going back would only lead to our destruction.

Under my breath, I whispered, “Come on,” and with heavy hearts, we continued down the path.

More hours passed; it was now nightfall. The full moon cascaded light down through the branches and the canopy of trees above. Neither of us had spoken since our friend left us, yet I could feel a sense of heaviness over us both. No words were necessary to describe or confirm this empathy we both most certainly felt. The heaviness was so pronounced that I found myself hanging my head down as I walked, almost as if the burden I felt from the loss of our friend was too heavy for my neck to bear.

“Look!” my friend exclaimed excitedly.

Having been in silence for so long, my friend's sudden exclamation caused me to feel a jolt of both fear and anticipation. I looked up and saw, about thirty meters ahead, a fork in the path. This was the first change we had seen in the path since we started it so long ago. Suddenly, the fear I had was gone, and it was replaced with a burst of adrenaline. Both of us started to hurriedly jog toward the new discovery, as quickly as our achy muscles would allow.

Both of us stood at the mouth of the split in the path. The path splitting to the left was very wide and seemed to be a continuation of the path we had travelled thus far. The path splitting to the right, however, was very narrow, and both sides of the path were lined with thorn bushes. If we went to the right, we would have to be very careful and walk single file, one behind the other, at a slow pace to avoid the thorns.

I glanced over at my friend. He was staring straight ahead, with a stern expression on his face. "Well, we would make better time on the wide path," my friend said assuredly.

I knew he was probably right; however, I had a strong instinct that the way we actually needed to go was down the narrow path. "I think we need to go right," I stated more confidently than I had any right to declare.

"What makes you so sure?" my friend inquired.

I paused for a minute before responding, rolling over the words in my mind that I wanted to impart, all to make sure that my reasoning made my case well. "The wide path is safer, but reminds me of where we have already come from. Safe only because it is familiar."

My friend studied my face intently, as if trying to measure the truth in my words. After a short while, my friend spoke up. “You may be right; however, a feeling is not enough for me. You can go your way, and I mine.”

Those words cracked like a whip against my heart. Already had I lost one friend. I had no wish to lose another. I tried desperately for the next twenty minutes to persuade my friend to trust me and the strong discernment I had to go down the narrow path, with no luck. It was clear he was resolute in his choice.

We hugged and promised that when we finally reached the end of each of our respective journeys, we would once again embrace on that day. He placed his hand on my shoulder, and a small, sincere smile cracked his lips. Without another word, he turned and walked away. I watched as he went out of sight.

I mourned seeing my dear friend leave. We had come so far together, and it felt odd to continue without him. However, as I started down my own path, I found that even though it was difficult going at times, I was filled with a renewed sense of hope — a sort of hope that wasn’t broken because of my struggle, but was instead galvanized by it. No longer was I headed in a direction that led me to what was easy. Now I was headed toward what was for the best.

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Read about **Kris Flynn** on page 171.

# The Gentleman



by Gemma Burnham (age 15)

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**M**y life is a rather dull, frustrating one. It's awfully lonely at times. To put it plainly, no one really ever listens to me. To be sure, I am a little hard to listen to. I don't say much, and I'm on the quiet side, but oh, the things I want to tell people! If they would just lend a moment, even the briefest moment, they would find themselves in a much better place, just like that gentleman ...

I never discovered what his name was, and I've only come across him once, so I will refer to him as the Gentleman. His story is a simple one, but one worth telling.

It was a Friday, and I was paying a visit to an old acquaintance. This acquaintance was none other than George Miller, the grown son of the mayor of the town we lived in, who was just recently married to the beautiful maiden Laura Gabesdaughter. George was seated at the dining table, drinking a very strong liquor of sorts. His dull, blue-grey eyes had been staring listlessly out a window for over half an hour. I was standing next to him, my white, gloved hands folded politely in front of me. We were both silent and had been since the time I had walked into George's home over half an hour ago. With tearful eyes, I watched as he raised the bottle of liquor to his lips and took another swig. He needed to stop. I knew that with every gulp of that horrendous drink, he was dealing another devastating blow to his and Laura's already shaky relationship. Liquor here in the city was no cheap investment, and the Miller couple had very little money. How many times had I seen Laura yelling at George to stop wasting their money and to start thinking about the life they would have to build around their soon-to-be-born child? To no avail were these sickening episodes. I would always find George back in the same position he was, brooding over the lip of a liquor bottle.

I was waiting for him to take notice, to acknowledge me, to give me a chance to comfort and advise him. I knew George well, however. As long as he brooded and stared, not even a tsunami could grab his attention. How, then, could I? Finally, with a heavy sigh and even heavier heart, I departed from George's home in silence.

I found myself walking along one of the city's many small, man-made ponds. It was that ugly green color that stagnant bodies of water always are, reeking of garbage and decaying organic matter. The wind refused to provide relief from the oppressive humidity and stuffiness of the city. The sky was as dark as my mood.

I was deep into a session of pondering the many thoughts that accumulate in a person's mind when one is troubled. My eyes were fixed on the ground, and if a little, round robin had not called out in the branches of a tree I was passing under, I would never have seen the Gentleman.

The Gentleman was sitting on an old, plastic bench under the tree. He wore a black suit, with a black dress shirt, shoes, tie, and had hair to match the solemn outfit. He was sitting straight, his dark eyes cast out over the pond.

As I drew up next to him, the Gentleman surprised me for a moment. He made eye contact with me and, with a gracious smile that suited his youthful face so pleasantly, he asked in a low, quiet voice, "How do you do, ma'am?"

Oh, how gentle and quiet that voice was! How long it had been since anyone had taken notice of me! I returned the greeting eagerly, then sat down by his side. His greeting had been ever so polite, but there was an unmistakable note of melancholy underlying it.

I asked him how he fared. No, not to be nice. Whenever I ask people how they are, I genuinely wish to know. For then, if they listen hard enough, I can give them advice and a word of comfort. I find it exceedingly aggravating when people say "I'm

doing good,” for nine times out of ten, that’s a lie. The Gentleman, however, did not reply at all for a couple of seconds. He shifted on the bench slightly and folded his strong, big hands. Finally, he said, “She was so lovely. My little Marie. Lovely and perfect in every way. Her long, glossy hair, her laughing eyes, her dignified way of holding herself. Never once did she anger me. Never once did she grow frustrated with all my many flaws. In a word, I wasn’t deserving of such a person. Maybe that’s why the Good Lord took her away. She deserved to live among the angels of heaven as opposed to living down on this sinful world with such a poor man as I. Three months was I graced with her delicate presence. Only three months.”

The poor Gentleman covered his tanned face with his hands. I nodded as the short, sorrowful tale drew to an abrupt close. We were both plunged into a deep silence, as I searched for just the right words to ease and comfort such a bedraggled heart as this one. In low tones, I began to talk, and the Gentleman listened. I drew words from the years of wisdom I had stored away in my mind, ready to be presented to anyone who would hear me. Anyone like the Gentleman. The more he listened, the brighter his countenance became. Not bright like the afternoon sun or a blazing fire, but like a dim candlelight burning in the middle of a dark room. His sorrow, inevitably, had not gone away. But he had chosen to stop and listen, to grow quiet. He had given me time to talk, to encourage, to enlighten, to soothe. The Gentleman was *silent*. Just as I am Silence.

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**Gemma Burnham**, age 15 going on 16, loves anything and everything to do with words and stories! When she is not buried within a novel, she can be found pursuing her love of gymnastics and picking the strings of her guitar.

# Beatrix's Downfall: Part 1

by Holly Braendlein

---



**Y**ou coming?

Yep, replied Beatrix to the text Frederick had sent. *See you at the pool.*

After locking the door behind her, Beatrix crossed the street and turned down a path through the woods, a shortcut to the public pool. She had her swim bag draped over her shoulder, and she had on her blue superhero suit. Her friends teased her for being so cautious and wearing her suit practically anywhere, but she had been in plenty of scrapes to know that one could never be too careful.

She inhaled the sweet, summery scent of the pine, and ran her hands over the moss and leafy overgrowth scattered all around her. She stopped in front of a bright red flower and admired

it. *Funny, she thought. I thought I knew every flower and shrub down this path. I've never seen this one before.*

Suddenly, the red flower slowly wilted and turned swampy green. It transformed into a towering figure with black, beady eyes and wrinkly, green skin. Beatrix gasped and tried to scream, but it fell on deaf ears. She felt a sharp pain in her head, and darkness enveloped her in its embrace.

\*

Frederick sat anxiously by the pool, waiting for Beatrix. It had been an hour since all his friends had arrived, and there was still no trace of Beatrix. Frederick grew worried with each passing second.

A high-pitched buzzing noise interrupted his train of thought, and Frederick leaped up and retrieved his swim bag. He rummaged through the contents, retrieving his suit. The logo on the front buzzed in alarm. He pressed the logo, and a hologram of Beatrix's superhero logo, a snowflake, appeared in front of him. Frederick's blood ran cold.

One of his friends shouted at him and said, "Hey, aren't you gonna come into the pool? Are you chicken or something?" The others in the pool laughed.

Frederick looked back distractedly, lugged his swim bag onto his shoulder, and said hurriedly, "Sorry, something's come up. Gotta go!" He darted away in the direction of the woods, hoping that this would offer him clues as to where Beatrix was.

Sure enough, along the path lay Beatrix's swim bag. He pounced on his find and rummaged through the bag, but only found her swimsuit, sandals, and sunscreen. He looked around some more.

Upon further inspection of the area, he found a good-sized hole in the dirt beside the path, and dirty footprints near the swim bag, accompanied by red splotches. He peered at the stains and realized with horror that it was blood.

*Beatrix's blood.*

Frederick raked his hand through his hair in agitation and whispered hoarsely, "Lord, show me where she is. Keep her safe until I find her. *Please!*"

\*

Blackness and a throbbing pain in her head greeted her as she woke up.

Beatrix slowly moved her limbs, making sure they were intact. She seemed to be lying down in a cell of some sort, for the floor beneath her was stone hard and icily cold. She sat up and tried to remember what had happened.

*Pool party.*

*Frederick.*

*Red flower.*

*Monster!*

Her ears picked up the sound of incoming footsteps, and then light flooded into the cell, piercing the darkness and making Beatrix's eyes sting in pain. Her head throbbed even worse. There were voices vaguely discernible, and when her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw the same swampy green, wrinkly figure from earlier. He stepped aside to let an even wrinklier man peer into the cell. He smiled, an evil smile that made her innards quake.

The person — as if he could be called that — reached over and took a microphone from the wall and held it to his lips.

“Greetings, Beatrix,” he said, his voice akin to a croaking frog. “Did you have a good rest?”

“How do you know my name?” Beatrix asked, frowning.

“Oh, we've been watching you,” he said. “We've been watching and waiting for this opportunity to cross paths with you. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Borakai, Chief Zorak of Planet Zona.”

The glass door of Beatrix's cell was opened, and two Zoraks tramped in and took her arms. Beatrix lifted her hands and released ice into one of the guards' faces, knocking him to the ground. Three others replaced him, carrying handcuffs that they promptly snapped onto her wrists, encasing her hands in thick metal.

They led her to a large room that housed a metal chair with groping wires connected to it. The various wires led to a huge computer screen on the opposite wall. She watched Borakai

stride over to the computer screen and boost the power up. He jerked his head in the direction of the chair, and the three Zoraks strapped the protesting Beatrix down onto it.

Borakai took on an intimidating stance and glared at Beatrix, who was being hooked up to the numerous wires all about the chair.

Borakai stalked slowly toward her and said, “Where is Derrick Falton?”

This took Beatrix by surprise. “Who?”

“You know who,” he snarled. “Where is Derrick Falton?”

“Why would you ask me?” she asked incredulously. “I have never heard of Derrick Falton. And if I did, I sure wouldn’t be telling you.”

Borakai snapped his fingers, and one of the Zoraks went to the computer screen and uploaded a file. The picture that popped up showed a man about 5’ 11”, with loose, curly blond hair that stuck to his brow, and shoulders made for battle. Borakai took a few steps toward the screen and spoke.

“Derrick Falton was a man who wrought havoc amongst our planet. He worked for our government until he was discovered. Unfortunately, we were too late, because he already had our government secrets in his hands. We failed to stop his escape from Zona, and we have spent the last three years diligently searching for him. After some thorough research, we found that he had only one living relative.”

He turned to face Beatrix. “You.”

Beatrix gasped. This was impossible. She *had* no family. She was an orphan raised by the village preacher. She was told that a tragic accident had wiped out her entire family.

“So,” Borakai said. “If anyone should know where Derrick Falton is, it would be you. Now let me say this again: where is he?”

Beatrix took a deep breath and glared up at Borakai.

“I am telling you the truth. I know nothing of this Derrick and his whereabouts. Now please let me go.”

By this time, the two Zoraks kneeling beside her had finished with the wires and stood at attention back up against the wall on the far side of the room. Borakai walked toward the screen and hovered a hand over a small red knob.

“If you won’t tell us,” he whispered, “then you aren’t going anywhere.”

He cranked the knob to maximum power.

\*

A loud, shrill scream ripped across the sky, making Frederick’s head snap up momentarily before returning to his feverish search on the computer in Beatrix’s apartment. Surely there was a tracking device on her suit. If there wasn’t, Frederick would have to fix that.

In an instant, her logo appeared on the screen. It wasn't located on planet Fortis. It was located in the sky.

*The sky?* Frederick thought. *But how?* The only scenario he could think of was if she were floating above the planet's atmosphere, and in order to do that, she would need a spacecraft.

*That's it!* He thought. *A spacecraft! But who had taken her?* When he had inspected the area where she had disappeared, there had been a patch in the dirt that could've contained a flower, but flowers never got up and walked away like that.

*Unless they were Zoraks!*

Another scream ripped the air. He ran outside, opened a portal in the atmosphere, and jumped through.

\*

When Borakai turned the knob, there was a crackling, and a powerful force within the wires shot into Beatrix's veins, making her scream and writhe in the chair. A pop, a fizzle, and the Zoraks had what they needed.

Beatrix was unconscious in the chair when a hole appeared abruptly in the room and out stepped a young man no older than Beatrix. He looked around and spotted Beatrix lying in the chair.

"Seize him!" Shouted Borakai, pointing at Frederick with a gnarled finger.

Two Zoraks approached him, and in an instant their skin melted and took the shape of two chains, twirling and twisting in the air. As they struck at Frederick, he opened a portal in front of him, and the two transformed Zoraks disappeared through it.

“You fools!” screamed Borakai in rage. He pressed a button on the keyboard underneath the screen, sounding an alarm deep within the recesses of the spacecraft, summoning more Zoraks.

Frederick looked at Beatrix. He couldn’t just rip the wires off Beatrix. It would hurt her.

Streams of Zoraks suddenly poured through the entrance, some transforming themselves into guns, some into swords, and this gave Frederick the perfect idea. He grabbed one of the Zoraks, one that had transformed into a sword, and slashed the wires from the computer. As fast as lightning, he opened a portal and pushed Beatrix, who was still unconscious in the chair, through it. Frederick followed suit, closing the portal behind him.

They both plummeted toward the ground, through the leafy forest, and made a crash landing in the shrubbery. Frederick pulled himself up and rushed to Beatrix’s side. Frederick began to meticulously unhook her from the horrid contraption. In each area on her body where a wire had been attached, there remained a small bloody spot.

Beatrix’s eyelids fluttered open. She lifted her head and groaned.

“Don’t worry, Gingerlocks,” Frederick said soothingly. “I’ll get you out of here. Don’t try to move.”

He opened a portal to her bedroom, gently picked her up, and deposited her onto her bed.

The last thing Beatrix remembered was Frederick’s big, gentle hands wiping her sweaty hair out of her face.

\*

Beatrix stirred ever so slightly and drew in her breath sharply in pain. Immediately, a hand rested on her shoulder, and a voice spoke through the searing pain.

“It’s okay. Just relax.”

She recognized the voice. She opened her eyes, and she focused on Frederick’s face.

Oh, how lovely it was to see his face. “Frederick. Oh, Frederick.” Tears streamed down her cheeks. Frederick lifted his hand to her face and wiped them away.

“It’s okay, Beatrix. You’re safe.” He stood up and reached a hand to her. “Let’s see how much damage they did.”

Beatrix meekly took his hand and rose from her bed, wincing. She slowly stood before Frederick, and copied the movements he did; stretching her limbs, arching her back, turning her head.

“Okay, let’s see about those powers,” he said. He walked over to the kitchen sink, filled a cup of water, and turned around. He proceeded to spill the water. Beatrix lifted her hands to freeze it, but the water splashed onto the floor.

Beatrix’s eyes went wide in horror. Her knees went weak, and Frederick got to her before she could crumple to the ground. He wrapped her in his arms, squeezing her tightly in his strong arms.

“They took my powers,” Beatrix said in despair. “That’s what the machine was for. It sucked all the power from my body.” She looked up at Frederick, her eyes filled with tears. “What am I going to do?”

Frederick held her away from him and looked intently into her eyes. “Don’t panic. We will get your powers back. You are still Beatrix even without your powers.”

Beatrix broke away from him, wiping the tears from her eyes. She started to pace the room, thinking. “They wanted to know where Derrick Falton was,” she said aloud. “They say he is my only living relative.”

She turned around suddenly to face Frederick. “We need to find Derrick Falton.”

**To be continued ...**

# Beatrix's Downfall: Part 2: The Search Begins



by Holly Braendlein

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“**T**his is just what we need to find Derrick Falton,”

croaked Borakai, as he watched his minions back on planet Zona handle a small flask of blue, sparkling liquid – the key to Beatrix’s ice powers.

“With this, we will be able to track Derrick,” he continued. “And then we will finally finish our mission.” He tipped his wrinkly, green head back and laughed cruelly, the sound resonating against the laboratory walls.

\*

Frederick sat in a chair near the desk in Beatrix’s bedroom, watching her slumber peacefully. It had taken much persuasion

and force to get her to retire to bed. Frederick had taken care of her wounds and had ordered her to sleep. Beatrix had shaken him off in a huff.

“I’m just fine, Frederick,” snapped Beatrix. “I need to find Derrick Falton. That’s what I should be doing right now, instead of wasting my time sleeping.” She stalked to her desk, but stumbled out of sheer exhaustion. Frederick rushed to her side and gently steered her to bed.

Frederick smiled to himself. Beatrix definitely had a stubborn streak. He watched as her chest rose and fell in the gentle rhythm of sleep. Bruises covered her body, but Frederick knew she didn’t care. She strove to serve people, which meant that she often pushed her own needs into the closet, leaving Frederick in the position of caretaker on occasion.

He sighed. How were they going to find Derrick Falton? And who was he, anyway? He had been told that Beatrix’s family had died in a tragic accident of unknown origin, and Beatrix was the only Berry to survive. She had been raised by the village preacher, a kind old man by the name of John Alden. He had never been able to tell Beatrix the details of the accident, and why it had wiped out the entire Berry line save for Beatrix. Maybe they needed to start with him.

There was a rustle among the sheets, and Beatrix’s eyes fluttered open, blinking in confusion as she processed her whereabouts. She sat up and spotted Frederick by her desk.

“Frederick,” she said in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Frederick tapped the desk meditatively with the tip of his finger.

“I think I know how to find Derrick Falton.”

\*

The door opened to reveal John Alden in a plaid button-up shirt and a pair of jeans.

“Beatrix!” He exclaimed, wrapping her in a hug. “What a nice surprise! And Fredrick!”

“Thank you, Reverend John,” Beatrix said, entering his quaint little living room. Frederick followed right behind her.

John sat down in his favorite armchair and clasped his hands in his lap. “So, what can I do for you two? Unless this is just a friendly visit, in which case, I will brew some tea.” He looked pointedly at Beatrix. “But this isn’t just a friendly visit, is it?”

Beatrix chuckled uncomfortably. “Your telepathic abilities sometimes creep me out, Rev. John.” She sobered and said, “As a matter of fact, you’re right. We’re here for different matters entirely.

“What do you know about my family’s death?” She blurted out.

John blinked in surprise. “Well, that depends. Why? Has something come up?”

Beatrix related the events of the day before, from the pool party to the alien abduction.

“Apparently,” she went on. “I am not the only living Berry. I have a relative named Derrick Falton, who is wanted for stealing government secrets. Borakai will stop at nothing to get what he wants, which is why we are on a quest to go and search for Derrick before Borakai reaches him first.” She exhaled wearily as she finished her story and waited for John’s response.

John, who had been listening attentively to her story, took a breath and said, “I’ll tell you what I know of your parents, Beatrix, if that will help.

“Your parents, Jeremiah and Courtney, met at the very same high school you both are attending. They started courting right after they graduated, and about a year later, they were married. I officiated the ceremony, in fact. They stayed around here for about a year. Eventually, they felt called by God to go to Khotar. Their reasons were not related to me, but if the Lord called them, who was I to stand in their way?

“About a year into their stay in Khotar, I received a letter announcing the birth of their firstborn, Beatrix Louella Berry, and a photo insert of a small baby with shockingly red hair.”

Beatrix smiled and blushed.

“Letters were few and far between, but your mother always made sure to keep me up to date on their life in Khotar, although they never revealed what Jerry’s job was.

“Well, around year four, letters were getting shorter, and I would receive maybe one or two per year. Eventually, they stopped coming. The night of June eighteenth, 2008, I felt that

something was not right. And then I got a visitor on my doorstep.

“A police officer stood there holding a bundle wrapped in a handmade quilt. All I was told was that there had been a tragic accident, and your parents were dead. You were the only survivor.

“So I took you in and raised you as I would my own child. That’s about all I know about the situation. Does that help?”

Beatrix, who had been sitting and listening attentively the entire time, nodded. “Thank you, Rev. John. I think I have all I need.” She stood up, kissed him on the cheek, and exited the house.

Frederick stood up and followed behind her, but was stopped by John at the front door.

“Do you know what you’re getting into?” John asked in low tones. “This is dangerous business, and I’m afraid of what she will uncover if she continues to dig up evidence about this Derrick person.”

“Don’t worry, Rev. John,” assured Frederick. “I promise to bring her back safely. You have my word.”

John placed a hand on his shoulder. “I would not want any other man to do what you’re doing for my little girl. Peace on your journey, Frederick.”

When Frederick reached Beatrix's apartment on East Fonse Street, she was in the process of packing her blue duffel bag full of clothes.

"Whoa there, hold up, missy," Frederick said. "What do you think you're doing?"

Beatrix ran to her drawer to retrieve more garments. "What does it look like, Sherlock Holmes? I'm packing!"

"Packing for what?"

"Think, dimwit. I'm going to Khotar to search for Derrick Falton."

Frederick walked and stepped in front of her bed, directly in the way. Beatrix stopped and frowned at him.

"What are you doing?" She asked irritably. "Get out of the way."

"Not until you promise that you will consult with me before you do anything rash," Frederick said defiantly.

Beatrix snorted. "What, are you afraid of missing out? I thought you were older and wiser than that."

"I'm going with you," declared Frederick.

Beatrix's heart skipped a beat at his firm but protective voice and his piercing blue eyes. She stammered a reply. "S-sure. You can come."

They packed together in silence, preparing for their perilous trip to Khotar and whatever dangers would follow.

\*

A flash of light was all that was seen in the dry wasteland of Khotar. Presently, two figures stepped through, the dust and wind playing friskily with their hair.

Beatrix peered about at the wide expanse of barren desert. “So this is Khotar. Now what?”

Frederick looked at Beatrix in bewilderment. “I thought *you* were the one with the plan! Didn’t you gather any information about Khotar before we left?”

Beatrix shrugged her shoulders sheepishly. “I might’ve overlooked that small detail.”

Frederick lifted his hands in the air in exasperation. “And you thought you could do this mission alone. Geez! Now I’m *really* glad I came!”

Beatrix waved him off. “Let’s go and see if there is any civilization around here.”

They walked through the dust and rocks of Khotar, the air drying out their throats with every breath, and the dust gathering on their eyelashes as the wind swept over the barren horizon. Two hours passed before they spotted buildings in the distance, nestled near an outcropping of hills.

“Yes!” She exclaimed. “Finally! Civilization! I was getting tired of talking to myself.”

“What, and I’m nobody?” Frederick said indignantly. “Thanks a lot!”

When they neared the outskirts of the town, they grew silent as they surveyed the area. The clump of buildings that they had seen from a distance was merely piles of rubble, with only a couple of buildings standing intact. Crude playthings were scattered near the piles, as if dropped in haste, and leftover paper scraps blew across the road, taken up with the breeze. There was no sign of life anywhere.

Beatrix looked about incredulously. “What happened here? It’s not even a town. It’s a wasteland.”

Frederick walked up to one of the huge piles of rubble and peered at it, wiping his finger on the surface.

“It’s charred black,” he said. “I wonder how?”

Beatrix and Frederick walked around the desecrated town, inspecting ruins, kicking the dust for any junk, and peering into the few remaining buildings. They had reached the third building when they heard a frantic scuffling noise from inside the empty building.

Both Beatrix and Frederick froze, listening intently. Beatrix looked at Frederick and beckoned for him to follow. They walked inside.

Accompanying the scuffling came whispered mutterings. Both friends dove behind a nearby crate. Beatrix pulled out the pistol from her holster, silently counted to three, and jumped out of hiding, with Frederick right behind her.

The person they saw turned in alarm and quickly pulled out a bottle of water from his pocket. His palms glowed red. He squeezed the bottle, sending the water at his opponents' faces. The water scalded their skin. Beatrix yelped in pain as she clutched her face, and Frederick jumped back, slapping his own face.

As the stranger darted away, Frederick quickly opened a portal in front of the retreating figure. The stranger was redirected into Frederick's firm grasp and deftly knocked to the ground with a swift punch.

Beatrix, who had recovered herself somewhat, whipped her head around to stare down at the figure.

"What was *that* for?" she shouted, but stopped just as abruptly.

He was unshaven and dirty. He had curly brown hair that reached past his ears, and he sported a handy utility belt along with his vest and jeans.

"Derrick?" Beatrix whispered incredulously. "Derrick Falton?"

The stranger stared at her. "Yes. How d-did you know my name?"

"I'm Beatrix," she said. "Beatrix Berry."

Derrick struggled to stand up. “Courtney’s daughter?”

Beatrix nodded. “How are we related?”

“I’m your mother’s brother,” Derrick answered. “Your uncle.”

Beatrix snorted. “Some uncle. I hear you’re a wanted man.”

Derrick frowned. “How did you know that?”

“I met Borakai,” she said. “He doesn’t seem pleased that you got away.”

“You ran into Borakai?” Derrick said in panic, reaching towards her. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

Beatrix stepped back, avoiding his touch. “Did they hurt me? Well, come to think of it, yes. Yes, they did hurt me.” She raised her voice. “In fact, because of you, they took my powers!”

Frederick stepped in, holding his hands up. “Whoa, time out,” he said. “We all just met. Let’s calm down and talk this out, alright?”

Derrick suggested they take it outside. They followed him toward one of the many piles of charred rubble, where he had set up a makeshift picnic table out of leftover pieces of wood.

Derrick cleared his throat nervously. “I-I’m sorry you had to suffer on my account. Truly, I didn’t mean for anyone else to get hurt. Not again.” He buried his head in his hands.

Beatrix peered at him suspiciously. “What do you mean, ‘not again?’”

Derrick sighed wearily and lifted his head up.

“I’m the reason your parents are dead.”

**To be continued ...**

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**Holly Braendlein** is an 18-year-old daughter of the King who lives in Kent, WA. In addition to having several health conditions, she loves to sew, write, do dance workouts, research her family history, and goof off with her siblings. You’ll find her other Beatrix stories on *Pure in Heart*, or her articles on *Reformed Perspective*.



Girl with Heart  
by Richard Hanus



Church in  
Turkey  
by Richard  
Hanus

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Read about  
**Richard Hanus** on  
page 172.

# After Last Summer



By Morgan Want

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**M**y school never seemed to change, even after two-and-a-half months of summer break. There were “Welcome Back!” posters and club sign-ups plastered around the halls, but those would gradually disappear to show the same old scuff marks on the walls and lockers. It would be like I never left, and in some ways, that was how I liked it. It was like reuniting with an old friend, and that was what I needed to feel when I walked in for my first day of eighth grade, especially after the summer I’d had.

“Angie!”

Heads turned in the hall as one of my actual friends, Stella, ran up to me, alongside two others, Tally and Chloe. They piled on top of me in one big group hug.

“It’s good to see you guys, too,” I managed to say, in between gasping for breath.

“Isn’t it?” Chloe squealed. “We missed you so much over the summer!”

“I missed you guys, too,” I said, as I wriggled out of the pile-up. “Talking on the phone definitely isn’t as much fun as you guys!”

“I know! So much happened while you were gone!” Tally said. “I couldn’t type it all out over text last night! And you’ll have to tell us what all is going on with you! Since you’re not living with your grandma anymore, does that mean your parents are back together – ouch!”

Stella flicked Tally on the back of the neck and shook her head. Tally’s face turned scarlet. “Sorry,” she murmured, rubbing her neck. “Rude question.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “Mom and I found our own apartment in town so I wouldn’t have to change schools. You can – you can, you know, come over anytime you want, once we’ve got everything unpacked, I mean – it’s still kind of a work in progress – but Mom missed you guys a lot, too.”

The silence stretched taut between us, then Chloe smiled. “That sounds great.”

“Just let us know when you’re ready to have us,” Stella said. “We’ll even help you unpack, if you want.”

I smiled now, too. I’d really missed my friends. Grandma lived in a different town, so I hadn’t seen them — or anyone from school — all summer. But her house was the only place Mom knew of that was both big enough for us to stay without being an inconvenience, and where she wouldn’t have to pay rent. I think that last part was the biggest reason we didn’t move out sooner; there was no point in signing a lease when she was convinced Dad would come after us any day. He never did, though. I knew he wouldn’t. After all the screaming matches he and Mom had, he looked almost relieved the day she turned to me and told me to pack a bag.

“That sounds really great,” I said. “Mom’s pretty busy with her new job, so we’ve mostly been unpacking on Saturdays. Sundays are good too, when we get home from church, but you guys could come with us, if you want. We could make a day of it.”

“Oh, when did you start going to church?” Stella asked.

“We just started going with Grandma when we moved in with her,” I said. “And we decided to look for a church in town when we got back.”

Tally whistled. “Wow, we did miss a lot while you were gone.”

I shrugged. There was a little more to the story, but I wasn’t sure how to go about telling it yet. Grandma did ask us to go to church with her on Sundays, but it wasn’t conditional for us to live with her. We didn’t even go the first couple of weeks we

stayed with her. It ended up being Mom's idea; she said maybe it was time to "change things up." I wasn't sure what she meant by that at the time. I just assumed she was depressed from sitting around Grandma's house all day with nothing to do but complain about my dad. All I knew was that her new church-going habit killed half the day every Sunday.

"Hey!" Tall nudged me with her elbow and pointed. "There's someone who will make you feel better about your life."

She was pointing at Vanessa Kane, another girl in our class. She wasn't even fourteen yet, but she was already nearly six feet tall — taller than some of the boys — and since she was part of the year-round community swim team, she always smelled faintly of chlorine. Her would-be light blonde hair had a green tint that reminded me of seaweed.

"Oh, yeah," Stella snorted. "Looks like the Loch Ness Monster's resurfaced." Vanessa didn't turn to look at us or give any sign she heard us, but I saw the back of her neck turn red as she walked away. Then I realized I was blushing too.

"Hey, come on, guys —"

"Come on, what?" Tally said, nudging me again and grinning. "It's just Nessy. She knows how to take a joke."

I hesitated. It had never felt wrong to make fun of Nessy — Vanessa — before. Everyone in our class did, but my friends and I were the first ones to call her the Loch Ness Monster.

"Y-yeah, you're right, she can," I stammered. "But, come on, it's our first day back. Maybe we could ease up a little?"

The three of them looked at me like I was speaking in tongues.

“You didn’t leave your sense of humor at your grandma’s, did you?” Chloe asked.

Stella and Tally laughed. I forced myself to laugh with them, but there was a twisted feeling in my chest I couldn’t shake, the same one I got when I couldn’t think of the right answer on a test. For some reason, it felt like I was doing something wrong by laughing with my friends.

\*

I knew exactly when I started to change. One especially hot Sunday, the AC at Grandma’s church was out. Instead of zoning out, like usual, during the sermon, I was actually paying attention as I sweated next to Mom in the pew, if only to distract myself from the heat. The preacher read something that stuck with me; it was almost as if he’d somehow been saving it up for the moment I’d be listening: “I traded their lives for yours because you are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you.”

As soon as I heard that, a thought hit me like a slap to the back of the head: I couldn’t remember the last time anyone said they loved me. Dad hadn’t stopped Mom and me from leaving, and when they were together, they were too busy fighting to acknowledge me. Even my friends and I didn’t really say stuff like that to each other. I was precious to no one, and I couldn’t imagine anyone trading their life for me. But I wanted to understand what those words meant. I dragged out Grandma’s old family Bible later to look them up.

I made it to the end of the summer before I was willing to accept that there was someone who once gave His life for me. That He did love me, and always would. The pain I felt when my parents split up was still there, but it seemed smaller compared to that love. Everything did. But I noticed something else: things that didn't used to bother me suddenly did, like the way my friends treated Vanessa.

But I had known them since elementary school, so it didn't take us long to fall back into our old routines. We sat together at lunch and in class, and the day they came to see the new apartment, they acted as if we'd always lived there. I loved them for that. If things were different between us now, I could ignore it, until the day Chloe found Vanessa's notebook under her homeroom desk.

"Hey, look at this," she whispered. "It's got Nessy's name on it."

I wanted to say we should give it back, but Tally grabbed it before I had the chance.

"Let me see that!" she said. "I hear she takes really good notes."

"Sure," said Chloe. "I'd rather you copied her homework than mine, for once."

"Seriously, Tally," Stella said. "I've got dibs on Chloe's homework!"

Okay, this is fine, I thought. They just want to look at her notes. That's not really wrong. Vanessa would probably let us, if we asked.

“Looks like she’s been writing in the margins,” Tally said, flipping through it. “Check this out: ‘Vanessa plus Ryan.’ She even drew a little heart around it.”

“How cute,” Stella said dryly. “Like anyone would ever hook up with her. And doesn’t Ryan have a girlfriend?”

“Yeah, Paula, in the grade below us,” said Tally. “You should see her, she’s got a waist like a tree trunk. Vanessa might actually be an improvement for him. Can you imagine what Paula would say if she saw this? It might actually be funny.”

“Battle of the beasts,” Chloe snickered.

“Okay, guys, knock it off,” I blurted out.

They all looked at me.

“What? We’re just joking,” Tally snapped. “Don’t get all high and mighty on us, Angie.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Forget it,” Stella said, glaring at Tally. “She already told you we were just joking.”

“No, no, I want to know what you meant by ‘high and mighty,’” I said. “Is that how you think I act? Just because I don’t think it’s funny to say mean things about people behind their backs, or go through their things without asking?”

“Yes,” Tally said, her face bright red. “Because you say stuff like that, when you say anything at all. You don’t ever laugh about anything anymore. You just look at us whenever we try to joke around about anyone. It’s like you turned into a different person over the summer. You used to be more fun.”

“Sorry my parents splitting up turned me into such a downer,” I said. “I’ll try to cheer up.”

“That’s not what we mean,” Stella said.

I knew what they did mean though, and Tally was right. I was a different person, but it wasn’t just because of my parents.

“We know you’ve been having a hard time,” Chloe said. “We didn’t mean to bite your head off, but you kind of ripped into us first. It’s not like we were really going to give the notebook to Paula, but so what if we did? She wouldn’t really do anything to Nessy, and Nessy would get over it. She always does.”

How do you know that? I wanted to ask. But the truth was, I didn’t know Vanessa well, or Paula. I’d known my friends most of my life. Was it worth risking our relationship for them?

“This is stupid,” Tally said, slamming the notebook shut. “If we’re going to fight about it, I’ll just throw the stupid notebook in the trash.”

“Whatever,” Stella said. “Just get rid of it.”

I looked at the three of them. They were bullies. Thinking about my friends that way felt as bad as cursing them, but it was the truth. And before this summer, I was just like them. But that wasn’t all we were. My friends could be so kind, and even if they

never said it, I knew they loved me by the way they treated me. Just like I knew Christ loved me, because He died for me. And for them. And for Vanessa and Paula.

“Give it to me,” I said. “I’ll give it back to Vanessa.”

Tally looked like she wanted to argue, but couldn’t find a reason to.

“Why do you even care?” she asked, handing it to me.

“Because I wouldn’t want Vanessa reading through one of my notebooks,” I said.

Because I knew how it felt to be dismissed and uncared for.

*Because someone actually does care for her. And for me, and you, I thought. And I wanted my friends to see that.*

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Read about **Morgan Want on** page 174.

# The Weight Inside



by Elsie Gentz (age 14)

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**E**veryone showed up with a backpack.

On the edge of the most infamous national park in the state, the Tri-State Trailblazers hiking group gathered in a friendly swarm. Each member was equipped with their own unique bag — some colorful, some practical, and others fashionable. Nobody expected their load to be a burden — nobody but one new member who was running far behind.

Nora didn't notice how heavy her backpack had become until the morning she couldn't lift it. She knew she didn't need everything in it, but the thought of leaving anything behind pained her. As a single mom, she'd learned that it's better to be safe than sorry, even if that meant she would struggle a little under its weight. Sure, it would probably be harder to hike with

such a heavy load, but she wanted to make sure she had everything just in case she was late picking up Colin from practice. She had just finished a long shift, and she wasn't in any mood to mess anything up. On top of that, she wanted to be prepared for any emergency she could possibly think of.

She unzipped the front pocket of her backpack, stressing as she tried to pick what to take out. Her father's medical notes? No, she needed them as a reminder to pray for a breakthrough. If she weren't constantly begging God, then maybe He wouldn't answer. She had countless appointments coming up, and she needed good news at all of them.

Should she take out her extra clothing?

No, it was possible she'd need to adjust her layers depending on the weather.

Her first aid pack?

No, perhaps everyone else had decided not to bring theirs. Nora glanced at her watch and gasped. She was already running late, and nothing had come out of her bag yet. She pulled the zipper, grunted as she hoisted it onto her shoulders, and silently blinked back a tear as she headed out her front door.

After a timely drive, Nora timidly joined the rest of the hiking group, who were all chatting lightly, relaxed and unworried. She didn't know any of them; she had been recommended this group by her own doctor. She needed to "find something for herself," as he had put it. She shifted her eyes from one person to the next, envious of their joyful demeanor. All their

backpacks were of normal size, hardly weighing them down, and most certainly more comfortable. She frowned and looked away. *God, she said, how come they aren't forced to carry so much weight? They all seem to have perfectly functioning lives, while I can hardly keep my family together.*

Swallowing hard and lifting her eyes from her dirty shoes, she beheld what seemed to be a very sorrowful man. He was in maybe his late 60s, and on his back sat a very empty bag. He was separated from the rest of them, quiet, his eyes wandering and shoulders slumping. He didn't seem to want to engage with other members; Nora figured he must also be new to the group.

As the hikers headed up towards the trail, she quietly cursed herself for carrying too much. She longed to be more like the gentleman she saw earlier — a lighter load to carry and an excuse to not be overhelpful.

Little did she know that man was walking through his own hell — and he worked hard to keep his load light ...

As soon as the trek began, Nora quickly realized that she needed to offer as much help as possible. Though her backpack straps dug into her skin under the weight, she managed to convince herself that it was for the better. Keeping her ears open for even the slightest indication that help was needed.

“Did you want a bandage for that? I have plenty!”

“Does anyone want a snack? No? Well, I have some if needed.”

She felt a small flame of envy watching the older gentleman's light bag bounce lightly with his steps, his pace slow and expression parched.

"Would you like some water?" she asked, motioning towards her own.

He shook his head. "No, that's alright. I can't take your water."

"No, no! Please! I feel the need to help out!"

He shook his head. "I'm okay."

Nora frowned. He obviously looked thirsty. "Well, good talk —"

"Caleb."

"Alright, Caleb. I'll see you around."

The next few miles, Nora continued to exercise her overhelpfulness, offering anything she could and engaging in conversations with the other members. She continuously apologized to the group for slowing them down, only for them to give the same response — she was doing fine, she wasn't slowing them down. Nora refused to believe it. Her pack was so heavy, and her steps were so forced that she felt she was becoming a burden. Never had she felt that before — she was always the one to carry others'. She didn't want to appear useless.

Caleb was always quiet, she had noticed. When he did speak, he used short, careful sentences as if he were rationing words. Nora felt as if her words were overkill. Whenever someone

asked about her heavy bag or checked up on her, she insisted she was fine. She knew that wasn't true. Her straps strained on her sore arms, and her legs burned from the extra weight. It was an incredible relief when they reached the end of their hike. She breathed heavily as she climbed into her car, exhausted and unprepared for the next week.

Whether she was ready or not, the next meeting came.

Everyone showed up with a backpack.

Nora's was a little heavier.

The past week had been rough — after an appointment with her father's doctor, she had discovered that his condition had worsened. This week, she had brought a few of his medications with her, just in case she had to rush over, of course. The added weight certainly wasn't convenient, but it gave her extra security.

She managed to struggle through a few miles of the hike when her bag's strap finally snapped. Everything she was carrying spilled across the dirt — extra clothes, snacks, first-aid supplies, Colin's extra sports gear, and her father's medical notes. Heads turned in her direction at the commotion, but Nora was quick to retaliate.

"I'm good, I'm good! Don't worry about me!" She cursed herself under her breath but continued smiling, reassuring everyone that she was in no need of help. Her voice was light, but her hands shook as she knelt to collect her things. Just one member came to help — Caleb. He knelt down silently, gently collecting her things and handing them into her unsteady arms. He didn't

comment on the excess; no words were muttered as he softly passed over her notebook. Embarrassed but grateful, Nora tagged behind the group for the rest of the hike, the only eyes on her being the weary ones of Caleb.

The next meeting came up faster than expected, and Nora found herself dreading the thought of the trails.

Everyone showed up with a backpack.

Nora stuck to the back of the group. She didn't say a word to anyone or offer any help. Her shoulders ached and her feet were in immense pain, but she decided this time to suffer silently. Little action took place until they reached a new obstacle — a shallow river with a surprisingly strong current. The group leader got the hikers' attention and gave warning.

“Alright, folks, you'll want to be careful crossing this river. It's pretty slippery around the shallower parts, so try to stay balanced.”

Being the caboose of the assembly, Nora and Caleb stood silently and watched the other members slowly make their way across the river. When everyone else had crossed, Nora hoisted her bag a little higher on her shoulders and started across. Her load was heavy, but she couldn't let her foot slip. Slowly but surely, she made it safely to the other side and turned to watch Caleb attempt to do the same. He started hesitantly, timidly approaching the water and dipping his foot in. His steps were careful, but he was unsteady.

After just passing the halfway point, Caleb's foot slid from underneath him, and he tumbled down with a splash. Nora

wincing. He had landed on his ankle, and it was already starting to swell. She immediately sprang into action, crashing into the shallow water and rushing to his side.

“Caleb, are you alright? Do you need something? I have a first-aid kit if you’re bleeding anywhere.”

Caleb’s face flushed. “No,” he said, “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Nora frowned. In him she saw the same stubbornness she’d carried, only this time in reverse. “Let me carry something for you.”

Caleb hesitated, then allowed Nora to support him across the rest of the river.

“Will you be alright?” she asked, breathing hard.

“I think so. Thanks.”

Nora caught herself smiling. Not only had they come to a point of mutual trust, but also of understanding. She wasn’t the only one pretending to be strong. Maybe everyone was. Maybe everyone’s backpack held different weights that she’d never understand. Perhaps she wasn’t the only one with a heavy load to carry.

As she walked beside Caleb for the remainder of the hike, her mind spun with plans for next week — she was ready for a change.

Everyone showed up with a backpack.

Nora's was a little lighter.

Caleb's was a little fuller.

Nora had found herself walking next to Caleb. They connected more naturally now, making more than just small talk. Nora found herself opening up about her father's illness.

"I'm afraid of failing him," she admitted, her steps lighter than before, "I feel like I need to be the one to handle all of this."

Caleb nodded. "I'm listening."

"This week has been better, I suppose. I let my sister take him to a few of his appointments so I could go to my son's game."

Caleb stayed quiet but continued listening, his face showing words he wanted to say but was too afraid to utter.

At the end of the hike, the group leader made an announcement.

"As a reminder, next week will be our last meeting of the year. It'll be an overnight hike, so bring everything you'll need for that. Have a great week, I hope to see everyone here next time!"

Everyone showed up with a backpack.

This time around, Nora noticed the weight of the others' bags in a way she hadn't before. She was prepared for bonding that night; she had already prepared in her head what she was going to share. She hoped others would open up, too.

At nightfall, Nora found herself feeling nervous. She could sense that Caleb felt the same.

Nora looked around at the faces lit by the fire. These were people she had built connections with, people she had learned to trust. She was ready.

She admitted that she was terrified that she was the one people had to rely on. She was carrying too much, but she didn't know how to ask for help.

After she was finished, it was Caleb's turn to share.

He revealed that his wife had passed away a year earlier and that the grief had left him empty. Nora's heart sank even deeper when he shared a recent medical diagnosis that he hadn't told his family about. He was too drained to handle it on his own, but he feared being a burden. He kept his load light so that no one would have to carry it for him.

It was a vulnerable moment among the group that night, and few eyes were dry by the end of Caleb's confession. The others offered smiles of support as they began to share their own stories.

Everyone unloaded their backpacks.

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**Elsie Gentz** is a freshman who has attended her Christian school since preschool. Involved in writing and having an interest in journalism, she enjoys writing various genres and about a variety of subjects. She has been published in a literary journal and various magazines.

# I Remember



## Creative Nonfiction by Ashley C. Shannon

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*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. — John 3:8, NIV*

**I** remember ... how the Midwest wind sounds like a thunderous train, or floats by — lifting the tendrils of hair that have escaped a ponytail.

In elementary school, during the spring, you'd pull the ends of your nylon coat high above your head and run against the wind. In the open field, when your first-grade legs were going as fast as they could, you'd leap, trying to catch the gale in your jacket, trying to get pulled into the sky.

I remember the dry crack in the dirt when the middle of summer, with its long hours out of school, dragged on. When the only thing to watch and the only channel Grandma's rural antenna received was South Dakota's PBS. I know while Bob Ross paints "happy little accidents," you go outside where the puff of the wind does nothing to dry up the sweat behind your and your cousins' knees. Instead, you ask Grandma if you can fill up the cow tank with the green garden hose. If you can have one of her homemade popsicles. If you can use the flyswatter to kill flies.

I remember the wall of trees planted to break the wind (as if the wind could be broken). How the trees stand tall, like the architecture in cement cities, redirecting the path of the wind. I know the snow kept on the fields by this barrier, the livestock protected, and the calm that floats around the house. The magnetic boundary. But mostly, I understand the pretend tales you act out as you create homes in these trees and the attempts you make to climb them.

I remember one Christmas, as your family drove from one grandma's to the other's, the wind caught your vehicle. The ice spun the tires. You were the tornado, twirling out of control, onto the path of another. Until suddenly, you weren't. You stopped. Safe. The wind quieted. Your dad turned the car around, and you drove on.

I remember the rock of the wind against the car – the staccato gusts that hit the gas station parking lot when your dad stopped on the way to Grandma's. I know if you stay in the car, your dad might buy you a bubbly orange soda as he goes inside to pay. If you close your eyes, you won't be scared of the blue 1984 Toyota Corolla rocking back and forth. The idea of the car tipping will be shadowed by the road trip soda that will make your eyes water but your tongue dance. I remember ...

... the scent of the wind when winter releases its grip. The lilac points open, and the honeysuckle starts to appear. I know the feel of the fresh grass, tender under bare feet, when you can't help but breathe in all the wet dirt and flowering bushes and robins showing up to pull worms and design nests.

... the caress of the wind, when, like your mother, you have an outdoor wedding with metal chairs, instead of the comfort of padded pews. When July forecasts heat, but you know the breeze will come. The open sky and the green grass offer their holiest kiss as you and your soon-to-be husband say your vows.

... the pang of nostalgia as you watch your son and daughter fly a kite. In the open space of the prairie, the kite soars up and up and up. The string stays taut. The diamond becomes a star in the daylight, winking, smiling, reporting the good weather and the how-you-dos of distant birds.

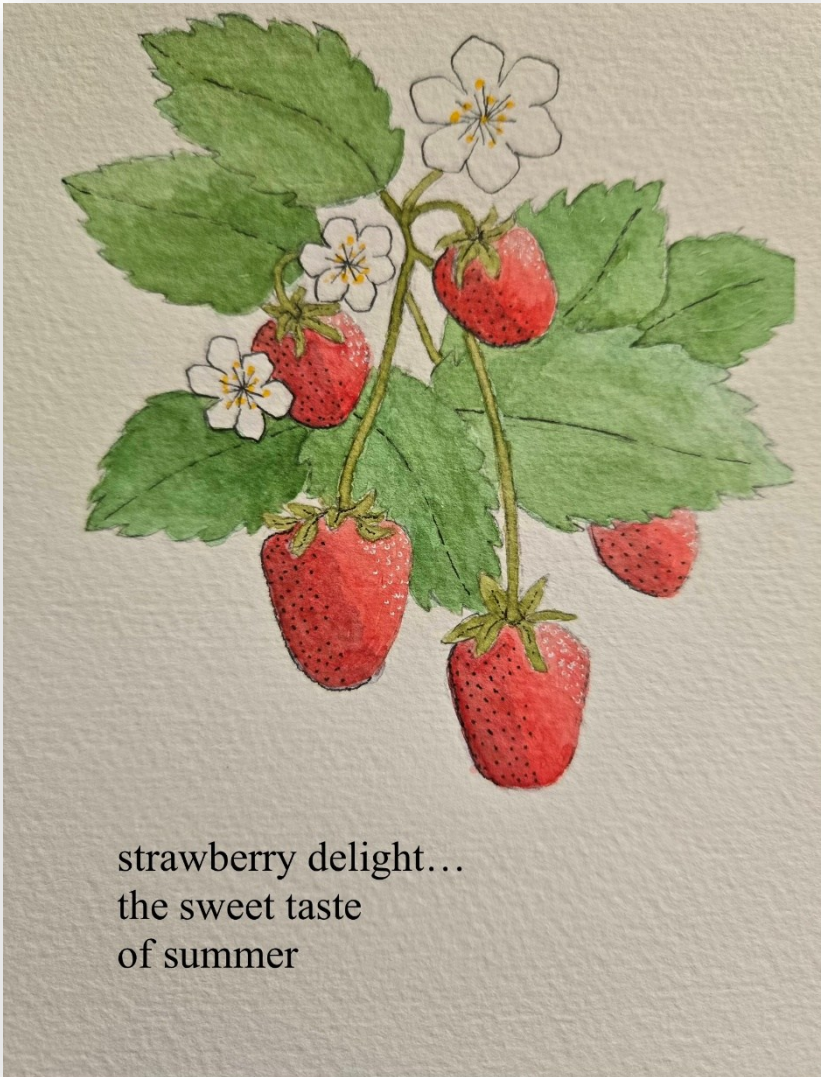
I remember after moving back to the Midwest, you experienced the deadliness of the wind. Although the basement protected family and friends, nearby, the wind whipped and whirled and devastated. Fifteen minutes later, as you drove your family home, you avoided downed powerlines sizzling on the road. Your foot leaned on the accelerator as you pointed out to the kids in the backseat, steak-knife trees and houses without roofs. You raced to beat the traffic that collects – drivers stopped on the side of the road, pulling out phones to capture social media clickbait while the red and blue flashes of emergency vehicles arrive.

I remember how every place you've lived has been touched with wind, yet nothing compares to the wind of your childhood, and how those memories merge into new ones as the wind tunnels inside you when you hold your children tight.

I remember how the wind surprises you.

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Read about **Ashley C. Shannon** on page 174.



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Poet, **Lisa C Reynolds**, and Artist, **Vivienne Bretherick**, reside in Durham Region, Ontario, CANADA. Their collaborative works are published internationally in literary journals and magazines.



Vikurkirkja  
by Michael  
Shoemaker



Good morning,  
Wick Farm  
by Michael  
Shoemaker

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Read about  
**Michael  
Shoemaker** on  
page 174.

## Recipe: Super Soft Scrambled Eggs by Faith Morin (age 11)

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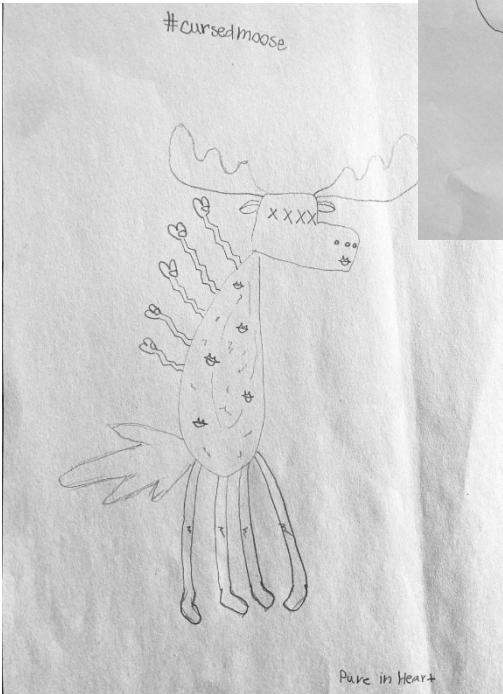
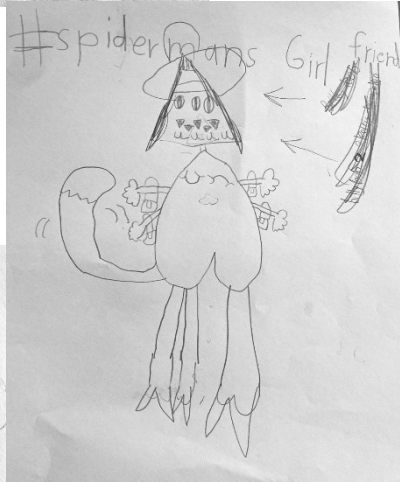
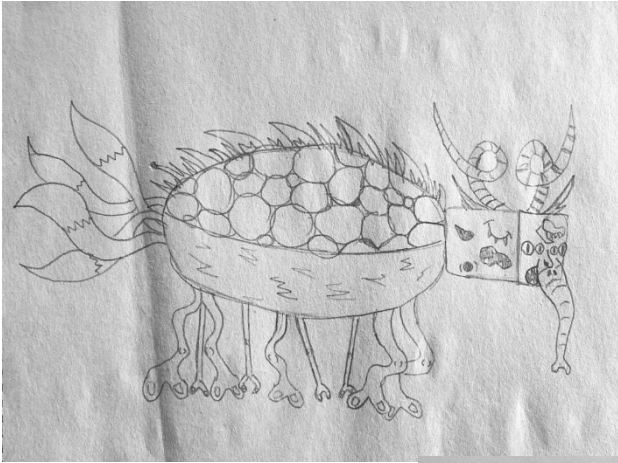
*“I looked in my family’s refrigerator, saw the ingredients and decided to experiment with the combination for breakfast. Caution – It’s heaven.”*

### Ingredients:

- 2 large eggs
- ¼ cup heavy whipping cream
- ½ teaspoon cream cheese
- 1 teaspoon butter

### Steps:

1. First crack eggs in a small bowl.
2. Add whipping cream and cream cheese and whip until blended.
3. Melt butter in a large pan over low heat.
4. Pour mixture in pan and cook, stirring constantly until mixture is fluffy.



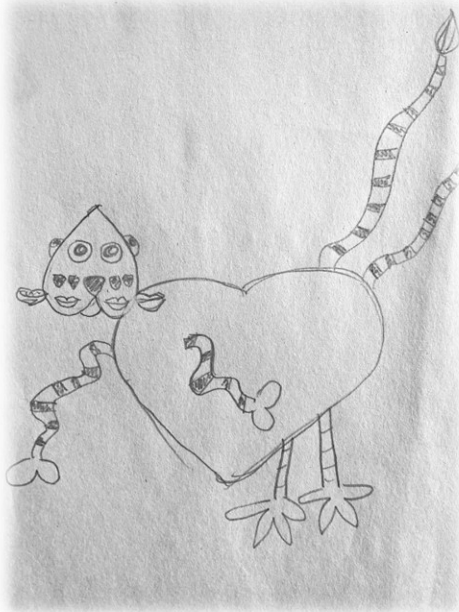
## Game: Roll & Draw: Roll-A-Creature

God created us in His image to be creative beings, and this activity is a fun and funny way to get those creative juices flowing. All you need are dice (or one die), a piece of paper, and a pencil.

The idea is simple: roll the die and use the instructions below to make a silly creature.

This activity is even more fun to do with friends and family members so you can compare your creatures with each other.

Once you're finished, give your creature a name and a backstory. Where does it live? What does it eat? Is it friendly? Make a story or poem about your new creature!



Go on to  
the next page! →

# Roll-A-Creature

## **Instructions:**






Roll the die in **11 Rounds** to build your creature.

**Round #1** and **#2** are to figure out what body shape and head shape to give your creature.

For **Rounds #3 – #5**, roll to find the type. After you have the type, roll again to see how *many* to draw! For example, on Round #3, if you roll a 2 and then roll a 4, you'll give your creature four thick arms. Do this for the arms, legs, and tail.

For **Rounds #6 – #10**, use the column to find out what to draw. Roll the die once to find out how many to draw. For example, for Round #8 you will draw a mouth. If you roll a 3, draw 3 mouths.

On **Round #11**, roll the die to see which details to add to your creature. After that, add any other details you'd like to finish your creature – glasses, ears, polka dots, etc. – then see what everyone else came up with!

	<b>Round #1: Body</b>	<b>Round #2: Head</b>	<b>Round #3: Arms</b>	<b>Round #4: Legs</b>	<b>Round #5: Tail</b>		<b>Round #11: Extras</b>
	Square	Oval	Thin	Zig-zag	Wiggly	<b>Round #6: Eyes</b>	Stripes
	Circle	Square	Thick	Long	Zig-zag	<b>Round #7: Nose</b>	Spiky Hair
	Heart-shaped	Rectangle	Zig-zag	Short	Thick	<b>Round #8: Mouth</b>	Horns / Antlers
	Triangle	Circle	Wiggly	Thick	Thin	<b>Round #9: Fingers</b>	Scales
	Rectangle	Triangle	Short	Thin	Long	<b>Round #10: Toes</b>	Feathers
	Oval	Heart-shaped	Long	Wiggly	Short		Claws

## Author and Artist Bios

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**Abraham Aondoana** is a writer, poet and novelist. He is a recipient of the Idembeka Creative Writing Workshop 2026. His works have been published in *Kalahari Review*, *Prosetrics Magazine*, *Rough Diamond Poetry*, *The Cat Poetry Anthology*, *IHTOV*, *The Literary Nest*, *Ink Sweat and Tears* (UK), *Rogue Agent*, *Ink in Thirds Magazine*, *Interwoven Anthology* (Renard Press), *Writing on the Wall*, *Alien Buddha*, *Blasphemous Journal*, *Rust Belt Review*, *Speculative Insights* and elsewhere.

**Jason Kirk Bartley** resides in Ohio. He is 50 years of age. He is married to his forever love and wife, Nila. He loves each and every one of you and wants you to be blessed. He has a Master's degree in ministry from Ohio Christian University in Circleville, Ohio. He has won many awards and been published in various places. God bless you all.

**Rachel Michelle Collier** is from Mississippi, and has been published in *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal* (the sister-site of *Pure in Heart*), *Fathom Mag*, *Ekstasis*, and *The Dirigible Balloon*. She wants you to know that you are loved. X: @CollierRachelM

**Heather Dickinson** is a teaching artist currently working in Catholic education. She hold a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Lewis-Clark State College, a Masters of Education in Humanities from Grand Canyon University, and her writings have been featured in *Spirit Fire Review* (December 2025), *Heart of Flesh Lit* (November 2025), and *Splatter Magazine* (April 2023). Her artwork has hung in various county offices, museums, and exhibits, with two works featured in the inaugural issue of *Wandering Lights Literary Journal* (March 2026).

**Tiffany Nicole Fletcher** uses the gift of story to live a creative life of faith in God. She is a worshipper whose tools of expression span multiple artistic mediums, including poetry, song, and film. Join her to reflect on the love of God at [www.tnicolefletcher.com](http://www.tnicolefletcher.com).

**Kris Flynn**: I'm a born and raised Nova Scotian. I'm an aspiring apologist and currently studying theology. I value truth with compassion and justice,

and seek God's will through His Word every day. I played basketball growing up and love reading, writing, and cats. Especially my cat, Drew.

**Stacey Longo Graham** is an inspirational author using faith, wit, empathy, laughter, tears, and mistakes to embrace life's grittiness and nature's splendor. After years in child welfare law, instead of anticipating retirement with her husband, she is now a mom to a wonderful child she never expected.

**Cleo Griffith** lives in California's Central Valley, surrounded by almond trees, ground crops and poets. She is widely published in such journals as *Main Street Rag*, *Straylight* and *Westward Quarterly*. She has been on the editorial board of *Song of the San Joaquin* since it began in 2003.

**Richard Hanus:** Had four kids but now just three. Zen and Love.

**Jonathan S. Harris** lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife Anna. His poem "Heaven's Harness" is published in *Pure in Heart* magazine, and he has haiku poems published in two books called *Fly: An Anthology of Poetry* and *Wild: An Anthology of Poetry*. He shares some of his poems on Instagram @jonharris7717 and @prayerful.poems

**Timothy Horne** is a recently retired missionary/social services support worker living on the beautiful east coast of Canada in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. He dedicates his time to writing (<https://substack.com/@timorlili>) and supporting the work of his church. Singing in the choir, enjoying downtime with Lil and any of their children who may be around, as well as exercising and reading, bring him joy.

**Ashley Hughes** is a poetic devotional author who meets God in quiet moments of prayer where He gently places words on her heart and shapes them into verse. Through her writing she shares His love, truth, and hope, inviting others to encounter Him. Her upcoming book *vessel of Grace* is a poetic devotional collection of poetry born from faith, surrender, and His presence.

**Denise Landry** is a disabled writer living in Montreal Canada. She has several poems and short stories published in several magazines and small press anthologies. Publishers include: *Sweetycat Press/Steve Carr* (2022), *Written Tales Chapbooks* (2023&24), *Wicked Shadow Press* (2023-26), *Pen*

*and Paw International* (2024), *River City Siren Press* (2024), *Micromance magazine* (2024-25), *Beaches and Trails Publishing* (2025), *VerseveZINE Blackout: Alice in Wonderland* (2025).

**Kyler Littlejohn** is a junior at the University of Texas at Tyler, majoring in Education with a minor in English. Inspired by a rural upbringing, her writing explores themes of faith, family, hardship, and love. Her work has previously been published in Tyler Junior College's *Bell Tower Arts Journal*.

Once upon a time, **Marcia N. Lynch** was a children's film editor, crafting live-action fairy tales for PBS. She and her husband of 41 years live in Arlington, Virginia, where one of her poems was chosen by the ArlingtonArts Moving Words competition to ride around on the local buses. She has just published her first book of poetry for children, available on Amazon, [\*Dear Miss Tickle: Poetry and Art for the Young at Heart\*](#).

**Nasta Martyn** is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. Instagram @martynpasta

**Polina Moys** is a Philadelphia-based teacher, translator, and writer. The Catholic faith inspired her to write poems for adults and children, where she reflects on the beauty of God's creation and His abundant blessings. In her free time, Polina enjoys traveling with her husband and son, playing with her dog, reading, dancing, and baking.

**Mark H. Paalman**, PhD, is a husband, father, and senior manager of a research integrity team for a major scientific publisher. His short fiction appears in *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal* and the anthology *Beyond Stories 2*. Mark is an active member of the Catholic Writers Guild. His Substack presents both fiction and faithful reflection (<http://pomalom.substack.com>).

**Chicken Palmer** is a mother and Christian artist who lives in regional Australia. She lives with her husband and their two young sons. When she is not wiping a bum or being overwhelmed by testosterone, she is writing or sketching. Her written works can be found in Paulett Golden's anthologies: *Hourglass Romance* and *Romantic Choices*. Her artworks are available for colouring and art lessons at: <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/store/mrbowtie>, including free

Christian resources. She attributes all credit to God, coffee, and her husband, who kindly watches the kids while she creates.

**Pat Severin** is a retired Christian teacher living in Wisconsin. Her poetic inspiration comes from her deep faith, her love of children and her analysis of people and the world around us. Besides *Pure in Heart Stories*, Pat's been published in such Christian magazines as the *Heart of Flesh*, *Agape Review*, *The Clay Jar Review*, *thewayback2ourselves*, *Words of the Lamb*, *Vessels of Light* and *Calla Press*. She has also contributed to *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and two other books, as well. Pat's personal ministry is weekly sending encouraging poems in her original cards to those going through difficult life struggles.

**Ashley C. Shannon** is a wife, mother, and writer living in the middle of the United States. You can find her logging her adventures with writing, motherhood, and faith on [Substack](#).

**Michael Shoemaker** is a poet and photographer from Utah. He is the author of four book-length poetry/photography collections including *Sacred Strains of Praise*, a 2025 ChristLit Book Award winner and a finalist for a 2026 Christian Indie Award. His work is in *The Christian Courier* and *Pure in Heart Stories*.

**P.T.K. Vasquez** is a writer living and working in her own quiet Rivendell amidst the Misty Mountains of southern Appalachia. Her poetry appears in *Amethyst Review*. When not scribbling in her notebook, you may find Ms. Vasquez tending her houseplants, humming along to Debussy, or talking to the trees — always with a mug of coffee in arm's reach.

**Morgan Want** is a short story writer and former journalist. She is currently at work on her first novel.

**Roslyn Weaver** was born in Australia and lives in the UK. She has a PhD in literature and works as a writer, with the occasional foray into editing and photography, birding, and music. Her published work includes poetry and creative non-fiction, as well as academic books and articles.

**Sean Wild** is a Catholic, husband, father, writer, and big fan of St. Francis of Assisi. He has written for publications such as *U.S. Catholic*, *Busted Halo*,

and *Rehumanize Intl*, as well as his self-published zine, “Ordinary Spirit.”  
You can find Sean on Instagram at [@christianityinthewild](#)

# Who is God?

Do you have questions about who God is? You're not alone. All of us at one time or another have wondered about the mysteries of our existence.

Here is what the Bible tells us about God:

God is real. He created the universe, the Earth, and everything in it (including you). He is the creator of life. As your creator and designer, He knows you, your mind, and your heart. He knows everything about you. He loves you (He *is* love), and He wants a relationship with you.

Here's the problem: there is a distance between us and God. This separation exists because, whether we know it or not, we choose our own way of living instead of God's way. This is called sin. Sin is choosing to say, think, or do things that are against God's will. Everyone sins, without exception, and it keeps us from getting close to a good, pure, and perfect God. We cannot get rid of our sinfulness by our own efforts—not by trying to be a good person or doing good deeds. But sin must be dealt with in order for a relationship with God to begin.

So, in order to restore the broken relationship with humanity, the Author wrote Himself into His own story...

God came into His own creation, and lived as a man. As a human, He helped us to know His character and showed us how to live. He shared in our humanity, but never sinned. After teaching people about the ways of God, He allowed Himself to be falsely accused by religious leaders and arrested by Roman soldiers, then executed. He did this to make Himself a sacrifice, so that all of the sins of humanity (past, present, and future) could be placed on His shoulders and be punished once and for all.

After He died, He came back from the dead three days later. This miracle proved that He had power over life and death, and confirmed the truth of all His teachings. He told us that whoever trusts Him will be given life—real *life*—and will one day live with Him forever in a paradise untainted by the sin that corrupts our world. He made a relationship possible again. His human name is Jesus. Many people often call Jesus their “savior” because He literally saves us from the consequences of sin—which are destruction, death, and separation from the love and goodness of God.

If you want to know the God who loves you, there’s nothing you have to *do*. You don’t have to go to church first and you don’t have to start making promises to be a good person. Just come to Him as you are, imperfections and all. Talk to Him, wherever you are. While you’re talking, recognize who He is. Ask Him for His forgiveness for your sins. Ask Him to take your life and make it new. And because He loves you, and because He is good, He will do just that.

#### Bible References:

- “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)
- “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8)
- “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)
- “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)
- “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 6:23)

- “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)
- “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)
- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)



Read more at  
[PureInHeartStories.com](http://PureInHeartStories.com)

