Pure in Heart

Stories

A Literary Magazine for Families



Issue #12

November 2026



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Pure in Heart Stories
Mobile, Alabama

PURE IN HEART STORIES
Issue #12 | November 2026
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Cover art: *A Peace Beyond Understanding* by Lucia Liu, page 40.
Cover design by Veronica McDonald.
Title page art: *Autumn Walk* by Marcia N. Lynch, page 26.

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+
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Letter from the Editors



Hello and welcome to the newest issue of *Pure in Heart*! We're well into November, the wonderful month that has all the joys of Fall mixed with the hints and flourishings of Christmas springing up all around us. It's a great time to be thankful and reflective, and also a time for family and fun. But more exciting than this magical season is the opportunity to present to you an issue that embodies these special themes for your reading pleasure.

No matter your age or mood, our 12th issue has a little something for everyone. There's a new dessert recipe to try for your Thanksgiving get-together, a two-part continuation of the thrilling Beatrix saga, heartfelt stories and poems, a new comic strip, beautiful photography and artwork, a little Sci-Fi, a sprinkling of fun here and there, and a lot of creative offerings to our Lord.

So grab your coziest blanket and a big piece of pumpkin pie, hunker down by the fire, and curl up with your copy of Issue #12. We hope that you are blessed by everything you find here, and that you draw closer to your loving Father this Thanksgiving and Christmas.

May God bless you and keep you,

Veronica McDonald & Mia McDonald

Little Bat's Dream



by Marcia N. Lynch

Little Bat had a daydream,
All the big bats were asleep,
Curled up in their wing-beds
Upside down, all tucked and neat.

Little Bat dreamed of perching
On the finger of a child,
Welcomed, like a bluebird,
With bright feathers, soft and mild.

Not the rubbery things
He stretched out to flap about.
Not the frightful things
All the humans talked about!

Bats! How they were hated!
Put in stories black and grim.
Little Bat dreamed of showing
All the good they do for men:

Gobbling up mosquitoes,
Nasty things that sting and bite!
Eating bugs by moonlight,
Going to sleep in the daylight.

He wasn't made a cardinal
To announce the start of spring,
He was a night bug eater.
Bats are truly marvelous things!

When Little Bat woke at nighttime,
When the children go to sleep,
He went to work as bats do …
And he hopes his dream you'll keep.



Read about **Marcia N. Lynch** on page 135.

Snowball

by Elizabeth Wrobel

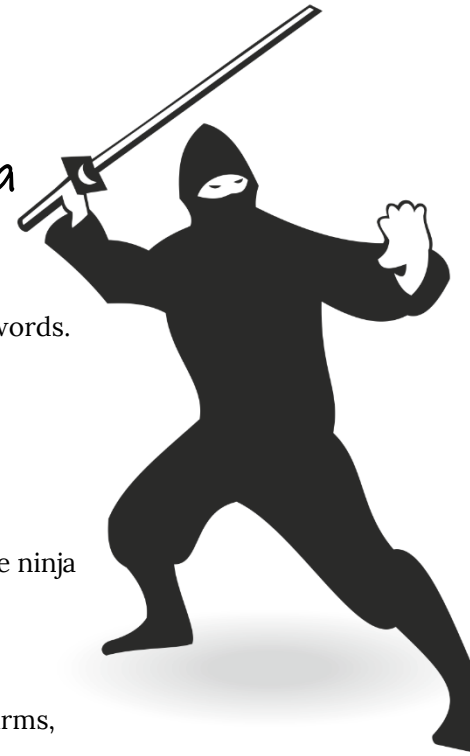
Snowflakes, snowflakes please fall,
So I can pack you into a fluffy ball.
Snowball, snowball fly across the yard,
Aiming to hit my big brother in the arm.
Brother, brother take your shot,
Will you hit me? I think not!



Read about **Elizabeth Wrobel** on page 136.

The Way of the Ninja

by Kirk Bartley



I bought two little boys fake katana swords.
They started play fighting
and exchanging some words.

They became miniature ninjas
with their moves and little kicks,
but I told them, “I know the way of the ninja
and all his tricks.”

I told them I was a ninja back then.
I hopped from leg to leg, moving my arms,
and tried to bend.

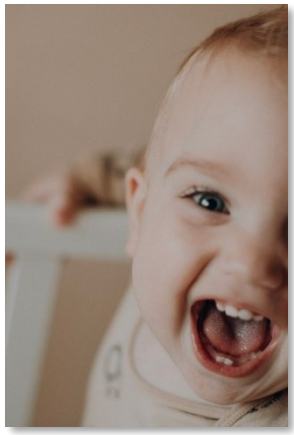
I gave a karate chop, then a “Flamingo move,”
standing on one leg with my arms extended —
What was I trying to prove?

A real ninja I tried to be, but the two little boys
just laughed, not falling for my bait.
I was just joking,
but it was getting kind of late.

They continued to spar, katanas in hand,
jumping around, doing somersaults,
and on their feet they’d land.

I walked off as I told them,
ninjas need plenty of sleep,
if the way of the ninja
they wanted to keep.

Read about **Jason Kirk Bartley** on page 134.



GRIN

by Elizabeth Wrobel

Give me one as big as can be,
Really lift up those cheeks.
I want to see your beautiful teeth,
Now you got it — say, “cheese!”

Caterpillar

by Reuben (age 15) and Caleb (age 12) Scheurwater







Pizza with PRO-SHOO-TOE?



by Pat Severin

I wish there was a rocket ship
to take me up to Pluto.
I'm sure they don't have this up there:
Mom's pizza with *pro-shoo-toe*.

Don't get me wrong, I really like
a pizza called "Hawaiian."
With pineapple and ham, it's great!
So does my brother, Ryan.

But our mom loves to try new things,
a new dish every week.
But this one's awful, tasted yuk!
One bite and I said, "EEK!"

This dish was in a magazine,
a famous chef's creation.
If you asked me, I'd have to say,
"I'd rather choose starvation!"

"My dears," Mom said, "that teeny taste …
You really didn't try it.
A few more bites, you'll love the taste."
I said, "I'm on a diet!"

Then both of us took one more bite,
then two, then three, then four.
Our mom was right, we liked the taste.
We asked Mom for some more!

My trip to Pluto's got to wait.
Prosciutto is a hit!
We both hope that another dish
tastes just as good as this!



Read about **Pat Severin** on page 136.

God Loves ...

by Ann Garrett

You can see God's love

in twinkling stars,

Hear God's love

in pattering rain.

Taste God's love

in cool fresh water,

Smell God's love

in springtime flowers.

You can feel God's love

in warm bear hugs,

and all of this

is because ...

God loves kids

and God loves

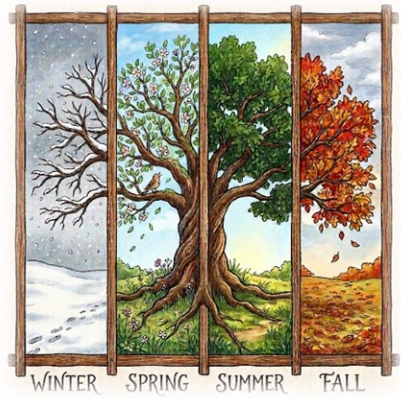
you.



Read about **Ann Garrett** on page 134.

The Beauty of the Seasons

by Juliana Stravitsch (age 12)



Summer is warm,
the trees are green,
bees are a swarm —
it's a beautiful scene.

Autumn is colorful,
orange, yellow, and brown,
crisp and cool —
the leaves flutter down.

Winter has come,
everything is white,
the winds are a hum —
it's a dazzling sight.

Springtime is here,
charming after the blast,
little sprouts push up,
from the earthy bottom —
at last!

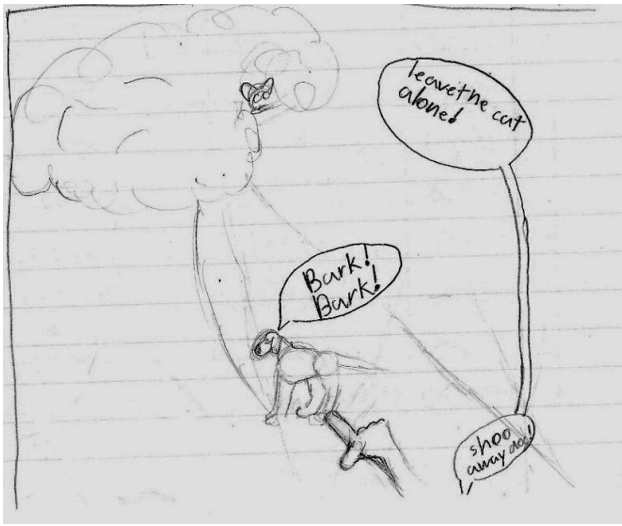
On a Sunny Day in Spring

by James Hernandez (age 13)

On a sunny day in spring
I start running down a cold
windy street.
A fast cat shocked me when
he jumped into a huge tree.
He had what looked like a toy
in his mouth.
As I got closer, I saw
what it really was ...

That was when a mean dog
ran up to bark at the kitty.
I shooed the dog away,
happy the cat was saved
by jumping to a neighbor.

That was when he dropped
the half-eaten, juicy rat!



Artwork by James Hernandez.

The Storm



by Sam McCurrach (age 13)

As I lay in my bed
and thoughts drift through my head,
outside there is a raging storm,
but in my bed I'm nice and warm.

Then my imagination gets the best of me
and I'm on a ship out at sea,
on a dark and windy night,
with the waves crashing against the ship
making it toss and tip.
Then I heard something that gave me a fright,
when one of my men yelled out: "Pirates in sight!"
It's *The Ocean's Haze*. They want a fight.
As the enemy fires
like a hundred, whistling cannonball choirs,
I yell out, "Hard to port!"
and the cannonballs land just short.
Then I say, "We are safe," but it does not last,
for a cannonball goes straight through the mast,
and as I watch it come crashing down
I hear another sound.
I turn around, and over the water I see a ship, *The Blood Hound*.
"Hooray, hooray!" I started to say,
"Captain Teddy Bear has come our way!"
And through the mist
I saw Captain Teddy standing on the deck, sword in fist.
"Fire!" he yelled, and the cannons did blaze straight
through the hull of *The Ocean's Haze*.
The pirates took to their lifeboats in twos and thirds,

after screaming a few very impolite words.
Captain Teddy let them go away,
and then shouted to us, “Are you okay?”
“We have two remaining masts, so we should be fine.
And thank you for coming just in time!”

Then I woke up, and the storm was gone.
I met my brother John on the front lawn.
“What adventure should we have today?” he did say.
I do not know, but we should get on our way.



Good Afternoon

by Faith Morin (age 11)

Blossoms slowly bloom in the heat of the day
They say, "*Good afternoon, my friends*"
Before they curl up for some shade

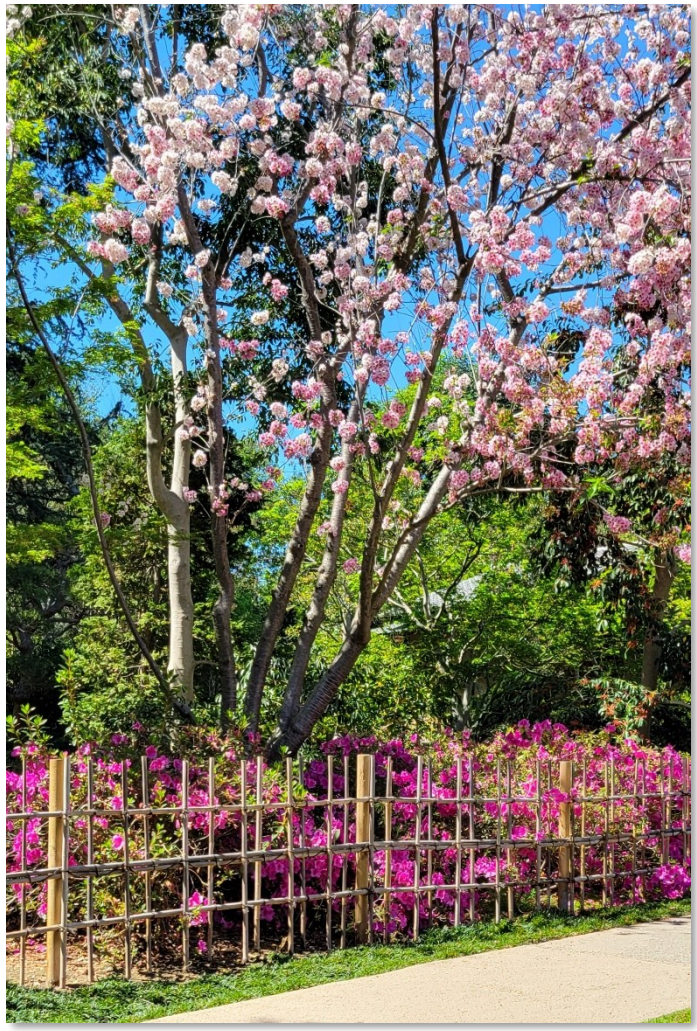


Photo by **Faith Morin**.

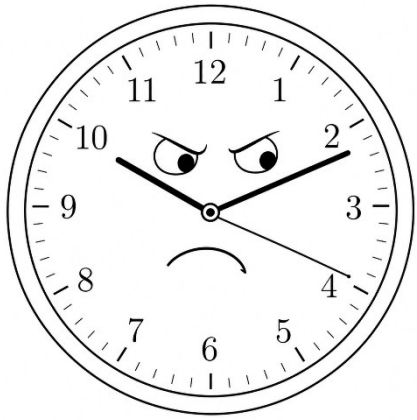
Autumn Walk

by Marcia N. Lynch



Second Thoughts

by Marcia N. Lynch



The hour and minute hands are here
We're having second thoughts ...
While he's allowed to tick so fast
We have to wait and halt
To move a tiny bit around
The face of one to twelve.
Why does he get to leap and bound
While we wait for the chance
To bump just one step closer
And to make the hour advance?
The minute hand and hour hand
Would like to voice complaint.
We're bored of waiting every day.
We're tired of our restraint.
The little hand has all the fun ...
You know, he ticks us off!
We're telling you, we'd like to quit.
We're having second thoughts.

The Cat in the Wind

by Rachel Michelle Collier

As one cat yawns in the living room, ANOTHER CAT IN THE WIND.
As one cat watches cat tv, ANOTHER CAT IN THE WIND.
The cat sits on a wooden post belonging to a fence —
As one cat yawns and watches strings, ANOTHER CAT IN THE WIND.

The cat in the wind on the wooden post watches cloudy skies.
The cat in the wind on the wooden post has no fear in its eyes.
The cat in the wind on the wooden post is ANOTHER CAT IN THE WIND.
The cat in the wind is wild and free, while one cat watches cat tv.

The cat in the wind on the fence with a post underneath is plump, and gray.
The cat in the wind on the fence with a post underneath has learned to pray.
ANOTHER CAT IN THE WIND it is, ANOTHER CAT IN THE WIND
The cat in the wind is still and calm; the cat in the living room is bored.

As one cat yawns in the living room, ANOTHER CAT IN THE WIND.
As one cat watches cat tv, ANOTHER CAT IN THE WIND.
The cat sits on a wooden post belonging to a fence —
As one cat yawns and watches strings, ANOTHER CAT IN THE WIND.



Read about **Rachel Michelle Collier** on page 134.

In Mother Words

by Marcia N. Lynch

In mother words
I've said it all,
"Your skirt's too short!"
"Watch out! You'll fall!"
"Clean up your room!"
"Practice the tune."
"You can't have fun
'Till homework's done."
"Don't you talk back ..."
But now, the lack
Of kids to scold
Makes life feel cold.
No treats to bake
For teacher's sake.
No tears to dry
After they cry.
In other words,
I miss the mess!
But wish my kids
Much happiness.
With clothes to wash
And balls to toss,
With pets and toads,
And carpool loads,
With all the joys
Parents can hold,
With love unfurled
In mother world.



Remember

by Shay McNally



Hey! Do you remember me?
I'm the child that you used to be.

Remember cartoons on Saturday?
We'd laugh half the time away.
Or watching raindrops race down the glass,
waiting to see which one would pass?
On family trips, we'd read each sign,
and count the cars and county lines.
At the zoo, we'd always stop and stare,
sure there was wonder everywhere.
We thought that maybe dreams came true.
Somehow, the world felt larger too.

Please tell me, what do you see these days?
Do small things still stop your gaze?

Do you remember bowing your head and folding hands,
trusting what you couldn't understand?
How Jesus knew our every care,
and we just knew that He was there?
We'd sing "Happy Birthday" every Christmas morn,
so glad that our Savior had been born.
You've learned a lot since you were me.
You've seen what I haven't seen.
But there's one thing I'd like to know:
Did your love for Jesus also grow?

I knew your heart when it was new.
Is He still First Love to you?

Read about **Shay McNally** on page 136.

Violets

by Mia Alicia Zamora (age 12)

Purplish and blue
Delicate flower perfume
For me and you



Garden

by Mia Alicia Zamora (age 12)

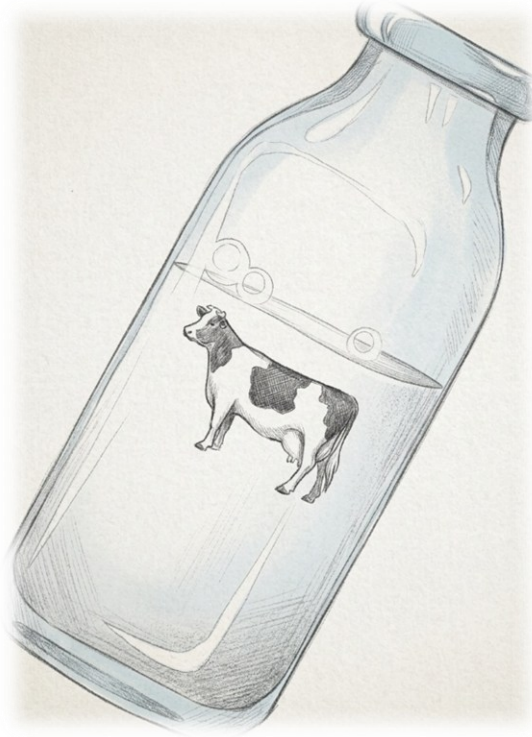
Growing flowers in different shapes and sizes
Action is always happening with visitors big and small
Roots grow very deep into the soil
Dependent on the weather, rain and sun
Embellished with color and beauty
Nurtured by the faithful gardener

Tasty Moo Juice

by Bella Morin (age 13)

Milk slowly running down your throat
Creamy like ice cream
If you're ever thirsty, drink it while it's cold
Milk is the way to go

This white liquid is produced by the bovine,
a wonderful creation
with brown patchwork spots
unique to each animal
The cow produces sweet moo juice
that's good for your bones



APPLES

by Olivia Kaddis (age 12)



A sweet, crisp and yummy fruit
Packed in bags and sent to stores
Preserved in cans or just in jam
Lavishly put in delicious baked goods
Evaluated at a low price
Some are juicy red and ripe

Sunrise

by Paul Kaddis (age 15)

Golden ray splits the sky
Red, purple, orange spreads out up high
Lakes and seas reflect the beauty
Of the vision above
Easily enhanced by a flying dove
As the sun begins to peek around a hill
Winds release a calm chill
Time stops as God supplies
Another early morning sunrise



The Sea

by Paul Kaddis (age 15)

Crashing over hundreds of miles around
Carrying secrets of the unfound
Waters violently swallow ships whole
While elsewhere calmly comforts lone souls
All shades of blue splash and batter
Washing away what no longer matters
Finally, it begins to slow
The sea finds rest and peacefully flows

Mighty Oak

by Paul Kaddis (age 15)

The mighty oak stands proudly high
For one last moment before it dies
One by one, chainsaws cut
Tree rings and branches filled with nuts
Reminded of its years of growth
Its young, youth, and old oaths
Sworn to raise up other trees
It lets out its final pleas
Reflecting on all it saw
It watches as his brothers fall
Mighty oaks like him are retired
As they have finally expired
Releasing hundreds of little leaves
That join the falling of the father tree

Then right before death arrives
A little acorn somehow survives
He drops and lands in fertile soil
Tuning out the dreadful turmoil
As the little acorn plants his roots
He lets out a final salute
To the giant oak who stands proudly high
For one last moment before it dies

Mary's Boy

By Elizabeth Wrobel

Mary's Boy, Mary's Boy, the ultimate gift of love,
Sent to us that first Christmas from God above.
He was born on a silent and holy night,
Bringing a dark world much-needed light.

So let's follow that star to Heaven's Gate,
Where you will hear God whisper, "My child, it's not too late."
Wrapped up in the everlasting arms of Thee,
He says, "Welcome home, come sit by me."

Mary's Boy, Mary's Boy, grew up following God's will,
Every job, every assignment, every task He did fulfill.
His final duty came at the very highest price,
For you and for me He made the ultimate sacrifice.

So let's follow that star to Heaven's Gate,
Where you will hear God whisper, "My child, you're not too late."
Wrapped up in the everlasting arms of Thee,
He sings, "Mary's Boy, Mary's Boy, brought you home to me."



Pop-Pop Choo-Choo

by Gabriel (age 12)

My Pop-Pop always wore a dressy flannel and sweatpants
With a casual denim baseball cap covering his flanks of hair.
And he enjoyed trains so much we nicknamed him Pop-Pop Choo-Choo.
Every Friday, my brother or I would go with our mom to see him.
At first, he seemed mostly normal,
But as the days passed, he started getting weaker and weaker.
He eventually needed a wheelchair because he kept falling.
On Christmas Eve, my entire family and I visited him.
We sang carols and read the Bible.
The next day my mom rushed around the house.
I asked my brother, "Is everything alright?"
"He isn't doing well, and might pass away," said my brother.
At that moment I didn't know what to do, so I prayed and waited for news.
Sadly, when my mom called my dad, she said that Pop-Pop Choo-Choo passed away that night.
I didn't know how to feel since I don't remember losing a loved one.
Not knowing how life would change, I trusted that Christ's will would be done.
We prayed that he would be with our Savior.
Knowing God's grace,
I believe Pop-Pop Choo-Choo is in Heaven.



Jesus' Crucifixion



by Adelaide Edwards (age 11)

Blazing in the temple
but calm is on the out.
Our Saviour doesn't whisper,
holler, nor shout.

His Father knew it all;
and the Son, so did He.
But the crowds just watched,
crying all in agony.

Then, they all watched,
as He took his last breath,
because they all thought
that He had fallen into death.

The whole world was silent,
both Heaven and Hell.
Simply no noise,
not even a 'baa' or a yell.

Then suddenly, the curtain!
It tore in two!
Nobody knew it,
came out of the blue.

The Earth was split,
holes in the ground.
'The Skull' they called it,
the cursed mound.

Nobody was laughing,
And it all was sad.
But in all this chaos,
neither were mad.

“It had to be done,”
said the Fatherly One,
because we couldn’t let
the evil sin come.



Adelaide Edwards: I love poetry, and I go to church most Sundays and Wednesdays. I am homeschooled and I am very outgoing, and my favorite color is very baby blue.

A Peace Beyond Understanding

by Lucia Liu

Medium: Acrylic paint and collage on cardboard



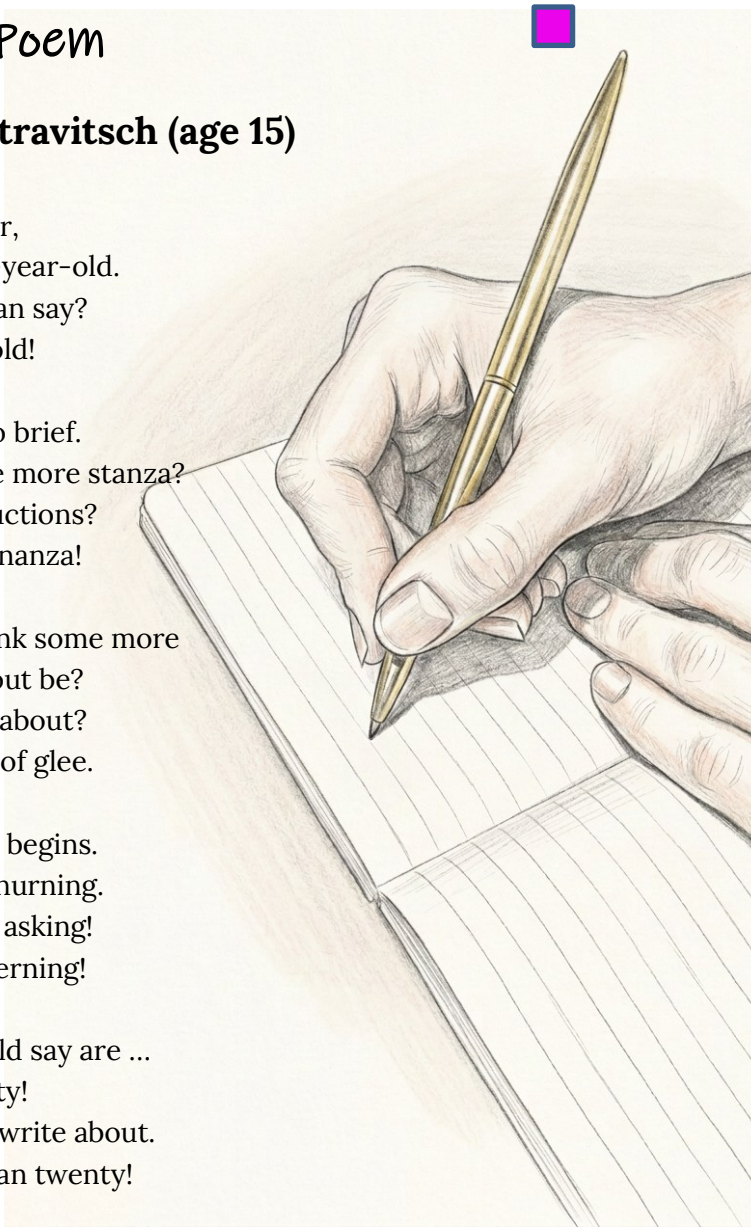
Artist Statement:

When the disciples were caught in a storm, they were initially filled with fear while Jesus was sleeping peacefully below deck. When Jesus woke up, he asked them, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Having peace in God doesn't mean that our lives will always be calm and peaceful — God never promises that. However, like Jesus sleeping through the storm, we can have peace even amidst the obstacles and storms thrown at us by trusting in God's promises and security. It means finding peace and rest even when it makes no sense. And when others see that peace in us, we can be a light to the world.

Read about **Lucia Liu** on page 135.

Writing a Poem

by Arabella Stravitsch (age 15)



I have a little sister,
My favorite eight-year-old.
I wonder what I can say?
All that is yet untold!

But this seems too brief.
Should I write one more stanza?
Or several introductions?
She deserves a bonanza!

I think … and I think some more
How shall the layout be?
What ought I talk about?
It needs to be full of glee.

My brainstorming begins.
My mind is now churning.
The questions I'm asking!
This is quite concerning!

A few things I could say are …
But what a quantity!
Too numerous to write about.
It's much more than twenty!

But which few ought I choose?
Which couple would be best?
Which handful would work?
How many should be addressed?

I will choose her love
and maybe her snuggles.
I may do her warmth —
Especially her cuddles.

I have to choose her smile
Or her imagination.
I shall mention her joy
And maybe her vocation!

I'll talk about her playmates,
About our friendly neighbors.
I should talk about her songs,
And possibly her labors.

I can choose her cleverness.
Definitely her dances!
I would choose her dress ups
Or maybe her prances.

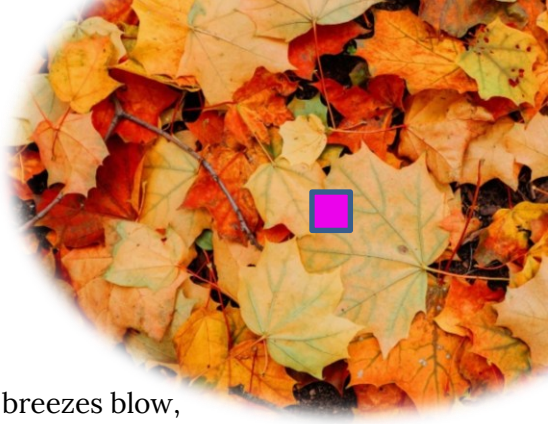
I could choose so much more!
But already it's too much.
At this rate I'll never get it done.
Not in time! With the final touch.

Hence, now the time has come;
I need to put it together.
I want it to be good —
Cuz' it'll be here forever.

At last, I'm done with the first part—
The brainstorming part is done.

Now it's time to actually write
About my little loved one.

Arabella Stravitsch is a 15-year-old from Katy, Texas, who enjoys gardening, crocheting, reading, sewing, baking, acting, and writing poetry.



Autumn Reflections

by Pat Severin

As the days become shorter & cold breezes blow,
I'm reminded of autumns so long ago,
when taking for granted each color and nuance,
I thoughtfully pondered just what I would do once
the piles were collected and I would jump in
with playmates and neighbors. What a terrible din
of shouts, affirmations, "Fall's finally here!"
How I loved my red nose and each freezing ear.

No hat, seldom coats, just a constant abandon.
Short days and long nights, and putting my hand in
those gooey old pumpkins we gave scary faces.
Combing closets and attics and various places
in search of the perfect costume to wear.
Applying the make-up, Mom fixing my hair
to go door to door. Was it trick or a treat?
All I knew was I'd soon have some goodies to eat!

Then stuffed to the gills I'd crawl into bed.
I knew, all too well, I had been overfed!
The days that soon followed, how quickly they flew!
Thanksgiving vacation! I hadn't a clue
what went into the turkey, the dressing and all,
and why they all called it the Great Butterball?
As I watch the leaves falling this bright autumn day,
I'd much rather turn back the clock and go play!
I may be the teen I was anxious to be,
but a jump in the leaves sounds like such fun to me!

If You Give a Skink a Cookie

by Paul (age 17)

If you give a skink a cookie,
He is probably going to run away,
To tell his friends about the nice cookie lady.
They will come back and ask for more cookies.
When you give them more cookies,
They will feel sick because skinks aren't supposed to eat cookies.

You will have to take them to the vet.
When you take them to the vet, the vet will tell them to only eat healthy foods, like insects.
The vet will also give you a suspicious look and judge you for giving wild animals cookies.
You will take the skinks home, feeling self-conscious and socially awkward
For being criticized by a medical professional.

Plopping down on your couch,
you will begin to stress-eat desserts to make yourself feel better.
Your skink friends will see this.
And chances are, if you stress-eat cookies,
The skinks will ask for some too.



* Based on the book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Joffe Numeroff

Desert Snow



by Sheri Bentley

Tiny bird atop a snow-laden tree
Gazing outward and downward
What do you see?

Snowflakes scurrying and flurrying
Swirling and twirling
Playful yet peaceful
Pristine

Free falling
From clusters of clouds
With billows and pillows
Quietly quilting
Beautiful blankets
Ornately outlining leaves

Covering, cradling
Agaves and saguaros
Prickly spines peering
Playing peek-a-boo
Through the snow

Trees catching crystals
Reaching righteously to the heavens
Their branches like wings
Awe-inspiring and angelic

Wisps of wind
Whispering

In this white
Day of wonder

Perfectly poetic
Powdered sugar sweetness
A magical metamorphosis

Snow



Read about **Sheri Bentley** on page 134.

No Longer Bound



by Phoebe Hernandez (age 14)

I skipped through the day
As if I carried no pain
Always masking a smile

But I carried a storm
One that ruthlessly tore
While the ocean tossed me side to side

Choking salt from my throat
The icy sea gripped my clothes
Making me gasp for breath

Fear snatched my fainting soul
A frigid chill went through my bones
Suddenly, there came an unnatural silence

The sea enticed me to follow
She coaxed, “You’ll never get hurt.”
As I felt sharp chains pulling me down

My pride began to fade
I feebly cried for aid
Then a hand drew me out of the storm

The ocean was calm, full of light
And there I saw my Lord Christ
Who shattered my piercing chains

He pulled me into his arms

Where there was no harm
Asked, “Why didn’t you call my name?”

What I failed to see
He wanted me free
Now I’m no longer bound



[Inpine oilis]

by Rachel Michelle Collier

Inpine oilis
inwind scentis
insea squidis
inu christis
inchrist uare
asquid insea
inhim iam
inchrist rwe
inchrist allis.



The Flame



by Emma Vander Kooi

A lump of wax, a piece of string,
Molded into a useful thing,
Shaped by the Maker's hands,
For to show forth His perfect plans.
Sitting useless in the dark,
And in sight, not a flame or spark,
Now drawn out of the darksome mire
And held up to th'Eternal Fire.
Then sheltered by the Maker's side,
So that it might grow and abide.
Soon out into the world of woe,
To shine its small light, it doth go.
Then all the world which hates the light,
Doth blow at it with all their might.
It smolders, fails, they think they've won …
And yet in it the Flame burns on.
For what the world mocks and smothers,
The Maker with His hand covers.
He guides the winds so that the same
Purpose only to fan the Flame.
Some draw so close in scorn and ire
That they are caught by that same Fire —
So through a piece of wax and string,
The Maker does a mighty thing;
For everywhere, as far as sight,
A great forest is set alight.
Its purpose done, the wick burns low,
Back to its Maker it doth go.

Then it, made new, consumed never,
Shall burn with that great love fore'er.



Read about **Emma Vander Kooi** on page 136.

Love and Power

by Robert Funderburk

The power of a rhino
In full charge
The power of Clydesdales
Pulling a barge

The love of a mother
For her newborn child
Remains steadfast
When he's teenage wild

A nuclear bomb
Her first romance
A smoking wasteland
Dreamy at the dance

One to be wished for
The other ominous
All minuscule at
The name of Jesus



Read about **Robert Funderburk** on page 134.

—At the Foot—



by Arabella Stravitsch (age 15)

Kneeling before the cross —
radiant in the darkness,
rays emanate from His heart,
illuminating the sky.

Remembering the past —
bleeding in the blackness,
humiliated in hopelessness,
gnashing and wailing,
All was lost.

A light!
burned and beckoned;
stirred my soul.

Hope
led me upwards,
towards the end.

Reached the summit,
perceived my soul,
awed by His glory,
knelt, unworthy.

Hearing my name —
gazing up
He looks down
eyes full of love

Gazing tenderly, lovingly,
wordlessly reassuring, cleansing,
— at the foot of the Cross —



Artwork by Arabella Stravitsch.

Arabella Stravitsch is a 15-year-old from Katy, Texas, who enjoys gardening, crocheting, reading, sewing, baking, acting, and writing poetry.

Armor of Clay

by Jimmy Lisotto



Remain vigilant on the front lines,
In the heat of spiritual war.
Stay armed in these tumultuous times,
As the enemy prowls at the door.

Be steadfast as you march ever onward,
Clad in the Armor of God against sin.
Guarded by the shield of His holy Word,
Gaining ground with each battle that you win.

Keep pressing firmly to the path you tread,
Using His teachings as your guiding light.
With such boundless grace, you are safely led
Through the darkest mantle of the night.

Yet, true strength descends from Heaven above,
In surrender, purpose is revealed.
A vessel crafted by the Father's love,
By the power of His Spirit sealed.

Always extend your hand in aid
To the lost souls in urgent need.
Show your faith as boldly displayed
By the righteous life that you lead.

Through every hour, come what may,
Let your inner beacon brightly glow
To guide the lonely wanderer's way
And help the battered spirit grow.

Read about **Jimmy Lisotto** on page 135.

Hopeful

by Makenzie Hill (age 15)

When you come home,
Your place is filled,
The forgotten bed is no longer empty,
Even the paint welcomes you in.

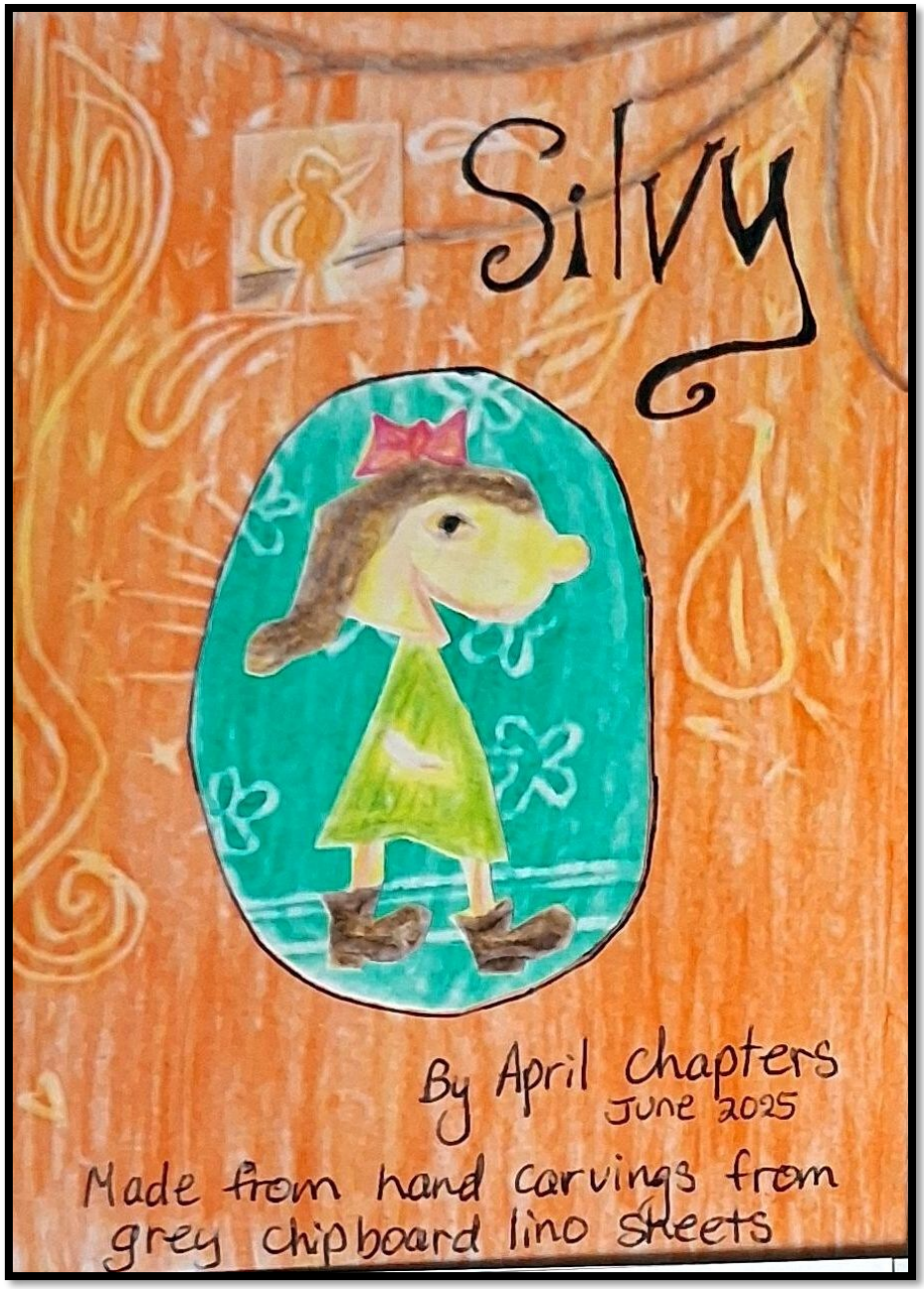
Things set aside, long ago,
Your favorite sweater,
Beat up shoes,
They all rediscover meaning,
Something they thought they'd never lose.

Only a few weeks' time gets whisked away,
Feels like it's only been one day.
The clock strikes noon, it's time to go,
I hope you'll be back,
I really hope so.

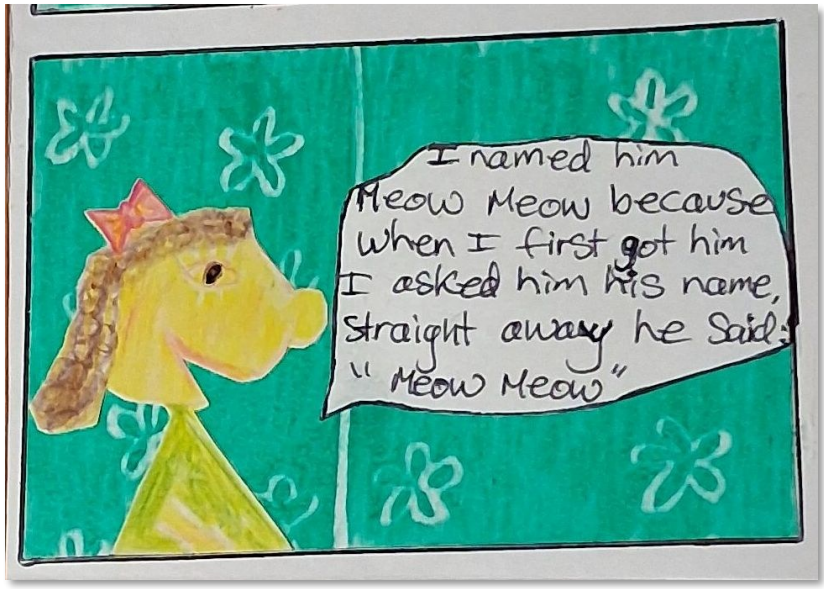


Makenzie Hill is an aspiring author that loves spending time outdoors. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing, and playing soccer.

Silvy **by Lily Paredes**




My name is Silvy and this is Meow Meow


I named him Meow Meow because when I first got him I asked him his name, straight away he said: "Meow Meow"


Meow Meow is the best cat ever, but I wish he would Stop saying his name


Meow.. meow.. meow
Meow Meow, I know yar name already



Read about **Lily Paredes** on page 136.

Lillie's First Game

by Jenna Bannister (age 16)



Lillie learned to tie her shoes when she turned four. Mom taught her first, and then her older brother took over, claiming that he could tie them the "right" way. Lillie became an expert at shoe-tying and even taught it to her younger sister. She offered to tie her friends' shoes when their fingers fumbled.

Lillie's fingers never fumbled. Until now.

"Oh, bother," she mumbled after she pulled the string too tight and undid it all. "Why can't you tie yourselves?"

The other shoe's laces slipped. *Just perfect.*

She slumped against the wall. To be fair, these shoes were *not* regular shoes. They were soccer cleats. But surely they couldn't be *too* much harder?

Lillie attacked the shoes, this time tying them faster. Her fingers wouldn't move fast enough, and the laces tangled together.

She huffed and tried again. And again.

Eventually, she called, "Dad?"

"Yes, Lil?" Lillie's father appeared in the doorway. He glanced at the laces spilling over her shoes onto the floor, and knelt to tie them, his fingers pulling and tugging until they were sturdy.

"Th-thanks, Dad." Lillie smiled weakly.

Dad smiled. "You'll be fine. Come on, or we're going to be late."

Lillie walked with Dad to the car. She climbed in the backseat with her water bottle and soccer ball. She hugged the ball tight as they turned off their street onto the main road. It hadn't been Lillie's idea, the soccer thing. But Mom and Dad had agreed that Lillie needed to do something to coax her out of her shell. Lillie decided to show them she didn't need it.

In no time, they arrived at the parking lot.

With a click, Lillie freed herself of the seat belt and opened the car door. What if the ball hit her stomach like at practice? What if no one talked to her? What if she was a terrible teammate?

Lillie clutched her water bottle in her left hand and carried her soccer ball in the other. Her uniform seemed a little big this morning, but now it was ginormous.

She stared at Dad. “Does it look okay?”

“It looks wonderful!”

They walked to the soccer field and spotted Coach Ellie on the other side. Lillie took a deep breath. When they arrived at the field, she dropped her soccer ball, and her free hand reached for Dad’s.

“Go on, Lil. I’ll see you at the end of the game.” Dad handed her soccer ball back.

Lillie gulped. There were a lot of people over there. Teammates, onlookers, and Coach Ellie. Butterflies in Lillie’s stomach came to life, fluttering, trying to escape.

She trudged across the soccer field, feeling the eyes of all the other team’s players on her.

She pressed the soccer ball to her chest. The grass felt strange, trapped under her cleats. She sprinted the rest of the way.

“Hi, Coach,” Lillie managed.

“Hey, Lillie!” Coach Ellie said. “You can pass the ball with the others before the game starts.”

Lillie followed Ellie’s gesture to the other girls by the goal. They stood in a circle, tapping the ball between them. The stomach butterflies flitted around faster.

Lillie took one step towards them, then another. Her ponytail swung behind her.

She stopped behind one of the girls and cleared her throat. “Hi.”

Nobody on this side moved, but a girl across from her smiled, motioning for her to come closer. Lillie did.

The girl had olive skin and dark hair, swinging in french braids. “Hi, I’m–”

“Hyacinth,” Lillie finished, remembering her from practice. She clamped a hand over her mouth. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” The girl giggled. “And you’re Lillie. You can stand next to me.”

Lillie nodded and let her soccer ball fall behind her and roll into the goal. As soon as she returned to the circle of teammates, a girl with braces and freckles kicked the ball to her. Lillie barely remembered to lift her foot and trap the ball under it.

Hyacinth gestured around the circle. “Pass it to anyone.”

Lillie smiled, then passed it to another girl she remembered from practice with blonde braids that fell halfway down her back.

Slowly, the butterflies calmed down.

When she’d gotten used to this exercise, the referee blew his whistle.

The butterflies tried to come back, but Lillie pushed them down. She glanced at Hyacinth, who seemed to know exactly what she was doing.

“Sit next to me,” Hyacinth said. “We aren’t on yet, remember?”

Lillie nodded. Coach told them at practice who would start on the field. Lillie only remembered that her name wasn’t mentioned.

“Thanks,” she murmured, and followed Hyacinth to the metal bench. When she sat, her feet dangled a few inches above the grass. She swung them back and forth, watching the players pass the ball.

“Have you played soccer before this year?” Hyacinth asked.

Lillie whirled to face her. “No,” she admitted. Her fingers curled around the bottom of the bench.

Hyacinth grinned. “You’ll be great. I just know it.”

“Thanks,” Lillie said. The butterflies fluttered again. She watched Hyacinth pay attention to the game and copied her. Soon, her fingers loosened, and she enjoyed the game as much as her new friend.

“Have you?” Lillie asked. “Played soccer, I mean?”

“Yeah. Only last year, though.” Hyacinth took a sip of her water. “I think Coach is about to sub us in.”

Sure enough, Coach called them, and they ran across the field, calling out the names of the people they replaced.

When they started playing, Lillie's butterflies returned.

Hyacinth whispered beside her, "Focus on kicking the ball down the field for now."

Lillie bit her lip.

Dad cheered.

She'd try to make him proud. When the ball came her way, she tried her best to pass it to her teammates, especially Hyacinth.

It didn't *always* work. But sometimes it did, and Lillie cheered just as loud as her teammates when Hyacinth scored a goal.

When the game ended, Lillie wiped sweat from her brow. Although her limbs ached and she felt like collapsing, she couldn't stop smiling. It was exhilarating, even though she'd been too focused on running to notice how many goals each team scored.

Lillie drank from her water bottle, barely stopping for breath. "Did we win?" she asked Hyacinth.

Hyacinth paused from untying her shoes. "The score was five to four. Yeah, we won."

"See you next practice!" Lillie smiled so wide she forgot the butterflies, and she dashed across the field to Dad.

“Hey, Lillie!” Dad swept her up in a hug. “Great job.”

“I did it, Dad.” Lillie laughed. “I really did it.”

Jenna Bannister is a teen writer from North Carolina who enjoys writing quiet but amusing middle grade stories. When she’s not writing, she can be found playing the piano, reading *The Penderwicks* for the 50th time, or filming videos for her YouTube channel “Jenna’s Books.”

A Home This Christmas

by Josephine Ken-Enwerem



Racheal stopped counting the days somewhere around two hundred and fifty. At first, every night after lights out, she would whisper a prayer and mark another day in her head.

Please, God. Let me have a family again.

But after a while, the numbers became too heavy, as they became like little stones in her head, and she was tired of carrying them. Still, she kept praying.

She remembered something her mother had told her when the illness was still new, and Mama's voice hadn't yet become weak. "God doesn't forget," Mama had whispered, brushing a strand of hair from Racheal's face. "He just sometimes takes the long way 'round. The long way still gets you where you're going." Racheal had held on to those words ever since.

The children's home wasn't a bad place. Mrs. Hartley ran it firmly but kindly. There were three meals a day, clean sheets,

warm blankets, and a little garden where the younger children grew carrots they watered far too enthusiastically. Racheal helped with them. She tied shoelaces. Wiped noses. Sat beside frightened children after nightmares, and there were times she made up silly songs about a brave teddy bear until the crying stopped.

But nobody sang to her. She had nobody to check beneath her bed when she pretended to be afraid of monsters. Nobody leaned over her at night and whispered, “Sleep tight, my girl,” in the voice that made the whole world feel safe.

Racheal was ten. In the children’s home, ten felt old.

She had watched many families come and go, to understand what usually happened. The babies were picked up first, then the toddlers. Most foster parents wanted children who were still small enough to grow into their families. Nobody looked at a ten-year-old and saw a beginning.

So Racheal stopped expecting anyone to choose her. She only prayed.

Then, one bright Thursday in November, Claire and David Ashworth came. They weren’t what Racheal expected. Claire had a glowing round face and was wearing a cardigan that had different colors of buttons. She was obviously pregnant, perhaps six months along, and moved carefully when she sat down on the carpet in the common room. David was taller and quieter. There was a smear of paint on his thumb.

Claire handed out biscuits and asked the children what they liked to read. When she reached Racheal, she didn't give her a special smile. "And you, love?" she asked. "What are you into?"

"Nothing at the moment."

Claire nodded seriously. "Well, we've got far too many books at our house. There's one about a fox who solves crimes. And another about a girl who builds a rocket out of a washing machine."

Racheal almost smiled.

David looked at her. "We've got a spare room too," he said. "We're getting it ready for the baby." He hesitated. "We thought … perhaps the baby could have a big sister."

Racheal looked at him.

David didn't look away. "You could be ours," he said quietly, "if you wanted … And we would really want that," he added.

The lunchtime bell rang before Racheal could answer. She walked away with the others, but her heart was beating so hard she thought everyone must hear it. *Could this be it?*

The following Saturday, they came back. Then they came again.

They took Racheal to the park beside the canal. Claire talked about the garden she was trying to bring back to life. David talked about painting the spare room pale yellow.

One afternoon, Claire sat beside Racheal on a bench while ducks fought noisily over a piece of bread. “I want you to know something,” Claire said.

Racheal waited.

“I’m not trying to replace your mum.”

Racheal looked down. “I know.”

“I just want to be someone who tucks you in. Someone who reads you a chapter before bed. Someone who leaves the hallway light on if you’re afraid of the dark.” She rested a hand on her belly. “And when this little one arrives, I’d like you to be her big sister. If that’s something you’d like too.”

Racheal’s face crumpled. “I’m scared.”

Claire didn’t rush to hug her. She simply moved closer.

“I don’t want to have a home and lose it again.”

Claire swallowed. “I know.”

“You can’t promise nothing bad will ever happen,” Racheal said.

“No,” Claire replied. “I can’t.”

That surprised her.

“But I can promise that David and I aren’t looking for a temporary daughter.”

Racheal wiped her face.

Claire smiled gently. “We’re making room for you. For good.”

For the first time in a very long time, Racheal allowed herself to hope.

Then the paperwork went wrong. A form had not been filed correctly. A signature was missing. The hearing was postponed. Two weeks. Then three. Christmas was getting closer.

Racheal heard Mrs. Hartley on the telephone trying to sort everything out, and one evening she went upstairs, closed the dormitory door and sat on her bed. The thread she’d been holding felt as though it were slipping through her fingers.

That night, she knelt beside her bed. “I thought You said the long road still gets me there,” she whispered angrily. “I thought You hadn’t forgotten me.” She wiped her eyes. “Please don’t let me lose them.” Then she finished her prayer. She always did.

Claire called every few days. “It’s going to work out,” she said.

“What if it doesn’t?”

“Then we’ll keep fighting.”

David got on the phone one evening. “The yellow room is ready,” he said.

Racheal smiled despite herself. “Even if I’m not there yet?”

“Especially because you’re not there yet.”

On the twenty-second of December, the solicitor called. The missing document had been found. The adoption was final. Racheal could go home.

Claire and David arrived on Christmas Eve. The car smelled of coffee and mince pies. Claire squeezed Racheal's hand as they drove. "Ready?"

Racheal looked out the window. "I think so."

The house had a blue door and a garden that Claire admitted was "mostly dead." Inside, it was warm and untidy. There were books everywhere. A half-finished jigsaw covered part of the kitchen table. Paintings leaned against the walls. And in the living room stood a Christmas tree. It was bare.

Racheal stared at it.

"We waited," Claire said.

"For what?"

"For you." She opened a box of decorations. "We weren't going to decorate it without you."

Racheal felt something loosen inside her.

They spent the afternoon decorating. David fought with a string of lights and lost. Claire directed from the sofa.

"Higher."

“I am higher.”

“Other side.”

“Which other side?”

Racheal laughed. It felt strange. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed like that.

Finally, David lifted her so she could place the star on top.

“There,” Racheal said.

“Perfect,” Claire replied.

That night, Claire read her a chapter from the fox-detective book. When it was time for bed, she pulled the blanket around Racheal and tucked the edges underneath. Then she left the hallway light on. “Sleep well, my girl.”

Racheal stared at the thin golden line beneath the door after Claire left. She listened to the sounds of the house settling around her. Someone moving downstairs. A cupboard closing. David laughing softly. Claire saying something she couldn’t quite hear. People. *Her* people. For the first time in months, Racheal slept without asking God for a home.

On Christmas morning, she woke to the smell of bacon and Claire humming in the kitchen. She walked downstairs in her socks. The Christmas tree lights were blinking. The star caught the pale morning light.

Claire turned from the stove. “Merry Christmas, love.”

Racheal stood there for a moment. Then the word came. She hadn't planned it. "Merry Christmas, Mum."

Claire went still. Her eyes filled with tears. She crossed the kitchen and held Racheal's face between her flour-dusted hands. "Merry Christmas, my girl."

Racheal smiled.

Outside, Christmas bells began to ring. Inside, someone she loved was waiting for her. And suddenly Racheal understood what her mother had meant. The road had been long. It had hurt. There had been many nights when she thought she had been forgotten. But the long road had brought her here. Home.

That night, when Racheal climbed into bed, she looked at the thin line of light beneath her door. She smiled. Then she folded her hands. She didn't ask for anything. She simply whispered, "Thank You." And for the first time, in a long while, she fell asleep knowing she belonged somewhere.

Read about **Josephine Ken-Enwerem** on page 135.

The Prince, the Bird, and the Greedy King

by Sarah Sims



Once upon a time, a prince was on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. While passing through a foreign kingdom, he encountered the most captivating singing he had ever heard in his life. But the song was filled with sorrow. *Surely, a voice of such beauty should sing songs of joy, not tears and sighing*, he thought. He left the road to follow the hauntingly beautiful sound and came upon a grand castle.

Now the king of the castle was greedy, and desired that all of the earth's most precious things would be his, and his alone. The king's most prized possession was the bird in the golden cage next to his throne. Naively, she had come to his castle singing songs of sunshine and flowers, and was quickly ensnared by the greedy king's trickery. The joy of springtime that had once filled her heart

slowly turned into bitter winter, as days turned into years within the bird's golden prison. The king triumphed over his new trophy. He delighted in her songs of wintery sorrow, for the warmth of spring had not touched his stony heart for many, many years.

The prince walked to the front door of the castle and knocked on it three times. The door creaked open, and a servant boy nervously peeked out.

"W-w-why have you knocked on His M-m-majesty's door?" said the page, eyeing the prince's richly embroidered cloak.

The prince replied, "I seek she who moves my heart to joy and sorrow. Who sings inside this castle?"

The servant straightened and opened the door further. "Why, it is the king's m-m-minstrel," he replied.

The prince followed the boy down a hallway covered with the mounted heads of exotic animals and golden statues. Their tortured expressions unnerved the prince, and he secretly wished the servant boy would pick up the pace. The prince squinted. Setting sunlight poured into his eyes, leaving him dazzled. Gaining his bearings, the prince saw he had entered a great hall, and soon discovered the golden feathers and deep sapphire blue eyes of a bird singing next to the king. Wonder filled the prince's heart as he looked upon her.

Meanwhile, a smile crept across the king's face as he surveyed the prince. "Welcome to my kingdom, Sir Prince." The prince tore his attention away from the bird and hastily bowed, for he did not want to show disrespect to his host. "You must be very hungry from your journey," said the king.

Suddenly, servant boys scurried into the room, carrying a great table and dish upon dish of the most enticing delicacies the prince had ever seen. While the servants laid out the feast, the prince sat down and bowed his head to say grace. As he was praying, he remembered the great King Solomon's wisdom: *do not overly desire the delicacies of a ruler*. In his heart, the prince decided to only eat what was on his plate. When he opened his eyes, every dish he saw was more luxurious than the next. There were steaming stews and creamy custards, spice cakes and sparkling pomegranates, and in the center stood a whole roasted boar. But when the prince looked down at his plate, all that lay there was a small loaf of bread. The prince thanked the king for the meal and, having contentment in his heart, ate the bread.

The king, refraining from eating, stared at the prince. "Do you not want anything else but bread?" the king asked. "There must be something on this table a prince like yourself would desire after such a long journey."

"No, Your Majesty," said the prince, "I am content with what I've had. I do not need more."

The king nodded and sighed a little, "Then let my servant show you to your room." The prince said a quick prayer thanking God for his supper and followed the servant out of the hall. Then the king waved his hand, and all the food on the table disintegrated into dust, except for the couple of breadcrumbs left on the prince's plate.

The prince climbed a flight of steps that led to a cozy bedroom with a window overlooking the city center. He yawned and prepared for sleep. Before too long, there came a knock at the door, and a servant boy came into the room with a large purse of gold. "A gift from the king for the prince and his travels,"

announced the boy, laying the purse to the right of the prince's bed.

After he left, there came another knock at the door, and a second servant boy came into the room with a large sack of gold. "A gift from the king for the prince and his travels," announced the boy, spilling the treasure to the left of the prince's bed.

Immediately after he left, two more servant boys walked through the still-open door carrying a large wooden chest overflowing with gold and jewels. "A gift from the king for the prince and his travels," announced the two boys, laying the chest at the foot of the prince's bed. The prince thanked the servants and wondered at the king's generous gift.

The prince turned towards the Holy Land to say his evening prayers. As he was praying, he remembered the great King Solomon's wisdom: *those who help the poor will be repaid by God*. In his heart, the prince decided to keep only one gold coin and to share the rest of the treasure with the poor.

The prince placed a coin on the nightstand next to his bed. Then he gathered the rest of the gold and jewels, and carefully lowered them down to some beggars crying for alms underneath his window. When he had finished, the prince lay down and dreamed of the golden bird's beautiful voice and glittering eyes.

The prince awoke with a start, feeling a crushing weight on his chest. Overnight, the gold coin had multiplied into thousands of coins. They had showered off the nightstand, poured onto his bed, and piled on top of the prince as he slept. Carefully, the prince crawled out of bed. After breathing a sigh of relief, the prince recognized the voices of the beggars he had helped the night before. They were praising God for the mountain of gold and jewels that had filled the entire town square overnight. The prince

said a quick prayer thanking God for blessing his gift and protecting him in his sleep. Then the prince reached out to pick up one of the coins lying on his bed. He paused and thought, *maybe I shouldn't take this coin.* But as he looked at it, the prince's heart was at peace. He placed the coin in his purse and walked downstairs to the great hall of the king.

The king sat rigidly upon his throne as the prince approached, "Sir Prince, why have you rejected my gifts? First my feast, then my gold. Were they not to your liking?"

"Oh, no, Your Majesty," said the prince, "I am grateful for your gold. Your people's joyous songs of praise lifted my heart, as they received your mighty gift." The king's lips curled into a snarl before he quickly regained control of his features. "There is one thing I do seek from you before I continue on my journey," the prince replied while kneeling, "I ask for the freedom of your songbird. Such a creature should not live in a cage, but move freely about the earth, blessing all who hear her."

The caged bird stared at the prince. Her deep blue eyes looked as if they were about to weep.

"That would be a great gift indeed," said the king. His probing eyes studied the prince's face. "But if I let her go, she would fly away, and you would never see her again." The prince looked over at the bird. "However," the king continued, "I have a mirror that can reveal to you whatever your heart desires, including my beloved bird." The king produced a little mirror from his robes.

The prince imagined never being able to see the songbird again, and wondered if the mirror could reveal to him deeper mysteries than even the wisdom of the great King Solomon. As the prince stared at the mirror, he wanted it more and more.

The king beckoned to the prince. The prince arose and walked to the side of the throne. As his fingers grasped the mirror, dread coursed through the prince's heart. He paused and thought, *I would be a fool not to see what this mirror can teach me.* The prince peered into the mirror. Light began to glow from the polished glass, drawing in the prince's hungry gaze. Suddenly, the prince fell to the floor like a dead man, with his eyes glued to the dark, swirling images of the mirror.

"He's mine! He's mine!" the king roared. "What shall I do with you, my dear prince? You are far too noble to mount on a wall with all those other beasts. Perhaps I will transform you into a falcon tied to a perch next to my throne. The songbird and the hunter. I've always wanted a pair."

As the king loomed over the prince, the bird began to frantically flap her wings. Her heart, frozen from years of icy sorrow, melted that day with compassion for the prince. She had fallen in love. As her heart swelled, so did her stature. Soon the golden cage could not contain her any longer and burst open. She flew at the king and slashed at his eyes with her claws. Terror suddenly seized the greedy king's heart. In a blind panic, he ran out of the castle, through the city and deep into the surrounding forest, to a place only rumor and myth can tell.

All was silence as the songstress moved over to the prince, still paralyzed by the mirror's enchantment. She shattered the mirror on the floor. Taking hold of the prince, she did something she had not done in many years: she prayed.

While her tears washed over the prince's face, his eyes slowly fluttered open and beheld a beautiful maiden with golden hair embracing him. He thought, *I must be in heaven to be held by a woman of such grace.* Then her eyes opened, and he saw the deep sapphire blue of his beloved songbird.

The prince took the king's gold coin and had it forged into two golden bands. One he put on his finger, and the other he put on his bride's. All people who heard them singing the praises of God's wisdom and bountiful provision were blessed, as the prince and the princess made their way to the Holy Land.

Read about **Sarah Sims** on page 136.

The Farm

by Faith Morin (age 11)



Barrette

by Anne Hogan



The road in front of Nora's home was the only one that led to the town dumps. Mostly pick-up trucks and garbage trucks passed to unload their garbage. But one Saturday that summer, she saw a beat-up excuse of a car go by, with an equally beat up trailer attached. The front fender was missing, and there were places where rust had eaten holes in the sides of the car. Nora's daddy had a car in the driveway that was in equally sad shape, but he knew not to drive it anywhere.

The car towed the trailer to the dumps slowly, low to the ground. The trailer was heaped with trash bags, and the car was heaped with kids. All of the windows were rolled down, and as hot summer wind blew through the car, everyone's hair whipped up and around each other's faces. They all had the same light brown hair and were in need of haircuts. Nora counted seven heads, not including the driver. All seven shared the same wide-eyed expression. She wondered how anyone

could tell them apart. They stared at the hog in a pen near the road by Uncle John's place. Then they stared at Nora as they passed her jumping rope in her driveway. She stopped jumping until the car disappeared around the bend in the road. That car was a wreck inside and out.

Fifteen minutes later, two things trespassed. The first was black smoke billowing across her yard. Workers were burning garbage at the dumps again. They were probably burning that family's trash. They were ruining her neighborhood, she frowned to herself. And they were ruining her day. Now all of the clean laundry Momma had on the clothesline would have to be taken down and draped over the kitchen chairs to dry. Her Sunday Best Dress would stink of onions because Momma would soon be cooking dinner while the clothes dried. Big Brother Bobby would say nobody would notice, but what did he know? On Sundays, he sat behind Grandpa's pulpit with the choir while she sat between Momma and her cousin Sally with everyone else. Every time that Momma had to dry laundry indoors, Sally would sniff and sniff like a dog, and then stick her stupid nose on Nora's shoulder. She'd wrinkle her nose and slide her dumb self to the far end of the pew.

The second thing to trespass was that family. The trailer was empty now, but the car still drove slowly. Fourteen eyes stared at her. She stared back, hands on her hips. She watched the car stop where her Uncle John stood near the side of the road. The driver and her uncle exchanged a few words, and she watched as Uncle John walked a few steps to the hog pen. Uncle nudged the hog with his walking stick, and the hog stood up, grunting.

The contents of the car exploded with laughter. Those kids stuck their heads out of the car to get a closer look at the hog.

One of them turned and looked down the road at Nora. Nora saw a barrette on the side of the head and decided it was a girl. The girl stared at Nora like she might be something to see at a hog farm, too. Nora stuck her tongue out at the nosy girl.

Momma didn't see her stick out her tongue. Her back was to the road as she hurriedly removed the wet laundry from the clothesline. But Big Brother Bobby, who had suddenly appeared beside her, did. He slapped Nora's face. That girl was still looking at her. Nora ran and hid behind the tool shed where nobody would see her crying. What was that girl staring at, for Christ's sake?

Big Brother Bobby would have slapped her again and then lectured her for an hour about using the Lord's name in vain if he had heard her say "for Christ's sakes." He wanted to be a preacher like Grandpa when he grew up. He loved practicing his sermons of love and tolerance and hope for a better tomorrow on her. She would sit quietly pretending to listen until the hard candy he'd bribed her with dissolved on her tongue. Then she'd get up from the porch chair and say that she had to go to the bathroom.

She rubbed her cheek and wondered if any one of that girl's brothers ever slapped her in the face. She hoped so. They should slap her for staring at Nora like that.

Nora listened for the sound of the car driving away. But the car remained idling by Uncle John's. She could hear her uncle's easy sing-song voice and the children's high-pitched ones. Curiosity won over humiliation; she wiped her eyes and nose on the hem of her sundress and stood up. She crept along the edge of her backyard towards Uncle John's other hog pen, and

stood behind it. This pen held the sow and her babies. The mother was lying on her side while six piglets suckled. A seventh one struggled behind its siblings. Impulsively, Nora leaned into the sty and lifted the runt to her chest. She walked towards her uncle with the piglet.

"Uncle John, this one's having trouble getting fed," she said. She allowed herself a glance toward the car. All eyes were upon her.

She knew she had taken a chance with the piglet. Her uncle might scold her for picking up the baby. If that happened, she would be shamed twice by her own family in front of this family. But Uncle John put his hand on Nora's shoulder and said, "My niece, Nora, helps me raise hogs. Yep, she's my number one helper!"

He asked the children if they'd like to pet the piglet. Nora thought they squealed just like the baby pigs back there with their mother when they said, "Yes! Yes! Can we, Daddy?" The father nodded and all four car doors swung open as the contents toppled out. Nora was afraid she would be trampled, but at the father's command, "One at a time, oldest to youngest!" the mob transformed into an orderly line. Uncle John laughed and complimented the father on his well-behaved children as each waited a turn to touch the piglet.

Nora kept her eyes down, seeing one fingernail-bitten hand at a time. The fifth hand had fingernails with crescent moons at the base. The fingers were long and slender like those of the church organist. Nora looked up and met the gaze of the girl to whom she had stuck out her tongue. The girl's eyes were the same chocolate brown as Momma's. Her hand lightly touched Nora's as she petted the piglet. She smiled shyly and said to

Nora, “I have the same dress at home.” Before Nora could respond, the girl was pushed aside by the sibling behind her.

When the last two on line had a turn to pet the piglet, the father said, “Everyone pile in!” As the older ones climbed into the car first, the girl came close to Nora and unsnapped the barrette in her hair. She held it out for Nora. Nora saw that without the barrette, the girl was indistinguishable from her brothers.

Both of Nora’s hands were busy holding the piglet, who was agitated in its hunger. The girl slipped the barrette into one of the front pockets of Nora’s dress. Then she turned and climbed into the car. An arm reached out and yanked the last car door closed. The father beeped the horn in farewell and thanks as the car and trailer drove away.

Uncle John and Nora walked together to return the runt to its mother. They watched to see whether it would get a chance to suckle. Most of its stronger siblings were now asleep, their bellies taut and full. The runt climbed over them and latched on to a teat. Nora was glad. She hoped it would survive. Her finger followed the edges of the barrette in her dress pocket. She hadn’t decided yet whether she would wear it on Sunday or store it in her box of treasures in her dresser drawer.

Read about **Anne Hogan** on page 135.

Escape from Earth

by Stephanie Mathews



It was by chance that I overheard a group of folks planning to board a ship and leave Earth. That wasn't surprising. Lots of folks wanted to flee Earth these days. Things had gotten so bad that people were willing to try just about anything.

It wasn't the environment that nearly destroyed humanity like everyone used to predict. It was humanity itself.

Everyone had their own truth. Right and wrong didn't seem to exist anymore, and nobody could agree on anything. Laws meant whatever the person enforcing them wanted them to mean. Every day seemed to bring another riot, another shooting, another neighborhood no one dared walk through after dark.

The surprising part of this encounter was that it was a church group. Most religious folks, especially the ones who believed the Bible, didn't talk about escaping Earth. Their answer was

always the same: Christ. They believed only He could save us. As far as they were concerned, flying off to another planet would only create another Earth, maybe an even worse one.

So when I heard them talking, I stopped and listened.

“If we leave now,” one man insisted, “we can build something better; a place where our children grow up knowing the gospel instead of this madness.”

“And what makes you think they’ll be any different than we are?” an older man said. “You think changing planets changes the human heart?”

A few nodded in agreement, but the majority only stood silent.

“We’ll have a chance to start over.”

“No,” the old man said. “Adam and Eve walked with God Himself. They had no sin, yet they still rebelled against Him. How do you expect us to do any different? We were born in sin and live in a cursed creation. It’s ludicrous. I won’t have any part of it. Our only hope is Jesus Christ and His second coming.”

Silence was the only response.

The older man hung his head as the group shuffled, looking everywhere but at the two men talking. Then the old man looked towards my direction; I thought he saw me, but his gaze moved up to the sky, and then he walked away.

“Our plans haven’t changed,” one man said after a moment. “Next Sunday we’ll meet at the launch site and board the ship.

If you're not there by six in the morning, you'll be left behind. We can't risk waiting even a minute longer than planned."

The meeting broke up, and everyone went their separate ways.

I stayed where I was, smiling.

Now I had a plan.

I was going with them. Not because I believed any of what they believed. I just needed off this planet. I'd stow away somewhere on the ship. Once we were safely in orbit, I'd come out of hiding. What could they do then? Throw me into space?

Church people were always talking about love and charity. They'd be angry that I'd snuck aboard, sure, but they'd get over it. They'd have no choice but to let me stay. One way or another, I'd become part of their little space family.

The main problem would be getting to the launch site. There was only one place in the city where ships launched from, but figuring out which ship they were boarding would be the hardest part.

My backup plan, well, my only plan, was to show up before dawn on launch day and blend into the crowds. Launch days were always chaotic. Cargo crews, mechanics, security, families saying their goodbyes. If I kept my head down, maybe I could disappear in plain sight. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was something.

After returning to my apartment for a quick bite to eat, a shower, and a few hours of sleep, I headed back to the place

where I'd first overheard the church group. I was betting they'd meet there again to go over any last-minute details.

My bet was right, but this time only two people showed up: the man determined to leave Earth and the older man who'd argued against it. I watched them from across the street. They talked for several minutes. Neither of them looked angry anymore, just tired.

The younger man had a lady with him, his wife I assumed, with him this time. She stood quietly beside him, holding his hand while they listened to the older man. She looked scared but determined.

Eventually, the younger man nodded, "I understand what you're saying, Jonathan," he said. "But I can't stay."

The old man sighed, "I know, Daniel."

Daniel shook Jonathan's hand, the wife hugged the old man, and then they walked away. The old man stood there for a long moment, watching them disappear into the crowd. He looked a little deflated. Maybe he was sad the others had chosen to leave. Maybe he was disappointed they hadn't listened. Either way, he seemed to carry the weight of it. Then he turned toward me.

"You don't belong to our church."

"No."

"You've been listening."

“Maybe I heard some things; it's a public place.”

He smiled faintly and walked over.

“Why?”

“I need off this planet too.”

He looked at me for a moment. “I believe you. We all need off this planet. But that spaceship isn’t the way.”

“That’s easy for you to say since you have a chance. I don’t qualify for a ticket, let alone can afford one.”

“If you’re planning to sneak aboard that ship, don’t.”

That caught me off guard. “How’d you know?”

“Why else would you care what a bunch of strangers are saying? You haven’t been wondering where they’re going or what they’ll find when they get there. You’ve only been trying to figure out how to get on board.”

“So why shouldn’t I?”

“Because you’re running from the wrong thing.”

“I’m not running. This planet is falling apart. Riots, crime, corruption … it’s not exactly a pleasant place to live.”

“No,” he said gently. “You’re running from yourself. You’ll still be there when the ship lands. The scenery may change, but the human heart won’t. Changing planets doesn’t change that.

Eventually, everything that goes on here on Earth will go on whatever other planet people land on."

"Maybe so, but I'd rather have my problems somewhere else than here."

"The grass is always greener," he said as he looked up towards the sky.

"I won't know unless I try. I can stay here and watch the world fall apart, or I can get on that ship and have hope."

"Hope placed in the wrong thing becomes an idol."

I laughed, "A spaceship is an idol?"

"Anything you trust to save you more than God is."

"Maybe for you, but I don't believe all that God stuff. I appreciate the warning, but you're not going to change my mind."

"I didn't expect to."

He said it so calmly that I wasn't sure how to respond.

"I only ask that you think about what I've said."

"Sure," I answered, already knowing I wouldn't. My mind was made up. I turned to leave.

"My name's Jonathan," he called after me.

I looked back.

“I’m not going.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small card.

“I can’t stop you from trying to get on that ship,” he said. “But I can stop you from becoming a stowaway.”

He held the card out to me.

I hesitated before taking it.

It was a boarding pass.

“I told them I wasn’t going,” Jonathan said. “If anyone asks, tell them I gave you my place.”

I stared at the card. “Why would you do that for someone you don’t even know?”

A gentle smile crossed his face. “Because Christ didn’t wait for me to deserve His kindness.”

“Thank you,” I said, not sure what else could be said.

“You’re welcome,” he replied. “Can you promise me one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“If you ever find yourself wondering whether I was right, don’t stop searching for the answer and remember that a new earth isn’t the answer, but a new heart.”

I slipped the boarding pass into my pocket and nodded.

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The launch site was even more chaotic than I imagined. People were everywhere. Families hugged each other goodbye. Children ran between adults, excited about the adventure ahead. Some people were crying. Others were smiling. Most looked like they were trying to convince themselves they weren't afraid.

I kept my head down and walked toward the boarding area, the card Jonathan had given me held tightly in my hand. A security officer looked at the card, and then looked at me.

"Name?"

For a moment, I considered lying, but for some reason, I thought about Jonathan. The old man had been honest with me, even knowing I wasn't agreeing with him. I wasn't sure why that mattered, but it did.

I gave my name, Thomas Kelley.

The officer checked the card, scanned it, and waved me through.

Just like that, I was in.

I stopped for a moment and looked back before walking to the ship.

The place I had spent my entire life trying to escape. I expected to feel relief, but instead I felt something else. I couldn't explain

it. Maybe it was sadness or maybe it was fear. Maybe it was because, for the first time, I realized I wasn't just leaving a planet. I was leaving everything I had ever known.

"First time leaving Earth?"

I turned.

A man stood beside me with a nervous smile. A woman stood next to him, holding his hand. They were the couple talking to the old man, to Jonathan.

"Yeah," I said.

The man laughed quietly, "Me too."

"You don't seem as nervous as I expected."

He looked at the ship towering above us as he said, "Ask me again after we're in orbit."

The woman laughed. "Daniel worries about everything."

"Someone has to," he replied.

"I'm Rachel," she said, "And this is my husband, Daniel."

"Nice to meet you."

Daniel glanced down at the boarding pass in my hand. "Where did you get that? Not trying to be nosy, but I recognize the name. I know someone with that name."

“An older man gave it to me.”

Daniel’s expression changed slightly. “An older man?”

“His name was Jonathan.”

Daniel just stared.

“Jonathan gave you his place?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah.”

Daniel looked away toward the massive windows overlooking the launch platform. “He would do something like that. He did tell me he had called the ticket kiosk and made a change.”

“You know him?” I asked, not wanting them to realize I eavesdropped on their entire conversation.

“He’s my father,” Daniel said.

I didn’t know what to say.

The man who had spent the morning trying to convince people not to leave Earth had given his own place away to a stranger, knowing his son was boarding that ship.

“Why would he do that?” I asked.

“Because that’s who he is.”

A voice announced that final boarding would begin. People started moving toward the ship. Daniel and Rachel followed in the line. I followed behind them, but then stopped.

“Changing planets doesn’t change the human heart,” I said.

“Pardon?” someone in line asked me.

“Nothing, I have to go.” I still didn’t believe what he believed. I still wasn’t convinced there was anything waiting for humanity beyond this life, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that the old man had seen something I hadn’t. Something Jonathan had said sounded like truth.

The ship lifted away from Earth.

I had spent so much time thinking about where I wanted to go that I had never stopped to ask myself why I needed to leave. For the first time, I wondered if Jonathan had been right about one thing: change can only happen if the heart is changed.

Read about **Stephanie Mathews** on page 135.

B Doubts

by Kataleigha Walsh (age 12)



Author note: Jesus matters even when you think He has given up on you. Trust me. You are not alone. Everyone has doubts; even I have doubts. Here's a story to help you.

Anna grabbed her book bag and one of her mother's favorite books, *Anne of Green Gables*. Anna's dad grabbed his car keys.

"Anna, you ready?" Mr. Belt, Anna's dad, asked.

"Yep, I am ready," Anna answered back. She threw her long, wavy, light orange hair over her shoulder. Her dad opened the front door.

Anna and Mr. Belt drove over to Blankley Hospital. They both walked to the front desk.

“Cornessa Belt,” Mr. Belt said.

The desk lady, as Anna called her, nodded and handed him a clipboard with papers. They both sat down right in front of the TV that was playing Sesame Street.

Anna’s phone dinged. She took it out and checked her messages. One message was from her Bible teacher. She sighed and responded to the text. “I do not have time for a Bible class next week,” she texted. She lied, but really did not feel bad.

Her dad handed the clipboard back to the front desk. The lady smiled and nodded. She opened the doors and out came Dr. Boss. He led Anna and Mr. Belt to door number 816.

Dr. Boss stopped at the door and opened it. “You have an hour. Then, she has to take her medication and exercise,” Dr. Boss said. He smiled and left.

“Mom, hi. I brought your favorite book today to read to you,” Anna said happily, hugging her mother. She looked around the pink room that had balloons that said, “Get well soon,” and candy bars and baskets, and there, next to her bed, was a brown Bible.

“Hi, my little angel,” Cornessa said, sitting up and hugging Anna.

“Hi, honey,” Mr. Belt said and kissed the top of Cornessa’s bald head.

“Hi, hon. So, Anna, tell me. How are those grades?” Cornessa asked.

“Good, Mom. I have a 98 in math, a 96 in English, an 89 in science, and a 99 in social studies. And, in all my activities, I have 100s.” Anna finished with a long sigh.

“Good, good, just checking. So what book did you bring?” Cornessa asked.

“*Anne of Green Gables*,” Anna answered.

The hour went by. Dr. Boss came in and gave a five-minute warning.

“Hey, Mom, why do you have the Bible with you?” Anna asked, slipping the book back in her bag.

“Anna, honey … I read the Bible for answers. To praise God while going through cancer is a hard thing to do. I am still praying to get better. Now, Anna, angel, you’re still going to Bible classes and praying and reading the Bible, correct?” Cornessa asked sternly.

Anna paused. “Yeah, of course,” Anna lied.

“Ok, angel, bye. I love you,” Cornessa winked and kissed the top of Anna’s head. Anna gave her a quick squeeze.

“Bye, honey,” Mr. Belt said and waved. He and Anna left. As they left, Dr. Boss was coming in. He waved, and a nurse came right behind him. They both entered the room and closed the door.

When Anna and Mr. Belt got home, they ate leftovers, brushed their teeth, and got ready for bed. Anna lay down in her pink cloud-patterned bed. She sighed as her best friend Billy texted her. “Girlie, I have amazing news. See you at school.” Without responding, Anna just plugged up her phone and fell asleep.

Anna woke up and got dressed in her white T-shirt and jean shorts. Her dad dropped her at school. The day went by slowly. She waited for Billy outside of school.

“Anna, you won’t believe it. My cousin Lila … well, yesterday, she woke up from her coma that she was in for eight years. She barely remembers anything, but she is taking classes. I am so happy. I knew God would answer my prayers,” Billy exclaimed, jumping up and down.

“Wow! Your cuz is really lucky. Maybe she found a four-leaf clover before her coma, and it’s starting to rub off,” Anna said coolly.

“ANNA! This is not a joke. God really did answer my prayers.” Billy stormed off to her car.

Anna waved. Billy ignored her and drove away with her new jeep her mom got her. Anna waved goodbye to her eleventh-grade English teacher and walked home.

Three months went by. Anna visited her mom. She tried to make up with Billy, but Billy would not budge.

Anna sat in her bedroom. She listened to some hip-hop music while drawing, then she heard a big bang. She looked across her room, jumping in fright. There on the ground was the Bible

her mom gave her when she turned thirteen. It was wide open on the ground.

“It must have fallen off my shelf,” Anna thought.

She got up and grabbed the book. She read the page it opened to when it fell: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6, NIV). Anna read aloud to herself. She sat on her bed in confusion. She read on and on until midnight. Her mind was full of scripture and God’s word.

She closed the Bible and sat up in her bed. She prayed to God, finally, for the first time since she was fourteen and her mom got diagnosed with cancer.

“Dear God, please help me somehow to follow you. I am sorry I gave up on you. Please, please, God, help my mom get better and heal. Please, God. She deserves it more than anything. Please, and forgive me for my sins. Please. In Jesus name, Amen.” Anna finished and went to sleep.

Weeks went by. Anna prayed and prayed and read the Bible every night. She even went to Bible classes.

She was reading *Romana the Brave* to her mom when the doctor came running in.

“The tests came in. They’re … negative! You’re cancer-free!” Dr. Boss nearly shouted the news. Cornessa, Anna, and Mr. Belt all started to hug and cry.

“Thank you, God. Thank you,” Anna thought.

Once Cornessa came home, they had a big community party for her. Anna sat in the corner as Cornessa and everyone else celebrated and danced. Anna took out a piece of paper and a pen.

“Hey, Ann, I forgive you. Come dance with me, please,” Billy begged.

“In a minute, Bill, thanks,” Anna said. Billy nodded and walked away.

Anna started to write down her blessings that had a B: Mr. Belt (her dad), Cornessa Belt (her mom), Dr. Boss, Billy. She paused and finally wrote down in big letters — BIBLE.

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

God of Light and Rain
by Kataleigha Walsh (age 12)



A Weed Saga

by Olivia Kaddis (age 13)



Tom was a weed. A green, pesky, stubby little weed, the flowers said. It wasn't his fault he was a weed; he was born like that. Tom was one of those short leafy weeds that are found at the edge of gardens, and that is practically impossible to pull out. Tom grew in a prize-winning daffodil garden where his roots intersected with a daffodil's roots, so the gardener didn't know how to remove him without harming the flower. The gardener was so frustrated trying to pull him out that he just gave up.

As a result, Lovely the daffodil (she named herself, but Tom called her "*Whiner*") had trouble dealing with him day after day. The other flowers were forced to listen to the following from sunup to sundown.

"Let go of me!" Lovely shrieked. "I stand for respect and regard, so you better respect me, little pest!"

Tom rolled his eyes and flicked an actual pest at her. Lovely tried to get the gardener's attention when he was slowly pulling other weeds out. "Hey mister, hurry up and get this weed away from me!" she called out rudely. The gardener could not hear her because only plants can hear each other.

"Oh, sunflower seeds, this guy is deaf," she huffed.

Tom laughed and started pulling her petals, which is like pulling hair for humans. She was so annoyed that she kicked him and made him stop. Tired of all the yelling, there was murmuring amongst the insects who wanted Tom gone. The butterflies and bees stayed out of the conversations.

One day the insects went to talk to Lovely while Tom was looking at the view. But he heard them coming.

"Hey guys, want to watch me prank Lovely, I mean Whiner?"

The ladybugs rolled their eyes and started to speak insect language (which Tom did not understand).

Eventually, King Cricket spoke up in plant language and said, "Move, you weed!"

Queen Spider yelled, "You, Stubby, over here!" and sprayed webs on him. All the insects laughed cruelly.

Tom hurriedly ripped off the webs and responded, "Hey, Hairy, is that all you got?"

She crawled away, but slowly turned around to ask mockingly, "No, but shouldn't you be with your mommy?"

Now this was hurtful because all insects and plants know weeds don't have parents.

"I don't have one," Tom quietly gulped before he shot back, "Where's your husband, the king?"

All the insects gasped. *Did he really just ask that*, they thought?

Queen Spider's lips turned up in a menacing grin. "Oh King, Stubby would like to see you," she said in a half-singing voice.

All the insects ran to hide, and the baby insects started to cry. Tom started to quiver with fear because he realized they were scared, but he didn't know why. Suddenly, an enormous, hairy, grayish-black tarantula crawled out, stepping on a baby daffodil. All the plants and insects (except for the spiders) started to scream loudly.

"Be quiet!" said Queen Spider, aggravated.

Everyone immediately shut up as she slid over to King Spider, who looked sheepish. The two together looked odd since Queen Spider was only a small house spider standing next to the huge tarantula.

"I thought I was supposed to stay outside of the garden," the king meekly complained, his voice higher than everyone expected.

“Well, Stubby here wanted to know if there was a king, so I felt this would be the best way to show him,” Queen Spider said calmly.

King Spider raised his thick eyebrows. “Is your name really Stubby?” he asked Tom curiously.

“No, that’s a nickname I gave him. Now leave,” Queen Spider responded, very annoyed. With a bold leap, King Spider left the garden as she asked, “Believe me now, Stubby?”

Tom tried to respond when Queen Spider spoke for him sarcastically, “Yes, your majesty.”

Tom spat in response.

Lovely had been watching the horrible scene before her with wide eyes. Then she made a decision. “Everyone, get out except the kings and queens!” she shouted.

All the insect civilians ran out while the kings and queens got in a group around Lovely. “Where are the butterflies and bees?” She asked.

“They think weeds are allowed, so refuse to come,” said King Ant.

“Fine, then we’ll do it ourselves,” she grumbled.

One by one, each insect king and queen stood up to speak in their language. It drove Tom crazy because he couldn’t understand what was going on, especially since every once in a

while, Lovely would smugly look back at him. In fact, a few hours later, all the insects left looking smug and happy.

“What were you guys talking about?” Tom asked as they left.

“Lay off weed,” was their answer, and pushed him away. Even Lovely ignored him.

That night, Tom fell asleep wondering why everyone came together in the first place. But not Lovely. She was wide awake, deviously smiling. In the early morning, she whispered, “Calling all insects! It’s time for Operation Kill that Weed!”

Every insect leapt from their beds and stealthily headed to the garden. They all quietly surrounded Lovely to wait for instructions.

“Spiders, web him!” she commanded. “Worms, eat every last one of his roots! Ants, carry him out! Everyone else, keep him quiet.”

Tom was sleeping when an itchy but warm web blanket wrapped around him. Then a very sharp pain by his roots filled him and woke him up. Tom screamed as the ants were already taking him away.

Out of nowhere, a swarm of butterflies came to save him from the ants, much to the despair of Lovely. The bees hovered over the garden, threatening to sting whoever dared to come out. Tom needed dirt and quick.

Unfortunately, the valiant efforts of the butterflies were not in time. That night, Tom died with one last lovely thought. Butterflies and bees are the best insects ever.

Beatrix's Downfall: Part 3 Uncovering the Past

by Holly Braendlein



Artwork by Ava Braendlein.

(Read "Beatrix's Downfall" Part 1 and Part 2 in Issue #11)

"I'm the reason your parents are dead."

Beatrix shook her head, speechless.

Derrick shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Beatrix," he began. "Your parents worked as bounty hunters for the government. Your father possessed shock paralysis powers. He could effortlessly send currents of electricity into his targets with a

touch of his finger! He mostly resorted to his trusty wire cable rope.

“Your mother could sense abnormal electromagnetic waves in the atmosphere, which she used to track down her targets. Your parents were a formidable team, Beatrix.

“Well, during this time, I was … well, I was off getting into trouble, and I happened to get on the government’s radar. Your parents were sent to track me down and capture me. Instead of turning me in like they should have, they resigned their position and went to live in Khotar, where they knew I was hiding out. They chose to rehabilitate me.

“And they shouldn’t have bothered,” Derrick said bitterly. “I wasn’t worth the trouble. I told them to get lost, but they stayed. They should’ve gone while they had the chance.

“One night, I had a visitor. I didn’t know who or what he was, and I didn’t care. Because in return for whatever I accomplished for them, they would reward me with cold hard cash, and lots of it.

“I agreed immediately, and was persuaded into giving them all the information on your parents. Your parents were a threat to these people, and they needed to get rid of them, and their families to boot.”

Beatrix stood up abruptly, clutching her ears. “No. No! I can’t bear it. I can’t stand to hear anymore!” Tears found their way down her cheeks. Frederick grabbed her sleeve.

“I didn’t know that was their plan until it was too late!” Derrick said in anguish. “It wasn’t until I saw Borakai’s spacecraft and the cascade of bullets on the town of Khotar that everything clicked.” Tears were streaming down his own cheeks, and he jumped up, his voice rising in volume. “I’m sorry, alright?” He shouted. “I’m sorry I ever fell for their evil plans. I’m sorry I risked their lives, and everyone I know and love. I’m sorry they ever came here in the first place! You think I don’t loathe my decision every second of every minute of every hour of every day? I DO! *I’m* the one who has to live with the guilt of their shed blood, screaming at me from the grave, their faces staring at me from beyond the curtain of death! It is utter *hell*, Beatrix! HELL!”

He turned and stalked off, leaving Beatrix and Frederick alone.

Beatrix collapsed on the bench and wept, the truth hitting her like a soccer ball in the gut. Frederick enveloped Beatrix in a tight hug, rocking her gently, allowing the tears to flow freely. When she had recovered significantly, she released her hold on Frederick and wiped her nose.

“I think there’s more to the story than meets the eye, Beatrix,” Frederick said quietly. “We should hear him out.”

Beatrix slumped in her seat and sighed in exhaustion. “I know that. I just can’t believe that he would do all this, and I don’t quite forgive him for everything he’s done.”

Frederick watched her knotted up face, conveying the boiling pot of emotions within her that threatened to control her.

They both stood up and looked around.

“Let’s go find Derrick and have him tell us the whole story,” Frederick said decisively.

***

They could hear Derrick’s sniffling even before they spotted him in the dimly lit abandoned warehouse leaning against a crate. Derrick, aware of their approach, wiped his face hastily with the sleeve of his shirt and stood up.

“I’m sorry for my outburst,” Beatrix said, avoiding his gaze. “It was inappropriate. I – we – would like to hear the rest of the story.”

Derrick stuffed his hands in his pants pockets. “Well, like I said, Borakai and his goons attacked Khotar, sending missiles and enemy fire all over this place. It was total chaos. Your parents fought bravely, Beatrix.” Derrick swallowed a lump in his throat. “Once I realized what they were doing,” he continued, “I joined your parents in stopping them. Everybody pitched in, but it didn’t do any good. As if eliminating your parents and the other Khotari residents wasn’t enough, they rooted out every member of the Berry and Falton family and killed them all. Everybody except you, of course. I can’t figure out how they never found you. Pretty lucky.”

“An act of God, to be more precise,” interjected Frederick.

Derrick shrugged uncomfortably. “Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

Frederick asked, “What happened then?”

“In the aftermath of the battle,” said Derrick. “I was the only one remaining, and I wanted revenge on Borakai. I studied, researched, and was able to build my way into the government of Zona. I disguised myself as a Zorak, snuck into their government, and for the next couple of years went by undetected. I gathered vital information that would help me in my pursuit of revenge. They eventually discovered my true identity and chased me off the ship. I escaped, and have been hiding here ever since.”

Beatrix spoke up. “So you’ve been hiding here for three years, doing nothing while Borakai continues to hunt for you?”

Derrick frowned at her. “I haven’t been doing nothing; I’ve been … well, I-I’ve been planning.”

“For three years?” asked Beatrix skeptically.

“Well, yeah,” Derrick replied uncomfortably.

Beatrix was about to speak when Frederick covered her mouth hurriedly. “Quiet! I hear something!”

The group listened closely. There was a whirring sound in the air, as of an engine running.

Derrick turned wild, terrified eyes on the two friends. “Borakai! He’s here!”

Frederick let go of Beatrix and crept to the open bay door of the warehouse, peering up at the sky. Sure enough, he spotted Borakai’s spacecraft investigating the area. He rushed back to the group.

“Quick! Get in!” Frederick immediately opened a portal in the atmosphere and ushered them in. There was a sudden revving sound from outside that turned the heads of all three people.

“RUN!” Beatrix screamed.

A barrage of bullets cascaded down on them, following them as they rushed hurriedly through the portal. They all reappeared behind a pile of rubble.

Beatrix whirled around on Frederick. “Frederick!” She whispered urgently. “We need to get out of here! Take us back home!”

“I can’t!” He whispered back. “Not without risking the lives of SunFall town! What if they follow us back? They already know where you live.”

Beatrix ran her hands through her long red hair and blew out her cheeks.

Derrick peered up at the spacecraft hovering above the town of Khotar. “I need to fight him,” Derrick said resolutely.

Both friends stared at Derrick.

Beatrix was the first to speak up. “Are you nuts? We can’t take them down! I don’t even have my powers, and …”

“I didn’t say ‘we’,” Derrick interrupted, turning to look at Beatrix.

Beatrix stared, at a loss for words.

Frederick leaned in from behind her. “We can’t let you fight this alone. It’s against our very nature to desert a friend in their time of need.”

“I’m not putting anyone else in danger,” Derrick said. “Trust me. I can handle this.” With that, he trotted after the spacecraft, leaving Beatrix and Frederick by themselves.

Frederick looked at Beatrix. “Beatrix?”

Beatrix’s forehead was creased, so many thoughts and emotions whirling in her brain. She couldn’t handle it all. She shook her head. “We take down Borakai and his goons *together*,” she said firmly. “Whether he likes it or not.”

Frederick grinned. “I knew you wouldn’t abandon your uncle in his greatest hour of need.”

Beatrix put a hand on his chest and stared menacingly into his eyes. “I’m here to get my ice powers back, and nothing more.” She turned around and ran to catch up with Derrick.

Frederick looked at her retreating figure with concern. “Lord God, we could really use your help right now,” he whispered to himself.

To be continued …

Read about **Holly Braendlein** on page 134.

Beatrix's Downfall: Part 4
Revenge and Destruction

by Holly Braendlein



Artwork by Ava Braendlein.

Derrick whirled around in surprise when he heard Beatrix creep up behind him, followed by Frederick.

"What are you doing?" He whispered in alarm. "I said I could do this by myself!"

“You’re not the only one who has a score to settle with them, Derrick,” answered Beatrix. “So don’t even try.”

Derrick looked at Frederick for some backup, but he shrugged helplessly. He knew Beatrix well enough to know that once she put her mind to something, nothing was going to get in her way.

Derrick sighed in exasperation. “Fine! But we do as I say, alright?”

Beatrix and Frederick both nodded.

All three of them hid behind a pile of rubble, scrutinizing the spacecraft looming overhead. Search beams permeated each building, each rock, each pit in the town. They were hellbent on destroying the Berry/Falton line, and would stop at nothing to get what they wanted.

Derrick turned around to face the group. “Okay, I have an idea.”

He pulled out a stack of papers from his vest. “Here are the government secrets I stole from the Zoraks before I was chased off their ship. They consist of the order and layout of their government, as well as the plans for their ship. Without their spacecraft, they would not be able to travel to other planets. We need to reroute the ship to their home planet, destroy it, and then we can return home.”

“Why are we sending them back home?” asked Beatrix. “We could just kill Borakai and destroy all the remaining evidence.”

“Are you nuts?” Derrick whispered loudly. “We’re not killing him! That would only cause trouble between our planets, which would result in an intergalactic World War, and that’s the *last* thing we want to do.”

“Or it wouldn’t, and the Zoraks would see who’s the boss around here,” remarked Beatrix.

Derrick slapped his forehead and sighed. “Just stick to the plan, alright?”

Beatrix fell silent as their roles were being meted out. Frederick was the means of transportation and would get them into the spacecraft. From there, Derrick and Frederick would create a diversion as Beatrix sped into the control room and steered the ship toward planet Zona. Once they were safely there, they would destroy the ship, and then Frederick would bring the three accomplices safely back home.

“Do you both understand your assigned tasks?” Derrick asked.

“Yep,” answered Frederick, giving him a thumbs-up.

“Sure,” Beatrix said vaguely.

Derrick clapped his hands together. “Great. Let’s end this once and for all.”

***

Borakai stood in the control room, looking out at the bright, hot expanse of desert. Suddenly, shouts resounded from somewhere in the ship, and the alarm went off.

Borakai strode over to Gunqrats, sitting at the control panel. “What’s going on?” he demanded.

Gunqrat typed feverishly at the keyboard and answered tremulously, “Sir, I believe there’s been a breach in security.”

The cameras to the entrance transmitted to the control room, and two male figures were seen on the screen. One resembled the man who had saved Beatrix the previous day, and the other he recognized as Derrick Falton. They stood and battled his soldiers, Frederick opening portals left and right, and Derrick emitting heat rays at his men.

Borakai reached for the comms and shouted into them. “Every man on board, report to the loading dock immediately and take care of these intruders!”

He straightened up and spoke to Gunqrat. “I want Derrick Falton alive. I don’t care about the other one. I want Derrick.”

He exited the room and quickly made his way down the cramped aisle toward the conference room. He went inside and shut the door. As he fiddled with the lock, there came a voice from behind him.

“Thought you could get rid of me that easily, didn’t you?”

Borakai paused, and a slow grin spread across his oily green face. He slowly turned to meet Beatrix face to face, standing casually opposite the Table of Meeting.

Beatrix raised her eyebrow as she stared into the face of the one responsible for her parents' deaths. She did not plan to make this easy for him.

"Well, what a delightful surprise!" Borakai exclaimed in mock surprise. "I am so pleased to be graced with your presence. Although, I must say, it was by my careless folly that you are here now, alive." He made a tsk-tsk noise in his throat. "How neglectful I was on that night of glory. I was so bent on destroying your parents, I never assumed that they would have a prodigy. I won't make that mistake again, I assure you."

Beatrix's eyes filled with tears of anger, threatening to pour over. She glared at him, hatred seeping through her veins as she spoke in low tones to her enemy. "You backstabbing leech. You have caused me nothing but pain. You wrenched my family from my arms and deliberately *murdered* them in cold blood when they had nothing against you."

Her voice steadily rose as she inched closer to Borakai. "I grew up believing that my parents died from an accident. I was content knowing that it was an accident, something unexpected that arose and killed many innocents. There was nothing I could do, nothing anybody could've done. But that wasn't the reason at all. No; they were murdered without reason by your men, without the slightest regret."

"Ahh, yes," interjected Borakai. "But we wouldn't have done it without your ever-so-loyal uncle, Derrick Falton. So who's to blame, Beatrix? Shouldn't *he* be the one at fault?"

"I will not deny that he had a large part to play in this," Beatrix conceded. "But in the end, it was you who wanted my parents'

extinction and successfully carried it out. To think that I could've had a peaceful childhood under my parents' loving care. Those precious moments were ripped from my hands in the event of their deaths. And God only knows how much I have held this pain inside of me!"

Beatrix was eye-to-eye with Borakai, and she could feel his warm breath on her face.

"What do you intend to do to me, Beatrix Berry?" Whispered Borakai. "You don't have your powers."

"I don't need my powers to send you to Hell," she whispered menacingly.

It only took one second for her to whip out her dagger and plunge it deep into her enemy's gut.

Borakai's eyes widened in shock by the impact, his face contorting in pain and anguish. He clutched his belly as Beatrix forcefully yanked the soiled blade out, and blood trickled slowly down from his open mouth. He lifted his head back and screamed, and within the blink of an eye, his green, wrinkly form melted and oozed onto the floor in a greenish-red puddle.

The door burst open, and there was a shout. Beatrix looked up to see Derrick and Frederick outside the door.

"BEATRIX!" shouted Derrick. "What did you do???"

There was no time to explain. The ship creaked, and there was a deafening crack as one side of the ship exploded. Beatrix

jumped on a chair and flew over the heads of both Derrick and Frederick, speeding toward the control room.

She heard Derrick shout after her. “Hey! What are you doing?”

“Getting my powers back!” She shouted back.

Beatrix burst into the control room and was met by two angry Zoraks, both of their arms transformed into swords. They advanced toward her, and Beatrix jumped out of the way, ducking and weaving expertly toward the control panel, where her ice powers were stored in a glass cylinder plugged into the computer. She grabbed the container, flipped on as many switches on the control panel as she could, and then turned around to exit the room, only to have a steel sword plunged deep into her side.

She gasped and doubled over as the Zorak retrieved his sword arm and stood over her. Everything started to dim. Beatrix was able to make out the sound of alarms going off, and red lights flashed from the panel behind her.

Then a roar from a familiar voice.

Beatrix, clutching her stinging side, collapsed on the floor, only to hear a deafening noise and to find herself falling, falling through the air, plunging toward the earth below, the wind whipping her long red hair about her face.

She didn’t care at this point. Everything went black as she succumbed to unconsciousness.

To be continued …

Grain of Wheat by Sophia Stravitsch (age 16)



Life in the Barrenness by Sophia Stravitsch



Jesus Died and Rose by Sophia Stravitsch



Sophia Stravitsch is an aspiring 16-year-old photographer from Katy, Texas. She loves discovering little sparkles of beauty that God sprinkles in His creation, and she uses her camera to capture them and share them with the world. Sophia's family has accepted that hiking with her involves stopping every two minutes while she photographs yet another flower.

Bonsai Tree by Bella Morin (age 13)



Recipe: Pear and Apple Crisp

by Janita Scheurwater



Ingredients:

- 6 cups diced apples
- 6 cups diced pears
- 2 TBS maple syrup
- 3 tsp cinnamon
- 8 TBS butter
- 1 cup rolled oats
- ¾ cup brown sugar
- ¾ cup all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp salt

Materials:

- 9×9 baking dish
- Two mixing bowls
- Small saucepan

Steps:

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

2. In a large mixing bowl, combine apples and pears with maple syrup and 2 tsp of cinnamon. Toss together with a spatula and put in baking dish.
3. In a small saucepan, melt butter over medium heat. Let it cook until foamy and turns golden. Stir well with a spatula. Remove from heat and let it cool down.
4. In a medium bowl, combine remaining ingredients: 1 tsp of cinnamon, rolled oats, brown sugar, flour, and salt. Add butter and mix with two forks to make a crumbly mixture. Spread mixture evenly over apples and pears, pressing down.
5. Bake for 30 minutes, or until golden brown.
6. Enjoy!

Author and Artist Bios

Jason Kirk Bartley is a published poet from Chillicothe, Ohio. He is 52 years old. He is published in Christian magazines and anthologies. He has a master's in ministry from Ohio Christian University in Circleville, Ohio. His new book is called *God's Light: Christian Poetry*. This is his first one.

Sheri Bentley is a reading tutor and literacy advocate who writes stories and poems for kids and adults. Her work appears in *Pure in Heart Stories* and will soon appear in the upcoming anthologies *Colors* and *The Perigian Tide*. She enjoys the beautiful dusting of snow that occasionally decorates the Tucson mountains.

Holly Braendlein is an 18-year-old Christian living in Kent, WA, where her father farms vegetables. You can find her other Beatrix stories in earlier issues of *Pure in Heart,* as well as articles in *Reformed Perspective* magazine. And if you want even more of her writing, subscribe to her Substack at Holly the Redhead. Other than writing, Holly loves to sew up a storm, goof off incessantly, and craft.

Rachel Michelle Collier is from Mississippi, and her work can be found in *The Dirigible Balloon*, *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal* (the sister-site of *Pure in Heart*), *Fathom Mag*, and *Ekstasis*. She wants you to know that you are loved.

Robert Funderburk was born by coal oil lamplight in his home near Liberty, Mississippi, graduated from Louisiana State University in 1965, served as SSgt in USAFR from 1965 – 1971. Writing experience includes seventeen published novels, one a national bestseller; one hundred twenty poems and seven short stories accepted by various literary journals; one Chapbook; 2023 Pushcart Prize nominee. Along with his wife Barbara, Robert lives and writes from the peace of their home on fifty acres of wilderness in Olive Branch, Louisiana.

Ann Garrett is a published author of fiction, nonfiction and poetry for both children and adults (www.anngarrettauthor.com). Ann received her degrees from the University of Utah in Social Work and Sociology. For many years she worked with severely disturbed children who had been abused. She is

now happily retired. Ann loves travel, kids, animals (especially dogs) and a good conversation over coffee. Happily married, she lives and writes in So. CA.

Anne Hogan is a parent and retired educator who lives in Brooklyn, New York. “Barrette” imagines how a large family might appear to an outsider. The story also explores not belonging to a group that others perceive you do. It is mostly a story about peacemakers.

Josephine Ken-Enwerem is a Nigerian pharmacist, writer, and Christian storyteller passionate about inspiring young minds with faith-filled narratives. In addition to hosting children for weekend Bible club, she now serves as a teen coach, guiding teenagers toward hope and purpose. She is happily married with three children: one teenage daughter and two sons. https://josephinekenenwerem34082.selfany.com/

Jimmy Lisotto is a poet in New Hampshire. He has previously been published in *Agape Review*, *Solid Food Press* and *Faith On Every Corne*r, among others. He believes that poetry is a medium that brings people together from all walks of life. He can be found on Facebook and Instagram.

Lucia Liu is a second-year college student from the Bay Area studying Computational Biology. While she is passionate about science and technology, she also loves making art in her free time and uses it as way to share glimpses of how God is working in her life to her friends and family.

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 Winter Springs, Florida. She was a winner of the ArlingtonArts Moving Words competition in 2024. Her first book of poetry, *Dear Miss Tickle: Poetry and Art for the Young at Heart,* is available on Amazon.

Stephanie Mathews lives in Tremonton, Utah and works as a part-time librarian and home schools her daughter. She has had two poetry collections published, articles in *Creation Illustrated*, and short stories in *Pure in Heart* magazine. Stephanie has a Facebook page called “Words in Bloom” where she shares poems and a bit of news on her writing.

Shay McNally is a Christian, a Confessional Lutheran, a pastor's wife, and the award-winning author of two free verse Christian poetry collections: *Breath of the Almighty* (2025) and *Virtue of the Most High* (2026). Her poetry has struck a chord with readers for its honesty, emotional depth, and spiritual clarity; grounded in both Scripture and lived experience. You can find out more about her at www.shaymcnally.com

Lily Paredes: I live in beautiful Sydney, Australia. My quirky hobbies are spending hilarious moments with the cats from my neighbourhood and later writing stories about them, playing popular tunes on my mini keyboard at local parks and creating extraordinary unusual objects from unusual discarded objects.

Pat Severin, a retired Christian school teacher, finds her inspiration from her faith and love of children. Besides *Pure in Heart Stories*, she is published in many Christian Magazines such as, *The Agape Review*, *The Clay Jar Review*, *The Way Back 2 Ourselves*, the *Heart of Flesh Journal*, *Words of the Lamb*, *Vessels of Light* and *Calla Press*. She is also a featured poet in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* as well as two other books. Pat's personal ministry is weekly sending encouragement poems to people going through difficult life struggles.

Sarah Sims is 31 and a singing teacher from San Francisco, California. She loves telling stories of all kinds, whether in song or in her writing, and enjoys teaching other people how to tell their stories.

Emma Vander Kooi is a homeschool graduate and nursing student who resides in Florida. During her schooling, she read a great deal of poetry and was inspired by poets such as John Donne, George Herbert, and Anne Bradstreet. Her writing wrestles with life's struggles and glories in biblical truths.

Elizabeth Wrobel writes for both kids and adults in the Northwoods of Michigan. She's been published in books, magazines, ezines, and online. Her latest poems have been published in *Pure in Heart Stories* and *The Dirigible Balloon*. When she's not writing, she's reading and spending time with family.

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