

Choices

by Megan Casey

The warmth of the sun felt so pleasant on her face as she stood with her eyes closed and head tilted up to the sky. She would definitely miss this carefree feeling of summer as soon as the bus pulled up in front of her house. How did this happen? The promise of a summer vacation, a break, and time off all seemed but a distant memory. Mom and Dad said it would be her choice to go, but she was only eleven. How could she even be capable of making such an adult decision?

Her face became hot with anger as she remembered her mother's broken promise of a pool pass for summer vacation. Her pool pass turned into a summer school course for advanced students. Being smart seemed like a crime to be punished with more homework and studying. Many of her friends always had much less homework, freeing up their weekends for social activities. Once again she would be alone, missing out on having fun with her friends.

She stared up the street, but the bus had still not turned the corner and come into view. It really was not her mom's fault. Her mother loved her, showed pride in her accomplishments, and could not imagine that summer school would make her feel this way. A small smile started to creep across her face as she thought about how much her family supported her efforts. Constantly her mom would tell her how everything would be all right, and how doing this was a positive step and a privilege. She owed it to herself to see how far she could develop her education. For a moment, she envisioned herself giving into her frustrations and darting back inside her front door just a few feet away. Closing her eyes, she imagined being back inside where her brother and sister were probably still snug in their beds, back in the safe haven of her home where everything would be much easier.

Now her stomach became queasy with the anticipation of wondering what things would be like in the advanced class. Would she be able to manage the homework and learn at such a high level? How high would the level be compared to what she was used to in her previous school? Would she be able to handle the embarrassment if she failed? These thoughts racing through her mind made her stomach feel queasy, but throwing up would just humiliate her and make her feel worse than she already did. She swallowed hard a couple of times to help combat the nauseous feeling in her stomach. The backpack weighing her down felt like a ton of bricks.

She gazed up the street and saw the yellow bus in the distance. Her friends would be on that bus; she would not be alone. The bus pulled up to a stop right in front of her as the doors abruptly swung open. She stood up

straight, took a deep breath, and put a fake smile on her face in order to look brave. Slowly she stepped up onto the bus and turned to see the faces of her friends. Her false smile soon became a real one as her friends called to her to sit by them. They were excited by what they were soon going to experience, and this enthusiasm was contagious.

Little did she know that by making the choice to step on the bus she would change her life forever.

Falling *by Mila Diaz*

It was all too much to think about on a grey overcast afternoon, and she just needed to go outside to process everything. So she walked with determination to the park holding her little sister by the hand.

Swiftly, softly, she tripped and fell to the ground, releasing her little sister's hand. Making no attempt to rise up, she just lay there on the grass staring up at the sky. She had no pain, she was conscious, and the world around her was perfectly still, allowing so many thoughts to gather up in her head. Her jaw tightened as her hands began to make fists. How could her parents do this to her? Her life was fine the way it was, but moving to a different state would ruin everything! Her life was like a building being destroyed, tumbling down all around her.

Trying to stay calm, she began to sit up. Slowly she exhaled as the wind whispered in her ears, perhaps trying to tell her not to be so negative. She knew she was being selfish. Even though this choice made her life difficult, maybe it was best for her family.

She stared out into the wide field by the park, and the tall, green grass swayed as if it were dancing with the wind. She would miss the clean pure air, graceful rainbow-colored butterflies, and warm presence of the places where her most precious memories happened. Goodbyes were never something she was good at. She laid her head in her hands to hide her face from the beautiful world that surrounded her but instinctively knew it the wrong thing to do. How could she hide her face from something as delightfully splendid as life? So she raised her head letting only a single tear trickle down her cheek and fall to the soft grass.

Concerned, her little sister ran back across the field to her. Her sister wrapped her arms around the crying girl and said, "Don't cry. Be happy." She felt a smile come to her face as her sister grinned back, and at that moment she knew she would not be alone.

As the sun poked its head out from behind the clouds, it was time to head for home.

A Spring Fall

by Elisa Kajiwara

As the sun shone proudly in the sky, a beautiful spring day boasted of its splendor with a chorus of newly returned birds, warm air, lush emerald green grass, and a gentle breeze. But at that moment, she stood inside with watery eyes and a heavy heart. She was watching as her three year old cousin cried, his head buried in his mother's lap. It was all her fault.

She had been in a playful mood, chasing her cousin around the yard. His laughter lit up her face as it always did, but dashing toward the house, he tripped on the sidewalk, landing face down on the rocks surrounding the path. Her cousin lay motionless, and she stood there for a moment, paralyzed.

Awakening from her flashback, she watched as her aunt gently carried the little boy up the stairs to clean him up. Having been the cause of her cousin's bawling, she felt compelled to help. Her aunt dotted the boy's face, wiping off bits of gravel, dirt, and tears. Seeing her cousin's face clean for the first time since the fall, she was somewhat surprised that the only injury was a minor bruise on his right cheek.

Her aunt briefly left the boy standing there in order to retrieve a change of clothes from his room. The girl glanced down at the floor with a guilty conscience as the boy continued to whimper a little for a moment or two. When his sobbing finally ended, she looked up, and there he stood, staring at her blankly. He seemed to wonder why she was so sad.

She lifted her arms a bit. Recognizing the gesture, he walked forward, mimicked the pose, and the two cousins exchanged hugs. The hug seemed to lift a burden from her shoulders. To test the toddler's mood, she lay down on her back for the amusement of her cousin, carrying him gently down with her. He had the same laugh and the same smile as when they played outside.

For the first time in several minutes, she could breathe easily again.

Best Friends

by Rachel Cybulski

There it was.

Standing in front of her was the most beautiful animal in the world. The horse's big, brown eyes glanced at her curiously. His mane was as black as the night sky itself and his body glistened with tiny soft, smooth patches of clean white like stars twinkling against a black background.

Moments earlier he had been grazing peacefully in the field, but then he trotted over to the wooden fence, seemingly drawn to her by some mysterious force. The connection between them was intense and immediate, almost as if they were best friends who had not seen each other for years. The girl's face lit up at the high-pitched neigh of the beautiful animal as he reared back, legs flying high up in the air. From the outside he looked very wild, but when she stared deep into his calm brown eyes she could sense gentleness inside. The girl shook off her nervousness, slowly and steadily stroking the horse's neck. She became excited, feeling the soft fur beneath her fingertips and the warm puffs of breath on her neck. It all felt like a dream.

Not only was the horse incredibly beautiful, but his surroundings were, too. There was a lush meadow that spread far and wide with amazing rivers and streams. Surrounding the meadow was a clean and stable wooden fence, and the air smelled pure with a light scent of pine. It was hard to believe that a creature this magnificent was standing in front of her.

She could not take her eyes off the horse as he started to glitter and sparkle, running free in a field of dreams, hair flying in the wind. She imagined herself on horseback galloping through the lush field at full speed. She dreamed of her hair flying in the wind along with the horse's long mane and tail, and she dreamed of feeling so free. Perhaps one day her dream will come true.

Honesty

by Madeleine Yuh

She was dead. Or at least she thought she would be soon.

A broken bracelet was on her table, and as she looked up, her gaze was drifting. What was she going to do?

She paced around the room and paused. Maybe she could lie about what happened or hide the bracelet or try to fix it. She went to her father's room, searching for pliers, string, and anything else she might need. Analyzing the pattern of the bracelet and the damage that had been done, there was really nothing she could do.

Her sister was not coming home for ten or fifteen minutes, and that would give her enough time to come up with a really good lie. But what if she was caught?

She went to the window of her room and stared at the street, watching for her sister's school bus to come. She remembered times when

she had lied before and had been punished severely when her mother found out. The consequences became worse each time she lied. If she was caught this time, she would not just be scolded.

She would be grounded for life.

She saw something yellow flicker at the corner of her eye and realized that it was the school bus. Her sister would be there any minute now, and she still did not know what to do. If she told the truth, her family might just be mad for a few days, forgive her, and then not talk about it for the rest of her life. She heard the door opening, and her sister entered having a cheerful conversation with her mom. Knowing that her sister was in a good mood and not wanting to make her unhappy, she thought about lying again, but realized that withholding the truth would lead her down the wrong path.

Sighing, she took the bracelet and headed for the door.

Changes

by Jenna Thanopoulos

She unwillingly dragged her shiny new shoes across the rocky pavement and up the steps, feeling certain that with her cousin gone on vacation this Sunday would be boring. With her shoulders slumped she stepped through the big oak doors and kissed the beautifully made icon noticing perhaps for the first time true wisdom and mystery in the face of Jesus.

Sitting down on the pew, her eye caught a glimpse of the priest directing everyone to rise. Most Sundays she would never have bothered to look up at the priest's loving smile and instead would have started chatting away with her cousin. She wearily rose with everyone else, pretending to be an attentive listener even though she knew it would not be possible to fully comprehend all of the different hymns and sayings while she was only eight.

She glanced away from the priest for a moment upon hearing loud whispers coming from other boys and girls. Looking at how immaturely they behaved made her think back to the previous week when she and her cousin were acting the same way instead of bowing their heads to pay more respect to God.

Scanning the church, she noticed an elderly couple with love and care filling their eyes as they examined the carefully made icons throughout the church. She wondered how they could give so much emotion to something that is so hard to detect.

So many mysteries seemed to evolve from this place that she used to

envision as a waste of time, and as her attention wandered back toward the priest, the pride in his voice and wisdom in his eyes told her that she would soon understand. It was almost as if he was looking directly at her, talking and explaining everything only to her. She could not help but flash a smile back, knowing that in just those few moments something wonderful was happening.

She was not the same little girl any more.

First Day

by Justine Tran

She sat on one of the swings by herself on a warm summer's day, swinging lazily underneath the shade of trees above her which towered over the playground. Squealing children played on the equipment beneath those trees a safe distance away. They ran and skipped around the playground equipment, laughing easily with their friends and playing enjoyable games as if they had no worries in the world. None of them asked her to join their carefree games.

Heaving a big sigh, she stared blankly at the ground beneath her, the swing gradually slowing until it was motionless. She knew it was a bad idea to let her parents coax her into attending school that day, and she knew they only wanted her to because they thought making new friendships with other kids her age in the neighborhood would bring a feeling of comfort to her. Moving to a new school in a whole new district was already too much, and coming to school the very next day did not help at all. Looking around at the unfamiliar faces of her new classmates with their curious eyes made her face redden with embarrassment, and it was painful to have such intense loneliness clinging to her heart like a burr that clung onto clothing.

Looking up briefly to wipe away a tear that trickled down her cheek, she noticed a girl about her own age gazing at her with those same curious eyes she had seen so frequently that day. Angrily, she turned away and started to push herself on the swing pretending to be amused by it while thinking about the many students that left her out of their games. If the others left her out, then the staring girl would no doubt do the same. She vowed at that moment to never make eye contact with any of them. She would refuse to participate in whatever they were doing, but a feeling of reluctance made her look back. The girl was still staring at her with a slight smile on her face, and she started waving, her eyes twinkling with friendliness before she ran off to play with her friends.

Her swing slowed to a stop once again, her eyes still on the spot where the girl had stood waving. Perhaps this girl could be her first friend, and then perhaps there could be others who would not care that she was new. Rising up slowly from the seat of her swing, she stared off into the distance at the rest of the playing children.

Perhaps she could actually become one of them, laughing and playing and enjoying the sunshine.

It could happen.

And she so desperately wanted it to.

Reflection

by Kasia Kuzniar

The hot interior of the car was uncomfortable. Glued to the leather seats with perspiration brought on by both humidity and anxiety, her legs were more than a little sticky, and the extreme temperature made it more than a little difficult to concentrate. Instinctively, she rolled down the window for fresh air while waiting for the air-conditioning to start working properly. A light summer breeze softly touched her face and temporarily eased her mind. Whether she agreed with her parents' decision or not, she needed to focus on the moment. This would be her last view of the country she was about to leave behind.

Though it used to seem impossible and completely out of the question, it was now a fact. She and her family would move to a new neighborhood in a new country on a new continent across the Atlantic Ocean. In less than an hour she would fly on a plane to America, a foreign nation that she knew only in theory. When the engine of her dad's car roared to life, she realized that in a matter of minutes she would set foot aboard the aircraft. Fear of loss and change was closing in around her.

As the car moved slowly out onto the street, she caught a glimpse of her house through the rearview mirror. She knew that the view of her house and front yard would gradually narrow, becoming smaller and smaller as the vehicle gained speed. Turning to watch, she could no longer see the small imperfections on the brick walls of her house or the potholes that made the sidewalk a very familiar though somewhat treacherous path leading home. All the memories she had ever made in that house silently flashed across her mind like a slide show. She remembered good times filled with the love of her family as well as bad times which she always tried her best to forget. It would certainly be tough to lose contact with her one or two close friends and start over as the new girl in class. Then again, she had made more than her share of mistakes, especially when it came to relationships. If there was anything she might choose to forget, it would be the many times she alienated others with her own selfish behavior. As a result, fear of being the "new" girl was perhaps not as great as fear of being the "same" girl who had created so many problems for herself. In many ways, the thought of unpleasant experiences would help her understand what her mother meant when saying that moving was like making a fresh start.

While watching her house recede in the distance through the rear window of the car, she began to appreciate the opportunity to start over again. As if time had slowed and reversed itself, she felt the sensation of new hope growing deep within her, warming her like a bonfire on a cold night. Basking in the glow of this hope for a new beginning, she turned away from the rear window and focused her attention on the road up ahead.

She thought briefly about taking one more look through the rearview mirror but decided against it. Her house had faded from view, and fear had faded from her heart.

Tree's View

by Magda Jasowicz

Sitting beneath a tree, she looked around, bored searching for something to do. Back at the cabin, the floor was cold, her mattress was stiff, and there was no TV. Why on earth had her parents forced her to come here to the middle of nowhere? After all, she was twelve years old and quite capable of taking care of herself and making her own decisions. She could have been at her friend's house, hanging out at the pool, or just watching a movie. Any movie would have been preferable to this; even one of the mushy romances would have been better than sitting on a dirty old log swatting away bugs at the campfire every night. Even the marshmallows were stale.

Her parents got mad because she was spending so much time in the cabin so she took off and slammed the screen door behind her. Leaning back against the tree, she checked her cell phone to see if it was receiving a signal now that she was outside. Of course, it wasn't. Not only was she completely bored, she was also totally isolated from everyone who wasn't a nature freak.

She looked up at the tree, studying its sturdy branches that reached out over the narrow path leading to the main campsite. If she could climb the tree, she could stay out of sight should her parents start to come after her. It would serve them right to go searching through the woods while she looked down from above. The branches seemed strong enough so after a quick glance to check if her parents were coming, she started to climb. She wondered if making her parents search for her was worth the trouble. They might ground her for something like this, but it was a good way to make them think twice about bringing her out here again.

She was surrounded by leaves, hiding her from view but allowing her to see everything below. She looked around, seeing the tree's view of the world. Nearby, a few flowers dotted the grass here and there, but a little farther ahead, a beautiful open field of grass and colorful flowers came into view, splashing a rainbow into the sea of green. At the center of the open field, there was a pond teeming with fish and frogs. Near the field, there was a small forest with huge green trees blocking everything else from view. Maybe there were other beautiful sights hidden in the forest. She would have to go exploring a little later to find out, but at the moment she was too busy enjoying the view.

Several minutes later, she started to climb down and then head back to the cabin. She wondered if her parents might want to go exploring with her.

The Call

by Jamie Valente

“Well, maybe if you didn’t tell everyone, this wouldn’t have happened!” her friend shouted furiously into the telephone.

“You can’t keep saying that it’s all my fault! They would have found out anyway!” she screamed in her defense. Both she and her friend were turning red as they felt their faces heating up.

“Either way you weren’t supposed to tell!” Her friend was getting louder, and she was sure that the entire neighborhood could hear them. Her mouth opened so wide when she hollered, it felt as though she could have swallowed the telephone whole.

She stood up and clenched her teeth as well as her fists, and through her tightly closed teeth she managed to defend herself once more. “You’re totally overreacting! You’re supposed to be my friend, and friends listen to both sides of the story!”

“Then maybe we shouldn’t be friends.”

She could feel tears forming in her eyes. All of her muscles became tense, and she felt as though the receiver was permanently attached to her ear. If she had not been sitting down, she might have fallen over. It seemed a million thoughts were rushing through her head at once. Her stomach turned upsidedown, an egg-sized lump formed in her throat, and her heart beat rapidly.

Through all of her pain and agony, she managed to get a few quiet words out. “Did you really mean that?”

There was a slight pause, but it was enough to make her already tortured stomach do flip-flops. The egg-sized lump in her throat grew to be the size of a baseball. Her face went from a cherry red to a ghostly white. She felt like she either had to scream with all of her might or to never speak again.

After a moment of silence, her friend muttered, “No, I guess not.”

With those words, her stomach fell back into place, the lump in her throat disappeared, and her heart rate returned to normal.

She had been forgiven.

The Unreachable

by Tayana Panova

She lay peacefully under the covers in her soft cushioned cradle. It was a cool day, and a soft breeze blew across her cheeks while a ray of sunshine danced upon her face. A mobile of flying animals circled above her head, and she giggled happily at the colorful figures as they turned, twisted, frolicked, and bounced on their strings.

She felt a sudden urge to be with the happy plump forms and play in the swaying wind the same way they did. She reached up and tried to grab them so she too could enjoy their freedom. Her efforts turned up short and she simply could not reach. Frustration started to envelop her. She did not understand what was stopping her to escape from her blankets, to fly into the air, and she did not like it. It felt like something was keeping her down but she refused to stop trying. She struggled to reach out with all her might but she could not do it.

She thought, "I want!"

She used all her strength but the wall of her limitations kept her from grabbing hold of the happy bouncing animals. She got tangled in her blankets and they brought her back down. She was tired. As much as she tried she could not do it, and she started to cry. Tears flowed down her face and wails escaped from inside her.

Tall loving figures rushed toward her. They lifted her and smiled, but she still cried. There were toys, a bottle, clean diapers, and lullabies. They do not know, she thought. They do not understand.

She cried and cried at the very first of her lost efforts.

Gone

by Catherine Sammanasu

The sky shimmered light baby blue as he walked gingerly through the garden concentrating very hard not to step on the gorgeous red and white flowers. He could not even imagine stepping on them. How could he? They were his mother's flowers.

His mother used to gaze upon them and keep them very safe like they were gold. It was her very own treasure.

Now she was gone. He was not sure when she would ever come back again. He wondered if she would even come back for his 4th birthday.

He had gone to visit his mother at the hospital. The smell there was so unfamiliar to him. That was the last time he saw her tired but beautiful lips turn into a smile. The next time he saw her was in that quiet and gloomy place. She was

sleeping in a big wooden trunk. Her hair was neatly combed, her dress flawless, and her skin looked smooth and soft. Everybody around him was crying but not him. He knew that she would be back.

Where was she? She had not come back since then. His father told him his mother was happy where she was with God and the angels.

Sometimes he saw her in his dreams. She was always singing a beautiful song. Her beautiful, brown hair swaying in the wind.

He really missed his mother. She was always there for him. She was always by his side.

His father told him that she would forever remain in his heart and memories. But his father was wrong. His mother would come back after she finished visiting God and the angels. Yes, she would come and be by his side again.

As he was climbing the steps leading to the front door of his house something suddenly made him stop to glance back at the garden. He thought he could hear singing from the garden. It was beautiful.

A World of White

by Bart Lis

The microwave beeped that his hot cocoa was finally ready. As he trudged over to grab his oversized mug, he glanced out the window. White specks were slowly falling to the ground which was no longer brown and bare. Now, the mud and dirt was hidden by a deepening of sparkling white. Memories of past winter mornings with mounds of snow that had to be shoveled and frost-bitten fingers at the bus stop came back to him as he looked out the window. He thought of the slush and traffic and wind chill. It was a depressing start to a bleak January morning.

But his eyes were enchanted by the tiny flakes falling. He remembered when his feet would be cold from the snow and the comforting warmth of the fireplace would unfreeze them. He imagined himself snowboarding on a cold winter day on a fast, smooth hill like he did last year. He recalled when he and his friends would surprise unsuspecting pedestrians with a storm of snowballs. He remembered that some days would be so silent and peaceful, that only the soothing sound of the fireplace crackling could be heard throughout the house.

As he sat there, gazing out the window and sipping his hot cocoa, he thought to himself: Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

One Last Time

by Michelle Logli

The dog's eyes enlarged like two helium balloons. His tongue hung out. The swishing of his beautiful brown and white tail made a whistling sound in the silent wind. As she stared down at him, she remembered the first time they played together, and how his tiny brown body would jump all around her while she laughed. Now, tears welled up in her eyes as she realized how far they had come from that day to this one. Seeing his limp leg lay crippled beside his aged body, a thumping pain emerged from deep inside her heart, and her eyes looked like they had not slept for days. So many memories came flooding into her mind as her dog focused on the toy she held in her hand. Every day they used to come outside just to romp and play and be together, but today was different. Today would be the last day she would gaze up at the beautiful sunset with her trusted companion at her side. It would be the last day she would throw his favorite toy across the yard.

He tried hard to retrieve the toy, but his leg gave him trouble. Watching him struggle, she knew all his pain and suffering would end the following day. As he whimpered and stumbled back to her side with the toy in his mouth, she caught a glimpse of that twinkle in his eyes she remembered so well. It was a twinkle of accomplishment and happiness. In that moment, her pain seemed to diminish. Her eyes brightened, and her heart began to beat like it did the first time she played with him. They had been through a lot together, and she was going to enjoy this day. She tossed the ball and watched him scamper, his limp leg off the ground, his tail swishing in the wind. His tongue was hanging out with droplets of slobber falling to the grass, and his large brown eyes twinkled like stars in the sky.

As the sun dipped below the backyard fence, the girl and her dog continued to play, enjoying their last moments together.

Changes

by Michal Kosciarz

From a path in the woods he could still see the sun poking its head through the tree tops. He glanced to the left at a stream that wound its way through a maze of rocks and remembered the times he had skipped stones near that stream on hot summer days. The trees near the water's edge stood guard over the entrance to the park, proudly showing off their green leaves and reminding him of the happy times he had over the summer.

He continued walking toward the edge of the water admiring how the sun's light illuminated the park like a candle lighting up a room. The overview of the park was an explosion of color. Most of it was different shades of green, but a bright blue sky and multicolored

flowers also pushed into the picture. Looking around, the boy sensed a nagging sadness as he thought about the start of school which was only a day away. This feeling had already penetrated the walls of his happiness. As he thought more about school he imagined how the leaves would start turning yellow and orange when hot summer days faded gradually into breezy, autumn afternoons.

He understood that the change of scenery would accompany changes in his life. He was starting junior high this year in a new school with new teachers and higher expectations. He felt excited about the year ahead and the new activities that junior high had to offer. He was anxious to see some friends who had been away on vacation. At the same time, questions about the school year started to bother him. Would it be too difficult? Would he make a good first impression?

He closed his eyes and thought about the changing seasons of falling leaves, snow covered walkways, and gardens beginning to bloom. The park had to face the challenge of all these changes every year. That thought made him smile as he turned around to walk back down the hill toward home.

If the park survived so could he.

He was ready to face the changes that lie ahead.

A New Beginning

by Alissa Santiago

He glared at it.

It glared back.

The little stub on the ground before him would eventually grow into a sturdy and magnificent tree. It would grow brave and tall with long arms to protect him and his father from harm. It would grow so broad that he would not be able to wrap his arms around its trunk. It would grow to be just like the other oak tree.

At least that's what his dad said. But it would never be the same. How could it be? He grew up with that old oak. It was almost like a brother to him, a companion who stood by his side until the very end.

He remembered the wonderful times he shared with that tree, spending afternoons climbing its branches and reaching for the top until his father called him into the house for dinner. Hot, summer days passed by quickly for he never grew tired of wrapping himself in its warm embrace. He explored every branch and every limb as the gentle wind helped that old tree nod in approval. He was not the only one who shared this loss. All sorts of tiny insects and squirrels would hang around the tree during summer, enjoying themselves. The hollow of the tree also served as a home to these animals on dark, rainy nights.

Everything changed, however, when those massive, bright yellow machines came to chomp on the old oak with their powerful jaws and razor sharp teeth. His trusted companion was but a memory now, and his yard would never be the same as it was throughout all those years of his childhood.

But neither would he. He spent his childhood with that tree, but he is going to grow up, and he will have to make many adjustments just like this one. This was not an ending but a new beginning.

He smiled at the thought.

It smiled back.

The Locket

by Larissa Kowal

Faint sunlight on an overcast day filtered through her window as she sat stiffly on the edge of the bed. Tiny specks of dust could be seen throughout the room, floating in the gray haze of early morning and silently landing on the hardwood floor. She continued to gently finger a locket she received from her parents so long ago. She had always cherished it.

The reality of what had just happened was slowly beginning to sink in. The angry screams and the sudden shattering of her mother's favorite gravy boat still echoed in her ears.

"How could you? What's wrong with you?"

"Me? *Me!* There you go again! Blaming everything on somebody else!"

"This has gone on for too long," she heard her mother say with very little emotion. She remembered a brief, yet agonizing, silence that seemed to multiply the distance between her parents. "I want a divorce."

Her mind drifted back to the day she had received the locket. The sun had been shining down brightly on the neighborhood picnic. She had been playing tag with a large group of friends when her parents called her over. Her father pulled a small velvet box out of his pocket and handed it to her.

"Open it," he said with a large grin.

She popped open the lid and gasped. Inside was a brand new gold locket. "It's beautiful! But how did we afford it? I mean with Dad losing his job and..."

Her voice trailed off just as her mother began to speak. "We've been saving every penny that we possibly could. We really wanted to get you something nice since we couldn't buy you anything for your birthday. I knew you would like it."

She looked up at her parents and smiled. She knew they loved her with all their hearts.

The barking of the neighbor's dog brought her back to the reality of the moment. She stood up on a sudden impulse, hurried over to the window, pried it open, and hurled the locket out into the front yard. She hung her head and slowly walked back to the bed where she buried her face in a pillow and allowed the tears to flow freely.

The Empty Pole

by Brennen Regnier

It was still early morning and there was a thick layer of fog over the pale green waters of the lake. The boat drifted ever so slowly as he and his uncle waited patiently for something to happen. He had been fishing with his uncle a few times before. Each time his uncle had been successful with his catch, but not him. His uncle once told him that the secret to catching a fish is to think like a fish. He had no idea what that meant, but he put it in the back of his mind and never forgot it.

Now, as he sat beside his pole in the little boat, he looked up at his uncle and then back into the water. He tried to think like a fish.

Suddenly the bobber plunged beneath the surface. He clutched the pole tightly, and his eyes sparkled with enthusiasm at the thought of catching his very own fish. Full of delight, he began to bring in his line. As he vigorously reeled in his bobber, he could barely stand the anticipation. His fists were clenched tightly around the pole, when without any warning his line became tense, and he was unable to pull in any more of it. He tried yanking, pulling, and reeling, but nothing would work.

Gradually, his eyes started to fill up with tears. Soon, his hands began to get sore, and he was about to give up because nothing he did brought him and the end of his line any closer together. He felt as if the line was never going to come back up. He took one last jerk at the line before it broke free. Finally, he managed to bring the line aboard only to find it bare. There was no bobber, no hook, and no fish.

His heart sank at the sight of his empty pole.

He scrunched up his face impatiently and once again he started to think like a fish.

He cast out the line, flinging it as hard as he could. The bobber sat there, floating on top of the lake for a short time before once more disappearing beneath the surface. He yanked the pole upward, and started reeling in the line. He could feel a fish fighting back as he reeled it in. He got his net ready right above the water and when the fish was at the surface, he quickly scooped it into the net.

He had done it!

His uncle was very proud of him, but actually there was really nothing to it. He just had to think like a fish.

A Twist of Fate

by Samantha Roberts

The young girl was surrounded by smiley faces of cartoon characters on the wallpaper attempting unsuccessfully to give her a sense of hope. Although the four walls around her stood tall and straight, she felt as if the walls of her life were slowly closing in on her. The unnatural cleanliness and antiseptic smell of the place only added to her discomfort. Her right ankle was suspended painfully higher than her left as she thought about the injury and why it had to occur when the recital was less than three weeks away.

She would have been the star of the show, dancing up on stage, performing her solo with the spotlight on her alone. She would be wearing her most beautiful costume, an elegant ocean blue dress. Slowly the music would begin as she preformed her complicated routine of graceful leaps, kicks, and turns. Gradually, the melody would fade to silence, she would bow, and there would be thunderous applause. But now that would be impossible to experience. Even if she was able to attend she could only sit in the audience watching the recital go on without her. Months of effort and hard work would mean almost nothing.

Her thoughts turned towards Kelly Swyn, her idol, and one of the world's finest dancers. She realized how similar her situation was to Kelly's a few years back. Kelly had also suffered an accident during a competition with injuries that were much more severe. Despite that fact, however, Kelly had come back to win the national championships the very next year.

Watching the championships on television late into the evening had been an inspiring experience. Kelly was by far the best performer, dancing flawlessly to every beat of the music.

Just then the doctor entered the room. The girl braced herself for the worst knowing she would have to face it eventually. Soon, however, her eyes lit up, her heart beat with joy, and everything around her came to life as the doctor gave her permission to dance.

But could she? The recital was coming up at the end of the month. It would take an incredible amount of work on a tender ankle to be ready in time to perform.

She thought for a moment in silence before allowing herself to smile back at the roomful of cartoon decorations.

Kelly had done it.

She could do it, too.

Beata Fiszler
April 7, 2004

The Fence

No matter how much I try to prevent it I am not able to. Whenever I pass the gloomy, gray house where it all happened the memory of the dog walk slowly creeps forward from the back of my mind to where the whole experience is vivid. The tiresome tugging, dreadful chasing, and the image of the broken fence will haunt me for the rest of my life.

It was another normal, hot summer day on Tuesday morning and I was hanging out at my friend Elle's house. Since Elle and I were both bored we decided to take my collie Sabee and her golden retriever Asil on a walk. As we stepped out the door we could feel the warm sun sinking into our skin. The trees swayed in the wind as the variety of multi-colored flowers reminded me of a rainbow. The farther we walked the more Sabee tugged on the leash because something must have caught her eye. And then we saw it, a rabbit, Sabee's favorite toy.

As if on cue, the rabbit darted away like a speeding bullet, Sabee ran after it, and Asil raced to catch up with Sabee. Because the dogs took off so suddenly, Elle and I were caught by surprise. Instantly the leashes weren't in our hands but dragging behind our speeding dogs. When I looked over at Elle, the laughter that usually filled her eyes was now replaced by fear. Fear. That's what I felt, too. There was no time to waste. Without saying a word we sped after our dogs. The trees passed by in a green blur as we ran faster and faster. We called, "Sabee! Asil!" but it only made them speed up as if it was a game of tag. My heart beat so heavily I thought I was slowing down because of its weight. As we turned a corner I saw the rabbit disappear into a yard nearest us. I started to cool down knowing Sabee will stop. She'll stop, won't she? I couldn't have been more wrong. Sabee, still trying to catch the rabbit, started to run around the fence looking for a way in. At the farthest side I saw a broken piece of metal fencing jutting out, and Sabee must have seen it as well because she immediately slowed, attempting to dodge it. Because of her speed she was too late. Sabee ran right into that sharp piece of fence. Since Asil was a little behind, he had time to stop.

I ran over to my struck dog and as I turned her over sticky, red blood stained my hand. Her chest was stained even worse. That's when I let myself believe it was only a dream. All I could remember until we got to the hospital was a child calling for help and people crowding around Sabee and me. When

I got to the waiting room of the hospital I sat there, tears running down my cheeks as I gave up on pretending it was only a dream. Elle sat by me, trying to console me, but even she didn't look that hopeful. The hours dragged by like days as we waited for word about Sabee's condition. The vet didn't come out of the operating room until mid afternoon. When she did, I scanned her face for a sign of relief. It was not there. At that moment I knew my faithful, fluffy companion had left this world. My mind raced to find images of Sabee and me playing together, but the image of her struck chest kept appearing instead.

Now, whenever I go to Elle's house we do the same things as we have always done. We play video games and go to the park. We even go on dog walks with Asil. The only difference is that Asil seems to be more obedient and that we never go by that corner again unless it's absolutely necessary. I learned that soon after a loss it is all right to cry, but as time passes it is important to deal with it. Failing to do so will only lead to sorrow and misery. Sabee left the big world of Earth, but she never left a smaller world of my heart, and she never will.

Taped Together

by Lisa Patel

She trudged home, approaching the torment that cried her to sleep every night. Around the corner, her house came into focus. The weight she carried with her increased with every step. She braced herself before entering her home. The doorknob turned, and the misery began.

Her parents' voices were raised to the fullest. She expected this, but the pain was still deep. While holding back tears, she crept in closer to hear the latest argument.

"Why do you do this to me!"

"I am not doing anything! Why do you always blame me?"

"I can't take it anymore..."

She knew what was coming. Her ears closed shut, but it still came.

...we are THROUGH!"

Her heart broke into a million pieces and she began questioning her own involvement. Why me? What did I do to deserve this?

Her parents glanced at her with surprise. After an awkward silence, her mother reassured her that everything was all right, but it clearly was not. And it never would be.

She darted upstairs as quickly as her feet allowed. Her hand pushed open the bedroom door, and she dived onto the comfort and security of her bed.

Tears tumbled down her cheeks and settled on the pillow. After a few minutes, she raised her head slightly and gazed at a family photo. Her angry hands raced toward it. When she reached the snapshot, her fury was released, and all that remained were scattered pieces on the floor.

She rushed back to her bed and began to cry again just as her little sister peeked into the room. The smaller girl saw the destroyed photo. With interest, she walked toward it, gathered it up, and quietly left the room.

Propping herself up against the backboard, the older girl reached for her diary. Her hands turned to the next page for that day's secret entry.

Dear Diary,

Today was horrible! My parents are getting divorced! I can't believe it! Well...maybe I sort of knew it was coming, but it still hurts. How is Daisy going to deal with this? She's four years younger than I am! Gosh! My head is overflowing with questions and concerns. Who will I live with? Will my family ever be together? Will I ever see my annoying little sister again?

And where did Daisy run off to now? Just as this thought entered her mind, a tiny head poked out from the entrance. "Come on in, Daisy," she said fighting back the desire to continue her crying. There was no need to worry her little sister even more than she was already. Daisy hesitated but then advanced cautiously with something in her hand. A smile lit up the older sister's face. For several minutes, the two girls held each other and rocked themselves gently on the bed.

Later that afternoon, a new entry was made in the diary that so often focused on misery and despair.

I am starting to look at my life from a different vantage point. My sister just handed me a photograph. It wasn't any old snapshot. It was the one I ripped up earlier in the day, and she taped it back together! I never knew a small child could be so wise. Daisy didn't just tape an old picture together, she made an impact on my life by teaching me an important lesson. My family might not remain together in one place, but we should never let anything tear apart our love for each other.

America

by Tayana Panova

America. That's the word that everybody repeated over and over again excitedly as they packed our things into big boxes and bags. Sometimes I would just sit at the end of the bed and watch all the commotion. I still didn't know what "America" meant and how big a change it would become in my life later on. Mommy said it was a place and Daddy showed me pictures, but I couldn't understand. The topic was soon forgotten, but as time passed it became harder to forget.

The big day finally came when we boarded the plane. I had already started to understand what America was, and I was worried about what it would be like to live there. I had never been on a plane before so I was a bit nervous about the whole flying business as well. I had that funny feeling in my stomach, and I couldn't stop biting my lip. I got to keep a little sack of toys with me so I held it very close making sure that it was safe. When the announcement came that we were lifting off I sank deep into my seat and tightly squeezed Daddy's large hand. A little after we had left the ground I cautiously peeked out the small oval window to see the many villages, hills, tall mountains, and rivers that were my country becoming smaller and fainter and after a while completely disappearing. I wondered if I would ever see my beautiful, old home again. I continued to stare out the window but all

I could see were white clouds and blue skies.

Once I unglued my eyes from the sky I took a deep breath and started to daydream about "America." I knew exactly what it would look like because I had seen it on TV many times. We would walk down a long path with gigantic pink lollipops and candy canes on both sides while big mice, doggies, and ducks (from Disney land) would come and dance with us. Then we would eat chocolate candies and live in a big blue castle. I smiled at this thought and happily wiggled in my seat. I explained to Mommy what it would look like, just to inform her, but she said that it wouldn't look like that.

"She just doesn't know," I convinced myself because I was absolutely positive that I was right.

As the trip neared an end I was practically jumping in my seat with excitement. We were almost in "America." After the landing, which was a bit scary, I said goodbye to the nice smiling ladies at the front of the plane and skipped down the steps with Mommy and Daddy walking not far behind me. My heart thumped in my chest all the way out of the airport, but as we climbed into our taxi I swallowed my laughter and my smile faded.

America was just a place. The air smelled weird and freaky clean. It was filled with tall buildings, gray skies, and lots of weaving streets loaded with cars. It was even worse than home. It had more smoke and more people and the color green was scarce. I couldn't understand what all that excitement was about. This place was horrible, and I felt homesick just looking out of the window of the car. There was no pink candy or dancing animals and I felt lied to. Then I saw the pretty lights sparkling from the tall dark structures and the bright signs rising from the sides of the road. They were so beautiful as they twinkled together with the stars across the sky, and a smile spread over my face. It was different, but maybe it wasn't all that bad. I hugged my sack of toys and snuggled up to Mommy.

"Welcome home," she said.

Trackless

by Beata Fiszler

"Good night, Mom. Good night, Dad."

As I cuddled into the covers of my bed, soothing sounds of snowflakes falling outside my window made it easy to fall asleep. "Swoh. Swih," was all I heard as I entered into dreamland.

After a time, my eyelids slid open expecting the usual bright sun.

to come shining through my window, but instead the dark, quiet chill of night awaited me. It was only midnight.

Two thumps on the roof disrupted the quiet. They echoed in my head, and I clenched my pillow anxiously as I strained to listen if the thumps would come again. Ten seconds later I heard them again.

I crawled out of bed trying to be as quiet as a mouse, but there was nothing I could do about the booming sound of my heart's rapid beating. I tiptoed towards my window for what seemed like hours and hours. As the endless journey moved on, I kept repeating to myself that once I reached the window all I had to do was to check what or who was on the roof. Try as I might, I could not silence the noise of my hair swishing against the silky back of my pajamas.

It was hard to see past the window as the snowflakes glittered against a moonless sky, but I could make out the fact that there were no tracks on the snow. Someone on the roof would have to walk on the snow and make footprints, wouldn't he? Unless it wasn't a person at all but a ghost. Before I investigated any further, I took my stuffed raccoon with me just in case there was danger up ahead.

At window after window I looked for any sign of footprints. There was no evidence of anything lurking on the roof except for the incessant thumping. The last place to look was the window in my brother's room.

The thumps intensified second after second as I neared his room. I shut my eyes not ready for what seemed to be coming up. My sweaty fingers tips clenched the doorknob and turned. I swung open the door. My heart started beating so fast I thought it would just shoot out of my body like a bullet from a gun. I inched open my eyes to find my brother serenely sleeping like nothing had happened. Hadn't he heard it? As I walked toward his window I saw something move from the corner of my eye. I spun over to find my brother still fast asleep, facing the wall, and moving his leg under the covers. Every few seconds, his knee would thump loudly against the wall alongside his bed.

If I told my brother about this the next day he probably wouldn't believe me. I reentered my room, flung myself into bed, and closed my eyes with a greater understanding that everything isn't always as it seems.

No one, not even my friends, had to know about what happened the night I encountered the trackless snow.

All Because of a Bank

by Michelle Logli

I loved my new tooth. It was my first front tooth and the best one I had because it was the biggest, the whitest, and it brightened up my smile. I brushed it after every meal, and I took pride in showing it off to my family. Then one day, an argument with my brother and a run around the house changed everything. My tooth and my brother have not been the same ever since that fateful day.

It was a luminous May evening, and I was sitting on the bed in my pajamas and slippers counting coins in a piggy bank I received from my aunt as a birthday present. It was a glass bank of a clown's face with a circular red nose, bulgy green eyes, and long dark eyelashes. He smiled up at me each time I dropped a coin into a little slot in his head. I had twenty-seven cents, and as I dropped in another shiny silver coin, I had twenty-eight cents. Of course, back then I had no idea that different coins were worth different amounts. It was hard enough for me to just keep count. My final total was sixty-nine cents, twenty more than the previous week.

Instead of patting myself on the back to show my satisfaction, I decided to smile in the mirror. I loved to smile so I could show off my shiny big white tooth. As I stared admiringly at the over-brushed tooth, my brother Tony walked in. Tony was six at the time, two years older than me. He had green eyes, brown wavy hair, and a one-of-a-kind personality. He often looked like he was scheming, and this was one of those times.

As he walked into my room, I could tell by his keen smile that he had something on his mind. Embarrassed about looking at my tooth in the mirror, I decided to stop and pretend I had just started counting coins. I was pouring out all of my savings when he asked if he could use my bank. Of course, I said "No," hoping to end the confrontation, but it was just getting started.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because I'm using it," I replied.

"No, you're not!" he said furiously. "You're counting your money!"

To avoid an argument, I did the first thing that popped into my mind. I picked up my bank and ran.

My house has a hallway that goes entirely around the first level and back to my room. So as I scampered out of my bedroom, I raced down the hall with my brother right behind me. I could hear the clatter of his steps following. I decided to speed up so I could run back into my room and lock the door before he could get in. I turned a corner and entered the kitchen, but my slippers slid across the tile. In those few seconds before falling to the ground, I felt the clown bank slip out of my hand, and I heard my brother shouting. All too quickly, I saw the brown tile beneath me, I felt the hard floor hit my new front tooth, and I went into complete darkness.

Moments later I awoke on the floor amidst scattered pieces of the clown piggy bank with a very sore tooth and tears in my eyes. As the day wore on, I continued to be moody and upset. My gums were bruised, I didn't want to smile, and I just knew that no matter how hard I brushed, my mouth would be black and blue for the rest of my life. Later, Mom made an appointment with the dentist, and he said the tooth had to be removed.

On the day of my appointment, I was very anxious. My brother was uncharacteristically quiet, full of guilt and sorrow. When we arrived at the dentist's office, butterflies were fluttering

in my stomach and thoughts were flying through my mind. *What is he going to do? Will it hurt? Will I cry?* My mother helped the dentist secure me to a papoose, and before I knew what was happening, the dentist stuck a metal thing in my mouth and gave my tooth a great tug. It didn't hurt even though I was sure it would. He had given me an injection to dull the pain. The only time I started crying was when I saw the blood.

After surgery, I got stickers and a new toothbrush. One sticker said, "You did great!" and I agreed so I wore it all day. I had survived, but my piggy bank had not. I tried to glue it back together. I tried tape, and I even tried to put mud in the cracks and wait for the mud to dry. Just when I was about to give up, my brother came home with a gift for me. It was the same exact clown piggy bank except it was better because it was from him.

Now as I look back, I believe that everything happened for a reason. My tooth had to be pulled, but I got a new bigger one in its place. Mom says I will have this one for the rest of my life, and this tooth definitely beats out my old one. It is whiter, bigger, and makes my whole mouth sprinkle. In addition, the aftermath of this incident allowed me to see the good, thoughtful side of Tony as well as helping me learn some valuable lessons. I learned to never run from my brother, never run while holding a fragile object, and never run on a tile floor while wearing slippers.

That was certainly a lot for a four year old to learn.

Two Sisters Too Many

by Jenny Shin

As I look out the window at my adorable little twin sisters, I remember a time before they were born. Back then, I did not know what to expect, and I guess I feel a little guilty about the selfish way I reacted.

It was the day of the "Big Surprise." Mom and Dad had asked me to come down to the living room for a little chat. I had an odd feeling about this because it was rare that our family gathered together in one place. We were mostly independent; Mom could be found in the kitchen, Dad on the couch watching television, and I was usually upstairs doing my homework. As I entered the room, I could see Mom and Dad waiting anxiously for me. When I finally sat down with an impatient look on my face, they said with great enthusiasm, "Heather, you are going to be a big sister!" Of course I thought they were kidding, but it was not April fools and my parents did not joke around like this. I just could not get myself to believe it. I was an average fourteen year old girl, and my parents suddenly expected me to accept such unpredictable news. As far as I was concerned, babies were just little creatures who cry and mess up everything.

"Don't worry. Your sister will be great and you'll love her!" Mom said, as I sat there like a dummy with my mouth hanging open. I wanted to say, "Oh sure, Mom. I would just love to have a little baby

crawling around and bothering me!" but that would have hurt her feelings so I kept it to myself. I thought for a moment that Mom wanted to tell me something else, but she decided against it. I was upset enough as it was.

The more I thought it over, the more miserable I became. What will my friends think when I am unable to go to the movies because I have to take care of an irritating little baby? How can my parents do this to me? What will it be like to be a big sister? Will I have to watch her all the time? Will my parents make me change the diapers?

When it was finally time for the delivery several months later, Dad and I sat on the hard, cold waiting room seats while I prayed that my mom would be okay. After what seemed like an eternity, the doctor came out of the emergency room and announced the arrival of two beautiful girls. Of course I had no clue what he was talking about, but that was not my main priority at the moment. All I wanted to do was see my mom, but the moment I walked into the room, I could not help but notice there were two small heads. TWO?! Mom never told me there were two of them!

That was almost a year ago, and since that time, my life has really changed.

In a brief moment of insanity last week, I told my parents I would watch the twins for an evening as Mom and Dad celebrated their anniversary. I only had one request. The girls should be sound asleep before I'm left alone with them.

I told my parents to have a magnificent time and stood in the doorway until their car was out of sight. Haley and Heidi were sleeping, but only fairytales have happy endings. Within ten minutes Haley started to cry. I ran into the room and tried to make her stop, but I must have been too late because Heidi woke up and started to cry, too. Well, I knew I would never be able to stop them, so I just put them on the living room floor to crawl around. They stopped when they were tired of crying, and found interest in adventuring around the room. While they were exploring, I received a phone call from my best friend and sort of lost track of time. After thirty minutes or so, I went back to check on the explorers, but they were nowhere to be seen. I panicked and started looking all over the house – behind the couch, under the beds, by the TV, in the bathroom – but I had no luck finding them. Just then, I heard one of my sisters cry. It came from outside. I rushed into the yard and found them sitting on the grass, fighting over a tennis ball. I was so relieved that I found them, and that is when I knew how much I really loved them.

Now, I cannot believe that I ever thought the twins were annoying. They are everything I ever wanted. If I could go back to the past, the only thing I would change would be my attitude. It turns out that the unexpected surprise that made me so unhappy was the most wonderful gift I have ever received.

Far Below

by Magda Jasowicz

Butterflies pranced freely in her stomach. The cement felt rough beneath her feet. Looking back, there was a long line of people enjoying themselves behind her. Ahead of her, there was only one. It was too late to back down, to change her mind. She would have to go through it, ready or not.

With both hands gripping the thin metal railing, she continued climbing the ladder slowly and deliberately. The chilly feeling of the breeze on her wet skin usually bothered her, but now, she was too scared to notice. Today was different. How could she have let her friends persuade her to do this? Practicing when only a few people were around was quite normal, but diving in front of others on a busy Saturday was completely new to her. She felt a slight chill on her back as she neared the top of the ladder and watched the diver just ahead of her spring forward off the end of the board. Bracing herself against the hand rails, she pushed up from the top step and moved gingerly out onto the board.

Glancing down, she watched the clear blue water lapping calmly up against the cement walls below her. Far below her. It seemed higher than it used to when she would run and jump from the board, laughing while curling up into a cannonball. This was going to be a serious dive, and it was no laughing matter. What if she couldn't go through with it? What if she jumped instead and then had to listen to a few of her insufferable teammates chastise her for chickening out? She couldn't let that happen.

But it really was a long way down.

She had been diving for almost a year and practicing for this one for the past few weeks, but never from this height. Why hadn't she tried this a few times from the high dive after swim practice? What made her think she could step up and nail it on her first try? She stepped closer to the end of the board. Without making eye contact or searching for familiar faces at poolside, she knew her friends were watching. She closed her eyes and remained perfectly still, knees bent slightly, toes on the edge, heels planted firmly. Did she really have the courage to do this?

After taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, a sense of calm serenity put her at ease, allowing her body to make the decision for her. She still didn't know if she could do it, but she certainly wanted to try.

Flexing her knees and springing out over the water, she felt herself fly away from the board on the wings of her newly discovered inner strength.

A Disappointing Christmas

by Melanie Foytik

It was early in the morning; the light snowfall had ended just before sunrise. She couldn't wait any longer and eagerly skipped down the hall into the living room. Under the Christmas tree were more presents than expected causing her eyes to widen with joy. All she really wanted from Santa Claus was a blond-haired doll she saw on TV a few months before. What was so wrong with wanting a doll? Whenever her mom took her along to the store she would enthusiastically point to a few toys she really liked and demand "Mom, I have to have it. I really want it" until her mom would grow tired of holding the line and reluctantly buy it for her. She could sense that her family thought enough was enough. They believed that because she was the youngest, she was more than a little "spoiled" and did not need any more toys. They just didn't understand. It wasn't like that at all. She just wanted what she wanted. Did that really make her "spoiled"?

As her mom knocked on the doors of her brother and two sisters one after another to alert them that the family was gathering in the living room, she continued to search for her special gift. Soon everyone started opening presents, the wrapping paper flying everywhere. The first box she opened had a pink shirt with flowers on it. It was okay, but she wanted one of the boxes to have her doll in it. She frowned and kicked at the floor, disappointment building inside of her. One after another she opened boxes, pretended unconvincingly to smile, and remained irritated and unfulfilled.

There was one box left. It was the largest one, and it had her name on it. As she took a little piece of the wrapping paper off, she saw the word 'doll' on the box. Quickly she tore all the colorful paper off the heavy box and saw a little doll with black hair wearing a purple dress. It was the wrong doll. Didn't they know they were choosing the wrong one? They probably knew and did it anyway.

She glanced around the room at the joy and appreciation on the faces of her brother and sisters. They all seemed to really enjoy their gifts even if the presents weren't exactly what they had hoped for. Her brother talked all winter about wanting some new video games, but he seemed quite pleased anyway with the football helmet he received instead. He jumped up and hugged his dad before trying on the helmet and dodging a few imaginary tackles.

She looked down at her new doll and forced a faint smile. Why does it have to have black hair and not blond?

Christmas was absolutely ruined.

Homesick

by Inga Majewska

Pleasing thoughts of Father's warm smile and Mother's delighted grin happily wandered through her mind. It was not much longer until the aircraft would touch down smoothly on her homeland, allowing her to see the family waiting for her at the airport. Soon she would see their beloved faces and hear them tell her how home seemed so empty without their "little joy" as they take turns holding her and giving her piggy-back rides. She found herself smiling at this image while the soft hush of the plane whispered through her ears. She loved the sound for it meant that she was slowly approaching her destination.

Through the window, a great view was visible. She could see a vast expanse of never-ending ocean changing colors from dark blue to misty green. When her eyes finally became tired of this endless scene, she turned to look at her aunt who was her guardian for the trip. Her aunt looked relaxed with hands on crossed legs and tired eyes closed while the youngster herself was restless. The girl was anxious, jittery, and wanted to squeak in an attempt to release the fluttering butterflies growing in her stomach. But the plane was quiet, and she feared many eyes would be staring at her if she made a sound. All through the summer she thought she would not miss her family, but there she was on a flight back home, wanting their loving hugs and kisses for herself. A moment later, a loud beep filled her ears, followed by a woman's talking through the speaker telling passengers the plane was preparing to land.

As the announcement ended and the clicking sound of seatbelts being fastened surrounded her, it was impossible not to grin. Not grinning felt like trying to fit a puzzle piece where it did not belong. In a matter of seconds her grin turned into a broad smile, and with her closed eyes she once again she saw her family in the back of her mind.

This was going to be a beautiful day.