



2024

Larry Kruse Memorial Writing Contest

Northeast Iowa Community College

Congratulations to our student writers!

Thanks to everyone who entered this year's NICC Writing Contest!

www.nicc.edu/writingcontest

“The goal of the writing contest is threefold: one, to encourage students to put forth their best effort in writing; two, to recognize our students for excellence in writing; and three, to reward their creativity, their interest, and their efforts to be good writers.” — *Larry Kruse*



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About the Writing Contest

The 4th annual Larry Kruse Memorial Writing Contest celebrates the writing of students at Northeast Iowa Community College.

Lawrence "Larry" Kruse (1945-2020) was a writing instructor in the Peosta and Dubuque Learning Centers. His gentle approach and unexpected humor made him a favorite resource for many student writers.

Larry actually launched the first writing contest on the Peosta campus in 2002, twenty-two years ago! That contest was held every spring until Larry retired from his Learning Center work in 2015. For the next several years, Larry stayed involved by serving as a writing contest judge.

Due to a car accident in 2020, Larry has now passed on to the next stage of writing and revision. We hope the ideas that he planted will encourage student writers for years to come!



In this year's writing contest, NICC students from across the district were encouraged to enter their original writing from the 2023-2024 academic year.

Each student could enter once, in one of three categories: **short essays** (up to 1100 words), **long essays** (1101-3000 words), or **fiction** (up to 3000 words or 10 pages).

Judges selected winning entries from a total of 50 eligible entries. First place winners will receive a \$300 NICC scholarship. Second-place winners will receive a \$200 NICC scholarship. Third place winners earn recognition. All of the winning entries appear in this booklet and on the Learning Center webpage at

www.nicc.edu/writingcontest

A big thank you to every student who entered this year's NICC writing contest! We appreciate your good work and effort. **Keep writing!**

2024 Writing Contest organizers

Pamela Brandt, Instructional Specialist, Peosta Learning Center

Dorothy Giannakouros, Communications Instructor, Peosta campus

Josh Ratel-Kahn, Communications Instructor, Calmar campus

Jeanne Stannard, Instructional Specialist, Calmar Learning Center

Meet the Judges



Jim Brimeyer

Communications faculty (retired),
Northeast Iowa Community College

As a retired composition and literature instructor at NICC, I am honored to serve as a judge for the 2024 Larry Kruse Memorial Writing Contest. I appreciate being a part of the annual writing contest because I continue to observe the creativity and competency of the excellent writers who enter the NICC contest.

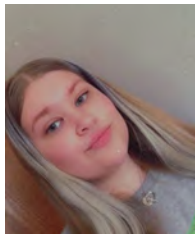


Jim Swenson

Journalist and editor (retired),
Telegraph Herald

Jim Swenson retired in 2023 after a 44-year career in the newspaper business, including nearly 40 in Dubuque. He's also worked for papers in Wisconsin, Missouri, Idaho and Wyoming. He began his career as a sports writer & editor, and later became a features editor. An avid biker and hiker, he has written three books and continues to write articles about local sports history and other topics.

1st Place ✨



The Good Days of Bohemian Baking

Written by **McKenna Hubka**

Dear all new and avid bakers: tell me, what persuaded you to take up the craft of baking? For me, it was my grandmother. Born in Czechoslovakia, my grandmother possessed the art and craftsmanship of baking for all occasions. Grandma was an angel, her short, silver hair always graced with loose curls on the top of her head. Her voice was always as smooth as velvet when she spoke, especially in her native tongue of Czech. Kolaches were our favorite thing to bake together when I would come to her house; their buttery crust with a small jewel of fruit preserves in the center filled the air with the aroma of baked goods.

We always prepared dozens of kolaches for the annual Czech Days our hometown of Protivin hosts. To this day, I can still feel the dough between my fingers. "Now, only add a little water at a time. We don't want the dough to become soupy," my grandmother would say. This always ensured my paying close attention to the dough, afraid to destroy it. Most of her recipe cards were worn and tattered, yet she knew every ingredient and instruction down to a science!

Czech Days happens once a year, typically in August in my hometown of Protivin. Kolaches were and continue to be a hit with those who attend, being the staple treat of the festival. Flavors ranging from tart lemon, tangy blueberry, to citrusy orange marmalade were among the crowd pleasers. My grandma, however, kept with the classics of Czechoslovakia, such as fresh-fruity raspberry, sticky apricot, and juicy cherry.

Each year, grandma would comment, "The last thing I need is for my mother to be rolling around in her grave over lemon kolaches!" That statement would make me giggle as a child, but after my grandma's passing, I grew to appreciate the classic, original flavors more.

Now, you best believe the Bohemian grandmothers would

gather at the Protivin Community Center each year to whip up dozens of kolaches for the festival.

Kolache making was a delicate, nail-biting experience for me as a child. Once we placed the fruit preserves in the center of the dough, we met the four corners in the center, creating a little "love knot," as my grandma would call it.

She made sure I felt comfortable when baking the intricate desserts, always made sure to let the townsfolk know that I was of great assistance in making them, and always put her arm around me and pulled me in for a side embrace. Marking the Ziplock bags with the flavor, date, and baker's name, my hands shook while writing. After writing on the bag, my eyes skimmed for any possible mistake. Our hands were always smudged with black sharpie after marking the bags.

Setting up our baggies of kolaches for Czech Days was always met with a bundle of nerves. Will they taste right? What if I messed them up and grandma doesn't let me help her anymore? What if the neighbor sells out because hers are more flavorful? What will we do with twelve dozen kolaches at home in the freezer?

Those fears, however, would be squashed like a June bug. People came from all over Howard County to buy and try our kolaches.

Grandma always said, "Have patience. Kolaches are a love language that cannot be forced onto people", and of course, she was always right.

It was as though a flower bloomed inside me when I saw how much people enjoyed the buttery, sweet, delectable Czech dessert. I imagined pinching the middle together on each one, placing the preserves in the middle, and baking them, but now, the kolaches were off to spread the love that grandma and I baked inside each and every one.

Grandma always said, "Have patience. Kolaches are a love language that cannot be forced onto people"; and of course, she was always right.

2nd Place ✨ ✨



A Helping Hand

Written by *Heidi Pechota*

SHORT ESSAY

Ninety-two percent of residents in Decorah, Iowa, are Caucasian. My biracial son is a part of the minority, making up only one percent of African Americans. I want my son to feel a sense of inclusiveness to be able to bond with others who share the same culture, language, advantages, and or struggles that may exist residing in a predominantly white city. Naturally, as a mother, I tried to connect my son to other minorities within the community. This is how I met my friend R.

I noticed R at a football game alongside a Hispanic boy around my son’s age. I assumed the boy was her son. She looked like a young mom; I was thirty-two years old with a thirteen-year-old. The fact she was a young mom was interesting to me because I was the youngest mom in my son’s class. I was hoping we could connect.

A few months later, I saw her at a restaurant, and we started talking about the Toys for Tots event I was helping with. She said that she was fluent in Spanish and that she would be happy to help translate. Shortly after our encounter, I received a call from E. M., the Toys for Tots coordinator for many counties in Iowa. He asked if I would join him in supplying immigrant families with clothing and toys in Clarion, Iowa, on December 19, 2021.

I was given very little information about the families. I knew a lot of them didn’t have proper housing or proper clothing for the winter months that we were currently in.

I had a week to get ready for the event. Luckily, my friends had offered to help earlier that year. It didn’t take much effort to get those volunteers lined up besides a couple of phone calls to those who had offered to help. My friends R and K had a trailer that we borrowed. My sweet son and his two friends helped me load the trailer the night before, on his birthday. The trailer had high chairs, strollers, clothing, shoes, winter gear, cribs, diapers, and toys. Rachel drove up separately and met me in Clarion with R and K.

We arrived at a large metal building where a loading dock was present. The trailer was probably ten feet long. R backed up the trailer; as we were helping unload the garage, the garage door went up. We were greeted by many volunteers, including E. The building was full of tables covered in toys. The toys were arranged by age. It made it easy for us to unpack the toys and put them in the desired location. The clothing was organized in big, clear bags by size. The coats and gloves we had to put on the floor due to the lack of space left on the tables.

Before long, the event started, and hundreds of people showed up. Ninety-nine percent of the people who received the services were migrants. Migrants of all different ages. They were given a big clear bag and were told to take four toys for each child. When it came to the clothing, I didn’t set a limit. There was not one person that took more than what they needed.

These families were all in the same situation; they all came from the border, many from Guatemala and Honduras. They were all trying to make this new place a home. Some had been living in Clarion for a while, and others only for a few months. But all of them needed help. There were a few children who spoke English. R translated the entire event.

I was able to find some information about how the immigrants got there. Some of them were dropped off in random areas with large hog farms. Some had family in the area from previous drop-offs. Many were seeking asylum or trying to flee from domestic violence. There was an immigration refugee organization near Clarion as well.

I was there for probably six hours and was working on helping families the duration of the time. During that time, R walked up to me with a fourteen-year-old, translating for her that she needed baby supplies. The girl wanted to take the pack-and-play. She had been raped while crossing the border and was expecting a child. She had nothing for the baby. The fourteen-year-old expectant mother wore a t-shirt two sizes too small in 40-degree temperatures.

She helped hundreds of people by knowing this language that bonded them all.

I think my heart broke that evening. The only thing I could do was pray for her and give her everything I could for her unborn child. She left with a winter coat and with almost everything she needed to bring her baby home.

R overheard a conversation between a mother and son. They were stocking up on winter coats, gloves, and hats. The woman had been living in a trailer with no heat or stove. A generous donor gave Kadens Kloset money to use while in Clarion. I knew these funds were to go to that woman. There was a hardware store across the block. R and I walked over to the hardware store and purchased a heater for the trailer. Luckily, her electricity was on. She held onto me and cried on my shoulder. She held me tight and then told me God was going to bless me, and I held her tight while praying to God to help her.

Six hundred families were served on December 19, 2021, and many more throughout the next few days. Christmas was celebrated in everyone's homes, and they all knew we cared. These people's lives were made better by this event, and that was what we intended to do.

I can't help but think about how much of an impact my friend R made that day. I don't speak Spanish. I wouldn't have been able to understand anything they said. These families would not have been able to communicate their needs to me if R had not been present. She helped hundreds of people by knowing this language that bonded them all. They bonded over their origin, culture, language, and work, and their struggle to live in a state that is predominantly English-speaking. A state that isn't inclusive to Spanish speakers. They all have each other, and I don't think they could get through it without one another.



Honorable Mention ☆ ☆ ☆



Stop at a Small Town

Written by **Elizabeth Ross**

SHORT ESSAY

Some trips seem like they will never end, especially when you are 8 years old and the scenery seems like it must be the flattest on earth. Legend has it that if someone's dog runs away in Saskatchewan, Canada, he can still see it running for three days.

And looking out the car window at vast continuous fields, I could easily believe it. The most notable variety in the level terrain was an occasional moose standing surely miles away. The highest amusements were long lines of boxcars my mother led me and my siblings in attempts to count. Beyond those engines, and the obvious fact that somebody cared for the colossal fields of golden wheat and mustard all around us, there hardly seemed to be any sign of fellow human life. Then suddenly, after a series of turns onto more long roads, we arrived in one of the tiniest towns I had ever been to.

My little brother Felix and I could barely contain our exhilaration as we drove into Main Street. If I remember correctly, it was composed of roughly six buildings, including a post office, bank, and porched restaurant. Just like an abandoned ghost town John Wayne might find, not a soul could be seen. Everything was so quiet and still that only better judgment assured me such tidy structures must possess life.

The restaurant was our objective, and my parents had apparently carefully altered our route to get to it. When my Dad finally stopped the car, there was a general rush as we all scrambled out of the vehicle that had served as our prison in recent hours. I was exhilarated to stand again, and quickly followed my Mother's example of performing all the necessary calisthenics for being trapped in the sitting position.

"Finally!" my little brother exclaimed beside me. "Ith thime

to eat!"

My stomach growled in agreement. After traveling past so much of *nothing*, it almost seemed too wonderful to us that we had reached a restaurant, complete with people and food.

As we entered the doorway, we were greeted by a small room containing a few empty tables and chairs and a girl sitting at a counter. She seemed almost as excited and surprised to see us as we were to be there, and quickly rose from her place.

"Feel free to sit at any table, if you want," she offered hesitantly.

We did want, and quickly chose the nice long table in the center of the room. By the time all of us had settled into our chosen seats, she was passing out simple paper menus for our perusal. Then she told us to let her know when we were ready to order before returning to her place in the corner and diving into a laptop and large textbook.

I would have probably been too distracted to notice this activity, if my older sister Maggie hadn't nudged me gently with her elbow and whispered something along the lines of "Look. I wonder what kind of school she is doing?"

I don't remember what kind of food was offered or what we each chose to eat, except that most of us received french fries with our entrée, and I deeply enjoyed whatever else had been on my plate.

Not long after we had received our meals from the young girl, a small figure slipped into the scene and climbed into an empty chair beside Maggie. It was a little boy, perhaps 2 or 3 years old, whose dark hair and eyelashes gave him away to be our studious server's younger brother.

He didn't say a word and just sat at our table, smiling and watching us with wide brown eyes. Leaning forward in his

Legend has it that if someone's dog runs away in Saskatchewan, Canada, he can still see it running for three days.

chair, he casually reached out and took a French fry from Maggie's plate.

At about this moment, his older sister looked up from her deep concentration. "I am so sorry!" she apologized, rushing forward. "You see, he likes to sit and eat with customers."

"It's alright."

"We don't mind."

"You can let him stay", we all hurried to offer in some form or another before she could forcibly carry her little brother from our table.

So he stayed, and we gave him his own little plate with a few French fries and ketchup. As it turned out he wasn't as ravenously hungry as I had personally assumed when I offered to donate my fries to his plate as well. Spending much more time holding each fry than he did eating, it seemed he was more interested in our company than our food.

I was just starting to contemplate the friendly environment of this small town, when suddenly a golf cart zoomed into view and screeched to a stop in front of the restaurant. The express vehicle was driven by an old, frail-looking man who slowly climbed out and made his way to the door at a turtle's pace.

My brother Felix, who had seen this happening, leapt from his spot and ran to hold the door open. He made it with plenty of time to spare, and waited patiently as the

gentleman shuffled in. The double-tasking student didn't look at all as surprised by this new arrival as she had been by us. Instead, she seemed to expect him.

After carefully making his way to the counter, he simply stated, "I'll have the usual." Nothing more was necessary. She signaled her understanding by giving a quick estimation of when his order would be ready, and without another word the old man turned around and began the long journey back to his waiting cart. Again, he slowly passed through the door, which brother once more opened, and shuffled across the sidewalk. Upon climbing into his seat, the cart suddenly jerked backward before leaping forward and streaking out of sight.

By the time these events concluded, most of us were finishing up our meals. Our time in the town was quickly coming to a close. Even the little boy decided he was finished and left our table for a back room where I imagined the rest of his family would be found. With the lowering sun, a slightly gloomy apprehension of the inevitable drive ahead settled around us.

The bill came and went before my father signaled our departure by clearing his throat and standing. As we made our way back to our van, a familiar speeding cart returned, and I silently said my goodbyes to the quaint community, reflecting that it was valuable in this busy world to experience the simplicity and beauty of a small town in the middle of nowhere.

1st Place 



Healing or Dying: The Care Is the Same

Written by *Debbie Wessels*

Embarking on my journey of attending nursing school and clinical instruction filled my head with preconceived Florence Nightingale moments. I envisioned myself hustling through the hospital hallway to the call light illuminated overhead, hearing murmurs of concerned family members, the clanging of the breakfast cart, and a request for something stat. I would arrive in my patients' room to clean their wounds, provide medication, and ensure their nourishment so they could return to their everyday life. I would begin my mastery of nursing by assisting those who were healing.

I got it wrong, though, in my preconceived thoughts. I learned the most from my patient who would never return to good health. The medications I administered were not for healing but only to provide comfort. There were no meals I could give that would sustain his life. This patient would never go home again. He had lived the last of his everyday life. This patient taught me that true mastery came when caring for those near death.

Arriving in his room, he was experiencing uncontrollable bleeding from a surgical wound. He had a port removed from his upper chest, and the incision made was left open for healing. My first thought was not about my patient, but about me, and I concentrated on how this disruption would affect the timing of the patient care I had planned for the day. As I reflect on these thoughts now, I am ashamed of their selfishness.

My patient's medication administration record documented receiving his blood thinner injection on time. His night nurse spoke aloud, realizing she should have thought about his current situation, and questioned the shot. She called the attending physician in charge for direction on further administration of the medication. The decision was a temporary suspension. I observed my patient moan in pain as nurses attempted to keep the blood at bay. At that moment, I understood it was necessary to consider the bigger picture of my patient's

present condition before administering medications to ensure they would not have a negative effect. My duty to my patient was to contact the healthcare provider to relay my concerns.

I appreciated the nurse acknowledging that she could do nothing to stop the bleeding. The nurse's next phone call was to a wound specialist who, upon arrival, knew precisely what needed to occur to curtail the bleeding and give my patient relief. I saw this as the perfect example of a nurse knowing her limits and seeking assistance from other healthcare team members.

The bleeding had no sooner stopped when it was time for me to administer his morning medication. As my clinical instructor and I reentered the room, my patient was settling in after all the hustle and bustle he had just been through. He was not ready to take his medications, and even when the request was made a second time, he was adamant about wanting fifteen minutes to catch his breath.

Looking at my instructor, I knew I needed direction to proceed. She looked at my patient, smiled, and told him we would return. As a nurse, I must remember to accommodate my patients and understand that my preconceived schedule must be fluid. My patient gets to decide the timing of their care.

Mid-morning, my patient's daughters arrived for a visit, and at the same time, the attending physician came to talk to my patient regarding discharge and his need for extended care. I do not think the timing of either's arrival was a coincidence.

The doctor told my patient he would need twenty-four hours of care and stated he would be releasing him soon. The doctor wanted to know how my patient felt about the possibility of living in a long-term care facility.

My patient was adamant that he was returning to his home and that his neighbor was more than willing to assist him with his daily needs. There were back-and-forth exchanges between my patient, his daughters,

and the doctor. My patient's mind was made up, and he told everyone in the room that he would go home when discharged.

One daughter left the room in tears. The doctor then asked my patient if he understood he would not be getting better. My patient disagreed because he knew, given time, he would put weight on and be strong enough to care for himself. His voice was like a foot stomping on the ground to make a point.

I stood silently against the wall, knowing his wants were not reality, but secretly hoping he would be allowed to die at home.

The physician advised the daughters that if their father is deemed mentally competent, his discharge location would be for him to choose. However, the doctor assured them that he had already scheduled a psychiatric consultation for later that day. The psychiatrist would determine if their father was mentally competent to make life decisions on his own, which would include whether he could return to his home.

I felt my body tense as I observed them talking about my patient as if he were no longer in the room. I am sure it was my naivety, but I felt like I was observing them hatching their secret preconceived plan. I glanced at my patient, watching his eyes move from one to the other as their conversation continued to exclude him. I bit my tongue but wanted to point in his direction so they knew he was still there. The conversation ended; the doctor advised the daughters they would be notified of the results of the psychiatric evaluation that same day.

Shortly after, my patient's daughters' visit was over. The daughters left with a quick hug and a kiss.

I was still standing against the wall, stunned. My patient had just been treated like he had no significance. The quietness of the room pulled me back to the now. I took a deep breath and smiled at my patient.

He asked me to grab his phone. He wanted to show me pictures of him from eight months ago. Looking at the photos, I told him I never would have imagined him with all that long hair. We both laughed when he pulled up the ones of him in his gangster look. He then showed me his Harley, which was in the garage at his home. His demeanor turned somber, his gaze frozen on the bike.

I wondered to myself, what was he thinking? Was he picturing himself on his last Harley ride with his long hair flying in the wind? Did he know then that it would be his last time on the bike?

He granted my request to get him cleaned up for the day. There was

silence between us as I carefully washed his face. There was no communication until I brought the washcloth down the length of his arm. When I reached his wrist, I felt him grab my hand. This was the first time I realized that clasped hands could speak. The tightness with which he held my hand told my heart he needed comfort for his fear. The reality of the end of his life was becoming clear.

I have gained nursing knowledge from the patients I have cared for since. They have included patients recovering from surgeries, healing from injuries, babies who had just been born, and those experiencing brain health crises. However, it was my dying patient who taught me the most. It is this knowledge I still hold in my heart. It directs my nursing care of those who are healing and dying.

I felt my body tense as I observed them talking about my patient as if he were no longer in the room.

2nd Place ✨ ✨



A Moment in Time

Written by **Shauntal Weatherspoon**

As I lay in bed tossing and turning, finding comfort felt impossible with another body residing within my own. I awoke, fighting the relentless sensation of having to pee. The urge becoming dire with each passing minute, I stubbornly crept to the edge of the bed, trying not to wake my partner sleeping peacefully beside me. With as much strength as possible, I arose blindly, finding my way to the door.

As I opened the door, I was greeted by warm, gold hues creeping in through sheer curtains. For a brief moment, I stood in the door frame, smiling. The bright rays from the morning sun bounced from the frosted windows onto the snow-filled ground. Snowflakes falling in slow motion, it seemed. I felt a sense of calm. An oasis of serenity washed over me.

Giving support to my round belly, I took a few short steps into the bathroom. I stood inches away from the toilet, anticipating the relief of release. Then, all of a sudden, a warm stream of fluid trickled its way down my legs.

A puddle formed beneath my feet as the slow stream started to gush. The realization set in, and I thought, "This is it — it's happening."

I called out to Joshua, who had begun getting dressed. "I think my water broke!"

Joshua rushed in. Light danced in his eyes as he replied, "Heck yeah, I don't have to go to work!"

I waddled my way down the stairs into the dining room as Joshua rushed past me to his mom's room to tell her the exciting news. We packed our essentials and grabbed the hospital bag I had prepared the week before. I filled the bag with the baby's first outfit, a blankie, chapstick, and anything we thought we needed to help us through labor and delivery.

The drive was a long one, as the roads were slick. I don't

remember much conversation from our time in the car. All I remember is praying to God that we would make it to the hospital and that I wouldn't be delivering a baby on the side of the road in the middle of a snowstorm. We arrived at the labor and delivery section of Mayo Clinic in Rochester around 9 a.m. on a Saturday. When we checked in, the receptionist asked if I was positive that I was in labor.

"My water broke," I said.

She proceeded to question me, "Are you sure your water broke? Or were you leaking urine?"

I pulled up the Christmas-themed plaid nightgown I had worn to bed. Annoyed with explaining the complications of my pregnancy at every visit, I replied in short, "I am positive that my water broke, and I am in labor. We live an hour and a half away. My cervix was sewn shut to stop premature birth, and the doctor removed the suture yesterday. I have been leaking clear, thick fluid since I woke up this morning. I am standing in a puddle, and it does not feel like I am just urinating."

The receptionist stood in disbelief and looked over the counter onto the floor for evidence. She then moved with urgency. She grabbed a wheelchair and rushed us to a room, apologizing for not comprehending the gravity of the situation. She told us we would wait for the labor and delivery team to speak with us, and then the nurse would move us to the room where we'd deliver our baby boy.

Not a minute later, the team showed up with a bed. I was transferred from the wheelchair to the bed down the hall and onto an elevator. Joshua followed closely behind. When we reached the threshold of our room, I became overwhelmed with excitement. The room was bigger than I expected. There was an incubator where the baby would sleep and a recliner chair for dad to sit in. The room was bright and smelled of fresh sanitizer. Not the most comforting of smells, but at least we knew it

There was an incubator where the baby would sleep and a recliner chair for dad to sit in.

was clean. The nurse hooked me to a monitor to track contractions and the baby's heartbeat.

It was hours before any action occurred. The hours felt like days as I anticipated what would come next. Different people on our labor and delivery team would check on us, going in and out.

The nurse asked me if I was getting an epidural. I said no. I wanted to feel the feeling of giving birth.

Soon after, my contractions became more intense. I thought more about not knowing how long I'd endure that pain, and my mind swayed. I regrettably opted for the epidural. After the anesthetist administered the epidural, the nurse reentered the room. I remember feeling relieved and simultaneously anxious.

"Push your light when you feel you're ready to push."

I felt nothing from my waist to my feet. I was immobile. "How will I know? I can't feel anything," I replied.

"When you feel like you're about to have a big bowel movement, you'll be ready to push."

Time went on, and I started to doze off. I heard the beeping of the monitors getting louder and faster. The door swung open, and the nurse asked if I was ready to push.

Still, I felt nothing.

"It's time," she said.

The labor and delivery nurses and the doctor walked in, in unison.

Preparing to push was different from what they do in the movies and how I imagined it would be.

"Pull your legs to your chest and hold them as you push. Deep breaths in and deep breaths out. On the count of three, you push."

I struggled to bring my knees up to my chest. Joshua rushed to my side to help support my legs as I began to push.

The doctor and nurses encouraged me through every push. "Keep breathing deep breaths. In through your nose, out through your mouth."

"You're doing great!"

"Almost there, last one!"

All of this motivated me to keep pushing as I held in my screams.

"Ugh! I can't push anymore," I cried in frustration.

"Should we try the vac?" I heard someone say. They brought out a machine that resembled a vacuum cleaner. They explained that the doctor would use the device to suction the baby out because we were losing time, and his heartbeat was fading.

They attempted the vacuum method. I heard chatter in the background: "Fetal heartbeat is still fading, and oxygen levels are dropping."

The doctor turned to me and said, "Do you think you can give it one last push?"

"Yes, I'm ready," I replied. I bucked up and gave it everything I had. With air draining from my lungs, I pushed with every fiber of my being. My ears rang, and the room fell silent.

What was supposed to be the most beautiful moment of my life soon turned into the scariest moment. The doctor pulled my baby boy from my womb, and I felt as if I were between life and death on the planes of another realm.

My eyes became laser-focused on the yellow-gloved hands holding my baby. He made no movements and no sounds. Everyone around me moved hastily. Everything outside those hands became a scattered blur of motion around me.

Darkness then engulfed my mind.

At 12:04 a.m., my world stood still.

Honorable Mention



“The Day the Music Died”

Written by **Matthew Huyer**

It was an end-of-summer day like any other in the prominent St. Louis suburbs. It was hot, but not too hot. Humid, but not too humid. It reminded me of Goldilocks and the Three Bears; everything was just right, or so I thought.

Bouncing across the threshold of my big red front door, I was surprised and excited to see my father at home, something that happened very rarely during the week. He normally got home around 6 p.m., and my normal routine when he got home was to make a White Russian for my father and a Kiddie Cocktail for myself. The drink was refreshing and tasted like sweet fruit with a sour aftertaste.

Being 10, of course, I didn't have anything alcoholic. Grenadine, lime juice, and Sprite were what made my drink, but boy, I made a mean White Russian. I was taught by the best and learned how to be heavy-handed with vodka far too young. At least my father liked them, and our “after work” drinks were a daily ritual.

This would not be the case today. I was about to receive news that would change my life, and the lives of my family, permanently.

“I need you to sit down. I have something to tell you, and it isn't good,” my father said.

“Sure,” I replied and sat down.

I never got to sit on this couch until that day. It was ornate with white cloth and small, delicate, hand-stitched roses on the upholstery, intricate and detailed hand carvings on the exposed lacquered wood armrests, and not a single sign of it being in a house with a family that uses it consistently. It was strictly an adult-only piece of furniture. I knew this couldn't be good, based solely on the seat I was in.

“What have I done wrong? How can I be in trouble?” I asked myself. Quickly going back through the highlights of the past few days, I knew I hadn't done anything worthy of this kind of sit-down talk.

“Son, I made a lot of mistakes, and they've caught up with

me. I was caught stealing money from my work and will be going to prison for a long time,” he said shakily and with shame in his eyes.

I don't remember much of the conversation that followed. I was told “I love you,” a lot during the conversation, but it all washed over me with the shock of the news. I didn't know what to feel. Shame, anger, fear, confusion. These with a myriad of other feelings. Not the easiest thing for a child to digest, let alone understand.

I had no idea what was happening. No idea what the future held. My biggest concern up to that day was whether I'd get the newest game on Nintendo. *Now I've got to process this? What am I supposed to do? What does this all mean?*

Eventually, the family settled down and we all had dinner together. It was a daily ritual that kept us bonded together. We shared the news of each other's day, and worked through any problems we may be having.

Unbeknownst to me, it would be my last normal family dinner. My mother was a woman of strong principles, and this was her one last gift to the man that had betrayed her. The next day he moved out into his own apartment... Yet another change to adjust to.

I found solace in my friends. I was an active member of my baseball team, participated in the elementary school band, and had lots of friends in the neighborhood.

The beauty of a child is that they often judge based on personal actions, not the intricate worries of social status. Interpersonal relationships all boil down to whether one was nice to others. Social status, how much money a family had, how much stuff one had, or where one went for vacation were not concerns to us.

Oh, to be a child again. Then the news broke in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the local television news. My small world that had recently blown up was about to get much more volatile.

Shortly after the news hit, I could tell there was a

difference in how people in the neighborhood were looking at us. Staring that quickly broke when noticed. Hushed conversations that couldn't quite be heard.

All my friends were suddenly busy when I'd show up to ask them to come to play. Plans that had been made weeks in advance were suddenly cancelled. Something was off, and even a child could tell.

It all came to a head when I went next door to ask my best friend to come out to play. His mother answered the door. Nothing unusual there, so I thought I might be ok. Sadly, I was about to learn a very harsh lesson.

"Can Brian come out to play?" I asked.

"No, he's not allowed to come out and play with YOU!" she exclaimed. Punctuating the word *you* in a noticeable way.

"Why not?" I replied.

"Matthew, I'm sorry, but our family doesn't associate with criminals like your father," she told me, pointedly.

"Oh," I replied, defeated and dejected.

Walking away, crying and mad, I figured out that there was a lot more to people than whether they're nice or treat people well. Why this woman felt it necessary to be so harsh with a kid will forever be beyond me, but that's not

for me to analyze.

I learned that social status consumes some people more than others. They're so wrapped up in what things look like that they forget what they are.

That day I promised myself that I'd never treat anyone else that way. The way I felt was so awful I knew that nobody deserved to be belittled that way.

"No, he's not allowed to come out and play with YOU!" she exclaimed. Punctuating the word you in a noticeable way.

Later in life I learned how to cope with this life-shaping event. Lots of reading, soul-searching, and sadly, lots of time alone, taught

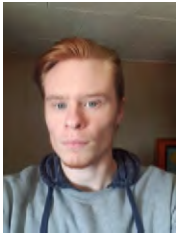
me to be incredibly careful about who I decide to be friends with. Careful about who I decide to let into my life.

I made a vow to be the kind of person that I would want to be around. A task that's much easier said than done and is still a struggle to live up to.

Luckily, I found a passage that struck home. In the book *Letter to My Daughter*, Maya Angelou wrote: "I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it."

She summarized exactly what I felt and how I wanted to move forward. I work to be a good person daily. I don't always succeed; however, nothing worth achieving is easy or smooth.

1st Place ✨



C.E. Wants to Be a Better Person

Written by **Colson Cruciani**

My name is **Christopher Erikson**, but most people call me *Chris*. I don't have many hobbies or interesting facts about myself. I once told my sister she looked like Quasimodo in her wedding dress. That wasn't a great move on my part, but she got over it eventually... after she punched me in the face. To be fair, her dress had this weird poof on her back, so she did resemble Quasimodo in some regards, but I'm also the kind of person who says the wrong things at the wrong time.

Take, for instance, when my girlfriend Mia told me: "I love you."

And my only response was: "You'll get over it."

Look, before you get up in arms or angry, I should warn you about something: I'm not a very good person. There are three definitive truths about me:

- 1) My name is Chris Erikson.
- 2) I'm not a good person by societal standards, or personal standards.
- 3) I work for a company as a mediary opportunist consultant.

If this is a confusing title to you, then good. It's supposed to be confusing. I've found the more confusing a job title is, the more people will pretend to respect you. It's a weird thing we've developed as a society.

Kind of like how people aren't *sandwich makers* anymore at certain unnamed establishments, but rather, *sandwich artists* or *sandwich designers*. We change words and titles instead of actually improving anything because it's easier that way. Cost less money.

For me, *mediary opportunist consultant* basically meant bearer of bad news. It was my job to deliver the news whenever someone was let go or fired from our company. I didn't get to decide who was fired. That's for some

faceless, nameless manager with a World's Best Boss mug on their desk. I was just the messenger.

One of my last assignments occurred about two weeks after that unfortunate incident with my girlfriend, Mia. It was a particularly tricky task because the person I needed to fire was never in the office. You can't really fire someone if they don't show up to the building. You could try to do it over Skype or Zoom, but more often than not, that just resulted in chaos. There were always too many glitches to get the point across in an effective manner. My job required a certain level of finesse. I didn't have that level of finesse, but I was comfortable with people hating me, and on occasion, threatening me for taking away their jobs. So, management kept me on.

The employee I was supposed to fire was— if I'm being honest, I don't know his name. We'll just call him *The Associate*. His job at the company was to... well, it must not have been crucial considering upper management terminated his position. No boss was ever going to fire an employee if they were necessary to the company... right?

Like I said, he was never in the office. Managers were getting antsy about it. They just wanted him out before the end of the season. Something to do with certain clauses in his contract. So, they told me to get creative about it.

I got creative.

One Friday after work, I went to The Associate's house. Completely unprofessional and inappropriate.

While my bosses instructed me to deny they had any influence in the matter, I would like to point out that I didn't have access to employees' personnel files. It would've been impossible for me to acquire anyone's address or schedule without someone from the top emailing it to me. But as previously stated, my bosses had absolutely nothing to do with my strategy whatsoever.

When I got to The Associate's house, a modern-style place

on the edge of a cliffside overlooking swathes of forests, it was about half past eleven p.m. Stars glittered overhead upon a black sky with gray clouds swimming around a pallid moon. A breathtaking sight.

(If it wasn't apparent, I took a Creative Writing course during my early years at university. I failed that class because I never showed up, but that's beside the point).

The Associate arrived a little before two in the morning. So much for me being clever, considering I sat there for almost three hours with nothing to do but wait.

He pulled up in a black sedan with chrome rims. The kind of car villains drive in superhero movies. I told myself this would be an effortless assignment. Believe it or not, it was a lot easier to deliver bad news when you didn't like the person you were delivering the news to.

Climbing out of his vehicle, The Associate waltzed up to my window with such swagger you just couldn't wait for this guy to lose his job. And no, I'm not saying that just to make myself look better, but hopefully, it's working.

He tapped on the glass. "Wanna come in for one?"

"Excuse me?"

"I know who you are," he said. "I know why you're here. Pop in for a quick drink, and we can talk things over."

There wasn't much to discuss. I provided a packet of materials that listed benefits, severance, other opportunities within the company (if any available), and so on. In fact, my job required minimal conversation. There was no room to wiggle. You just took the first deal upper management offered because they had enough lawyers to negate any lawsuits.

Once inside the house, The Associate turned on the kitchen lights and started an electric fire with a small remote. The house consisted of dark log walls and vertical floorboards. The kitchen had checkered tile, minty blue and creamy white. Children's art adorned the fridge.

It was an odd combination of rustic hunting lodge and modern suburbia. The view from the back porch, from what I could see through the sliding glass door, overlooked a sea of green trees. Thousands of them bunched together, too close to discern any of them individually.

"Jacuzzi and a heated pool," The Associate said. There was more despair than pride in his tone. "If that's what you're wondering."

He whipped up two glasses of whiskey, the expensive stuff, and we sat at the middle island separating his dining area and kitchen.

"I imagine that's got everything I need in it," he said, gesturing to the packet I'd laid on the countertop.

"Talks about severance and medical," I said. "Some other openings at the company..." I swirled my tumbler, watching the whiskey whirl around. Ice cubes clinked against the glass. "I'm sorry, but you're surprisingly calm about this. I thought you were bringing me in here to murder me."

He shrugged. "Well, it's not like I can act shocked, right? I mean, everybody in my department has been let go or transferred. I'm not young enough to transfer. May as well call it an early retirement."

"That's one way of looking at it."

Aside from some gray patches in his otherwise dark hair, there weren't many noticeable features of age. Faint lines on his tan face. A slight jitter in his right hand. Eyes that looked slightly cloudy, but still very much alive. I wouldn't place him any higher than early fifties. If I looked like him in my fifties, I think I'd be ecstatic. Instead, I'll probably end up looking like Nosferatu.

"Sorry to do this at your house," I said, "but we couldn't really get you to come into the office."

He laughed. "I've been on back-to-back flights almost all month. I've been to New York twice in the last four weeks. Atlanta three times. California six times. I actually thought about buying an apartment there, but it just didn't seem worth the expense. Guess that was the right call."

"Right..."

"If they wanted me in the office, they should've stopped sending me on engagements."

"To be honest with you, I think they forgot they were terminating your position."

Again, he laughed. This time with an edge of bitterness. "Is that how they say it now? Fired is too aggressive, right? They've gotta make it technical, clinical, so that there aren't any emotions involved."

"I don't—"

"But there are emotions involved. How couldn't there be? I mean, you give your life to something, and what do you get in return?" He downed his drink and poured another. "I can't tell you how much I've actually sacrificed for this damn job."

"It started with birthdays and the occasional holiday," he said. "A couple of dance recitals, football games, date nights. Stuff you don't think you'll miss. Little-by-little, you just keep giving and giving. Then, it's every birthday and holiday and recital. You only ask for time off when there's a wedding, and even then, you've still got your laptop with you. You're only taking a half-day, you know?"

He poured about two fingers into his glass, and then added a splash more to be safe. The rigidity in his body

Children's art adorned the fridge. It was an odd combination of rustic hunting lodge and modern suburbia.

Atlanta three times. California six times. I actually thought about buying an apartment there, but it just didn't seem worth the expense. Guess that was the right call."

thawed like ice in the summer humidity. The whiskey seemed to relax him.

"When you first start, you think it's your big break," he continued. "You can justify these absences because, ultimately, you're providing for your family. You're keeping the lights on and putting food in their bellies. It doesn't matter that you've forgotten your dreams or needs.

"It doesn't matter that you've become a stranger to your wife and kids, or that your wife has lost any subtlety whenever she talks about how unhappy she is. Your parents, who've been in a home for almost six years, finally die, and you can't decide if it even matters if you go to the funeral because you've got meetings to attend, and it's not like they're coming back anytime soon.

"And you know you hate this cycle, but you can't really imagine yourself existing without it. Whenever you get depressed about it, you just think about buying a boat or a really fast car. Except, what's the point? You don't have the time to drive a really fast car or sail a boat. You haven't even been on a boat in the last ten years unless it was work-related. Team building cruise— utter nonsense."

I tried to steer the conversation back toward the packet and opportunities. A lighter note, but The Associate just wasn't going to hear it. Instead, he filled my glass some more and pushed it toward me. I think he had something against drinking alone. Termination changes that about people. At least, that's what I've heard.

"You know, when I first got out of high school, I wanted to apply to a liberal arts college." He smiled, but he wasn't actually smiling. Just pretending. "I wanted to be an artist. I don't mean those pretentious idiots you see in movies with their scarves and turtlenecks. I mean an actual artist, but then, my old man ripped me a new one. Told me how the world was for artists. How disappointing that lifestyle could prove. Instead, he got me a position at this prestigious academy where everyone wore suits and ties, and before you know it, here I am."

I flipped open the packet, carefully removing the presentational material from it, but he placed his hands on mine, pushing them away. Gently, he shook his head and closed the packet, sliding it aside, waving it off with a look of indignant disgust.

"I still remember this, uh, this survey they gave us my senior year of high school," he said. "What do you want from life? That was the first question. What do you want from life? You know what I wrote? Money, fame, success. In that exact order. But if you were to give me that survey again, here and now, you know what I'd say— do you know what I want?"

I shook my head because, honestly, I had absolutely no

idea.

"I just want my wife to bring the kids back home. For her to not have moved on so quickly while I'm still grasping—" He swallowed his sorrow with a sip of whiskey. "I want to read to my kids before bed and tell them how much I love them. I want to check their closet for monsters. To pack their lunches for school.

"And I want to hold my wife— dear God, I want to hold my wife, and for her to hold me as well. I want to sit in the living room and watch her read a book in her pajamas. To wash the dishes while she dries them. To cook dinner for her, even though I'll probably burn it.

"I want..." He laughed into his cup, splashing some whiskey onto his tie. A pale glow from the overhead light reflected in his glossy eyes. "I want her to sit in the bath and tell me about her day while I rinse the shampoo from her hair. I just want to see her smile, for her to laugh at my jokes knowing they aren't really funny. That she's just doing it to be nice. And more than anything, I wanna hear her tell me how much she loves me, so I can tell her I love her even more."

He looked up at me with a newfound sense of clarity. As if the mist had parted for the first time in ages. The fuzzy drunkenness provided a sense of honesty as opposed to a means of escape. It was a means to express his pain. To finally put it all into words.

"And what about you?" he asked. "What do you want, or has this job been blissfully opportunistic for you?"

Assuming the jetlag and lack of sobriety would make him forget, I told him the truth.

"I want to change." It hit me hard in the stomach. "I want to be someone that people can admire and respect. I want to be a better person because, quite frankly, as of right now,

I'm just pathetic," I admitted. "I, uh, I want to love without loathing it. To be someone who can feel love without having to fake it.

"Honestly, my life has been empty, and that emptiness just keeps growing inside of me, swallowing everything I ever

enjoyed. And it just makes me contemptuous towards everyone. It makes me wish I weren't ever born, you know? Not dead because then other people are in pain, or at least pretending to be, but just to have never existed at all, so as to be nothing and hurt no one."

I took a drink. Not because I needed it or because I was parched, but to have something to do to fill the silence between us. Then, something else hit me.

"Even though I can recognize the worst about myself," I said, "that I can somehow maintain this sense of self-awareness, I don't know if I can actually change any of it.

No matter what I do, I'm still the same person, day after day. There's no *off* switch to being a bad human being. It's engrained into you, and you can try doing the right thing, but you'll always be worried about screwing it up later down the road. So, you push people away before you can hurt them."

The Associate stared at me, entranced. Then, he blinked back to reality. It took him a moment to process.

"I imagine this is the part where I say something wonderfully profound," The Associate said. "Where the old man gives the young buck a piece of advice that he'll carry with him for the rest of his days."

He stared at the countertop as if it held the answers to the questions neither one of us asked. The outside world was frozen still. No wind, no movement, no noise. Nothing at all but two people stuck between two moments in time.

"If you want my honest advice," he said, "it's that you shouldn't look to others for advice. Life is a series of experiences, and we all embrace them differently. We learn different lessons from different occasions. The only person whose advice you should trust is your own. Look at what you know to be true for you and try to use it. Of course, this still technically qualifies as advice, I suppose. While I'm at it, let me tell you one more thing: *'I'm sorry and is there any chance I can make it up to you?'* tend to go a very long way."

"Is that what you plan to tell your wife?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't imagine it'd work on her. Not after I've used it so much. When you say something like that, you don't have to mean it, but you should."

After that, I went back home and slept in the next day. My boss commended me for going the extra mile. And about a week later, I overheard through office banter and gossip that The Associate had become intoxicated and drowned in his pool.

I never went to his funeral.

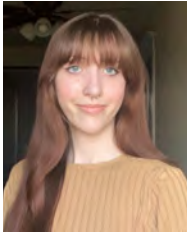
No, instead, I called my boss. I turned in my resignation letter. They weren't overly upset about it. I think they were confused because I was supposed to hand in other people's resignation letters, not my own.

Then, I called my sister. I apologized for the Quasimodo comment. I apologized for getting drunk at her wedding and puking on her car. She didn't know about that second thing. Which was unfortunate, but I apologized.

And finally, I called Mia to meet for coffee. She was furious when she showed up, understandably so. But after I bought her a latte and a chocolate donut, her anger diminished a little. She was willing to hear what I had to say.

"I love you too," I said. "And I'm sorry I didn't say it then. I wished I would've. Is there any chance I can make it up to you for being such a jerk?"

2nd Place ☆ ☆



Birthday Girl

Written by **Olivia White**

Grandma’s fingers ripped through Erica’s tangled dark hair. The girl sat in front of her on the fuzzy brown carpet with Buster, their giant Saint Bernard. Grandma normally kept him outside on a chain but made an exception that afternoon since it was “hotter than sin.” It was good to have a guard dog, as she told her granddaughter, even though Erica knew he wouldn’t hurt a fly.

Erica’s ears weren’t tuned into the *Golden Girls* reruns that Grandma and her friend Dee Dee watched. Instead, she waited for the merry beeping sound from the kitchen that meant their cake was finished. The heavy old box TV, teetering on a tiny table with legs that seemed much too feeble to support it, soon finished the last episode and launched into the local news. The weatherman popped up with stains of sweat on his button-down, and even more of it dripped down his forehead. He gestured wildly to the graphic behind him where red heat advisories covered their part of the state.

“He doesn’t have to tell us it’s hot,” grumbled Dee Dee as she wedged a cigarette between her lips, and Erica had to agree. The windows in the trailer were all open since the very early hours of the morning in a futile effort to keep it cool.

The air conditioning had kicked the bucket mere days before the heat wave, and Grandma resorted to several of her own attempts at fixing it since money had been tight that summer. None of them worked. The still, stuffy air pressed against them until she was afraid they all might melt into the couch and disappear into the cushions.

Grandma hit a snag in Erica’s hair and tugged at it. Aches of pain bloomed across the girl’s scalp. “Didn’t that doctor of yours tell you to quit that?” Grandma hissed at Dee Dee, “And Lord, I know it. Feels like I’m in hell.”

“Well, it ain’t hurting the doctor any,” said Dee Dee, pulling

away at Grandma’s attempt to snatch the cigarette from her mouth with one hand. Curls of smoke drifted up into the humid air. She closed her eyes and leaned back, wiping her green-tinted tattooed brows. They were jet black when she got them done. That was a long time ago when she was “young, stupid, and careless,” as she once told Erica when she asked.

“Hurting your heart a great deal more. You already had one heart attack,” Grandma muttered. “Can you go check if that cake is done yet, Erica? I can’t hear the timer with these fans going.” She ran a hand through her dyed brown hair before shooing the girl away, then got up to check if the box fans could be turned on any higher. They seemed to do little for the heat, circulating the sweltering air and dust that was lodged in the blades from being stuck in a closet.

Erica bolted into the kitchen with the dog loping after her, taking care to avoid the pulled-up nail in the carpet near the oven. She’d had one too many run-ins with it for her liking.

It was a small area, hidden in the mass of other...stuff, but it was also the only place that Grandma kept anything related to her mom.

The small kitchen of their trailer was packed to the brim with anything Grandma could fit in it. Dee Dee called it hoarding. Grandma said it wasn’t if she kept it all in the kitchen.

The most common thing was crosses and pictures of Jesus that were found at thrift stores and now littered the walls. He stared down at them from all angles with a warm gaze, but she found her eyes drifting to the family picture wall.

It was a small area, hidden in the mass of other...stuff, but it was also the only place that Grandma kept anything related to her mom.

Lindsey, as Grandma instructed Erica to call her, was forever as young and pretty in Erica’s head as she appeared in the graduation photo that hung on the wall. She had seen her mother a few times, of course, but she could never remember her face well, so she kept this

image of her in her mind. Lindsey had permed black hair, wore a blue cap and gown, and had a crooked smile that sometimes Erica recognized as her own in the mirror.

"Mom," she whispered, afraid Grandma would hear her, "I'm turning eight today. Grandma and Dee Dee made me a cake. It's lemon 'cause we didn't have any more plain old chocolate boxes of the mix. Do you like lemon? I don't. It's gross, but I won't tell Grandma." She checked the oven timer, groaning when it still read five minutes.

"What's that timer say, Erica?" shouted Grandma from the other room.

She pulled out a rickety chair from their table and set it up in front of the oven to watch the cake. "Five minutes!" she called back.

"Hold on, Dee. I'm getting a phone call," said Grandma, just loud enough that Erica could hear her over the fans and blaring TV.

"Probably one of those spam callers."

Erica picked at her lips where the dry skin started cracking off and winced when she tugged at a piece that was still attached. She pressed a finger to it that came back with a shine of blood and spit, then dragged her hands across Buster's fur, patting the drooling mammoth of a dog on his head. Hair clung to her sticky hands.

"I'm gonna wish for something real special when I blow out my candles," she told the dog, who lounged with his belly up towards the ceiling, where brown wet spots littered the cracked panels. "I prayed for it, too. Grandma says praying is the way to get God to listen to you and ask him for what you want, but I don't know. I prayed for Mom to come back every single night. I told my brother about it, too."

"Grandma says I have a baby brother buried out in the yard in a little jar," she said to the portrait. "I talk to him. I tell him all about you and me and Grandma. I bet he misses you, but he gets to look at you from heaven, and I don't get to see you hardly ever, so I guess he's lucky. Do you miss him, Mom? Do you miss me? I think I'm gonna write all this down someday and send it to you. I'm gonna tell you about me and Grandma someday and how we miss you. I hope you'll read it." She paused. "I hope you'll come back."

Grandma came through the kitchen with her flip phone pressed against her ear, pointed at Erica to pay attention to the timer, and opened the door out onto the steps. As she turned away, Erica saw the outline of a cigarette carton in her back pocket.

"Don't get heat stroke out there!" Dee Dee called.

"Grandma, I thought you quit—" Erica started, but the door slammed shut before she could finish. Directing her

attention back to the hazy glow of the oven window, she leaned forward and furrowed her brow, picking at her sundress that clung to her sticky legs.

"I told you not to call me," Grandma said outside. Her voice was even and low, and she took a deep drag from her cigarette before pressing the hand holding it against her temples. Erica turned around to peek through the open windows, pressing her sunburned, freckled face into the back of the chair.

Someone was shouting on the other end of the line. Grandma leaned over the railing of the porch, sheltering the phone with both hands trying to prevent any eavesdropping grandchildren from hearing.

"Don't raise your voice at me," she rasped, "I think you know very well why you can't be here. You made that decision a long time ago when you decided to get into that stuff. It's always the same thing with you trying to crawl back. When will the next call be? Next year?"

Grandma scoffed at the response. "Oh 'got better.' Well, we're not going to stick around to see how long it lasts this time. I won't let you hurt her again. I'm putting my foot down. You know she still talks about you even after everything? And now you want another chance. To do what, come back for a few days and then run off again?"

Grandma pulled the cake out with her crocheted potholders and set it on the cluttered counters to cool, pushing cracked figurines of baby Jesus to the back of the mess. Buster grumbled beside Erica, rolled onto his stomach with his ears perked up, and began to whine, listening to the crescendo of Grandma's anger.

Erica had never heard Grandma so incensed at someone on the phone, except for when she was talking to the electric company after the power shut off. She brought a piece of hair up to her mouth, chewing on it even though Grandma said she needed to break the habit, but it was a mindless action that persisted. Her eyes flicked back to the picture.

"I won't do it. I won't let you. I'm done," Grandma said, her voice wobbling. She slammed her phone shut, stubbed out her unfinished cigarette and flicked it into the bushes, then wiped at her cheeks.

The screen door opened and closed with a scream from its hinges. Erica whipped her head back around to the oven, where the timer had started blaring. Grandma pulled the cake out with her crocheted potholders and set it on the cluttered counters to cool, pushing cracked figurines of baby Jesus to the back of the mess. "Just gotta frost it now," she said with a tight smile.

When the afternoon had crept into dusk and the night air cooled the room, they all sat around the table. They finished singing "Happy Birthday" to her, and Dee Dee was positioned with her disposable camera in hand. Erica looked down at the cake where the loopy handwriting of her grandmother clumped together in sticky purple icing.

The candles, numbering a perfect eight, burned down and dripped wax as she hesitated.

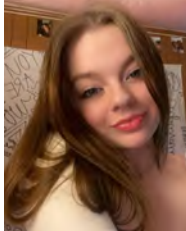
She glanced behind them to the picture of her mother again, frozen in her mind as a grinning 18-year-old. It was so long ago. Her mom had dyed yellow hair when she last saw her, and slight wrinkles cropped up around her face and on her neck, where her tattoos were blurry and dark. She didn't look too much different from Dee Dee's daughter Cheyenne, who had just thrown a party to celebrate turning 40 last month, though she must've been a few years younger. Grandma was already getting old when Lindsey was born, and the photos of her in the hospital with graying hair were enough proof.

Erica didn't know Lindsey. Did Lindsey even know her? Chewing on the skin around her little finger, she sat up to loom over the candles. Her lungs filled with the greatest amount of air that such a tiny body could hold before releasing it, blowing out every lit flame on the cake.

"What did you wish for?" Grandma laughed, reaching for the cake with a knife in her other hand.

"I can't tell you, or else it won't come true."

Honorable Mention ☆ ☆ ☆



Upside Down Hearts

Written by **Chloye Gmur**

In the quiet corners of a bustling hospital, our paths crossed in a destined encounter, setting off a domino effect of events that redefined my understanding of love and self. His presence in my life brought a profound shift, not just in how I saw the world, but in how I perceived my own goals. Some people enter your life for enduring chapters, while others grace us with fleeting moments. Navigating the journey alongside someone for only a brief time, and ultimately saying farewell, proved to be one of the hardest things I've had to do. But as we're aware, upside-down hearts can transform, depending on the angle from which we look at them.

I sat on my bed reading a novel, about a love found only in books, something beautiful and bittersweet, to end a peaceful day. My cat climbed over my stomach, which forced me to shift attention towards her. I laid the book down with a post-it note in between the pages so I didn't lose my spot like I had countless times before. She lay down on me as she stretched and made a calculated attack against my book. It hit the floor and disappeared from my line of sight. I got up from the bed with a huff and started to look for my missing book. I knelt down and made my body small so I could see underneath the bed.

The book was not there, surprisingly, but a glistening gold box caught my attention. I pulled out the medium-size box, trying to remember what I had put inside it. The outside of the box was torn a bit, leaving specks of gold along my curious hands. My fingers traced the opening hesitantly, only opening it a second later. It was the trinkets I had collected during a very pivotal time in my life; they were untouched and placed how I remembered. Nostalgia wisped over me as I looked at the sentiments, ones I'd long since forgotten about. I picked up the first object that caught my attention. It was a very delicate, dried rose, and as I looked at it, I remembered how I had gotten it.

The book was not there, surprisingly, but a glistening gold box caught my attention.

Tim, my boyfriend, had never been good at planning dates. I, on the other hand, loved going out. We often had disagreements when it came to going out, or staying in. I enjoyed dates because it meant I got to get all pretty, and I had an excuse to do so. It didn't have to be expensive, but an activity out of the house is what I considered one. Tim was the type of person who would rather play games together in the house and save some money. This one mildly chilly night, Tim asked me to get pretty and come outside.

When he got to my house I eagerly hopped into his car, ready to hang out with him. I asked where we were going only to be met with a playful smile. He teased about taking me to McDonalds, though I knew he had something else planned.

We arrived at this tiny little bar and grill. We walked in and were swiftly greeted by a server and directed to our seats. We ordered our food and made conversation, and time slipped away unnoticed.

Before we knew it, we found ourselves back at his house. Inside, we settled into watching a movie, and caught ourselves drifting to sleep. Our sleep was interrupted by the sound of my phone ringing. I picked it up. It read 12:23 a.m., almost thirty minutes past my curfew. I leaped up, and as I started to pack my belongings, he urged me to help him find an item he lost under his bed a few hours prior. With a flutter of surprise, I discovered a dozen red roses. Hiding with them were two bags of my favorite candies. As I turned towards him, I saw him smile. "Will you be my girlfriend?" he asked.

Setting the rose down, I remember it had been the first time we had been out together on a date. We spent time together before that, but the connection felt stagnant prior to that moment. He was the first guy to ask me out properly, so this memory was one I held dear. He remembered the candies I liked, even though he himself didn't care for them too much. He put a lot of thought into making it a great evening even though he had a busy

schedule, which is really what mattered to me. Looking at the flower, I was reminded of the good times we had. It wasn't always that way, though. As I looked back into the box, a black slip dress that I had worn to a party made itself apparent.

I was hanging out with a couple friends, and we were all celebrating the passing of our exams. I stayed at the party for a few hours, but decided I wanted to leave. I had talked to Tim a day prior, and he agreed that I should come over afterwards. I left my friends there since they wanted to stay, and I went to his house. I hadn't changed from the party, so I was still in this flowy black dress with a red leather coat, and kitten heels. My hair, makeup, and nails were done. I felt beautiful, but when Tim saw me, he quickly ushered me into his house without a word. He was never one to compliment me, and it had always bugged me that he didn't, but I never mentioned it to him.

We walked to his room, him a couple feet ahead of me like he was racing against time. I put some of his clothes on and sat on his bed as he finished up some homework. Half an hour later, he jumped out of his chair and started telling me a story about something his ex did recently. I had brought up multiple times that telling me stories about his ex made me uncomfortable. I got upset at his dismissal of my feelings and wanted to go home.

"Why do you always bring up your ex? It's like you're stuck in a loop of resentment. There's no way you don't have any feelings for her!" I sighed tiredly, my voice ringing with frustration.

"I can't believe you think I still have feelings for her. I'm only telling you because what she did was cringey." He paused, taking a deep breath as if trying to steady his emotions.

My shoulders slumped slightly; a mixture of sadness and surrender showed in my movements. "Almost. Every. Single. Time," my words came out slow and weighted with emotion, "there's always some news about her, and I can't even get a simple 'you look great.' Meanwhile you don't ever shut up about her."

He ran a hand through his hair, a sign of inner turmoil. "I never meant for you to feel that way." His voice cracked slightly, betraying a hint of vulnerability. "I just thought I could come to you about this."

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to steady my emotions. "I know your past has shaped you," I said softly, my voice tinged with sadness, "but we can't build our future by dragging her along." I reached out, my hand trembling slightly, needing reassurance. "I need to feel like you actually care about me more than you hate her, or this relationship won't last."

"I do care about you, I love you," he said desperately, his eyes pleading for me to look at him. He lifted his hand to my cheek, turning my head towards his.

"How? What do you love about me?" I said, letting a deep sigh fill the air around me. "I feel like you don't even know me," I scrambled, trying to understand his words.

"Because you're kind, and sweet... and you're good to people," he said sincerely, his voice trailing off like he was in deep thought. "Just because you're you." He leaned over, and ever so softly planted a kiss on my cheek.

I recall that conversation verbatim; I remember the feeling I had during it all too well. I felt seen for the first time in my life. Like I was important enough to solve the issue right away, and not be left overthinking. That night we had a fight, but that night we also were more vulnerable with each other than we had ever been.

A feeling of excitement surged through me when I saw the next thing in the box. This object carried with it a memory that impacted me the most during our relationship. It led me to discover myself, a part of me that saw a future for myself. It was a picture of us at his family's event.

He excitedly shared the details of an upcoming event he planned to attend, and promptly invited me to join him. Without hesitation, I accepted the invitation, eager to meet his siblings. Though the event was still a couple weeks away, he emphasized the importance of making a good impression, which heightened my nervousness. He told me that his sister was very critical when it came to having a good career in place. This was when I started taking my future career seriously; I became worried because I had no idea what particular job I wanted. I wanted his family to like and accept me, so I set out on a journey to make sure I was figuring out myself for the right reasons. I knew it had to do with business, but healthcare had always been something I enjoyed doing. I spent several days researching careers related to business and healthcare. I was reaching out to professionals and attending meetings to explore different career options. It wasn't until I stumbled upon an article titled "Healthcare Administration" that I almost immediately knew it was the job for me. As I delved deeper into its contents, I realized it perfectly aligned with my interests and aspirations. At that moment, I knew I had found my calling: Healthcare Administration.

When I finally met his sister and explained what it was that I was going for, he was very impressed and surprised. Given how much I was freaking out, he probably assumed I wouldn't be able to answer his sister's questions adequately. His surprised look gave me a confidence I had never felt before; it was the first time I felt like I could rewrite who I was and turn into someone I wanted to be.

It helped me to start actively working on having a better future, instead of just hoping for one. This gave me a newfound courage to take every opportunity presented to me. My whole life I was deemed the shy kid, but after that, I no longer felt held back on becoming my true authentic self. It was one of the better moments of our relationship.

Looking in the box I knew that the next object in there held tear-jerking memory: it was a receipt from McDonald's.

Tim and I hadn't seen each other for a week after the night of the reconciliation, so he invited me to come over for something important he wanted to talk about. I got in my car but decided to stop at McDonalds to grab us some cookies first. When I pulled up next to him, I realized that he hadn't noticed that it was me yet. I sat there for a moment staring at him; he looked nervous. Tim wasn't a nervous person. He was haughty, disciplined, and suspicious of any decision that affected his future, so naturally this brought an uncertain feeling to my stomach.

After a few seconds had flown by, he looked in my direction, and peered at me like a deer caught in headlights. I got out and headed for his car. We greeted each other as I slid into the passenger seat. With a hesitant nod, he started the engine, and glided smoothly into traffic. He's always one to crack a joke, so when I noticed the difference in his demeanor, I immediately knew it was important. Not long after leaving, we were on the highway. I asked him where we were going, but I only ended up with an unsure smile. My head turned towards him as he started to speak. Tim's usually confident demeanor faltered, his words stumbling out in a jumble. It was unlike him to be so withdrawn, and I felt a pang of concern knot in my stomach.

"I'm not sure how to have this conversation, so I'm not sure how to say it," he said lightly. My eyes portrayed a mix of worry and confusion as he spoke.

"Can I guess what you're gonna say?" I asked softly. He nodded silently, unable to meet my eyes. "Are you thinking about breaking up with me?" I guessed, my voice barely above a whisper.

A tear escaped his eye as he struggled to find the right words. "It's not like that," he finally managed, his voice choking with emotion. "It's just I've been thinking a lot lately, and you deserve someone who can give you the attention you need during the day and someone who isn't constantly preoccupied with their own worries and obligations."

My brow furrowed in confusion, trying to grasp the weight of his words. "I knew that school was a big priority for you. I don't get what's changed from when we started dating?" I question, with sadness in my voice.

"Nothing, and this isn't because of anything you did. But," he hesitated, "you just deserve someone who can be there for you in ways that I'm struggling to be right now."

I nodded slowly; a painful realization hit me. "Have you already made up your mind about this?" I asked quietly, already sensing the answer.

He met my gaze, his eyes filled with sorrow. "Yes, I have. I'm sorry," he said, his voice barely making a whisper.

Little did I know that such a vulnerable night would be the last time I was at his house. That those cookies on the car ride would be the last meal we shared. That the hug we shared before parting ways would be the last.

There were signs during our relationship, so it didn't come out of nowhere. I sat and grieved the loss of what could have been and grew distant from reality. A single tear dropped from my eye, as I remember how hard the weeks after the breakup were. I felt like we had just gotten started, and it was all just ripped away in the blink of an eye.

Now looking back, I knew it ended right where it was supposed to, and that the stuff I learned while being with him still resides in me.

"Sometimes, your heart needs more time to accept what your mind already knows," Paulo Coelho once said. As I sat on my bed, putting away the memories, this quote repeated in my mind.

I realized that our journey together quietly veered off course long before the final goodbye. I stumbled upon an enlightening realization that, within the chaos, I discovered a version of myself that was unafraid to seize every opportunity that came my way. This not only changed the trajectory of my life, but it added so much value to it.

The girl who was once afraid of the world turned into a woman ready to take on the world. I was never one to put myself in uncomfortable situations, so I took initiative and joined extracurriculars at school. I was asked to represent my school at a legislative seminar and accepted the opportunity with excitement. I also applied for a second job, one more in line with the area I'd be in for my future career. I closed the box with a better ending to the story than there once was; I enjoyed this version better.

Only we have the power to decide the ending of a story. It all just depends on if you're ready to look at the upside-down heart from a different angle.

My Tribute to Larry Kruse

How fitting that the NICC Writing Contest be named in honor of Larry Kruse. Larry was a top-notch educator and person. He gave countless hours to helping NICC students learn and improve their writing skills. I recall his generosity in meeting students one-on-one beyond his work hours during weekends or whenever times fit the students' schedules.

His knowledge of writing skills and teaching methods were second to none. Larry and I were active participants in the Iowa Writing Project via the University of Iowa, and I recall a meeting when Larry was asked to share his strategies for guiding students in the NICC Writing Center. Larry's knowledge, strategies, exemplary patience, and sincere concern for each individual student was paramount in his presentation. So much so that the head of the University of Iowa Writing Center asked Larry if he could implement and share Larry's insights with his colleagues there.

Larry Kruse loved Northeast Iowa Community College, its students, staff, and faculty to the utmost. I feel blessed to have been a colleague of this wonderful educator and person. I am so proud that the NICC Writing Contest is named in his honor.

Jim Brimeyer

Writing Contest Judge

NICC Communications Faculty (retired)



Larry Kruse working with a student in the Peosta Learning Center (2010)