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Contest Winners

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First Place
Charlie
By: Theresa Ruwe

Second Place
Home
By: Alicia Kerby

Third Place
Angie's Favorite Character
By: Taylor Giordullo

The High School Contest judge for Issue 6 was Shannon Elderon.

Shannon Elderon is a Ph.D. student in the Creative Writing program at the University of Cincinnati, where she also teaches undergraduate composition and creative writing courses. She earned a B.A. at the University of Oregon and an M.A.T. at Stanford University. Prior to coming to Cincinnati, she taught high school English in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her book reviews can be found online at The Rumpus, The Nervous Breakdown, and The Millions.

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Charlie

By: Theresa Ruwe

Mrs. Haines was a perfect candidate for the Good Samaritan Outreach Program. According to her profile chart, she had recently been widowed, and her sole companion was her black cat, Charlie. Mrs. Haines was in poor health and eagerly anticipated the visits and packages from the Good Samaritan volunteers.

I was one of those volunteers, and the only thing standing between me and a four-day weekend was a quick visit to Mrs. Haines' house. Mrs. Haines was at the doctor's office for a check-up; all I had to do was leave a care package on her porch.

I had never met Mrs. Haines or visited her, but I found her house quickly. Once I was there, it took seconds to drop the package behind the rickety porch swing, sprint back across the weedy lawn to the car, and jam the keys into the ignition. Eager to begin my long weekend, I stripped the gears into reverse and pressed hard on the gas. The car lurched back, faster than I had intended. I slammed on the brakes, but not before hearing a sickening thud. I knew I had hit something; as I ran behind the car, I could only pray that it wasn't the cat, Charlie.

"Oh, Charlie!" I groaned softly. Blood matted his soft black fur, and he lay very still. Then a leg twitched, and I was able to breathe again. My heart pounded as I gingerly placed him onto a makeshift bed of old Wall Street Journals in my car.

I drove feverishly to the nearest vet. When I finally reached Dr. Muller's office, I rushed in and declared that I had an emergency. Dr. Muller calmly accepted the cat and then banished me to the waiting room.

I paced nervously, unaffected by the room's restful photographs of peaceful sunsets and frolicking kittens. Noticing the receptionist's curious stare, I abruptly sat on a slick, faux-leather chair and pretended to absorb myself in "Impress Your Friends: Ten Tricks to Teach Your New Puppy!"

I was re-reading the first paragraph for the hundredth time when the veterinarian reappeared. "Ms. Harrison? You brought that cat to me in the nick of time. He was in bad shape, but thanks to a successful surgery, he'll come away with just a broken leg, some bruised ribs, and multiple cuts. I'll be frank with you, Ms. Harrison. That cat doesn't have many lives left!" Dr. Muller chuckled and the receptionist rolled her eyes. I had a feeling that she heard this joke a lot. I wasn't amused either. Dr. Muller coughed self-consciously. "Well, you can take him home; just keep him calm and give him his medicine." He nodded at the receptionist. "Sally will finish up the paperwork and give you the meds. We'll send you the bill by Wednesday." I nodded mutely; I was relieved that Charlie would be okay, dreading the surely enormous bill, and anxious about telling Mrs. Haines. I doubted she would be relieved at Charlie's "good" fortune.

I drove to Mrs. Haines' house slowly, half-hoping that she was still at the doctor's office. At her door, I took a deep breath and knocked. I heard feet shuffling inside, and I cringed inwardly as the door opened slightly to reveal Mrs. Haines' frail face.

"Yes?" She peered at me suspiciously.

"Um, I'm Samantha Harrison from Good Samaritan. I'm here about your cat. This may come as a shock, but I want you to know everything is all right."

"What? Are you saying something happened to Charlie?" The door opened another inch. I opened the screen door and beckoned toward my car.

"I'm sorry, it is about Charlie. I'm—well, I hit him with my car this morning. But it's okay, he's not dead—I took him to the veterinarian. I can't tell you how awful I feel. He's in my car. If you'll follow me, I can show you that he's all right. The vet said it was okay to bring him home." I paused to catch my breath and to see how Mrs. Haines was taking everything. She looked bewildered. Poor woman. First her husband, now her cat.

"Please, Mrs. Haines, don't be upset. It looks worse than it is." I opened the car door. Mrs. Haines gasped at the sight of the shorn cat. Stitches crisscrossed his body like a baseball and a white cast enveloped his small leg. Feeling even guiltier, I began stammering more apologies.

"Mrs. Haines, I am so, so sorry. Dr. Muller assured me that Charlie will live and be as good as new in a few weeks. I'm so sorry, I will pay for all the veterinary fees."

Mrs. Haines suddenly stood very straight. "You're darn right you're paying." Oh no, she was angry. I opened my mouth to reassure her that I would accept all responsibility. But she wasn't finished. "That's not Charlie. That's the meanest cat in the neighborhood. Bit little Johnny Holmes on the face last month, and he's always picking fights with other cats. Vicious thing. I don't know what you're playing at, but it's not funny." And with that, old Mrs. Haines spun around, hobbled up her steps, and slammed the door.

Overwhelmed, I sank onto her dilapidated steps and let my shoulders sag. When I wearily lifted my gaze, I was alarmed to see Mrs. Haines standing in front of me. But she gave me a small, apologetic smile and handed me a plate of cookies. She patted my arm gently before limping back into her house. Encouraged by her kindness and unspoken apology, I straightened my shoulders and headed for the car. There was only one thing standing between me and my weekend: I had to figure out what to do with what was now a very expensive stray—and if Mrs. Haines was to be believed, preferably before he woke up.

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Home

By: Alicia Kerby

This floor is hard and cold; the hair on my legs has worn away from constantly laying here. The yells and screams from others echoes through these cages, hurting my head and ringing my ears. I don't know how long I've been here...days? Weeks? Years? I was never that great with keeping time. All I knew was how I long to be free from this prison.

Don't get me wrong, the people here are nice and caring towards us. They feed me, let me walk around outside, and let me do my business. Sometimes, I even interact with other prisoners here. We talk and play every now and then. I don't recall any of their names, though. After all that, I'm led back into my cage cell, my hairless-patched legs interacting to the cold, hard ground, and the others yelling, crying and screaming to each other from cell to cell. It's the same routine every day.

I don't know why I'm here. I didn't do anything wrong; I was minding my own business, running around in the open. Suddenly, I was just snatched up and put into a car. I don't remember too much of my past. But I know I didn't do anything wrong. I'm a good girl.

Anyways, I would get visitors every now and then. Some would come see me, and I would be so happy that I suppose I could get a little rough. They didn't like that, so they would take me back to my cell. This would upset me. All I wanted was to leave this place with nice people and start my life over. Time went by (I don't know how long exactly) and I start to lose hope. "I'm never leaving this place," I thought to myself. "I'm not worthy of a nice, caring family. Maybe I am a bad girl."

That thought changed one day, however. I hear the warden walk towards my cell and lead me out to the visiting area. There are five people standing there: a man, a woman, a younger boy, an older girl, and another girl, but she looks smaller and younger. I haven't seen many people recently, so I take off with a bolt of energy straight towards them. I didn't realize how fragile the little boy is; he flew to the ground. Opps! Sorry! I give him kisses until he gets back up. The man walks up to me and starts playing with me. He has more strength and energy than the boy. I start to play rougher, and he just laughs. This lightens my mood greatly. The sound of laughter makes me happy, like I am a good girl.

All of the sudden, the warden takes me back to my cell. I am confused; I thought those people like me. I suddenly feel that sadness again that I felt earlier. Perhaps that dream family was too good to be true. I see the warden take a larger prisoner out of his cell to the visiting area. Oh, how I envy him right now. Why didn't they keep me out there? Was I too rough with that boy?

After a while, the warden brings the prisoner back to his cell and brings another one with him to see the people. He wasn't out there as long as the one before him though. This surprised me; this prisoner (whatever his name is) is a friendly one. Suddenly, the warden walks back to my cell, unlocks the door, and leads me back to that family I saw earlier today. I was so excited to see them again that I forgot how weak the little boy was. Down he goes on the floor again with a plop. The man helps him back up. The warden opens the door and says outside. I run outside into the sunshine and fresh new smells. The family walks outside to join me, and I hear them say the word walk. I love that word. We go on the trail and the girl walks with me, with her family behind us. I know this trail very well. I look at her and smile as I pant for air, and she smiles back at me. What a nice family. I would do anything to go home with them and prove to them that I am a good girl.

We head back to the visiting room and I hear another familiar word. Home. Was it finally the day I leave this place? Was I finally going to live with a family with a new life ahead of me? Yes. They put a necklace around my neck and attach a rope to it. The man talks to the warden about something but I don't hear any familiar words to understand. But then the man takes the rope in his hands and leads me to a car. I'm nervous when it comes to cars, so I hesitate. He pats the floor of his car, and I finally give in and jump into the car.

After what seems like an eternity of a car ride, we arrive to a building. I hear the word again. Home. What a beautiful word. I can't think of any better word right now. The yard was beautiful and very big. It's all mine now. But better than calling the yard mine, I have a family now, too. I am finally home.

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Angie's Favorite Character

By: Taylor Giordullo

I wouldn't have remembered Angie's sixteenth birthday if I hadn't overcooked the spaghetti the night before. I suppose I also wouldn't have remembered if my father had not spent the better part of his Sunday draining a bottle of whiskey, yet he was more often intoxicated than not. As I attempted to conceal the clumpy noodles with excessive amounts of tomato sauce, I prayed that he wouldn't notice. However, my feeble efforts to be furtive were surely in vain. My father was a blind man when it came admirable behavior, led by a seeing eye dog that only detected failure. Sure enough, after a single mouthful of the viscid pasta, he released his rigid grip on his fork and let it fall into the bowl with a piercing "clank." Indifferent to table manners, my father spat out the noodles, tiny chunks flying across the table like shrapnel.

"You call this dinner?" he thundered.

Instinct led me to look to my mother for protection. The reasonable, human side of my brain was well aware that my mother was merely a listless ghost, a specter who haunted our home with the memories of a happier time before my father began drinking. Rather than the make-up all my friend's mothers wore, bruises and cuts highlighted her features. For a moment I saw her cracked lips quiver as if she was preparing to speak, but the words quickly retreated back down her throat, as if they realized that the enemy was much too formidable for them to conquer.

My observations of my mother's destitute state were suddenly interrupted by the painfully tight squeeze of a large hand around my arm. My head instantly whipped around, and I saw my father's fingers coiled tightly around my flesh.

"Worthless... good for nothing..." my father snarled, his breath omitting an odor that made both my eyes and nose sting.

And then I was sailing backwards, flying away from the dinner table. Watching my unresponsive mother and my drunkard father shrink before me reminded me of the time when Angie and I visited my Uncle Henry two years ago. Despite my mother's worried protests (for back then a soul still inhabited her body) Henry had allowed us to ride in the back of his battered pickup truck. I remember watching the world behind grow smaller. I remember it was the last time Angie had put her arm around me, or anyone for that matter. I remember feeling safe.

"Crack." My illusion of security was shattered, my head taking the force of the blow as the refrigerator halted my backwards descent. I lay on the ground disoriented as various papers and magnets showered down upon the kitchen floor. There, with my head pulsing in rhythm with the quickened pace of my heart, our calendar fell neatly onto my lap, as if divinely intended. Through blurred vision, I was able to make out my mother's small and careful handwriting, mirroring her unassuming nature. As the haziness began to subside, I was able to make out the words "Angie's Birthday" written in the February 16th box. Tomorrow.

Angie's disposition was not unlike that of my mother. They shared a common fear, my father, and dealt with it in the same manner, through passive avoidance. However, while my mother simply retreated internally, Angie found her escape in stories. Ever since I could remember, my sister had always had a book in tow, often with a cracked binding and dog-eared pages from multiple reads. For years, I had simply accepted her novels as a part of her irremovable anatomy. She used to read to me at night, providing me entry into her realm of magic and fantasy. However, in the two years since my father had become unemployed and found solace in the bottle, she had ceased our nightly ritual, and boarded up the door between fiction and reality, permanently separating herself from everything outside. Including me. Sometimes, after an outburst and a new bruise, I would find myself unconsciously entering her room, hoping that perhaps she had decided to make room for one more in her safe haven. But each time I opened her door, her eyes would merely take a brief pause from sliding across a page.

"Not now Ryan," she would always whisper. And I would always toddle back into my room wondering how her words could hurt me so much more than my father's hands. Wondering if "not now", then when?

I sat at the base of the refrigerator and silently mourned the coming of Angie's "sweet sixteen," knowing there would be no party, no presents. I knew my parents would not be buying Angie a gift because two months ago, I was awoken by the sound of my father drunkenly bellowing. This was not an uncommon occurrence, for he often hallucinated when he drank, but the muffled sobs of my mother drew me from my bed. I crept silently down the stairs and peered around the banister. In my right hand I clutched the telephone, making sure that after each slam and bang I could still hear my mother crying. Making sure she was still ok.

On this particular night, my father's rage was fueled by the fact that my mother had bought me a remote control car for my birthday. Through hitches and grumbles, my father shouted how they couldn't afford to buy presents for children who were already so burdensome. After about an hour of delivered blows and suppressed screams, he finally allowed her to crawl into their room and go to sleep. Just before I returned to my own bed, I witnessed my father obliterating the small car through repetitious kicks and jumps.

Anyway, after my collision with the fridge, I was miraculously allowed to go to my room, for my father declared that he simply wanted me to get out of his sight. Still dizzy, I lay on my bed and fought back nausea and tears. Worry, my constant and only companion, settled down beside me. More foe than friend, it plagued my mind with fear. Fear that Angie would grow up to be as lethargic as my mother. Fear that she would marry an alcoholic like my father. I desperately wished that I could save her from this horrid fate, but I was incapable of even getting her a birthday gift.

I pulled myself into a sitting position and scanned the room for something, anything that would serve as a suitable present. Suddenly my eyes came across a stack of paper and crayons sitting on my desk, and my mind was illuminated by a brilliant idea. I would write my sister a book for her birthday.

With my head still throbbing, I stumbled to the desk and snatched up the crayon labeled "Tickle-Me Pink." I slid a piece of the flawlessly white paper in front of me, positioned my hand in the top left corner of the page, and waited for an idea to come. For each minute that the sheet sat there blank, my cheeks burned a more vibrant red as shame overpowered my supposed ingenuity. Was I pathetic to believe that I could actually write a story that lived up to the countless novels my sister had read, the ones written by esteemed authors? How could I possibly make my book special?

Luckily, my first experience with writer's block was shortly followed by my first experience with writer's inspiration. The characters of books captivated Angie as much as if not more than the plots themselves. If I made myself the main character of my story, I would be the object of her admiration. Once I had this realization, my crayon no longer sat idle. I wrote about myself battling monsters, curing cancer, winning baseball games. In each tale, Angie was the one I would save, cure, or celebrate with. And they all ended with the heartening phrase "happily ever after." I laboriously wrote late into the night, and eventually fell asleep at the desk. Yet it was the best sleep I had gotten in years. This time there were no nightmares.

The next morning, I awoke with one of the pages of my novel stuck to my cheek. I hurriedly gathered up the papers, trying to put them all in order and lamenting my neglect of page numbers. I slipped silently down the hall to Angie's room. Even though her door creaked loudly as I opened it, my sister's focus remained on the book in front of her.

"Not..." she began. But I interrupted her before I had to suffer another of her uniform rejections.

"Happy Birthday Angie," I said. I could tell my words surprised her, for her eyebrows raised slightly, and she actually turned to look at me. Her pale blue eyes were illuminated by inquiry and interest. I hoped that I wouldn't disappoint her.

"I made you a present," I mumbled, suddenly not so confident in my work. Another new experience: fear of critique.

"Okay..." Angie replied guardedly. She was obviously wary about the alteration of our previously nonexistent relationship.

My trembling hands caused the papers to rustle as I carefully handed them to her. I sat on the very edge of her bed, ready to flee from disapproval if it should arrive. Angie's eyes began to consume my words at their usual rapid rate, however, as she continued they gradually slowed, as if she were trying to decode ancient cryptic scrolls. And then, much to my dismay, Angie began to cry.

She hated it. After all, I had never seen her cry while reading Charles Dickens or Edith Wharton. The tears fell silently, staining the page with marks of criticism. I launched myself from her bed, muttering apologies as I searched for the door that would free me from this air stifled with disenchantment.

"Ryan," Angie spoke, her voice not a whisper but rather audible and melodic. I forced myself to look back, and to my surprise my sister was smiling, an expression that still suited her well even though she had not worn it in years.

"You are my favorite character," she finished with a definite tone, as if she had never been surer of anything in her life.

I ran back to her and she embraced me, holding me close as we each wept silently. We sat like that together for a long time, enjoying the feeling of security. Enjoying our first hug in years.