

1st Place – Kennedy Blechinger – 8th Grade

What Took You So Long?

It was a day like any other as I waited for Emily Stork to make it to my car. I never knew why it took her an extra fifteen minutes to make it to my beaten-down Chevy, but the parking lot

was almost clear by the time she got out of school. I watched as she shuffled to the passenger's side door, white puffs of steam leaving her chapped lips and evaporating into the frozen air.

"What took you so long?" I asked, feigning annoyance.

"I'm elderly, Jackson! You know this!" Em shrieked. "Do you know how long it takes to climb the grand staircase with these hips?" She patted at her legs as if she were ancient instead of just a mere sophomore. I laughed at the sight as I pulled out of the school lot. Emily reached forward and tinkered with the radio and a loud voice filled my car's interior. "Freezing weather today, with temps dropping below 16°F. Be careful on the roads, this is the perfect condition for

black ice. There have already been 27 reported crashes today..." She flicked the station to a pop song, wiggling to a synthesized beat. Honestly, I loved Emily Stork. We'd been friends since elementary school, and she'd always had a bright personality. Even when people made fun of me, she was always my friend, even if it threatened her popularity. Everyone loved her, with her

perfect tan skin and long golden hair. She looked like summer, like warmth, like everything you'd ever need.

I, however, looked like death warmed over. My hair was a shock of white, my skin just as pale; I blended in with the winter landscape of the Midwest. I was too tall and too thin, not bulky

enough to fit in with the jocks and not nerdy enough to fit in with the gamers. The only person I fit in with was Emily.

As trendy as Emily was, she refused to drive even when all of our peers did. That left me

with the wonderful responsibility of driving her home every day. I was a good driver, and her parents trusted me to get her home safe. I'd never even gotten into an accident. As Emily danced in her seat, I realized how much I cherished our thirty minutes together every afternoon.

I turned onto Main Street and felt my wheels slip. The tires struggled to catch on the asphalt, spinning madly over an ice patch. I regained control and Emily gasped, trying to catch her breath after the slide.

"I hate Harrisburg," I said, letting out a nervous laugh and tightening my hand on the stick shift, making my knuckles an even brighter white.

Emily smiled back at me and put a shaky hand over mine, her soft mitten warm against my skin. She reached forward to turn down the radio, making sure I could keep my focus on the street. I turned down the side road that got me closer to the edge of town. Em lived in a big farmhouse in the country, a beautiful Victorian home with wraparound porches, surrounded by crab apple trees. I remember how we used to hang upside down from the branches, letting apple blossoms fall around us. The pale flowers were always so much prettier than their frozen counterparts, the heavy white flakes that pounded down on my windshield.

I kept driving in silence, my eyes glued to the white road, my heart racing. A sick feeling slithered down my throat and clutched frozen fingers around my chest. Something wasn't right; I

could feel it. I just have to get Em home safely, and everything will be okay, I told myself, repeating it like a mantra. I made another turn, knowing I was only fifteen minutes from her house.

"I'm too hot," Emily whined, unbuckling her seat belt to slip off her coat. She settled back into her chair, and I never even noticed that she didn't put back on her belt. I never even noticed.

The next thing I knew, my rust bucket of a car was spinning, tires spiraling out of control.

I tightened my grip on the wheel, but it was useless. I wasn't in control, the ice was. The car

tipped and started rolling, somersaulting into the ditch. The airbag exploded into my chest, hard

enough to leave a bruise. My head banged into the ceiling of the small car, and my vision went fuzzy. The last thing I remembered was Emily's horrible screams.

I woke up weeks later in a small ivory room; a sharp, sterile smell pricked my nose. The muted beeps of angry machines buzzed across the hall. The room felt emotionless, detached from everything but cleanliness. Despite the purity of the room, everything in me felt dirty. Dread, cold and clammy, crept up my spine and writhed between my ribs. I looked out the window to see heavy, white flakes pounding down outside. It all looked so innocent - so perfect -

but in my head, I saw a different picture. ...Spinning, tires spiraling out of control...Bruises, screams, crashing, rolling. A monitor beeped and a nurse came rushing in.

"Oh good, you're finally awake," she chirped. "What took you so long?"