

APPLAUSE 2020 HOLIDAY FICTION CONTEST

MIDDLE SCHOOL WINNERS

FIRST PLACE

Hospital for the Holidays

Bella-Adore Williams

Seventh Grade, Theatre



Pad! Pad! Shuffle! Pad! Pad! Shuffle!
Went my socks as I crept downstairs. Creak!
Went the old floorboards under Mama's
oriental rugs, as I tried to slowly sneak past
her room. It was like a warning for what was
to come. If I got caught that was. I could hear
Mama proclaim, "Nia, get in your room now!"
Though I was afraid that she would wake up.

I couldn't even think about her right now. My focus was my destination. The whole reason for this midnight excursion. As I moved my heart beat like a drum. It was the tempo of my abnormal behavior. My heart rewarded me for all of my excitement with little stabs of pain. But, it was all worth it. It was Christmas Eve. My first Christmas Eve home, and I had finally escaped.

I finally escaped the sterile smells, the bland foods, the sorry stares, the arm pricks every hour, and the metal tastes in

my mouth. I have Leukemia. I am getting better though, I get to be at home. I also get to spend Christmas with my Big Ma, Mama, and my brother Lamar. I don't think my life could get any better. Until I realized it would also be my first Christmas without Jake and Izzy. My best friends, who are stuck at the hospital.

Izzy, and I have known each other for over.... Oh, I don't know 4 or 5 years. We met in Fayetteville, NC at the George Floyd Memorial Hospital. When I first laid eyes on Izzy I thought, she was one of those "Gossip girls." She had perfectly glossed lips and the latest fashions. I was worried that if I told her something by the next day everyone and their mom would know my business. But to my surprise, she sat in the corner by herself, all day. I felt bad because I saw her sit alone for two more days after that. On the third day, I mustered up the courage to talk to her. She told me that she was from Mexico and her real name is Itzel. It means Rainbow" in Spanish. Izzy also told me that she was diagnosed with Neuroblastoma. Neuroblastoma is a cancer that is often found in the small glands on top of the kidneys. After I told her that I had Leukemia we started to talk everyday developing an unbreakable bond.

Izzy and I have known Jake for 6 months, 3 weeks, and 4 days. Not that I am counting. When I first saw Jake, I was doing the mail delivery. When I saw Jake's name on the list. At first, I was thrown off. We never get any new people.

Especially with such odd last names, Zakharchyk. When I asked him about it he said it was Ukrainian. He also said he was 27th in line for the throne in a small town in Ukraine. I'm 99% sure he was kidding. He's ridiculous like that. Jake has Ewing sarcoma and has to use a wheelchair. I sometimes wish I could give Jake my legs so he can walk again. Wheelchair or not I am still glad I met Jake.

Once I finally reached my destination. I saw the tree lights casting a soft glow on baby Jesus, and the little snowmen. The snowmen Lamar made for me in the hospital. When I thought of the hospital, I started to miss Jake and Izzy. They were stuck at the hospital while I got to be home. While I got to have Big Ma's sweet potato pie. Wake up in my bed. Have my family there with me. That's when it hit me. My great Idea, my Mona-Lisa of ideas.

The next day, Christmas, I packed up all three sweet potato pies, the mac and cheese, the ham, turkey, hot chocolate packets, candy canes, mini trees, and the kitchen sink for good luck. When we arrived at the hospital I could not wait to go in. I ran up all four flights of stairs to the children's wing. As I, for the second time this week, crept down the hall and knocked on the door. Surprise!!! This was my first time wanting to spend Christmas at the hospital. It was then that I realized home is what you make it so make the best of it. The joy that I brought my friends if only for one day is the true meaning of Christmas.

SECOND PLACE

Silent Night

Katherine Largent

Seventh Grade, Creative Writing



"Here goes." She swallows, glancing around anxiously. "You'll be fine." I squeeze her hand and give her a smile of encouragement. "You've got this." "Really?" She laughs that nervous and adorable laugh of hers. "This is the first time I will have performed in front of

your church, Ainsley."

"You know they love you, Rosa."

"I... I guess you're right." She takes a deep breath, quickly adjusts her glasses, and smiles bravely. "Wish me luck."

I love her smile. She always smiles at me like I'm the best thing that's ever happened to her, and it makes me feel better about myself than I ever have. Rosa acts like she's so lucky to have me. Doesn't she know I'm so lucky to have her? She's so nervous all the time, especially when it comes to my church...

I hope she knows how much they love her. I hope she knows how much *I* love her.

It's the end of my church's Christmas Eve service. The end... and my favorite part. At the end of the service, we all

hold lit candles and sing “Silent Night”, a capella. Not just the first verse, but all four of them. Our voices rising together, the candlelight illuminating our faces... it all adds up to make one of the most beautiful sights I see this time of year. There’s no suffocating silence. I’ve always hated silence, but my sedatephobia doesn’t matter when there’s music in the air.

And this year, my fiancée will be leading us in the song.

She doesn’t sing in front of people. At least, not until now. Rosa’s pretty shy. But now, she’s heading up to the pulpit and standing behind the microphone. She clears her throat. In the golden light from the candle she’s holding, with her deep brown skin and long black braid, she looks more beautiful than ever.

We don’t need instrumental music. All we need is for her to start singing, to fill up the quiet.

And she does.

Her voice, quiet but powerful, rings out through the sanctuary. *“Silent night. Holy night. All is calm, all is bright...”*

I catch my breath. I think I have goosebumps. Her voice is just so beautiful...

Slowly, slowly, the rest of the congregation begins to join in. I sing along as well. Some of the church choir members are harmonizing. Rosa’s voice rings out above everyone else’s, gaining confidence as she goes along, amplified by the sound of the microphone. I can see her smiling.

As the second verse ends, she ducks out from behind the pulpit, still clutching her candle and walks down the stairs

back to her seat next to me. She wraps her candle-free arm around me, and I lean against her shoulder. Still singing, the congregation begins to funnel through the doors and out onto the church steps. We raise our voices, our candles illuminating the night. The stars twinkle above us.

I feel a tear on my eyelashes. Not a tear of sadness, but one of pure joy at the beauty around me. I glance over at Rosa, her arm still around me, and I can see that she’s crying too. Our eyes meet, and we share a smile.

Before I met Rosa, I thought almost nothing could make the end of this service any more beautiful than it already was.

Now I know what can.

Love can make anything more beautiful - even something that’s already as beautiful as Christmas.

The service is over. The church is slowly dispersing, everyone getting into their cars, waving goodbye, wishing each other happy holidays.

I shake my sleepiness away. I still have to drive myself and Rosa home. We don’t live too far from the church, thank goodness. I unlock my car, open the door, and slide into the driver’s seat.

Suddenly, Rosa’s there too, buckling her seatbelt in the passenger’s seat. She smiles at me once more, and I smile back.

I’m about to put the keys into the ignition when Rosa spontaneously bends over and plants a light kiss on the top of my forehead. I feel peace steadily spread through me, like ripples in a pond.

“Merry Christmas, Ainsley,” she murmurs.
“Merry Christmas to you, too,” I whisper back.
We don’t say anything else. We don’t need to.
Suddenly, the quiet doesn’t bother me so much anymore. Love
- combined with the pure holiday joy in the air - more than fills
up the silence.

THIRD PLACE

All to Ourselves

Joy Su

Seventh Grade, Creative Writing



In the distance, I heard sleigh
bells.

Well, not really in the distance.
More of in my ear. And if you want to get
technical, the bells weren’t actually bells,
but a rattle. You know, the kind you get at

the dentist’s office? Either way, though, it was annoying.

I opened my right eye and squinted at my sister.

“Emma!” I groaned, rolling away.

If anything, she seemed to get giddier. “It’s Christmas!”
she sang. Again in my ear. Not the picture-perfect start I had
been hoping for.

Finally, I opened my eyes, yawning. She whacked me
in the forehead. “Wake up!”

“I just did.” I stretched and sat up. “Is Mama home?”

“No.” She said, nonchalantly. “She’s at work.” I
wondered which was sadder: that our mother wasn’t home for
Christmas, or that her youngest daughter didn’t care.

I pushed the thought aside. “That’s alright. What do
you want for breakfast?”

Her eyes nearly bulged with glee. I swear, that girl was
far too excited about one day of the year. “Can I have
pancakes?”

“Of course.”

“Really?” Emma bounced up and down.

“Thankyouthankyouthankyou!”

“Just let me get some clothes on.” I laughed. “Go on,
shoo!”

She happily obliged, slamming the door behind her. I
heard her muffled shout of “You’re the best sister ever,
Avery!” moments after it shut. I smiled.

Sure, she was a little eager, but who wasn't on Christmas day? I slid out of bed and got ready to make some pancakes.

I plopped the last pancake into a dish and set it onto the table where Emma was waiting.

"Maple syrup?" I asked, already grabbing the jug. She clapped as I poured the syrup onto her pile and dug in as I pulled out a chair next to her.

It wasn't snowing outside- yet another thing that wasn't very holiday-esque. There were layers leftover from days past, though, the kind of snow that never clumps together right.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out.

Sorry I can't make it, picked up some extra shifts at the hospital tonight. I'll be home by midnight. Love you.

10:04 AM

I sighed and swiped the notification away. My wallpaper gawked at me. *You don't have texts from anyone except your mother? On Christmas Day? What kind of loser are you?*

"Shut up." I told the bird and shoved the phone back into my pocket. Emma glanced up at me from her diminishing stack of flapjacks. "Are you okay, Avery?"

"Sorry, just thinking." I picked up my fork again, ready to change the subject. "How are your pancakes?"

She didn't get the hint. "Thinking about what?"

"About the chickadees, Emma."

"What are chickadees?" She scooted closer, and I wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

"They're a kind of bird. Black-capped chickadees. Sounds funny, right?"

She giggled. "Black-capped chickadees."

"Black-capped chickadees. They don't migrate, like the rest of the birds do. And when I was younger-

"Like me?"

"Like you, I really liked birds. Really, *really* liked them." I made a face. "I asked Mama for a bird every year for Christmas. And she always said no."

"Why not?"

"Well, Em-" I ruffled her hair. "Birds can take a lot of money and care. They need a lot of energy. And when I'm at

school and she's at work, who's going to take care of that bird?"

"Me?"

I chuckled. "You were only a baby back then. Anyway, so one Christmas, the third time I asked, she took me to the park. She said we could feed the birds. But guess what?"

"What?"

"There weren't any there. Except for three little black-capped chickadees."

"That sounds sad."

"I was sad, too, at first. But then Mama said chickadees were good luck. She said everyone else could have their doves and cranes, and we could have the chickadees. All to ourselves."

"All to ourselves." Emma repeated. She looked up at me. "Avery, do you think we'll see one today?"

Just as I turned my head, something caught my eye.

"Emma?"

"What?"

Wordlessly, I pointed behind her, at the black-capped chickadee sitting outside our window. It turned its head.

Emma gasped and jumped out of her chair to press her face to the glass.

And there it was, little black cap jumping out at us, gray wings and pale belly. Not even caring all its bird friends had left behind.

Emma waved. It chirpled.

And at that moment, I could only think of one thing to say.

All to ourselves.

HONORABLE MENTION

Santa's Adventures

Amulanga Advaeva

Seventh Grade, Creative Writing



The North Pole was buzzing with energy and excitement. My cheeks were rosy, and I was shaking with excitement. I'd been doing this for hundreds of years, yet here I was worried about being caught. I sat in the shiny sleigh, bedecked with red, green, and gold, and patiently waited for the elves to finish loading the presents. The elves were working hard, for a feast was to be placed on

Christmas day. I grabbed the reins, pulled on them, and we took off. The glowing cabin got smaller and smaller until it was not in sight anymore. I steered gently into the night. Donner was humming little tunes, and Vixen kept getting off track, his energy steering the sleigh this way and that.

We got to our first stop, England. I stopped in a lightly decorated neighborhood. I was a bit creeped out by the mechanical me, but I adored their spirits. I grabbed my list and went through everyone's name on the good list, only one didn't get on it. I plopped into everyone's house, got their gifts under the Christmas tree, and ate all the cookies and milk. I love the food, sometimes even the reindeers get carrots! I stopped by the coal house last and rushed through it, my least favorite part of my job is to give coal. But it has to happen as a lesson. Then we took off again. I did this all throughout the world, the same repetitive thing in every house. I loved seeing the styles of the homes, different shapes, and families.

We were doing great and had our last stops in America, We were running out of time and our fastest reindeer, Dasher took the lead, and Blitzen was trying to get all the reindeers energy back up. Rudolph was working hard on finding each stop faster. It was so rushed, and even the cold breeze wasn't easing my sweat. At each stop, I was rushing getting into everyone's chimney and staying quiet because people were about to wake up. No one awoke until our last stop in Charleston, South Carolina. I will never forget this house.

It was a small yellow house, with a brown roof which had no chimney. These were always the hardest ones because getting through the doors quietly was a bit difficult. Yes, I

know it sounds weird, but I'm used to the chimney, it allows me to get to the Christmas tree faster, and a great hiding spot. Everything was going wrong, but I kept my spirits up. I opened the door, I cringed from the squeak. I grabbed the milk and cookies from off the counter and shoved them down my throat, nearly gagging as I dumped the presents down under the tree. This family had two siblings, and the girl's room started to make noises. I was panicking, she *couldn't* wake up. I just held my velvet sack to my body and dumped out the presents. I snapped my fingers, and they rearranged themselves to a nice layout. At least that worked in my favor, or so I thought. I was running back to the door, but I tripped and my heavy body made the loudest thump. I stood up and there was the family standing in shock at the bottom of the stairs. Their mouths hanging open. The girl leached onto me, and held to my waist so tight I was beginning to suffocate.

I twisted out and tried to stay jolly," Ho-Ho-Ho, It's me Santa! You two were great children, and I'm sorry to scare ya! But it's not time to wake up, and I must go! Have a great Christmas!"

I tried to leave but then the brother grabbed my leg, and started crying," Please don't leave!"

I frowned, "I'm sorry... I must go."

As he let go, the parents started to take their phones out. My eyes were wide open. I zoomed out of the house, and into the sleigh.

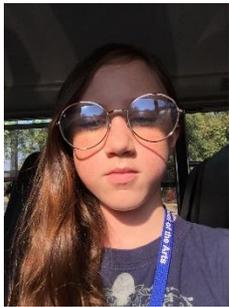
They followed, but I pulled on the reins and yelled," Go!" before they could snap a picture. This is the exact reason parents do not get gifts on Christmas from Santa, their minds

are full of reality and news, not cheerfulness and belief. I shook my head and rode out into the sunrise, I could hear the children gasping and giggling. Though I tried my best not to get caught, this was still a great Christmas.

Jingle Bells

Riley Brockman

Seventh Grade, Creative Writing



The sand sinks into my toes and the cool Capri sun in my hand wets my skin. December in Australia is always a little odd for me, being born in New York meant that my younger selves December's were always full of snowflakes and warm

drinks. Now my winters are full of lounging on the beach with juice boxes and wishing that I could travel back to the states so I could bundle up and listen to Jingle Bells on Christmas Eve. It seems like every year we have to move somewhere else for my dad's work.

My sister Miki bounds over to me, she's wearing a two-piece swimsuit, the bottom half looks kind of like a frilly skirt and it's pink with polka dots while the top half is just plain white. Miki is just two years older than me, she's seventeen and

a spitting image of why I didn't get the good genes in my family. Just looking at her makes me shiver, she's tall with tan skin and caramel brown hair, her eyes are beautiful sea green and her lips are like crescent moons. She throws the beach ball at my face.

“UH- HEY WHAT WAS THAT FOR!” I yell. Miki may be older than me, but she sure doesn't act like it sometimes. I get out of the shade of the beach umbrella and grab her ball with my pale hands. *Man, maybe I should tan a bit.* I think. I throw the ball back to her and she chucks it full speed back at me like she's playing hot potato.

“What are you thinking about Ari?” Miki catches the beach ball and gets ready to punt it my way. I tilt my head.

“Just missing the snow,” I sigh and place the ball on the ground, “I wish I was back in New York you know,” I kick the beach ball to Miki and look out at the big, teal ocean. It slowly transitions to a deep blue where there is an abundance of fishing boats. I miss New York. The bustling streets and bright lights. The snow. Oh, how I wish my dad didn't have to drag us all here for a low wage job.

“Yeah New York was great,” Miki says, breaking my daydream into tiny little shards. We head into our small house

as the sun sets over the orange horizon. I mark off the day on my “Funny Dogs” calendar. One week until Christmas.

My elbows dig into the gloss wood dining table as I scarf down my pancakes. Miki is sitting next to me, she has a serious case of bed head and her eyes are half-closed like she didn't get any sleep. Dad comes into the dining room carrying a big plate of bacon. *That's odd. I think. We never have such a big breakfast, we have to save up for the bills and gas!*

“Dad?” I put down my fork and stare him in the eyes, “What's with the big breakfast?” I say. My dad smiles and places that bacon on the counter.

“Well,” His smile fades, “We’re moving again,” I sigh, of course. It's only been a few months and we are already packing up and leaving. Maybe where we move it will snow! I smile.

“Where?” I take a few pieces of bacon and place them on my plate.

“Back to New York,” My dad walks back to the kitchen and starts to hum *Jingle Bells*. I turn to Miki, her mouth is curved into a smile. Back to New York! I smile back.

“We’re going back home, Miki!” I jump up and down.

All of our bags are packed and we are waiting for the Uber to take us to the Airport. It's so hot here, like Summer even though it's December. Miki is listening to music on her AirPods and my dad is scrolling through Twitter. I fidget with my straw-like hair and think about New York. The uber arrives, it's a black van with tan leather seats and a small, weasel-like driver. He drives without talking, too busy listening to his loud rap music on the speakers. When we get to the airport we pay him and board the plane.

The flight will be long, I hope I can sleep on the way to the snowy streets of my home.

White falls from the New York clouds outside. Jingle bells, jingle bells.

Man in the Red Robe

Kaia Reed

Seventh Grade, Creative Writing

“And then, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless us, Everyone! And Fin,” Father finished reading and clapped the book shut with one hand.

“Again! Again!” me and Georgie bounced on the bed and clapped our hands, pleading Father to read another story.

“No, No,” he sighed, placing the book on our oak nightstand next to the bed, “it’s too late. Look!” he shoved his watch in my face. I took his hand in mine.

“Please Daddy?” I batted my eyes, furrowing my eyebrows, and sticking out my bottom lip. Father tried to stifle a laugh.

“Abbey, you know that trick doesn’t work on me,” He gave a sympathetic smile. “Now get those butts in bed!” He made a fake stern face as me and Georgey burrowed under the covers. Father pulled them up to our chins. “It’s a cold one tonight. Now, get some rest. You know what tomorrow is, don’t yo-”

“CHRISTMAAAAAAAAAAAS!!” Georgie and I screamed.

“Christmas Christmas Christ-MAS!!!!” Georgie sang, pumping his fists in the air. We always *loved* Christmas, with the lights and the carols, it was like a snowy wonderland.

“Settle down,” He placed a hand on Georgie’s head, trying to lull him to sleep.

“Good night,” He kissed us on our heads, stood up, and switched off our lamp. Our room became pitch black, the only light coming from the streetlamps outside and the small green light blinking on the air conditioning unit near the window. I stared up at the popcorn ceiling above us. Whenever I couldn’t sleep, I tried making out shapes with the little bumps.

“Georgie?” I whispered, not taking my eyes off the ceiling.

“Yeah?” he managed to say, tiredness dripping from his voice.

“I can’t sleep.”

“Mmm.” he flipped over on his side, and within a minute or so, he began snoring.

My mind raced. I wanted to leap out of bed and run downstairs, catching Santa mid-act. I’ve always wanted to, ever since I was a littler kid. And then I realized- that’s what I was going to do. There was nothing holding me back, no ropes or principles. I flung the sheets off myself, shoved on my slippers, and raced downstairs, eager to finally catch a glimpse of old St. Nick himself. And that’s when I heard it-a rustling from downstairs. Presents being set, ornaments being fiddled with, and cookies being dipped in milk and eaten. I slowed

down, not wanting to be noticed. I clung to the railing as if the floor beneath me was about to give way and swallow me whole. I finally got to the bottom of the stairs, and looked over to our Christmas tree in the corner, opposite the fireplace. There, standing in front of the tree, was a man in a long red robe and chunky black boots-no, not boots...slippers? I tilted my head, trying to make out the Santa-like figure I was supposed to have seen. Footsteps thudded behind me, and a familiar voice said, "Abbey? What are you doing down here?" Georgie came down the stairs, rubbing his eyes. I held my finger to his mouth, trying to tell him to be quiet, but it was too late. The man in the red robe turned around and stared at us. He was not a plump, jolly old fellow with a pink nose and a long white beard, but instead was a thin, tall man with short brown hair and no beard. He was... father. I stared back at him, eyes wide and mouth hanging slightly open. Father looked down at the presents and the ornaments, half-empty glass of milk and cookie crumbs laying on the porcelain plate that we had set out earlier that night. He then looked down at his feet.

"I'm sorry kids."

May I Have This Dance

Rachel Wheelon

Seventh Grade, Creative Writing



Blurred lights flashed through the car window. Christmas lights. There were red and green and a bright white. Everywhere you could see the holiday spirit! Carolers went door to door singing beautiful music that never got old.

Although the holidays could be celebrated in many ways, my family celebrated Christmas. Although, our celebration of Christmas wasn't really a celebration... My Dad worked in the military, so he was never home for any holiday. He would try and come and stay for (at most) a week. He was a general and loved his job, but it felt like sometimes that was all he loved and not his own daughter.

My Mom did try to make the holidays as special as she could for me, and through all her efforts, I pretended to be thankful. Being an eight year old girl with her Father in the military is kind of hard. Kids at school would taunt me and say, "That's a nice necklace, did your Daddy give it to you? Ohh..."

your Dad doesn't love you. Oops," and they would add a slight chuckle.

It was sort of hard to be the only girl who never went to The Father Daughter Dance. Those always happened during the holiday season, and this year it was at the annual light festival. There were going to be beautiful designs made only out of lights. Artwork was displayed, and you could buy a holiday story if you wanted to. The only problem was, my Dad was deported.

As always.

The dance was tomorrow and Mom and I were going to pick up dinner right now and drive through the festival so we could at least see it. Although it would be more fun to dance under the lights with my Father, I liked seeing the lights and going to the festival. There was a place where you could roast marshmallows and make a s'more.

As we were driving, my Mom talked to me and told me what some of the light designs were. Since I was kind of small, I could not see everything super well. Of course, my Mom pretty much tried to tell me every detail about whatever we were looking at. It sort of felt like she was not going to stop talking. It wasn't like her voice was annoying, but rather, I felt

like there could be my Dad's voice to help her describe everything. Of course, that was not going to happen. I wasn't hearing everything she was saying because I wasn't paying full attention. I started to see the lights disappear and realized that she probably said that it was getting late and we should head home.

It was Christmas tomorrow. It was the dance tomorrow. I was excited for Christmas and the presents and the food. Mom would always make this chocolate cookie pie that was amazing. We would always do a game with the pie. We would each get half of it and see who could eat it faster. I would normally win because Mom thought that the pie was "so rich" and "too much." That was just her way of letting me win but I didn't mind. We pulled into the driveway and had a couple of Christmas lights on our own house.

When I went to bed that night, I was tired, but couldn't sleep. Knowing that my Father wasn't going to be here on Christmas was awful. Through my sadness, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I awoke to the smell of bacon and cinnamon waffles. After Mom and I ate, we opened presents and I didn't get the thing that I wanted from Santa. Earlier this month, I wrote him a letter that I only want my Daddy. Of

course, the old, fat man couldn't deliver on my wish. I knew that it was going to happen, and I knew that my wish was impossible, but come on, this man is immortal and couldn't even bring me my Father on the most giving time of the year. I wasn't mad at Santa. You can't be mad at Santa, but I was. My Mom did the pie eating contest and watched Home Alone. At night, we heard a knock on the door... DAD!!!! I ran to the door and opened it, I heard a Christmas Carol blast in my face. No Dad. Disappointment spread through my body until I saw the group split and my Father appear.

“May I have this dance?” he asked.