

Teen
Short Story
1st Place

Nicole A. M.

She could see it from the small window of the ark. Small and blue against the darkness. It was so small, a pebble against the black sea. Perfectly round like a marble. It looked so lonely out there. She watched it get smaller and smaller, whispering a quiet farewell to the only home she has ever known.

The last bell rang, signaling the children's freedom. Sally rose from her seat, grabbing her backpack and rushing out the door before Mrs. Tereshkova could even think of reprimanding her. She ran to her cubby outside the classroom and quickly shoved on her coat and thick leather boots. If she wasn't fast enough Mrs. Tereshkova would yell at her, but Sally had done this all her life, dressing and undressing in record speed, and Mrs. Tereshkova always spent the last few minutes of class explaining homework and answering the last of the questions. Sally finished lacing up her boots and put on her wool hat, scarf, and gloves, running out the door just as she heard Mrs. Tereshkova's heels approach the door.

The harsh, freezing wind blew into her face, she almost fell, but quickly re-oriented herself. It always got windy during winter, making the already cold temperatures feel even colder. She heard it was worse down south, where it got so cold you had to wear five layers. She trudged across the rocky terrain in silence.

"Wait up!" Niel yelled from the steps of the school, almost faceplanting onto the ground. He hadn't even put on his scarf yet.

"Hurry up! You better put on your scarf or your nose will freeze off!" Sally yelled back.

She watched him hurriedly walk towards her, careful not to fall. Their school was in one of the rockier areas, and though the Major continually promised to smooth it out and build an actual road, Sally's mother said not to count their stars. Alan had told her that a kid once fell off

the steep cliff a few ways off from their school. Sally would have been inclined to believe him if Alan hadn't also told her that Earth was green.

"From all the trees," he explained smugly. His legs were propped up on his desk.

"Nuh-uh! It was blue!" she responded. "My Nan said it was all ocean!"

"Well, guess your Nan lied. There were only seven oceans but there were more than a billion trees," he haughtily declared.

Sally would have fought him—and would've won too—if Neil hadn't dragged her away from Alan. That didn't count as a loss since she didn't willingly forfeit, but now her Nan's honor was on the line. If Neil didn't have all the best Chuck Berry records, she would have abandoned him for his cowardice. It was survival of the fittest and Neil was very weak, he still looked at the ground when he walked. Sally sped up, eager to see her Nan and tell her all about what happened. Alan probably got his information from a book or maybe a relative, but Sally's Nan had actually seen Earth. She lived on it too, for about ten years, and she was the only one who remembered it. She knew what earth looked like and would prove Sally right.

Lucy sat up in her bed. At this age there was little more for her to do besides eating and sleeping. That's why Sally's presence was always a delight. She always asked for stories, and it kept her from forgetting. The forgetting was getting worse these days. Telling Sally was like it was happening all over again. If there was anything Lucy hated, it was that there was no ocean on this damned planet, not like Earth, not like home. She could almost taste the salt in the air.

Sally burst through the door. Neil quietly followed. She ran straight to her Nan's room, throwing off her coat, boots, and other outside clothes in the time it took to reach the door. Neil carefully took off his coat and boots, folding it into a neat pile which he placed outside the door. She sprawled out, face down, at the foot of her Nan's bed.

“Naaaaan!” Sally whined. “Alan said that the Earth was green because of all of its trees! That’s a lie, right? There were more oceans than trees!”

The old woman chuckled from her bed. She looked towards Neil, who was standing in the doorway, and beckoned him inside. He entered the room and sat on the small stool near the foot of the bed.

“Earth had lots of trees, but the planet was mostly filled with water,” she responded with a gentle smile. “When you got close you saw the green and yellow islands floating on the blue, but from afar it all looked like one pale blue dot.”

“So I was right?”

“Depends on where you were looking from.”

Sally groaned into the bed. “That ain’t an answer!”

Neil quietly raised his hand, which left Sally stunned. That was something you only did because Mrs. Tereshkova would put you in the corner if you didn’t! Neil really was the weakest link. Her Nan didn’t seem as appalled by Neil’s obvious weakness as Sally did. She just looked at Neil and asked him what he wanted.

“Um... about the ocean. What was it like? Did Earth really just have all that water?”

Lucy laughed a little at the boy’s question, which made him blush a little. It saddened her that these children would never know of the sea or the great boats that lived in it. Or maybe they were lucky. They could never miss what they never knew.

“It was big and it was blue,” she smiled fondly, the sea breeze echoing across her skin. “It was all water, but you couldn’t drink it. It was too salty. All sorts of things lived in the sea.”

She opened the drawer of her nightstand and took out a large pad of paper and a pencil. Both of the children drew closer as she scrawled creatures in graphite.

“There were fish and whales and penguins.” She drew each one on the paper. “The deeper you went the stranger things got. Some creatures glowed and others had see-through skin.”

She began drawing her father’s boat, just the way she remembered it. The big white hull and large mast. She colored in the red sails and the black steering wheel.

“Humans had these machines called boats. They floated on the water and you could ride them. The wind would help push them forward, but there was also an engine that allowed the boat to move in spite of the wind.”

The children leaned closer, their eyes wide and amazed. It was all foreign to them, and neither of them could even begin to imagine how such a thing looked, much less how it worked. She wished she could show it to them. The endless blue and salty breeze. She could describe it all she’d like, but they would never understand. It just wasn’t their world.

They heard the front door open and shut. Soon Sally’s mother, Anna Lee or Mrs. Gagarin, if you were Neil, opened the door and sighed.

“Sally, you better not be bothering Grandma.”

“I ain’t bothering Nan at all! She says I make delightful company!”

“Mrs. Tereshkova doesn’t seem to share that sentiment.” She registered the third presence in the room. “Hello Neil. Does your mother know you’re here?”

Neil quickly got up and rushed out of the room.

“I gotta go now!” he yelped, tugging on his coat.

“I’ll tell her you’re on your way.” She turned towards Sally. “And you, young lady, ought to wait until Mrs. Tereshkova finishes class before rushing out the door. Finish up here. Then you clean up the mess across the floor before you can eat.” She softly closed the door behind her.

As soon as the door was shut once more, Sally turned back towards her Nan. "What about the trees? Were there really more than a billion?"

"There used to be, yes. Near the end, I don't think there were as many as there used to be. When the trees disappeared, the ocean grew."

"So there was more ocean than trees!" Sally cheered. Her Nan shook her head.

"Too much of it really. Made life a lot harder. Everything is best in moderation." Sally wasn't listening. She was trying to visualize what all that water would look like.

"Gosh, it must've been beautiful!" She turned to her Nan, who only nodded.

"Yes, it was, even at the end." Her Nan looked out the window, her eyes traced the mountain's silhouette as their red star set. "Earth was such a beautiful and lonely planet."

Teen
Short Story
2nd Place

Iniya S.

It was a beautiful night when it happened. The sky was clear and so full of stars, and you almost couldn't see the night sky behind them. Your father was pointing out his favorite stars in the sky to you, and your mother was back in the burrow resting. She was heavy with eggs and was exhausted from carrying them around all day. Looking back, you wished that someone had stayed back with her, or that you had hidden your burrow better. Maybe then, you could have prevented it.

A human had suddenly appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. He had ignored you and your father, despite you two being in easy reach. Heading right for your mother, he was easily able to scoop her up. She was too weak to resist, only able to turn around and look at you. "Goodbye, darling. Remember..." and she was too far away for you to hear the rest of her words. If only you could hear the rest. But chasing after her would dishonor her memory as it made you an easy and obvious target.

At that moment, all you could remember was a seemingly innocuous day. Your mother had brought a coconut home, back when you were a little larva. You didn't know how to break one open, as you had never needed to until then. She taught you how to pierce the holes on the top, and encouraged you as you tried it yourself. You watched in fascination as she used her claws to cut into the tender meat, offering you little pieces here and there. Now, she's gone.

Perhaps you and your father were safe because of your blue shell blending into the night. Perhaps he just wanted to take your mother for whatever reason. But regardless, you spent the week mourning her and her memory. Her deep red shell was uncommon among the coconut crabs, even rarer than your deep-purple shade and your father's bright blue. But looking around the colony, you could see that very few red crabs remained. It was probably another reason why your mother was killed because she was easier to see in the cover of darkness than you.

A crab about your age came up to you. She had a lighter purple shell than you and seemed like she was grieving too.

“Did they come for your family?” you asked.

She nodded, and replied, “Yeah, my mother. She had eggs at the time, and I was so excited to meet my new siblings too. Now they’re all dead.”

“Hold on, did your mother have a red shell too?” you questioned.

The crab shook her head. “No, but I know a lot of crabs whose moms were taken by this human. Maybe he has a vendetta against crab eggs. Or he wants to destroy our future. Maybe the eggs taste good?”

“Wait, is this deliberate? I thought it was a coincidence!” you replied.

“Yeah, but I don’t know how to stop him. Your mother was the latest victim, but who knows which one of us he’d target next.”

You know that there has been a war between humans and coconut crabs for 5 generations now. It had started when the humans overhunted both their and the crabs’ main sources of food, such as coconuts and pretty much most of the prey living on the island. Out of hunger, the humans had attempted to hunt the crabs next. Unfortunately for them, the crabs had the same idea as well. Thus a war broke out, but this war was rather unique. It consisted only of both sides attempting to eat each other, and trying to protect their friends and family. Right now, the humans are overpopulated and successfully thinning out the crabs. It was time for the tide to change, and your peers have selected you as the leader. You seemed the most brave out of all of them, despite your protests of how you were petrified that night.

The rest of the crabs that gathered (you never expected this many) told you about how your ability to adapt and overcome this tragedy in your life and try to fight back had inspired

you. It had taken many of them months to even come out of their burrow, much less try to interact with the rest of the colony. But in only a week, you had started to spend time with your friends again and attempt to start this army. Truly, you were the best qualified as a leader out of them all.

There were a total of about 10 crabs gathering together. You all had consulted the elders of the colony on how to best hunt and kill humans, and how to prepare and eat them. They had told you that the brain is the tastiest part and that the skull was easy to crack, much easier than the coconuts you are used to. You knew to attack them when the full moon was highest in the sky. That way, they'd all be asleep but you'd have plenty of light to see by. Of course, a swift death was best as it would not give the rest of the humans any time to mobilize and take you out.

You pulled pieces of driftwood out of the sea and gathered coconuts. You were able to erect huge models of humans out of these, with the coconut as the head and the wood as the body. Your second in command, who introduced himself as Koa, was a fantastic drill instructor. He taught you his ways, and you both went around instructing your miniature army on the best ways to take down a human quickly.

First, you started with the skull. The coconut was good practice as it was harder than what you'd have to deal with when you reached the humans. You approached from behind and immediately started cracking it open. Unlike a coconut, you immediately started cracking and squeezing with your claws. You need to be fast, and a human doesn't afford you the luxury of time a coconut can. It took a long time to perfect it, but in a couple of days, you were able to crack open the coconut skull in less than a minute. Your recruits took two minutes to open the coconut, so they elected you to be the one opening the skull for them. They will get their

opportunity with the rest of the bones since they weren't that much different from the skull, but now had the time to painstakingly break open.

The day before the invasion, a bird flew too close to the colony. Koa snatched it out of the air and presented it to you in front of the army. You cracked open the skull and offered the body as a sign of their success. That night, the elders of the colony feasted well on fresh seabird flesh, praising your work and wishing you luck for the faithful day. The moon was close to being full that night, and you could not wait to attack that man the next day.

You all spent the day roaming around the island restlessly. You could not do anything to suggest the mere idea of your invasion to the humans, but watching them cook your mother over a spit in the fire. You snapped your way through a pile of wood attempting to keep your anger in check as you watched the humans slowly pull your mother's shell off and relish in the meat. Your face darkened in horror as you watched them eat spoonfuls of the eggs, *your siblings*, so carelessly, with no regard for the lives they ended.

Perhaps you could attack now, just you and the humans. You could probably take out a couple of them before they caught you. Maybe you could even catch the man who started it all. But what good would that be? There's no guarantee that you could kill the man properly before they kill you. And how would the other crabs feel if you took their revenge from them? They had joined because you made a promise to them, and now it's your job to uphold it. No, attacking now will do no good. It's best to wait, no matter how agonizing it is. After all, this attack is not only for you, it's for all of you.

It took a lot of self-control, but you all made it to the moon rise. Under the cover of darkness, you all surrounded the hut you saw *that man* walk into. The army started quietly,

snipping away at the straw as you waited for the moon to reach its highest point in the sky. No one stirred or suspected a thing.

When the moon had finally made its agonizing path to its destination, you stormed in. The crabs lifted you up so you could climb the rest of the way onto his bed. He looked so deceptively peaceful as he lay there. You avoided his brown wavy hair and knocked over the huge pieces of glass at his bedside table. The crab who got the whole idea of revenge into your head (huh, she still hasn't told you her name) grabbed them before they broke and woke the humans up. A few blows were all it took until you cracked open his skull and pierced the brain with your claws, silencing him forever.

Your army held his body over their heads as they carried him out, giving you the privilege of supporting his skull. The colony worked together to break the bones and flesh into pieces, feasting on the remains of this man in honor of your fallen.

Never again will he hunt your mothers. Never again will the crabs let the humans get away with hunting innocent larvae. From this moment on, you started to be the winners of this long-lasting war.

And yet, you feel some remorse at taking a life so callously, so cruelly for no reason. The colony had plenty of food, so you did not have to attack the humans to live like your forefathers did. Wouldn't this just go against the colony's belief of only killing if you need the food? But none of them had objected to this kill in the first place, only encouraging you on. Isn't this for the best, to make sure that no one has to suffer like you did? Wasn't it supposed to be cathartic to exact revenge on those who have wronged you? He had hurt so many of you all, and you must remember that. You must harden your heart because you cannot give mercy to someone who has never extended that to you. You must put the others before you, for the good of the whole.

Teen
Short Story
3rd Place

Nicole A. M.

Lia had been in the middle of washing the dishes when she got the call. It had been another long day at work, her job sapping all of her energy and replacing it with a deep seated exhaustion in her bones. She couldn't help the groan that escaped her as she dried her hands and hurried to answer. One glance at the caller Id was enough to startle her from her apathy. Anelli it read. Lia answered the phone.

Lia had met Eleanor the day after she had moved to the quiet suburbs of Illinois from her old home in Boston. Work was all the explanation given by her parents, and while it was suitable for them, to nine year old Lia it had been a stupid explanation to leave behind her friends and grandparents for a new house. Her mother had decided that it would be wonderful to introduce themselves to their neighbors before she started school. Lia pulled on her arm, but did not say a word, though she wanted to, as she was dragged to the house across the street. That house had been light blue and had one small gray car in the driveway. As they walked up to the front door Lia noticed that there was a small, overgrown garden filled with weeds that came up to half of her height. Her mother marched them to the front door and rang the yellowed doorbell of the house. There was a ring and after some time a tired woman with dark brown curls and a baby on her hip answered.

"Hello," her mother smiled, "We're new to the neighborhood. I'm Sandra Grisby and this is my daughter Amelia."

The woman's eyes softened when she saw the frustrated expression of the nine year old. She crouched down, the baby at her hip letting out a small whine, and smiled at Lia.

"How old are you?" the woman asked.

Lia clenched her fists and straightened her back. "Nine years and two months, Miss."

At that, the woman let out a small laugh. "I have a daughter your age." She got up and turned towards the house.

"Ellie," she called out. No sooner than the words left her lips, a small girl peeked from behind the woman. She gestured at the girl. "This is Eleanor."

"Hello?" A small, uncertain voice answered.

"Hey Anelli."

An astonished laugh came from the phone. "You remember?"

"Course I do. How have you been?"

"Well enough."

Their conversation continued and Lia realized with startling clarity that it lacked the awkwardness she had expected. It was easy, so easy to act as if they had not last seen each other five years ago, simply slipping back into their old dynamic like they were teenagers once more.

That last summer they had frequented the old burger joint across the strip mall. It had an old sign that read Jan's burgers, which apparently meant the greasiest burgers in the country. Eleanor would always insist on going, telling Lia stories about how her father used to take there as a special treat. Lia, not having many other friends, would agree. They had sat in the booth next to the window and spoke about whatever had crossed their minds. The conversation was blurry now, they had so many of them that the memories all bled together until all that was left was the taste of grease in her mouth.

"Do you remember that merry-go-round in the playground?"

"A little," Lia answered.

"Remember when I knocked my tooth out on it when we were twelve?"

"Not your brightest moment," she laughed.

Eleanor chuckled. "I got a total of three dollars that day, so it wasn't that bad."

"I forgot about that. What did you spend the money on?"

"A can of spaghettiOs. God, I used to love that sorry excuse for pasta. Would have sold my brother for a can of that stuff."

Lia laughed, warm and genuine, though it wasn't terribly funny. It felt strange looking back at who they used to be. The past seemed warm and carefree in a way that allowed Lia to forget her present worries. They used to be simple and innocent. Back then her whole world consisted of her family, Eleanor and the burger joint across the strip mall. A small, but precious planet filled with a joy so brilliant and unlike anything she had today.

Oh, she realized, those were the best years of my life.

"I think I'm gonna try my hand at computer science or something. Heard it pays well enough."

Lia looked up from peeling off the pickles from her burger. "What happened to writing? Thought you were planning on publishing a book or something."

"Yeah, but it's a risky business. Gotta make money to survive," she answered through a mouthful of burger.

"Ah. What a shame. You seemed to like writing."

"Yeah, well, we all gotta grow up sometime. Might as well be now." She took a sip of her coke. "Anyway, just because it isn't my job doesn't mean I have to stop entirely. It can be a side thing, ya know?"

"Sorry for rambling for so long. I've kept you up for quite a while and you probably have work tomorrow or something."

Lia checked the clock. 1:25 it read. God, she was going to feel that in the morning. She suppressed her groan. She hadn't talked to someone outside of work for so long, and even though tomorrow would be hell, she enjoyed it. "No sweat. I liked talking to you. It was fun."

"Yeah, it was," she agreed.

"Well, I have a busy day tomorrow and it is way past my bedtime, so here's where I'm signing off!"

Eleanor laughed. "Adios, cowboy."

The call ended and so did the dream. Reality would soon catch up to her in the form of sleep deprivation, but before that she allowed herself to relish in this sweet nostalgia for a moment longer. Tomorrow she would wake up more tired than usual, and the whole conversation would slip from her mind, like a sweet dream, in favor of focusing her attention on a job she hated and devoted her life to. She wouldn't hear from Eleanor again.

"It's a real shame, what happened to Eleanor."

Lia looked up from the puzzle spread across the dining room table. "What do you mean?"

Her mother continued mixing the cookie dough. It was for some church event. "Poor girl," her face all solemn and filled with a shallow sadness as she folded in the chocolate chips. "Found dead in her apartment. The funeral was held last week. No family came when they buried her, not even that brother of hers. So far from home too, they buried her in the city's cemetery. She didn't even get to be with her mother."

"Oh."

"You guys used to be so close too."

When Lia drives home she makes a stop at the grocery store. She walks through aisles of canned foods before finding what she is looking for. The price had gone up. SpaghettiOs should

not cost more than a dollar. She grabbed a can and made her way to the self checkout. When she got home she emptied the contents into a bowl, microwaved it for a minute, and sat at her table with a too hot bowl of canned pasta. It was dark out and the moon was bright and heavy. The pasta was mush and the sauce-soup-thing wasn't as good as she remembered.

She was twelve and neither of them had outgrown their love for mushy pasta and sweet sauce-soup and meatballs that were likely not made of meat. They sat at the rectangle table in the dining room. Lia's mother had scolded them for being too loud, but that did not stop either of them. Their laughter was loud and their joy was bright, all from being together.

"I'm gonna be a writer, ya know? You are looking at the world's next DaVinci!" Eleanor loudly declared between spoonfuls of pasta.

"Wasn't he an artist or something?"

"Yeah, and an architect and scientist. I'm a renaissance man. I'm gonna be an astronaut too." She rolled her eyes as if it was obvious.

"I think I'll settle for one thing. Maybe a baker? I like baking."

"Do I get a discount since I'm your very best friend in the whole wide world?"

She looked at Eleanor's sad, pleading eyes. "No way!" she laughed. "Full price on everything. Maybe I'll even charge an extra friend tax!"

She shoved the last spoonful of spaghettiOs in her mouth. She closed her eyes as the taste filled her mouth. She chewed on mushy pasta and not-quite-meat meatballs. The soup-sauce was bright and sweet. The flavors of her youth danced on her tongue until all that was left was a bittersweet nostalgia. And then she swallowed. And then it was gone.