



2025

Larry Kruse Memorial Writing Contest

Northeast Iowa Community College

The 5th annual district-wide Larry Kruse Memorial Writing Contest celebrates and encourages original writing by students at Northeast Iowa Community College.

The first NICC writing contest was organized in 2002 by **Lawrence Francis "Larry" Kruse** (1945-2020), a writing instructor in the Peosta and Dubuque Learning Centers. With his soft touch and wry sense of humor, Larry was a helpful writing resource for many NICC students.

Larry retired from his Learning Center work in 2015. 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!

For several years there were two NICC writing contests, one organized by the Calmar Learning Center, and one by the Peosta Learning Center. In 2021, the first district-wide writing contest was held in Larry Kruse's honor.

This year's writing contest, in Spring 2025 is the 5th annual district-wide NICC writing contest. It was organized by a committee of Learning Center staff and communications faculty from both the Calmar and Peosta campuses.

Students were encouraged to enter their original writing from the 2024-2025 academic year in one of three categories: **short essays** (up to 1200 words), **long essays** (1201-4000 words), or **fiction** (up to 4000 words).

Two judges selected winning entries from a total of 28 eligible entries. First-place winners will receive a \$300 NICC scholarship. Second-place winners will receive a \$200 NICC scholarship. Honorable mention winners earn recognition.

We hope you enjoy reading the winning entries!



Thanks to all faculty and staff who encourage our students to write well. Your work and dedication are making a difference!

A special thank you to every student who entered the writing contest. We appreciate your hard work and effort to create original writing that moves and inspires the reader!



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★ 1st Place ★



Fortress of the Farm

Written by Louis Blommel

SHORT ESSAY

The small lightning rod twitches once; it twitches twice – a third wrench, and it is gone. It disappears with the invisible hand that slapped it. The grounding cable bangs and twists itself against the siding – a Lilliputian tornado skewered against the giant wall of metal. Whirlpools and waterfalls fight and bleed their watery selves into the concrete as they hasten underground.

The lightning blinks in perpetual shock. The torrents blend themselves into the fading shadows falling from that old fortress – the faithful barn. This old barn guards some treasures, both old and new – from the rafters of the pigeons, through the posts of the old milking stalls, to the silos and gardens that surround the solid centenarian.

As night thickens beneath the thunderhead, bats and pigeons snuggle under the barn’s welcoming roof. They perch amid the rafters of the old bale conveyor. Five brackets hold this conveyor from the uppermost part of the roof. Like the slats of a toboggan, these brackets cradle the two long runners of the old conveyor.

Around this sturdy relic – about 50 feet above the ground outside – drape the sloping walls of the airy hayloft. Long, wooden slabs (the old and true 1-by-6’s) spread the length of the barn and as they armor the bubble of calm. Thick ribs swoop down these walls like two wings of a mother hen.

Just above the hayloft floor, ten beefy 2-by-10 planks connect the walls to the floorboards. These planks glide away from the wall and disappear beneath the downy hay on the floor. With one sniff, a past meadow shares its crop of timothy and orchard grass, slightly musty with age. Most of the small square bales have broken apart and are quite round. Now the old meadow shares not only its smell, but also its network of knolls and valleys, mapped out in miniature across the settled hay.

Despite the storm outside, dust has risen from this meadowland like apple-wood smoke from a campfire. The dust is not at all thick. It merely hangs like a gentle fog as the ghost of the old meadow whispers, “Here is a place where the rain and wind can enter not. Here I can rest.”

The smoke from Aladdin’s lamp drifts down the hayloft and into newer life below. If ancient memories are stored above, memories are recorded and created on the main floor. Beneath the hayloft are the remains of old dairy stalls. Six-inch posts form two picket lines. They stand like soldiers on both sides of a concrete road that leads down the center of the barn to a Dutch door at the end of the barn. Water lines, electric wires, and vacuum pipes used to line these posts like Christmas lights. All those are gone. Now, rusty-red posts – still solid – support new plywood boards that enclose the center pen.

Along the outside of this pen are two side aisles. Each aisle runs along the side of the barn-like buttresses to an ancient cathedral. Both aisles terminate in the dark brown boards at the back of the wall on either side of the Dutch door. In the front corner of one aisle stands an old milking canister, silently pleading for a shine. In the corner of the other aisle, the limbs of a small bunker fold themselves around a pile of glossy wheat straw.

The old memories have moved over for new memories continually arriving with the pigs and dogs and two calves that call this home.

But there are some guests in these aisles and the central pen. The old memories have moved over for new memories continually arriving with the pigs and dogs and two calves that call this home. The pigs have the choicest room – the center pen – as they are destined for the choicest spot in the center of a future Christmas table.

Ordinarily, the three not-so-little pigs weave themselves around the old posts, scratching and rubbing where milk jugs used to clang. Tonight, though, the pigs snort softly as they sleep, digging up acorns and mud in some far away meadow. They snuggle together in the straw like

juicy chunks of hams buried in a bed of creamy mashed potatoes. Though they are near the closed Dutch door, inches from the violent weather, the pigs sleep deeply.

In a side aisle, two twin calves softly chew their cud. Crunch, crush, crunch... It's the rhythm in the distant wail of the rain. Above the bovine brother and sister, a spider lets down her spinneret. Soon, she will listen to autumns call and take her rest. But her sleep will be long – and final. A hundred little torches will carry her spark of life next spring when they begin their watch over the barn as did their ancestors of old.

But spiders sometimes show mercy – a fly lands on one of the dogs. The mother hound with a single wink flicks the pest into the still air. The aisle and the front of the barn are littered with signs of her domination, as well as that of her two puppies. New plastic toys and antique shovels rest their remains in the dogs' quiet play area.

Small puddles, splashes of the hurried evening chores, surround the wreckage their moisture mists away in the

dry air. The windows above the toys welcome the small drafts of rain-beat air, seeking shelter from the violence outside. Nitrogen, recently split by the lightning, slowly wafts between the broad blades of the resting fans in the walls.

Outside, a tree trunk snaps, but none of the tenants in the barn notice. Outside, a silo releases some loose chunks of cracking concrete. The wind shrieks a whish of triumph down the silage chute. Not far from the barn, a thick butternut squash anchors its quivering vines beneath an ocean of drenched and frothy darkness.

But inside the old fortress, the pigeons and bats are asleep without quaking. The pigs and calves and dogs shift into more comfortable positions. Gracefully gleaming with each lightning stroke, the feathers of straw lie on the barn floor, protected and peaceful – still and silent beneath the ancient fortress of the farm.

★ ★ ★

★ 2nd place ★

A Home Built on Friendship

Written by Serena Brainard

SHORT ESSAY

We all have a place we consider home, whether it be the place we currently live, somewhere we've lived before, or even someone else's home. While some may think that home has to be a physical place, I am always reminded of the quote, "Home is where the heart is," which can be interpreted to say that a home can be built with love, rather than just some bricks and wood.

For me, I have found my home with my friend K. Through the years that K. and I have been friends, she has lived in many different places, but in each place I have experienced love and comfort, thanks to her.

One word I would use to describe K's lifestyle is maximalism. A maximalist can be defined as someone who embraces their unique tastes through how they dress, decorate their home, and even how they engage with art and culture. While she may get weird stares for her outfit choices or décor, she can hold her head high with an inspiring amount of confidence because she knows how to be true to herself and her happiness. These traits of K. and her room are the few reasons I have always experienced comfort and joy when I spend time in her room.

K. lives in a university residence hall. This building's exterior is somewhat dull and uninviting, as are the long hallways leading to K's dorm room. As I reach the door to her room, the first sight of home I see is the abundance of glow-in-the-dark stickers scattered across her door.

As I turn the handle and swing the door open, many different things greet my senses. While the fun lighting and pleasant smells of her room are constantly changing, the one thing that remains the same is the happy greeting I receive from her happily chunky, orange cat, Pixie. After I've given this furry gatekeeper enough pets to be granted entrance, I can take in the many items K. has collected in the entryway of her room. K. loves to fill her home with the many knickknacks that bring her joy; and while some may see these items as clutter, these items are crucial to the comfort of K's room.

The first part of K's room is a small entryway that she has turned into a makeshift kitchen and storage area. In one corner sits her black microwave stacked on her mini fridge, decorated with some funny capybara magnets, more glow-in-the-dark stars, and a colorful pair of food-themed stuffed animals.

Next to the fridge is a desk littered with make-up, jewelry, and more random knickknacks that haven't quite found their home in her room. As I walk through this small section of her room, I try to decipher which of the many perfumes in her collection is still lingering in the air. As of late, the scent has been the delicate scent of fresh lilacs in anticipation of spring to come.

Once I've reached the bigger section of her room, with Pixie hot on my tail demanding more pets, I look to the left, checking to see which rerun of "Deal or No Deal" is playing on the large TV for her small room. Sitting on the bay windowsill next to the TV are K's new favorite stuffed toys called Fugglers. As the name suggests, they are somewhat ugly, but in a cute way.

My favorite Fuggler is the bright orange one with a heart-shaped head, sporting a very fashionable pair of rainbow tie-dye undies. While each Fuggler is unique in shape and color, they all have one creepy detail in common: a very unsettling set of humanoid teeth. Even though they give me the heebie-jeebies, a fact I have always made clear, I know they will forever be a staple in K's room.

While the fun lighting and pleasant smells of her room are constantly changing, the one thing that remains the same is the happy greeting I receive from her happily chunky, orange cat, Pixie.

As I take my designated spot, a black bungee chair which normally has some blanket haphazardly draped over it, I drag my feet through the bright and fluffy rainbow rug that resides in the middle of the floor. As I drag through the rug, I occasionally run my foot over a Perler bead which has managed to find freedom in the depths of the shag. K. then takes her spot on her bed. The bed is decorated with about six blankets, each with a different color and texture, a mound of pillows, which are also mismatched, and like the rest of her room is littered with an assortment of stuffed animals.

This is usually when K. and I have our daily recap of the day's events. Most days after our daily recap, we both

like to find something to do on our own. At this point, the room is filled with sounds from the TV, the Instagram reels I'm scrolling through, a flute arrangement that K. is thinking of playing for her next music recital, and of course Pixie's demanding meows for more attention.

During the day, K.'s room is lit by the sun shining through her window, but the room comes to life after dark with a wide variety of lights. Although the room has a light on the ceiling, we never turn it on, as K. says, "I don't like the big light." Her main source of light at night comes from a cool lamp with different color settings that projects a wave-like effect around the room. Other than its green and blue waves, there are small night lights plugged in around the room.

At the end of the night, we share our usual goodbye, which consists of me prolonging my departure, and K. getting fed up with my antics, which normally results in her kicking me out. As I drive back to my house, I ponder as to why I feel so much comfort when I'm in K.'s room.

When I think about K.'s dorm, I don't think of it as just being the space she inhabits; I think of it as a reflection of who she is and the many things I love about her. K. will always be creative, maybe a little messy, but forever full of love, warmth, and life. Her room will always be the place I go to seek comfort, no matter where she goes, because being in her room will always remind me that I have found my forever friend.

★ ★ ★

★ Honorable Mention ★



First Day in College

Written by Alivia Wagner

SHORT ESSAY

Have you ever thought about going to college after high school? Some students may believe college isn't very fun, but my first day of college taught me an important lesson: you need to step outside your comfort zone and embrace new experiences.

College is an exciting chapter for new students because it allows you to explore subjects that interest you. You have the freedom to choose your own major without anyone dictating your path. Since you are investing in your education, it's important to make the most of it. My very first day of college was both thrilling and eye-opening.

Some might not expect a two-year college to be fun, but for me, it was an incredible experience. Over my two years, I made great friends who helped me feel more comfortable in class and encouraged me to participate. Smaller class sizes were another advantage. Some of my classes had only 10 to 15 students, and in one case, just three students — including myself! My first college class, Business Ethics, was particularly engaging and set a positive tone for my journey.

Having in-person classes on my first day was helpful because it allowed me to familiarize myself with the campus. If you're unsure where to go, don't hesitate to ask someone. It's better to ask for directions than risk being late. College schedules can vary; some classes are only an hour long, while others, like accounting, may last two hours. Taking breaks between classes is essential — you can use the time to study, grab lunch, or simply relax before your next lecture.

Time management is crucial when balancing classes. If you have back-to-back courses, staying focused can be challenging, so use breaks wisely. Also, never be afraid to ask questions in class — instructors are there to help, and no one will judge you for seeking clarity. Unlike high school, college is a place where everyone is focused on learning and working towards their degree.

During your first week, you'll notice how different college

is from high school. Instructors are supportive and often available after class for extra help. Being on time is essential, as attendance and participation may count toward your final grade. Staying engaged in class will help you succeed in the long run.

Choosing a major is a significant decision. I chose to pursue a degree in Business Administration because it offers a wide range of career opportunities. Opting for a two-year college allows me to save money while still earning a valuable degree. In some cases, a two-year degree provides just as much experience as a four-year program, but in a shorter time frame.

One of the best aspects of college is meeting new friends. Having friends in class can make attending lectures more enjoyable and motivate you to stay on track. If in-person

classes aren't an option, online courses can be a great alternative, especially for those balancing full-time jobs. However, if you prefer face-to-face learning, make an effort to attend class regularly.

Over time, college becomes easier as you adjust to the workload and expectations. Within the first two weeks, you'll understand what professors expect and how to succeed in your courses. Completing a semester feels like a huge accomplishment, especially after putting in the effort for 16 weeks.

For those starting college, don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. Whether it's college or a new job, change can be stressful; taking it one step at a time will make life manageable. The first few days may feel overwhelming, but once you find your rhythm, you'll do great.

Education is the foundation of success, and by choosing to pursue it, you are taking an important step toward your future. Though the journey may be long and challenging, the experiences and knowledge gained will be worth it. Wishing you a fantastic and fulfilling college experience!

★ ★ ★

★ 1st Place ★



Warts and All

Written by Symon Winsor

When I picture home, this is what I see: a three-story antique, ivy growing between the bricks, broken window on the top floor, and a yard packed with twenty-two years of my memories. Walking through it now, I walk through time, carefully stepping over the years before we fixed the crumbling old sidewalk, afraid again that my bare feet will become trapped between slabs of concrete and I will be sucked into the ground. It's been many years since I last skinned my knees on this sidewalk, but we are never too old to experience aspects of our childhood over again in our strange adult bodies.

I walk to the front garden and kneel down in the dirt, feeling the mulch digging into my knees, and knowing it will still be stuck there when I stand up. I am encircled by moss-covered limestones and pale green hostas, with a few pops of color emerging from the leaves— bright pink bleeding hearts, light purple blooming hostas, and pure white lily of the valley.

Outside of the garden, the lilac bush sways gently in the wind. Can something that big even be called a bush anymore? It's at least twenty feet tall, and fragrant pale purple blossoms burst forth from it, like florets of icing on a cake. The flowers of my childhood color my memory and are visible in my appearance even now.

I put my hand on the side of the house to push myself back to my feet. The soft ivy seems like it would be no match for the hard brick of the house, but year after year, the deteriorating tuckpointing between the bricks proves that the ivy will always be victorious in its battle to take over, no matter how many times we pull it down.

On my way out of the garden, I run my hand over the rim of the stone fountain in the center. The carvings of grape vines around the bowl of the fountain are pleasantly rounded, both by design and by age, mirroring the round

face of the cherub holding up the top of the fountain. He too is mossy, and I think how strange and unnatural he would look if he were clean. I was five years old when we moved to this house, so he has aged with me, though only one of us has gotten taller.

Moving to the backyard, I see the back garden, which has resisted cultivation for the entire 22 years I have known it. Dominated by a mulberry tree which has been steadily trying to shade its way towards the ground for years, the garden plot is surrounded on all four sides by railroad ties, threatening splinters for even looking in that direction. The garden puts up a hostile front, harboring only weeds and the occasional accidental pumpkin vine or sunflower coming out of the compost pile.

We tried to grow vegetables there one summer, but after months of sweating dirt off of my arms and legs, I ended up with only some extremely bitter tiny carrots and two or three cherry tomatoes which weren't supposed to be cherry tomatoes.

But I don't begrudge its wildness and stubbornness now. As an adult, I celebrate its refusal to be a proper garden. It serves its own purposes, stubborn and unkempt, only accepting occasional offerings of life and death as it sees fit.

The mulberry tree has always been fruitless, an omen of the garden's attitude as much as it was a biological fact of the male tree. Still, it provides many services, particularly to the birds. It shadows over the bird feeders, giving both respite from the sun and protection from birds of prey.

I lie down in the grass below the tree — the ground is squishy and cold beneath my back, a small mound of dirt having formed around the bird feeders over the decades of birdseed completing the metamorphosis from food to waste, one way or another.

I gaze up at the sun through the leaves, and the dappled and rippling light gives me the impression that I'm

But I don't begrudge its wildness and stubbornness now. As an adult, I celebrate its refusal to be a proper garden.

underwater. As I lie on this grassy seabed, I imagine the long reaching branches as great ships above me, and watch the many sailors work along their rigging. The speckled sparrows are brandishing cutlasses at a group of goldfinches huddled around the mast, the blue jay in the crow's nest with his piercing warning caw, the cardinal commanding respect to the captain in his vibrant red coat. Hopefully, the birds are too occupied with their work to drop any anchors on me as I watch them from below.

Beneath the sagging mulberry tree sits a small wedge of wood, engraved with the name "Hammy." It serves as the grave marker for a hamster who has been dead for ten times as long as he was ever alive. I often worry that the erosion of time will eventually reveal his bright green plastic tomb, but so far, his resting place has remained peaceful. Perhaps future generations will discover him and admire his tiny delicate bones, never having known of the child who once read him a story every single night before bed.

I know my next stop should be the side yard, but I pause for a moment, deciding which route to take. I can either go through the hedges, or make my way around, passing where my treehouse used to be. No, there is a reason that structure is no longer there. Although I loved it, it took my dad and me too many years to build, and by the time it had four walls and a roof, its purpose had changed.

I no longer wanted to treat it as a pirate ship or castle keep, instead using it to sit with my friends and listen to them weep about what was going on at home, or how they struggled with the other kids at school. It stood as a monument to the horror and trauma of being a 13-year-old girl, not the play fort I wanted it to be. Still, it took years for me to be ready to take it down, as the loss of the treehouse felt like the final stitch unraveling me from my childhood. I decide to leave that tree with its unreasonably sticky sap and dark memories alone, and instead go through the hedges, back through the fairy portal once again.

In the side yard, a line of privacy hedges separates the house from that of the neighbors, with only a silver maple tree and a rusting LP tank on the other side. But the hedges hold a secret; when the previous owners planted them, they made a delightful error in spacing. A gap between two of the bushes was left, and as they grew, it formed a perfect child-sized archway. This is a useful shortcut, but more importantly, a gateway to the land of the fairies.

The walls of this portal are significantly overgrown now, and I am larger than I once was; still I crouch down to pass through the gap. Branches tug at my hair and catch my clothing, but I press on, eyes shut tightly against both the

material realm I exit, and the twigs that scrape against my face. In this moment, I am both twenty-seven and seven years old. That skinny child with blinding blond hair and purple wire glasses steps forward with me, like a toddler wearing her parent's shoes, and we both open our eyes.

I stand in front of the silver maple and run my hand across the smooth gray bark as I look it up and down. Two trees which grew into one, a seam runs down the middle, rough and jagged, like the fused plates of a skull. The place where those trees parted from their shared base and began to grow apart used to be about at my waist.

The divide served as a perfect foothold, exactly at the height I needed to get up to the lowest strong branch and start climbing. A painful stab of memory hits my ankle— I see myself as a child clinging to the tree like a weeping koala, foot wedged tightly between the two uncaring trunks, waiting desperately for help to arrive. I conclude at that moment that my tree climbing days are firmly behind me.

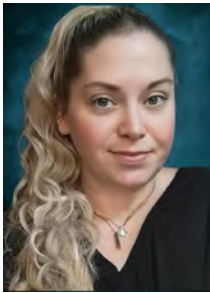
I turn to a much more easily climbable structure: the LP tank, rusted and unromantic, but a suitable perch nonetheless. I grab onto the handholds provided by a pair of very tightly sealed spouts, their rubber lids giving me enough traction, and throw one leg over the side of the tank. The paint is peeling even worse than it was in my youth, and I can feel the scrape of rust and chipped white enamel on my thigh as I hoist myself up and look out at the landscape. The sun is setting over the neighboring corn field, bursts of orange and purple catching the clouds near the horizon. I've seen thousands of sunsets across this same horizon, and loved each and every one of them.

My house shows its 110 years of age in many ways: warping hardwood floors, astronomical electrical bills, and an emergency repair needed every year or two to keep it from crumbling around us. It's gone through many changes and has endured a lot of disasters, as have I. But we've both survived, watching this yard grow around us, seeing trees I planted grow past the rooftop.

Just as many things have changed here, many have stayed the same. I love this home for many reasons— it has kept me warm and safe, even when my life was crumbling around me. It holds a lifetime of memories, with more created every day. But I also love it for its flaws. This house and the yard around it have raised me and shaped me as much as my parents and friends. I love it for all of its joys, and most of all, for all of its imperfections.

★ ★ ★

★ 2nd Place ★



The Boy

Written by Courtney Beecher

Summer 2005. My flipflops smacked my heels behind me as I walked down what could possibly have been the longest corridor in the world. I walked into a sterile, cold room with an examination bed and a single wooden chair next to it— as if other people actually had someone else to bring with them to such an appointment. The sun was shining bright through the narrow window, but it was easily 50 degrees due to the overworked air conditioning running constantly in the building.

Maybe it was 50 degrees, or maybe I was just terrified. I couldn't resist the urge to open up all the little drawers and cupboards to see what they were hiding in there. I found tape, gauze, gowns, and a reflex hammer— nothing interesting enough to steal. I was becoming more anxious and bored simultaneously, with every aching minute that passed. A woman finally walked into my tiny freezer with a long white jacket, a clipboard and a big smile.

"How are you, Courtney?" the doctor asked excitedly, as she reached out to shake my hand.

"Hi, I don't know, thanks," I replied awkwardly.

"I have your baby's gender results here. Would you like to find out the sex today?" The smile on her face never faded.

"Yes! I need to know!" I almost shouted at her with excitement. I had been waiting for this moment since the day I found out I was pregnant.

And then she asked me, "Is there a specific gender you were hoping for?"

I replied so quickly that I almost cut off her question: "A girl!" I said, again almost shouting.

The doctor flipped a couple of pages, with the sole intention of causing more stress and torment to my life,

and finally stopped at one page. She looked over that one page for several months, or so it seemed, and said to me with the biggest smile and sweetest voice possible, "Well, Courtney, my dear, you are having a baby boy!"

"What?! A boy? Oh my God..." I muttered in disbelief. I had visions of dresses and dolls and pink butterflies in my head. I couldn't picture anything else in my little 18-year-old mind.

As my only guest for my appointment, the doctor told me, "Little boys are just as much fun as little girls. You will see." She gave me a hug and congratulated me one last time before leaving me in the room alone to try to imagine an entirely different future for myself. I thought, "What am I going to do with a baby boy?"

Since that time, being a mother has taught me patience, prioritization, and unconditional love. I learned to take a lot of deep breaths and to pick my battles wisely. From

the tantrums and endless questions of a toddler, to learning to juggle work and household chores, Hazyn's existence taught me how to identify what was truly important. When a woman is trying to raise a man, she has got to learn to roll with the punches, sometimes literally, because boys are so rough.

Mothers often put everyone else's needs before their own. This can sometimes cause a mother to feel sadness or resentment— not towards the one's she is caring for, but towards herself. I experienced feelings such as depression and loss of identity. It caused me to have difficulty setting boundaries, and over time, I was overcome with the urge to rebel.

Fall 2016. The piece of paper that had been taped to my door approximately two weeks beforehand lay in front of me on my kitchen table: *Eviction Notice*.

People who resembled zombies roamed my house around me and my son, placing my belongings into boxes and

The doctor flipped a couple of pages, with the sole intention of causing more stress and torment to my life, and finally stopped at one page.

making trips up and down the basement stairs to satisfy their demons. I didn't know where we were going to go or how to fix this, but I did know that this was solely my fault. There were a million things I didn't know, but I always knew one thing for sure: Hazyn did not deserve this. He did not deserve to live the way I had been forcing him to live, and he surely did not deserve to have his home taken away. He had seen the ugliest side of me, but I was his mother and he loved me unconditionally.

I looked up from the table. Everything seemed to speed up and slow down at the same time.

Hazyn asked me, "Where are we going, Mom?"

"I don't know, maybe T's house," I told him.

"But T lives far away. How will I get to school?" He looked at me with sad, concerned eyes.

"Hazyn, I don't know!" I bit back, frustrated and angry with the situation that only I had caused.

Again, I thought to myself, "What am I going to do with this boy?"

Winter 2019. West Union was a good town to start my life over. I had nine months clean and sober, my own apartment, and a job. I had a great support system in place, and this time felt different from all the other times I had attempted to put the puzzle pieces of my life back together. And the best part of all was that Hazyn was coming home to live with me.

Hazyn had been living with my mom and stepdad since 2016. After we moved to a very dysfunctional situation, I made the decision – along with my mother – to have Hazyn go live with them. He deserved to be in a clean, safe environment; and I was, at the time, incapable of providing that for him.

A few months after Hazyn moved home, I mustered up the courage to have a deep conversation with him. I asked

him if he was angry with me for leaving him at Grandma's house. He answered me with words of wisdom beyond his years. He told me he was not mad at me and that he understood what was going on back at the old house. He agreed that going to Grandma's house was the smartest decision, given the circumstances. Hazyn's resilience was astonishing, and it taught me that even when things in life are tough, we can always overcome it.

One of the biggest lessons Hazyn has taught me is forgiveness. He was able to forgive me for the path his life was forced to take. He gives me hope that in the future, I might someday be able to forgive myself. The unconditional love that I feel for him has given me the strength to continue being a better person every day, always trying to be better than I was the day before.

Being a mother has taught me overwhelming strength and courage, yet that was put to the ultimate test when I was learning the bittersweet lesson of letting go. Trying to find the balance between holding on and letting go was one of the hardest things I have ever done. As a mother, you need to encourage your child to be independent even when your heart may be breaking inside.

When my son was born, I was worried about what kind of role model I could possibly be for this boy. Now, unbeknownst to him, he has ultimately become a role model for me.

Fall 2024. The day has come, when my firstborn — and my only son — has turned 18 and is moving out of our home. After making sure all of the lights and other features on his vehicle are working properly, and asking for the twelfth time if he is sure he hasn't forgotten anything, I give my 6'2" son, who towers over me, a great big hug goodbye. And I ask him, with tear-filled eyes, "What am I going to do without you, Boy?"

★ ★ ★

★ Honorable Mention ★



The HeART of Listening

Written by Chloye Gmur

In the bustling world of healthcare, where every moment counts, the act of listening is often underestimated. However, this simple yet powerful skill has the potential to transform patient care. Listening is not just about hearing words; it's about understanding, connecting, and responding in ways that build trust and foster a sense of safety for patients. These benefits show that listening should be more than just a habit — it should be seen as an important skill that healthcare providers actively work to improve, just like they do with technical knowledge. The development of listening skills should be treated as a key component of medical training curriculum because active listening results in better care, increased patient-provider trust, and reduced costs.

The impact of listening on patient satisfaction is truly significant and cannot be overlooked. When patients feel genuinely heard by their healthcare providers, they tend to view their care more positively and are more likely to trust the process. This sense of being understood creates a more comfortable, relaxed, and open environment during medical interactions, which is crucial for positive outcomes.

Research supports this idea, showing that patients who perceive their providers as attentive listeners report higher satisfaction with their care (Beck et al., 2014). Listening, at its core, serves as a foundation for improving patient experiences and ensures that healthcare feels personal, compassionate, and empathetic, rather than simply transactional or rushed. By making patients feel valued, listening enhances the overall experience and builds trust, which is essential for effective healthcare.

Patient satisfaction goes beyond simply creating a good impression; it has real, and measurable consequences for health outcomes. When patients feel satisfied, they are

more likely to adhere to treatment plans, which can help prevent complications, reduce hospital readmission rates, and improve overall health (Beck et al., 2014).

By taking the time to listen carefully, healthcare providers gain critical insights into patient concerns, allowing them to offer more personalized, effective solutions. Moreover, patients who feel genuinely heard are more likely to trust their providers, which strengthens the provider-patient relationship. This shows that listening is not just a soft skill but a vital, practical tool that directly contributes to better patient outcomes and fosters a more patient-centered approach to healthcare. It reinforces the importance of communication in ensuring both the emotional and clinical needs of patients are met.

For example, while working as a CNA, I had a patient who seemed to be making slow progress after surgery. At first, I just thought that it was the usual recovery timeline, but during one of my rounds, the patient mentioned feeling anxious about going home. She expressed that she was worried about managing her medication and the possibility of forgetting it. The husband (the main caregiver) had died a few months prior, and she hadn't been in the hospital since.

By making patients feel valued, listening enhances the overall experience and builds trust, which is essential for effective healthcare.

By listening to her concerns, I was able to relay this information to the nurse, who arranged a meeting with the pharmacist and the case manager. Together, we ensured the patient had a clear understanding of their medication schedule and provided them with helpful resources to ease their anxiety. This not only helped the patient feel more confident but also contributed to a smoother recovery at home, demonstrating how active listening can address concerns before they become bigger issues.

The connection between listening and patient satisfaction is truly transformative in healthcare (Lang, 2012). When patients feel genuinely heard — not just viewed as a collection of symptoms but acknowledged as whole individuals with unique experiences — it opens up a

world of possibilities for better care. This sense of being valued encourages patients to share crucial details about their health, creating the opportunity for healthcare providers to craft more accurate diagnoses and highly tailored treatment plans. Beyond the clinical benefits, this exchange fosters a deep sense of trust, which is the backbone of any meaningful relationship, especially in healthcare. This means that taking the time to actively listen not only makes the patient's experience positive but also enhances the quality of care in ways that are necessary, impactful, and encouraging.

While technical skills are essential in healthcare, there is a growing recognition of the need to improve communication training. Historically, medical schools have focused heavily on clinical knowledge, often overlooking the development of "soft skills" like listening. Research suggests that although healthcare providers receive extensive training in medical sciences, their communication skills, particularly listening, are frequently neglected (Pennebaker et al., 1997). This gap can lead to misunderstandings between healthcare providers and patients, which can, in turn, affect the quality of care and patient outcomes.

To close this gap, it's crucial to make listening an integral part of medical training. Programs such as role-playing, patient simulations, and feedback on communication can be included in the curriculum to help healthcare providers sharpen their listening skills. For example, research shows that when medical students participate in simulated patient encounters — like those used in Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs) — they improve not only their technical skills but also their ability to listen and empathize with patients (Mann et al., 2009). By incorporating more of these techniques, healthcare professionals can develop stronger communication abilities that work alongside their clinical expertise, building better relationships with patients and leading to more effective and compassionate care.

Incorporating listening into medical education could also involve teaching students how to use non-verbal cues effectively and respond empathetically to patient concerns. According to the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, programs focusing on empathy training in medical schools have led to better communication skills and improved patient outcomes (Rogers et al., 2002).

For example, the Cleveland Clinic's Empathy Program has been successful in fostering communication skills among medical students, ultimately improving patient satisfaction and clinical performance. These programs have shown that listening, as part of broader communication training, can lead to better healthcare delivery. This shows the need for systemic change in medical training. It shows that improving listening skills is not just a matter of individual providers' attitudes but requires institutional support and educational reform. This

shows that this combination is not only possible but also beneficial in improving healthcare outcomes.

Listening with both ears and eyes is essential in healthcare because nonverbal communication often reveals crucial information that words alone cannot convey. Patients may not always feel comfortable expressing their concerns verbally, but their body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice can provide valuable insights into their emotions and needs.

Healthcare providers who are attentive to these nonverbal cues can detect signs of discomfort, anxiety, or hesitation that might otherwise go unnoticed. The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality highlights that paying attention to nonverbal communication improves patient-centered care by ensuring that healthcare providers address not only symptoms but the whole person (Engaging Families in Patient Safety, 2024). This attentiveness fosters a stronger provider-patient connection and allows for a more accurate understanding of the patient's condition, ultimately leading to better care.

In my experience as a CNA at the hospital, I have witnessed firsthand how effective listening can profoundly impact patient care. One example involved one of my patients with kidney disease who seemed restless and uncomfortable but did not voice any specific concerns. After taking the time to ask and listen, the patient shared that they were feeling unusually weak and lightheaded. Although it wasn't time for routine monitoring, I decided to check their blood sugar levels. Recognizing the importance of advocating for my patients, I consulted with the nurse and received approval to proceed.

When the blood sugar reading came back at 50 mg/dL, the nurse and I quickly administered treatment to raise the patient's blood sugar. By listening attentively, I was able to alert the nurse to a critical issue, ultimately improving the patient's experience. This example highlights the importance of treating listening as a vital component of clinical knowledge in medical training. It's not just about hearing what's said, but recognizing when something feels off and knowing how to respond.

Engaging with patients empathetically and making eye contact reassures them that their voices are valued. When providers acknowledge patients' emotions and respond with care, it builds trust and encourages open communication. This broad approach, incorporating both verbal and nonverbal listening, has been shown to improve health outcomes and patient satisfaction.

Experts from Harvard Medical School emphasize that practices like maintaining eye contact and addressing unspoken emotions reduce patient stress, improve adherence to treatment plans, and foster a sense of trust (Building Empathy in Health Care, 2024). By actively listening with both eyes and ears, healthcare providers create a supportive environment where patients feel

heard and respected.

Trust, a key component of any healthcare relationship, is also built through listening. Patients who feel heard are more likely to disclose important health information, follow treatment plans, and engage in their care (Hall et al., 2001). Research found that effective communication, including active listening, is a primary factor in creating trust between patients and healthcare providers.

When patients trust their providers, they are more likely to follow medical recommendations, which leads to better health outcomes. This connection between listening and trust highlights the practical importance of listening in preventing medical errors and improving patient safety. It shows that listening is not simply a soft skill, but a vital tool that can help ensure more effective care.

By fostering a patient-centered approach and emphasizing active listening, healthcare providers can create an environment of trust and mutual respect. This trust is essential not only for enhancing the patient experience but also for improving their quality of life and supporting informed decision-making. Research by Epstein (2016) underscores how transformative effective communication can be in improving patient outcomes, especially in cancer care. This underscores the idea that active listening is more than a passive act, it is important to high-quality healthcare.

Listening enhances both the clinical and emotional aspects of patient care, reinforcing its role as a foundational skill in medical training. Active listening strengthens provider-patient relationships and directly contributes to positive patient outcomes, making it essential for improving healthcare across the board.

Listening is a critical skill when it comes to reducing medical errors, which are unfortunately common in healthcare settings. One of the leading causes of these errors is poor communication between patients and healthcare providers. When patients' concerns are not fully heard or understood, critical details about their symptoms, medical history, or treatment plans can be missed, leading to preventable mistakes. The 2000 Institute of Medicine report on medical errors highlighted that communication failures, including poor listening, are responsible for a large portion of these adverse events (Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Miscommunication can occur in various ways, such as when healthcare professionals overlook a patient's concerns or fail to relay important information during shift changes or when transferring care. These misunderstandings can ultimately harm patients, demonstrating just how essential active listening is to ensure both patient safety and effective care delivery. By prioritizing listening, healthcare providers can drastically

reduce these risks, leading to fewer medical errors and better patient outcomes.

Every moment in healthcare carries the potential to uncover life-saving details, often hidden in plain sight. Whether it's a subtle shift in a patient's condition or a family member's concerned observation, these small cues can pave the way for timely intervention or, if overlooked, lead to critical missed opportunities. Research underscores the profound impact of communication breakdowns, identifying them as a leading cause of errors in healthcare (Leonard et al., 2004). Their findings highlight that many of these errors could be prevented through something as simple, yet powerful, as active listening. This skill isn't just about hearing words, it's about truly understanding and responding to the unspoken urgency behind them. In my own experience, I've seen how transformative active listening can be in creating better outcomes and strengthening trust between patients, families, and providers.

As a CNA, I've witnessed how active listening can make a life-saving difference and help prevent costly medical

errors. One experience that stands out involved a patient whose family noticed subtle changes in their loved one's condition, slurred speech and weakness on one side of the body. Recognizing these as potential stroke symptoms, I immediately assessed the patient using the BEFAST method: checking for Balance issues, Eye movement changes, Facial drooping, Arm weakness, and Speech difficulties.

When my assessment confirmed their concerns, I alerted the nurse, and a code stroke was called. This swift action ensured the patient received critical care, avoiding delays that could have led to severe complications or costly interventions.

By truly listening to the family's observations instead of dismissing them as over-worrying, I helped catch a potentially catastrophic situation early. This experience reinforced the importance of attentiveness and collaboration in improving outcomes and reducing medical errors, showing how even small actions can have a profound impact on patient care.

Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting the importance of listening in healthcare, some may argue that clinical knowledge and efficiency should take precedence over "soft skills" like listening. In high-pressure medical environments, where time is limited, some might view listening as a luxury that slows down clinical work. However, research consistently shows that effective listening can actually enhance efficiency by reducing mistakes, preventing unnecessary procedures, and improving patient outcomes.

For example, a study by the Agency for Healthcare

By truly listening to the family's observations instead of dismissing them as over-worrying, I helped catch a potentially catastrophic situation early.

Research and Quality (2017) demonstrated that healthcare facilities that focused on communication skills, including active listening, experienced fewer misdiagnoses and unnecessary tests. This led to both time and resource savings, showing that improving communication can actually streamline care, reducing the need for follow-up visits and enabling faster, more accurate treatment decisions.

In conclusion, making active listening a priority in medical training is a key factor in improving patient care. It's easy to overlook how much listening impacts health outcomes, but this skill is essential for building trust, enhancing patient care, and reducing mistakes. When doctors, nurses, and other healthcare providers actively listen to patients, they not only understand symptoms more clearly but also foster a sense of care and respect that patients value. This leads to better communication, more accurate diagnoses, and treatments that are better suited to individual patient's needs.

As the medical field continues to change, recognizing listening as a vital skill alongside technical expertise will help produce more empathetic, effective healthcare professionals. This focus will ultimately create a more efficient healthcare system that benefits everyone, improving patient well-being and supporting healthcare providers in offering the best care possible.

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★ ★ ★

★ 1st Place ★



Pass the Woods

Written by Luke Giegerich

He remembered flying, the sky and ground jumbling into one dark painted smear as he spread his arms and caught the wind. The sensation was fleeting, the caress of the cold air quickly replaced by rigid earth as he crashed. Blinding flashes ignited in his skull. Blood and dirt gathered in his open mouth. The ground trembled and juddered about his prone body. He stayed there, his lungs a bellows, drawing breath in and out as he prayed for the world to cease its terrible convolutions.

Interminable time passed. The shaking slowly faded. The boy crushed loose pebbles in his hands; anything to anchor him from floating away again. Over and over he kept hearing his father's voice right before he took flight. There had been too much rattling and too dark to hear or make out what he'd said, though he could recall the sad love in his father's voice as he held him close to his thin body, then pushing him up, up into the air where he took aloft.

The world drained away for a time; when the boy returned to his senses and lifted his prone body up from the damp soil, he could see that he had flown into the clearing next to the train tracks. Far, far away he could make out a small line of exhaust smoke in the distance where the tracks led. Contrary to his father's wishes, he hadn't flown nearly as far as his father had wanted for him. His legs were tender when he stood up; he scrubbed flakes of blood out of his left eye. A gentle glow suffused the horizon from edge to edge as dawn leaked color into the rough edges of night. Despite being terrified, he knew that he would need to walk to safety if he couldn't fly there.

★

The land about the tracks was devoid of any cover, an empty space that broke against the line of faraway trees. The tracks stitched an industrial line of metal and hostile purpose through the barren land. The boy could tell that

dawn was breaking harshly overhead, and soon he'd be visible to anyone on or around the railway.

"You'll need to find shelter. You can't stay in the open. The soldiers will find you with the daylight. Hide in the forest." His father's voice sounded in his mind with ringing clarity. Imagining his thoughts as his father's instructions gave him the impetus to move for the verdant shelter of the forest.

The boy traded the vulnerable open spaces for the enclosed hush of woodland. The forest floor was relatively spacious and clear of obstacles. This helped to conserve his strength while he alternated between walking and jogging.

He absently picked at the Star of David patch loosely sewn onto the left breast of his jacket. Recalling how his mother had carefully stitched it into the worn fabric, pleading with him to be a good boy and be sure to wear this everywhere he went to ensure the rules were being followed. They had still lived in their modest home; this was before they'd been removed from their home by the large, foreboding Nazi men. He could see his mother's kind face pinched with alarm as he, his little brother, and father were grouped with the other males in their neighborhood, taken away from all the gentle, nurturing womenfolk.

He could still smell the fetid stench of trash piling up in the slums. His parents would whisper with their neighbors late at night over a solitary candle in the dining room. Trading horror stories of how instead of just trash it was bodies that were piling up like cordwood in Warsaw. Mass deportations from Lublin; thousands of families extricated from their homes, loaded like animals into pens and taken away without notice or explanation.

"Tear the patch from your clothes; hide it in the roots of that tree, over there." The voice of his father bade him, urging him on. He busied himself stripping out his mother's stitches as he trekked beneath the canopy of the trees; sunbeams stabbed through from above, revealing the swirling slow dance turn of dust motes.

With a final tear he removed the dirty yellow star from his chest, the word “Jude” both his identifier and damnation. Heeding the thoughts that came to him in his father’s voice, he balled the star in his fist and shoved it deep amid the roots of a towering tree.



The day stretched out over the reaching limbs of the trees like a diaphanous fabric; the swaying boughs bundling it together with wooden arms. They folded the gossamer radiance covetingly into a tiny bundle at the edge of the woods as nightfall descended.

He wandered the woods under a gentle breath of starlight, encouraging himself through the inscrutably dark forest floor with thoughts of his father’s rumbling voice. He heard, though never saw, the noisy flight of animals as he encroached on dens and nests.

Deep in the dark as he was curling up around the shelter of a towering tree, he thought he heard a dog barking far off, though couldn’t be sure. Nor did he care too much, as tired as he was. Hunger and thirst were of course ever present, though in the last months of their time living in the ghetto, he had become accustomed to those devilish demands on his body.

Sleep was a dark water he sank into, then reemerged with no knowledge of its passing as the morning sun pried his eyes open. His father’s voice goaded him to his feet, both knowing he had to keep moving if he had any hope of escaping pursuers.

He nearly stumbled into a hushed creek; his threadbare shoes filled with icy liquid as he splashed in. The boy sat down in water up to his crotch and was immediately jolted awake by the stinging frothy rush. He leaned over to place his mouth directly into the stream, sucking down great gulps until his belly hurt and his throat burned from the cold.

He sat and waited, trying to conjure up what to do next. Like a tributary drying up as it wanders too far from its source, his father’s voice had gradually evaporated from his mind. Try as he might, he could not conjure up the last words his father said right before pushing him through the rolled-up wire of the train window.

Tired and scared and sad, he blankly sat in the swirling eddies of the brook, wondering what to do next and on the cusp of praying, when a growl roused him from his soaked reverie.

Startled, he spun about to the opposite side of the stream where a large dog bent low, hackles raised and tail standing out like an exclamation point. The boy slowly stood, chilly water and fear causing his knees to knock together. Both his father’s voice and his own thoughts

had completely fled his mind. Terror like a brand sizzled against the flesh of his heart, quickening his heart rate, urging him to flee before the dog pounced.

Twitching in anticipated flight, he nearly fell back into the creek with shock when an old man materialized from the tree line and summoned the dog to heel with a sharp whistle. The boy splashed back to his side of the water in a blind panic, and didn’t stop until he heard the word “stay” yelled out in Yiddish.

The older man had his hands out and spread to the side, as if to say, “I have nothing to hide.” The boy could see a dented metal bucket lying next to the man’s feet. The dog now rested on the bank, front paws folded and pink tongue lolling out of a lopsided canine grin. The man beckoned the boy over with a summoning gesture.

He wore creased brown trousers and a voluminous stained white shirt that opened at the neck, revealing a bristling nest of white chest hair. The most shocking feature was the lack of facial hair; the boy could see every divot and imperfection in the old man’s seamed face. He

had become so accustomed to the bearded profile of his father and other Jewish men in his neighborhood that he just expected facial hair as part of a man’s intrinsic nature.

The man expectantly waved him over again. His eyes seemed kindly, despite the quizzical frown of wrinkles marring his forehead. The

man spoke at length to the boy, though in a language he wasn’t familiar with. After a few attempts, the boy thought he picked up snatches of garbled Yiddish, mixed in with whatever else the old man was saying. The man slowly bent over to pick up the discarded bucket. He pantomimed dipping the bucket through the air, making it obvious he intended to collect water.

The boy waited on the far shore, dripping and nervous, as the old man cautiously stooped into the stream and filled his vessel. He again tried to communicate with the boy through various words but settled on flitting his hand about in a wave, heading away into the woods with his dog companion obediently in tow.

The boy observed, wondering what to do. Taking it as a sure answer to his prayers, he followed along, hoping the absence of his father’s voice meant the old man had been sent to help him.



The boy was surprised to see how well-swept and orderly the interior of the cottage was compared to the ramshackle, deflated mushroom appearance of the outside. Nearby was a small shed-like structure with a windowed door that the boy assumed was the latrine.

Chickens clucked amiably in a thatched coop leaning against the cottage.

The old man waved the boy into his home, and from there provided the basic needs he'd had to leave far behind, even before boarding the train. Bread, an old crumbly block of hard cheese, and some dried fruit presented as a feast. Soon the old man had a cheery fire crackling in a corner fireplace, a kettle percolating over it. The boy sat on the only bed in the home, the big dog defensively curled around him in companionable repast.

Soon much of the horrors of the train gradually faded. The memories of emaciated families huddled together against the cold nights and cruelty of the Nazi soldiers seemed as distant as the train itself. He sent a grateful prayer to God as he drifted off in downy dog fur, secure for the moment.



The officer barked at the old man in German; astringent, commanding words demanding immediate action. The old man prostrated before the soldiers arrayed before the cottage, pleading. The boy was shocked to once again see the old man attempting to brush off the Nazis. This was the third time soldiers had appeared, intent on finding the train escapee.

At the first visit they had merely knocked; a hard rap at the flimsy wooden door announcing their arrival.

The old man hid the boy in a shallow cellar accessible from under the bed. With bated breath he had waited and listened to the conversation. The words were cryptic to him, except for the word "Jude" that was repeated several times by the soldiers. The old man sounded confused, with a denying attitude soaked into all his responses.

Eventually the door closed, and footsteps thudded away, when the old man pried the cellar hatch open. The boy let the old man pull him from the crawlspace, amazed at his willingness to risk his life to keep him concealed.

A few more days passed, and the boy thought he might be safe from scrutiny, when there was another disturbance at the door. He had been lounging on the bed with the dog, close to a freshly laid fire, when the next interruption occurred.

The old man hastily helped the boy into the crawlspace again, while the dog barked with menacing conviction at the door. The boy had just crouched low in the space, trying to hold back a rising sneeze caused by the disturbed dust swirling about the cellar, when the door was thrown open. Men stomped into the home, led by a stern-faced man with insignia and medals adorning his coat.

The boy could see the familiarity between the old man

and the Nazi officer. They argued a bit, the old man daring to admonish the officer in front of his men. The old man pointed to a dusty sepia-stained framed picture on the wardrobe he kept his few clothes in, indicating the family posing for a portrait.

The officer sneered sourly, and through the floor cracks, the boy could see the resemblance between the officer and the old man. After a few more heated words, the Nazis filed out, the officer throwing up his hands in obvious disgust. The old man could only shake his head sorrowfully at their departure, commanding the dog to sit as he closed the cottage door. The boy let out a breath of relief, followed by an involuntary sneeze attack.

Not even a full day passed before the officer was back, this time with naked malice towards the old man.

The boy had been using the latrine when the group of soldiers approached the cottage. The old man had been around the corner collecting eggs from the chicken coop, and had the guile to walk towards the far side of the cottage, drawing their attention away from the latrine and

where the boy hid. The dog barked and pranced about the soldiers, eagerly jumping up at the officer in recognized greeting.

The boy had to suppress a groan of fear as the officer reacted to the dog's antics by drawing his pistol

and shooting the animal in the head, ending its life in a shocked yelp. The boy covered his mouth with both hands, a soundless scream shaking through his body. The old man threw himself at the officer's — his son's — feet, weeping in anguish. The officer gestured with his pistol at two of the Nazis to comb through the cottage; they jumped with a fervent salute and dashed inside.

The boy knew he didn't have much time left. He wordlessly thanked the kind old man with a prayer, and crept to the back of the latrine, working at a loose board behind the pit. Just as he pried it apart, he heard footsteps heading right for the latrine door.

The boy anxiously stuffed himself into the hole, bursting through the other side into the brush lining the cleared area about the cottage. He left behind surprised shouts and could hear bodies trampling through nearby brush.

Being small enough to not attract their notice, or since the soldiers were already distracted by their own commotion, he broke through the shrubs back into the forest proper. Having eaten his fill and slept soundly the past several days allowed for a great burst of stamina to lighten his stride. The soldiers were far behind him when they finally passed into the woods.

He climbed a small rise, the sloping ground like a landing strip leading to his takeoff. Even through his labored breathing he heard the finality of a gunshot echo from the direction of the cottage. His father's voice rang out as a

The officer sneered sourly, and through the floor cracks, the boy could see the resemblance between the officer and the old man.

clarion in his mind, as if he'd now tuned back to the proper radio station.

"Fly, my son! Fly to your freedom, Samuel! Papa loves you." As Samuel crested the rise, too late he saw that it terminated over a ravine. Deep below a strong current of water moulded its way through the woods, like a snake burrowing among leaves.

Instinctively he raised his arms, as if in flight. Unbidden, the memory of his father pulling apart the wire grate over the train window came back to him; he could see the blood seeping from his father's hands as he sliced open his fingers, pulling the metal threads wide enough to emit a thin ten-year-old boy's frame to squeeze through. He couldn't recall what his father had said when he'd taken flight, careening into the packed gravel strip running along the tracks. It was as if the impact had jarred the words from his memory. Now though, it returned, and Samuel realized he wanted to so badly obey his father's last request. He wanted to escape, and live, so that he could make his papa proud.

As his father pushed back the metal wiring, eyes dimmed with fatigue and the knowledge that this was his last goodbye to his son, he had endearingly kissed Samuel on the forehead, then sent him aloft to freedom, saying, "Go, and be a good boy."

Once again Samuel flew, knowing that he'd fulfil his father's request, diving into the churning water below as shouts of the soldiers could be heard above him.

★ ★ ★

★ 2nd Place ★



My First and Last Hunting Trip

Written by Ruby Gaynor

It is getting dark, and the dogs are barking as we meet up by the tailgate of that old white Ford in front of Uncle Joe's garage. My sister Audrey has one of dad's old belts on. It wraps around her twice, and he has run it through the loops on the wheat light he lets her use. It's so heavy for an 8-year-old girl, the light hangs down past her hips and swings like an old satchel as she walks.

My cousin Mellisa wears one of Uncle Joe's old flannel jackets. It is so big she seems to disappear when she puts it on. We all three wear tennis shoes because we have heard all about how much walking we will do while coon hunting, when the boys brag of their trips. We just know we are about to have the most fun we have ever had in our lives since listening to all those tales.

Dad and Uncle Joe are brothers, and both are dark haired with blue eyes and stand well over 6 feet tall. Uncle Joe is tall and thin, Dad is heavier built and broad through the shoulders, but both men wear overalls for their daily attire. We feel like nothing can get us as long as we stay close to them.

The old tram road runs around behind Uncle Joe's house. We often use it as a four-wheeler trail, so we are very familiar with the route we are taking for our big "hunt." Despite knowing the trail, we still follow our dad's lead. It is dark, after all. The dogs are so far ahead, it seems like we will never catch up. This is the first time we have ever followed the dogs; they usually follow us when we are playing.

Audrey's little blonde curls are bouncing with every step she takes. They are the only thing on her you can clearly see in the dark. She must be out front since she has the light. Mellisa and I bring up the rear, and despite our best attempts to stay close, we walk right through the center

of the gigantic mudhole that everyone else has avoided. So now in addition to being cold and scared, we have wet feet as well.

"You girls should have worn boots," dad sighs, as he ignores our complaining and keeps walking.

"Daddy, my feet are soaking wet!" I proclaim.... He just keeps walking. It was as if he knows that I am scared and will keep following despite being close enough to turn around. I can hear the dogs in the distance. I just know that maybe the fun hasn't started yet, and this night will have to get better.

Audrey's light is more like a strobe light now. She has grown tired of trying to hold it steady, and it shines a different direction with every step she takes. I can see Dad's smile get bigger and bigger as he watches her struggle to be in the lead. Her determination tickles him.

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"Daddy, Daddy, look, there's Copper. He has one treed!" Audrey screams.

"Are we gonna shoot it?" asks Mellisa.

"Nah, We're just training the dogs tonight," says Uncle Joe. "Big Jim didn't even bring a gun," he explains. We are so disappointed. It's hard for three young girls to understand why they

haven't gotten the same treatment as the boys get. We are supposed to come home with our big trophy coon and really show the boys up. Then they will be jealous when Dad and Uncle Joe tell them how much fun they had hunting with us, this time.

We walk up to the old spring in the Martin Bottoms. As Dad and Uncle Joe sit down on the bank, we three girls follow suit. A Pepsi can that had been cut in half is floating in the water. Dad had left it there to use as a cup a few days prior.

"You girls thirsty?" he asks as he dips us all a drink of water

out. We three girls sit there complaining about being cold and having tired wet feet, only pausing to take a drink. Uncle Joe is chuckling as he listens to all our woes.

"Y'all think, maybe coon huntin' ain't your thing?" asks Uncle Joe.

Mellisa has been quiet for most of the trip, as usual. But she musters up a quick reply for him this time. "I'll never ask to go again," she says.

I think on it for a minute, waiting to see if Audrey replies, before deciding on my response. "The boys made it sound like so much fun," I reply.

Dad reminds me that the boys don't like going with him to check the cows or going with him to the co-op to pick up fertilizer. I start to realize that maybe he and I already had our own "thing," and that it was a lot more fun for me than coon hunting. After all, I am not that crazy about guns, or dead animals. I don't particularly like the dark, and nobody likes wet feet. I do, however, really like riding to town in my daddy's old truck and getting ice cream on the way home.

Uncle Joe gets himself a pinch of Skoal for the walk home. Audrey, Mellisa, and I get one last dipper full of water.

Dad pulls Audrey close to him and asks, "Do you want daddy to take that light?"

He helps her unbuckle that old belt, and we all giggle as he puts it on under his overalls. He looks silly but is a much better leader than my little curly-headed sister. The dogs are long gone by this time. We can't even hear them anymore. The only thing we can hear is the crunching of leaves under our feet as we head back up the old tram

road.

The silence gives us time to reflect on the night. Maybe it was a good idea to "train" the dogs tonight. I think that gunshots couldn't have possibly helped with the fear of the dark or the cold wet feet we are already struggling with.

I am thinking about how Audrey will most likely ask to sleep with me when we get home. When she is this tired, she likes to be close to her sissy. Mellisa is so tired she probably won't even ask to spend the night with us.

The ghost story our older cousins told us once at a sleepover about the headless horseman that rides the tram road comes to mind. I run up beside dad and grab his hand.

There's probably never been three girls so glad to see the streetlight at Uncle Joe's shop in their life. That old white Ford looks as if it's just waiting for us under that light. Mellisa waves bye as she heads for her momma on the porch.

Before dad can finish asking, "You girls ready?", Audrey and I are in the truck. He unbuckles the belt with the wheat light on it and puts it down in the toolbox, waves at Uncle Joe, and gets in the truck.

As we pass the barn headed out the driveway, the moon is so big in the windshield. I am thinking to myself that this is probably the last time I will ever ask to go hunting again. I now realize that I don't have to be like the boys to be close to my dad. We already had our own special things that we liked to do, just the two of us.

★ ★ ★

★ Honorable Mention ★

Something to Be Seen

Written by Collin Pollock

The city of New Angstrom was half the size of New York City and nearly doubled its population. Built in 2065, the founders capitalized on a rising demand for steel refinement as a foundation for the city's economy. Infrastructure for the mills were built first, then expanded with complex mazes of housing and trading centers. Construction prioritized fitting as much into as little space as possible.

Despite how dreary it sounds today, its citizens were thriving. The lucrative refinement industry offered salaries much higher than most, making the city one of the wealthiest. However, demand for the industry would fall starting the summer of 2092, sending it into a spiral of decay and depreciation.

The result was the cold and hollow slum it's known as today. Alleyways and halls devoid of light, aside from a neon sign now and then. Jobs with pathetic wages. Then, of course, the lowly, poor, and empty residents.

In this lonely pit, we find a small man named Maroon looking to spend the night at his local nook. Maroon did pay for his share of a decrepit apartment. Yet, like most others, he liked to spend the nights in these nooks for comfort in times of need.

Bowing his head and sneaking through a set of pipes, he found himself in a small maintenance room. The air was temperate and a hair moist. In the far corner was a middle-aged woman kneeling on a withered cloth beside a bed. The woman recognized Maroon as he began to approach.

She gave a hearty smile and gestured to the open bed. The mattress was soft and well cared for, lined with cloth and pillows propped up to hug the customer as they lay. Without regarding her, Maroon dropped a coin in her palm and snuggled up in the smooth embrace of the silk sheets.

The woman reached to her side and pulled out a thick, tightly rolled, puffy blanket. She unrolled it onto Maroon's body and firmly tucked the ends under his sides, taking extra care to ensure his feet were nestled deeply in. Maroon closed his eyes and rolled his head toward the woman.

Maroon spoke in a tired, raspy voice, "Mother, they worked me to the bone today. I am exhausted." The woman was not his mother. However, the service she provided was the comfort of a motherly presence, at which nook keepers

were highly skilled.

The woman lowered her soft lips to Maroon's forehead before gently stroking his cheek with her soft thumb. "Oh, my dear boy, this work you do will make you strong." The woman's gentle voice rode smoothly into his ears. "Rest, my boy. Let your aching muscles rest, and you will be strong at it again tomorrow."

"I am tired of this life, mother." The woman had heard this many times before and was used to it by now.

"My boy, leaving this life presents you with not just part of death but all of it. Something that means nothing if you have not experienced all of life. You have not yet grown into a strong, wise man. You have not seen the fruits of your labor."

She spoke with such confidence and conviction, as if she wrote the truth herself.

Deep in the silk cradle, Maroon's body still ached from the day's stress. The line she gave, he had heard before. Only now, he sought to question her. "How can you be sure?"

The woman moved her hand from his cheek to his arm, lacing her long nails up and down, tickling Maroon in a funny way customers often liked.

"Wise men can be content when they frown. Wise men do not need their mothers. Wise men understand life, and its glory, and freedoms."

The soft stroking continued, helping Maroon ease the tension in his spine. Farther and farther, he fell into the mattress, his head slumping more and more to the side. "One day, you will not need your dear old mother. I'll still be here, but you will find comfort elsewhere."

"You promise?" Maroon kept his eyes closed and imagined his own mother above him.

"I promise." The woman gave Maroon a kiss. "One day, your blossoming mind will see you out of this place. You will leave to a place warm and inviting, where you can live as you see fit. Oh, my boy, and someday..." She paused momentarily, letting out a little chuckle and a warm smile, "Someday, you will see the sun. That is why you must go on."

Maroon's breathing grew faint. The woman stroked his arm again and again, letting him stay a little while longer.

★ ★ ★

Spring 2025

5th annual district-wide **Larry Kruse Memorial Writing Contest**

Writing Contest Judges:

Jim Brimeyer, communications faculty (retired), Northeast Iowa Community College

Jim Swenson, journalist and editor (retired), *Telegraph Herald*

Writing Contest Organizers:

Pamela Brandt, Instructional Specialist, Peosta Learning Center

Dorothy Giannakouros, Communications Instructor, Peosta campus

Joshua Ratel-Kahn, Communications Instructor, Calmar campus

Jeanne Stannard, Instructional Specialist, Calmar Learning Center

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