

High School Essay

Second Place

Empathy Echoes

By Anna Roberson, Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School

At 2 a.m., three of us lay on orange and pink striped covers as thoughts unravel and exhaustion hovers. Somewhere between starry-eyed descriptions of big, bright futures and barely audible admissions of a fear of being incomplete, my eyes rake your dresser before landing on a certain frame.

A picture of you and your brother as toddlers, on the shoulders of your newly settled parents. All four of you sporting Mickey Mouse ears and a hauntingly similar, beautiful smile. At first I held back tears because there was something so unfair about an old photograph proven false 12 years later. How could that memory, frozen in time and secured by cool glass and silver frames, cause an accident *that* much further down the road?

My parents are getting a divorce, you texted us on a Saturday in February. My heart ached for you because of how you must have felt, and my heart ached for you because I didn't know what that feeling was.

At first I held back tears because it was so unfair. Then, I let them out because it was so unfair. I was crying because I couldn't feel what you'd soon be going through and I was crying because I didn't know if I wanted to.

And I was crying because I have family photos of toddlers on shoulders and hauntingly beautiful smiles protected by cool glass, and was it possible that I could wake up one morning in February to that glass shattered?

If empathy is the ability to share in what others feel, does imagining do you justice?

In the weeks to come I tried not to look into your green eyes differently. I fought the urge to notice a hardening in your face, or how you came late to first period every morning. And I fought the urge to cry when you told me about the Mother's Day card your dad wrote for your mom.

How you found it hidden behind a stack of newspapers three days later, with *Jen* written in boyish, humble handwriting.

When pain is on your mind you come to see more of it. By hosting your pain in my imagination, I noticed it elsewhere—usually on accident—but in the rawest forms. Like when I stumbled into the bathroom on a bleak Tuesday morning, weighted down by homework and heartbreak, and heard the faint, broken sobs of my English teacher. Pain is everywhere you look but you can't see it.

So maybe empathizing wasn't just journeying into your mind, tears as souvenirs, but

something meant to last longer. Perhaps a sabbatical?

Perhaps the only way to understand the feeling is to try to look at every moment from your green eyes. To walk to school and back in your shoes—then maybe I'd see what makes you late.

I hope that although my shoes fit differently, our glass never shatters.