

## High School Short Story Second Place

### Solace in the Stars

By Rashmi Kanipakala, Thomas S. Wootton High School

There was a girl on the rooftop. That wasn't anything new though. She was there every day at the same time, like some sort of guardian angel. When James first saw The Girl, he thought he must have dreamt her up—another thing he had imagined to keep time away. But then she kept coming back. Every night at around 2 a.m., she would be perched on the rooftop.

\*\*\*

He frowned, shifting forward in his bed. From his bedroom window there wasn't much he could see since she was across the street and two stories higher than him. The Girl was merely a shadowy outline with occasionally flipping hair and swinging feet.

James rolled his eyes at the carefree way she rocked back and forth almost as if she wasn't 12 stories high on a building that had probably *never* been in code. He couldn't imagine being that uninhibited and free.

Ever since he had been confined to his room it was like there was an ever-present air of unease slowly suffocating him. He wasn't alone either, the entire city seemed to hum with anxiety in the eerily quiet streets. James sighed, suddenly everything was a reminder of the chaos in the world.

\*\*\*

James carefully made his way to his nightstand, methodically taking his pills before slipping under his covers. He smoothed the sheets atop him, folding his arms over his chest.

He sort of fell into a life of ritual and rhythm when he moved to New York. He had a routine that he lazily clung to, but the days were all so lackluster they blended together anyways. Not that he particularly cared. Most of the day was spent hacking away at schoolwork and incessantly scrolling through his phone. The nights were spent thinking; sleep had become less and less reassuring. It was the only thing that he couldn't perfect into a pattern. He would spend hours aimlessly turning in bed, completely alone with his mind in the dark.

\*\*\*

It was when the day and all of its wonderful distractions fell away that he would be forced to confront his thoughts. It was the taunting darkness and the seemingly endless stretch of nothingness and unproductivity that reminded him of how human he was.

He shifted in his bed when something fell from his ceiling directly onto his face. He wrinkled his nose, holding up a stray glow-in-the-dark star that he had painstakingly stuck onto his ceiling in the shape of constellations. It was one of the first major things he did to his room after he found out he was going to stay indefinitely. *His room.*

James tried to remember when it had become his—when did this room and this desk and these sheets become his? When his Uncle Neil took him in, everything was *not his* and it was perfect. There were no gray areas, the things in James' bag were his and everything else in the apartment was Neil's. He frowned again, flipping the plastic star between his fingers—it belonged in the middle of Orion's belt.

Nothing was clear anymore, there wasn't a plan, a future. And if there had been one, it was all tossed away. He was supposed to be in Virginia with his grandmother. But she was gone and he was here—in the wrong state with the wrong person.

\*\*\*

He thought about every hug and kiss he had given her the week before she got sick. All the times he touched the bus railings and forgot to wash his hands. James blinked. Every time someone said that *it wasn't his fault*, it felt more like his. *It wasn't his fault*, but he should've been more careful. *It wasn't his fault*, but he should've watched the news. *It wasn't his fault*, but it was.

After the "funeral," things started to spiral and he needed something to hold on to. The temporary stay with Uncle Neil became permanent. The guest bedroom was now his room and Roosevelt was his new school. He had started to find solace in the strangest things. Three pumps of hand sanitizer, a minute of hand-washing, layering on latex gloves and surgical masks—a routine. He built himself a world he could control.

When he had a routine, it felt like the universe could bend at his will; that is until it fell apart right before bed.

\*\*\*

James turned again, listless. He looked out the large window. It was his favorite thing in *the* room. It went from the ceiling to the honey-wood floors and it had the classic view of the New York City skyline. But even the view lost its appeal when the lights fell dark and the sidewalks abandoned. It was like living in a deserted city in one of those dystopian movies.

He exhaled, eyes shifting back to The Girl. She was still swinging her legs, her arms now swaying with her. She held something that glinted in the moonlight. He squinted trying to make it out in the darkness when his heart fell two paces behind because in her hands was a glass bottle.

James sat up, his heart kicking in his chest. He wasn't sure what to do, if he should even do anything. Should he call the police, start yelling?

He thought about Neil snoring on the couch and decided against either option. James swallowed, before shoving his covers aside. He grabbed his coat before putting on a mask and throwing on his shoes. He didn't bother being quiet; Neil slept like he was dead anyway. James pushed through the bedroom door, skipping over the towers of paper organized in circles. His uncle was passed out on the couch in the center of it, light spilling through the TV illuminating his face.

James skipped over the piles and quietly shut the front door behind him and quickly started for the stairs. He took two at a time, carefully avoiding the handrails and kicked the apartment's front door open with his feet. He didn't bother checking the empty street and ran straight to the apartment building across from his.

Over the past few months, James had been struck by an indifference to the world around him. Every day there seemed to be something new wrong with the world and he became apathetic to it all, letting the world and its catastrophes wash over him as he scrolled past one disaster after the other. He was surprised with what he was doing.

\*\*\*

The doorman was asleep at the desk and James quickly snuck past, his body hovering close to the beige walls as he scanned for a staircase. He took a deep breath before shuffling forward. His feet clanged on the metal stairs as he ran forward, not letting his brain catch up to him. By the time he got to the rooftop, he was a panting mess.

James pushed the metal bar with his elbow and nudged it open with his feet. A thin white card fluttered to the floor and he stepped over it.

He tried not to think about all the hands that had touched the door before him in the past five days. James frowned, the CCD website said that metal was one of the worst surfaces to touch and he didn't even have his gloves on. He wasn't wearing his usual two layers of masks either. James swallowed thickly and stepped through the doorway. It was too late to think about that.

"Hey!" he called out.

The Girl swung around at his voice, turning to face him. She stared back at him before taking another sip. The glass bottle swung dangerously from her fingertips as she stretched her arm out above the eerily silent New York streets.

James swallowed heavily, suddenly afraid that the weight of the glass bottle could propel her 12 stories down. "Put it down!" he managed to get out. His brain was slowly catching up to him.

She frowned, wrinkling her nose. "Why?" she asked. Her voice still rang clear which eased James' racing heart a bit.

"You're going to hurt yourself."

She snorted, "That's kind of the point."

"Why?" He frowned, trying to nonchalantly slip his hand into his pockets. He fiddled through a gum wrapper, a receipt and a rubber band, trying to discreetly get to his phone.

She took another swing from the bottle. "Why?" she echoed.

"Why do you want to hurt yourself?" James stalled as he clawed at his sweatpants. No, no, no, no. His heart thudded...*why didn't he bring his phone?*

James took a careful step backward, reaching behind his back and wincing as his fingers reached the cool metal handle. He tugged on the door but it remained firmly sealed. He shuddered as he tightened his fingers around the handle and took another step backward, pulling harder.

When he went to move back again, he nearly slipped on something smooth, and when looked down, he found himself standing on the white card.

The white card that was keeping the door open. Oh f---.

James looked up. He was so, so, so screwed. What the *hell* was he supposed to do? He didn't have a plan for this, he didn't know *what* this was. He was panicking, he could feel it—his palms were sweaty and his breathing uneven.

Talk her down, de-escalation, he reminded himself. All he had to do was get her to get off the ledge. And then find a way to get back to the apartment.

"Look, I don't need help," she said suddenly.

James frowned; he had heard that before. He had said that before. "Can you please just sit down?"

"I am sitting." She cocked her head at him.

"On the ground." He pressed his fingers to his temple. "Can you sit down on the ground?"

"You don't get to play Batman, OK." She flipped her pink tipped hair. "You can say you tried to be a hero if you'd like and maybe be like in one of those interviews." She took another sip from the bottle. "You look like the kind of person who'd get a kick out of being on the news."

James felt his mouth run dry, “You—no—you aren’t...”

“Yes, I know. It’s quite unfortunate. I’m going to be killing myself.”

“What? Wait, please.” He was choking on his words. He felt his hands shake. “You, you can’t—”

She turned away from him. Her blond and pink hair floated in the wind behind her. “This is why you should mind your own business.”

“I can’t just watch you die,” James said.

“Go away, then.”

“I—I can’t do that either. Just let me get help, they can—”

She laughed dryly, turning back to face him. She shook her head, “They don’t do help. *They* don’t do s---.” She paused, narrowing her eyes. “And if you call anyone, I swear to God, I’ll jump right now.”

“Look, I don’t have my phone.” James probably shouldn’t have said that.

“Leave. Just go. Pretend this never happened.”

“I can’t—”

“Why? Do you want to be some kind of hero?” She rolled her eyes. “Save it, I’m not gonna write a memoir anyt—”

“No, I literally can’t. The door’s locked behind me.”

She paused, her mouth agape.

James froze, that wasn’t the right thing to say *at all*.

The Girl didn’t look mad. She laughed silently, throwing her head back. “How unlucky do I have to be?” she breathed.

James bit a completely inappropriate smile down.

“Can you sit down on the floor now?” He lowered himself down, kneeling on the cold cement floor. “Please.”

The Girl blinked, pulling her knees to her chest. Her pink hair blew in the wind behind her. She closed her eyes, tipping her head back. The Girl shook her head, “I—”

“Please.”

She didn’t say anything.

*Something personal*, he needed to tell her something personal. His heart was racing. He shut his eyes, something to tell her, something to tell her. “My—my nana died,” he said. “And I saw her die,” James swallowed. “I—I can’t see any other person die.”

“How?”

“COVID,” James shifted, uncomfortable. “I was on video chat with her when, when, it happened.”

“I’m sorry,” her voice was flat.

“You don’t get to die, OK?” his voice cracked. “It’s not fair.”

He opened his eyes, finding The Girl staring back at him. She seemed almost frozen still with her eyes wide and her cheeks red. She was quiet as she rocked back and forth on the ledge. James felt like he could hear her think, nearly see her eyes shuttling through memories before they finally cleared. “OK,” she whispered, slipping off the ledge.

They sat in silence. A few cars drove by and the air got colder. The Girl had her face buried in between her knees; almost like she was squished into herself. She was probably crying.

James sat down across from her. They were almost 4 feet apart now, he fidgeted with his mask.

Finally, she broke the silence. “I know you, from school,” she sniffed.

“I was only there a week before it closed.”

“You’ve got one of those faces,” she replied. James briefly wondered if that was a good thing.

“Well, uh. I’m Jameson—James.”

“Lynn.”

Lynn, it was one syllable, short. It fit her well. He nodded awkwardly. “You’re a sophomore?”

“Yeah.”

"I am too, I guess."

Lynn lifted her head. "That's a bit of a boring question."

"Yeah, sorry."

"That's OK, you have a better one?" She half-smiled.

James frowned. "Favorite color?"

"That one was worse. I'll go first." She took another sip from the glass bottle with a grimace.

"What's one thing you like about the world?"

"Uhh... I'm not really sure." Suddenly it felt like there was nothing good, nothing that was just plain good on its own. "Is there really anything good?" he questioned.

Lynn snorted and held out the bottle to him.

James hesitantly reached for it, just to get it away from her, he reasoned. He gently placed it to his side. He tried not to think about the saliva and fingerprints wrapped around it or how close it was to him. He curled his fingers into his palms, his nails digging into his skin.

"You don't drink?"

"No, I, uh... I thought of something good." He pulled his knees to the chest. "Don't laugh, though"

"OK."

"I think like maybe, love?" He waited for her to laugh. She seemed like the person to be cynical of love. She didn't though. "Like idea of it. The kind of love between places and people and writing that lasts for ages."

He paused and swallowed heavily. There was a certain adrenaline rush in talking to her. It was like playing a game of Jumanji, every sentence was unpredictable. It was different and it was nice.

"What about you? What's one thing you like?" he asked.

"You do realize that I tried to jump off a building like 10 minute ago."

James froze, suddenly reminded of the stakes of their conversation, the 12 stories beneath them. Lynn's green eyes bore into him, blatantly analyzing his response. "Then, uh... what's one thing you hate?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I don't have a good enough answer for that." Lynn shifted, "I think you're wrong about love, though."

"Why?"

"It's not all that good, there some really s--- types of love. Some people think that the spite of their love can make you love them back."

James paused, "Yeah, I guess you're right." He bit his lip.

"My mom's like that."

"Why?"

Lynn laughed humorlessly, "You're gonna have to pass back the bottle for that."

"I uh... I think I'm gonna keep it for a while," he stuttered.

"It's mostly water," she shrugged.

"Still."

"So, uh, we don't have a way back down?" James asked, pointedly changing the topic.

"That's my way down," she said, about to point to the ledge when James reached out and grabbed her wrist. Lynn dropped her hand and James sat back quietly. She was probably angry and he was angry too.

"Can I have the bottle back?"

"No."

Lynn glared at him. "Fine," she said. She reached into her coat and to his surprise, pulled out another bottle. He decided to ignore it.

"How'd you know I was up here?" Lynn asked, unscrewing the lid and tossing it in his direction.

He swiftly dodged the metal cap, "I live across the street, on the 10th floor of that apartment," James said, frowning at her as he gestured across the street.

She nodded, taking a sip.



"I, uh... see you every night. Up here." James wondered if that was creepy.

Lynn didn't seem to notice. "Why are you up so late?" she asked.

"Insomnia, I guess. Nothing really helps."

"I'm not sick y'know. Just wanted to throw that out," she gestured to her maskless face and pointed to his.

"Yeah, yeah it's just ah... I get nervous about it."

"Right, your nana," she said bluntly.

"Yeah." They went quiet for a while; it wasn't an uncomfortable silence however.

"Why'd you move here in March?" she asked.

"I used to live with my nana and uh... now I live with Neil." James tugged his coat sleeves over his hands. "He's my uncle."

"What about your parents?"

"Died a while ago. I think I was like 9."

"What were they like?" Lynn rocked backward, hugging the bottle closer to her chest.

James laughed a little. "Wild. Eccentric." He smiled, "Honestly, my whole childhood was crazy."

"Got a good story there?" she leaned forward.

"Well for starters, my name."

Lynn smiled a little, stretching her legs out. "Go on, then."

"My father's name was James and—"

"Oh like, James' son" She wrinkled her nose, "Erh, your name is literally a pun."

"It's not even as bad as my middle name."

"What's your middle name?" she asked, tilting her head back.

"No, no—I don't want to go." James shook his head violently.

“Now I have to know. I bet there’s a good story”

“My mother was into Ancient Greece and liked history. My father couldn’t care less, but she wanted to choose my middle name.” James raised his eyebrows, “and she wanted me to have a powerful name.”

“Like Hercules or...or Apollo? Oh, is it Apollo?”

James laughed, “No, no, I wish. Let me finish. All of those sound reasonable, but my mother was wild, right.” He readjusted himself, wrapping his arms around himself. “She didn’t want me to have a weird myth or tragedy associated with it. So—”

“Oh no.”

“She went with Basil.”

“No, why?” Lynn pressed her face into her hands. Her hair fell forward in a waterfall of pink and blond. “Like the seasoning?”

“Like the seasoning. I know, very funny.”

“It is.”

“Oh, is it?” He huffed even though he was already smiling. “It apparently means like fearless, no elementary schooler cares about that.”

Lynn sighed, “Basil, that’s good. I don’t think I can top that.”

“Well, go on. Is it just Lynn?”

“It’s actually Gwendolynn,” she made a face. “After some old dead person.”

“No middle name?”

“And I thank God every day for it,” she rolled her eyes. “Can you imagine what they would have given me? Some s--- like Guinerva or like Gwyneth.”

James laughed, trying to imagine a younger Lynn hating her name. “It’s not that bad, it kinda suits you.”

She took another sip. “I’m going to take that as an insult, but you’re right Gwendolynn isn’t that bad.” Lynn licked her lips, “Guess what my Mother named my half-sister.”

“I have no idea. Anne?”

“Hint. She wanted it to be unique.” Lynn said with finger quotes.

“Oh, no.”

“I’ll spare you the mental gymnastics.” She grinned devilishly. “It’s Ensleigh. Like pronounced En-sss-lee. Spelled: I don’t f--- know how!”

“Oof, poor kid.” James shook his head

“I told her it was a s--- name and then she cried.”

“How old is she?”

“Five, probably 6 now.” Lynn sat back, “I’m kind of an asshole.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” She was looking at him again, right at the face. It didn’t feel as unnerving as before.

Lynn had a knack for saying things you weren’t supposed to and James couldn’t hold a conversation for the life of him. It was a good thing they were both socially inept, James thought. They sat in silence again, the morning light finally breaking through the night sky.

“I don’t think I want to die.”

James didn’t know what to say to that. Anything that came to mind seemed awfully inappropriate. “Good,” he said softly.

She turned to him. “Good?”

“Everything else seemed wrong—like *Congratulations! Or Me too!*”

Lynn laughed. “I like your no filter.”

James tilted his head. “It’s not always a good thing.”

“Bet.” Her eyes darted around, before settling on her shoes. “I don’t want to be a dead body.”

It seemed impossible for her to be still. James couldn’t imagine her unmoving and quiet. He didn’t want to.

“Ask me why,” Lynn stood up.

“Why?”

She walked over to him, standing by his side.

“I have no f--- idea.” She paused, sitting down. “It just doesn’t feel like the end. It doesn’t feel right.”

“I don’t think you really wanted to die,” James said. Lynn frowned, turning away from him. He answered her unasked question, “the white card.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“My—my uncle’s got a friend. I started to see him when I moved here, he’s really cool. Maybe, you could talk to him?” He expected her to be angry or at least upset, but she nodded.

“OK.”

“Yeah.” James reached a hand out. To his surprise, she folded her cold fingers over his.

“James,” she said.

“Lynn,” he echoed. “How are we going to get down from here?”

“Moment ruined.” She smiled a little, “I have a janitor friend, he’ll be here at 5.”

“We’ve got a long while, huh?”

“Yeah. Have a way to pass the time?” Lynn asked.

“I used to stargaze with my nana. Don’t have a lot of stars here, though.” Even with the empty streets, it was impossible to see anything in the middle of the city.

“Isn’t that a star?” Lynn pointed at a tiny speck of white in the lightning sky.

“I think that’s a helicopter.”

“We can pretend it’s a star,” she said.

“OK.”