

## 1st Place High School Short Story

**Title: Rye**

**By Ainsley MacSlarrow**

On the other side of the creek, an elephant wearing a rugged cape of dried tree needles plodded away toward the sinking, spitting sun. Rye watched it with a somber expression that looked odd on a 9-year-old's face; she repeatedly swung her heels against the legs of her porch chair.

The door to the cottage opened, and Hannah appeared, carrying a hot mug in each hand. She shut the door softly behind her by pulling the knob with the crook of her elbow. The cottage was getting older, built 50 years ago in 2046, and the door's hinges squeaked like mice.

Rye sniffed her mug. It was tea. She wrinkled her nose. Hannah, sinking into the rocking chair beside her, noticed her expression. "Dr. Copeland recommended it. Ginger tea. It might help with the nausea." Rye scrunched her face but tried a small sip. "It's spicy," she said. For a few minutes, the two sat drinking their tea in silence, watching the sun slowly set behind the pine forest and the humping orange hills. "When do I have to go back to the doctor?"

Hannah took a long draught of her tea and replied, "We have another round of chemotherapy in two weeks."

"I hate chemotherapy."

Two birds took flight from atop the elephant's sun-touched back. They circled distantly up into the sky, like raindrops falling in the wrong direction. Rye took another sip of tea.

“Hannah, why are we always the only ones when we go to the doctor?”

“I suppose it’s the time we schedule our appointments. Most people are at work or school on Tuesday mornings.” Hannah drained the last of her tea before getting to her feet. “I’d better get dinner started.”

“Hannah?” Rye asked. “Did my parents have red hair, too?”

“No, child. Your parents both had brown hair.”

“Is my red hair why I got cancer?”

Hannah sat back down. She placed the palm of her hand against the side of Rye’s head and gently brushed the springy red curls out of her eyes. “Your hair is beautiful, Rye. Everything about you is beautiful.”

In the silence, the faraway twittering of the two birds drifted back on the wind.

“Red hair does not cause cancer. Sometimes when a body creates red hair it also creates skin in a way that makes it easier for the skin to get sunburned. Sunburns can lead to skin cancer. It’s possible your skin is more vulnerable to sunburn, and it’s also possible that’s why you got melanoma, but we don’t know anything for sure.” Hannah stood up and went again to the door. But she was still looking at Rye, her eyes warm, like the tea heating Rye’s hands. “I think I’ll unfreeze some of that lemon cheesecake for dessert.” She disappeared into the house.

The elephant suddenly wasn’t an elephant anymore. It was a boring, sun-warmed, dry leaf-covered, red pine needle-strewn hill.

After dinner, Rye wanted to play dress-up. She knelt on the red, handsewn carpet in Hannah's closet and pawed through a thicket of hanging dresses, fancy sweaters and coats that were popular in the 2070s. An emerald gown slipped from its hanger and crumpled on the floor. Rye scooted forward to pick it up, ducking underneath the hanging clothes, but as she drew the green dress aside, her fingernails clattered against something metal. She pulled out a small tin box.

For an eternity of a split second, Rye stared at her finding. It was obviously Hannah's private possession. It would be wrong to open it. But so many questions had recently bothered Rye: Why did they only go to the doctor when there were no other patients around? Why did they live so far away from the village? And why had Rye's parents never come to visit her? Rye lifted the lid.

A bundle of envelopes was wrapped in a rubber band. On top of the bundle, another envelope lay haphazardly, as if it had been read recently and hastily replaced.

Hannah could enter at any moment. It would be a betrayal of Hannah's trust to read any of these. Rye picked up the unbundled envelope. It was addressed to Hannah in slanted handwriting. Rye carefully slid the letter out and unfolded it; the paper was worn with time and with handling. At the top, a date showed it had been written nine years ago.

*Dear Hannah,*

*I was both delighted and horrified to receive your last letter. It was wonderful to hear from you, but the story you shared is sickening.*

*As a history professor, I unfortunately know much about societal "othering" in history and in our world today. I am aware of the discrimination red-haired individuals face. Despite this, I can hardly fathom the story you brought to my*

*attention. The idea that any mother and father would be repulsed by their first child simply because that child possesses red hair is abhorrent. The thought that those parents would then attempt to drown that red-haired infant for fear of being persecuted by society themselves ... I have no words.*

Rye touched one of her own ruby curls. *It's a different red-haired baby*, she thought, *my parents wouldn't do that.* Hannah had told her that her parents were wonderful people, that the only reason Rye had never met them was because they'd been unable to take care of her and had moved to a different village when she was just a baby.

*I am so very sorry, Hannah, for what you and the child have endured. All I can say in comfort is this: You were an excellent midwife, and you will be an even more excellent guardian. The idea of you saving the baby's life, leaving everything behind, and purchasing a lonely cottage in the hills to raise the child away from discrimination is extraordinary and heartwarming. I hope you know what a courageous, humane and truly inspirational thing you have done.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Alan*

Rye folded the letter along the creases, slid it carefully into the envelope, tucked the envelope back on top of the bundle, latched the box and placed it on the floor of Hannah's closet. She stood. The legs that obediently unbent, the feet that planted, the thin, pale hands that smoothed the rumpled skirt seemed to belong to someone else, someone far away. She looked around dazedly, feeling as if she might fade into mist and seep through the cracks of the wooden door.

The next time she breathed, she was in the forest, the moon weakly shining through the shadowy leaves. Somehow, she had made it out of the house and across the meadow without Hannah noticing. Rye wondered briefly why she was in the forest, then realized she already knew: She needed to find her parents. She needed to confirm that the professor was wrong. She needed to confirm that she was born to wonderful people.

She was determined. She would walk to the village and ask people if they knew where her parents had moved. Surely someone could point her in the right direction. Her feet began to move.

For a long, long time, she walked, the moon a steady light directly above her. In the hissing wind, the leaves rustled menacingly, and she tried her best not to look at them because they tilted into terrifying shapes when she did. After a while, she realized there was a ghostly girl her exact height treading serenely beside her.

“Hello,” Rye said. She knew who it was. The girl had gathered all of the pieces of Rye that were strewn around—bits of hair and fingernails, forgotten thoughts, abandoned teddy bears, and most of all, footprints—and had woven them into something resembling a clear, glassy, Rye-shaped pond with a twinkling jewel at the center.

“Hello,” the pond girl said.

A breeze shook dry leaves down on their heads, and Rye flinched, but the girl didn’t even blink. “Doesn’t the wind make you scared?” Rye asked.

“No,” said the pond girl. “The night wind isn’t any different from the day wind, except maybe a little colder.”

Rye thought this over and decided it was sensible. Another question occurred to her: *Why would people think red hair causes cancer?* She was remembering a poster she'd noticed lying wet in the gutter on a village street. On the left side of the page was an image of a red-haired girl with the caption "RED HAIR." An arrow connected this to an image of a girl with blond hair falling in clumps out of her head, labeled with the word "CANCER." Rye explained this to the pond girl, then added, "Hannah says red hair doesn't cause cancer."

The pond girl seemed to contemplate this deeply. She watched her soundless feet step through the rising mist. "You can trust Hannah," she finally said. "Hannah's probably the one who's right."

They walked in companionable silence for a while, listening to the not-so-scary wind hum among the branches. After what must have been a long time, Rye realized the pond girl was gone. Rye looked forward. Surprise shook her gently to her roots.

Ahead was a small clearing ringed by the wide trunks of pine trees. In the center, three people clustered around a fire. A child in a puffy blue coat leaned sleepily against a tall woman Rye thought was his mother. Two older children, perhaps brothers, hunkered together on a log with their backs to Rye, roasting things on sticks. Rye lingered by the trees, watching, not wanting to go any farther. All of them had thick brown hair.

Suddenly, the child in the puffy coat moved his head, and his gaze met Rye's. His eyes widened. "Look!"

The brothers swiveled around. The mother narrowed her eyes. Her fingers tightened, whitened, on her youngest son's shoulders. "Redhead," she muttered, and Rye thought her voice sounded like the hissing of the wind when it was frightening.

The mother raised her voice. "Go away, now. Clear out!"

Rye wondered why she was frozen solid to the ground, because it wasn't cold enough for ice. She wanted to open her mouth, to ask for directions to the village, because it was now clear to her that she had been wandering aimlessly and was lost. But her mouth was frozen shut.

"Did you hear me?" the mother said, still louder. "We don't want trouble. My boys are too young for cancer."

The ice suddenly seemed to melt, and Rye's feet were free. Quick as anything, she ran, and the tree branches blurred above her head. By the time she finally stopped, she was panting heavily. She looked around.

Ahead, there was a gnarled, twisted old tree with a smiling face. It beckoned, kindly, and Rye tucked herself, hearing her own faint sobs, into the oval gap in its trunk. It fluttered across her mind that there might be spiders, or snakes, or beetles, but then she was distracted by the tears storming from her eyes, and she had to rub them away vigorously and bury her face in her arms. The sweater knitted by Hannah months ago scratched against her face, and she realized she missed Hannah terribly and wanted more than anything to be with her. This only made the crying worse; for quite a while she sobbed, pressed trembling against the soft bark of the tree. By the time the tears stopped, Rye was wrung out. She leaned against the inside of the tree and listened to the silence.

A distant voice calling reached Rye's ears, and a bouncing, sharp light cut through the trees. Rye thought she must have cried out, because the next thing she knew, Hannah was running toward her, flashlight hanging limply in her hand, calling "Rye", and Rye started crying again.

“Oh, Hannah,” Rye sobbed, “I’m sorry, I opened your box and read your letter and it said my parents tried to kill me because of my red hair, so I went to find them, but then there was a family, and the mother shouted at me to go away, and she said not to give them cancer, and I remembered a poster I saw on the street that said people with red hair can give other people cancer, but you said it’s not true ...”

Hannah scooped her up, tear-soaked sweater and all, and carried her the whole way home.

They did not talk about the box for two days. Hannah made a lot of raisin bread, which she did when she was worried. Rye helped a little with the stirring, but she mostly played with pond girl or looked for the orange elephant or read one of the chapter books that Hannah bought for her after every round of chemotherapy. Then, during dinner on the second day, Rye suddenly started crying again. Hannah rushed to get tissues, and once the tears were done, they talked about the letter from Alan and the family in the forest. Hannah told her that people tended to wrongly, disgustingly hate redheads (turning “redhead” into a derogatory term) and blame them for things nobody could control, like cancer. Rye asked if her parents had really tried to drown her, and Hannah told her yes. Then Hannah got them each two slices of raisin bread—because one is never enough, she insisted—and said Rye was perfect and beautiful, that anyone who said otherwise didn’t know what they were talking about, and that she, Hannah, wouldn’t choose any other life—even one as a famous millionaire, Rye asked, and Hannah confirmed, even one as a famous millionaire—if it meant she couldn’t live with Rye.

When Rye looked out the window at the rolling orange hills, she saw with a wave of joy that the elephant had returned.

Months passed, and Rye turned 10, and visits to the doctor became more frequent, and hair clogged the shower drain five times before chemotherapy stopped working, and

Hannah made so much raisin bread that she had to start giving loaves away in the doctor's office, and one day, everything stopped. Even the raisin bread stopped.

Many years later, Hannah made the slow walk to a specific hill visible from the porch that Rye had once imagined was an elephant, and she knelt on the orange pine needles. The setting sun cast a shifting light on a gravestone, which read, "Rye Jamali, a most beloved girl, July 5, 2088 to Nov.19, 2098."

Hannah settled flowers around the grave, and then she sat and simply looked at it. She drew in a heavy breath and let it out softly. After a time, she rose and returned to the cottage, to bake raisin bread and write a letter.