

2024 HIGH SCHOOL SHORT STORY CONTEST – 2ND PLACE

A City Storm

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The humid air consumed the city, smothering the skyscrapers in an oppressive heat. An angry breeze wrapped itself around the city blocks, causing trees to whistle and dogs to howl. Clouds crammed together in the sky, and the ground underneath darkened. Footsteps quickened, a new sense of urgency filling the streets.

Max watched out the townhouse windows as his father hurried home. Head down, pace quick. He watched others doing the same, their only concern reaching shelter. Averting his eyes from the sidewalk, he noticed the white-throated sparrow perched in a nearby crepe myrtle. Its eyes darted back and forth nervously as it fluffed its gray feathers. It hopped along the myrtle's branches and watched the people rush by. Suddenly, the door burst open, snapping Max back to attention.

"Max? Linda?" called his father. "Anyone home?"

Max rushed to the front door to greet his father. "I'm home! Hi, Dad."

"Hey, buddy!" His father ruffled his hair. "I'm glad you're home, seems like it's gonna storm real bad."

Max's eyes drifted back to the window and fixed on the desolate street.

"So, is your mother home?"

"She's upstairs."

The sound of his father's footsteps echoed through the house before fading. Max scanned the branches of the crepe myrtle, but couldn't pinpoint where the sparrow had gone. A strong gust of wind swept through the street, shaking the trees with such strength that the pink and orange leaves tumbled out, getting caught in the breeze and carried to the ground.

A young girl jogged down the street, her school bag slung over one shoulder and her jacket lifted over her head. The first drops of rain began to fall. Softly at first, then larger, and more frequent. With a loud crack of thunder, the clouds opened up and rain came crashing to the ground. The girl disappeared around the corner.

"Sounds like it's started!" Max's mother said as she and her husband walked into the kitchen.

Max's gaze remained set outside. He watched in fright as the rain thudded onto the ground, flooding the street. The wind blew stronger and out of the crepe myrtle tumbled a small, soaking-wet sparrow. Max gasped. "Mom! Dad! Look!"

His parents glanced out the window.

“Looks nasty out there,” remarked his father.

Max stayed silent for a minute, watching the little bird try to stand. But the rain cascaded down, imprisoning the sparrow and knocking it to the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the neighborhood stray, Yoshi, darting down the strip of grass next to the sidewalk. Yoshi’s paws landed in the dirt, coating him in a brown paste. He skidded to a halt under the sparrow’s tree, his fur dripping from the rain and mud.

The sky lit up as a bolt of lightning struck the ground. Thunder followed, a deep roar in the sky. The plants drooped with the weight of the rain. A loud crash sounded from the top of the street. Max turned to see the neighbor’s trash cans knocked over, with garbage spilling out and being swept into the gushing water.

“What are you doing, kiddo?” Max heard his mother ask.

“Can’t we go help? There’s trash everywhere and it’s terrible out there!”

His mother shook her head in dismissal. “No, we shouldn’t go outside. Besides, it’s not our problem. People will take care of it.”

“But who?”

“The trash collectors, fire department, whoever,” she said, just as a telephone wire detached from its pole, splitting the wood. It dangled in the air, tossed in every direction by the wind.

Max’s mother left the room. From the kitchen came his parents’ muffled voices.

“What’s up with Max?” asked his father.

“He’s just worried about the storm. Thinks we should do something,” replied his mother.

“Aren’t there people who take care of these things?”

“That’s what I told him.”

They shrugged it off. But Max watched as the clouds began to lighten. As they separated, a rainbow revealed itself. Max tugged on his sneakers and called, “Be right back!” to his parents.

He ran out the door, surveying the damage. He began to make his way to the tree, cautiously, so as not to slip. The door to the brick townhouse across the street opened, and Susie, a girl in his year, came out.

“Max!” she called.

He waved in response, his face scrunched in concentration.

Susie walked over to him and gasped. “Yoshi!” She scooped the cat up and ran her palm over his head until he began to purr. “I’m going to get him clean,” she stated, before turning to go back to her house.

Max lifted his head and realized that all the children on his street had begun to come out. Up the street, the twins were collecting the trash. The girl with the backpack joined them, trash bag

in hand. An older boy was on the phone with the electrical repair company, and Susie was now on her doormat with Yoshi, drying him with a soft pink towel. Max smiled to himself and knelt in the mud. He found the sparrow chirping under a clump of wet leaves, cupped it in his hands, and lifted it up. He wiped the dirt off its wings and carried it over to his steps to dry.

The door cracked open and his parents stood there. "What's going on out here?" they asked.

"It looks better!" remarked his father. He paused. "We would've helped if we'd known we could, you know?"

Max just shrugged and smiled at him. He looked over his shoulder at the children who had stepped up. Then he turned back to his parents. "We've got this."