

2024 HIGH SCHOOL SHORT STORY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

The Knight

By Naomi Bortnick

A bench. Black swirly armrests, long wooden braces holding up a man and his chess set. His name is Jason. He went to the park to play, with whom he didn't know. Yet.

The sparrows sing; kites dot the clear blue sky; the flowers slowly open up to the start of spring. The pigeons peck at the crust of the sandwich that the children forget to eat. People laugh, people grieve, people live.

That's what happens at the park.

He comes here every day, his place to think. To watch. To reflect. To learn. He's at the age where there are regrets, but he doesn't dwell. Life's too short for that.

He brings the chess set, hoping someone will sit down and play. Like how he did when he was a child.

Like when he met Lance. The closest friend he's ever made in his life.

But then he moved his rook too fast and lost him. Forever.

The old man closes his eyes, reaching for the familiar memory. Lance's smile, a glowing rainbow on a rainy day. His freckles, dotting his nose and rosy cheeks. The old man remembers brushing each one, and with each touch, Lance would reward with a bubble of laughter.

He opens his eyes. A child is learning how to ride a bike in the park, her father running after her as she practices leaving the security of the training wheels. He is with her the whole time, won't allow anything to happen to her. The old man remembers learning how to ride a bike for the first time. His father was also running with him, down the neighborhood road. He fell, scraped up his knee, tears spilling down his face. His father comforted him that day, absorbed some of the pain. Why did that have to change? His father wasn't there for him later, not when he confessed.

Lance, his deep brown skin, wavy curls falling over his eyes. The man Jason loved, but didn't disobey his father for. The man Jason kissed many times, but pushed away when his father pushed back.

The man Jason thought he was protecting.

They were in Jason's room, talking. Playing chess. Laughing. One of Lance's brown curls fell over his eyes, and Jason took it between his fingers and tucked it behind his ear. He kept his hand there for a moment, cupping Lance's face, tracing his thumb over Lance's dimple that appeared whenever he smiled.

Jason's bedroom door opens. His dad barges in.

“Jason, I need you to—” Jason jerks his hand away from Lance’s face, but Jason’s father had already seen enough. Lance’s dimple disappears. Jason’s stomach drops; his heart rate accelerates.

“Get the hell out of my house.” Jason’s father’s firm, quiet voice rings loudly in Jason’s ears. Lance stands up and walks out, head lowered. Jason peers up at his father’s icy stare, his bottom lip trembling.

He shakes his head, jaw clenched. What his father whispers next stabs Jason like a sword.

“Disgrace.”

Jason curls up on his bed. His body won’t stop shaking, his mind won’t stop racing, his tears won’t stop pouring. He squeezes his eyes shut as his emotions swarm him like bees.

Each a painful, lasting sting that Jason will always remember.

A couple is sitting on the bench next to the old man. Their dog is running around, chasing after the sticks they throw. Lance had a dog. A big gray husky, icy blue eyes, always hyper. They used to walk her every morning before school started, even when they were forced to wake up before the sun rose. But after that day, Jason didn’t meet Lance outside his house anymore. Jason ignored the smile Lance gave when they passed each other. Jason would only steal a glance when no one was looking.

The old man sits on the bench, staring mournfully at his chess set. Someone else joins him. A hand moves a pawn up two squares. The old man looks up, and gasps. A familiar face, bright brown eyes, gray curls falling onto his forehead. Freckles dotting his nose and cheeks. Brown skin containing the wrinkles of old age, a bright smile.

“Your move, Jason.”