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1999

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST
WINNERS

1999 Senior Nonfiction Winner

The Memoir of a Domino Player's Granddaughter

by Lisa Anne Smith

Grade 12 – Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

I remember well sitting at my grandparents' table on warm summer nights, the sound of cicadas coming through the open door and the flicker of August sheet lightning flashing in the distance. After dinner was through – an old fashioned meal of thick-cut ham, mashed potatoes, corn, and my grandmother's famous apple pie – and the dishes had been cleared away, my grandfather and I would spread a clean tablecloth over the smooth surface of the table and play dominoes. These dominoes were not the kind made of something cold that looks like ivory, but the ones with coloured paper dots and black plastic casing. We would play all evening, just the two of us, munching on the carrot and celery sticks we hadn't finished at dinner, joking and laughing until we cried. I loved to watch my grandpa laugh. His clear blue eyes would squeeze shut and the muscles of his face tighten, restricting his deep-down laughter in such a way that he only chuckled. Sometimes, though, the laughter was too great to be contained, and a boisterous guffaw would explode from his chest, his mouth thrown open to share with me his profound joy.

It is because of moments like these that I remember my grandfather so fondly: summers spent together, days of haylofts and barn cats, John Deere tractors, swimming, and trail rides on the ridge. And my grandfather, incredibly, still maintained this active lifestyle until his eightieth year. His shoulders were still wide and strong, the muscles not atrophied like those of other eighty-year-old men. He still dug potatoes, meticulously wiping them clean of the dark earth before placing them in empty margarine buckets. Every June, he would still monitor the wind and sky for signs of rain, awaiting the right moment to start the haying, and, come threshing time, he would spend long hours under the heat of the August sun.

But last year, on March 30, my grandfather's eightieth birthday, all this changed. This date, however small and insignificant it may seem, marked the day when my grandfather admitted, unwillingly, that his body was failing him. It was the day that represented the beginning of a new stage in my grandfather's life: his retirement.

When my grandfather retired from the Word of Life Bible Camp, where he had lived and farmed for two and half decades, the staff gave him a plaque in gratitude for his dedicated service. They also threw him a party, inviting everyone who knew him to attend the celebration. We gathered in the meeting hall, all one hundred and ninety-two of us, chatting busily with one another and nibbling tiny crustless sandwiches.

Throughout the party, my grandfather sat at the front of the big room, awkwardly perched in the oversized plastic patio chair which had been decorated with streamers as his throne. Sometimes people would journey to the front to say a few words to him, but mostly my grandfather sat alone.

It was not a celebration. Instead, it was the death of Burt Marshall, farmer, and the beginning of Burt Marshall, old man.

My grandfather died on February 21, 1999. The funeral was a sombre affair, held in a dimly-lit room of the Knox Funeral Home in Owen Sound. During the memorial service on the previous day, I stood motionless against the wall, uncomfortable in my too-tight shoes, watching the respectful coming and going of people as they offered my grandmother well-meaning, but useless words of condolence.

At one point during that afternoon, an elderly man, who reminded me of my grandfather, entered the room. His eyes were bright and, just like grandpa, his hair, although greying, was still surprisingly dark for his age. He approached the open casket slowly, lingering a moment over the stiff and tranquil body. I heard him say to the woman beside him, "That Burt Marshall, he sure was some farmer."

And it is true; my grandfather was an incredibly skilled farmer, recognized as such by his acquaintances and by himself. But he was also much more. To my grandmother, he was a faithful husband of fifty-four years, and to my mother and her siblings, a dedicated father. He was an active member of Grace Baptist Church, a valuable player on the Owen Sound Curling Club's over sixty-five men's team, and a lovable Uncle Burt to the children who attended the camp every summer. He was a man who was many different things to many different people. I only wish he had been aware of this, that he had known of the deep affection people had for him, which seemed to go unnoticed at his retirement party. I wish he had known that, to me, his identity was not that of a farmer, but of a passionate domino player, a weathered horseback rider, a good-hearted jokester, a caring grandpa. My grandpa.

1999 Junior Nonfiction Winner

Survival

by Heather Johnson

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I walk down the nighttime streets of Clifton Hill with my friends Chela, Morgan, and Amy. We quickly cross the street and enter a dark building. We pay at the door of The House of Frankenstein. There are fake spiderwebs everywhere, and in the corner there is a crocodile that snaps out at the people who walk by.

“I’m not going first,” I say.

“I’m not either,” says everyone else. We push and shove each other to the front, but everyone keeps running to the back of the group. We manage to move about three steps from where we started. Finally, we decide to wait for somebody braver than we are to lead the way.

Luckily, as if by fate, a nice family goes in front of us. They laugh when we tell them we’re too chicken to go through all by ourselves. We all walk up the stairway that has exactly thirteen stairs into a hallway lit with only black light. There is glowing paint splashed on the otherwise black walls.

“This isn’t so bad,” I think, and then we turn the corner.

I feel somebody grab onto my backpack for protection, and I, in turn, grab Morgan’s arm. The family walks bravely in front of us, sometimes screaming just to get us all to scream at the approaching horrors.

There are too many hallways! There’s even one that looks like a torture chamber with a dead end, which is the worst. We’re scared enough walking into those hallways; it’s just plain cruel to make us walk all the way back through them.

After we leave the torture chamber hallway, we hear a song start to play that everybody recognizes. I sing the words silently in my head, “All around the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush...” We cluster even closer together and prepare ourselves to scream at anything and everything that could jump out at us. There is a huge colourful box in a cage on my left that looks familiar, but I can’t quite remember where I’ve seen one before. The music gets slower and slower, as if some giant machine is shutting off. Bang! The lid flies open and an enormous clown pops out of a jack-in-the-box and laughs wickedly at us. We all scream and run as fast as we can away from the evil clown.

We turn to go into yet another hallway, and it's pitch black. How are we supposed to find our way out of this? Flash! Oh, there's a strobe light, how helpful! Although it provides some light, it only comes on for a split second, and it takes so long for it to come back on! Flash! I jump as I see a wide-eyed person standing right in front of me. I scream at her. Flash! Oh, it's just a mirror. Everyone else screams too before realizing it's a mirror. Flash! With some help from the people in front of us, we are able to find our way out of the mirror maze. I'm so glad to get out of there. It feels way too much like I'm in a dream.

Hallway after hallway, we finally come to the end. We turn to go down the stairs when the family in front of us screams, making everybody else scream, too. They just laugh at us; we scream too much.

"It's been nice screaming with you," they say as they leave.

"I can't believe we did that," Chela remarks. We all agree with her.

"Wanna do it again?" Morgan asks, grinning.

"Okay."

We all laugh, and pay at the door.