

Years 11 & 12

1st Place: Ivan Gonzales

Year 12, Dale Christian School

### The Unforeseen

"You know what to do."

"I don't want to do it!"

"But you like Aunt Molly." Eliza rolled her eyes.

"You'll do as I ask," snapped Eliza's mother. "Or no car this weekend."

"That's not fair," hollered Eliza. "She's your sister. You have to take her."

"I'm in meetings all day," said Eliza's mother as she shrugged into her black blazer and grabbed her computer bag.

"Aunt Molly can't drive herself. She'll be too sick after, and you know that Elz!"

"Can't she take an Uber?"

Eliza's mum stamped her feet into her black stiletto.

"That's enough, Eliza. Be at your Aunt Molly's at three o'clock, right after school. I'll see you tonight." She disappeared into the garage.

Eliza dragged on her backpack and grabbed the keys to the hand-me-down Toyota Camry her parents liked to remind her she was lucky to have.

*"Not everyone has their own car at sixteen, Eliza".*

A car with a back seat full of burnt holes from the time her stupid older brother tried to smoke cigarettes with his stupid friends and glitter nail polish all over the dash, spilled by her airheaded older sister. As if that wasn't embarrassing enough, now her aunt would probably puke all over it. Eliza reversed down the driveway, dreading the day ahead of her.

Eliza knew what to expect. She'd gone to one of Aunt Molly's chemotherapy appointments with her mother, three years ago. Stuffy waiting room, sick people shuffling in and out, hushed voices. Aunt Molly, IVs in her arm like porcupine spines, acting like everything was fine, asking Eliza about school, trying to smile.

Eliza would have to prop her up after, walk her to the car, like she and her mother had three years ago. And that was when Molly was stronger. Would she even be able to stand this time? The last time Eliza saw her, at Christmas, her eyebrow-less face hung slack, her frail frame shook even when she sat.

Eliza had kept her distance.

At 2:53 pm, Eliza pulled up in front of 15 Jess Street. She turned the car off and dropped back against the seat. Her aunt's villa looked smaller. And more exposed, somehow. Had she lost a tree in her front yard? Eliza couldn't remember. Had it always been white? In Eliza's memory, it was yellow. She used to know Aunt Molly's house better than her own, she'd spent so much time here. Aunt Kitty Molly – that's what Eliza had called her back then – even gave Eliza her own room. And she never, ever told her to clean it. Eliza's older brother and sister thought Aunt Molly was weird, so Eliza got her all to herself. She'd spent so many afternoons alone with her aunt, which often turned into sleepovers, with her tucked up in bed while Aunt Molly made up wild stories about magical and mysterious lands. For months after her Aunt

Molly read her *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Eliza went into every closet in every house they went to, looking for a way into Narnia.

*That's enough, Eliza.*

They used to do other things, but Eliza couldn't remember now.

Aunt Molly was an artist. A painter, mostly. She turned her house into art. She painted murals on the walls, ceilings, floors.

"Life is my canvas, Elz," she used to say.

"I have fairy blood, you know," Molly had told her once. Eliza was seven. With her wild blonde hair, porcelain white skin, bright brown eyes, and tiny frame, she could be a fairy, Eliza had thought. All she was missing was wings.

"Is that really true?" Eliza had asked.

"Do you believe it?" asked Molly.

Eliza nodded. She wanted to believe it, anyway.

"Then it's true," said Molly.

Eliza checked her phone. 2:59. One more minute. Then she'd have to walk across the flagstones to the front door, ring the bell, and face what was left of her aunt.

*The treatment's gonna kill her before the cancer does.*

Her aunt was slow to open the door. A thin red dress hung on her skeleton frame and a blue turban covered her hairless head, picking out the blue in her eyes, the only part of her that had any life left.

"Eliza!"

"Hi, Aunt . . . Molly."

"Come in."

The living room furniture was just as Eliza remembered, but the murals on the walls were gone. There was just splotches of formless colour splashed here. Perhaps her aunt was experimenting with abstract art these days.

She walked past a puddle of blue paint on the floor, long dried. She remembered. She'd spilled that paint, one day.

"That patch of floor needed something special," Aunt Molly had said.

And she and Eliza had transformed the spilled paint into a pond filled with goldfish and white-flowered lily pads and spotted frogs. She could still feel the warm water on her hands, perfect for swimming.

*But it couldn't have been warm,* frowned Eliza.

"I made your favourite. Oatmeal raisin cookies, extra cinnamon-y. They're in the kitchen. Follow me."

Eliza fidgeted. "Don't we have to go? Your appointment and all?"

"We have some time."

Her aunt's paintings were out, her two-person table and chairs pushed away from the colour-splashed wall. She handed Eliza a cookie. Eliza took a bite. The taste was caught in her throat. She'd forgotten how good her aunt's cookies were. How much fun she'd had making them. Aunt Molly always let her pour in as much cinnamon as she'd wanted. Somehow they'd always turned out perfect.

Eliza cleared her throat. "What are you working on?"

"I'm adding flowers to the forest scene," said Molly.

Yes, that's what the kitchen mural had been. Eliza remembered now. But there was no forest scene on the wall now. Just random colour. She squinted at the wall, trying to see anything resembling, well, anything.

"It's getting harder to see as you get older," said Molly. She picked up her brush, dipped it in purple paint, and began adding splotches to the wall.

"How are you feeling these days?" Eliza asked into the uncomfortable silence.

"I'm dying, Elz."

*You're going to have to hold her up while I get the car.*

Stuffy clinics, IVs. Eliza crossed her arms against the water welling in her eyes.

"That sucks," was all that came to her.

Aunt Molly smiled and held up a brush. "Paint with me."

"But I can't see the forest."

"Do you believe it's there?"

Eliza nodded. She wanted to believe, anyway.

"Then it's there."

Wiping away an escaped tear, Eliza dipped the brush in red paint and turned to face the wall, unsure what to do next. She glanced at her aunt. And, she could see. The purple paint was a flower, delicate petals balanced on a swaying green stem. Next to a graceful birch tree. In a patch of wildflowers, and the base of a tall oak.

Eliza sucked in her breath as the forest scene assembled itself before her. And she remembered. This is what they used to do. She touched her brush to the wall. A red rose swirled out. She did it again, and again, rose after rose. She laughed and stepped forward, off the linoleum and onto the soft grass. The smell of roses wafted around her. She painted a bluebird. It chirped. Her aunt laughed.

"You remember how," she said.

"Why did I forget?"

"That's what happens when you grow up."

"I don't want to forget."

"Remember, then."

Together, Eliza and Aunt Molly walked through the forest, painting flowers, frogs, dragonflies. Eliza ran her hands through grasses, and they bloomed. She touched rough bark, and moss spread. She swiped away clouds, gathered warm sun on her face, shook her hair in the lilac breeze. Laughing, she painted a wild mane of black hair on her aunt, filled in her hollow cheeks.

"That's better."

Her aunt painted a fallen log on the shore of a shimmering blue lake, and they sat down together.

"I want to be seven again," said Eliza.

"It doesn't work that way."

"I don't want all this to die." Eliza choked on the words while breaking a tear down her face.

"Do you believe it lives in your heart?"

Eliza nodded.

"Then it will never die."

Eliza held her aunt's hand and they watched the sun set in the forest.

"We missed your appointment, Aunt Kitty-Molly."

"That's okay, Elz."

As Eliza walked back to her car, she noticed her aunt's house was white.

"The funeral's on Thursday." Eliza's mother's eyes were red and swollen.

"I found this, when I was going through Molly's things. It has your name on it."

She handed Eliza a small canvas. It was covered in splotches of paint.

"It doesn't look like anything," said her mother. "Do you know what it is?"

Eliza held her breath, tears spilling down her face. Her mother shrugged and left Eliza's room.

Eliza blinked once. The paint swirled. She blinked again. She saw a forest. Blink. A cloud-streaked sunny day. Blink. Flowers. Blink. A portrait of Eliza. Age seven.

Eliza breathed out. "I'll remember."