

Years 7 & 8
2nd Place: Leyla Baker
Year 8, John Calvin Christian College

Living in a Fantasy

Light blinded my vision.

I blinked, trying to focus on my surroundings.

Laughter sounded behind me.

I turned to see a tall, well-built man. His skin was leathered by salt and sea air. A dark tan, I noticed, from weeks in the sun. He had tough hands from pulling huge coils of rope. But the thing that struck me most was the kind humour in his dark eyes. He smiled; I allowed a ghost smile to cross my lips before I turned back to the sea beyond me. The sunlight danced across the clear water, skipping with such ease and grace, as though it was challenging me. I smiled. A small wave crashed against the side of the ship, beckoning me closer. I took a shaky step forward. Then another. And another. I walked faster and faster, till the deck dropped out from below me. I halted.

I lifted my eyes to the sea.

Wind billowed into my golden-brown hair, throwing it out behind my back. Salt scent pierced my nostrils. Rays of golden sunlight blinded my eyes. I knew that this is where I belonged.

This is my world.

“Tell us Salty!”

“Yeah! We know you took it!”

The taunts hit me from all directions. Sneering, insulting, goading, mocking. I put my hands over my head, waiting for the next shot to hit. It came with a jabbing elbow to the middle of my back. I grunted in pain and fell to my knees.

“C’mon, weak Salty!”

This scoff was emphasized with a strike of a fist.

I fell to the ground, defeated.

An arm rose, for the finishing strike.

BEEEEEP!

The bell saved me from my fate. I almost had to shove my fist in my mouth to stop a sigh of relief.

“This isn’t over!”

A voice hissed, and the scurrying of feet proved I was alone.

I groaned as I got to my feet.

“No,” I thought. “This is just the beginning.”

The rest of the day welcomed me with glares in the classroom, shoves in the hallway, and just plain ignoring. In the end, I just wished there were days I could relive. Better choices to make. Better things to say.

The first day of middle school was exciting, even though I was at a new place, I had done this before, and I knew that there would be other kids who were new as well. Primary school sucked. And I knew that middle school had to be better.

I was wrong.

I didn't notice right away. It started pretty normal. Everyone was nervous, so they didn't have time to pay attention to me. But one student did.

Becky was from my old school. She was mean, selfish and cruel. Everyone feared her. Everyone obeyed her. If you didn't fit with her standards, you didn't fit in at all. It was kill or be killed. Now with her in this school, it would repeat all the suffering and pain I had been through, part of me destroyed, and now she was here to do it again. Becky didn't care that there were teachers standing close to us. She walked right behind me and yanked with all her might on my braid. My head snapped back, tears stung my eyes; I shook my head angrily to clear them away.

"Aww . . . Look at the big baby!" she sneered, and giggled as she stalked away.

I trudged into class, unhappy . . . upset. And it was just my luck that I ended up sitting right next to Becky. During the attendance she pulled my hair, jabbed my arms, and kicked my shins. I pretended not to notice. Then a ridiculous thought hit me: What if I somehow got Becky to like me? I had to act cool! The next time she kicked me, she glanced at her companion, and they giggled, I giggled too. Becky glared at me.

"Shut up!" she whispered furiously.

Our next activity was to say to the whole class one thing about us. I thought of the perfect thing to say, something that would make Becky so surprised and astonished she would have to be my friend.

"My name is Inyanja, it means ocean in Kinyarwanda," I stated proudly.

I glanced, I admit, hopefully back at Becky, seeing her reaction. It was nothing past her personality. She laughed. Right out, loud and clear. What's worse, the whole class joined in. They rolled in their seats, tears streaming down their faces.

That's when the taunting began.

If I could, I would live every day in my own world. The wind, the sea, the sun. This world I understood. This world was the place where I could be who I wanted to be. But sometimes, fleeing to your own world will never solve any problems.

"Strange sail to the east!"

The warning cry sounded out from the high perch on the mast.

"Description!" I called briefly.

"Strange design on the front . . . square sail . . . looks about 20 oars a side."

I calculated quickly. That meant 40 oarsmen, plus extra and the sails handlers. It was almost 90 people in all. I gritted my teeth. All too many. We couldn't afford to have a battle now, considering the odds.

"It's the Haai!" The mast man called excitedly.

The Haai was Becky's ship. She was brutal and dangerous. Her reputation went before her as fast as sails billowed. She was going to be a tough nut to crack.

Days were long and lagged. School filled my days with despair and hopelessness. I knew that if I didn't do something soon then I was doomed. My ship would sink. My life would be ruined.

I couldn't stand for myself in this world. It couldn't be done. But if I lose in this world, I lose my world. My beautiful, friendly, amazing world. I could never live with that. But there was no way I could take a stand.

"Hey Salty!"

Becky's voice sounded behind me as I opened my locker.

"We have something to tell you!" one of her minions said excitedly.

I ignored them and continued to dig through my locker.

"Listen to me NOW!" Becky slammed my locker shut, right onto my fingers.

I leapt back, yelping in pain. I glared at Becky with narrowed eyes. My hand was throbbing. The chance was before me.

I took it.

"Sail up!"

I yelled orders to my crew. This was the moment. The time I'd take a stand. The time I'd save my world. The time I'd fight back.

"Archers to port!"

They scrambled up, quickly leaping into position.

I narrowed my eyes, judging the distance between us and the Haai. As soon as the moment came I had to take it. It wasn't practice, it wasn't a game. It was war.

"To starboard! To starboard!" I shrieked.

My ship, the Voyajo, cut smoothly to the side, easily out-manoeuving the bigger, heavier Haai. If she tried to match the turn, the result would be fatal.

She didn't.

Heart in my throat, I saw her slow and do a smooth, steady turn. Even though they had lost all their momentum, they were not going to fall for the death trap.

I swore under my breath. It was looking bad from my side of things. All the odds were stacked against us. All the chances I took had to be perfect. There was no room for error.

A strange and sudden thought hit me. Could it work?

I swung the ship around 180 degrees, pointing her right straight into the path of the Haai. Closer and closer, we were going head to head now, any moment and there would be a collision –

I yanked the steering oar to the side, pulling with all the strength I had. Desperation for keeping my perfect world. Hope that someday to stop being teased. Pain from all the blows I have received. Anger for allowing them to get control of me. Sadness for a broken part of me, never to be healed again.

SMASH!

The Haai, trying to manoeuvre with the speed and agility of the Voyajo, came to an abrupt halt. A deadly crash came from its inner planks. The mast came down in a mighty crash, creating a gaping hole in the side of the ship. Sparkling sea water gushed hungrily into the ship, flooding everything and anything in its path.

With an agonised groan, the ship went under. A huge bubble sealed its fate.

I stared in shock and horror at the now empty spot where the Haai had stood. As bad as she was, no-one deserved a fate that ferocious.

Cheering sounded out from the rowing benches, spreading across the deck, till everyone was cheering and clapping. I stared at my delighted crew, then threw back my head and laughed.

The ocean laughed with me, sparkling and dancing. I knew I had done the right thing.

I saved my world.

Becky left me alone after the confrontation in the hallway. There were no more snide comments behind my back. No glares or sharp words. I started to be liked by my classmates, and slowly Becky lost popularity, more and more people realised how mean she was and stood up to her. In the end she moved to a private school, saying that they had way better education, and only rich people went there. I think the truth is that she was just scared of us, and hated the fact that she wasn't popular. I survived, and slowly middle school got better.

Wind billowed into the sail, shooting the ship forward like an arrow leaving a bow. I laughed with exhilaration, feeling the wind whip past my face and hearing the water splash onto the deck.

I ran to the bow of the ship, stepping easily over thick coils of rope, bounding around the busy crew. I threw my voice into the sea beyond me. Spreading out my arms, I closed my eyes in pleasure as the sun's warm rays engulfed me. This was the freedom I yearned for. The years of pain I had endured, was easily forgotten. This was true freedom. I turned back –

“Inyanja, could you answer question three for me please?”

Mr Magistra’s cold voice snapped me back into the cold classroom. I looked around uncertainly, blushing deep red,.

“Um . . . it means that . . . ah . . . classrooms are colder than on ships?” I jabbered on pointlessly.

He narrowed his cold eyes.

“See me after class,” was all he said before he turned back and continued the lesson.

After class I hung around nervously. He called me into his dark office. What I saw inside surprised me. There were posters all over the walls of space. Galaxies, planets, robots, stars, he even had a mini glowing globe on his shelf. I stared in shock as I realised that Mr Magistra also had his own world.

“This is my world,” he said softly.

I turned to him, and froze in surprise. This was not the cold eyed teacher I knew. But his kind, gentle dark eyes reflected his personality.

“I’ve seen you!” I said, surprising myself.

“Yes. The first day you came onto that ship.” He smiled a sad smile.

“How did you do that?” I asked curiously.

“When you give up your world, you get to visit someone else’s,” he explained. “I got to see yours.”

Give up? What does he mean give up? I thought, suddenly scared.

He must have seen it in my eyes because he answered my thoughts.

“In the end you need to give up your world. And find out that that world is not forever, that it’s only the beginning of a much better future.”

I pondered what he had told me, and maybe he was right. Maybe I had been living in my own fantasy for too long.

Maybe now it was time to let it go.

Time to anchor my ship.