

Years 11 & 12  
3rd Place: Francheska Dulay  
Year 12, Harrisdale Senior High School

## Louis

It was 11pm when Eliza called.  
The hour at which she called wasn't the reason I was shaken, though.  
It was the fact that she was calling at all.

I stared at the caller ID displaying her name – the name that hadn't crossed the screen for years.  
After a few seconds, I decided to pick up.  
Pressing the green button, I lifted the phone to my ear.  
Suddenly, I didn't know what to say.  
Was the person who called supposed to say hello or the one who picked up?  
"Hello?" someone said. I wasn't sure if it was me or her.  
Moments passed as silence overcame the line.  
"Hello? Eliza?" I tried.  
"Elijah," came her voice, strangely timid and quiet.  
"He's . . . he's going."  
Another beat. A sniffle.  
"He's going? Who's going?"  
"Louis," she spoke softly. "Louis's going. Louis's dying, Elijah." -

When I was five years old, and Eliza was four, our parents had decided to get us a big present for Christmas that year because we hadn't gotten presents for our birthdays earlier in the year.  
But it was fine.  
Even as kids, we knew Mum and Dad did everything they could to save every cent. So, it came as a huge surprise when Louis showed up at our door.  
He was the biggest thing I – a five-year-old Elijah – had ever seen, and he was the first thing to ever make me cry.  
Of course, Eliza cried too – tears of pure gold and joy.  
But mine had been tears of regret and sorrow.  
I'd isolated myself from Louis as Eliza played with him, the small Golden Retriever running in circles, chasing his little furry tail.  
As soon as I'd looked into his eyes glowing with innocent ignorance, I knew I just couldn't bear to see him.  
I couldn't bear to see the thing my parents had spent money on just so me and my sister could be happy.  
Not when money was so tight my parents didn't eat breakfast just so we could have food for lunch.

I felt betrayed by my parents who had taken money away from themselves, betrayed by my sister who was oblivious to the silent struggles my parents had obviously endured to get us this puppy, betrayed by the child in me who wanted to roll around with the little puppy as if nothing was wrong with the world.

It made me feel selfish.

Louis made me feel so selfish.

Because who was going to pay for his food when we could barely provide food for ourselves? Who was gonna wash him when he got dirty when Mum had to wash our clothes by hand to save money on electricity? Who was gonna buy his bed and his toys when Eliza and I shared a mattress, and our only toys was the chalk we used to draw pictures on the sidewalk?

So, at the ripe age of five, I had decided that I hated Louis with all of my five-year-old self.

But that all changed when Mum got sick.

It was inevitable that she'd get sick. I'd known it since I'd turned ten.

Funnily enough, it was on my tenth birthday that she'd started coughing up blood.

It was the most horrible thing to see – she was coughing as if a big block was lodged in her throat and it wouldn't come out, no matter how hard she squeezed her lungs, then finally, a fat, red splodge came out before she caught it on a tissue and turned away from us.

It wasn't the first time my mother had turned away from me to hide her sorrows, but she was so empty and devoid of happiness, despite her small, tired smiles at me and my sister, that I could see right through her, and I knew everyone else could too.

It got worse when she had to go to hospital. I couldn't see her anymore, so I didn't know how she was doing. Even after Dad came home after visiting her, he would simply say,

"She's doing alright, Elijah, don't worry."

But how was I not supposed to worry?

That was the second thing to ever make me cry.

The day that Mum had gone to the hospital, I'd stayed home. Eliza went to school because Dad thought it would help take her mind off it, but I refused to go out and pretend that everything was okay.

So, it was just me in the house.

Me and that darn Louis.

He'd been scratching at the door ever since I'd closed it to hide away.

"Go away, Louis!" I shouted; my voice hoarse from sobbing in the dark corner of the room.

That only increased his scratching at the door, and then, he started barking.

"God damn it, Louis, shut up!" I yelled, standing up from my corner.

Then he'd finally gone quiet.

Retreating into my corner of the room again, I sat but didn't start crying again. Because what was my crying going to do? My crying wasn't going to make Mum better, it wasn't going to magically give us money, it wasn't going to miraculously make someone pop out of nowhere and say, "It's a prank! Your mum's okay, we just wanted to see if you cared."

Suddenly, my stomach growled. I hadn't eaten since the day before and it was getting to my head. So, I stood and walked over to the door, slowly opening it. And there he was. Louis, staring up at me expectantly.

"Huh, are you hungry too?" I grumbled, as I walked past the Golden Retriever who was now half my height.

Walking to the pantry, I reached to the top shelf to grab a box of cereal before stooping down to the bottom where Louis's food was stored.

Grabbing a bowl for me and Louis's designated bowl from the cabinet, I filled mine with the dry and crusty cornflakes I hated, but they were the cheapest – milk was something I could live without, and my house partner's with his own dry pieces.

"Here you go," I mumbled, placing the bowl on the floor before sitting at the dining table.

As I sat down, I heard a whine before the sounds of metal scraping against wood pulled my attention towards Louis, nosing his bowl towards me before stopping to stand beside me.

Sighing, I looked down at him.

"Look, I know it's not much, buddy, but you know how it is."

Looking up at me with those same shiny innocent, ignorant eyes, I realised it wasn't because his food wasn't enough for him.

Ever since Mom and Dad hadn't been at home, Eliza had been eating with Louis on the floor. She'd take her plate, sit with him and talk to him about her day the same way she'd talk to our parents after school.

Louis wanted me to do the same.

"Nah, buddy," I said, shaking my head at him. "Sorry, but I'm not gonna sit down there with you."

Turning away from him, I shoved a spoonful of desert-dry cornflakes in my mouth to ignore the gleam of Louis's eyes.

It worked for a solid two scoops of the God-awful drywall before Louis's warm, wet nose prodded my arm once. Then twice. Then –

"Alright, fine!" I exclaimed, throwing my hands up as I turned around to face him.

"Fine, Louis, I'll sit down with you."

I hadn't looked at him as I sat down, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw as the gleam in his eye turned from glossy and teary to happy and excited.

What he was excited for, I wasn't sure, up until I sat down, my legs outstretched in front of me as I leaned back against the wall.

"So..." I started, finally looking at the dog who seemed to smile at me.

"What's up, buddy?"

And of course, Louis just looked at me.

"Not a talker, huh," I chuckled dryly before forcing a mouthful of cornflakes down my throat, Louis lapping up a few pieces of his own food.

And so, we sat like that for some time.

I didn't know how long had passed until I felt a soft pressure on my leg. I turned towards the pressure and saw Louis kneeling next to my leg, his head hovering as if waiting for my permission.

"Sure, Bud," I mumbled, as his soft furry head lay on my thigh.

"Been a long day, huh?"

Louis let out a low whine and I laughed at his response.

Then, tentatively, I extended a hand over his head. Looking up at me with expectant eyes, he moved his head forward in a similar nodding motion. With a small smile, I laid my hand on his head, feeling his soft fur for the first time.

In all those five years, I had never touched him out of fear I'd get attached to him, then he'd get taken away because we didn't have enough money to pay for him anymore.

But Louis was there for me when Mom was sick.

He was there when Mom passed.

And he was still there after we buried her.

He was even there when I had last spoken to Eliza.

"How could you do that to him?" Eliza yelled as I was packing up my things. "After all that we've been through, you're just going to leave him?"

"Yes, Eliza, I'm leaving," I answered, my back to her as I refused to meet her burning, red eyes.

"But why? Isn't your life all here? Are we not good enough for you?" she shouted again.

"Why is this about you, Eliza?"

I stopped to turn and around and face her, towering over her face that screamed 'you betrayed me, you betrayed us.'

"It's not about me, Elijah, it's about you being selfish, leaving me and Dad!" she screamed.

"How do you not see how selfish you're being?"

Louis yelped, frightened by the rare screaming, and, shockingly, Eliza shot him a hard, hateful glare, causing him to bow down and whine. She had never looked at Louis in a way that wasn't full of love.

“As if I haven’t been selfless all of these years?” I retorted, refusing to break eye contact with her.

“I’ve given up so much for us to get where we are now. Even when we got Louis and got set back, even when Mom passed away and we got set back, even when I worked so hard instead of going to university just so *you* could go to university, and I got set back. You’re telling me *I’m* being selfish?”

Eliza didn’t have answer for that.

“And now that we’re living a stable life, I thought it would be fine for me to want more – to want to be selfish, to finally want something for myself,” I huffed, my shoulders releasing their tension in defeat.

“I just wanted something more than working to survive. I want to work to be happy, Eliza. Can’t you see that?”

She broke our gaze as a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Eliza?”

“Just go, Elijah.”

Louis whined as he looked between us. Then, when the string between us had been pulled too tight, it snapped with a bark from Louis and a yell that came from Eliza, full of hatred.

“Don’t yell at him like that, Eliza.”

“You lost your right to look after him the moment you decided to leave.”

“Eliza . . .”

“Say your goodbyes to Dad and Louis.”

“But what about you?”

“. . . Goodbye, Elijah.”

Louis’s eyes were the last thing I saw as I walked out that door. Not even my sister’s, downturned, hurt and away.

His bright shining eyes turning confused as he saw me walk away.

Louis had been there for all the times that I needed him, and I had left him.

And now he needed me.

So now, I had to be there for him.