

Years 9 & 10

2nd Place: Kavin Sanjeevkumar

Year 9, Harrisdale Senior High School

A Thing with Feathers

15-year-old Evelyn had wandered into the clearing in a trance, unconscious and oblivious to the consequences. With her eyes sealed and feet quiet, her body remained motionless, imprisoned in a daze.

Nestled deep in the woods, lay two chairs and a table. Unknown to young Evelyn, a chessboard patiently waited for her. Its intricate pieces gracefully poised themselves and thrummed with eldritch power. Ominous whispers hushed and mumbled from the edges of the clearing, and all the trees chanted and concaved her with voices, yet mere fragments were heard by her deaf ears.

Suddenly, an unearthly force pulled Evelyn towards the chessboard and seated her in a chair. Awoken from her daze, her eyes stirred open, and her breath hitched at the first sight of her rival. The whispers silenced themselves, and in hindsight, she realised they were warnings after all.

“Acute lymphocytic leukaemia or ALL,” the doctor had informed her. “Your blood test results have revealed cancerous cells.”

Cancer? A shiver crawled down her spine. It was a name you’d hear on the news, a name that ruthlessly torments their innocent victims, and often waves goodbye with their hands bloodstained. Not the word written in your diagnosis. Not the word that answered why she had been feeling so tired lately.

“Why me?” she asked, trembling.

Her opponent snickered, “Why not?”

He was darkness coalesced into a formless shape, a looming bitter shadow of her own body’s making, seated opposite her. He had once been a single faulty cell in her blood but divided and multiplied, growing in power over time. Ultimately, he suppressed her healthy blood cells, and in an act of thievery, began to steal their sunlight and water.

Defying nature's traditions, his black pawn moved first. Evelyn felt his voice seep through her body, pool in her limbs and make them too heavy to carry, and echo ripples

of nausea through her head. A tense silence hung heavy in the air, and to her horror, his single black pawn had doubled and tripled into a disastrous army.

Yet that wasn't the worst of him. Light would quietly peek under her bedroom door at night, and her parents' sobs echoed down the hallway. An unfair burden of guilt pressed down upon her, tightening her lungs and restricting her breath, even though she wasn't to blame.

Abruptly, Evelyn spotted a peculiar bird fluttering around and encircling the game. Its feathers were dipped in the shades of dawn and dusk, almost as if it had been birthed by the sun itself, unique like no other. Intricate silver linings danced across its wings and shimmered gracefully, illuminating the darkness within her mind. Entranced by its beauty, she forgot her odds of winning. Deep inside, she knew the bird was on her side.

Refocusing her attention back to the chessboard, she encountered her knights. Armed with their trade of medicine, they tested her bone marrow, her nemesis's origin, to analyse him further. Hesitantly, after a month had passed from her diagnosis, her fingers curled around her bishop and without waiting any longer, she made her first move – chemotherapy.

The aim was to capture his rapidly dividing shadow particles, but chemotherapy was a double-edged sword that weakened her healthy cells in sync. The routine piercings of the IV drip into her skin left her battling against two opponents at once. The ripple in her head caused by her leukaemia amplified into a harsh wave that pounded her mind with chemo. They crashed at the shore of her hair roots, crippling them and eroding away her beloved locks one by one. Her sails that manoeuvred her life's wind, her energy, were wounded with rips that only tore larger with each powerful gust. Navigating the ocean was risky but with her friends, family and doctors, keeping afloat felt possible.

Evelyn looked him in the eye.

“Why aren't you making your move?” she asked tentatively. “It's time.”

He chuckled, “I already have.”

Flustered, she studied the chessboard, trying to make sense of his words. *What could he have done now?* Then, she saw it, the immobilisation of her immune system. Her powerful army of pawns had been sent false messages instructing them to surrender and they stood obstructed by his black pawns. With her defences weakened, higher

chances of being preyed upon by external predators like infection appeared, leaving her more susceptible to defeat.

Her eyes teared up, and dread choked her chest.

“Why do you want to win so bad? If I ever lost . . . you'd die with me.”

He mindlessly shrugged off the question. Desperate for comfort, she turned to the bird. It had slowed and shrunk in size. Its feathers had dulled into a muted orange, and the silver linings were now cool grey. Yet, it persisted in flight; driven by something that had vanished long ago. Like the bird, she persevered with her bishop. The first month of intense chemo had passed, and she sat in the hospital room awaiting results. A thrilled doctor flung open the door.

“Good news Evelyn!” she announced. Clutching tight onto her parents' arms, she tensed on the edge of her seat.

“It's working! It's time to drop the dosage now.”

She nearly jumped and held her breath whilst scanning the chessboard. Her opponent's pieces lay scattered, little in their numbers. His shadow had dwindled into a thin black wisp. Her doctor resumed to explain the next step forward would be to clear the board of leukaemia. Following the plan, she continued advancing with her bishop and soon realised the pools that once weighed her body had lightened, the horrific waves pounding in her mind had calmed down, and the sails of her boat began to patch up again.

Occasionally, her rival would make a few moves, grow in power, and boast his ugly smile, but he would eventually weaken every time. Night and day flew by in the forest, and 14 more months passed. The game was on her side, yet something somewhere nagged at her mind. He had been silent for too long, but she knew better than to talk to him.

“Hello Evelyn,” he said first. “It's been a while.”

“N-no . . . go away!” she stammered.

“Hah! Did you really think it'd be so easy?” he teased.

Without a warning, the black wisp in the air started to twitch and growl menacingly.

“Stop . . . please don't,” she panicked.

“Tsk. Too late.”

He wickedly cackled with his atrocious voice, and violently twisted and writhed in the air, enlarging into a monstrous figure. As if in response to his call, the black pieces on the periphery of the board respawned back onto the checkered battlefield, taller and more grotesque than ever.

The puddle within her grew into an ocean, which heaved and growled with tsunamis, crashing into her bones and tearing her muscles apart. Relishing in her misery, the crevices of his smile deepened each time she agonised in unbearable pain. Cold sweat trickled down her forehead, and with shallow pants, she searched for the bird. The forest had dulled into grey, and a veil of ashen clouds settled in, sparing little rays of sunlight. The bird perched motionless on the ground, its delicate frame fragile and tiny. Its feathers had now dimmed to reflect the night and beneath were bones that shivered in the cold.

“Check,” he whistled.

Her eyes darted back to the board. Her knights were speechless. The unexpected relapse had left her worse than ever before. Murmurs circulated between her parents and her doctors, and they approached her with a solemn look.

“Evelyn, we have a viable treatment option. A bone marrow transplant. This way we'd fight leukaemia from its root . . . but it's risky.”

After lengthy conversations and careful consideration, she nodded her head in agreement to be put on the transplant list. The bone marrow transplant was now her rook, tucked away in a corner. Once she found a compatible donor, the rook would castle, where the donor's healthy marrow cells would be infused into her bloodstream and gradually overtake her leukaemia. Until then, her routine now included a pattern of doctor consultations, long rests, and medication. At times she'd return to her bishop to keep her leukaemia at bay and undergo low-dose chemo.

Days bled into weeks, and weeks into months, and a year and ten months of an exhausting wait had passed. Weakness lingered. Time was running out. The leukaemia fidgeted restlessly, sensing near victory.

“Five seconds left, make a move!” he hissed.

Her gaze darted to her name on the transplant list. Third, she was third. The bird's gentle eyes looked up at her, its sorrowful gaze mirroring her thoughts. Memories of its fire and graceful flutter flashed through her mind.

“Four.”

The bird lost almost everything, its warmth, flight and life. *Tick*. But it was still there. She was still there. *Tock*. Her name had climbed to second on the list.

“Three seconds. Hurry up!”

Her triumph relied on time, an unpredictable fickle little thing. *Tick*. Suddenly, her name moved up to first. A flame flickered in her heart, hanging tight onto the rays of sunshine left, she waited.

“Haha . . . two more seconds left,” he jested.

“Evelyn,” her doctors announced. “We have a donor!”

A sharp pin unknotted itself in her lungs, and relief washed through. *Tock*. Tests, hospital admission and information on what to expect blurred by.

“One.”

For the last time, she played her bishop. The high-dose chemotherapy drip sent her leukaemia wincing and shrinking in dismay. Then, skipping his turn, her fingers wrapped around her rook and castled with no time to waste.

In the months following the procedure, the sterile environment of the hospital became 18-year-old Evelyn's home. Under the close monitoring of her medical team, her rook moved around the board by itself, capturing his black pawns without instruction. The donor's cells travelled to her bone marrow and produced new healthy cells. The engraftment suffocated the leukaemia, wiping the smile off his face, and belittling his form into a barely visible figure.

With his downfall, the pools in her body sunk to mere puddles and drops, lifting her fatigue. The tsunami in her mind calmed down into gentle ripples and she regained her

energy as the holes in her sails patched up and became resistant to the wind. The grey clouds parted, and sunlight pierced through, illuminating the forest with an emerald glow again.

Two years into recovery, 20-year-old Evelyn had captured all black pieces on the board, all apart from one – the lone king. The solitary foe remained her only obstacle left, and to bring him crumbling she only needed one thing – the absence of leukaemia for five years: A complete remission.

Evelyn, aged 25, clutched onto her armrests tightly, awaiting her blood test results with her heart hammering in a frantic rhythm. The doctor scrolled through the results on the screen, and the silence stretched.

“Evelyn,” the doctor finally said, a warm smile lifting their face. “That's all clear.”

Breath filled her lungs again and lightness flurried through her chest. Checkmate. With a clink, her rival's king dropped onto the checkered battlefield. Empty air occupied the space her opponent had once sat. After all this, she had one hope; that no remnant of her leukaemia lingered, for the tiniest speck, invisible to her eye, could arouse a whole other game.

A flash of sudden movement caught her sight. The bird! Its feathers blazed with warm pigments of dawn, no longer resembling charcoal. Evelyn outstretched her finger, and understanding the cue, the bird gently perched upon her hand. Sunlight bathed its wings, and she intently admired the silver linings that twirled across its body. It had faint marks too, scars that narrated past struggles. Despite the storm, not once had the bird left the clearing. One thing was clear.

Smiling from ear to ear, Evelyn softly whispered to the thing with feathers, “Thank you for being my star, you lighted my way in the darkest night.”