

Years 9 & 10

2nd Place: Patricia Tan

Year 10, Harrisdale Senior High School

Woodpile

The wind off the ridge didn't blow so much as it scraped. It carried the smell of motor oil and pine needles cold enough to snap.

Jonah found it behind the woodpile, wedged between where the cedar planks met the foundation of the cabin. At first, he saw the greyish fur and thought it was a discarded winter jacket, water-logged and heavy from snow soaking in. But when he nudged it with the toe of his boot, it moved with a fluid quality that no fabric could mimic.

"Hey." He dropped down to his knees, breath blooming in white plumes from the cold November air. "Hey, buddy."

It didn't scream. It didn't growl, hiss or make that wet clicking noise that the things from the valley usually made when they were cornered. It just lay there, its long, coarse fur matted with frozen mud and burrs. The creature was the size of a large greyhound, but the proportions of its limbs were entirely wrong. Its front legs were too long, curling into blunt, multi-jointed fingers, and its spine was arched sharply. Jonah reached out a gloved hand, hesitated, then pulled off his mitten. The cold bit at his hand instantly, but if he was going to do this, it had to be real.

His fingers sank into the dense topcoat. Beneath the rough guard hairs, there was an undercoat of surprisingly thick fur, holding onto an odd reservoir of heat despite the freezing subzero temperatures. Jonah moved his hand up its neck, feeling the heavy, skeletal structure underneath.

Then, just behind the base of its broad, featureless skull, Jonah found it.

He found the soft spot beneath the fur.

It was a small, circular patch, no bigger than a bottle cap, where the coarseness gave way to skin as soft and delicate as a baby's eyelid. The skin there beat with a soft pulse, a rhythmic *thump- thump*. The moment Jonah stroked the patch, the creature's entire body shuddered, a breath escaping from its hidden mouth that smelled faintly like ozone and sweet grass.

It didn't pull away. It leaned into the touch, its heavy skull resting against Jonah's knee.

"Jonah! Inside, now!"

His mother's voice cut through the sharp air instantly. Jonah flinched, quickly pulling away and tucking his fingers back into the glove. He pulled a loose tarp over the gap in the woodpile, covering the grey fur, before standing up, his legs stiff from the cold.

"Coming!" he shouted, voice cracking slightly.

The kitchen smelled of boiled cabbage and salt pork, the unchanging perfume of late-autumn rations. His mother, Martha, was standing by the woodstove, hands tucked in her armpits to catch the heat. Her face was lined with the permanent creases of a person listening out for the crack of snapping twigs all day.

"You were out there for a long time," she said, not looking at him as he took off his boots.

"What does it matter?"

Jonah knew the answer to that. The later you stayed out, the more likely you were to . . .

"You know what I'm talking about. When it gets late, the fog rolls in and the day fades into nightfall. And tell me again, what follows that?"

Jonah didn't reply. He just watched as Martha sighed, ladling thin broth into two wooden bowls, tension dropping from her shoulders slightly.

"I was just stacking the birch," he said smoothly. Jonah had gotten good at lying over the past three years. Everyone had. "The bottom logs were getting damp."

Martha slid into her seat at the scarred oak table. "Your father used to say the birch was the only thing that kept the damp out of his bones. He'd spend all November out there. Stubborn man."

"Do you think they ever look for us?" Jonah stared down at his bowl. "The ones that went into the valley?"

Martha's spoon paused halfway to her mouth. Her eyes, usually sharp and defensive, melted into soft distance for a second, before the steel returned. "Nothing comes back from the valley, Jonie. You know that. What goes down there . . . changes. It forgets."

"But what if it doesn't forget?" Jonah pressed, fingers tingling from where he had touched the soft spot, "What if it just forgets how to say it?"

"Eat your soup," Martha's voice dropped into a deep, low register that meant the conversation was over, "and lock the storm shutters before it gets dark. It's meant to snow hard tonight."

That night, Jonah couldn't sleep. The wind howled through the floorboards, making the cabin creak like an old ship trapped in ice. Every time he closed his eyes, he felt the soft, rhythmic pulse against his thumb again.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

At midnight, he slipped out of the wool blanket. He didn't put on his boots, as the sound of the soles hitting the wooden floor would wake his mother instantly. Instead, he pulled on three pairs of thick, wool socks. Jonah padded down the hallway, movements silent and cautious. He slid the iron bolt of the back door open agonisingly slowly, wincing at the faint *click* it made as it cleared the housing.

The night air was a physical blow, freezing the moisture in his nose. The fog had blown in, swallowing the trees and turning the yard into a milky white sea.

Jonah hurried over to the woodpile, his feet sinking into the light dusting of snow that had already fallen over the ice. Carefully, he pulled back the stiff, frozen tarp.

The creature was still there. It hadn't moved an inch, but it was shivering violently now, its long limbs tucked into its arched body. When the light of the moon broke through the fog for a second, Jonah saw its face clearly for the first time. It didn't quite have eyes, not really, just two translucent membranes where eyes should've been, stretched over bone.

"Hey," Jonah whispered, "You're freezing."

Jonah reached out again, gliding his fingers down its neck until he found the soft spot again. The pulse was slower now, sluggish, like a clock running out of spring. As he pressed his warm palm against the spot, the creature slowly uncoiled. It raised its heavy head, tilting it back so blind membranes were directed right at Jonah.

Then, it reached out. Jonah braced, ready to jump back, heart slamming against his ribs like a frantic animal trapped in a cage. But it didn't strike. Its multi-jointed fingers

brushed against the sleeve of his wool coat. It slid upward, tracing his arm until it reached the top of his shoulder. It pressed against him, seeking the warmth of his body.

Jonah didn't run. He wrapped his arms around it, burying his face into its coarse-furred neck. It smelled like old wool blankets his father used to keep in the truck: oil, woodsmoke, and old iron. Snow was falling steadily now, a thick sheet settling over the mist.

"Dad?" Jonah breathed into the grey fur, the word catching in his throat like a splinter.

The creature didn't answer. It couldn't. Its biology was all wrong, its throat rebuilt by whatever patrolled the old valley. But the pulse in its soft spot quickened.

The back door of the cabin creaked open, a harsh beam of yellow cutting through the fog, illuminating the two figures by the woodpile.

The creature reacted instantly. It didn't attack, but it stood up, emitting a cold hiss of pressure and warning. It placed its body between Jonah and the house.

Martha stood at the door, her hands shaking as she raised his father's old double-barrelled shotgun. Her eyes were wide with terror, with the fear of the unknown, with the fear of the things that had stolen her life from her for the past three years.

"Mum, don't! Don't shoot!" Jonah yelled, voice breaking with desperation. "Look at it. Just look at it."

"Jonah, move! That's one of them! It'll tear you apart!" Martha sobbed, her finger tightening on the trigger. "Please."

"It won't, Mum! It had all night to hurt me, and it didn't. It's cold! It came here because it was cold!"

The silence that followed was heavy with the ragged breathing of two humans just trying to survive the night.

Suddenly, the creature shifted. Martha held up the shotgun again, hands shaking so much that the barrel danced in the warm light. But it didn't try to attack her. It slowly lowered its high-arched spine, tucking its front legs beneath its chest in a gesture that looked remarkably like a dog settling by a hearth. It tilted its head back, exposing the bare, pulsing soft spot in the golden glow.

Martha looked at the delicate, pale spot, so utterly defenceless against the coarse fur and heavy bone. She saw the way it throbbed, a fragile echo of life in the frozen wasteland.

"It . . . it didn't scream." The wind carried her voice. "They always scream."

Slowly, she lowered the gun, but she didn't drop it. The sky was shedding small, white clumps of snow now, hitting the ground with the softness of falling ash.

Then, she saw the scar across the soft spot.

Three small, white lines, the same as the ones her husband had from a table saw accident twenty years ago, before Jonah had even been born. The same ones she had to take him to the hospital for. The same ones that had smoothed over but never quite disappeared, because scars have a way of reminding us that the past happened.

The moment her eyes caught the lines, the gun slipped from her hands, disappearing into the snow. She sobbed, reaching out blindly, her son's fingers guiding her fingers to the soft spot beneath the fur.

Snow was falling heavily now, hitting the wood and the backs of the humans with a sharp, cold *thud*, wind soaring through the treetops. But in that moment, the world had been reduced to the three of them, Jonah, Martha and the creature, sharing softness by the woodpile. Love always comes back in some form, even if it had to reinvent itself to survive the cold.