

Third Place

The Boy in the Garret

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Lily gripped her pencil so hard, her knuckles were whiter than the snow falling outside. Hoping a poem would come to her, she bit her lip and looked around the classroom for inspiration. But nothing stood out to her. Just a loud 'thump' from somewhere above her head, she shuddered as she thought about how many rats were in the garret, eating away at the only shelter they had from the cold snow falling outside. The bell rang, awakening her from her thoughts, she gathered her inkwell and heavy books. Clutching them, she knew the brave characters in the adventures were her only friends. She sighed as she stepped into the cramped cloakroom, the other kids had already run to play outside, so all was quiet, except for the schoolhouse groaning under the weight of the thick blanket of snow on the roof.

While she sat down to eat her crisp apple, a small figure climbed out of the hole in the corner, near the ceiling. Lilly spotted him and watched silently as he rummaged through her classmates' bags. He was a strange sight, a skeleton of a boy, wearing muddy, ripped shorts and a too-small yellow stained singlet. Underneath his grubby face, arms and legs he had a dark complexion and freckles dotted all over his skin. His mousey hair was chewed and messily arranged as a mat on his head. He turned around to see Lilly crouched in the corner and they both jumped.

"Who are you?" Lilly asked.

The boy motioned to his mouth but said nothing, Lilly understood.

"You can't talk?"

He nodded his head slowly, looking at the hole in the wall.

"You're the one who makes the noise in the garret, not rats?" Lilly murmured. He nodded again.

“You must be hungry, here, eat this,” Lilly said, as she threw her other apple to the boy. He bit into it and immediately his eyes lit up as he wolfed it down in seconds.

Wiping his mouth and picking up Lilly's notebook, he flicked through the thin pages and, with Lilly's quill, etched ‘MAX’ in big letters and drew a beautiful picture of Lilly.

“You are exquisite at drawing, Max.”

The two became friends. Everyday Lilly would bring food for Max and he would help her to draw. She was getting quite good actually, and Max wasn't looking quite so thin anymore.

One morning, at the start of spring, the grass was icy and the trees laden with fresh snow, Lilly strolled along the trail to school, a skip in her step and the sweet aroma of the apple pie coming from her bag. She stopped to let the smell waft into her nose and have a breath of the cold air that bit at her lungs. She watched her breath glide in front of her and smelt something else in the air, a toxic odour.

Confused, she ran ahead to reach the schoolhouse, and then she saw them:

the exterminators.