

FIRST PLACE

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12th Grade

It was recess time and Sarah Burt was playing on the swing. At age six, life was blissfully simple. The most arduous decision she made all morning was what color crayons to use. Daniel, her best friend, was swinging next to her. Only a few months older than her, Daniel was intelligent, just like Sarah, and equally as quiet. They were softly chatting as they trudged back to the school when she saw her friend tackled, his face shoved into the dirt. She had never spoken to the bully before, so she wanted to turn, run, and hide in the comfort of her teacher; however, her feet would not take her. Instead, she opened her mouth and quietly said, "Get off him." Her voice crescendoed into a scream: "Get off him!" Shocked by the strength of the voice, the bully raised his eyes to her face. Sarah stared back at him, half petrified by his eyes, the other half in shock of the booming voice of which she did not know she was capable. Standing up, he let go of Daniel and sauntered off. Her friend...

... was looking at her from the car. "Are you getting in or what, Sarah? You are seventeen now, loosen up and enjoy yourself for once. It is not like we are robbing someone's house; we're just going for a smoke."

"Rich, as much fun as that sounds, I don't think I want to."

"Oh, are you scared? Do you think your mommy is going to catch you?" The crowd that had silently been observing from the shadows of the back seat decided to chime in with a sharp laugh. Her facial expression remained cold, showing no change in heart. "Alright, if you are going to be like that," he declared. His car sped off and was consumed by the blackness of the cold night. Satisfied, she turned and walked confidently back to the front door. She went to sit...

..."down in the chair, Sarah. I am afraid I have bad news." Time had etched its way into the doctor's face. Wrinkles covered his rosy cheeks, and his welcoming bright blue eyes stared back at her when he spoke; however, today, the life had left his eyes, and the color had drained from his face. He avoided Sarah's eyes and gazed at his shoes, as if he expected one to hop off and run away. "I'm afraid we have found a spot of breast cancer," he said weakly. "You are so young... it does not make any sense. I'm... I'm sorry."

Silence filled the room. "It will be a fight, but I will give it everything I have," she exclaimed. "It is not the end, just a small bump in the road." He was...

...staring at her coolly from across the table. His decision was made; there was no changing his mind. "You know we no longer need him. What does he bring to this business? If we let him go, we will make more of a profit."

"I do not care about the profit," she said under her breath.

“Sarah, this is a business, we —”

“Nick, can you forget about the damn profit for two minutes?” she yelled. “When did this all become about money? The only people losing money in this situation are you and me. As far as I know, we do not need it. He needs to feed his family. I am standing up for what is right. He needs it, not us.” Silence followed as she quietly picked up her jacket and walked...

...into a room filled with her grandkids. Their eyes darted to their matriarch and followed as she glided across the floor. Their eyes glistened, as if observing an idol. Slowly, she lowered herself into her chair and began to speak:

“Life is incredibly different nowadays. Sixty years ago, you went to war to fight for your country. That was courage. It is different today. It takes courage to get up in the morning, courage to fight illness, courage to resist bad influences, courage to fight for what is right. While life will present many challenges, none of which will be easy, it is how you approach them that establishes your character.”