

## 3rd Place, Prose, Grades 7-9

### *“The Big Mistake,” Caroline Epstein*

The air swarmed me, corrupted me, as I fell. It felt like I had been falling forever. Pain was searing up my spine, through my arms and cycling around my body, not wanting to leave. Blood flooded through my eyes. All I could see was thick red blood, stinging my eyes. I never wanted to die this way. My wound was gushing, bubbling with blood. I felt it sear through my stomach.

Light flashes through my eyes, yet I cannot see. All I can do is remember. I remember the guy, the way he punched me with anger, kicked me without skill, just fury. Each kick was randomly placed, and I could tell he wasn't thinking straight. I recall how he shot me with his gun four times out of fright that I could survive and put him in jail. I remember his words, striking me harder than the blows. Shock had kept me from fighting. I felt paralyzed, not able to move my legs to run or arms to fight back. I would never hurt someone. I remember the way he ran when he realized how badly hurt I was, what he had done. By then my eyes were filled, salty tears mixed with new blood, as I heard his footsteps run away.

I thought of my family back at home in Nashville, who knew I shouldn't have been friends with him, how disappointed they will be in me if I come home hurt. They always told me, “Sam, you're only 15! Find friends who are nicer, who will support you. Please...” The look in their faces was fear, yet I did not listen. Now I am in Franklin, far away from them so I wouldn't get caught and left with no hope of them finding me, or even trying.

School was also a struggle, another reason my parents hated me. My average was a C, and I don't care to try in my classes. I knew I was friends with bad influences, but they were the only ones I could find. At school I was considered mean, a slacker and a show-off. There was no way around it, I had sewn the label myself.

My thoughts were interrupted as my head slammed

the ground, spraying blood everywhere and sending everyone around me to silence. Even through the pain, I could hear people murmuring, the call of the phone, the footsteps running. What was I supposed to do? I couldn't feel my arm and my phone was gone. I was hopeless. I wanted to run, to call for help, to get off the ground, but the excruciating pain was impossible to overcome. I didn't even know where the pain started, but I knew I was losing a lot of blood. I could feel my head getting lighter, my legs weaker with every breath. My clothes were soaked, I could feel the wetness spread through my body. Was I drowning? Memories flooded my brain, but I only looked for one. The one where I angered him, my best friend, Dan. I did something. I had to have, but I couldn't pinpoint what happened. My breath was staggered. Every breath seemed harder.

Another wave of pain rushed over me, stimulating all of my nerves to go haywire, but causing a once-distant memory to be close. Dan. He wanted money, I owed him money. It was money I didn't have, and I shouldn't have borrowed. \$5000, barely enough to pay my car bills, yet I thought I could pay him back. Dan had threatened me. I had owed him \$6000 because of interest, which was way more than I had. I remember shrinking and trying to hand him my \$102.34, but he wanted more. He always wanted more.

My head jerked to the side, my eyes squinted, trying to see through the blood. All I could see was the night sky and the moon, which was full. I could hear the clock inside me ticking, its ticks diminishing, slowing down, dying. I knew I had to act, but I couldn't. I looked strong on the outside, but inside I was as weak as an infant. I didn't know how many times I had been hit, but I knew it was a lot. Mustering all my strength, I drew up my left hand, shaking and weak, and wiped the blood from my eyes. For

a few seconds I had clear vision. I caught sight of a person, urgently calling someone, perhaps it was help. I could see black figures running on the street. A woman with her child was running, the woman protecting her child from my attacker, who was probably far away now and wasn't a threat anymore. I tried to talk to someone, anyone, but my throat was dry. My eyes filled up again. I couldn't see, and I didn't have enough strength to do anything.

My mind wandered away from the moment for only a second, trying to recover my entire life's memories. My brain failed, the pain wouldn't let me think straight, and I was left with total blankness. Suddenly I wasn't sure what would happen to me. Would I live? Would I die? What would happen if I did survive? I couldn't change now, but high school was almost over. I could start fresh in college. New thoughts swooped in. Could I even get into college? My blood flowed faster. Tears rushed down my face, first one, then four, bringing my health down with them. As my body started to shut down, all I could hear were sirens, louder and louder with each beat of my heart, which was slowing down until I could no longer gasp for air.

*Caroline Epstein is in 8th grade at The Blake School. She loves to travel, draw and do many forms of art! She especially loves her cat, Figaro.*