

Aidan Cook

2<sup>nd</sup> Place

2019 CFUW Writing Contest

### The Gamble

The message was clear -- he didn't want us in there with him. He specifically told us to stay out here and stay safe. But how could we sit here and let him risk his life? What kind of men would we be? Sitting here watching him walk to his almost certain death. We both knew full well that going towards that cloud of concrete dust and twisted metal was like calling, "Hit me", with two face-cards on the table. I'm not a gambler; I always play it safe.

As we sat, more tremors shook the ground. Vibrating our bones like a broken massage chair stuck on its highest setting. The man who had been a stranger to me until this day, brought together by the crumbling of our small town, sat quietly beside me. We both remained there fidgeting, our minds ready to run off after him, our legs useless underneath us.

The man next to me reached out, offering me a smoke, his hands uncontrollably shaking, like a fish out of water. I took it and nodded a thank you. Our eyes met, and in his face, I saw the same longing I felt in myself. The desire to go. The driving urge to get up and follow him. To not sit here like cowards. Yet, we continued to sit in silence; not a word was spoken.

Inside our heads it was a different story. The vision of him walking up that path and disappearing into the trees wouldn't leave my head, even when I closed my eyes. It was as if the vision was glued to the inside of my eyelids. My thoughts raced around my head. The birds perched in the trees above, taunting us. Their piercing screeches trying to push us from our places, like a dog's bark herding sheep. Seconds felt like minutes, minutes felt like hours.

As we sat, I held the cigarette between my fingers, turning it over and over. I thought back to the day my mother caught that first whiff of burnt tobacco on my clothes. I smiled to myself, remembering that sharp smack to the back of my head -- a pain I quickly grew accustomed to after the broken window, the missed curfews, and skipped classes. I also remembered her hug. The hug that made me feel whole, that showed how much she cared, the hug that showed compassion and love like no words ever could. I thought back to the car crash in senior year. She saw me in that hospital bed and the first thing she did was hug me. Nothing she could have said would have made me feel the way that hug did. That car crash should have killed me. The car was crumpled like a tin can run over by a transport truck. If I had been alone on that road, I would have been dead. My best friend pulled me from my car that night. Kept me alive until help showed up. The man that I just let walk away is the reason I am here. He pulled me from that crumpled mess of a car, stayed with me, kept me alive. If I had been alone on that road, I'd have been dead within minutes.

Now I sit here letting him walk up his road, alone. A sharp shriek comes from the birds above as I rise from my place. The man next to me remains, shaking like a leaf, frozen to his spot.

A rush of adrenaline rises within me. My legs become solid underneath me, and I begin to walk down the path following the vision of my friend. I pull a lighter from my pocket and spark the tobacco dangling between my lips. I take a couple slow pulls and toss the smoke to the ground. I begin to move faster down the path, memories rushing through my head. The car crash, the vision of him pulling me out of that car. I run faster. The memory of him pulling that brute off me in that small-town bar. I run faster. I take the gamble. I call, "Hit me."