

Martyn Godfrey Young Writer's Award Entry Form
Presented by the Young Alberta Book Society

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Grade: 8

Title of your story: Guilty Product

My brother leans into me as we silently watch the sun sink into the horizon, marveling at the extravagant colors spread across the atmosphere like firm brushstrokes over a canvas. We lie in the grass, watching as the sky slowly shifts, stars appearing like splatters of raindrops falling on the bubble that surrounds the earth.

“Look, Mirembe” my brother, Jabari, says softly, pointing upwards “The sky is putting on its pajamas!”

I laugh. Only my brother could think of something like that. On my other side, my sister Jamila is silent. She’s always silent. When we’re alone, sometimes she talks, but mostly she observes, entertained by our chatter, or off in her own little world of fantasy.

I hear soft footsteps on the grass, and twist my body to take in Mother walking out, a baby on her hip, and one holding her hand, toddling with unsure steps towards us. I smile. In moments like this, the world so quiet, the sky so beautiful, and the grass whispering a song, I wish I could pause time and live here forever. Except not. If I had to choose, I would pause time one year ago today, the evening before Dad died. When we all were together, laughing and talking, united in happiness and bliss. What I wouldn’t give...

I am snapped out of my thoughts as my mother comes and settles herself beside me, saying nothing, but saying it all. She remembers. We all remember, except for maybe Abedi, who was born a couple months after. Abayomi would soon forget; he was only 2 when it happened, and almost nobody remembers things from when they’re two. I know I don’t. But I definitely remember last year. So does Jabari, and Jamila. So does Mother. We sit and weep in remembrance of that day, last year tomorrow, when our lives went downhill for good. We sit basking in the dying light of the Bangladesh sunset. We sit together.

The next day is routine hard work and labour. Jabari is the only boy even close to old enough to work, so he helps mother at work. I would too, but someone has to look after Abayomi, Abedi, and Jamila. While I'm doing that, I clean the house, so that when Mother comes home she doesn't have more work to do. I would prefer to do something else, but I don't have a choice. Our family was living in poverty before the death of my father, but now it's more extreme than ever, without him to do most of the work and without him supporting us. We're barely getting by, with less and less food every year. Everyone, including me, is as skinny as a twig, ribs showing through our skin, and as bony as a skeleton. It's surprising we made it this far. It's not fair. We're as good as everyone else! How come we're the ones that wake up hungry and go to bed hungry, with little difference in between? My stomach has developed a constant pain, and it's been going on for so long that I've learned to ignore it. We are learning which plants are okay to eat, so we can have snacks during the day, and something to munch on to curb the pangs. One time I was standing in the field, and then the next thing I knew, I was down on the ground! I have no recollection of the in between. I can usually feel the dizzy spells coming, and can get my hands on a plant, or sit down before they happen. When you live like this, you have to be prepared.

My sleep last night was bad. We had finished the day's work, had a small meal, and watched yet another sunset. It was the same, but different. Sometimes we try to point out the differences, each one seeing if they can find the most. It helps you to notice it more. Although, sometimes just silent appreciation of the fact that we are alive to enjoy it is nice too. We went to bed soon after, each one dropping off on their own time, all except for me. I laid awake, listening to the whispering wind through the grass. I just couldn't get comfortable. After the incident I never slept as well, but last night was brutal. Just last year, he died. Just last year.

The ground sways a little as I move around, due to my pounding headache. My legs aren't working the way I want them to, and I stumble over everything, my shin throbbing from where I hit it earlier. Jabari almost started to cry when I snapped at him. And to top it all off, Jamila's sick. I hope I don't catch it. I have to look out for her all day. She doesn't eat, meaning that there's more for us, but it's guilty food, like when you steal. It's your luxury at another's expense. It's guilty food and it is not to be celebrated.

Over the next few days, I'm watching Jamila all the time, in case she gets worse, and helping her. If it's even possible, she's getting skinnier. Though now, she's finally sitting up straight and eating tiny morsels. I don't think it's over, and I'm ready for more to come.

I look up as Mother walks in, and seeing the distraught look on her face, send the children outside to play. She sits down slowly, and I kneel beside her as she begins to weep. I'm shocked, and overtaken with a wave of emotions. The only other time I've seen Mother weep was when Father died. My eyes tear up in spite of myself. Seeing another person cry always breaks me down. Finally she speaks, and I can still tell that she's holding back, and trying to not make me more worried than needed.

"We might not be able to get enough food for everyone anymore. W-we're out of money." She says. I swallow.

"How long will the provisions last?" I try to keep the tremor out of my voice.

"A couple of weeks. After that, I'll have to buy again, but in that short amount of time, there won't be enough money to buy food for everyone."

"What'll we do?"

“I-I don’t know, sweetie. I don’t know.”

We weep. I don’t want to see my siblings starve, and of course, *I* don’t want to starve.

We miss the sunset, as we sit in silence, but my siblings stay out there, playing in the innocent way they do.

I can’t sleep. I can’t sleep for the life of me.

I try to carry on as usual, but just as it’s hard not to close your eyes when you’re tired, it’s hard to act normal when everything in your life just fell into a bottomless pit. My siblings can sense when things are different, and today’s no exceptions. They don’t ask, they just do extra nice things, like hug me, and try to be helpful. Jamila is up and walking, and looking quite a bit better, but she’s still not back to her normal self, at least not yet. The day passes slowly, and it’s a lazy one, where you’re just weighed down by everything that’s happening. Mother comes home sooner than usual, offering no explanation, and begins to prepare dinner.

“May I come in?” A stranger’s voice asks from the doorway. I jump sky high, dropping everything, and letting out a little squeak. I was not expecting a random man to show up at our house, especially not such a handsomely dressed man. Both Mother and the man chuckle as I gather what I was holding, embarrassed, then shoo the little ones outside to play, and take my seat beside Mother. He cocks one eyebrow (a thing I’ve always wanted to do), but I stay where I am, and he doesn’t question it further. Maybe 9 year olds aren’t allowed to hear certain things where he comes from, but here, I support Mother, and she supports us. He turns to Mother.

“Ma’am” My eyebrows raise involuntarily. No one had ever called Mother ‘ma’am’. “I am here with a proposal.”

Mother nods, looking uncomfortable. “Go on”

“I understand that your husband died last year around this time?” Mother nods again, stiffening slightly. I do too. “How are things for your family?” he asks, all silky and smooth, like he’s talking to children. I don’t like him. His smile is as forced as a doll’s. Sewed on, and unnatural.

“We’re doing just fine, thank you,” Mother stiffly replies, looking tough and unmoving, like all the grief and pain we had gone through didn’t exist.

“I don’t think you are, looking at your children. They appear underfed. I also realize that your business is not going well?”

Mother nods again, caught off guard, but trying not to show it. “Why does this concern you?” Now she’s on the defensive.

“Because,” he leans in, just the way I imagine a villain would when they propose evil plans

“Because I can help. Ma’am, I’m...” I let his voice fade out, my mind momentarily wandering.

How can he help? The sudden movement of Mother shaking his hand snaps me back into reality.

“I would like to take your three eldest children to a program we have, many miles away.” It

sounds like he’s dumbing it down, again speaking to us like children. Mother’s eyes flare

dangerously. “Don’t worry,” he says hurriedly “I’m not taking them away forever, just until things

get better for you here.” That sugar-coated voice makes me want to vomit. I excuse myself to go

play with the children while Mother talks. I don’t want to hear more.

Finally, the man leaves, and Mother gathers us all together.

“What was that all about?” Jabari asks innocently, and Mother sighs and bends down.

“I’m sending you, Jamila, and Mirembe away. To a place that is very nice, with food and clothes and toys! You’ll even get to learn things!”

“Actually go to school?” Jabari asks, amazed. None of us have any education, but we love to learn. I shift my weight, annoyed that Mother’s sugarcoating her words. I guess she has

to, for the little ones. Her eyes travel along us, until they meet mine. They say *I'm sorry. I love you, but this is for the good of the family. I don't want to watch you starve.* I nod my head ever so slightly, and she heaves a sigh of relief, turning back to the children and continuing her description of this most wonderful place. My eyes begin to burn. How do we know he's telling the truth? Is our situation that bad that she is willing to send us away without even seeing it for herself? I know it will help our family, but it just doesn't feel right. Mother doesn't know whether or not he's lying! Unnease creeps into my belly, gripping my insides and not letting go.

Sleep has not been my friend for the past couple of days. It certainly isn't coming now. I toss and turn, trying to get comfortable, but with really no result. So I lie and fantasize and listen. I love the noises of the night. And the cool thing is, you have to be willing to listen in order to notice, so it's pretty hard to take for granted. I finally fall into a fitful sleep, waking up every few hours and feeling just plain horrible. By the time I rouse myself for good, my face is soaked in tears. I wipe them away, afraid of being seen. I compose myself, and then go over to Mother and softly wake her before rousing my siblings. They're apprehensive as well, at least Jamila and Jabari are, but Abedi and Abayomi don't know what is happening. Just as well. The man comes soon after we're all ready. I hug Mother goodbye one last time, stretching up to whisper in her ear.

"I'll take care of them, I promise." Mother nodded, shaking slightly. "I love you."

"I love you too" She barely gets in the words before we both pull away. Composing ourselves, we say our goodbyes to my siblings and then turn away. We step out of the house and onto the dirt for the last time in our lives. Heading off to an unknown place, to an unknown future. No looking back.

Mother can have more food now, for Abedi and Abayomi. But it's guilty food, and she knows it. She did it for us, and she did it for them. I don't think she'll ever eat the same. At least we won't starve. At least we're going to be safe. At least Abedi and Abayomi have a chance.

It's pretty evident early on that the man lied to Mother. We don't get any of the promised things. Once we get out of sight of the house, we join a band of other scared children, with men all around, guns in hand. I knew it! I knew he was lying! Why didn't I try to tell Mother? I have to go back and tell Mother! I struggle, and grab Jamila's and Jabari's hands, trying to run, but the men grab us and hold us back. Tears run down my face. Mother thinks we're safe! She needs to know! There's nothing I can do, however, so I silently resign myself. We are forced to walk on for who knows how long. I yelp in pain as I stumble over a rock, the lack of sleep catching up to me, and my hunger making me weak. I earn shouts from the men, and take extra care not to fall again. When I finally get a chance, I lean down and whisper to Jabari and Jamila. "I'm sorry..." I'm about to continue, but I never get the chance. A rough man yells at us from the side, and I quickly stand up straight. But I keep a hand on each of their shoulders. *I'll take care of them. I promise.*

The men do not treat us well. We women have to stick up for each other, though it's hard. I don't let them touch Jamila. The poor kids are on their own most nights.

We get to a giant building, near a city with a horrid stench emanating from it. We are shoved through the doors, and given places to work. We earn sympathetic glances from the other workers, but no one offers help as we struggle to figure out the instructions. Jabari, Jamila and I work on quilts, our small fingers making it easier to weave the fabric. I'm shaking as I

thread it through, and my hand slips, tangling the string. I try to fix it hurriedly, but it ends up more tangled. My pulse increases as one of the supervisors notices something is off, and begins to make his way over. My fingers are trembling so hard that I keep slipping and I can't untangle it for the life of me. I feel an arm on my shoulder and I'm spun around abruptly. The supervisor looks kind of drunk, or maybe he's just tired, but either way he's angry. I struggle as he drags me away, sobbing. I'm thrown to the ground, and I feel it cold and painful against my skin. I'm shaking so hard that I can't stand back up, and my vision is blurred. I can just barely see him, advancing with something in hand. I beg and cry, but the lashes come. Cutting, tearing at my skin. I scream in spite of myself, but still they come, until I can't feel anything anymore. I go numb, and fall from my knees to the ground. But still they come. They come and come and come and I can't stop them. Then darkness envelopes my vision.

I wake up aching and sore, covered in blood and tears. Jamila is kneeling beside me, looking sick, but staying strong. Jabari is sobbing, and I can smell where he threw up. I smile, and try to reassure them, but we all know. We all know it'll never be all right, never again. I look up and see a man standing over me. Before I can protest, he grabs my bruised arm and pulls me up, onto my feet, and shoves me towards my station. I cry silently as I continue to work, pain accompanying every movement.

Every day is the same. Everyday's an endless struggle, a bleak routine with no end. I tried to escape once. It earned me more severe beatings. Now my body aches all over and though my fingers tremble, I must continue. I would've escaped too, except they lock the door, which kind of puts a damper on all my plans. We all have given up, I think. We have no choice. We have no rights, and we can't even stick up for ourselves. We have no voice in our planet of

sorrow. Even if we did, we wouldn't be heard in the roar of the world. They just want more, and we're providing it. We're giving them what they want. Why would they want to stop it?

It makes me angry to think about how people are going to be buying what I'm making when they probably aren't even going to use it, they might not even like it, they might return it, or throw it out. Or it may not fit where they want it. Or maybe they will accidentally get it dirty and it'll be of no use. Then they'll just go buy another thing, or maybe they would buy something else completely different. It makes me bitter. They're not only eating guilty food, they're using guilty products. They're getting something at another's expense, but they push it aside and try not to think about it, because ignorance is bliss, right? If you don't 'know' about it, then you can do nothing and feel like you're not guilty. I'm angry now, and my movements are jerky and rapid, the way I get when I'm stewing inside. Jabari notices and moves closer, but Jamila moves away. She never used to. She used to have that sort of silent strength. I grow even more angry. This place is breaking her, piece by piece, and tearing apart her resolve. And Mother thinks that we're safe and happy! Together and getting an education, getting fed and kept secure! What a joke. What a big giant joke.

I sigh. My legs ache, but we're not allowed to rest, and I have to go to the washroom. But I can't even do that. Not until the end of the day. I'm so sore that even when I breathe I ache. We have to get out! We have to be heard! But we can't. We can't because nobody *can* hear. Nobody even wants to. Nobody wants to know that something's going on, because then that'll ruin their 'happiness'. But how can they know true happiness if they haven't experienced true sorrow?

I'm snapped out of my thoughts by a queer smell in the air. I glance around. The supervisor had left, probably taking a washroom break. Lucky. I shrug and turn my back,

dismissing the smell as throw-up, or something along those lines. Probably nothing too concerning. But I notice others looking around too, nervousness showing on their faces. Then something catches my eye, and I whirl around. Something bright and hot, something alive.

Fire!

I immediately grab Jabari and Jamila, and head towards the door, on the opposite side of the flames. I begin to pound on the door, fear coursing through me. The fire's catching onto the fabric, the string, the supplies, and spreading as fast as a cheetah. I try the door. Maybe the supervisor left it open when he left. Locked. I pound harder still, and I'm joined by the other workers. There's screams of pain, screams for help, screams of terror. The fire lets off smoke, enveloping us as if it finds our screams annoying, and is trying to choke us out. Some people are climbing on one another's shoulders, trying to reach the roof, and find a way out there. Others are sitting on the ground, awaiting the imminent doom, too broken to even fight, too weary to even try. All around me is chaos and fear, death and the sickly smell of burning skin. I pull Jamila and Jabari close to me, and we lie on the ground. They're crying, sobbing, and I am too. What do you do when you know you're going to die? What do you do when pure terror takes over, tries to get you out, when there is no out? It's like trapping animals underwater. Slaughtering something doesn't even have a chance of escaping.

A calm washes over me. It'll be over soon. I just have to wait. I just have to wait. The flames hurt more than ever. I put myself on top of Jamila and Jabari. Maybe I can save them from the pain. Maybe I can die instead of them. *I'll take care of them. I promise.*

I close my eyes, and wait for the end. I can't do anything but wait. It's scary, it's painful, it's terrifying. I'm panicking, but I still can't escape, can't get out. I want to, but I can't, I can't, I

can't. Poor Jamila. Poor Jarabi. They both haven't stopped screaming since the flames came. I haven't either. It hurts so much. They deserve so much more. They deserve to live. They don't deserve to die so soon. I don't either. I wanted to do more! I wanted so much more, for our family, for me, for the world. I was going to help! Going to. Now, I have no chance.

I'm sorry. I couldn't protect them. I'm sorry.

The pain is so unbearable I want the end to come. I have no other option. I wonder if this is how Father felt, when he was slowly dying from sickness. I hope not.

My world fades from red to black.