

Hide and Seek

By Ava Serena Jivraj, grade 8

Her eyes are a canvas. A baby blue sky filled with white speckled stars. They stare, wide and smiling. Her little chubby hands grabbed at the air. She giggles, and snow white socks jump up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

"Sister! Hide and Seek!" She coos, her soft pink lips curving up, up, up, into a smile so big I wondered how her tiny face managed to form something so joyous.

I turn towards the windows. It has started to rain. The fat blotches of water falling onto the grass are like little feathers that slowly turn and dance and turn and dance. Plop. Plop. Plop. I watch as they land on the window—the sod. They make the dull pastures sparkle and shine, as if fairy dust had landed and made them fly. The pricks dance as the cold rush of air hits them. A soft, ghastly dance.

"You... want to play?" I ask her softly, turning away from the painting that the outside world has drawn. A world so calm. So quiet.

She lets out a giggle. A high-pitched squeal of excitement as she nods her little head up and down so hard I wonder if it would fall right off.

"Hide and Seek!" She babbles again, this time her tiny face contorted with a spark of anger.

"Hide and Seek." I repeat, reassuringly. My voice is high. Strangled. "Yes," I say.

Hide and Seek.

She squeaks, and I let my lips lift into a small smile, corners hinting at the tiniest little bit of fake joy.

"Yes!" She exclaims, her little fingertips rubbing against the wooden surface of the stairs, a mop of messy blonde curls flopping sideways. The top of her hair is a fuzz of yellow and gold as the static swims through the air.

"Okay," I utter, "you hide first."

She giggles again, and this time I wonder: I wonder how someone so small, so tiny, could be so *happy*.

"Me first," she sings, beaming.

And then she is gone. A rush of wispy honey hair and rose-pink flowers. A little bundle races up the stairs as I turn. I stay for a moment and listen. Listen to the pounding of her footsteps and the shrieks of the stairs as they groan and rattle under her force.

The quick, excited breathing of a girl as she races off to hide.

Then it's quiet. I close my eyes and picture her. Blonde hair, pink overalls, shining white socks, and pigtails with pretty little bows.

"To 30," I call out, to no one in particular.

One.

Two.

Three.

There's something about hide and seek. Sometimes you hide. Sometimes you seek. Sometimes you stand and wait, and then you think, "*What am I really doing?*" You seek, you hide, you do both.

Maybe you do neither.

Sometimes you race off to the bedroom and dive under the bed, or maybe you run to the yard and hide behind the tree near the forgotten wooden shed. Maybe you wait, and then you run. You run and run and run until you don't know why you're still racing as if something, *someone*, is chasing you.

10

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12

The thing about playing hide and seek is that you never really know. Is she here? Is she there? Do I run? Do I hide?

Maybe you'll wait. Wait until so much time has passed that you are sure the person has given up, leaving you hidden inside the cupboard in the bathroom, still waiting and waiting and waiting. Maybe they've gone down to watch the television. Maybe they've snuck into the pantry and eaten all the chocolate bars you've saved from last Halloween.

Maybe they're gone. Exploring the world and leaving you in the realm of darkness and wonder, still hidden safely in the storage room closet.

28

29

30

I open my eyes and watch the pounding of the rain on the windowsill. The droplets of water were sliding down the glass and pooling on the edges.

"Ready or not, here I come!" I call out, the fake enthusiasm burning in my throat like fire. A piece of food stuck at the back of my throat.

I listen. I wait. There is no noise, except for the familiar rasping of rain and the heaving sounds of my breath.

I take a tentative step forward.

Pause.

Wait.

Listen.

Silence.

And then I hear it.

A giggle. One so quiet, so drowned out by the song of the droplets, if I had waited another moment, I wouldn't have heard it.

Upstairs.

I know she is there. I know she is hidden behind the shower curtain, crouched in a little ball in the left corner of the tub, giggling silently with wide, curious eyes.

Waiting.

She is waiting for me to come and tickle her, laugh with her, play with her. She is waiting, like me. Like you.

Maybe I will wait. Wait until I forget what I'm supposed to do. Wait until I forget that I am waiting, and watch as she comes down the stairs, a confused expression on her small face.

Maybe if I wait, she will come. Come down asking, *"You didn't come find me!"*

And I will say nothing. I will still wait. Wait until the cold air of autumn has passed and the snow showers have begun.

But still, I take another step, the sound of footsteps ringing in my ears like a gentle, calming breeze.

"Are you ready?" I call out, this time walking, not waiting.

Although there is no reply, I know she is ready. I know she is holding her breath with excitement, holding in the loud shriek of joy that is burning at the back of her throat.

"Ready or not, here I come." I call out again, listening to my cold, calm voice, I stay still as it bounces around the room, echoing in my ears.

I know there will be no reply. I know that she will stay silent. I know that she will sing a song of patience and happiness as she waits and waits and waits. As she waits for me to come and whip open the curtain of our little white bathtub. Wait until she squeals loudly, giggling at the sudden outburst.

She will exclaim, *"You found me! You found me, sissy!"* And then she will pause and realise that it is her turn. It is her turn to wait and wait and wait; it is her turn to explore the hidden land of this home and come and find me.

And once she is done counting: *28, 29, 30!* she will sing, *"Ready or not, here I come!"*

And I will say to the deep, dark, black hole of emptiness, calling out to no one, *"Here I come, ready or not."*