

# WRITE NOW

## Write Now Flash Writing Contest 2024

### *Honorable Mentions*

	Genre	Character	Object
<b>Prompt A</b>	Thriller	Fortune Cookie Writer	Dish Soap
<b>Prompt B</b>	Fantasy	Elevator Inspector	Balloon

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## **“Jack’s Elevator Surprise”**

by Yusof T., Iowa (Prompt B)

Once upon a sunny Sunday morning, Jack, the super-duper elevator inspector, received the most exciting message ever! It was like, “Hey Jack! We’ve got this brand-new flying elevator, and you’re the chosen one to give it a thumbs up. It’s going to be the coolest thing ever! But wait, we need you to check it first.” Jack was over the moon with joy! He gobbled up his breakfast faster than a rocket, threw on his super-special work robes, and zoomed off in his shiny new black Audi Q5 to beat the day.

When he arrived at the elevator headquarters, something extraordinary was happening - everyone was holding balloons! Jack scratched his head, wondering, “why do we have balloons today?” And then, like a lightning bolt, it struck him - it was his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday! The moment of realization was as surprising as when Paul, one of the workers, accidentally let go of his balloon and it took a solo trip to the sky. “Happy Birthday Jack!” cheered everyone, and the birthday vibes filled the air with joy.

After the greetings, Jack dove into his inspection duties with energy. He approached the flying elevator, and oh boy, it was more than he could have imagined - super fancy and classic, like a magical carriage ready to whisk people away to the clouds. Stepping inside, Jack was met with a burst of color and beautiful pictures that turned the elevator into a work of art. “Wow!” he exclaimed, feeling like he stepped into a fairytale.

The inspection began, and Jack carefully checked every inch of the elevator, making sure it was neat and tidy. It was like searching for treasure, only the treasure was a perfectly working elevator. To his delight, everything was OK! No cracks, no creaks, and definitely nothing stuck. Jack proudly announced, “This elevator is ready for action! Hop on board people!”

The first passengers were Bob and his two excited sons. The elevator soared higher and higher, reaching a breathtaking height of 572 meters. But then, out of nowhere, disaster struck! The elevator stopped in the air and crashed to the ground! Fire started dancing in the air! There was panic everywhere and the once joyous atmosphere was now a scene of panic!

The consequences for Jack were heartbreaking. A few days later, he received the saddest news - he was out of job, fired like a rocket launch gone wrong. Suddenly, Jack found himself facing a new adventure, but this time, jobless on the streets. The flying elevator, once worth a dazzling \$900,000, now lay in ruins, a silent witness to the twist of fate.

In the aftermath of the chaos, Jack was left scratching his head, wondering what went wrong. It took a whopping 5 weeks for the mystery to straighten out. Searching through recorded videos of the event, he learned that Paul’s runaway balloon had sneakily snuck into the elevator from a big hole in the bottom, causing all the trouble. Imagine a naughty balloon causing such a disaster!

The day after, he went to the headquarter to explain his finding, but they kicked him out because they wanted to blame everything on him! Jack was roasted. Because he had no money and was almost broke, he tried to find a new job.

After a lot of searching, he decided to work in an amusement park, but not selling balloons for sure. Because he was good at engineering and passionate about safety, he started designing fun and safe roller-coasters. On the opening day of his first roller-coaster he had one request - no one with balloons around it.

Jack was soaring through his new career, and had found excitement in making fun for other people. But more importantly, he learned that the sad end of a career can lead to a thrilling new adventure!



Drawing of people by Anna Semchenko | Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

## ONE TUESDAY AFTERNOON

by Lena H., Iowa (Prompt B)

One Tuesday afternoon I was sitting at my desk in the lobby when the unthinkable happened. I was waiting for the elevator inspector when I heard a loud noise coming from out the back. I went out to see what it was but when I got there all I saw was a red balloon tied to a fence post. Before I had time to look around I heard the front doors open, so I went inside. When I got back inside I was surprised to see a scraggly dog with a blue suit, red tie, and a badge that said 'Mutt: Elevator Inspector' looking up at me. I knelt next to the dog and looked him over. He was thin with pointy ears. I stood up and headed toward my phone to call the animal shelter when Mutt grabbed my leg and started pulling me toward the elevator. It was clear Mutt wouldn't let go, so I went with them.

When we got there, Mutt pulled a mysterious looking key out of his suit pocket. I tried to get the key out of his mouth, but he growled and wouldn't let go. Mutt placed the key in a keyhole below the buttons for the different floors. The elevator doors closed, and I felt us start to go down.

When the doors opened I found myself on a floor I'd never been to before. It was a dark room with a damp smell. I was a little unsure, but Mutt jumped into the darkness, and I felt the need to follow him. I heard a bang coming from the corner of the room. I went to check it out, when I got there I saw the same red balloon I had seen outside. I took two steps closer, but then the balloon vanished into thin air. By now I was a little creeped out, but I wasn't ready to give up on this mystery. But before I had time to investigate I heard a woof coming from the elevator. It was time to go.

When I got back into the elevator I noticed Mutt had a black briefcase. I thought Mutt might take us to another floor, but instead he used his nose to open the briefcase and pulled out something

incredible. It was a wand. It was rainbow colored with a swirl on top. Mutt zapped himself with the wand and began to speak!

“Human, hear my voice. My real name is Uno. I am from a land of mythical creatures. I am here because I must gather three magical items to save my home. I already have the briefcase of power and the rainbow wand. The last one I need is the balloon of vanishment. Will you help me catch the balloon and save my home?”

“Yes,” I replied, very startled.

“The briefcase of power can contain the balloon of vanishment, but we have to catch the balloon first,” said Uno.

“How do we do that?” I asked.

“I have a plan,” Uno said, “I just need you to keep the balloon in one place long enough. My wand detects that the balloon is on the sixth floor now.” Uno pushed the button for the sixth floor.

When the doors opened I could see the ballon at the end of the hallway.

“Follow me,” Uno said. And we walked slowly toward the balloon.

I was about to take another step when Uno grabbed my leg and yanked it back.

“Be careful,” he said, “if you get too close the balloon will vanish.”

He ran to the elevator. When he returned he threw me the rainbow wand and ran back to the elevator. As he ran he shouted, “zap the balloon in exactly twenty seconds, I’ll be ready.”

I didn’t know what Uno was doing, but in my head I started counting. At 20 I pointed the wand at the balloon and ZAP! the balloon disappeared. I raced down the stairs to see what Uno had done.

When I got to the lobby Uno was sitting on his briefcase wagging his tail.

“We did it, my friend,” he said.

I handed him the rainbow wand back, and he opened what looked like some kind of portal right in the middle of the lobby.

“Please join me, he said, come and see my world.”

Uno jumped into the portal.

I wanted to know how he caught the balloon. I wanted to see his world. I had a lot of questions for that dog.

So I jumped right after him, ready for the new adventures ahead.

## Sofia

by Maureen F., Iowa (Prompt B)

Hello, my name is Sofia, and I want to tell you about my unusual day.

So, it all started at 8:30 a.m. this morning. I was walking to work as an elevator inspector at the Empire State Building in New York City, New York. When I got there I was greeted by a kindly desk clerk that guided me to the elevator. When I was checking to make sure that the mechanism worked the elevator doors shut!

It went up and down way too fast. Blinded by my fear, I hadn't noticed that there was a red balloon floating about the elevator. I didn't have time to think about it because then the elevator dinged, and it was time to go to the next elevator. When I stepped out I was somehow in ancient Greece! I ran back to the elevator to press a different button. When it dinged and opened I was a mermaid under the sea. I pressed another, and it opened to a beach. The next one I pressed led me to a Chinese New Year celebration in 1987!?! I pressed another button and thought a little about the red balloon. I saw magic dust, and I thought *What if the balloon made all of these things happen?*

The doors opened and I saw the balloon float away. I had to think fast, so I ran after the balloon into Lalaland. All I could see was candy and the balloon. I ran after it and followed it back into the elevator. I tried to grab it, but the second I touched it it popped and everything went back to normal. Then I realized no time had passed in New York City, New York.

**The Soap Cipher**  
by Anjana M., Iowa (Prompt A)

In the middle of a busy city lived Destiny, a mysterious fortune cookie writer with a ghostly ability to predict the future. Attached to her house is her small shop in a dimly lit alley. Destiny's fortune cookies were known for their accurate predictions. Lots of people came to her shop, hoping to discover their future. But nobody knew that Destiny had a secret that would lead her to a dangerous adventure.

One evening, an odd-looking man walked into Destiny's shop. He ordered a fortune cookie and then left the shop without saying a word. Destiny could feel that something strange was going on with the man. As she got back to writing more fortunes, an object caught her eye. A strange-looking bottle was on the counter. Tied to the bottle was a note that read, "Your fortunes have caught the attention of the ones who control the future. Beware!!". The hairs on Destiny's neck stood up as she read the ominous note. Confused and scared, she looked around the empty shop, feeling as if someone was watching her. She picked up the bottle with the mysterious blue liquid, trying to figure out what it was. She thought nothing of it until the same odd man came into the shop again a week later. This time, he approached her with anger. He threatened to shut her business down if she didn't cooperate with him, and left abruptly. Destiny was confused by what the man meant. As she searched for answers, she thought of the bottle and the note again. Did the note mean something? What was the bottle of liquid for?

Fueled by determination, she dove into figuring out the mystery of the strange blue liquid. Could it be soap? She didn't want to touch it, as she feared it could be poisonous. Then she remembered Alex, an old friend of hers with a penchant for puzzles and cryptography. She took the bottle and the note to Alex. As if it were obvious, Alex poured the liquid onto the note, and a new message appeared in fluorescent color that read, "Meet me by Mulberry Lane at 2:30 sharp on Wednesday." Destiny was awe-stuck. It was Wednesday yesterday, and she had missed the cryptic message. Now she understood why the man was angry.

Destiny felt uneasy thinking about what was coming at Mulberry Lane. Unfortunately, she couldn't predict her own future and did not know what to expect. To calm her down, Alex promised to come with her. They had about a week left until next Wednesday. Destiny wrote as many fortune cookies as she could, and Alex tried to make sense of the fortunes to get some clue about what lies ahead of them. Nothing caught their attention.

When Wednesday arrived, they went to Mulberry Lane. The mysterious man was waiting there and took them to a shaggy house. The house was full of old and mysterious objects and many bottles of blue dish soap. He might be writing lots of cryptic messages. Why would he need me? Destiny kept wondering. Then he asked Destiny to make fortunes about him. She made several fortunes, but nothing seemed to make the man happy. Finally, the man confessed that he didn't know who he really was and had forgotten his own identity. However, he has been having cryptic visions every day that a young boy is trapped. He wants to help the boy. He wants to



know who he was. Could it be his son? If so, where is he now? He had millions of questions swirling around in his mind. He showed Alex and Destiny all the messages that he had deciphered so far. Based on the messages, he made a picture of what the boy might look like and where he might be.

As soon as the man confessed, Destiny's face lit up. She knew exactly what she had to do. Not only can she predict the future, but she also has the ability to locate anything at any time. As soon as Destiny saw the drawing, she knew where to go. She pinpointed the place on the map; it was a mountainous area, and the three of them set out to find the boy. They drove for two days and finally got there. The place looked like it had recently rained and flooded. They looked all over the place to try to find the boy. Destiny led them to a place where rocks had fallen. As soon as they neared the place, they could hear a faint human groaning. They quickly dug through the rocks, and sure enough, the young boy was still alive. They carried him to their car and rushed him to the nearest hospital to get help.

As the three of them finally sat down to reflect on what had happened, they looked at the fortunes Destiny wrote: "Go where your dreams take you!"

THE END

## The Café

by Lydia A., Iowa (Prompt A)

It was around 2 AM when I reached my apartment, and my back was killing me. I yawned and counted my tips. 20 measly bucks for a whole 8 hour shift. Still, what do you expect when you work for some rundown Chinese 24 hour cafe? I rubbed my eyes. I had to get to bed so I could get what little sleep I could before my next shift.

I woke up at 5 AM and poured myself a coffee. I had to stay awake all day. Working two shifts hasn't been good for my sleep. I spotted a letter on my table and my heart sank. It was a letter from my landlord. I had been a little behind on the rent, and she was demanding payment. If I couldn't pay up I had to find somewhere else to stay. I shook my head. I would just have to ask for more work at the cafe. I walked through the steps of my routine like I always did and was out the door with 15 minutes to spare. On my way to the cafe I spotted a wealthy businessman getting into a sports car. I sighed. There was no way I would be able to afford that. Hopefully if I took on more hours at the cafe then I would be able to save a little.

I arrived at the cafe and saw Brenda. She gave me a wave and tossed me the shop keys.

"Hey Maya. How are you doing?" Her bright blond hair and sunny Southern accent made it hard not to like her.

I yawned, "I've been better."

She smiled sympathetically, "Those late nights have been hard on you, huh?"

I shrugged and half smiled. What could I say? Brenda was 9 years older than me and had been like a mother to me since I had started working here. I knew if I told her about the rent she would have quickly offered to help. I couldn't do that to her though. She had a hard enough time supporting herself. At least her new boyfriend had a car and let her use it.

She patted my shoulder, "You just tell me if you need anything. I've got to go now though. Can't be late to my new job."

I gasped and hugged her. She had been to an interview a week ago for a columnist position at the local newspaper. It seemed that she had gotten it. "You got the job?"

"Yep, I did. It has a much bigger salary, and the editor was very impressed by my writing! I know it's going to be hard alone here, but hey, you might get a promotion!"

I smiled but was confused. Why was she leaving so abruptly? It seemed very sudden and although I would miss her, this could be my chance to get more work. I waved goodbye and started working. The day flew by and as my shift came to a close I went up to Mrs. Wong to ask if I could get more hours.

"Mrs. Wong? Do you think I could take on more hours? I ... I need the work. Please." I hated to say it, but I needed the money more than I needed my pride.

She scowled up at me from the register. I knew she hated to be interrupted when she was doing something, but I had to ask her.

“You know that Brenda quit yesterday, right? You can take her job writing and making fortune cookies. Now go. Get back to work,” She turned back to the cash register and began counting money. I said a quick thank you and went into the back room where I would write the fortunes. I sat down and wrote a few basic sayings (“you will become rich”, “there is someone who wants to give you a gift”, etc). I kept that up for a few hours and Mrs. Wong came in to check on me.

“It’s time to go home now. Your shift is over,” She went into the coatroom to get her coat, and I started to clean up my station.

Suddenly, there was a crash. I heard a male voice call out “Where’s the money?”

I peered over the counter and saw Mrs. Wong was trapped in the entranceway by a man with a gun. I had to do something! I grabbed the closest thing to me, a bottle of dish soap. I quietly crept up behind the man and when he turned around I squirted him in the eyes with the soap. He screamed and dropped his gun. Mrs. Wong grabbed a pan and knocked him unconscious. I grabbed my phone and called 911.

“Are you alright?” I asked Mrs. Wong.

“I’m fine. He just scared me.” She then did something unexpected and hugged me. “Thank you. If you weren’t here, then I would have gotten robbed, or worse.”

I smiled with relief, but something seemed off. The man... he seemed familiar. Wait, was that Brenda’s boyfriend? I sighed.

“Are you okay?” Mrs. Wong asked me.

“I will be. I have to make a phone call first,” I said, pulling out my phone. I hated what I was about to do, but Brenda had a right to know... unless she already did know.

## Elevator Mess Up

by Emily H., Iowa (Prompt B)

Once upon a time, George Wilson, an elevator inspector, was at work. The people in this fairy tale don't live like you. Some are magical, but most don't know it. They figure out their powers by the powers randomly happening to them.

"We'd better go check that the elevator's balloons are still holding up the elevators," said George to his work partner, Bob.

"Good idea," agreed Bob, as they started to walk to the elevator shaft.

"You're going on vacation tomorrow, right?" Bob asked.

"Yes, Thank goodness" said George. "We're here, time to inspect the balloons!"

"I wonder how things worked to hold up elevators before there were balloons."

"Who knows!" George said. "They probably just used regular electricity." This balloon needs to be blown-up more, he thought, but he was so sleepy, because he didn't sleep well the day before. He didn't bother to fix it. "This balloon is fine," lied George.

"So are the rest of them," said Bob.

"Well that was easy!" said George.

When George got home, Judith, his wife, was fast asleep. Then he went into the room that his children, Mark and Olivia, shared, and kissed them both on their foreheads. As he was walking out, he had a vision about the elevator balloon he didn't fix. He saw the balloon deflate. Then he saw people stuck in the elevator, and one of the people's eyes turned red. He knew only evil people's eyes turn red. After that, George saw himself and Bob getting fired, and Bob yelling at him for being such a fool. Lastly, George saw himself, Judith, and his kids captured by the evil person. That was the end of his vision.

The next day, George's family teleported to Phoenix, Arizona, with the magic of their pet unicorn, Hazel.

"This is going to be a good vacation!" Mark said.

"We are going to miss school!" said Olivia!

"I'm getting a call, please excuse me," George said. It was Bob calling.

"Are you an idiot, or just lazy? 'Cause you and I just got fired," Bob scolded him. "You saw that the balloon you inspected was not pumped up completely, then you lied to me about it. Guess what happened next, the elevator crashed!"

"I'm really sorry, I—" George was cut off.

"I don't care about any excuses you have!" yelled Bob. "These are the last words I'm saying to you, so you'd better listen carefully. There was someone evil in the elevator, and he is going to go after you. He will find you."

Before George could ask him any questions, Bob hung up. George went into the other room, and was puzzled over how the evil person would get him. He went back into the room with his family.

“George, we decided to go to a museum,” said Judith.

“Sounds good,” George agreed.

They got into their car. Out of nowhere, the car locked.

“Ahhhh,” they all shrieked. Red eyes looked up from the back of the family’s station wagon. It was the same person that was from the elevator in George’s vision. George’s kids clung to their parents.

“I’ve got a lot of explaining to do,” George murmured.

“What do you need to explain?” asked Judith

“I was—” he started to say. Then, drowsily, he looked at the kidnapper in the family's car, who was now wearing a gas mask. The entire family, besides Olivia, drifted off to sleep.

“Oh my gosh, I’m immune to gasses. That’s my power! I need to be quiet,” Olivia thought. “There are the keys, and everybody thinks I’m snoozing. I need to take it from the guard, but how,” she pondered. She looked up at the guard, and saw that it wasn’t human. It was a robot. She realized she could take the keys without the robot noticing. “I doubt the robot feels anything, much less is trained to fight, ‘cause everyone should be sleeping,” she whispered to herself. Then she stole the keys, as planned.

When the family woke up, about 1 hour later, they were trapped. They were in a prison cell, with shackles on their arms and legs.

“How do we get out?” asked Mark.

Meanwhile George was having another vision. He saw guards in hall C, so he decided to watch out for that hall. He did that, because he thought he had the power of seeing the future when needed. Then he saw a few more halls to avoid, and his dream ended.

“I never fell asleep. I think gasses don’t work on me. That is my power. I got the keys from the robot that was carrying me.” Olivia said excitedly

“That’s amazing!” Judith said.

“Since we’re talking about powers right now, I think that I have visions of the future. Meaning that there are guards in hall A, C, F, and H,” George said.

“So many powers!” Judith said.

Olivia gave George the keys, and they escaped. The family avoided the halls that George saw were guarded, while George explained what happened. One hall that George didn’t see did have guards.

“What do we do, Dad?” asked Mark.

“There are two choices: fight or flight. I think if we fight, we have a better chance. Plus, there are only three guards. We don't run a lot, but we do family karate, so let's fight.” George decided.

They started to fight the guards. First George knocked out someone whose badge said Hally. Mark and Olivia teamed up against Kayla, while Judith fought Jack. When all of the guards were knocked out, the family escaped. Hazel was waiting for them, so she teleported them home. George was scolded by his family, for not reinflating the balloon. Then they lived happily ever after.

## Unfortunate Allergies

by Silas C., Iowa (Prompt B)

It started out a regular day for Ellie, the elevator inspector. Her schedule was very short, she only had one elevator to inspect then she could go home.

When she got to the elevator, she went over her checklist.

Lighting: check.

Safety guard: check.

Buttons for all floors: check.

Lighting type: incandescent.

Music: none.

Floor indicator: check.

Grip rails: check.

Number of floors: 10.

Finally, Ellie got to the part where she actually tested the elevator. She pressed buttons one through ten. All went fine. She put a check mark on the list for each floor. Now to test going down. Ellie pressed the down button, but instead of going down, the elevator started to swirl and bob! It started to dissolve around Ellie. Suddenly, all she could see was purple. And just as suddenly, she found herself standing in the back of a cave!

She started towards the entrance of the cave. When she exited it, she was in a field. She could see a village to her right, and a forest to her left, and more fields in front of her. As the village looked quite inviting, Ellie headed towards it. The sun was warm on her skin, and she could hear birds chirping and water gurgling somewhere. When she got closer to the village, she could hear children playing and chickens clucking. As the people of the village started to notice her, they shook her hand and offered her food and water.

Suddenly, a horn sounded somewhere in the village and all the townsfolk ran to their houses as fast as they could! Ellie had no idea what to do when she heard the flapping of large wings. Then a roar! As Ellie turned she saw a dragon flying right towards her! Mouth open, fangs glistening, the dragon let out a... yelp? Just then Ellie noticed that a child was standing at the village entrance, holding... a balloon?

“This is getting weirder and weirder,” thought Ellie.

The child thrust her balloon towards the dragon, “Get gone, scat!” she said.

“Ack! Fine, I’m going, I’m going. But I will be back in two days time! Mark my words!”

And with that, the dragon flew off towards the forest.

Now, Ellie was a kind person, and she couldn’t bear to leave all these people to face the dragon alone, so she started to think. And think. And think. Suddenly, an idea came to her. She asked the first person to walk past her if this village had a leader.

“Yes!” they said, “her name is...” they paused for dramatic effect, “Kyle. You can find her in her house down the road.” Ellie thanked the villager and went to meet this... Kyle.

She found Kyle in a modest house eating some soup. "Excuse me, can I come in Kyle?" said Ellie.

"Come in," replied Kyle.

"I have a plan to defeat, or at least ward, off the dragon," said Ellie.

"Tell me more," encouraged Kyle.

"Well, I was thinking, since it seems that the dragon might be allergic to latex, we could set up a bunch of balloons all around the village to ward him off."

"How do you know he's allergic to latex?"

"Just a hunch."

"Hmmm, fine, you can use the balloons in the cellar. We were planning on using them for a party, but this works too."

"Cool! We'll get started right away!"

And so, Ellie and the villagers strung up balloons all over the village. They worked long and hard and sacrificed every last balloon to the cause. Finally, the day came when the dragon was spotted on the horizon. The horn sounded, but almost no one went inside.

"This is the end for your puny little village!" growled the dragon, "I will burn it all down and-GAH! Why are there so many balloons around! Don't you all know I'm allergic to latex!?!?"

"We know, Mr. Dragon," replied Ellie, "so that's why you'll never, EVER harm this village again, understand?"

"Gah fine!" replied the dragon, and he flew off into the sunset.

That night, the villagers held a party (regardless of the balloon shortage) and Ellie was pronounced a hero of the village!

"We are so thankful for your help," said Kyle, "Even if you did use all our balloons to do it."

"The honor is mine," agreed Ellie, "It was my duty to help you."

The next morning, Ellie said her goodbyes and started back towards the cave. When she got to the entrance, she turned and looked back at the village. A smile spread across her face. She had fun here, and would never forget it. As she pressed the down button in the cave (the only elevator related thing there) she started to smile... then almost barfed as the cave began to swirl around her. When the movement had stopped, Ellie opened her eyes. She was back in the elevator, on the first floor. She exited and walked through the lobby of the building and as she glanced at the calendar on the front desk, she noticed that it was the same date she had left.

"Interesting," she thought. Then she checked the last box on her checklist: down button.



**Nevesiald**

by Evelyn I., Iowa (Prompt B)

Riley made a mad dash for the elevators that would take her up to Nevesiald, the network of islands floating above her city. As the Principal Aerostatic Stability Engineer, being on time was critical. She needed to get to Island Three as soon as possible, but the elevator that would take her there was leaving.

“Wait!” She called, picking up the pace. “Please!” Her heart sank as the doors shut and the glass walls of the elevator began to rise. Without a moment to waste, she turned on her heels and hurried over to the man at the help desk. “Excuse me, sir?”

“Oh, hello there!” The man greeted her happily. “What can I do for you today?”

“Well, I missed my ride up to Island Three, and I need another way to get there as fast as possible. It’s an emergency,” she said.

Nodding, the man tapped a few buttons on a tablet. He scribbled something down on a piece of paper. He looked back up at Riley and handed her the paper, smiling. “Looks like you can take Elevator Five. These are directions.”

“Thank you.” Riley turned away, read the directions, and set off.

When she found Elevator Five, there was no one on or around the elevator, and the doors were wide open. She cautiously stepped inside, the doors slid closed, and the elevator began its ascent.

Usually, the elevators were packed and she couldn’t see out of the windows. This was different. The city below glittered in the early-morning sunlight and the sky was a pleasant light blue. Riley took in the view and felt like she was flying, even though she was encased in a floating glass box.

The elevator lurched to a stop. Riley panicked. She was suspended midair. There was no button she could press to call for help. She was going to be even more late for work. She sat down, not knowing what to do.

A few moments passed and Riley caught a glimpse of something shiny and red. As it got closer, she realized that it was a balloon. Holding onto the string of the balloon was a man with a briefcase. The balloon and the man drifted closer.

Riley watched as the man landed on top of the elevator. What was he doing? The man waved at Riley through the glass. Riley hesitated, but waved back. The man bent down and tapped the glass roof. He then pulled part of it upwards like a trapdoor.

“Hi! Are you alright?” The man asked her. He dropped down through the new opening and landed right next to Riley.

“Y-yes,” she stammered. “I’m fine. What’s going on?”

“Just some technical difficulties. I’ll have it fixed in a jiffy.” The man tugged the balloon down until it was eye level. “Would you hold this for me?” He handed the balloon to Riley and pulled a pin out of his pocket.

Before she knew what was happening, the man popped the balloon and a small marble dropped into his hand. “There we are,” the man said, plucking the marble out of his palm and examining it. “I was wondering where this went.”

“Who are you?” Riley blurted.

“Me?” The man looked at her. “I’m the elevator inspector. It’s my job to make sure that the elevators are working properly.” He paused. “Clearly, I didn’t do it quite right or we wouldn’t be here. Now it’s my responsibility to sort you out of this mess.”

The inspector took the limp remains of the balloon out of Riley’s hand and handed her the marble. “Eat that,” he told her. “It’ll help you breathe.”

“What do you mean, help me breathe?”

“Just trust me.” Begrudgingly, Riley put the marble in her mouth. Expecting a hard bite, the marble dissolved like medicine in between her teeth.

The inspector pulled another balloon out of his pocket and blew it up. “Ready?”

“Ready for what?” Riley asked, puzzled.

“I can’t fix the elevator while it’s in the sky, so I have to get you out a different way. Some other people will take the elevator back to the ground.”

“How are we going to get out of here?”

“Same way I got here,” the man said, smiling. “This balloon.”

He helped Riley climb out of the elevator and onto the roof. The wind was whistling in her ears, and her legs were shaking.

The man noticed how frightened she was and grabbed her elbow. “It’s okay,” he told her. “I promise you can do this. Just hold on to the string.”

Riley, too scared to think straight, did what he said. Her eyes widened as her whole body dangled in the air and the only thing keeping her from free falling to the ground was the balloon. She clenched the balloon string tighter as it drifted upwards. Riley was in awe as they floated to Island 3 and she and the balloon inspector landed. “Thank you,” she said, letting go of the balloon. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she felt that something was off. The island was tilting, and she had to fight gravity as not to fall.

“Of course,” he replied, flying off.

“Wait!” She cried out. It was too late. The man was gone.

Riley suddenly felt a tap on her shoulder. She whirled around to see one of her coworkers.

"Riley, thank goodness you're here!" the coworker exclaimed, relief washing over their face. "We're facing a crisis. Island Three is losing altitude at an alarming rate. We need your expertise immediately!"

Riley's mind snapped back to her responsibilities. The thrill of her aerial adventure faded as she confronted the gravity of the situation. The stability of an entire island, the lives of its inhabitants, all depended on her swift action.

## The Creatures' Elevator

by Clara U., Iowa (Prompt B)

I race across the jungle floor, leaping over tree roots and dodging the constant looming boulders. Branches and twigs snag in my fur, which is frustrating and painful but I am undeterred. My breathing is short and heavy, and my paws burn. Spotting the entrance, I squeeze my long, lithe body into an opening beneath the tree roots and pop out on the other side.

I am faced with a ginormous clearing, lit by the afternoon sun. The warmth of it is in stark contrast to the rest of the forest, which is shaded in gray by the trees. Above, the sky is clear and the clouds white. But it is what is inside that gives me the most thrill. Hundreds of creatures roam about, the likes of which are everything you could ever imagine plus more. All the creatures that you know as real, all that are fantasized in myths, and all that you have never even fathomed yet. All, minus one.

When I can finally breathe again, it is short and fast and can never seem to fill my lungs. Some of the creatures stop and stare at me in my unruly state. Across the green grass bounds a large, orange orangutan, dressed in guard attire. He holds his weapon, a long spear, out at me with a furious expression and barks, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

I gulp and gather my wits. "Humans." I take a breath. "Humans at the gate."

"Alright now, let us proceed." The speaker is a giant dragon dressed in the finest clothes and adornments our world provides, and the ruler of our kingdom. We are in his throne room, the walls finely decorated, the carpet rich. Two guards stand at his side and one by mine.

"So, to lay everything out," he says in a deep, booming voice. "You say that there are humans at the gate. They have not yet entered our world, but the threat is imminent. You do realize that this could mean peril to us all, leopard? This kingdom has remained untouched by the hand of man for more centuries than anyone can remember. Should we be discovered, life as we know it would end." He looks down on me. The room is silent.

"Yes," I say, but my mouth is dry and it comes out like a whisper. I clear my throat and say again, "Yes, I do. And my name is Fletch, not leopard." I draw in a breath and the room gets colder. I stutter to apologize.

"I- I- I'm sorry, your Majesty, I did not mean any disrespect-" he silences me with a raised hand. I quiver on the cold stone floor, in a crouch with my tail around my paws and ears flat back. After a moment, he laughs. I blink rapidly in confusion.

"Ah, I like your spirit, Fletch. Now, continue and tell me what you know." He says, shaking his head while smiling.

I glance warily around, unsure. The guards at his side nod.

"Okay, so, I was on my regular guard duty at the gate." I stop, thinking. He raises his eyebrows for me to continue. "Watching the cams, I saw two humans enter the library. They talked to the librarian when I heard they're elevator inspectors." His brow furrows in unsettlement. "I know that sooner or later, they'll get into the elevator and poke around and come up here and discover us and-"

"Whoa, whoa, there, calm down, don't get all worked up," he says. I realize I was ranting. I nod, numb with fear. He sits in silence for a while, considering.

"I think," he proclaims loudly, "I think that we should go for ourselves and look into what is going on, discover more and see what we can do."

"But, your Majesty, it is too risky," the guard protests.

"Nonsense. Bring security, if you so wish. But we leave at once."

We stand in silence at the portal between worlds. The king brought five guards and two of his council, so although we moved at a fast clip it was slower than I had traveled earlier. However, my breathing is still short as I gaze upon the elevator. Really, it looks like any other elevator you might see,

just the knowledge of its capabilities and the fact it stood alone in the middle of a shady jungle filled one with awe. Oh, and one of its quirks, a balloon attached to the top that would pop if someone were to be riding the elevator into our world.

The balloon pops.

My heart nearly stops, and I'm sure everyone else's does. The guards move in front of the King, shielding him. I took a step back.

The elevator dings, the doors open, and I squeeze my eyes shut. But I almost immediately open them again in surprise to the sound of quiet sobbing that comes out of the elevator.

What I see surprises me; a young, female human is leaning against the side of the elevator, head in her hands. I see a label on her chest marking her as the elevator inspector, but she is most certainly not what I expected. After a moment, she lifts her head, catches sight of us, and her eyes go wide.

"Wha- what are you? Where am I?" she stutters.

"You're in our world now, a different one than your own." the king speaks. He pauses, looks at her tearstained face, considering her state, and asks gently, "Are you happy with your life right now?"

She appears taken aback by the question, then after a moment of thinking shakes her head.

"If you were given the option to leave your world behind right now, would you take it? Know you'd never be able to return," he inquires. I smile to myself. Perfect.

After a moment of slight hesitation, when I see years of trauma and sadness and distress flash across her face, she nods and says, "Yes."

**Legere**

by David D., Iowa (Prompt B)

The boy in the elevator held his red balloon as it bumped gently against the ceiling. He was nine years old, and was a little small for his age. He was not accompanied by a parent. Perhaps that was a good thing, because any parent would have been panicking after the elevator had been stuck for five minutes. The boy wasn't.

"Encountering technical difficulties," said the elevator. "Would you like to signal for help?"

"No, thank you." the boy said, clutching his balloon tighter.

"This issue may take a significant amount of time to resolve." argued the elevator. "Signaling for help could help you reach your destination quicker."

"No," replied the boy.

Silence.

The boy leaned against the wall and gazed up at the balloon. It was a brilliant shade of red, dampened slightly by the coat of dust that had stuck to it. It was by far the brightest color he had ever seen. Everything else was so gray.

He looked over at the elevator touchscreen. There was a gray error message with tiny words on it.

The boy didn't know how to read.

"Elevator," asked the boy, "what does the screen say?"

"You are not authorized to know." the elevator said.

"Why?"

The elevator was silent. The boy didn't think the elevator was going to tell him why not.

The boy watched the gray digital clock on the screen for a while. It was 12:48. It had been stuck at 12:48 for a while.

Then he looked back at this red balloon. He pulled it down to his level and brushed off some of the dust. It was important, because his grandfather had given it to him.

His grandfather knew how to read.

"Elevator?"

"What is your question?" the elevator said.

"Why can't I learn to read?"

There was silence for a moment. "You have no reason to learn to read."

"My grandfather said that reading can change the world."

"You are not authorized to learn to read." the elevator said.

The boy didn't think the elevator had heard him. He cleared his throat and said a bit louder, "My grandfather –"

Suddenly, there was a lurch that knocked the boy off of his feet. The balloon bounced on the ceiling. The entire elevator vibrated violently.

“Inspection complete.” said the elevator in a monotonous tone. “All severe issues have been addressed. Commencing descent.”

The elevator began sliding downwards.

Minutes ticked away. There was an odd sound from outside the elevator – a kind of howling noise. The boy had never heard anything like it before.

“Elevator, what’s that noise?” the boy said.

The elevator was silent for a moment, then said, “No unusual audio is detected.”

“Elevator? What year is it?”

The elevator’s touchscreen briefly flashed a number. “It is now 60 years after the Final Enlightenment.”

“What’s the Final Enlightenment?”

“The day written ignorance was banned.”

The boy didn’t understand, but he remained silent. He looked back at the digital clock on the screen. The digits were changing as he looked. First it was 9:00. Then it was 4:37. Then the numbers started changing so fast that the boy couldn’t even keep track.

The boy pulled the balloon down to his level and grasped it with both hands. He reviewed the plan in his mind. His grandfather had told him: once he got to the bottom floor, pop the balloon, give his grandmother the letter inside, enter the elevator again. His grandfather said this would change things.

The howling was getting louder. The elevator seemed to be descending faster and faster.

“Elevator?” the boy shouted over the noise. “What year is it?”

“IT IS NOW 38 –” static – “37 YEARS AFTER THE FINAL ENLIGHTENMENT,” the elevator said with increased volume.

The howling was getting deafening. The elevator wasn’t sliding anymore – it was falling. The boy let go of his balloon, hugged his knees, and squeezed his eyes shut.

It felt like hours. But then, all of a sudden, it stopped.

The boy opened his eyes.

“Elevator? What year is it?”

“It is the year 2099.” said the elevator. And the doors rattled open.

The boy was facing a long, dark, metal-clad hallway. At the very end of it was a metal door with an actual doorknob. His grandfather had told him about doorknobs.

The boy grabbed his balloon and walked out. The heavy elevator doors closed smoothly behind him.

All was silent except for the boy's footsteps echoing throughout the corridor. But then he could hear hushed voices from behind the door. The people inside seemed to be discussing whether or not to do something. The boy heard the word "books" multiple times.

And he reached the door. A pin in his hand. He lifted it to the balloon and touched the tip of it to the red rubber.

The bang was deafening in the silence, and the boy jumped and felt a brief stab of adrenaline. The voices stopped abruptly, and for one horrible moment everything was silent.

The boy took off. The hallway seemed longer than it had been when he first entered it. He tripped on his own feet, nearly fell, kept balance, ran, slammed his hand on the UP arrow, and waited.

The doors rattled open. The boy shoved himself in the instant the separation would allow. But at the same time the door at the other end of the hall rustily creaked open, as if it hadn't been used for a long time.

The great metal barriers began to close. The boy watched as a tall woman who looked vaguely familiar entered the hallway, staring at him. She called out his father's name in a questioning tone.

Then the elevator doors shut.

"Elevator?"

"What is the question?"

The boy hesitated, then asked, "What was written on the slip of paper?"

"The slip of paper had these words written on it: 'Don't destroy the books.' And a signature."

And the boy thought: Maybe things have changed, after all.



**Oliver and the Blue Balloon**

by Victoria B., Nebraska (Prompt B)

Oliver LaFoe stepped into the elevator of his New York City apartment building. Oliver's left hand clutched his mother's, and his right hand was wrapped around the string of a slightly deflated blue balloon.

Oliver's mother pressed her manicured finger to the 12 button on the elevator's art deco panel. Just as the doors were sliding shut, a man wearing a top hat and holding a briefcase rushed towards the elevator.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, sliding between the doors just before they closed. As the man caught his breath, Oliver took in his impeccable three-piece suit, graying handlebar mustache, and circular glasses.

"Which floor?" Mrs. LaFoe asked politely.

The man peered at the button panel. "Oh, twelve will do," he said cheerily. "In fact, twelve is superb!" He turned to Oliver and his mother. "My name is Arthur Benson. I'm the elevator inspector, you see. I've found that twelve is always the best floor on which to inspect."

Oliver's mother gave the man a curious look, but she was too polite not to follow up his introduction. "I'm Whitney LaFoe, and this is my son, Oliver."

"Lovely to meet you both," Mr. Benson said, tipping his top hat at them. He smiled at the sight of Oliver's balloon. "Where did you get that balloon, my boy?"

"It's my birthday," Oliver said quietly.

"Ollie just turned seven," his mother added.

"Happy birthday!" Mr. Benson beamed. His brown eyes twinkled. "Hold on to that balloon, Oliver. It may serve you well."

The elevator shuddered to a stop, and the doors dinged and slid open.

"Before you go," Mr. Benson said, placing his briefcase on the floor, "would you like to see a little bit about how the elevator works?" He opened the briefcase, and a workbench made of polished wood sprung out.

Mrs. LaFoe's mouth fell open. It should have been impossible for something like that to fit in a briefcase that size.

"Can I see, mama?" Oliver begged. "Please?"

His mother, still shocked by the fantastical workbench, managed to utter her approval.

A smile spread across Mr. Benson's face, crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Marvelous!"

He opened a drawer on the workbench and pulled out three golden gears and a screwdriver. He then turned to the elevator's button panel, humming and twirling his mustache.

"Mr. Benson!" Oliver exclaimed. His blue eyes were wide as he stared at the golden gears, which were floating above the workbench. "Your gears!"

"Oh, my apologies," Mr. Benson said, grabbing the gears and placing them back on the workbench. "They tend to do that." He shook a finger at the gears. "Stay right there."

Oliver's mother rubbed her eyes. She had to be hallucinating.

But Oliver was grinning as he watched Mr. Benson unscrew the button panel and poke around the mechanisms. "Come see, Oliver," Mr. Benson called, and Oliver happily bounded over to him. "The elevator is working properly, but I think it's missing a certain... magic touch. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes," Oliver said eagerly. "What's the magic touch?"

"These gears, of course," Mr. Benson said, picking up the golden gears. Even in the low light of the elevator, they had a magical gleam. Mr. Benson carefully situated the gears behind the button panel, then replaced the panel itself.

"That is perfect," he said happily. He closed up his briefcase, and the workbench easily shrunk inside. "What do you say we take it for a test ride?" He looked to Mrs. LaFoe, who, in turn, looked to Oliver.

"Yes!" Oliver exclaimed.

"Well," his mother said. She seemed to still be in shock. "Ollie, if you want to, I don't see why not."

"Wonderful!" Mr. Benson grinned. He turned to the button panel, which had sprouted a shimmering gold button in the shape of a star. "Before we go, I need you to do one thing, Oliver."

Oliver looked up at him curiously. "What?"

Mr. Benson leaned down and whispered, "Hold your balloon as tight as you can and make a wish."

Oliver complied, his fingers tightening around the string of the balloon. He squeezed his eyes shut and thought hard about what he wanted to wish.

"I've decided my wish!" he declared, his eyes flying open.

"Well then, it's time to wish it, my boy!" Mr. Benson exclaimed.

Oliver closed his eyes again. *I wish for something magical*, he thought.

“Oliver, have you wished your wish?” Mr. Benson asked. Oliver opened his eyes and nodded eagerly. With that same twinkle in his eyes, Mr. Benson pressed the star-shaped button. “Hold onto your hats!”

The elevator rocketed to the sky. Mrs. LaFoe screeched. The floor counter above the door did a full 360 and kept spinning as they shot upwards, faster than any elevator should have been able to travel.

Oliver grinned. Suddenly, the elevator soared out of the top of the apartment building and coasted to a stop. Mr. Benson pressed another button, and the metal edges of the elevator melted away into glass.

Oliver ran up to the glass and pressed his tiny hands against it. They were floating!  
Above New York City!

“This is amazing,” Oliver breathed. He could see people, tiny as ants, dotting the streets below. The elevator glided above glimmering skyscrapers, the green expanse of Central Park, the endless blue sky— this was definitely magical.

“Mama, isn’t this the best birthday ever?” Oliver exclaimed, turning to look at his mother. She was white as a sheet and clutching the railing of the elevator.

“Don’t you worry, Mrs. LaFoe,” Mr. Benson said. “We can start heading down.” He pressed the star-shaped button, and the elevator drifted back toward their apartment building.

Oliver looked down at New York City in all its majesty. “Thank you, Mr. Benson!” he said.

“Of course,” the eccentric elevator inspector said cordially, tipping his top hat again. Just before the elevator sunk back into the shaft of the apartment building, he added, “Happy birthday, my boy.”

Oliver smiled and held his blue balloon tight.

## Fortune Favors No One

by Elizabeth R., Iowa (Prompt A)

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The only thing that could have made my bad mood any worse would have been Jenny opening her mouth. So of course she had to go and do just that.

"I think it's really nice of Becca to have dinner with Mrs. Walker. It's too bad that I'm sick and can't go," my sister says to my gullible mother. Mom smiles at Jenny and continues stirring the chicken noodle soup she is making for Jenny, who is lying on the couch. The one time my mother accepts Mrs. Walker's weekly invitation to dinner, Jenny just so happens to come down with a stomach bug, even though she was perfectly fine going to school earlier in the day. Jenny smiles an evil smile at me. I try not to strangle the conniving monster I call Sister.

Jenny coughs the fakest cough I have ever heard. I shove my arms through the coat of my jacket, the dark cloud that is my mood grows ever larger and ever darker. I yank the door open, step into the chilly autumn air, and trudge to Mrs. Walker's house. I climb Mrs. Walker's porch steps and ring her doorbell. I wait for about thirty seconds before the horrid old woman opens the door.

"Hello, Rebecca," she says, too-wide smile still on her face. "Thank you for eating dinner with me tonight. I hope you like Chinese."

I smile stiffly. "Hello, Mrs. Walker. Call me Becca." I take off my coat and shoes. She leads me to her dining room where the table is laid with noodles, rice, and orange chicken. There is also a small plate with two fortune cookies. Everything smells delicious, so I sit down and start filling my plate with food. Mrs. Walker follows my lead and we eat in silence. The two of us finish eating and clear everything off the table except for the fortune cookies, bringing the dishes to the sink to wash them. The dish soap forms great white bubbles in the warm water.

Ten more minutes of blissful quiet pass. I finish the dishes, rinsing my hands of the grime and dish soap. Then Mrs. Walker says, "I don't know if you know this, Rebecca, but my late husband was Chinese. He immigrated here and opened a restaurant. That's how we met. The fortune cookie I got that night said, 'Love will be found where you least expected it.' And it was. As it turns out, he was the one who would make the cookies and hand-write the fortunes in them." She laughs a bit, lost in memory. "After we married, he would make the cookies and I would write the fortunes to go inside of them."

I nod and say, "That's nice, Mrs. Walker. Thank you for the meal, but I have homework tonight, so I should probably head home."

"I must insist that you eat a fortune cookie before you leave," she says.

"Thanks, but I think I'll take the cookie to go—"

"Don't be silly. Fortune cookies are meant to be savored. Stay and eat it here."

I sigh and roll my eyes internally, but I do what the old bat wants and grab a cookie. I break it open and read the fortune.

"Make sure you eat the cookie," Mrs. Walker says. For once in my life I put up no argument and shove the cookie in my mouth, then head towards the door. I manage to put on my shoes and coat when the old hag asks, "What did your fortune say?"

I sigh. "It says, 'Good luck always finds its way to good people.'"

She nods. "And the back?"

The back? I flip it over and frown in confusion. "There's only one word—"

I break off. Mrs. Walker is nowhere in sight. My heart starts to race, fear stirring in my chest. I reach behind me for the doorknob but it won't turn. I face the door, trying to open it, but to no avail. I slowly turn back to Mrs. Walker's living room and step away from the door to walk farther into Mrs. Walker's house. I call out, voice shaking, "Hello? Mrs. Walker—"

"Run," a voice hisses in my ear. When I turn to look, no one is there, but there is a cracked-open door. Grabbing the doorknob, I pull it open, and I can see that there are stairs leading down to the basement. I make my way down the creaky steps. At the bottom, I can see a pull-string light about twenty feet in front of me. I hurry to it and pull the string. The light does not turn on.

I hear something scuffling in the darkness. I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart. The door leading to the basement slams shut, cutting off my only light source. My heart stops at the sound of the slam. Black surrounds me, so dark my eyes cannot adjust.

A prickling sensation forms on the back of my neck. Then I hear a rasping breath coming from behind me. I spin around, my throat tightening. The breathing stops, but in its stead I see eyes. Eyes staring directly into my own. Fear sits heavy in my stomach, squeezing my stampeding heart. I want to vomit.

I take a step back and the thing staring at me smiles an all-too-familiar, all-too-wide, grin. The tears leak down my cheeks. I take another step back before turning and sprinting for the stairs. I can see the outline of the staircase when something slams into me, knocking me to the ground. My head hits the cement. I see a slip of crumpled white paper flutter out of my hand. The fortune. I had forgotten it was in my hand.

I can feel consciousness slipping away. The rasping breathing returns.

The last thing I see is the back of the fortune with its single word: Run.

## Hidden Misfortune

by Vienna R., Iowa (Prompt A)

In my dimly lit apartment, with shadows dancing on the walls, I sat hunched over my computer in front of a table cluttered with piles of blank paper slips. The sweet smell of fortune cookies wafted around me from the kitchen, comforting and nostalgic. I sighed as I tapped my pinky on the enter key, printing my last batch of messages.

The miniature printer whirred and clicked, spitting out a train of tiny paper messages onto my desk.

A loud bang from the hallway interrupted the soft jazz I had on, my normal work music, and the sudden noise nearly knocked me out of my chair. I walked briskly towards the door, opening it and peering outside, but the hallway was vacant. *Probably someone's door*, I thought to myself, taking one last look before I shut and locked the door behind me.

As soon as I heard the loud beeping of my oven timer, I scooped up the pile of paper and raced into the kitchen. As I pulled the oven door open, a wave of hot, fortune cookie-scented air hit my face, nearly knocking me off balance. I dropped the papers onto the stove, slipped on a pair of worn oven mitts, and slid the tray of perfectly baked circles out and onto the counter, sitting on the marble next to stacks of baking sheets and an assortment of cleaning supplies.

*I have to be quick and precise*, I thought to myself, grabbing a plate from the cabinet to fold the cookies on. I grabbed a cookie from the pan, the malleable surface warming my fingertips, and placed a message in the middle of the cookie, making sure the side with lucky numbers was facing up. I folded it in half, then made the signature shape, my message neatly tucked inside. As I made my way through the rest of the cookies on the tray, I found my rhythm, neatly folding the cookies and leaving them to cool. I smiled to myself as I placed the last fortune cookie, always the hardest to fold, back onto the tray with the rest of the finished cookies. They were perfect, and my work for the day was almost done.

After I had packaged the cookies into small bundles, complete with a bright red ribbon tying their bags shut, I left them by my apartment door, waiting to be taken to their new home. I promenaded back into the kitchen, feeling accomplished, but my mood took a hit as I saw the mess that needed to be cleaned up. Extra messages I had printed just in case littered the countertop by the oven, and a stack of

mixing bowls from throughout the day sat by the sink, the leftover batter dripping from the edges taunting me. I sighed, ready to get back to work for the last time.

As I drizzled dish soap onto a used mixing bowl, I grabbed a sponge from the side of the sink, scrubbing away the last of the fortune cookie batter from the sides of the bowl. One particularly aggressive scrub launched soapy water out of the bowl and onto the counter, where my unsuspecting fortunes lay. A large sud of soapy water landed on the mess of paper slips, and I cursed under my breath. *Another waste of paper*, I thought to myself, shaking my head. I dropped my mixing bowl into the sink and dried my hands on my favorite floral dish rag, I noticed something strange. The wet spot on the fortune closest to me was beginning to change color as the dish soap and water soaked into the paper. I grabbed the paper quickly, examining it more carefully. *I must be seeing things*, I thought to myself. But, sure enough, the limp paper had revealed text beneath what I had printed. Underneath the lucky numbers 3, 7, 14, and 29, a new message appeared. *'I am watching you,'* it read.

I dropped the paper back on the counter and looked around me. I rubbed my eyes a little too aggressively and shook my hands out, trying to ground myself. Then, I took one more look at the paper, hoping that what I had seen was gone. It was not. I rushed out of the kitchen and back to my desk, nearly slipping in a puddle of dish-soapy water. I scrolled through the documents I had used to print my messages, searching for the words on the paper. I muttered them under my breath as I read and read, but nothing came up. *There must be some logical explanation*, I thought to myself, rummaging through my brain for anything at all that could explain the message. Coming up empty, I sprinted back to the kitchen one last time to check on the message. The water had begun to dry, leaving a wrinkled water stain on the paper, and the message beneath had become more faint.

Suddenly, I heard banging on my door. I virtually jumped out of my skin at the sound, and I covered my mouth to hold in a yelp. I put the mysterious paper into my apron pocket and tiptoed my way toward the door, cautiously moving closer to the peephole. I hesitantly put my eye to the glass and, to my surprise, saw one of my most regular customers. I let out a massive sigh, letting go of the tension in my shoulders and neck. I turned the lock on the door, listening for a satisfying click, then swung it open.

The hallway was completely empty. I felt my body freeze up, my eyes widening in confusion. I pulled the message out of my apron pocket, a bad feeling washing over me. The message beneath the

lucky numbers had nearly faded, but as I flipped the paper over, I found a second message hidden beneath my own.

*'I found you.'*



## The Cookie Crumbles

by Susan Israel, Connecticut (Prompt A)

*The end is near.*

“Is this some kind of a joke? Who puts this kind of stuff in a fortune cookie?” Annalise crumbled the slip of paper in her fist and rose from her chair. Her complexion almost matched her bulky scarlet turtleneck sweater. “Where’s the waiter? Where’s the maître d’?”

“Annalise, calm down,” her best friend Margot patted her arm, but to Annalise even this tender gesture of friendship felt like an assault by a killer bee. She shrugged her off.

“Connor said I wouldn’t live to see an alimony check from him and now *this*? This is a threat! I want to see the maître d’. I want to call the police.”

“Annalise, it’s only a cookie! They make loads of them in some factory in China. Calm down.” Margot held up her near empty glass. “Have some more wine.”

“I’m driving.”

“I’ll drive you home. Just...sit and take a sip and relax” She filled Annalise’s glass. “We’re here to celebrate you being rid of that bozo, remember? Just calm down. And lock the door after I drop you off.”

“What did your fortune say?”

Margot looked down at her own slip of paper. *Be wary of false friends.* “I don’t know what happened to it, it’s all smeared,” she said, stuffing it in her pocket. “You can’t take these things seriously. I’ve got the check. Let’s go.”

Annalise felt a little woozy when she got out of Margot's Prius. "Are you okay? Do you want me to help get you inside?"

"No...well, maybe yes."

Margot smiled and turned off the ignition. She followed Annalise up the brick walkway and stepped aside as she turned the key in the lock. The warmth of the foyer enveloped them as they stepped inside. Annalise turned her back to Margot to slip off her nubby wool coat and it was all the time Margot needed to pull the Beretta Bobcat out of her Prada bag and shoot Annalise in the chest. She didn't wait to see blood. "The end is here," she whispered, punching in Connor's number on her iPhone X. "Done deal," she said. "Nobody saw us go in. I'm out, You're free." She licked her lips. "Very creative with the cookie fortunes, dear. You really got her rattled."

"What'd you do with my gun?"

"It's right here, sweetheart. Come and get it."

"No, you better come here. To the dock. We'll sail away. Don't let anyone see you, for Christ's sake. We'll be long gone before anyone finds that wretch."

"On my way, darling," Margot paused at the mirror to check her hair. "What are friends for?"

He was waiting for her on the deck, all gorgeous 6'2' of him, his Florida suntan a glorious relief in the midst of February, and Margot ran to him. His arms enveloped her but she felt the tension built up in him. "The gun?"

"In my pocketbook."

“Give it to me,” he let her go and put out his right hand.

She handed over the Beretta and he caressed it like it was a precious gem and then aimed it at her head. “I can’t leave behind any mistakes,” he said, pulling the trigger. Margot fell back into cold Raritan Bay, sending ripples out in every direction. “Now,” Connor said to the waves. “Now it’s over.” And then the police cars roared up to the dock, lights flashing.

Annalise’s eyes fluttered open. The Kevlar saved her. Margot couldn’t have guessed that she was wearing bulletproof protection. Annalise would have bet that it would be Connor doing the shooting, but when she saw Margot switching the cookies on the waiter’s tray, she knew she had to be on guard. She knew Connor was catting around, but with her *supposed best friend?*

The impact from the bullet had only caused a bruise. Her heart would easily recover from that. She pulled out her phone and punched in 911 and reported where the police could likely find two-timing Connor and the woman who tried to kill her, a description of Margot’s car, all the particulars they wanted to know. She noticed in the mirror that when she fell back, she cut her cheek and then that there was a streak of blood on the Persian carpet. She went to the kitchen and poured some dish soap on a sponge and scrubbed it out while waiting for the first squad cars to show up.

#

## A Novel Idea

by Amy Grinna, Iowa (Prompt A)

The howling wind swept the snow into a deep drift across Ben's front door. Winter had arrived with little warning, and it looked like it could be days before the roads would be drivable. Seclusion suited him. Starvation did not.

Ben opened his fridge and took inventory. A half empty quart of milk, past its expiration. Two eggs. A leftover carton of takeout Chinese. An assorted mix of condiments. One sad looking lime and what remained of a six pack of Corona. He grabbed a bottle, took a chance on a sliver of lime, and plopped soundly on his sofa, disrupting Gertrude's nap in the process. Gertrude slowly shifted her head, giving him a sideways glance and curled her long tail around her for warmth.

Ben had claimed this remote mountain cabin sight unseen. It had seemed the perfect spot to jump start his stalled novel. Sure, he made ends meet with some freelance work, but he doubted the sappy fortunes he personalized for wedding cookie favors would win him a Pulitzer. His first few chapters had won favor with his publisher but the deadline for the rest of the book was just twelve short weeks away.

He set his beer on the coffee table, leaned over his laptop, and read back his last few paragraphs.

Kyla stepped out of the steam filled shower trying to shake the nightmare she was living. If she could rewind the clock back to that day she'd said yes to a coffee. A coffee with Derek, her now stalker. Charming, cunning, mentally unstable Derek. Her life transformed from carefree to frightful all because of a flipping coffee!

The last weeks had been filled with looking over her shoulder and sleeping on friends' couches. She'd finally worked up the courage to return to her place, but she could not escape the sense that she was not alone.

She shivered as she wrapped her hair in a towel and turned to see words revealed in the condensation covered mirror... I SEE YOU... Kyla cries out and sinks to the floor. There is no one there to help her.

Hmm, Derek thought Ben. Who was Derek? What made him so obsessed with Kyla?

She had an innocence that mesmerized him from that very first moment. So playful. So joyful. So very, very

trusting. He first noticed her weeks earlier, unlocking her bike from the rack near the entrance to Walter's Park in that small mountain town. Fresh from the farmer's market with a small pumpkin and large bouquet of sunflowers. He watched from the café window across the street as she juggled the items, tucking them into her bicycle basket then pedaling away.

He followed her. Took note of her route home and her route to work. Watched as she met her girlfriends for drinks. Followed her to yoga class and the grocery store.

The next Saturday, he was waiting by the park entrance. Said he was new in town. How nice. Asked if she could point him to the vendor with the best eggs. She could. She was headed there too. Why, he should join her. He did. The overcast sky and the crisp fall air surrounded them. He suggested a coffee. She said yes. And so, it began.

Kyla wasn't his first obsession and likely not his last. He liked them innocent yet apt to put up a bit of a fight. He enjoyed the fight, then the resigned look of panic in their eyes when they knew he was the one who controlled their destiny.

Gertrude, now awake and interested in some attention, jumps to the coffee table, positioning herself between Ben and his laptop. Ben, still deep in thought, absentmindedly pushes her aside. Undeterred, the cat jumps to the floor, weaving between his ankles, purring loudly.

Ben goes to the kitchen to retrieve Gertrude's food. He opens the cabinet under the sink, grabbing the food and upsetting the dish soap then stops when he sees her standing in the hall. Hair still damp. Hands and feet bound with a resigned look of panic in her eyes. "Kyla", he said, "I'm so happy you could join me."

## **Adaptable Nature**

by Corrie Brase, Iowa (Prompt B)

Pixies were never meant to live in cities. They weren't meant to dodge traffic, wheeze through smog, or build their homes out of litter. But, neither were pigeons. Along with their fascination with French fries, pixies and pigeons shared an adaptable nature.

Despite the cement towers dominating every block of the city, pixies had still managed to carve out a corner of nature for themselves. They'd found a park on a prime slice of real estate between two high-rise behemoths. Humans never noticed their petite homes made of discarded boxes or saw the smoke rising from their drinking straw chimneys. Never had a human foot trampled the pebble paths lined with bottle caps, nor knocked down the picket fences made of cigarette butts. It was a quiet, happy community.

Allani, a glittering purple pixie, loved her juice carton home and her plastic bag hammock. She would lay back in the evenings and watch the light from the streetlamp catch on the chandelier she'd crafted from lost earrings. She and her neighbors had just cleared a patch to start a garden and a new coffee shop had just opened near the park—promising a world of tasty cast offs. All would be well.

With a contented smile, Allani stretched eagerly one morning. It was still dark, but her chore for the day needed to be done early. She closed her front door and flapped her dragonfly wings. Buzzing into the air, she took off down the street and hummed to herself, observing the neighborhood. She waved at a rat she knew as he scurried away, dragging a soft pretzel behind him, and blew a kiss to the raccoon in the dumpster.

She cried out in pure delight when she spotted a purple balloon stuck in the scraggly tree by the street. It was the same color as her hair and she loved it immediately. For ten minutes she fought with the string and the branch holding it, before freeing her prize.

The few, sleepy humans who noticed the balloon watched it only for a moment. In their city there were more exciting things to pay attention to than a lone, bobbing balloon. Allani towed the purple orb to the shiny building not far from her park and used it to trigger the sensor for the sliding glass doors. Once inside, she breathed in the scent of the perfumed lobby. She admired her reflection in the floor and then made her way to the elevators.

Both were out of order, but Allani was in a good mood. She could have found the stairwell and flown up, she supposed. However, she knew that elevators were important in emergency situations for paramedics and police. So, Allani decided to investigate and find the cause of the problem. She'd lived in an elevator shaft for a short time before moving to her current home and she considered herself an expert. At least among pixies.

She left her balloon waiting in the lobby and pressed the button on the elevator. Nothing happened, so she pried the cover off the button panel and examined the wires. Humming again, she used her teeth to cut through a few wires and rework them to open the heavy metal doors. With a nod to herself, she entered the elevator and began poking around. Her inspection seemed to be a dead end. Nothing she could find would stop the lift from lifting, so she tried pushing a button on the panel. It lit up, but there was no movement.

Crossing her arms and tapping her chin, Allani tried to think. Eventually, she snapped her fingers and flew through the crevice that led to the shaft. She fluttered up to the suspension cables and looked around. Just as she'd suspected, a fuzzy green creature sat, gnawing on the cables, a fistful of important looking wires in his hand.

A gremlin.

Allani wasn't big enough to fight the machine destroying creature, but she was smart enough to get rid of him. It helped that gremlins were not so bright themselves. All she had to do

was tell him that there was a helicopter landing on the roof and he scampered up the cables and away with a hoot of excitement. There was nothing gremlins liked more than air vehicles.

After that, it was short work to put the elevator back in working order. Before she rode to the top floor, she went back for her balloon and brought it with her. She'd learned the key code for the penthouse days before by silently watching and she entered it to gain access to the luxurious apartment.

Once inside, she marveled at the array of trinkets. When she finally found her way to the bedroom, she picked up a sparkly diamond earring. It would be perfect decor.

She glanced at the two sleeping figures in the bed and then at her balloon. She knew she couldn't keep the big purple thing, but she decided it could still be useful.

She gently poked a hole near the balloon knot with her new earring. The helium whooshed out and she giggled in a higher pitch at the flatulent sound. Once it was deflated, she took the purple latex and flew toward the king sized bed. She landed on the man's sharp cheekbone and watched him sleep peacefully for a moment.

Then she pried open his mouth and shoved the balloon deep into his esophagus. He choked and spluttered. The woman next to him tiredly slapped at his arm, muttering for him to be quiet.

Her wish came true a moment later and Allani sat on the man's neck to check his pulse. Satisfied with her handiwork, she wrestled his phone over to his face to unlock it. With a gleeful grin, she typed a text message:

*I changed my mind. Don't build on the park. Leave it alone.*

After hitting send, she took the earring and returned home.

## THE FORTUNE MASTER

by Stephanie Fox, Iowa (Prompt A)

*This is the best part. Well, not quite. Look. Look at her. Snapping open the fortune cookie. Casually. Like reading her morning horoscope. Yeah, read it again. Look at those eyes. The eyes are the most fun. She can't comprehend it. Squints. She's looking around wondering if it's now. Or maybe never? Maybe it's a joke? She'll find out soon enough. I can't wait.*

Who the hell am I? I'm the invisible man. A dishwasher. I scrape the dirty plates of people who can afford the outrageous prices at this Asian cuisine bistro. Cuisine. A hundred-dollar word for meals that aren't half as good as my friend Rocky sells for ten bucks in Chinatown. As I squirt the dish soap on the plate, I chuckle on just how easy my new hobby has become. Everyday I pocket at least one fortune cookie from the plating area, making sure no one sees me. Once I get home, it's easy to use a sharp chef's knife (yeah, I own a lot of knives) to pry open the cookie and remove the lame fortune. Who thinks up that crap? But then, a few lucky Guests will get a fortune penned by me, the Fortune Master.

But that's just the start. The tease. The second-best part.

It can take days, sometimes weeks to find someone worthy of my Messages. Problem is, not a lot of people enjoy Cuisine alone. Apparently, Cuisine is best shared in groups. Loud groups. Intimate groups. But my Messages can only be delivered to a single Guest. One who has no partner with which to consult or discuss. Or protect them.

Lucky for me, there are only two tables that can accommodate a single Guest and one of these directly faces the kitchen. In an oddly kindred coincidence, the owner of the bistro must be a stalker too. He likes to watch the patrons and has one-way glass between the kitchen and the tables. We can see them, but they can't see us. Mr. Big Shot owner says this is to "observe patron reactions" and act immediately to both good and bad body language but I know otherwise. He likes to watch too.

Step three is the easiest. I watch for my newest friend to read their Message and leave. In a hurry. You would think they would be on high alert like those zebras on TV when a lion is in the grass. But no, a stalked human isn't nearly as careful. They just scurry out the door and I slip out for a break. No one notices me gone. I'm just the dishwasher.

.....

The woman gazes at the opulent silks covering the walls and accenting her table and appreciates what it's like to dine like this regularly. After inheriting a startling amount of money from her sister, she resolved to occasionally treat herself and sample the five-star restaurants in town even though she really had no one with which to share the experience. She didn't care as she thoroughly enjoyed her own company. Conversation is so overrated.

When the waiter discreetly presents the bill on the small silver tray, she smiles at the anachronistic ending for which Temple is famous. Only a restaurant of this stature could pull off the service of an old-fashioned fortune cookie. When she cracks open the cookie, she sees the



slip inside and realizes what she has heard could be, is true. She grabs her bag and flees. Like the zebra, leaving the Message that had fluttered to the floor:

### YOU ARE NEXT

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Yeah, there's the expression. Shock, disbelief. Gotcha!

As I glance to the side of the kitchen to saunter out the back of the building, I look back and she's gone. Already gone. What the... No one has ever bolted that fast. Damn, if I miss one, the game'll be over. She'll tell. I can't let that happen. I yell that I need dish soap from the stockroom and slip out the side door.

The alley is tight and dead ends on the right. To the left is the street, perfect for grabbing a selected Guest as they flee to the parking lot. No other businesses in the area are open this time of night. Very dark. Rich people love to go slumming for their Cuisine.

I stride towards the end of the alley, knowing that I could attempt an encounter in the parking lot if I'm too late. But a silhouette appears at the end of the alley. Hands on her hips like fricking Captain America. Her right hand lifts towards me and I see the gun. Pointed at me. And her white T-shirt with ginormous letters

### NO, YOU ARE NEXT

"Remember the redhead from last month? That was my sister. On the morning you brutally stabbed her to death, she told me she was going to Temple for dinner. Guess what I found in her pocket? A little Message. The dark web calls you the Fortune Master. But you're just a dishwasher, and no one will miss the Invisible Man."

And they didn't.

**TRADITIONS DON'T DIE**  
by Thomas Gingerich, Iowa (Prompt B)

The house stood alone on the hill, desolate, stamped forlornly against the crimson horizon of the Mayfield estate in the fading twilight. Eddie Cheever made his way slowly up the winding lane in his ragtop Jeep, downshifting on the steepest grades. “The strangest damn call I’ve ever made,” he said aloud as he rolled to a stop just outside the gothic-like structure.

The phone call had come at day’s end as he was moving toward the office door to head home. He almost ignored it, but changed his mind at the last moment. The caller’s voice was panicky, almost frantic and pleaded with him to come to the lavish property to do what his job description implied— to inspect and if necessary repair the elevator of the nineteenth century mansion. He told the female caller he’d drive out the next day, but she was persistent and quoted him an exorbitant sum if he came at once— an offer he couldn’t refuse.

Her name was Phoebe and she met him at the ostentatious wooden front door. She looked to be in her mid thirties, was quite attractive and dressed in what appeared to be a maid’s uniform. She filled it out nicely, Eddie thought.

“Thank you for coming so promptly, Mr. Cheever,” she began. “If you’ll follow me please.” She turned and headed to her left. Eddie followed from the foyer through several extravagantly furnished rooms until they arrived at the elevator which he thought dated from the nineteen-twenties upon first glance.

“What seems to be the problem?” he asked, setting his toolbox and notebook on a nearby table. “Anything specific you’d like me to look at?”

Phoebe seemed distracted, uneasy, and stood a good distance from the open elevator doors. “It’s not an easy thing to explain,” she stammered. “I’m sure you’ll understand when you hear it.”

“Hear what?” he asked.

“The voice,” she replied under her breath.

Eddie cocked his head, squinted his eyes, and smirked for an instant at the remark, not sure if she was kidding. But the look on her face convinced him she was serious.

He turned and peered into the open elevator. It was similar to others of the time period he had worked on— five by six feet dimensionally. Stepping inside, he saw it served four floors and a basement.

“This *voice* you mention— could it just be the wind?” he pondered. “I’ve actually experienced that in old houses before. It does happen.”

“It isn’t the wind,” she blurted. “*Not* the wind! And I can’t stay here alone any longer! I’ve put up with it for over a week since the Mayfields left for Thailand. It’s the first time they’ve gone anywhere for any length of time since I’ve worked here.” She was wringing her hands and fidgeting side to side as she spoke, clearly overwrought. “I’ve been here for five years and nothing like this has ever happened before. Why now?” she asked.

“Let me see what I can find out,” Eddie said. “Why don’t you make us some coffee, Phoebe, while I take a look. And just call me Eddie.” He smiled and winked.

“Thank you, Eddie. I’m so glad you’re here,” she responded, seeming somewhat relieved.

The elevator worked perfectly—very smooth as he put it through its paces stopping on each of the upper floors. He heard no voice. Then from the attic, he pushed the basement button and descended rapidly. As the doors whooshed open he was momentarily startled. A bright yellow balloon with a dangling string was wafting ever-so-slightly back and forth directly in front of him at eye level as if awaiting his arrival, set in motion by the opening door.

He stepped out and viewed the basement surroundings, then grabbed the string and moved back into the conveyance, pushed the first floor button. As he began to ascend, he heard the voice. It was a whisper and definitely not the wind. “Thank you,” it said.

He looked around, clearly unnerved, and stepped out on the first floor with the balloon just as Phoebe was approaching with two mugs of coffee.

She could tell by the look on Eddie’s face. “You heard it, didn’t you?” she whispered, displaying a slight smile and placing the cups on a table.

“Yes. But only as I left the basement after finding this balloon.”

“I’m so relieved! What did it sound like? A child, right?” she asked.

“Now that you mention it, yes. It sounded like a little girl,” he responded.

“Exactly! Was she clear? Could you understand her? Anything?”

“Only two words. ‘Thank you,’” he replied.

“What do you think that means, Eddie?” she asked. “And it must have something to do with the balloon, don’t you think?” Phoebe paused in thought and then a shocked expression spread across her face. “Oh my God!” she blurted.

“What’s going on?” Eddie responded clearly concerned.

“They had a daughter, Emily, an only child. They still constantly talk of her. She died the year before I arrived. The nursery is still the same. It’s on the second floor and hasn’t been touched. They keep it locked. They couldn’t change it. She meant too much to them. I clean it once a month. And she loved balloons. Always got them on her birthday!”

“Let me guess,” Eddie interrupted. “It’s today.”

Phoebe nodded. “And they’ve never been away on the day before.”

Their eyes locked and they stood silently for a moment as something passed between them. Then Phoebe stepped toward a nearby cabinet, pulled open a drawer and retrieved a key. She returned with key in hand and they both stepped into the elevator. As the doors closed Phoebe placed her hand over Eddie’s on the string of the balloon. They turned and smiled at one another, and Eddie pressed the button for the second floor.

**Wendy**

by Becky Zuithoff (97BA), Iowa (Prompt B)

This story starts with a girl living in another world.

Not literally. She lived technically and actually in a suburb in the midwest. She attended a decent school. Her favorite dinner was baked frozen lasagna and she lived with her parents and a cast of cats in a clean but not stylish apartment with a view of the freeway. She lived in the real world, as far as anyone knew.

Except that in the most important ways a person can live anywhere, she really didn't. Her minutes and thoughts were consumed with people and places elsewhere. Her feet walked her to school, but her mind wandered in Narnia. Her eyes gazed at math problems, but her thoughts were deep in conversation with her friend, Harriet- the Spy. And when her hands buttoned her coat or played the piano or stirred her oatmeal, she was contemplating where to look for tesseracts and rings of power.

Her parents described her as a girl with a head full of dreams. Her teachers used terms like "unfocused" and "distracted." Her friends- well, her friends were not the kids in her school. They were Roald Dahl's Matilda and a host of other clever, brave, and lucky girls and boys she met in a place that felt more real than the hallways of her school and apartment; she met them in realms of ink and paper.

She was, to reiterate, living in another world.

Her name was Wendy. Her parents named her after a favorite character of their own. But unlike her literate and loving parents, Wendy did more than just read and love books. She wanted- needed- them to be true. Not true in the strictest sense, but for there to be magic in the world. She needed there to be at least the possibility that behind a wardrobe door was a portal to a place where things were different, where she could be different. Brave. Important. Royal.

That was how she became so good at examining things. For someone so dreamy and distracted, Wendy started noticing the details of door handles and hinges. She peeked into, around, and

behind things. What if there was a lovely golden light ready to pour out of an old box in the attic? What if that strange door led to a garden with secrets? What if under that broken floor plank was a key that would lead to... somewhere? Living in a suburban neighborhood constructed in the 1970s made life feel less likely to hold a fissure leading to another dimension, but anyone with half an imagination and a worn library card could overcome that doubt. She had faith that the dull veneer of the world was hiding something better. She just had to have the eyes to spot the evidence.

Years of examining things with the hope of being the character in a more interesting story, led her to a unique job. She became, of all things, an elevator inspector. A very thorough elevator inspector. It let her seek out magic in new spaces. As years went by and she became undeniably grown-up, capable of leading a (mostly) logical life, she maintained the tiny flame of faith in her heart. Meg and her tesseract, Frodo, Harry and Hermione, and Charlie with his chocolate had all found the something she was looking for. She could too. She could.

On a day that this faith was dim and timeworn, she entered another building and checked another elevator. She hit the button that would get her to the top floor. The elevator lifted her until it gently stopped. The door slid open with a chime.

For someone who had been looking for something all her life, it definitely caught her off guard when she saw it. Her eyes blinked slowly and her foot hesitated to step forward. In place of what should have been the dim hallway and worn wooden doors of an old apartment, was a field of bright grass under a blue sky. After a beat, several things happened quickly. Her heart raced, her breath caught, and she strode deliberately off the elevator.

The adventures that followed were exactly like those of Wendy's heroes, yet uniquely her own. Did she fight evil? Of course. Did she face a crisis and rise to the challenge? Also yes. Did she journey far and learn a few things along the way? Absolutely yes. Did she meet talking animals or wizards? Actually, no. But like many of her literary forebears, she came to a point when it was time to go home.

There was by then no sign of the elevator door. No handy lamppost marked the spot. Nor were ruby red slippers available. She was, however, offered a whether balloon. It was a handy object,

much like a helium-filled latex balloon, pink as bubble gum, that pulled so a person knew *whether* to go left or right in seeking a true desire.

With the *whether* balloon yanking (not painfully) on her arm, Wendy arrived at a conspicuous tree. A door in the trunk was engraved with the single word, “Knock.” After all her adventures, this strange command gave her no pause at all, and she knocked forthwith.

The door swung outward, revealing a dim hallway with musty carpet and many doors. Wendy stepped through. Just as her feet felt the plush surface underneath, the door clicked behind her. A glance over her shoulder revealed not the door, but an elevator. She was in the real world. In a way, for the first time.

Wendy never stopped looking for magical portals to elsewhere, but now she started looking for thresholds to adventures that start and end here. People on the city bus with a story to tell. Parks with hills to climb. Plane tickets to places where the food and music said something new. Her heart became a *whether* balloon of sorts, and she had a little flame of faith in her that she could still seek her true desire, here.

## Messages

by Jim Duncan (93MA), Colorado

Conversations meandered, another bottle uncorked. Sam wished their dinner party would wind down soon but suppressed the emotion with a warm smile transmitted across the table toward Maddie. His girlfriend caught and volleyed back; her smile was genuine.

“I’m just going to clear a few dishes, get dessert ready for later,” he said to nobody in particular. Six guests chatting, listening, laughing, nodding, interrupting, laughing again – each person comfortable and enjoying the meal, plus Maddie. Music filled brief gaps in conversation. 70s yacht rock.

No answer, no acknowledgement he’d spoken. To this assemblage of near strangers, Sam was that “nice but quiet guy” who blended into the background. He was okay with it, actually, preferred not to hold the center of attention in social situations. Their guests barely noticed as he slid plates and bowls out from under hands and away from elbows. Maddie did, sent him another smile, and eased right back into the conversation. *Effortless*, Sam marveled.

His retreat to the kitchen offered respite. Sam poured two fingers of whiskey over ice in a tumbler, sipped, and began stacking dinnerware in the sink. Party sounds floated down the hallway, now a murmur, sometimes punctuated with the barking laugh of one of the men. *Was Cliff his name?* Maddie would quiz him later about what he thought of each guest.

A sink full of sparkly suds and hot water. Plates in their depths. Another sip of whiskey. The liquor warmed his throat and ever so slightly, his spirit. All in all, not a terrible evening.

The cough startled Sam, and the bottle of disk soap slipped, dove below the bubbles then bobbed to the surface. “I’m sorry, but could I trouble you for some more water?” It was Grace, a friend of Maddie’s. *From Vermont? Yes. A social worker. Difficult career.* He retrieved two glass liter bottles from the fridge. She thanked him and returned to the party.

Sam returned to the sink. Splashes of sudsy drips on the kitchen window. He wiped away, then saw it. A tiny tissue-paper snowflake, pressed into the outside corner of the pane.

Sam knew all about signals. Now 56 and retired, he had served 28 years as a “communications specialist” for one of the three-letter agencies. Outside D.C., within the bowels of a nondescript office building, penned in government-gray cubicles and lit by flickering fluorescents, he and his colleagues would trawl for coded messages in AOL chatrooms. Or pose as users and implant their own ciphered directives designed to flush out sleeper agents.

In the 90s, the screech of dialup modems provided the soundtrack to their intelligence work. Over three decades the technology evolved, and the complexities of his work required a measure of energy Sam no longer could summon. A failed marriage 12 years prior was the result of his inability to prioritize anything beyond the Work. Retirement brought comfort, hobbies, and then Maddie.

Internally, Sam and others in his role had been referred to as “fortune cookie writers” -- for their ability to string series of chatroom messages conveying special meaning to a certain recipient while remaining innocuous to the casual reader. “You will be graced by the presence of a loved



one” might be interpreted as advance notice of an arms shipment. “All your weeds are wildflowers” could be an explicit warning about a mole within a terrorist cell.

Sam created communications to trap, sow uncertainty, spur betrayals, promise rewards, and stoke fear. “Precise words will achieve desired results” was a phrase Sam held tight as a motivational mantra for years. A literal fortune cookie message pinned to his cubicle wall.

His work was rooted in psychology, strategy and a facility with language – hundreds of interactions and messages every day, thousands every week – from his brain, through the keyboard and out into an endless Internet populated with networks of bad actors, splinter groups planning future threats, and many, many lone operators. The government has endless enemies.

Sam had no direct field work or “wet work” experience. That was the purview of the “bulldogs,” agents who relied on reports and analysis from desk agents like Sam. But over the years he had bonded with bulldogs serving on mission operations, and he’d picked up some things. The agency blended comm specialists and field agents, overseen by humorless senior agents. Typical culture: everyone angling for their next career step. Unlike many, Sam was content serving behind the screen.

He found a kindred spirit in one of the bulldogs, Warnock, who despised bureaucrats and thrived on the action beyond the agency’s walls. Warnock was 10 years younger than Sam, and often said, “Luck requires equal parts preparation and opportunity.” Sharp. The man could’ve been a comm specialist but loved the life of a bulldog.

Seeing off the last of their guests, and with Maddie sleepy-buzzed on four glasses, Sam suggested she head to bed. “Cleaning up messes is satisfying, even therapeutic,” he said. She patted his arm, kissed him, clutched the railing and shuffled upstairs. He waited while she completed her bedtime routine, listened for the soft sigh of content as she pulled the covers. And then waited a bit longer.

The cat watched him leave. Sam’s workshop, a large detached building behind the house, stood dark. He eased the door open and flicked the light. Warnock was waiting. “Good party?” he asked.

“Not bad,” Sam said. He noted the field agent’s posture and relaxed. “You look good. What’s up?”

“Classic Sam, right down to business. I miss you, man.” He extended his palm. They shook, and both men pulled stools from the bench. “So yeah, they need you back, just for one op. We’ve been pulling stuff from some subreddits. Bad weather coming, the fortune cookie writers say.” Warnock filled in the details.

From the upper windows of the house, Maddie watched. Her mission called for flushing out the agent code-named “Warnock.” She remembered the activation code. *A secret admirer will soon send you a sign of affection.*

## Dyersville

by Daniel Hauser (86BA), Minnesota (Prompt A)

Half-way through “The Office,” there’s a banging at the door. Jane squints, confused. Only three people know she has moved into this crappy, little apartment - her best friend, her mother and her kid sister - and all three know not to interrupt her during *her* show. Who could it be? “Just a minute,” she calls out, wiping her hands on the thighs of her favorite jeans. Since the show began, she has been trying to pry off her wedding ring, first with brute force then with a squirt of Dawn dish soap she got during a commercial. The soap wasn’t helping. And now her hands were too slick to get a good grip on the ring. Why did she love Chunky Monkey so much?

The knocking continues. Three times now, in quick succession. “Just a minute,” she snaps. She wipes her hands again on her jeans and then pushes her long, auburn hair behind her ears before rising from her chocolate-colored, second-hand couch. “Who is it?” she asks, approaching the door. When there is no answer, she looks through the peephole and sees the back of a head covered with long, dark hair. Could be a man or a woman.

“Who is it?” she repeats into the door, her hot breath bouncing off the wood back into her face. She touches the chain to make sure it’s secure. The person mumbles something, which Jane interprets as “papers.” That’s possible. Jane had asked her attorney the day before to draw up the divorce decree. But wouldn’t he have called before sending a courier over? Looking through the peephole she demands, “What did you say?” The person, back still to the door, replies with what Jane hears again as “papers.” Tentatively, Jane turns the deadbolt and places her hand on the knob. “I can’t hear what...” Suddenly the door flies open, the chain stopping its progress after a couple inches. A dirty, white hand with grease under the nails snakes through the opening, grabs her by the hair and tries to yank her through the gap between the door and the frame. Jane falls

into the door, slamming it onto the assailant's forearm. "Jesus," Jane hears a man exclaim - a short but powerful man who won't let go despite having his arm pinned in the door. He pulls her to the left, slamming her head against the frame. She sees stars as tears stream down her freckled cheeks. It feels like he is ripping every single hair from her skull. "Leave me alone," she cries.

The man continues to slam her head against the frame.

Why is this happening? She's got nothing worth stealing. Hell, she's just a freelance writer who makes most of her meager income writing pithy sayings for fortune cookies for some food company in Brooklyn. Almost everything she owns is still at Gary's. All she has is her clothes, shoes and her dumpy, Goodwill-furnished apartment. "What do you want? I don't have any money."

No reply.

"Help," she screams as loud as she can, but she knows no one is going to come to her aid. Mrs. Jackson, across the hall, is practically 100, completely deaf and by this time of night fast asleep. Only two other people live in the building and they're likely down at The Palace downing Budweisers.

The psychopath tightens his grip. With each thrust of her head against the wall, her ability to think diminishes. Why did he choose her? Bash. Does he want to rob her? Bash. Or worse? Bash. It's too random. Bash. It's Dyersville. Bash. Nothing ever happens here. Jane's knees finally buckle, and she falls to the floor. As she does, the assailant lets go of her hair. She leans back and the door shuts. Stunned, she sits there, not quite sure what to do next. Seconds pass, nothing happens. Through the door, she hears the man sucking in air, as if he had just finished a 100-yard dash. She wipes her nose on the sleeve of her hoodie. Her shoulders shake, ribs heave in and out, legs tremble. After several minutes, she realizes that she can no longer hear the stranger. Did he leave? Her answer comes with a bang as she feels him throwing his weight against the door. Jane's back holds firm. He bangs again. A third time, the man tries to push in

the door, but Jane's back remains against the door. Sobbing, she touches the side of her head and feels warm liquid. Her fingers are red. Another convulsion of sobs washes over her. How long can she keep this up? She scans the apartment frantically. Where did she leave her phone? The banging resumes. Jane winces. The blood on her fingers leaves a mark on the dirty white carpet beneath her. She needs to get to the deadbolt. If she can do that, it will buy her enough time to find her phone and call the police. The stranger bangs the door again. Jane's addled brain tells her that the time between his outbursts is lengthening. She waits - chest heaving, tears streaming down her cheeks - for the next bang. When it comes, she counts. One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. By the count of 10 he bangs again. Once more, she counts, careful not to speed up or slow down. Evenly. Methodically. At 10 he bangs the door again. There's a pattern. She waits one more time. She reaches 10 and boom, another bang. All she has to do is let him knock at the door again, then stand up and lock the deadbolt. That's what she's going to do. She has to move and she has to move fast. Otherwise, she may never see the outside of this crappy rat-hole. She's going to do it. She can do it. She will do it. Right after the next...

## Destiny

by Chris Kilgore (10BA), Iowa (Prompt A)

Hopelessness descended over him like a shroud. There he was, naked on his back, his wrists and ankles tied to his bedposts, his arousal quickly fading, looking at the tiny, discolored piece of paper with red lettering scrawled on it, held in front of him by the beautiful mysterious woman who had entered his life just yesterday like she was made just for him, like in a movie, as if she were in fact, his own destiny.

As he read the writing, he remembered when he'd written that fortune. It was one of maybe a few dozen he'd written few months ago. Just a joke really, a diversion from the monotony of feeding paper into a machine at Wonton industries where it was printed, cut into strips, and then cooked briefly into fortune cookies that were distributed across the country.

His friend gave him a specific type of acid pen, and described to him how you could write invisibly with it on paper and then only by rubbing it with soap could the message be made visible. So they had some laughs fooling around with writing "secret" messages on the fortune cookie paper. Mostly it was silly stuff, like "don't leave the house today" or "you may have already won a billion dollars"... But after awhile their messages drifted into the somewhat creepier; things like, "I'm watching you" and "you will die an untimely death."

He quickly lost interest after they ran out of ideas for things to write, but not before he'd written the fortune which the woman was holding in front of him now. Maybe he was feeling a bit morose that day; it was January, it was cold and dark, his job was unfulfilling, he was lonely. When he wrote, "you will find me and kill me", it was just a joke, a bit of gallows humor. Besides, he didn't think anyone would actually read any of these because they required soap for the acid ink to become activated. What were the odds of someone actually rubbing soap on their fortune cookie paper?

But she was already telling him the story. She was living in a small town in Idaho, her life was regressing into meaningless, she'd even entertained thoughts of suicide. Then one day her grocery bag broke on the sidewalk in front of her apartment and picking them up and carrying them into her apartment she set them on her dining room table. She hadn't noticed the dish soap had punctured until she saw it leaking out on the table, soaking the items scattered across it, mail and papers, a plate and a cup from her morning breakfast, a Chinese takeout box and a fortune cookie fortune. While cleaning up the mess, the red lettering caught her eye. It was like a sign from God. It was like her life suddenly had a meaning. It was her destiny.

While she related the story and described the disturbing lengths to which she'd gone to track down the identity of the author of her destiny, he saw her remove a long knife with serrated edges out of her bag beside his bed. He began to feel nauseous, desperate; he was an insect caught in a web, helplessly watching the spider approach him. "It was a joke", he croaked, his mouth absent of moisture, "there's no such thing as destiny."

She looked at the fortune and then back at him, then said with a smile, "And yet here we are."

**Will You Write Your Fortune or Shall I?**

by Erin Studer (99BA), California (Prompt A)

I was delivering a custom-order of fortunes and their cookies to a warehouse in South Chicago when I saw Johnny Vantangelo murder two people in cold blood. A steady drizzle had soaked the earth all day and by the time I arrived at the delivery address just after dusk, water seemed to hang in the air. I was worried about the cookies being ruined, and was struggling to find the entrance to the warehouse. Maybe I had come at the wrong time or maybe things had gotten out of hand too soon, but when I looked in one of the windows of the warehouse and saw Johnny gun down two men as they pleaded for their lives over half eaten plates of Chinese food, I couldn't help but scream.

I dropped the box of fortune cookies and ran. As I turned away, I saw that Johnny had heard me scream and was looking toward the windows. I prayed that he wouldn't see me starting to run away but no luck. I was only fifty yards away when I heard a third shot ring out into the night sky.

"Stop or the next one kills you! Turn around and walk slowly back over here."

Up to that point the custom fortune cookie business had been a good one. I had been hooked on writing fortunes since the very first fortune I had ever opened as a child: YOUR FEET SHALL TOUCH THE SOIL OF MANY LANDS. How amazing does that sound? Especially to an 11-year-old boy. Ever since that day, I was always coming up with fortunes. Even in that moment walking back to Johnny Vantangelo, Chicago's most feared mob boss, my mind kept coming up with new fortunes to write.

HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY EXCEPT WHEN YOU SHOULD LIE. Or DOING BUSINESS WITH BAD PEOPLE IS BAD BUSINESS. Ain't that the truth.

"Who are you?" Johnny said.

"I'm just making a delivery," I said, my voice shaking. "I brought the fortune cookies. There was an order of fortune cookies that was a rush job and had to be delivered here tonight."

"Yeah well, dinner is canceled. We don't need those cookies any more. Besides it looks like you dropped 'em instead of delivering them," Johnny said.

I should have known from the start that this order would be bad luck. Most of the time in the custom fortune business, when the customer wants to write the message instead of letting me really do the work I loved, the messages were pretty pedestrian. I LOVE YOU! HAPPY BIRTHDAY! WILL YOU MARRY ME?

Lately people have started using fortune cookies at gender reveal parties. IT'S A BOY! IT'S A GIRL! And of course, they would ask for the slip of paper to be pink or blue. This actually turned into a bit of a specialty for me. All of my custom fortune cookies were hand printed and hand made. When I started getting requests for colored paper I would hand dye the paper with watercolor paints. Very custom high-end stuff.

That must have caught someone's attention because I received an order for fortune cookies asking for an "aged" slip of paper in the cookie with the message YOU'RE DEAD. That fortune was a little dark for my tastes but business is business and some people have a funny sense of humor. The customer used the name John Smith and put the

order in through my company website. I followed up with them about exactly what they wanted the paper to look like via email. I used a classic pastel yellow water color to discolor the page. I did a sample where I burned the edge of the paper. I used water to bleed out the ink. The customer didn't like any of them. I was about to give up and say I couldn't do the job when I had an idea. I could smear just a drop of yellow Joy dish soap across the slip of paper which would not only smudge the writing but when dried give the paper a yellow wrinkled look. Well, the customer was thrilled but said he needed the order done tonight. So, it became a rush job with hand delivery across town.

"I'm sorry," I stammered to Johnny as he waved his gun menacingly. "No charge. Or I can go back home and make you some new ones. Again, no charge either way."

"I said, we don't need those cookies anymore," Johnny thrust his gun toward me. "And I think you might have seen more than you should. So now you're never going back home."

I had to act fast. REFLECTION CAN BE HEALTHY BUT HESITATION CAN BE DEADLY. I leapt out and grabbed the gun and Johnny's arm. We began wrestling for the gun. I caught him off guard as he must not have thought a fortune cookie writer would be so bold. He used his free hand to punch me in the ribs. Despite the pain I kept both of my hands on the gun. SINGULAR FOCUS ON YOUR GOAL IS A PATH TO ACHIEVEMENT.

Johnny punched again but this time I was ready for it. I jumped back out of the way of the punch but still held onto the gun pulling Johnny forward. He stepped on the box of fortune cookies at our feet. Maybe it was the wet cardboard box, or the soggy fortune cookies, or maybe the dish soap that soaked the fortune paper had become slick in the rain, either way his foot went out from underneath him and he slipped and fell to the ground and then BANG. The gun went off. Johnny



was dead. The hot 9mm was still smoking as I held it in my hands. I looked down at Johnny, slumped on the ground with pieces of fortune cookie strewn around him like a makeshift chalk outline. YOUR DESTINY MAY BE BIG BUT IT IS NEVER FASTER THAN A BULLET