

1st Place
Arborglyph
M.Y. (HS 1)

“Care to give me a hand, young man?”

I was hauled from my dream-like state by a man’s voice, which was marked with a pleasant indifference, as if he was reading from a script. Blinking in confusion, I realized that the man had seemingly materialized from the frosty fog and was towering over the tree stump that I was sitting on.

“Young man,” the man repeated himself. His lean figure was immersed in an ugly black coat, and although he was handsome with silky blond locks, his wan smile seemed lifeless against his wine-red scarf. I observed all this with a distinct detachedness. Usually I would have been alarmed by a stranger in the woods, but I myself must have looked outlandish: a runaway from the nearest village, tattered clothes, bruised arms.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I will not provide an answer, because you do not expect nor need one,” the man began wandering into the fog, and turned around like an expectant toddler waiting for his mother. “I ask you to find a tree. Not any tree, but one with an *arborglyph*— carving of letters and symbols— on it, the kind that couples create as a symbol of their permanent love.” he announced. He was disappearing into the forest, his pale skin almost absorbed in the blinding whiteness of the landscape. For reasons I could not fully fathom, I trotted after him.

The snow was never-ending. As much as the birch trees were breathtaking in their white caps and icicle necklaces, it soon got strenuous to trudge through the heavy slush of half-melted snow. Our breaths rose into the mellow gray sky, little wisps vanishing swiftly as if we had never been there. We briefly traced our hands on every tree we encountered, and tried to identify anything other than scars created by nature.

After a few long hours— or it could have been mere minutes— my chapped fingers brushed a deep crater. “Hey,” I called out, “I think I’ve found one.”

With startling agility the man rushed to my side, and examined the birch tree like an infant scrutinizing a christmas present still wrapped in paper. “You most definitely have,” he gushed, his mask of polite lethargy peeled off for the first time. “I want to thank you, you have a keen eye. This is a love carving, the most typical type with initials and a heart, presumably made about three decades ago. Ridiculous yet endearing, is it not?” the man continued despite my obvious disinterest. “I wonder if you know this couple... judging based on this location, they probably came from your village. Can you identify the initials?”

The man read the letters out, and what little suspicion I had of him knowing my village evaporated in the face of such a shock. I knew the initials all too well. Two faces that raised me emerged in my head, wrinkled, wilting, warped in fury.

Shards of a wine bottle, reflecting two blurry figures locked in an embrace... No, is that a chokehold? Muffled voices, shameless stares, bruises blooming profusely on smooth skin, yellow, purple, angry crimson. Who knew one could recreate a rose garden so easily?

“No.” I choked.

“Well, I do not care if you are acquainted with the couple. Apologies, but I have to accomplish my job.” the man shrugged, magically oblivious to the tears I was holding back, and yanked a short knife from his belt. “Since you aided me in this journey, I will grant you the honour.” He handed me the knife, and when I turned it over in perplexion, he led it above the crudely carved heart, the sharp edge digging into the bark.

Without being told, I knew.

Without hesitation, I brought the knife down on the arborglyph, and scraped it off in one swift, satisfying motion. There was surprisingly little resistance; the promise of eternal love peeled off easily. Beside me, the man clapped boredly like a child attending church, and a vicious giggle escaped my lips.

“You knew it, didn’t you?” I chuckled, but he stared back blankly, again with a mixture of innocent amusement and incurable apathy. Now intoxicated with a sadistic elation, I started twirling in an awkward waltz, the sound of snow falling as my only music.

And so I danced, until my legs ached and my head spun. All the while, the man was watching me, a trace of a smile dancing on his lips then disappearing within an instant, like a snowflake.