

2nd Place
A Thawing Heart
K.S. (HS 1)

Persephone pushed her hood back, wincing against a sudden snowy gust, and caressed the heart etched into the tree. Her eyes shone at the blissful memory that flooded in from the rough bark, yet clouded almost immediately as she recalled the torturous experience that had occurred in the same year.

When Persephone was nine years old, she was caught Googling “Girls kissing girls” in her room on her private laptop by her parents. Her mother had barged into her room ignoring the KEEP OUT sign she had on the door, her mouth open in anticipation of yet another scolding, then locked her eyes on the laptop’s radiant square screen. Persephone fumbled frantically with the mouse, unsuccessfully trying to close the tab including the 339,000,000 results of her search. After a few moments of petrified silence, her mother fainted on the spot.

Just like that, Persephone’s family was sent into chaos. Mother was bawling, asking God what she had done wrong. Father was yelling, blaming her mother and locking Persephone in her room. They completed all the dramatic reactions one could imagine, yet forgot to ask their daughter why she had googled the pictures, which she was grateful for. She would not have been able to bear the agony of explaining to the hysterical pair that she liked girls, not boys, and that she was in love with her best friend.

Sitting solemnly at the dinner table after making sure Persephone had gone to bed, her parents discussed what to do with her. Meanwhile, Persephone lay stiffly in her bed without a single thought on sleep. Her heart tattooed quickly. Eyes wide open as an owl. She chewed on her thumb until they were wrinkly white and raw. Her feet were numb and unfeeling; sweat drenched her back and hands. A million scenarios on what could happen to her raced through her keyed up brain, but none of them pointed to anything pleasant.

Persephone had somehow fallen asleep somehow in the midst of her violent whirlpool of negative thoughts and emotions. The next moment she opened her eyelids was to her mother tapping her shoulder, smiling gently, telling her to wake up. Persephone felt a flutter of expectation. Had her parents understood that she was a lesbian? Had they forgiven her? However, her hopes were quickly dashed with her mother’s next line.

“Get ready quickly, sweetie, we called the priest over.” So they had not accepted her after all. More importantly, they were going to try to “kick the gay” out of her.

The meeting with the priest felt like hell to say the least. He came through the door, shaking his head with overexaggerated disappointment. Peering at Persephone over his gold-rimmed round spectacles, he mumbled a few words about seeing the devil next to her shoulder. Persephone glanced at her parents with disbelief, yet the two only nodded along with the priest, sorrowful expressions pasted on their complexions. The priest was ushered into the living room, where he was served a cup of tea that he sipped interminably. Then he took Persephone’s hand with his coarse one and prayed,

“Oh Holy God, may you have mercy on this girl and her homosexual sins! May you banish the devil from her body forever!” Waving a cross frantically in her face, some spittle formed at the edges of his paper thin mouth. Persephone flinched against his cabbage reeking breath.

After the holy ritual was over, her parents sobbed tears of joy that their sweet, innocent daughter was back again. Persephone feigned a beaming smile at them and hugged the priest, laughing to hide the sound of her grinding teeth. She felt her nose and ears flush. She did not dare blink, for she knew that tears from the feeling of betrayal would flow out mercilessly. Her parents whom she had loved dearly for all nine years of her life, only loved a purified mirage of Persephone, not her true form.

Now that Persephone was twenty-one-years-old, she could look back on the episode and laugh about the ridiculous situation she had been caught in. Yet from that day she hid her gayness, no matter how much she killed herself in the process. As she traced the heart that she had carved with her best friend over and over again, the tears that she had held back twelve years ago came flooding out of her eyes, each tear drop thawing her little by little. She took a closer look at the heart, and through her blurry vision, saw clumsily carved initials in the center. Persephone could not believe how blind she had been. Because how could love so innocent and pure be shameful? The priest had failed in kicking the gay out of her after after all, and she was glad.