

Bill Coppel Young Writers' Award 2011

Winner, 15 years category

Prisoner of Mind by Madeleine Zurowski

“Happiness is not being pained in body or troubled in mind.” That’s what Thomas Jefferson said all those years ago. I reckon he had it right too. But it’s not like you can argue with that at my age. When arthritis plagues what feels like every inch of your body, you know that wherever there is pain there is rarely happiness. And that thing about the mind too. Yeah, good old Jefferson sure had his head screwed on right . Here at this hell hole they all call a nursing home, there is no one who doesn’t have some form of disease or something. Whether it is a diseased mind or body, there is no one whole here. And no happiness.

The nurses pretend to be all supportive and happy and helpful when your family visits, but as soon as they leave the nurses turn back to their shuffling ways, communicating in low whispers that they think we can’t hear. Talking about this depressing jail we are forced into. They are as much prisoners as we are, forced to the bottom of society with qualifications only for a glimpse as to where they will end up in the future. And it drags them down. Occasionally you might get one that actually cares about what they do here, but eventually they fall prey to the endless monotony of this place.

When a family visits they bring happiness with them, a small spark of joy from the outside world, the faintest trace of what I used to know, the smell of flowers, and the heat of the sun. Sure we are allowed out into the garden sometimes, but it’s not the same when you know you’re locked in. My family stopped visiting a while back. I think they got bored with me. My son moved out of town and my daughter claims she’s too busy with her law career to come and see me. She doesn’t have any kids she can send to see me either. My only grandchild left me with my son. She was a gorgeous girl. Solemn after the death of her mother. It happened so young. She was only ten when the car crash happened, and now she gazes at the world in a way which is too old for one so

young. I loved it when she used to visit. We would talk about the accident together. My wife was in it too you see, and that's when my children decided to send me here. When my granddaughter visited we would talk about what happened and what we both lost. She lost a mother and her innocence. I lost my wife and my freedom. Some people might think we are masochistic, torturing ourselves with the loss of our beloveds. But we aren't. Through talking about it, we gain acceptance, and through acceptance we can gain happiness. But she left too soon. I still remember the last talk we had, when she told me she would leave. We both sat there for a few minutes, knowing that we would never gain acceptance. By the time she is old enough to come back again for regular visits, I will probably be dead. And one visit a month would not be enough for us. So we sat there, thinking our own thoughts, and then said our final goodbyes. As she walked out that door I knew that with her left my final chance of happiness, or at least peace of mind.

So now I sit here, locked in this armchair, leaving only to go to the bathroom and sleep. My eyes remain focused on the television, though that's not what I'm really seeing. I'm thinking about my life, absorbed in what I did wrong and my losses. First my wife and daughter in law, then my children and my grandchild. The people who work here and the volunteers are all scared of me. Even the ones who knew me before I became a prisoner of my mind, flinching with every horrible thought that passes my mind. Knowing that people who pass by me whisper, and argue about who will have to tell me about dinner, or changes the routine. Not that I pay them any attention. I just wish it would all go away and I could leave this prison. Not this prison of a nursing home. Oh, I would give anything just to leave the prison of my mind.