

The Red Mechanical Pencil

By Veronica Van Den Burg

Bryce Heartly's bike crashed to the ground with a thud. Not caring enough to pick it up, he ran toward the old, red brick house. Through the main window he saw his family sitting down at the dinner table, illuminated by a soft glow. He opened the huge wooded oak door, slamming it shut as he kicked off his shoes and dumped his bag on the floor. Groans and creaks emerged from the old-fashioned floor as Bryce slid on it.

"Hey mom! Dad! Guess what!" Bryce announced. His parents looked up expectantly, his father frozen in the act of spooning fresh mashed potatoes into his mouth.

"What?" his younger sister Amy inquired.

"Well," Bryce started slowly. "I got my G1!" He pulled a chair out from under the table and sat down. The rest of the dinner was almost like a joyous holiday, with everyone talking at the same time, sharing stories of the day. Amy pestered Bryce with questions, and he filled in his mom and dad about all the changes to the old brick building in downtown Lennon that held the driving tests. After dinner Bryce and Amy cleared the table while Mr. and Mrs. Heartly washed and dried the dishes. Looking in, an outsider would think that the Heartly family was a perfect family. Everyone helped out and was kind to each other. And with this train of thought in mind, Bryce flicked off his bedroom light. In the consuming darkness he pulled the blankets over him and drifted into a dream filled sleep.

The next morning, the dreaded bell rang throughout the school. The hallways were filled with multiple groans from students. Bryce slammed his locker shut.

"Hey! Bryce! Happy Friday!" a southern voice drawled across the hall.

"Hey Chase. Happy Friday to you too. What's up?" Chase Willaims was as close to a best friend that Bryce had. The Willaims had moved from Texas a few years ago for a change of scenery and a new adventure. Shortly after they moved, Chase befriended Bryce and the boys had become inseparable.

"I just wanted to check if you were done your part of the biology project." Chase asked, clearly expressing that he already knew the answer.

"Oh yeah, that..." started Bryce but he didn't finish before Chase cut in.

"You didn't finish it, did you?"

Bryce tried again. "Well you see..." The look on Chase's face told Bryce that he wasn't in a mood for beating around the bush- or in this case- the project.

"Come on Bryce. You knew that it was due today. What are we going to say to Mrs. Stevenson?" asked Chase. Chase liked to keep his grades up so that he could stay on the soccer

team at school. However, Bryce knew full well what he was going to say. It wouldn't be the first time that he would have to ask for an extra day to get a project done.

"I'll take care of it. Mrs. Stevenson is pretty reasonable when it comes to giving us an extra day," Bryce replied with a shrug.

"US?" questioned Chase. "It's all you this time, and you are going to have to get out of it." There was an uncomfortable silence while both Bryce and Chase contemplated what could be done.

"Anyways, we'd best be getting to class, or we're gonna be late." Chase said quietly, and both boys walked away from locker 117, down the faded yellow halls and split into their different classrooms.

Bryce's first class of the day was English. To him, there was something that made English feel like it was just more than words, sentences, and paragraphs. He loved the feel of poetry on his tongue, the way the rhyme and meter rolled off into a sea of pictures in his mind. He passed through the orange door and headed by the posters to the right of the huge, black chalkboard. Bryce smiled to himself. Personally, he thought that the posters didn't belong in an English room, or any school room at all. They said things like 'be kind', 'help others', 'do your best' and other cheerful teacher sayings.

Bryce shrugged and turned down the second row and sat at the third desk. Putting his books on the desk, a bright and always cheerful Mrs. Stevenson came into the classroom. Mrs. Stevenson was a little bit eccentric. She has passions for Biology, English, cats from the animal aid on St. George street, and skydiving – or so she said. On the first day of school, she had told the grade 11 English university class all about herself and had taken up a whole class to do it. Then, in Biology 11, Bryce heard the whole spiel all over again. So, in the end, he knew a lot about Mrs. Stevenson. Thinking about all the things that he liked about her, Bryce decided that if he had to choose one, it would be that she had a kind, gentle nature. Mrs. Stevenson, not aware that she was being thought about, went on humming and sorting through papers.

"Good morning class!" she said in her singsong voice.

"Good morning," came the muttered reply of the 20 students. Bryce looked around. In front of him sat Jermy Baldwin, the resident artist. He had his sketchbook open and was drawing something that looked like a shark and octopus fighting in the deep blue unknown. To his right sat Carley Richardson. Her brunette locks fell around her shoulders. Bryce had known her since first grade, but he rarely talked to her now. By no means were they mean to each other, it was just that they weren't in the same cliques. Also, Chase had a massive crush on her. Before he could see who was sitting behind him and to the left of him, Mrs. Stevenson clapped her hands.

"Okay class!" she exclaimed. "We have a lot to get through today so I would love it if you can pay attention! Let's start with some notes." Bryce reached out to where he always put

his pencil case, but on this particular day, it wasn't there. *Oh shoot.* Bryce thought. *I must have forgot it in my locker.* Glancing around, he looked for someone he could borrow a pencil from. He couldn't ask Jermy, because he wouldn't let anyone touch his drawing pencils. Apart from his drawings, he took great pride in having the sharpest, clean, and precise HB pencils in the entire school. Glancing around once more, he knew he couldn't ask Carley - that would be going too far. The last thing that Bryce wanted was to be in debt to *Carley*. Bryce shuddered at the thought. He turned to his left side, his metal chair screeching on the hard floor.

"Hey. Can I borrow a pencil?"

"Ya, sure." Leon Daehdrah, whose name was pronounced *Dee – ha – dra*. Leon was known as the school buzzkill. Bryce wasn't always nice to him. He had always reasoned it with 'he's always ruining our fun'. Leon unzipped his pencil case and pulled out a red mechanical pencil and handed it to Bryce.

"Just give it back at the end of class." he whispered.

Bryce gave his best thankful smile and whispered back, "Thanks man. I owe you one."

The time seemed to drone on and on as the students moved on from taking notes to reading the novel assigned by Mrs. Stevenson. To a grade 11 student with a big imagination, it seemed like the clock hands had been glued in one place, and couldn't move, even if they tried. After reading through three and a half chapters in '*The Great Gatsby*', being assigned an essay and a report that was due on Monday, Bryce was completely done with English class.

"Alright class," Mrs. Stevenson announced loudly, jolting everyone awake from their sleep- like trance that '*The Great Gatsby*' had put them in. "You can pack up now and leave with the bell." The room instantly filled with chatting from the students.

Bryce eased his way out of the chair and slowly walked over to the big, brown desk that Mrs. Stevenson sat behind. Upon hearing footsteps, she looked up.

"What can I help you with Bryce?" Mrs. Stevenson asked. She always knew when Bryce had a question.

"Ummm..." Bryce started, trying to find a crafty way to form the words. Suddenly, an idea came into his mind. "I got my G1 last night!" he exclaimed, trying to sound authentic.

"Good for you Bryce. Were you nervous?"

"Not really. I have been ready for this for a long time." Bryce paused and looked around the classroom. "But the lineups were really long, and I had to wait a long time to write the test. When I got home, I didn't have the time to finish the biology project." He looked at Mrs. Stevenson, whose face was scrunched up as she processed what she was hearing.

“Well Bryce, If I give you another day to work on it, I’m expecting that the project will surpass my expectations.” Bryce gave her his best charming smile and Mrs. Stevenson gave a weak smile back.

“On Monday Bryce, first thing, I am expecting an amazing project.” The bell rang, and there was a tidal wave of students flooding the halls.

As Bryce walked out the door, he turned around and said “I won’t let you down Mrs. Stevenson! Thank you!” She nodded and returned to her paperwork, humming quietly to the radio beside her.

After three more classes full of notes, reading, assignments, and paying attention, Chase and Bryce awaited the much-needed weekend.

“Did you get the weekend to finish our project?” Chase poked at Bryce; whose face knew just how much Bryce wasn’t listening. Bryce’s mind could very well be in another world. Chase poked Bryce harder.

“Oww! What did you do that for?” Bryce whined.

“I asked if you got the weekend for the project,” Chase asked again.

“Yeppers. I did. You feed Mrs. Stevenson the right line and you can get her to do anything – well, anything related to school at least.” Bryce said with the smuggest look that he had. “It works every time.” Chase looked at Bryce, his blue eyes full of mixed emotions that Bryce could not interpret.

“You know,” he started softly. “It’s not right how you play people for what you want. You’re a nice guy Bryce, and I wouldn’t trade your friendship for the world, but could you be kind to people even when you don’t need something?”

Bryce was silent for a minute. He knew that he always got what he wanted. He considered it his superpower.

“Are you saying that I’m not kind?” Bryce retorted, not in a mean way, but surprised. Chase slowly rolled his pencil in his fingers. Chase always did this when he was thinking of something important to say.

“Being nice is different than being kind. When you are nice you just treat others well. When you are kind you actually care about others and find ways to show that you care.”

Before Chase or Bryce could comment any further, the end of the day bell resounded in the classroom and the halls.

“My, my, Chase. You’ve turned into quite the philosopher.” Bryce chuckled, slugging Chase playfully on the shoulder. “I’ll see you around, okay?”

Bryce picked up his green zip up binder, water bottle, pencil case, and walked out of the doorway. Chase took a little longer, though, watching his friend leave. Hoping that something that he had said got to Bryce, he packed up his school binder and pencil case, and left the biology room. *If only Bryce would understand*, Chase thought as his new shoes squeaked on the floor, walking down the hall and toward his locker.

Back at home, Bryce dumped his bag on the ground, papers flying everywhere. *Shoot*. Bryce thought. *I forgot to zip my bag up*.

"Bryce honey, are you home?" came a muffled yell from upstairs.

"Yeah mom, I'm home!" Bryce yelled back. The Heartly house was big, and yelling was the most common form of communicating when the family members were in different rooms.

"Did you have a nice day?" Mrs. Heartly asked, descending the stairs in a queenly fashion. You couldn't hear her footsteps on the hard, wooden stairs.

"It was school." Bryce shrugged. "What can I eat for a snack?"

Mrs. Heartly smiled. "Oh, you teenagers and food. You can have some crackers and cheese if you like." Sighing, Bryce made his way into the kitchen. The light was dimmed, and the shiny metal fridge stood out to Bryce like it was surrounded by a halo.

"By the way Bryce," Mrs. Heartly started. "Some government papers came in the mail today. I think they have something to do with your G1..." That's all Mrs. Heartly had to say. Bryce tore toward the counter where the mail was kept. Muttering under his breath, Bryce fingered through the envelopes, tossing each one back that wasn't his back onto the counter one by one.

"Dad...Mom...Dad.... nope not this one...Amy's bank... Ah! Here it is!" He exclaimed when he found the thick, brown envelope covered Ontario government markings and lettering. Eagerly he tore it open. To Bryce's disappointment, his G1 card wasn't in the envelope.

"Did you get your card Bryce?" his dad asked as he walked into the room. Mr. Heartly set his black briefcase on the counter and gently pushed the gold-tinted clips to open the lid. Taking out his papers from the office, he laid them one by one in an orderly fashion on the table.

"No. Not yet. Just a bunch of papers and stuff," Bryce huffed. Bryce grabbed the crackers from the cupboard that held all of the crackers and chips. Brooding, he cut slices of cheese and poured himself a glass of milk. Taking a long sip, the cool milk slid down his insides that seemed to be burning with displeasure. Bryce didn't really taste the food as he forced it down.

"Guess who's a grump today?" Amy chirped when she came into the kitchen. Amy had that sisterly way about her that annoyed Bryce to his core.

"I'm not grumpy!" Bryce said rather forcefully, which summoned Mrs. Heartly into the kitchen to put an end to the sibling war that could erupt any minute.

"Amy, how was school? Do you have any homework?" Mrs. Heartly asked. Amy sighed, sounding very much like Bryce when he sighed.

"School was good. You wouldn't believe what Martha Thomas said about Kieth Rammy! We were sitting in the art room--"

That was as far as Amy got. Sending a look that only mothers can send, Mrs. Heartly said swiftly, "Amy," she paused for effect. "I suggest that you do your homework and then come help me with dinner."

Begrudgingly, Amy muttered a reluctant "Okay" and trudged to her room in a sulk. Mrs. Heartly turned to Bryce, and he braced himself for what his mother would say.

"Now Bryce, would you care to explain why you are in such a foul mood? You were perfectly fine when you came home." Bryce, quickly looking up at his mom from his cheese and crackers, suddenly found the cheese to be the most interesting thing in the room.

"Well Bryce?" Mrs. Heartly prompted.

Bryce looked into his mother's warm brown eyes. "I'd rather not talk about it right now. I have a biology project to finish and lots of English homework." Bryce simply said. His mother nodded, as in giving permission to leave or not to explain. Bryce didn't know which one it was, but he knew better than to ask. Gathering his papers and the envelope he slung his bag over his shoulder and stalked out of the kitchen. Something flew out of one of the pockets that wasn't zipped up. A red mechanical pencil landed on the floor, but no one noticed.

Bryce honestly didn't know what had put him in such a foul mood. His day was okay. Just like every Friday he was antsy to get out of school and embrace the weekend. He wasn't in a bad mood when he asked Mrs. Stevenson for an extra day, or even when he had to borrow a pencil from Leon. The fact that he didn't give the mechanical pencil back to Leon was completely forgotten and erased from his mind. Then, it seemed like a big bright yellow light bulb turned on above his head.

"It was what Chase said!" Bryce said aloud to himself. "That whole thing about being kind and nice or something like that..." To tell the truth, Bryce didn't really remember any of it. "Oh well – better finish this project." He muttered. Moving his binder to the side, he saw the brown envelope. He picked it up and used his pointer finger and middle finger to pinch the paper that were neatly inside. Pulling them out, he opened the first one. *Looks like I need to get my health card updated. Better show mom that one.* Bryce thought. Setting the first paper aside, he opened the second one. It was an information pamphlet on organ donations and attached to the back was a form with check boxes to fill out. Bryce read in his head. *Be nice. Even after you die. Canadians are nice and generous, which makes us a nation of organ donors.*

“What in the world?” Bryce muttered. He tended to mutter a lot when he was grumpy, or at least that’s what Amy said. “Be nice after we die? Canadians are nice and generous? That’s what I call a sweeping generalization.” Bryce exclaimed sarcastically. Bryce’s temper seemed to have new air to ride on. “Be nice, be kind, that’s all I hear! How am I supposed to be nice all the time?” Bryce’s blood seemed to boil at the thought of being nice to everyone, all the time. “And Chase wanted me to be kind? That’s way too much to ask.” ranted Bryce. *This whole organ donor thing and being nice after death is all too much. people are way too sensitive nowadays. Why can’t people toughen up?* Chucking the second paper on top of the first, he opened his biology binder and started on his project.

By dinnertime, Bryce had made his decision. He wasn’t going to fill out the organ donor paper. This way, he reasoned, he could fill out the paper on a day that he was feeling nice. Walking down the stairs, Bryce felt lighter at the smell of food. The scent that wafted over to him was the beckoning smell of roast beef. *Yum! Bryce thought. My favourite.*

Amy and Mrs. Heartly had spent over an hour cooking dinner, with perfection as the goal. Mr. Heartly and Bryce, the bias judges, granted them five stars. After the table was cleared off and wiped, Bryce and Amy washed and dried the dishes. Unfortunately, Bryce’s foul mood returned.

“Bryce, what did you get in the envelope?” Amy asked as she washed the dishes. Bryce was absentmindedly drying plates and stacking them on the counter.

“Just some stuff” Bryce generalized, not really wanting to go into detail. Amy, knowing that Bryce was avoiding the topic, pressed further.

“It had something to do with your driver’s license, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. Just some stuff.” Bryce shrugged, hoping that Amy would leave well enough alone.

“Shara Jenkins was talking about her older sister today. Her mom is a nurse and is into all kinds of medical stuff. Anyway, Shara’s sister is 16, and she got a letter asking her to be an organ donor. Aranda got it shortly after she got her G1. So I was just wondering...” Amy studied Bryce as he has stopped drying the white and black plate he was holding. Bryce didn’t look at her, because he was staring at the wall that was in front of him.

“Fine.” Bryce said evenly, but it came out like a growl. “I got a letter asking if I want to be an organ donor.”

Amy smiled. “And?” she prompted.

“I’m not going to fill it out.” Bryce said quickly. “Now it’s really none of your business, and--” Bryce stopped. He saw the reflection of his father in the window.

“Why not, Bryce?” Mr. Heartly inquired. Bryce stiffened at the question. Mr. Heartly was a researcher for Epidemiologists. He was into medical breakthroughs and was a supporter of organ donations. Bryce new better than to talk about anything medical with his father. After giving his dad a blank face for several minutes, Mr. Heartly found the need to educate his son.

“Organ donations can save lives Bryce. New research shows that one organ donor can save up to 8 lives and make 75 others better. It is a fascinating study that I personally wish I could do more of. Organ donors give the gift of life to someone.” Bryce shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another. He had read that on the paper, but he hadn't paid much attention to it.

Amy, feeling like she had to translate what Mr. Heartly had just said, piped up. “You can be a nice person even after you die! It’s showing you care for someone who you have never met!” she exclaimed enthusiastically. Mr. Heartly nodded.

“And a good young man like you, Bryce, should want to pass on kindness.” Mr. Heartly walked out of the kitchen and through the hall. Amy pulled the plug from the sink. The water swished through the drain, the soap bubbles crackling. Amy, not saying anything, smirked at Bryce and followed her father to the living room. Bryce was now alone in the kitchen muttering to himself.

“Whatever, *Nice* guy.” Sudden anger pulsed through Bryce. Nobody could tell him what do - or even suggest what to do - with his own body. And all this talk about being kind and nice had put Bryce into seeing red. Reluctantly, with much self-control, he told himself to calm down.

Walking down the dark hall that led to the garage, he looked at the key rack that was nailed to the wall. Bryce and Mr. Heartly had built it for Mother's Day five years ago. They two of them had spent hours cutting, sanding, nailing, and painting the wooden shelf to perfection. Engraved on the front were two words, ‘Welcome home’. Bryce shook his head, letting the memory flitter away. Now, hanging on the little pegs were three keys. Two of the three keys were spare house keys that Bryce and Amy used when their parents were not home. The third key was the key for the car that his mother drove. She didn’t take the silver Honda Civic out too often. Mrs. Heartly liked to stay home if she could.

The Honda was an older car with some little issues regarding the brakes and the headlights. One time on the way home from school, the brakes were not working so Mrs. Heartly had to ease her way off the road and come to a complete stop. It was a scary experience that made both Bryce and Amy dislike the car, but their mother always said that ‘if you know how to drive it, then go ahead, but you can’t be too hard on the brakes’. *Maybe a little joyride will help me calm down*, Bryce thought.

Bryce’s feet made a straight path towards the rack. His hand darted out in front of him and took the old Honda key in his hand. Holding the key in a tightly clenched sweaty palm,

Bryce walked through the connecting doors that joined the house and the garage. Walking around his father's black Audi R8, it gleamed in the semi darkness. The three-car garage was dimly lit by two old yellow light bulbs. If someone didn't know their way around, they would trip and fall flat on their face. Bryce sidestepped a green and black hose and walked around a rake that was leaning too far away from the wall. Bryce yanked on the chain that would pull the door open. Only one door had to be opened manually. Heaving the chain, Bryce thoughts tumbled down as the door opened. *You know what?* Bryce thought, *dad has all his medical scientific mumbo jumbo, and then Amy just goes along with everything and is smug the entire time. This is stupid.* Bryce swore and breathed heavily, as if oxygen was in short supply. Bryce didn't swear too often, but when he was mad, his mouth tended to run off. *I need to calm down.* Bryce concluded to himself.

Sunlight streamed in, as the sun was just starting to set. Bryce turned around and walked back to the driver's side of the Honda, which was gleaming silver. The car had been backed into the garage the last time it was parked. Opening the door, he slid in. Bryce sat still for a minute. He reached out and held the wheel. Taking a shaky breath, Bryce put the key in the ignition. Looking in the mirror, he glanced back at the connecting door. *Good. No one's there.* Now, turning the key, the car came to life. The low – pitched humming sent thrills through Bryce's fingers as he gripped the wheel. Shifting the car into drive, Bryce calmed down entirely.

The car slowly rolled out of the garage and onto the driveway. Bryce stepped on the gas, sending the car jerking forward.

"Oops. This car is touchy." Bryce made a note to himself not to hit the gas too hard. Bryce looked in his mirror again. The old red-bricked house looked like it was abandoned. There was no sign of his family. Bryce pulled out at the end of the driveway. The incredible feeling of freedom that came with driving swept through Bryce. He let out a whoop and turned the radio on. The station that came on was playing the Tennessee Waltz. Bryce automatically switched the station to Pop Radio.

Turning the radio up, rolling the windows down, Bryce continued his joyride down main street. He passed the old bricked building where he wrote his drivers test. He passed the road that led to Lennon High School. He passed the grocery store, the library, the art gallery, and Tim Hortons. Then slowly turning off onto a less traveled side street, Bryce squinted against the setting sun that was starting to block his view. His gaze drifted to a sign that hung in a window on a shabby wooden house. The all too familiar 'Be Kind' was written in pink paint and surrounded with painted daisies of all different colors.

"It seems like everyone and everything is on my case about being *kind*." Bryce huffed. Now, Bryce started once again to sulk, letting his foot become heavier on the gas pedal. Bryce didn't want to say it out loud, but this whole kindness thing started with Chase and what he said about Bryce being just nice, and seemed to add up. The word *nice* seemed to taste like bile

in Bryce's mouth. After he got the organ and tissue donor paper in the mail, he was fine until it said, 'be nice.' Bryce scanned the road ahead.

The fading sunlight was bright against the edges of the darkening sky that held a glorious sunset. The brilliant hues of blues, purples, oranges, and yellows were striking. Bryce glanced down at his speed. *I'd better slow down*, Bryce thought. Looking back up at the road, Bryce suddenly saw a dark figure in the corner of his vision running toward him.

Panic spread through Bryce. An oncoming car was in the other lane, the bright lights blinding him. Bryce couldn't swerve fast enough. Gripping the wheel, Bryce hit the brakes. The car screeched and Bryce heard a loud 'thunk' above the rushing in his ears. Bryce hit the brakes again, but nothing happened. Bryce swore loudly. Swerving on the road, Bryce couldn't control the car anymore. Sending a silent prayer to anyone who could hear, Bryce braced himself for impact. A deafening crack and the sound of glass shattering resounded in the dead quiet.

After what felt like hours had passed, Bryce finally snapped back to attention. Sirens were blaring, and Bryce opened his eyes. Bryce shuddered and quivered as he forced his hand to open the door. Stepping out, immense guilt and sorrow washed over him. The car that was in the other lane was missing the fender and the hood was all banged up. Shock catapulted through Bryce as his gaze drifted to blood splattered on the ground. His eyes followed the trail until it ended on Chase.

Hysterically, Bryce started yelling. "Chase! Chase!" Bryce tore towards where he lay. He fell on his knees beside his injured friend. Groaning softly, Chase opened his eyes when Bryce touched his head. "Oh Chase. I'm so, so sorry." Bryce sniffled. Chase closed his eyes, and slowly opened them again, his face contorted in pain.

Everything happened in slow motion after that. Bryce thought that someone had put a hand on his shoulder and said "Come on son," but Bryce couldn't remember. All he remembered was the panic, shock, guilt and pain from seeing his best friend lying on the ground. Bryce went so numb that he couldn't feel anything. Gasping for breath, Bryce shuddered and choked on sobs that were stuck in his throat. It felt like he was sinking, and he couldn't swim. He was going to drown in his own guilt and unkindness. Reaching out to hold something, Bryce grabbed at the air, and collapsed on the grass while blackness consumed his vision.

Blinking slowly, dizziness overwhelmed Bryce. Trying to focus against the flickering blue lights and a soft white glow, Bryce decided just to close his eyes and listen. An unfamiliar beep sent throbbing pain through Bryce's head. He could hear his own ragged breathing and distinct 'thump thump' from a heart broken in two.

"Chase." Bryce tried to say, but instead words couldn't form, and it came out in a groan. Resting his head further into the pillow, he drifted off into a fitful sleep.

"It's not looking good Mr. Williams. The internal injuries that he has received are serious and life threatening." A gasp and a sob came from Mrs. Williams.

"You have two options," the Dr. Craig continued. "As his parents and guardians, you can give us permission to take him off life support after you have said your goodbyes." The sobbing of Mrs. Williams turned into full out crying, and she buried her face in her husband's chest.

"That can't be the only way..." whispered Mr. Williams.

"Now I said that there is a second option," Dr. Craig said gently. "If Chase can receive an organ transplant, he will have the potential to make a full recovery."

"If?" questioned the shaky and hesitant Mr. Williams. His shaky hands gently wrapped around his wife.

"Organ donations rely on people's kindness. They also rely on the organ type, condition, and availability," the doctor replied. "If someone died in a car accident and was an organ donor, we could use his or her organs to save someone else. As I said before, it relies on kindness."

Mrs. Williams hiccupped and asked, "but if no one who is an organ donor dies..." She broke into sobbing and didn't finish her sentence.

Bryce jumped to a groggy attention as a beep startled him. Vision blurring, Bryce's heart grew heavy as he thought about everything that had just happened to him. His best friend was going to die, and it was all because of him. He wasn't being kind and nice to everyone, and when he was mad and distracted, he had hit his best friend who was out on his evening jog. Bryce, against his will, let out a sob. He didn't want to be an organ donor and now that was the very thing that Chase needed if he was going to live. It was all too much for Bryce to handle. He started to cry like a little kid crying when his favorite toy was taken away. Light from the outside hallway poured into his room. Bryce opened his eyes and through the veil of tears saw his mom walking toward him.

Bryce sobbed. "Oh mom..." Mrs. Heartly walked over, and saying nothing, wrapped her arms around Bryce, wishing that she could take all the pain away from her son.

Finally, she softly said, "I know Bryce, I know." Both mother and son cried, on and on.

Bryce was let out of the hospital the next morning. Greeted by local and non-local reporters, Bryce limped toward the car. It took most of his energy to walk, and his body burned with every step that he took. His dad held the reporters at bay by saying 'he is unable to comment right now' and stalked away from the nosy investigators.

Sleep fled from Bryce, who was plagued with nightmares and memories from that night. Days later, Bryce still scarcely said anything. Mr. Heartly didn't punish him for his deadly joyride because Bryce was already punishing himself. Mrs. Heartly fretted over her son. She didn't talk about the accident at all because she knew that half of Bryce was still at the hospital with Chase. The Heartly family still had not received any news about Chase, and they were starting to get worried.

Bryce didn't go to school on Monday, and he spent the whole day in his room, playing Chase's music playlist. Bryce lay on his bed staring up at the ceiling. If you stared at it long enough, the spots where the paint was chipping would form blobs and turn into different things—if you had an imagination. Bryce remembered the first time that Chase had come over. They had laid on this very bed and talked about all the things they wanted to do. They were going to build a treehouse, write a story, go to Australia together, and put a whoopie cushion under Mrs. Meecheu's pillow on her chair. Bryce remembered everything from that day. Those were some of the best days of his life. Bryce switched the song that was playing and went back to staring at the ceiling. A knock came at the door while Bryce was listening to 'Someone you loved' By Lewis Capaldi. Bryce didn't bother to answer but rolled off his bed and opened his door. Peeping to see who it was, he opened the door all the way after seeing it was Amy.

"Hey," Amy said quietly. "There is someone downstairs to see you." She glanced down the stairs and then walked back to her room.

Bryce gingerly made his way downstairs. The walls were painted a dark blue. Pictures were hung up in an orderly manner. Pictures when Bryce was a baby, when he was two, when Amy was born, and a picture of the Heartly family. Bryce's breath hitched when he saw the next picture. He reached up and with two fingers he lightly brushed Chase's face. Twelve-year-old Chase was holding a soccer ball and had a medal in his mouth, like the Olympic players did after they won. His free arm was around Bryce, who also had a medal in his mouth. They were both grinning from ear to ear. Bryce gave a small smile as he walked down the rest of the stairs, and when he got to the third last step, it squeaked. All conversation in the room below stopped, as they knew that Bryce was there.

Bryce walked quietly into the living room. He nervously looked around, and he saw his mom and dad sitting on the beige couch. Mrs. Heartly had her legs tucked under her and was tightly holding a striped pillow. Mr. Williams and Mrs. Williams sat on different chairs. Mr. Williams had one leg crossed over the other and Mrs. Williams sat straight and stiffly, her hands firmly folded and gaze down at the floor. Bryce stared in horror at his best friend's parents. Bryce's mind was working overtime to find something to say. What could he say? *I'm sorry that I caused your son's death? He was my best friend?* Bryce tried to say hello, but no words formed, so he nodded instead. There was an awkward silence. Bryce shifted his feet, and Mrs. Heartly fingered the loose strings on the pillow. Mrs. Williams coughed, and then she looked up at Bryce.

“Bryce,” her voice was just above a whisper. “We know that it was an accident-”

“No, Mrs. Williams. I caused it.” Bryce said in an unsteady voice. “If I had just listened to what everyone was telling me, Chase would still be here! It’s all my fault!” Bryce said in a harsh tone. He wasn’t made at the Williams, but at himself.

“Still here?” Mr. Williams asked, with a puzzled look on his face.

“Yes!” Bryce said. “He wouldn’t be dead.”

Mrs. Williams gently put a hand on Mr. Williams knee. “He doesn’t know, Garrett. He hasn’t been told yet,” she said to her husband, a flush in her cheeks. Mr. Williams looked at Bryce and smiled a real smile.

“Chase didn’t die, honey. He is hurt badly, but he is alive.” Mrs. Williams said quietly. Seeing Bryce’s shocked face, Mrs. Heartly cut in.

“He’s alive?” relief washed over him, followed by a tidal wave of guilt.

“Bryce, Garrett and Susan were telling us that Chase received an organ transplant at the last minute. It was successful and he is expected to make a full recovery,” she explained.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Bryce said meekly.

“We didn’t know until now,” Mr. Heartly answered.

Turning to Mrs. and Mr. Williams, Bryce said quietly, “I’m so, so, sorry.” Very few words were said after that. Just idle talk about work and family back home. Bryce was okay with this though. He didn’t know what *to* say. All that Bryce could feel was thankfulness and relief, but ten times that the guilt and sorrow. slowly getting up from the chair he was sitting on, Bryce said polite goodnights and made his way to the hall.

Bryce stopped by the kitchen and poured water into a glass cup. Taking a long sip, something red caught his eye. Putting the cup down on the marble countertop, Bryce picked up a red mechanical pencil from off the floor. Clutching the pencil in his left hand, Bryce finished his cup of water and went back upstairs to bed. Before climbing into bed, however, Bryce sat at his desk and finished what he should have done two days before. Completing the task, Bryce crawled into bed, feeling more refreshed than he had in the past week.

The next morning, before Bryce biked to school, he stopped at the drive test building. The open sign hung in the large, clear window but it was not turned on. Bryce put the kickstand on his bike down and opened the small front pocket on his backpack. He pulled out a return envelope that had a service Ontario address. Bryce took small easy steps toward the bright red mailbox. As he pulled on the handle, the hinges creaked and the cold metal sent a chill through Bryce, who’s nose had already gone numb in the cool morning air. Looking one last time at the

envelope, Bryce felt it slip through his fingers and heard a dull din of the letter hitting the bottom of the box.

Bryce sighed and went back to his bike. Swinging one foot over the bike and the other kicking up the stand, Bryce biked onto the side street that led to Lennon High School. Putting his bike on the bike rack, he dashed inside as it started to rain. The smell of the musty halls greeted Bryce as he passed familiar faces. When people saw Bryce, they turned and whispered things like “accident.... killed his friend... Chase?” Bryce ignored the swirling gossip and searched for the one face he was looking for. On his way to his locker, Bryce stopped by the teachers' room and dropped off his part of the biology project in Mrs. Stevenson’s mailbox. Finally, as Bryce came to his locker, he found who he was looking for.

“Daehdrah! Hey, Leon!” Bryce shouted to catch his attention. Leon turned around and walked to where Bryce was standing. Bryce had one hand in his bag, digging through his binders and papers.

“Here.” Bryce said as he pulled out the red mechanical pencil from his bag. “I forgot to give this back.” Handing the pencil to Leon, Bryce smiled – a true smile - and opened his locker door. For Bryce, the day seemed to fly by. He didn’t remember to hand in all his English papers, but Mrs. Stevenson didn’t say anything because she knew what had happened on Friday night. Bryce had told her all about, wanting to seek comfort in telling someone other than his family. Bryce walked through the halls, commenting to himself about the faded yellow colour of the paint. On the way out after the dismissal bell had rung, Bryce passed by the gymnasium, glancing away from the walls and looking at the big metal grey-blue door.

“Hi Bryce,” said a sweet feminine voice. Bryce whirled around. He was to almost face-to-face with Carley Richardson.

Taking a step back, Bryce said, “Hey.” She looked around for a minute and smiled. *This is the definition of awkward.*

“Well...” Carley started, clearly looking flustered. She stared down at her nails and started scraping at the cherry nail polish. “Goodness, this is awkward.” She gave a nervous giggle and Bryce gave an equally unsteady laugh. Looking back at Bryce, words rushed out of Carley.

“I heard about the crash and Chase and everything, and I'm sorry for everyone...” She trailed off. Bryce, whose interest was now peaked, gave her a questioning look. “How is Chase?” Carley looked up with an honest and concerned face.

“I’m fine thanks for asking,” he teased, and Carley gave an exasperated face. Bryce, feeling a little bad for her, said quietly, “he will be fine.” He started to walk away and then a mischievous thought came into his head. He turned around and shouted, “I’ll tell him that you asked about him!”

Carley went tomato red and hurried away, her long hair flowing behind her. Bryce passed through the front doors of Lennon High School. The soothing sound of rain calmed Bryce as he looked out of the window. Normally his mom or dad would pick Bryce up when it was raining hard. Squinting, Bryce saw his dad's black car and ran toward it as the rain pelted against him. After being thoroughly soaked, Bryce reached and swung the door open, throwing his bag by his feet.

"Hey dad. Thanks for the lift." Bryce said to Mr. Heartly. Mr. Heartly was also covered in rain drops that had splattered over his navy-blue work vest.

"I put your bike in the back." Mr. Heartly said, making a hand gesture to the back seat.

Bryce smiled at him "Thanks. Umm, dad? This isn't the street that we take to get home." Bryce pointed out. Mr. Heartly looked at Bryce.

"I thought that we could take a small detour." He looked ahead at the road, careful not to let his face give away the destination.

"Where?" Bryce asked. Instead of answering, Mr. Heartly turned the radio on and was silent. When he didn't get an answer, Bryce sat back and decide to enjoy the ride. Thirty minutes later, Bryce and Mr. Heartly ambled out of the car and walked toward the towering building. There must have been at least four floors, and hundreds of windows. A huge sign hung on top of the overhang where cars could drop off passengers. Written in blue fancy loopy writing was 'Denssink General Hospital'. Denssink was a larger city compared to Lennon. It had more people and commotion than small-town Lennon. The Denssink General Hospital was known for the technology and rehabilitation programs. Mr. Heartly motioned for Bryce to follow him inside. Bryce stood still, like his feet had turned to concrete, his mouth agape.

"Here?" Bryce said in disbelief.

"Well if you want to see Chase," suggested Mr. Heartly. Bryce didn't need any more prompting. He sprinted to catch up with his father, and then both men walked through the automatic doors and made their way in. They were welcomed with the smell of a typical hospital. Bryce would have a hard time describing what the hospital smelled like for an English paper, because the hospital had its own smell. Mr. Heartly talked the receptionist in a hushed tone. The younger lady behind the counter smiled politely and said that Chase Williams was in room 117, third floor. Mr. Heartly and Bryce thanked her and went to the elevators. Upon arriving at the third floor, Bryce counted down the numbers till he got to room 117.

"I'll stay out here Bryce. You go in and talk to Chase first. I'll come in later." Mr. Heartly said. Knocking quietly, Bryce heard a muffled "Come in." Bryce slowly opened the door, revealing a hospital room. There was a large window that had a view of a green park, with a swing set and playground. Underneath the window was an old yellow couch and a stiff metal chair. The bed that sat in the middle of the room looked uncomfortable and hard. The clean

bedsheets looked crisp and untouched, even though Chase, wearing sweatpants and a black hoodie, was sitting on them.

“Hey Bryce.” Chase said. Bryce looked into Chase’s eyes. Chase’s face was all scraped up and his right arm was in a cast. Without asking, Bryce knew that Chase had forgiven him.

“Hi.” Bryce returned. “How are you?”

“I’m doing fine. The doctor is really nice and they’re saying that I could be out of here in a few months. How’s school? Did I miss anything important?” Chase asked, looking up with earnest eyes. Bryce thought for a minute.

“School is still there. I handed in the biology project to Mrs. Stevenson, gave a pencil back to Leon, and I talked to Carley for the first time in years. But it’s not the same without you.” Chase smiled at Bryce and then looked super confused.

“Hold it. You borrowed a pencil from Leon? And talked to Carley WITHOUT me? Dude, what happened?” Once Bryce started talking, he didn’t stop. He started with the Friday where everything went wrong and recounted what made him so mad. He talked about the red mechanical pencil that he borrowed from Leon Daehdrah. Bryce talked about everything. The driving, the crash, and the shock and pain. Chase was a perfect listener. He didn’t say anything until Bryce had said what he wanted to say.

“Chase, I’m so, so sorry. I should have listened to you and everyone else.” Bryce choked out, with tears threatening to cloud over.

“You’re not done your story yet.” Chase said.

“What?” Bryce said, a little shocked. “I’m not done?”

Chase grinned. “No. You’re not. What did Carley say to you?” Bryce was not expecting this question, and all seriousness faded away.

Grinning like a child with a deep secret, Bryce simply said, “Oh, you know.”

With an impatient sigh, Chase muttered, “Aww, come on Bryce. Be a nice guy. Show a little kindness to your dear and broken friend.” Chase held up his right arm as if to prove that he was broken.

Bryce Heartly smiled and said, “I’m learning.”