

Creative Writing Contest 2022
"Stage Fright" by Isabel Schuster
1st Place - Short Fiction

My hands are shaking again. Why won't they stop shaking? It's not a big deal. In a few days, in a week, in a month from now, this moment won't matter. It's just a speech. It's just another assignment. Looking around the classroom at my fellow students' dull, glazed faces, I can tell that they will hardly remember anything I say in front of them. I take a slow, deep breath and wipe my sweaty palms on my pants.

"Ariana Lewis." My history teacher smiles at the last presenter and gestures for me to come to the front of the room. I push back my chair and it squeaks as I stand up. I feel everyone's eyes on me as I take step after terrible step forward. My stomach isn't full of butterflies, it's full of acid, eating away at every part of me until there's nothing left.

The worst part is I know, rationally, that there's nothing to be afraid of. All I have to do is stand in front of my classmates and talk about the difficulties of trench warfare in WWI. I've done plenty of research and know what I need to say. That isn't the problem. The problem is everyone watching and judging. The problem is my every thought vanishes into thin air as soon as the focus is on me. The problem is I hate being the center of attention, and sometimes I just can't take it. Now feels like one of those times, but I've reached the front of the classroom and there's no turning back.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear and clear my throat.

"Throughout World War I, trench warfare..."

This can't possibly be my voice; it sounds too high and thin.

"...trench warfare was used as a way to advance each side, although..."

I swallow, trying to articulate how slow and painstaking gaining ground using this technique was, but the words lodge in my throat. I blink and stare ahead and continue to talk haltingly. If only I could have written a paper, if only I could think faster. I want to cry.

Stage Fright

Five minutes seem to last a lifetime.

My face burns by the end of the presentation and there's a scattering of half-hearted applause. I have to restrain myself from running back to my seat. Instead I take quick, measured steps and all but collapse into my chair.

"Nice job," a voice from behind me says.

I groan and twist my body around to respond. Looking into Claire's clear, blue eyes, I can't help but smile at her seemingly genuine compliment.

"Thanks, but if I was given the choice between jumping off a cliff or talking about trench foot for a second longer, I would take the cliff in a heartbeat."

Claire giggles. The sound helps dispel the last of my lingering anxiety. I let out a deep breath.

"You know if you ever need any help, I'm here," she says quietly.

Of course Claire would say that. Kind, smart Claire, always looking out for her friends. She does everything so effortlessly; she barely even broke a sweat giving her speech. Could Claire actually help me? I'm willing to try anything at this point.

"You know, I'd really appreciate that," I responded and gave her a half-hearted smile.

"My house afterschool?"

"Sure."

The rest of the day is a blur. In a blink, I find myself raising a hand to knock on the door of Claire's house. The sound echoes and I stand shivering on the doorstep, waiting for my friend to answer. It doesn't take long; Claire is always punctual.

"Hi, good to see you," she says, opening the door wider.

"Thanks again for inviting me."

Stage Fright

I step inside and pull my shoes off, stacking them neatly in the closet. Together we walk down the hall to her bedroom, my sock feet slipping on the hardwood floor. We sit on her soft, comfy bed for a moment before she turns to me.

“You have to get over this fear. Tell me what you feel like and why.”

I frown. No small talk then. Sighing, I explain my mounting anxiety, the way my whole body shakes, and the panic I swallow every time I have to talk in front of people.

She nods and watches me carefully. After a moment, she pulls out a pad of paper and a pen and starts taking notes.

Something feels off. My head starts to ache, and I rub it with the palm of my hand. Claire stands up.

“Look in the mirror.”

She points to the one hanging on the wall across from the bed.

“I want you to start your presentation from history and remember what you felt like earlier. Look at your reflection and tell yourself you’re not scared. You can do this.”

In a daze, I walk across the room. I frown at my reflection. My hair hangs tangled and messy to my shoulders, my lips feel dry and chapped, and my green eyes are wide and staring. I look terrified.

“I’m not scared,” I say to the mirror. I swallow.

“In WWI, trench warfare was a method of combat where soldiers built trenches in the ground for cover and would climb out and charge the other side to gain ground.”

I frown at the mirror. For a second Claire’s bedroom behind me didn’t look like a bedroom. The walls turned a dark gray, the comfortable bed was replaced with a desk, and the warm lights changed cold and flickering.

Stage Fright

My head pounds.

“I’m not scared. I’m not scared. I’m not scared,” I whisper.

Claire’s reflection smiles at me in the mirror. Was she wearing glasses earlier?

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear and prepare to say the rest of the speech when something around my wrist catches my eye. A paper bracelet with small writing on it. A hospital band. The words die in my throat. I slowly turn around.

“It’s okay. Just imagine what you’re going to say; don’t worry about what anyone else thinks. Picture the words in your head,” Claire says as she gently leads me to the desk.

I move my mouth but nothing comes out. I choke back panic. I can’t speak. Staring at Claire questioningly, I claw at my throat, tears in my eyes.

“Calm down, we’re here to help you. Take a deep breath and relax. It’s like a bad case of stage fright but everyone’s gone now.”

I can feel my body trembling. My lips trace one word:

Help.