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a celebration and
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Best Midwestern High School Writing: A
Celebration and Recognition of Outstanding Prose

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La Casa De La Bella

Elizabeth Davis

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SORIA, SPAIN - 1944

Mi amour.

She skipped out into the garden, plucking a daisy here, a tulip there. Springtime. Her favorite season. It made her happy, to see the new life.

He liked it when she was happy. He liked it when she smiled. It made her look even more *Hermosa*.

She twirled about, mouthing a tune her *Madre* often sang. Well, he assumed as much. He wasn't close enough to tell, but if he knew her as well as he presumed he did, that was what she was doing. At any cost, she danced about to a tune only she could hear.

She was so innocent, so young, so precious, he was so *en amour, amour, amour*.

He could faintly recall when he first heard of her unavoidable arrival. Her *Madre* had excitedly called to him over the fence, doing an odd shuffle-hop-step dance in place. As soon as he came into hearing distance, she called, "Estoy embarazada, estoy embarazada!" - *I'm pregnant, I'm pregnant!* He could remember, try as he might to forget, that his thoughts were entirely on the unpleasantness of the shrill, loud cries babies make and the revolting smells they emit, and how he hoped he wouldn't have to re-establish himself elsewhere to escape them.

He was completely unprepared for the tidal wave of emotion that overcame him the day her *Madre* brought her outside of the house. Her *Madre* stood up on her tip-toes, her new little bundle cradled safely in her arms, and showed her baby girl to him over the fence. He felt a gut-wrenching pull towards the girl almost immediately, and asked ever-so-politely if he could hold the baby swaddled in terry cloth. As the new *Madre* handed him the sleeping girl, she proudly announced the arrival of Bella Levisquete. Bella. *Beautiful*. It was so fitting, so *perfecto*.

That was eight years ago, and the connection he felt to Bella was still there, still strong. Now, he peered at her over the very same fence from eight years ago, when she first came home. He chuckled as she spun in useless circles. She was barefoot- again. Her *Madre* hated it when she ran about without shoes. Oh, well. Bella obeyed nearly every rule her *Madre* set. Breaking one, tiny rule wouldn't hurt anybody.

She slowed her dancing to a stop in front of a bed of a pansies, and sat down on a large boulder. She laid down on her back, stretched across the rock. She closed her eyes and let out a huge pent-up breath. Absently, one of her hands reached up to play with her thick, wavy black hair. She crossed her tan legs and lay still. This was something she did often, ever since the news came that her *Padre* had perished in the Civil War last year.

He looked over to the windows on the back of Bella's *casa*. The lights were on, but nothing stirred. His eyes were drawn to a window on the second floor, where he knew from dinner parties that a bathroom was located. The blinds were closed, but he could see the distinctive yellowish glow of a light within the room. *Perfecto*.

He crept over to the gate and shimmied through the partially-opened gate. Silently, he weaved around several various flower beds and pots, creeping up silently behind her. Slowly, he reached out his hands and touched her tanned shoulders. "Boo!"

Bella's eyes snapped open and she sat up with a start. She turned around to see who scared her, and upon realizing it was him, Edgar, she flashed a huge smile. Then, she cocked her head to the side, eyes scrunched in confusion. It was a silent question of, *Why are you here?*

“I saw you sitting here and thought you would enjoy some company,” he said quietly.

She smiled again and nodded vigorously. She scooted over on the rock and patted the empty space next to her. He quickly sat, his arm brushing hers. A jolt of electricity flew up his arm.

“It is so you, today.” He joked. *Bella, sweet Bella, sweet beautiful.*

A small blush formed on her cheeks, and she gave a tiny smile that indicated she was giggling, in her mind. He tried to imagine what her giggle might sound like. What her laugh might sound like. What her voice might sound like. But he soon gave up, deciding that anything his brain could picture couldn't possibly compare to the real thing.

“The poppies are growing well,” he said, gesturing to the yellowish-gold potted flowers opposite their rock. Bella flashed another giggle-indicating smile and pointed to some red flowers on his right. “Oh” he said, slightly embarrassed for stating the wrong flora. “Well, the gold ones are *bonita.*”

She smiled proudly, having grown them herself. They sat in silence for a while, which was not a problem to Edgar, as he was just happy to be in her company. *Time with mi Bella is so precious.*

Soon, a thought came to him. “Should we go the rivulet?” Just past the fence that marked the end of the Levisquete property, there was a large grove of trees, and tucked in the middle was the rivulet he had in mind.

Bella bit her lip and cast a worried glance back at her *casa*. She normally wasn't allowed to go to the rivulet, as her mother was insistent that it held nothing but danger. She had gone fishing with her *Padre* there years ago, but even then, she wasn't allowed to leave the trees and stand in the rocks. She had been a few other times that her mother wasn't aware of, on days when she felt especially brave. However, she could never make herself leave the trees.

“Oh, your *Madre* will never know. I won't tell.” He chuckled. “Besides,” he added, grabbing her hand, “I'll be there with you. I'll even hold your hand the whole time.” *I promise. I won't let go.*

She stared at him a moment, then smiled largely, showing her approval, but forever silent. He stood up quickly, taking her with him, and strode to the gate in the back of her fence. He unlatched it quickly, then, still holding her hand, slipped out of her property closing the gate behind them as they did. Together, they walked a few yards across some grass, then went across the grove. They swerved and dodged thorny hedges and prickly weeds, and soon came to a stop where the thick, concealing trees ended, and large rocks the size of a grown man's fist began. The rocks led downhill and stopped at the bank of the gushing rivulet, then picked up again of the other side, only this time, leading uphill, and then back into thick trees.

“Come on.” Edgar prompted, tugging her down towards the water. Bella didn't budge. She looked at her hand clasped in his, and then at her other fist that was still clenched around the stems of the tulip and the daisy. Then, she looked up at Edgar's face, her own impassive. Suddenly, she shook her head. *No.*

“It's ok, Bella. I won't let anything happen to you. You are much too precious to me.” *Mi amour. Can't you tell I won't let any harm come?*

Bella bit her lip and took a tentative step forward. Then another. Then another. Soon, she was standing with both her feet on the rocks, on the edge of the grove. “See?” he

coaxed. “Nothing’s going to happen.” *Don’t you trust me, mi amour?* Slowly but surely, clutching Edgar’s hand with incredible force, she picked her way down the rocks to the rushing water. She cleared a few rocks out of the way and sat down, sticking her feet and ankles in the water. Edgar sat beside her, smiling.

Edgar thought, and not for the first time, what it would be like to kiss her. Not her forehead, not her crown, not her hand, not her cheek. He’d done all of that. No, he wondered what it would be like to kiss her, on the *los labios*- her mouth.

But he didn’t dare try- not yet. Just wait a few more years. Eventually, she’ll be old enough to attempt to kiss. Just not yet. *But I will wait, mi amour.*

She smiled broadly at the water as it bubbled along, her feet making ripples across the surface as she kicked and splashed. Looking at her smile, he decided that in all of his thirty-seven years, he’d never seen a smile so radiant or beautiful. *Mi Bella-Beauty.*

“Isn’t it so *hermosa?*” He asked after a while. He stroked her palm with his thumb. Bella nodded vigorously. She tilted her head to the side and gave the tiniest of nods, a silent thank you.

“*De nada,*” he said, almost absently. She returned to her childish kicking. He glanced up at the sky, and through the canopy of tangled-together branches overhead, saw the sun was retreating to the other side of the world. “We should head back, Bella-Beauty.” He tugged her up so that she was standing. Carefully, he guided her back up the rocky climb. Near the top, he dropped her hand so that he could grab onto the branches near his head, to enable him to steady himself and climb up the last few feet of rocks. Bella daintily followed behind him, stepping on the flattest stones she could find. However, she found that the next flat stone was a step ahead of Edgar, and he was a few steps ahead of her.

She couldn’t call to him, and when she stretched out her arm to tap him, he moved out of her reach. *Oh.* Well, she could reach it by herself. She steadied herself, crouched down, and leapt for the stone. She soared through the air. The toes on her left foot slapped down onto the desired stone, but the rest of her left foot and her entire right foot slammed down onto surrounding stones. The sharp edges stabbed into her bare feet, and her mouth opened to let out a cry of pain that would never come. Unable to dig in her bare heels to get a grip on the rock, she tilted backwards, arms flailing.

Edgar was shaken out of his Bella-induced thoughts by the sound of clattering rocks. “Beauty?” He looked over his shoulder, just in time to see her fall completely backwards. She tumbled down, down, down the rocks, bumping and scraping, her face painted with a look of pain, her mouth frozen in a silent scream.

Crack!

The sound reverberated through the air as her the back of her skull collided with a large, pointed rock. She rolled a few more few downhill, stopping face-down right on the bank of the rivulet. Her right arm splashed lifelessly in the water, and the flowers she’d held so tightly in her fist were yanked from her slackened grip and carried downstream on the current.

“*Mi amour, mi Bella, mi amour!*” Edgar fumbled and skittered downhill, sliding to a stop next to her. He dropped to his knees and rolled her over. He shook her shoulders. “Bella! Bella!” She did not stir. A distinct puddle of redness grew larger and larger around her head. He propped her up so that she was sitting upright against his knees. Her eyelids drooped lower and lower until her eyes were completely covered.

They did not open again.

He gathered her in his arms and bounded up the rocky hill, stepping where Bella had tumbled, as her body scattered the rocks away.

He raced through the woods, stepping on brambles, tripping over branches and being scratched by thorns and hedges.

“*Ayudame! Ayudame!!*” He shouted at the top of his lungs. Neighbors poked their heads out of their *casas*, looking around for the source of the shouts. He plowed through the unlatched gate in the back of the Levisquete property, running as fast as his legs would take him. *Mi amour, mi amour, mi Bella.*

The kind old woman across the street was the first to catch site of the bruised and battered girl. She let out a shrill cry and rushed as fast as she could across the street. Others soon followed her example. *You are not fast enough. You are not fast enough to save mi Bella.*

Soon, wrapped in a robe, Madre Levisquete herself peered out her back door to find the source of commotion. Her eyes widened at the sight of her lovely, beautiful, only daughter. She pushed past the groups of people gawking at the sight of the broken girl, until she was in front of Edgar. She reached out with a shaky hand, and brushed Bella’s hair out of her closed eyes, as if she did not quite believe what she was seeing. Then she was screaming. Her high, shrill screams barely registered in Edgar’s ears as her put her gently down on the grass.

“*Que hiciste?! Que hiciste?!?*” Madre Levisquete seemed to just notice who it was that had carried her precious daughter. *What did I do? I did nothing. I did nothing.* But Edgar couldn’t bring himself to open his mouth and say the words he was thinking. He couldn’t bring himself to do anything, anything but stare at the broken girl on the grass. Madre Levisquete came at him, screeching and clawing. She got a swipe at his face, tearing it with her nails. She began to hurdle accusations at him. She began to shout that she knew he had a fascination with her daughter. That he had an obsession. That he had morbid intentions with her.

And then she began to cry. She told him that she did nothing to stop him. That she said nothing about his constant hovering over her Bella.

“*Esto es culpa tuya. Esto es todo por tu culpa!*” She was putting the fault on...him? Maybe herself? It was all someone’s fault, according to Madre Levisquete.

And it was all the same, to everyone, because Bella would not stir again. She would not beam her stunning smile, and her bright eyes would not shine anymore.

Mi amour, please come back to me.

She didn’t.