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**2019 STEM Options Writing Contest**

**Grades 6 – 8**

**Second Place Winner**

**Palladium Lungs**

**Anastasia Lauer**

It’s been a year. A year since the worldwide gasoline explosion. A year since my brother died in the accident. And a year since my world turned upside down.

Before the big accident, my mom had been a nerdy metallurgist that was never with us exactly, she was only ever thinking about her strange metals project. After everything went wrong everyone my mom ever knew left or wasn’t there to help. They were too busy at the lab, the lab my mom used to work at.

The reason my mom got fired wasn’t something she openly talked about, from what I got out of her was that her metals’ project had gotten out of hand and it caused her to get in serious trouble.

Before my world got turned upside down I was just a normal kid doing things that normal kids do. I would sit in a classroom for eight hours waiting for the final bell to ring. I had a best friend who would get into trouble with me and he would also listen to what I had to say.

I think about all this as I walk into the kitchen, my mom sleeping on top of her computer. She never seemed to stay awake long enough to walk up the stairs and go into her bed. It was always: “must finish the research” or “where did the prototype go?”

“Mom…” I say quietly, “Mom… wake up mom, I need to go out for a little bit.”

I shake her shoulder softly, trying to wake her up. I continue doing this but after a while, I give up and leave her a note instead.

*Hi, Mom*

*I’m going out to look for more metal scraps.*

*Don’t worry, I have the tank!*

*Love you*

*-Athena*

Going outside isn't something people do, most don’t even own an oxygen tank.

Our family is lucky, we own one. It’s okay though, I’m the only one who goes out anyway.

When I look out a window you can’t tell there's something wrong. There are plants and trees everywhere and lakes and ponds scattered about. But when I step out the door I hear nothing, everything is still, no squirrels scatter by, no birds chirp from the trees.

It’s utterly quiet.

Of course, it wasn’t always like this. Before there was life everywhere, animals in the woods, birds chirping on trees. Before, we were able to have pets.

But as I step outside, it is lifeless. I don’t stop to wonder what it would have been like if the air was never poisoned if everyday people could just walk outside and take a breath of air like we are supposed to. But I don’t even miss a beat, my feet carry me to the one place that I know my mom would want me to go, the junkyard.

The junkyard isn’t much at first glance if you were just walking by you wouldn’t think much about it. But for me? It’s a place I can find anything that has anything to do with metal. But it’s also where I go to find the parts my mom wants me to get.

Most of the time my mom just wants me to scrounge around but sometimes she tells me to look for old cars and find certain metals that are found in the engine.

As I get to the spot that I normally find all the car parts the tank on my back starts to feel heavy. I start to tremble as my lungs begin to burn. I fall to my knees, hands shaking, I try to take a breath.

It burns.

My lungs feel like acid, and I start to see black spots at the corners of my vision. I try to stand up, I stumble at first and almost fall down again. I try to take a step forward.

One more step. Just one more.

I tell myself this as I stumble down the hill. The pain in my lungs was almost too great to bare.

One more step.

I push my right leg forward, trying not to fall, then I push my left leg. I repeat this stumbling at times.

Right.

Left.

Right.

Left.

As I round a corner my vision starts to wander and my brain loses focus of what I set out to do.

One last step.

The constant pain seems to die down, at least for a little bit, and it gives my brain a chance to think.

Why?

Why was this happening?

The answer comes to me, mom had been working all night and wasn’t able to put more oxygen in the tank! As soon as I realize this the acidic pain in my lungs comes back greater than before.

I crumble to the ground, tears streaming down my face. This is how my brother died, I think, as my vision goes black.

I’m dead.

That one single thought comes to me as I open my eyes. My head spins as I try to sit up.

“Hello? Is anyone here?” I yell my voice strained. No response.

“Hello?” I say trying again. “Mom? Someone? Anyone?” “T-tina?” a muffled voice say.

I knew that voice!

“Mom!” I say hoping she would explain where I was and why I wasn’t dead. Dead.

The word sticks in my head. Why *wasn’t* I dead? As I think about this my eyes wander and I take in my surroundings. I was in a dark room with mirrors on every wall.

“Tina?” My mom's voice jolts me out of my thoughts. “Oh, Tina!” My mom runs over to me.

“Mom! Where am I?”

“You’re safe, that's all that matters.” “What happened to me?”

“Well… I think I should let someone else explain that.”

Just as she says that a man walks into the room. The man whore a crisp black suit that made him look taller than he actually was.

“How are you, Tina?” he asks.

I don’t know what to say, thankfully my mom saves me.

“Excuse me… Mr. Kreyn? Tina is a little tired. She just got up…”

“Oh... sorry!” he answers, “I just thought Tina would like to know what a major role *you* played in her… um, what would you call it? Instrument perhaps?”

Instrument? What was he talking about? My mom must have seen the confusion on my face so she summed it up very quickly.

Basically, My mom had saved me by putting two devices, using the metal Palladium, in each of my lungs so I could breathe normally. My mom had been working on a prototype of this device and I had been the test subject.

They had no clue if the device would work but my mom seemed confident. “You will test this new device and I will hope it works.” Mr. Kreyn said.

“I’ll do it,” I say trying to sound confident.

As I walk up to the door my mom walks up beside me and takes my hand.

Whatever happened my mom had my back. I don’t think of all the sad heartbreaking things that happened in the past year. I thought of all the good happy things as I step outside for the first time in a year without a tank and take a deep breath.