

February 2017 Contest Stories:

Love Conquers All

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Winning Story: *By A. Petersen*

The children were screaming again. Kevin Williams could hear them. He always could. But this time they were getting louder...louder...they wouldn't stop.

No...no...NO! He sucked in a breath and opened his eyes, breathing hard. He was still in a jail cell, a cold, lonely jail cell. His breath still came fast. He placed his hands on his knees and tried to remember to breathe.

In...out...in...out.

Finally the calm was reaching his soul. He needed a drink. Surely that would take the pain away. It had been three days...or was it three weeks? He couldn't remember. All he could remember was the screams, metal bending, loud screeches of tires grinding to a halt. His legs curled beneath him as his head hit his pillow, and he knew no more.

Aimee Wright watched as they lowered the casket into the ground, the casket that held her little sister, the little sister whose delighted giggle she would never hear again, the little sister who would never again annoy Aimee with her constant jabbering or whiny pleas. The thought sent a sob to her throat. The preacher was still speaking, but she couldn't pay attention, couldn't concentrate.

"God,why?"

Why hadn't God protected her little sister? And why did it have to be her? The drunk should pay for what he had done to her family. And he would; Aimee would make sure of that.

The funeral was finished and Aimee sat cross-legged on her bed, making tiny designs in the bedspread with her finger. Her Bible lay beside her where she had laid it when she got home. She reached over, running her thumb along the browned pages and thinking about the past week. Never once had she opened this book. A wave of guilt slammed into her. She had tried to convince herself she was just busy with the funeral, but maybe the real reason was that she was mad at God. Was it possible? She had always fancied herself as being close to God, but maybe she wasn't at all. She ran her fingers along the old cover, remembering the long talks she used to have with God. She knew the real reason she was avoiding Him. It was because of her bitterness, bitterness against Him for letting the accident happen at all, bitterness against the drunk who lost control, slamming into the minivan carrying her sister and her friends that fateful Saturday night, the man who was left completely whole and unharmed, while her sister's life had been cut short when she still had so much of it to live.

“Why, God?” she asked, for what felt like the trillionth time that day. She heard no audible answer, but somewhere from the deepest parts of her soul, she felt a barely detectable whisper. She glanced down at the book in her lap. Did God want her to read? Was he going to show her something? She fingered the pages again, then closed her eyes as she inserted her thumb among them.

Okay, God. Show me...please. I’m listening.

The Bible fell open on her lap, and she opened her eyes. The passage was 1 Peter 2. She ran her eyes down the page, and they fell on verse 21.

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:

Follow his steps? Jesus had suffered much for her; she had known that since she was five. But had she ever really suffered for him? She glanced back down, and as she did, her eyes came to verse 22:

Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:

How many times had she thought wicked things against her “persecutor”—the drunk who had murdered her sister? She gulped and continued reading.

Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously:

As she read on, it talked of the suffering Jesus had endured on the cross for her. What she went through was small compared to that. If God was asking her to forgive Kevin Williams, then she could try, but only with God’s help. She jumped up and ran down the hall to the kitchen where her mother was sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee. Aimee leaned in the doorway and grinned—her first smile in a long time.

“Mom...I have an idea.”

“Williams, you have a visitor.”

Kevin groaned and sat up in bed. A visitor? Who could that be? No one cared about him. At that moment, a young girl—maybe fourteen or fifteen—stepped up to the bars. She held a book in her hand.

“Hi. My name is Aimee Wright...Sara’s big sister.”

His jaw dropped. This was her? The older sister of the little girl he had killed in a drunken stupor? What was she doing here? She looked extremely uncomfortable, but she held out to him the book she had been carrying. Not until he got it in his lap did he realize it was a Bible. Tears pricked his eyes, but he didn’t have time to cry; she was talking again.

“I don’t have much time, but I just wanted you to know that...” she hesitated, “that I forgive you.”

And with that she was gone.

She had done it. She had done the hardest thing she had ever done—forgiven her sister’s killer and shown Kevin Williams the love of Christ that he didn’t deserve—that she didn’t deserve. As she pushed open the door of the lobby leading out of the county jail, Aimee silently praised God for giving her the strength and courage to show the love of Christ to the young man. Maybe he would read the Bible—her Bible—and maybe one day he would come to Christ and know the love she now understood just a little bit better—the love that truly conquers all things.

A Quarrel on Africa *By Victoria Minks*

It was the first time Audrey could ever remembering quarreling with Luke. The cousins had been best of friends since they were babies. Their temperaments balanced each other and rarely did they disagree on anything. Now, sitting alone on the big swing, the shock overwhelmed her. She wouldn't cry, though. Luke had shouted after as she had left "Go ahead and cry now, and see if I care." It would be humiliating to cry after that. But the tears choked her throat and she hoped--no, she knew-- that Luke surely did care.

Pushing her feet against the ground she set the swing in motion, jerking hard on the ropes as needed. If Luke didn't care, she wouldn't either. Luke had been so mean--how could he think that it was foolish of her to want to go to Africa? It was just the same as a girl going abroad for her education. The other girls did it all the time. Why, the girls at her own school had. Maud was off to tour the Continent, Eileen was now living in France, and Bella was off to her uncle's fine estate in Scotland. All the girls had gone somewhere, except for Rosamund, but Rosamund had been the only girl who scoffed at the notion and chose to work-- she had become a secretary for that rich old woman, saying it was a fine job for an independent girl.

All Audrey wanted was to see Africa. She didn't care where in Africa, and she didn't care how she got there. She just wanted to go. Her uncle and guardian didn't see the harm in it, promising to set her and Mrs. Thomas to a nice place in Morocco. Mrs. Thomas, who had been charge over Audrey since she was twelve, wasn't sure about the idea. But she would not think of saying "no" to Audrey, and so kept her mouth shut.

"It would have all gone off splendidly if Luke had not interfered!" Audrey cried out loud, stopping the swing. "Dangerous, indeed. It is only just across Spain." She sat in silence for a few minutes, her face tight with a frown. Now Mrs. Thomas was worried, her uncle and Luke had a violent disagreement, and she herself was in such a bad mood.

Five more minutes, though, and Audrey couldn't bear it any more. Leaping up and gathering her skirts, she started back to the house. Both she and Luke could not be happy if they were angry with one another. Besides, if anything, she felt she ought to take the mature part and listen to Luke's thoughts with more consideration. Luke could not mean to hurt her, after all.

She had just reached the inner garden when she saw Luke coming swiftly towards her. Audrey paused, bracing herself for his scowl.

But it never showed itself. When Luke glanced up and noticed her, only a bit of surprise crossed his face. "Audrey!"

"I was coming to see you," Audrey fumbled. Luke motioned to one of the garden benches.

"Shall we sit down? I was coming to see you as well, in fact."

They both sat, as far away as possible on the small bench. The silence between them was awkward and unusual, and Audrey hoped Luke would break it. He didn't though, and twisted his hands together looking so painfully unsure that she began. "I fear I was very unreasonable."

"Then you decided against Africa?" Luke looked at her quickly.

"Oh, no!" Audrey hesitated. "Only I felt it was a sorry thing for us to be so disagreeable to each other. Surely Africa ought not get in the way of our relationship. I can't understand

why you would take such offense to my plans on Morocco and that's upsetting to me, but I know I must have been unkind in my response."

Luke gave a small smile. "I might have behaved rashly. The idea does seem so unusual--so preposterous and dangerous, that I was afraid for you. It's only because I care."

Audrey studied her skirt, shifting. "I know."

"I suppose it's in my nature to be cautious," Luke admitted, "And not in yours. But we have grown up together-- never quarreled before. We cannot begin now."

Audrey bit her lip. "We could, but we shouldn't," she corrected him. "We don't want to end up like our parents." She winced as she thought about it. Her father and her uncle had fought over something insignificant, parted ways, and never spoke again. Only a couple years after their argument had her father been killed in an accident, and Audrey knew from growing up with her uncle that Luke's father regretted every cross word.

"No, of course." Luke agreed. "We must remember-- that the love between us is strong--stronger than words we may say when we are upset."

Audrey nodded, a lump in her throat. "I never meant to be angry with you."

"And I never meant to be so with you." Luke gave a short laugh. "Let's say we are sorry and make up, shall we?"

His cousin smiled. "Alright, then-- both of us are sorry, and both forgiven."

Luke ran his hand through his hair. "Which brings me to my next point. If we are all back in each other's good graces, I have a proposition."

Audrey raised her eyebrow. "Go on."

"What if your old cousin went along with you to Morocco? It would be interesting, and I would not be back here in England missing you and worrying you're about to be eaten alive by giant insects."

Audrey's laugh came bubbling out of her. "You are trying to frighten me--" she accused, but then nodded. "I wished you could come with me the whole time, only I thought you were to join that paper in London?"

"I am," Luke pulled out a small piece of paper. "But they should like some foreign correspondents, too. If you let me join you in Africa I will be able to send them interesting pieces for their paper about life in Morocco."

Audrey grinned. "I knew you must have a plan of some sort, you always were sly."

Luke shook his head. "Don't believe that for a second." He rose and held out his hand. "Join me for some cake?"

"Why, yes, thank you. That sounds delicious." As they walked back to the house together, Audrey could not help but feel lighter in heart. Luke was right-- they cared too much about each other to let anger simmer inside them-- and Audrey was glad for that. It was easy to forgive an enemy in a grand gesture, but when it came to the smallest things with the dearest people it was the most important to let love overrule crossness.

Besides, it all ended up better than she could have hoped-- Luke with her in Morocco would be delightful!

FOR FRIENDSHIP'S SAKE *By Primrosebud*

Louise tapped her fingers on the iPad, frowning. She really wished to enter this contest for Helen's sake. Helen was so eager to have Louise join her! The only snag was that she had no idea what to write and the contest ended the next day!

Hummm, let's see. . .

'Carrie smiled as she watched Harry come up the path. Only twenty-four and engaged!

No. No romance. Can't do it. Let's try again.

'Tom licked his lips desperately. He knew that inside, Dick was getting the scolding and caning of his life. But try as he might, he could not make himself jump in and take the punishment for his little brother.'

No, no. Not brotherly love. Too cheesy. Try. . .

'Dorcas slipped her arm around Tabitha. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and above all she was with her best friend again.'

No, no, NO!! NOT friendship! Too cliché! And that beginning. . . yuck! Positively stale!

Louise groaned and hopped onto her phone to text Helen.

"I want to write a story for the contest but I haven't the faintest idea!"

Helen's answer was typically sassy.

"Write a story about a gal who can't think of a story but must write one for a contest because her friend wants her to!"

Louise raised an eyebrow. "What does that have to do with the theme of 'Love Conquers All'?"

Helen snickered. "She's writing for her friend's sake."

Louise groaned.

"Tell you what. I'll do the same thing and let's race!"

"Mmmhmm. . ." Louise tapped again, unsure.

"Ready? Set? Go!"

Louise squealed and dashed her fingers against the iPad screen. "Wait!! Oh. . ." She raked her hands through her hair. WHAT DO I WRITE ABOUT????

She thought briefly of quitting. Then she straightened herself.

No. She was writing for Helen's sake. She would do her best, and anyways, Helen would just be happy to see her name figuring among the contest entries. She would do it for Helen's pleasure. That was what true friendship and love was about.

She ran her fingers randomly along the keyboard and frowned at the illigible 'ássdjfkLdhskdks' that popped up. Then a thought dashed through her brain and she sprang onto this random idea.

'Once upon a time there was a teenage writer who wanted to write a story for a contest but couldn't think of an idea. So she texted' ("Actually, Direct Messaged via Instagram," Louise interjected) 'her friend and asked for help. Her friend gave it by challenging her to a race. The girl still didn't want to but she thought she would to please her friend, because that's what love is all about—sacrificing yourself for others. And to have friends, one must be friendly.' ("Now, any quote collector will see that's a paraphrasing of Emerson there and not my own idea, but oh well, it's a good quote," Louise remarked to Kit, her American Doll and writing fan). 'So the girl sat down and tapped around on her computer and all of a sudden she had a thousand words and so she quickly bundled it up and emailed it to the contest host and the next day she saw she was the winner and had won a free ebook and Helen' ("No, musn't get any names in," Louise objected, as she quickly wiped the name off

the screen) 'and her friend was very happy and the next year she dedicated to the girl her new novel as a Thank-You.

THE END.'

"There," Louise leaned back and eyed her doll. "Well, Kit, it's a mess, but there's two saving graces. One, it's short, and that means I'm a good author. Two, it's realistic, and Ann—that's the contest hostess, Kit—liked another such story I wrote, and said it was a wonderful picture of my writing life. So there."

Then Louise seized her phone and texted the triumphant words: "DONE." to Helen.

"Aww, no! You beat me by half a jiffy!"

A Summer's Day *By E.*

Summer tugged at her boots while hopping out the door. The bright, warm day offered the perfect excuse to slip outside and away from her fear. "I'll be back later, Mom!"

"Do you have your phone?" Her mom hollered from the living room couch.

"Yes!" Summer wrestles her bouncy hair into a high ponytail. She swings the door shut and jogs down her crooked sidewalk, taking in the rays of the sun with a full smile.

At the end of her street she squints into the sun to look at the street sign that marked her quaint road.

The old paint on Abigail Rd still hadn't been freshened, despite her letters to her mayor. The bleached lettering could only be read as "Abgal R."

It wasn't just this sign, though. Nearly every street sign in the neighborhoods surrounding her house were as old as the hills.

Summer used these thoughts to cover up her looming fear that hung back in her room. Those thoughts prickle the back of her neck and speed up her heart. If she could help it, she would never go to her room again. Not as long as it was in there.

No, the thoughts of street signs and city letters attempted to fill the heaviness in her mind as she walked around the block.

Mrs. Pollhouse was out pulling weeds in her lawn, despite the afternoon temperature.

"Hi Mrs. Pollhouse!" Summer stopped at the woman's nearly manicured lawn.

"Hello, dear." She laid down her weeding tool and smiled at the teenage girl.

"It's looking fantastic."

Mrs. Pollhouse smiled at the compliment and thanked her.

"How's your writing going? Your mama told me you're doing a competition of sorts."

"Uh, yeah." Summer tapped her right heel.

"Well. It was nice chatting with you. Good luck with your lawn!" With a wave and a half smile, Summer continued jogging down the splintered sidewalk.

As she slowed, her eyes caught on yellow dandelions springing up between the cement.

Images of the mural in her room came to mind. She tried to shake it off, but it only kept coming back.

"A dandelion is like a story. Your one flower may inspire others to make their own, even if you can't see it."

Summer slowed and sat on the curb. She bit her lip, her right heel tapping again as she thought about her room and the dandelions painted on the walls.

There, on the curb of Harvey Ave, Summer watched something begin to unfold. Her mind smoothly fluttered from her fear to the scene playing out before her.

Across the street two toddlers played in their front yard. Both were struggling to get to the top of a plastic slide, pushing each other and screaming. The girl with black hair and freckles was able to scramble up first. She successfully shoved the brunette off into the dust, then slid down the miniature slide. But as she slid, she tilted too far to the left and rolled partly down the slide. When she got to the bottom she cried in pain. The brunette, who had started to pout, ran around to her friend and bent over her. Freckles calmed down into small hiccups as Brunette hugged away her pain. The two had made up as quick as Freckles had gone down the slide. They did not stop loving each other despite the fact that they struggled against the other.

Summer sat up straighter on the curb.

I don't have to hide from it just because I've struggled with it. I can do this.

Adrenaline courses through her veins as she ran back to her house; the smell of fresh air fueling her all the way.

"I'm back!" Summer ripped off her boots as soon as she closed the front door, throwing them by the shoe rack.

"That wasn't very long." Her mother commented plainly.

But Summer's mind was miles away. Her heart thumped wildly now, but this time from excitement. She zipped to her room and stood in front of the closed door.

Deep breath in.

Deep breath out.

Summer clasped the round, brass handle and spun it to enter her room.

Her twin sized bed, stuffed in the far left corner, had been ruffled by her cat whom she forgot in the room. But her eyes shifted to her desk, opposite of her bed, and below the window.

The notebook with scribbles and x marks sat innocently on her desk as if to say, "Back already?" The pencil lay rolled to the side, having seen better days for its eraser.

"I'm going to try." Summer confirmed out loud. Her mouth quirked into a smile.

"I'm going to get past this writer's block because no matter how many times I mess up, I'll still love writing more than anything."

Love Conquers All *By Ryana Lynn*

Salem Springfield eyed the interpreter standing near him cautiously. Asa smiled at Salem, then looked away. Salem exchanged glances with a fellow Marine, Henry Tucker. The latter shook his head. "Just keep an eye on him," he whispered.

He didn't need to tell Salem that. The five year Marine veteran never turned his back when a Muslim was in the vicinity. He'd been in the military ever since he'd graduated, and he

wasn't about to mess up his record with a stupidly gotten injury. True, Asa wasn't a practicing Muslim, but that didn't mean he wasn't pretending to be an 'Infidel.'

Another reason he didn't trust interpreters was because his younger adopted brother, Mitch, was in the custody of the Taliban right at this moment thanks to their interpreter turning traitor on them. That was why Salem was getting ready to head out on this mission, to get him back alive.

Salem shook his head and the platoon headed out in groups of two. Except their group. Salem and Tucker had Asa along. Fine with me, Salem thought. I can keep an eye on him this way!

They neared the compound they had been told the Taliban was holed up in. A task force of special ops from the Navy and Army were already in the area to help. It wasn't going to be easy, rescuing a squad of heavily guarded men from terrorist forces.

Salem didn't remember much about the rescue later...he remembered the bullets whizzing and a few grenades going off as he, Tucker and Asa made their way through the compound, extinguishing resistance when needed. He barely recalled finding the holding room and shooting the door open...his younger brother looking at him, real relieved to see him...then an explosion rocked his world, wiping out the rest of the mission from his mind's eye...except for one thing: Asa shooting an insurgent that was coming at Salem with a knife.

The next thing Salem remembered was screaming in pain, the whirr of a helicopter's blades pounding in his ears. Three guys were working over him, one wearing a special ops uniform. He remembered calling for Mitch, asking if he were alright. No one answered him. He was just told to calm down and relax...everything would be fine. Then he felt something pricking his arm and everything went black again.

When he awoke, Salem's vision was a bit blurry at first, like he was underwater. He blinked a few times and groaned; his left leg hurt so much! "Salem, just lie still, honey."

That certainly wasn't one of his fellow marines talking. He smiled as his mother gently rubbed the side of his head. Her hand was cool and felt so good. But his leg! He tilted his head to look at the aching appendage. His mouth went dry. It was gone! His father entered the room, smiling as he checked the monitors Salem was hooked up to. Being a retired Navy Corpsman, he knew what all the monitors meant. "Looks good, son. Glad to see you awake. How do you feel?"

"It's gone, Dad," he whispered, all the sound he could manage at this point.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. But at least we still have you."

"Is Mitch alright?"

Dad nodded. "He's got a few scrapes and bruises, but he'll be just fine." Salem closed his eyes. "Scrapes and bruises" could be more serious than it sounded. But as his father said, Mitch was probably on the mend.

"How's Asa?" Salem asked.

"The interpreter?" Dad asked. "He's alright, but concerned about you."

Salem looked surprised. "When I'm a little more rested, I want to see him."

"We'll see to that," Dad assured him.

"I'm so sorry about your leg," Asa said. "My people, they are very stubborn."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for," Salem said. "After all, you saved my life. I'll admit you're the last person I expected to come to my rescue."

Asa fidgeted. "I don't blame you for that. My people are not trustworthy. No one trusts us. That is our fault. We can't expect love or trust from anyone."

Salem smiled. "God loves you."

Asa looked up and Salem was surprised to see tears in his eyes. "How can He love me? He is the God of America and Israel. He can't love us!"

"But He does, Asa. Ishmael is the father of your nation, right? Well, did you know that God had the chance to kill Ishmael, but He didn't do it?"

"Why not?" Asa demanded. "It would have saved me a lot of trouble!"

Salem smiled. "He is a God of Mercy. He was giving Ishmael a chance, although he didn't take it. You know about Abraham in the Bible. When his son Isaac was born, Ishmael and his mother were cast out from the camp of Abraham. Ishmael would have died out there in the desert, but God heard his cry and provided a well for him. He is the God Who Hears."

Salem talked long with Asa, sharing the Gospel plan with him, of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. Asa was overwhelmed at the thought of a God who loved him and died for him. It was a very different message than that of the god of his fathers. "Allah" seemed to always be mad at his people and could only be pleased if they did cruel things to people who did not believe in Islam or if Muslims themselves committed suicide bombings.

"He loves me? Even though I don't deserve it?" Asa asked.

Salem smiled. "He does, Asa. And He wants to be your God."

Asa smiled brightly. "That's some kind of love!"

"It is. This love conquers everything, bitterness, hate, and death."

Asa decided "I want the God who hears and the God with the conquering love to be my God. Will you show me how?"

Salem smiled, in spite of the pain in his leg. "I'd be happy to, Asa."

See His Love *by K. Cox*

Sin and depravity, wickedness, death-
'Tis a world marred by Adam's fall.
Yet see amidst its sorrowing cry,
Amidst transgressions bleak and high,
God's blessed love which conquers all.

"All is for naught", I hear a man whisper,
"Hope is dead and love is small."
Ah, dear friend! heed this sweet thing-
'Twill cause your troubled heart to sing:
God's perfect love which conquers all.

Though death is strong and sin is dark,
There rings a bright and living call;
"Come, ye weary; now make haste!

Oh, come ye weary, come and taste
Of God's love which conquers all!
Rest in His love which conquers all".