

Best in Show Prose, Hanna-Renkes/Jan Smith Literary Award – High School

“No More Normality”

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Arthur knows that he shouldn't be at the store. He shouldn't be anywhere, for that matter. Anywhere except the confines of his house are forbidden. He isn't sick—not yet, at least—but he is on the watchlist. Ever since his older brother and his wife came back from their honeymoon in Italy, he and the rest of his family have been under quarantine.

He can still remember the first few tense days. His brother, David, was on one of the last flights allowed in or out of Italy. Since Arthur's house was closer to the airport than his own, that was where he and his wife, Julia, made their first stop. They didn't realize that in doing so, they had jeopardized the health of their entire family.

At first, everything was alright. Then, after three days, Julia woke up with a high fever and a tight feeling in her chest. She was whisked away to get tested. Of course, it came back positive. Only a day after that, the same thing happened to David.

Arthur hates being stuck inside. He misses his friends, and all of the activities that he was looking forward to doing outside of school. That's why, as soon as he heard David say that he really wanted a specific type of granola bar that they didn't have at the house, Arthur took it as his opportunity to escape.

The streets are almost entirely empty. Although he lives in a small town, Arthur has never seen this few cars out on the road. He expects the grocery store to have a considerable population since it is one of the only places that is still open, but he is surprised to find that it is mostly deserted. What surprises him more, however, is when he turns a corner and sees a familiar face.

“Cinthia,” he says before stepping back to make sure he is at a safe distance of six feet.

“Arthur,” she replies, stepping back as well. She is wearing gloves and a face mask, just like he is. She is also alone. Arthur wonders how she and her family are doing. He had never been close friends with Cinthia when they were in school, but he knew who she was.

“What are you doing here?” Arthur asks. It's a stupid question. He realizes that as soon as he says it. They're at the store, so she must be shopping. Cinthia ignores his stupidity.

“I'm looking for soap,” she says. “What about you?”

“Same, I guess,” he replies. Technically, he's telling a half lie, but he suspects that mentioning his sick brother won't win him any conversation points. Cinthia nods.

“This is crazy, isn't it? I haven't seen anyone in days.” She crosses her arms over her chest.

Arthur can't see much of her face, but from what he can tell, she looks slightly apprehensive.

Not just of him, but of everything around her. It's almost as if she thinks the corona virus could suddenly jump out of a box of cereal and take her down. Now that he thinks about it, that could happen—only in a less literal sense.

“Yeah, things are crazy,” he agrees. “How are you? How is your family?”

The fear in Cinthia's eyes deepens. Arthur wonders if he has hit a sore spot.

"I'm not worried about myself," Cinthia admits, "but I'm terrified for my family. My little sister has an immunodeficiency disorder, and my grandpa has lung cancer from smoking for over twenty years."

"Oh," Arthur says, unsure of how else to reply. Her family really does have it pretty bad. He wants to do something nice for her, like give her a hug, or buy her some soap, but coming any closer to her would only make things worse.

"Yeah," Cinthia agrees. "How's your family?"

Arthur pales. He should have seen this coming. It was only common decency to return a question back to the asker. He stutters out a vague response.

"We're okay, I guess."

Like almost everything he's told her, there is a bit of truth masking the one monstrous lie. Yes, David and Julia are both getting better, but that isn't exactly what Cinthia had in mind when she asked how his family was doing.

Cinthia sighs and shakes her head. "This is crazy," she says again.

Arthur nods, suddenly feeling a strong urge to get out of the store and away from everyone. He's putting people in danger by being here. He is a threat to Cinthia, even from six feet away, and he's a threat to her sister, and her grandfather, and anyone else that he has come into contact with today.

What was he doing here in the first place? Just because he was going a little stir-crazy didn't mean he was suddenly allowed to leave. Just because he wasn't showing any symptoms didn't mean that he wasn't a carrier. He starts to back away from Cinthia.

"Hey, I should probably go," he says.

"Oh." She looks surprised by his sudden departure, and maybe a little disappointed. "Okay. It was nice seeing you, Arthur."

"You too," he says, still backing away. She stops him.

"Wait," she calls. "Maybe, when this is all over, we could hang out some time?"

At any other point in time, this would have made Arthur's stomach flip with excitement. Today, however, he just nods and waves goodbye. As he walks back to the hospital, he can't manage to shake her words.

When this is all over. Arthur isn't sure what will happen 'when this is all over.' He doesn't think that anyone knows. However, he has noticed that everyone seems to be living with the hope that everything will snap back to normal, like the horror movie that they are living through on a daily basis will suddenly cease to exist.

Arthur isn't sure what will happen next, but he feels certain that it won't be considered 'normal' anymore.