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The Girl

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The Girl

Cole Dable

Third Place

Notes from our judge:

Heartbreaking and straight-forward, this piece gives us an insightful overview of a person with Tourette's syndrome. This is the type of piece that you want to put down because you are right there, feeling every uncomfortable detail, itching with the protagonist. Putting it down is not an option though, because you want to know what happens to Sarah. This story doesn't cut any corners or glamorize anything. It is firmly set in the real world where endings aren't always happy.

Sarah is enjoying a glorious childhood; she is funny, smart, and so athletic that she beats all the boys in basketball. But in second grade, Sarah suddenly found herself overcome with strange inclinations, resulting in bouts of throat clearing and body tensing. She is unable to fully understand the doctor, but is unconcerned when he diagnoses her with a mild case of Tourette's Syndrome.

Even though Sarah doesn't know what's going on, at least she now has an excuse for the people who mock her. But sometimes, the term "Tourette's" is not enough to stop the teasing. There are times where she can't quiet her vocal tics during a spelling test. Whenever the noise escapes her, Sarah's cheeks burn and she nervously apologizes to her neighbors. No one else can see Tourette's for what it is: an itch—a mental itch that distracts and annoys you, fueling emotional tension until it is scratched.

Though her tics do not subside over the years, her awareness of them does, though others never grow used to it. Sarah's itch is beginning to spread. Body tensing and throat scratching are no longer enough; everything has to be even. Sarah has holes on the insides of her shoes from consciously kicking herself as she walks until it feels just right. Irritation sprouts from things as trivial as crooked lines. And when expectations go unfulfilled, Sarah retreats into an unassailable fortress of sorrow.

As the years go by, the effects of Tourette's not only refuse

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to regress, but proceed to worsen with the onset of Sarah's OCD and depression. The itch has never felt so powerful. Sarah fights the battle every day, eventually building up the strength to resist the itch for brief moments. Sarah can give a smooth presentation in Geology only to excuse herself from the room to succumb to the demonic itch that has consumed her.

By the age of 18, Sarah can restrain herself for most of the day, successfully masking the disorder from her classmates. But at night, she spends sleepless nights lying in bed, shearing her itch with maniacal desperation before she is finally hospitalized for her perpetual convulsions. The cataclysmic bouts of spasms amplify her anxiety, which reignites the spasms. It is a vicious, interminable cycle. No matter how she fights the impulse, she is always dragged back into a waking nightmare.

The struggle overwhelms her—exhausts her mentally, emotionally, and physically. One night, she loses control and begins slapping her head, crying and screaming at herself between blows: "Just. Be. Normal." Then her OCD takes hold, and she finds herself unable to stop. Sarah lies on the floor for hours, beating herself around the head, unable to satisfy the hellacious itch.

Then it's gone.

There Sarah lies, broken, on the floor of her bedroom, consumed by sobs, desperately trying to imagine what her life may have been like if she could "Just. Be. Normal." Sarah doesn't find out and Sarah never will find out.