

# Inklings Book 2020



**The following youth authors contributed their short stories and poems to this anthology.**

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Claire Belcourt	Claire Guo	Reagan Ricker
Steven Cavros	Suhani Gupta	Shreya Sujit
Jubilee Close	Trisha Iyer	Lila Tierney
Victoria Cui	Ayana Kadkol	Pierce Wright
Aidan Felt	Karina Knowles	Anna Yang
Ynez Foxe-Robertson	Emma Long	

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At Society of Young Inklings, we mentor youth authors because we know learning to think creatively opens every door. We offer game-based resources, online courses, and one-on-one mentorships to help youth authors move the big ideas from their heads and hearts onto the page. Find out more about our programs, including the annual *Inklings Book Contest*, at [www.younginklins.org](http://www.younginklins.org).

# Foreword

Dear Reader,

In this, our twelfth annual Inklings Book, you'll experience laughter, heartache, magic, surprise, and above all, hope. The twenty 3rd – 9th grade authors featured in this anthology are this year's Inklings Book contest winners; inspired writers who've poured their hearts and creativity onto the page.

When readers see a published piece, it's tempting to think the words came out polished and perfect in first-draft form. However, drafting is only the beginning. I'm probably not telling you anything you don't know. Most likely, you, like many of our readers, are a *writer*, too. One of the most supportive gifts writers can give one another is the story behind their writing. How do initial ideas shape up into masterpieces, like the ones you'll read here?

Okay, yes, the answer is *revision*, but not just any kind of revision. At Society of Young Inklings, we don't pick through our manuscripts for errors, searching for everything that's wrong. Instead, we consider an amazing piece of writing an opportunity to take our thinking and innovation to the next level. That's what artists—and of course, authors are artists who create with the medium of words—do.

Here's how revision works in the Inklings Book process. First, our applicants polish and refine their work before they submit. They think about what effect they'd like their piece to have on their readers. Do they want their readers to laugh? To cry? To think? How can they use their characters, settings, word choice, rhythm, tone, or plot to create that outcome?

Once a piece is chosen for the Inklings Book, youth authors meet with a pro mentor. With their mentor, youth authors focus on one element as they revise, such as character development or metaphor. Instead of looking for what's wrong in the piece, they look for opportunities to exaggerate what's working well. Each piece comes even more fully to life through this collaboration. Many of our youth authors say what they like best about the Inklings Book process is working with someone who cares as deeply about their work as they do. That's pure creative joy.

Alongside each of the stories and poems in this book, you'll find letters from our mentors about the revision strategies used, plus an interview with the youth author about their revision process and insight they gained. You'll find many tips and tools you can take away for your own projects. And of course, the heart of this book is each of these twenty phenomenal stories and poems.

It's always a joy to edit the Inklings Book, and to see the anthology come together. I love the range of genres, the way I'm laughing one minute and tearing up the next as I read my way through. This year's book is a particular treat. Savor the reading, and may our collection also spark creative ideas for your writing, as well.

Happy Reading!

**Naomi Kinsman**

INKLINGS BOOK EDITOR



# Pacing

---

Reagan Ricker worked with mentor, Tasslyn Magnusson, in a revision focused on pacing in Reagan's poem, *Dear Sarah*.

---

Dear Reader,

Did you know poets think about pacing? **Pacing** is as important in a poem as it is in prose. How does the poet unfold the sequence of events for a reader to build to a satisfying conclusion? Just like the end of a good book, the end of a good poem should make you sit back and say, "Ah! Wow!"

When Reagan and I talked about her poem "Dear Sarah," I explained how active language is an integral part of what moves a reader through a poem. Reagan had terrific uses of alliteration and onomatopoeia throughout her poem. I loved the line, "soft shhh of a soda pop can." In her revision, Reagan built on this foundation to tighten her very honest story about friendship.

We started by thinking about how the colors of the rainbow might represent different challenges in the friendship. I suggested an outline. When I'm thinking about questions like these, I will make an outline. Nothing fancy—just "stanza one is about the girls meeting; stanza two is about the girls become best friends; stanza three is about a fight." You have to write this outline without looking at the poem. Next, compare it to your stanzas. Do things match up?

Because Reagan uses a cool extended metaphor, I encouraged

her to really think through her word choice. Poetry is language and your words should both sound and behave in unexpected—sometimes pleasing, sometimes not—ways. Speaking of not pleasant ways, a great example is when Reagan writes about yellow. Look at all the ways her word choice sounds and feels uncomfortable. “Pucker, twitch, spit, disgust”—these are all good words. How does your mouth feel when you eat lemon juice? Maybe make a list of all the words that also put your mouth in that same shape?

Finally Reagan took advantage of what poets get lots of choice with—line breaks and white space. As part of her revision, I asked Reagan to think about the words and then think about the shapes the words make on the page. What would be the way she could show the good—and the hurt—of this friendship.

If you’re writing poetry, maybe you didn’t realize some of those things we talk about in regards to prose could apply to poetry. They can. Especially pacing! And they can be really exciting to consider. What kind of stories are you telling in your poems? And don’t forget to use your white space. Create a poem that grabs attention on the page and helps the reader feel and see the story you are telling.

Happy Writing!

**Tasslyn Magnusson**

Tasslyn Magnusson received her MFA in Creative Writing for Children and Young Adults from Hamline University in Saint Paul, MN. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Broad River Review*, in parentheses, *Room Magazine*, *The Mom Egg Review*, *The Raw Art Review*, and *Red Weather Online*. She was nominated for a 2018 Pushcart Prize in poetry. Her chapbook, “defining,” (dancing girl press) was published in January 2019.

# Reagan Ricker

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Reagan Ricker is a young teen who enjoys writing poetry and adores English, yet struggles to find time with school. Between her passion with debate, six different sports, and an entrepreneurial business, she is packed with a busy schedule but would never change anything about it. She has been published in the *No Safe Place Anthology*, and won the 2020 *Poetic Power* writing contest as well.

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**Tasslyn Magnusson: What changed as you revised your poem?**

**Reagan Ricker:** First, I took your advice on reading it aloud. That really helped. When I wanted the reader to close to pause or wait I added a period. Some of the words, I took out the spacing so they would be read faster.

**Q: Did you think the poem would change through the revision process?**

**A:** I did. I've always thought that when people judge poems they are looking for the potential in poems, not what it is already.

**Q: What advice do you have for Inklings who don't like revision?**

**A:** I think that revision is looking at the work with a new perspective. A teacher told me that as the author, you know what your work is about and you have all the details worked out in your head, and order to make it better, you need to hear it from another person's perspective.

**Q: When did you start writing?**

**A:** I think I developed my passion for writing around third grade. Third grade was my chance where I could write and that it evolved as I grew up.

**Q: What's the last book you read?**

**A:** *Germes, Guns, and Steel.*

**Q: What is a book that you think every writer should read?**

**A:** I can't think of a title off the top of my head but any book that has a different perspective or a different way of writing is important. Every writer should allow themselves a chance to read a different style from them, just to involve more variety in their writing. Basing some of your poetry on real life experiences really helps, and you can certainly add in creative liberty to that.

**Q: How do you come up with ideas for poems?**

**A:** I have a continuous list of ideas that I save for poems. Anytime I get an idea and can't work on it, I put it there.

If I'm having writer's block and can't find an inspiration for poems at that time, I go online and find a writing prompt. I use that. I'll shift it into my perspective or adapt it for me.

For short stories, I try brainstorming. A general theme helps narrow it. If you are looking at a broad topic its hard to find a place to start.

# Dear Sarah

---

by  
Reagan Ricker

Dear Sarah

once i tasted a rainbow just me, a white backdrop, and shimmers of light that  
fell softly on my fingertips i gently lapped up the spilt colors and they crumbled  
when I licked them  
like sugar

red

it tasted like sweet, crunchy watermelon chunks,  
grainy juice dripping down your chin  
leaving a sticky trail for your fretful mother to find later  
a cold rag rubbing away at your delicate skin  
in hopes that you'll be clean  
hot, freshly cemented sidewalks awaited the splatter it would leave  
red. two girls sitting side by side,  
munching on the leftover rinds that held only sour puddles of water  
caramel wispy strands of hair dimpled chins patented Mary Janes  
small, colorful pinwheels were scattered across the yard  
they spun themselves into oblivion

we laughed and it sounded like music.

pink  
it took a while to bite through it  
but ended up being naively chewing a ball of bubblegum  
i stuck a rusty quarter in the slot, waited for *cha-ching* and got to  
working my jaws and pearly whites to a perfectly white center  
the outside kind of melted down  
into small rivers of a sickly sweet flavor that ran in thin streams between my  
taste buds and the gap in my front teeth  
pink. it ended up being not realizing the world around us, just blowing  
bubblegum and forgetting that  
  
it would eventually pop.

Dear Sarah

orange

bursts of citrus exploded onto my  
surprised tongue

like freshly picked clementines in the summer, resting in a woven basket  
where the crumpled leaves with their twisted veins would fall softly to the  
grass

and fresh sprays of zest would erupt to reveal tangy fruit

*the aftertaste is a bit bitter the aftertaste is always a bit bitter*

orange.

snack time

in fourth grade wouldn't be complete without crumbling crackers,  
the salt falling off

and cold cheese slices on top of them

a girl next to me smiles, and its contagious

yellow  
so easily can I discern that it's a bittersweet color  
that I nearly want to spit it out onto a paper napkin,  
so that the kite shaped design can absorb my disgust instead  
it's addicting this yellow. the way it lures you in so easily  
only to betray seconds later  
my lips pucker up instantly and my eye begins to twitch rapidly. yellow.  
your hair, contrasting with your new summer tan  
a dotting of freckles across your nose like grains of sugar  
brightly colored flip flops  
and a conch shell bracelet that adorns your slender wrist  
if i look for too long, i may learn to like the new you  
just like everyone else  
so I turn my gaze  
down

Dear Sarah

green

this may be the only time i wish it was the crunchy asparagus  
the wilting broccoli, watery cucumbers, tough zucchini  
that my mother is always nagging me to eat  
but it tasted kind of artificial, and synthetic  
like rice krispies that were dyed green for st. patrick's day  
the ones that always left a cardboard aftertaste and a parched tongue  
green. hot, sticky grass that scraped and scratched at our bare thighs  
two girls giggling and rolling around at the edge of a park.  
turns into our past.

talking engulfs our present

before she begins, i know where it's going to end

"you're so overprotective grow up i have other friends

... i think it's best if we go our separate ways"

but which way do i take, when my only way has been with her?

i open my mouth to interrupt,

to whisper sorry

one more time

but end up exhaling and letting go a breath i didn't know i was holding in.

blue

i try convincing myself that it's sweet,  
this pastel light that sits in the palm of my hand  
but my brow is furrowed and my lips pursed in a tight knot  
because reassurance doesn't do much when you know the truth  
blue is pungent and funky, a sour item like the wrong type of cheese  
blue. murky lakes, and rubber tire swings  
that wedge themselves into sweaty legs  
shrieks and hollers of excitement, laughter that's free and easy  
the soft *shhhh* of a soda pop can opening,  
sweet, sickly liquid that washes away guilt  
i try convincing myself you forgot to invite me but

it doesn't work.

Dear Sarah

purple

i was almost sad to taste it, the last of the colors

it's alone now, left behind by all the others

i'm expecting it to be bitter, yet it has a startling flavor of sugar

and warm honey like an overly ripe plum, the pericarp creased,

juices oozing out of the indigo flesh

it dribbles down my chin like the

watermelon we once shared

i laugh a bit, remembering, and it sounds like a broken music note

purple. you and me, something that only exists in old, cracked photos

and false promises

purple. the color of your smile after you finished dancing but also the color of

petty gossip, and whispered secrets. purple.

being left behind on an open road, not knowing which direction it will

take you but only knowing what you will be leaving by doing so

once i tasted a rainbow

it was knowing that not

everything's black and white not everything is gray

it was realizing life is colorfulandconfusing

no matter how you look at it

dear sarah

once i tasted a rainbow

funny thing was, it tasted like you.

# Character Arc

---

Pierce Wright worked with mentor, Alex Doherty, to further develop a rich character arcs for Detective Smellburg and the entire cast of this fantastic whodunit story, *File Number 52: Ms. Passno*.

---

Dear Reader,

How often do you find yourself reading a story, wondering what will happen next? The complexities of a plot are often the first things you'll recount when telling other people about a new story you've read or seen. The ups and downs get your heart racing as you ride along with the characters through the story. But how often do you recount the moments where the characters in the story underwent a change? Beyond plot, another important aspect to storytelling—the one that creates the characters you fall in love (or hate) with—is the **character arc**.

Pierce had developed an intriguing premise prior to the editing process: The body of a school teacher, assumed to be murdered, goes missing. Our main character, Detective Smellburg, finds himself in an elite private school environment of those destined for great things in life. His background is far from that of the students attending the school, though he can relate to the teachers who work day and night to educate their students. The detective prides himself on catching every last criminal he's ever come across, and is skilled in rooting out motivations of his suspects

through heavy questioning.

But things don't always go as planned. Essentially, an arc is a change from one state to another over the course of the story. In extreme cases, good guys may become evil or bad guys may even save the day. Characters set off on their story, sure of themselves and with their motivations set on the outcome they believe is how the world should be. But by the end, these same characters may have a change of heart, or a realization that they might have been wrong all along. The development of a rich character arc allows the audience to empathize and understand why a character takes his or her actions over the course of a story, and why a character may change their mind.

In Pierce's story, the detective is confident that he'll get to the bottom of the mystery and send a murderer to jail. But by the end, he allows his perpetrator to escape for the first time ever. He discovers the true motive behind the crime, and has a change of heart. Through the editing process, Pierce was able to dive into the backstory of his characters, and bring dialog and motivations to the page that helped us understand the changes the detective as well as the suspects went through as a result of the crime. We can understand why a detective committed to truth and justice found a way to justify hiding the truth.

Happy Writing,

**Alex Doherty**

Alex Doherty is a writer based in the San Francisco Bay Area and has an MFA in screenwriting. He worked as a Story Assistant for film and TV production in Los Angeles before working as an Assistant Producer in video game development. He's inspired by the creativity of others and enjoys theater, movies, reading and finding time to practice his green thumb when he's not backpacking.

# Pierce Wright

---

Pierce Wright resides in New York City and is a rising eighth grader at The Browning School. An avid reader for many years, Pierce primarily enjoys reading science fiction books, especially multi-part series. In his free time, Pierce enjoys playing with friends, listening to music, riding bike and running cross country.

---

**Alex Doherty: Where did the idea for your story begin?**

**Pierce Wright:** In English class we were asked to write a mystery story. I used some of the teachers and faculty at my school as a starting point for characters in the story.

**Q: What did you discover about your character's backstory as you worked on your revision?**

**A:** I discovered as I revised my work that he was more of a lower middle class New Yorker—a juxtaposition with the fancy private school he was investigating.

**Q: If another young writer is working on developing backstory for a character, what would you encourage them to try?**

**A:** Try making your characters have some unique things that brings them to life.

**Q: Did anything about the revision process surprise you?**

**A:** The revision process was a lot easier than I thought it would be. Writing the original draft was much harder.

**Q: What advice do you have for Young Inklings about revision?**

**A:** Revising makes your story better so keep an open mind as you work through the process.

**Q: What do you like best about writing?**

**A:** I really like having the control to make the story say and do what I want. Having artistic license to create stories and characters can be really powerful.

**Q: What are your favorite books to read?**

**A:** My favorite books are more in the science fiction realm and some of my all-time favorite books include the *Harry Potter* series and the *Gone* series.

**Q: Anything else you want to tell Young Inklings?**

**A:** At first writing a story can seem intimidating but once you get into, it can be a lot of fun.

File Number 52:  
Ms. Passno

---

by  
Pierce Wright

As I approached 52 East 62nd Street in the heart of Manhattan, home of The Browning School, I found myself oddly drawn to the place. I couldn't keep myself from thinking: So here it is; the tony all-boys prep school renowned for minting Ivy Leaguers and captains of industry, a place where teachers make it a career—their life's work—to mold boys into men (or so I've heard). I never thought the likes of me—a scholarship kid from Queens—would walk through its sacred red doors and be ushered into the depths of its hallowed hallways. But here I was, veteran NYPD Detective Henry Smellburg, prepared to find out more about the mystique that is Browning.

Upon arrival, I walked down the eerie hallways that were lined with pictures of former graduates and filled with students and teachers consoling each other. I finally found the office I was looking for—my crime scene—not knowing that something darker than the supposed crime was going to be revealed.

On my way from the precinct to the school, the responding officers and CSI had filled me in on the details of the crime: at approximately 3:30 p.m. a Ms. Marjorie Olney, middle school science teacher, stopped by the

office of a Ms. Danielle Passno, as was her usual routine, but this time it was very different. When she walked in, she found Ms. Passno's mangled body on the floor. Ms. Passno, the admired head of the middle school, was covered in blood with many knife-like wounds. Ms. Olney could be heard shrieking as she ran to the Head of School Dr. John Botti's office and shared the news with him. Dr. Botti called the police but by the time the first officers arrived at the scene, the body had vanished. Without a trace, Ms. Passno was gone. That's where I come in. There is no case I can't crack; there's not a single criminal I've investigated that hasn't been convicted. They are all biding their time at Rikers.

The cops mulling around cleared out as I entered the crime scene; they know I like to review the scene alone. I was told there was a stabbing but, unlike every other murder scene I have witnessed, nothing seemed off. There wasn't even a drop of blood on the carpet. Curious. It didn't even look like a crime had happened in the office other than the mess. There were piles of books thrown to the floor and bins of Legos, apparently leftovers from a school-wide project, were spilled everywhere which made me wonder if there had been a struggle. I glanced over the evidence that CSI had collected at this point to see if there were any immediate clues that might point me in the direction of the killer. Here's what jumped out at me: an email from an English teacher named Ms. Lydon Vonnegut that was suspiciously in Ms. Passno's trash folder after the time of death and a knife with a red blood-like substance on it that would be tested and dusted for fingerprints. There was a Browning pep rally towel that might have been used to wipe the fingerprints and a few Ricola wrappers in the trash can. For a school with such a prestigious reputation, something seemed off—way off. I needed to find out more information about the towel and more about that email.

After a restless night thinking about the case and pondering a lot of scenarios about what could've happened, I arrived at the school building early

to start conducting interviews as soon as teachers arrived. My first person of interest was Ms. Vonnegut, who'd written the email we found in Ms. Passno's trash folder. When I strolled into her classroom I was greeted by a kind woman with an easy smile who was wearing a floral blue dress and heels. There were photos of family in frames on her desk and college diplomas on the wall. She didn't look like a likely suspect but one thing I've learned from the past three decades on the job is that murderers come in all shapes and sizes.

I said, "Hello, Lydon Vonnegut? I am Detective Smellburg. I was hoping that I could take a few minutes of your time to talk about Ms. Passno and her murder."

Not giving her a second to duck my questions, I launched into my interview. "Was there anything unusual about Ms. Passno's behavior or mood over the past few weeks or days?"

"Nothing really that I noticed. She was a little distracted but she's a busy lady so that's not unusual. She was fighting off a cold, but I think we all are; it's that time of year."

"Do you have any connections with Ms. Passno outside of work?" I wondered if she and Ms. Passno might have had a disagreement outside of Browning.

"No," she replied. "I only know her as the head of the middle school."

I wanted to better understand her email to Ms. Passno so I inquired, "What did you mean in that email that was in Ms. Passno's office? That email said that you were going to involve Ms. Passno in something."

"It was about a teacher supposedly quitting their job," she said as she shrugged her shoulders. "It doesn't have any connection to the murder."

I wondered why she would add that last bit.

"One more thing, why would the email you sent her be moved in Ms. Passno's trash folder after she died?"

Ms. Vonnegut looked at the floor and twisted her dress in her hand before she answered, “How would I know?”

“All right,” I said as I wondered why she was being so evasive. “Thank you for your time, Ms. Vonnegut. I will be in touch if I have any follow-up questions.”

“Anytime,” she said. “Glad to help out.”

She didn’t seem to have a motive, but some of her responses raised the hair on the back of my neck. I couldn’t completely rule her out. I needed more information about who might have access to Ms. Passno’s office, who might have wanted to see her dead, and who may have taken her body so I set out to talk with more of the teachers.

I went to the classroom that was directly next to Ms. Passno’s office. A classroom belonging to a Mr. Daniel Ragsdale, a fifth grade teacher. Since his room is so close to Ms. Passno’s I figured he might’ve been a witness. I casually walked up to Mr. Ragsdale’s room and came across a man in a blue and white checkered button down shirt with khakis immersed in whatever he was doing on his laptop. I entered the classroom, introduced myself and although he was grumpy about being interrupted agreed to talk with me.

“Mr. Ragsdale, how long have you worked here at Browning?” I asked.

“Geez, let’s see, I can’t believe it but I’ve worked here for 22 years—my whole career,” he said.

“Then you’ve probably seen a lot of teachers and administrators come and go over the years?”

“No, not really,” he said. “No one ever leaves here, just the students when they graduate, but not the teachers.” I made note of that last bit on my notepad.

“I was wondering, Mr. Ragsdale, did you see anything happen around the time of the murder?”

“Hmmm. I heard it was sometime after school. Let me think. Yes, I saw a tall person, I think a man, walking towards Ms. Passno’s office around then.”

“Do you know anyone who would be that height?”

“Well, there is only one person in the building around that height. Sam Permutt. Sam is the director of student life and coach for the basketball team. Sam works very closely with Danielle—he is always in and out of her office.”

“Was there anything unusual about seeing him yesterday?”

“The only thing that would be strange is that the person I saw was in clothes like I’m wearing and Mr. Permutt is always in sweats after school due to basketball practice.”

“Would Mr. Permutt have anything to gain from Ms. Passno’s death?”

“He would have a lot to gain from Ms. Passno’s death. If she weren’t here, he’d become the head of the middle school.”

Interesting, I thought to myself as I wondered if the basketball team uses pep rally towels. “Last question. Is the head of the middle school a good job?”

“Well, it pays nicely,” he replied.

*Hmmm, I thought usually if the pay is the best thing about a job then there are probably a lot of drawbacks.* I asked, “What’s the worst thing about being head of the middle school?”

“Well, that’d be hard for me to say,” said Mr. Ragsdale hesitating. “You’d have to ask Danielle... uh, I mean someone who’s had the job.”

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Ragsdale. If you think of anything else that might be helpful to the investigation, anything at all, give me a call,” I said as I slipped my card across his desk.

“Sure thing, Detective Smellburg.”

I set out to find Mr. Permutt as he was now my lead suspect in the case. It seemed like the evidence pointed to him since he had the means, motive and

opportunity: he was seen by her office after school, he had access to the towel and, most importantly, he had something to gain. I set out to find my prime suspect but worried he could be anywhere in the school or could even have already left the building. As luck would have it, he was walking up the stairs and went into his office. Perfect timing.

“Why hello, Mr. Permutt,” I said.

“Uhh, who are you?” Mr. Permutt said frantically, even though he had nothing to be afraid of because he was a tall, young, fit man who could probably beat me in a fight, even in his blue button down shirt, tie and khakis. I wondered if he was nervous because I caught him off guard or because he was hiding something. I certainly hoped he wouldn’t take off in a sprint because I did not relish the idea of trying to tackle this guy.

“I am detective Henry Smellburg from the NYPD and I wanted to ask you a few questions regarding the murder of Ms. Passno.”

“All right then, it couldn’t possibly be me.”

“Why not?” I asked, thinking to myself that only the guilty ones respond that way.

“You see I was coaching the 7th and 8th grade basketball team until 5:30 p.m. then I had to change into my normal work clothes for dinner, that’s why I was not in my usual Browning sweats,” he said, adding that last bit as if he could read my mind wondering why he had changed clothes.

“Where and with whom were you having dinner last night?”

“I don’t really see why that’s relevant, Detective, but I was dining with a lady friend of mine,” he replied. “It was our third date so I took her to my favorite restaurant called Paola’s.” I took note of the name so I could confirm his story later.

“How long have you known Ms. Passno, Mr. Permutt?” I asked.

“She hired me right out of grad school. That was six years ago now. Times flies.” he responded.

“In those six years, have you ever had a disagreement with Ms. Passno?”

“Well, I mean, sure, we didn’t always see eye-to-eye,” he said as he fidgeted with his keys. “But, I mean do you always see eye-to-eye with your colleagues?”

Choosing to consider that a rhetorical question, I continued my interrogation. “Can you explain the team’s pep rally towel in Ms. Passno’s office?”

“Ah, yes,” he said confidently. “I forgot the towel at a basketball game and a student brought it back. They left it with Danielle and she told me it was in her office earlier that day. I went to pick it up around 3:30 p.m. before practice, but her door was locked.”

“Interesting. I’ll be in touch, Mr. Permutt.”

I wasn’t buying Mr. Permutt’s alibi, especially since Mr. Ragsdale said that Mr. Permutt had something to gain. He certainly had a motive, but I needed more evidence to build my case.

I went back to Ms. Passno’s office to review the crime scene to see if CSI had missed anything that might help me. I also wanted to review the file that came in overnight to see if I overlooked anything. A few things piqued my interest.

I noticed a torn piece of paper which was titled “Employee Contract Quitting Regulations.” I didn’t know what it was but it stated: “All employees that leave the school for unnatural reasons such as quitting before retirement will have to hand over everything they earned while working at this school.”

I also found a note from Ms. Vonnegut saying that she stopped by to talk with Dr. Botti but his door was locked. She had presumed he was in a meeting. There were also more of the same cough drops in the office, this time with a CVS receipt. I noticed it had a purchase date and time of 1/18/20 at 9:45 a.m. This meant that whoever had purchased these had visited the crime

scene after the murder, since the murder happened on 1/17/20. I also took down the credit card number on the receipt to see if we could track the owner of the number.

Suddenly, I remembered all of the wrappers in the trash can from before! I figured the culprit would be on their way to CVS soon to get more cough drops. My plan was to go to CVS at the same time the next day and see if anyone would come to buy cough drops.

The stakeout, which was just me leaning against a wall watching people come in and out, started off very boring but then, the unexpected happened. I saw someone enter the store who was way over dressed for the weather. The oversized coat, sunglasses and scarf wrapped around the head were a dead giveaway that whoever this was didn't want anyone recognizing them.

I followed the person and watched as they headed to the cough drop section. I got behind her in line and watched her buy some cough drops and I got the credit card number which happened to be the same as on the receipt I found at the school. Before my brain could process all this, the person had already walked out of the store and onto the busy Manhattan sidewalk. Not sure which way to go, I suddenly caught a glimpse of the scarf and chased after my mystery person.

"NYPD," I said as I showed my badge. "I need to see your ID"

"Excuse me?" the person replied. "What's this about?"

"I'm the one who will be asking the questions," I responded. "Now, show me your ID"

The ID said "Danielle Passno" in bold letters. How could this be? Was this the murderer? I took the mystery suspect back to the police station where I checked her fingerprints and ran them through the system. It appeared to actually be Ms. Passno.

Figuring that she'd talk more freely with me if my interview felt less official I led her out of the station and into an alleyway to question her.

“So let’s cut to the chase, Ms. Passno,” I said fiercely. “Why did you fake your death?”

“It’s a long story.” She said nervously as she glanced around the room. “It’s a really long story”

I cut her off. “I want the full story. Now,” I demanded, “Start to finish.”

“It all started when I was getting tired of being head of middle school,” Ms. Passno started, then hesitated.

“Go on...”

“I’ve been at Browning since I was 22 years old—I started teaching there because I love watching the boys’ brains learn and absorb information. Teaching is a calling. But over the years I was promoted so many times and finally a few years ago became head of the middle school. But it’s a boring desk job. No more teaching. Just endless paperwork and unhappy parents to deal with.”

As she spoke it made me think about what would happen if I was the chief and only did paperwork.

Ms. Passno continued, “So I went to the headmaster Dr. Botti to talk about my options of leaving Browning and he showed me the part of the contract where it says ‘All employees that leave the school for unnatural reasons such as quitting before retirement will have to hand over everything they earned.’ I was devastated. The way Browning pays its employees is unusual you see. They give you a stipend to live off of, but you get your full pay after being here for 30 years. Since I have been here for so long I am owed a hefty amount and I can’t afford to lose all the money I earned because what would I do then?”

“I see,” I said as I tried to process this strange payment structure. “And around what time did you meet with Dr. Botti? And how does your dying help your situation?”

“That was around 3:30 p.m.”

This explained why the door was locked when Mr. Permutt went to get his pep rally towel, and was matching up with my time line.

“Dr. Botti was sympathetic with me and thought that if someone wanted to leave, they should be able to without giving up all their money, but the school’s Board of Directors didn’t want good teachers to ever leave so we devised a plan to fake my death. He got Ms. Vonnegut, the English teacher, to make some fake wounds to stage my death and then sneak me out of the building. But he had to tell her which ways to take me to not be seen and then we planted the letter in my office to throw people off. Because death is considered natural, I would keep my money as it would be sent to my family, which I would then retrieve. Faking my death at school meant no one would look for me at home. That’s my story.”

“All right,” I said. “And if the people who own the school know you are alive and want to quit, they’ll take everything?”

“Yes, that’s right,” replied Ms. Passno with a tone in her voice that sounded like she was worried about losing everything.

I thought about how I would feel if I were stuck in a boring desk job pushing paper or about to lose all the income I had earned over the years. This situation didn’t feel right.

“It’s a weird turn of events, but your secret is safe with me. No one has to know you faked your death. Not even the police. And, by the way, I am going to look into the school’s payment policy.”

“Thank you so much, Detective Smellburg,” Ms. Passno exclaimed as she bear-hugged me. “Will you be at risk of losing your job?”

I replied, “My job is to solve mysteries, not follow school rules.”



