

2016 Maryland State Level 2 Winning Letter by Noor Saleem

Noor Saleem
January 9, 2016

Center for the Book
Library of Congress
101 Independence Ave. S.E.
Washington, DC 20540

Dear Hans Christian Andersen,

The first time I read one of your works, *The Matchstick Girl*, I was deeply engrossed in the text of the short story, as it was one of the most poignant, moving pieces I had encountered. As a young girl, I was flabbergasted by its pathos and injustice. Why was a child forced to work? Why would her father treat her so? Why did no one take pity and help her? It was incomprehensible to me – how could this happen?

Years later, I remembered your bittersweet tale and read it for the second time. I began to understand and appreciate the outcome. The little child *did* receive happiness – not in this world, but in the next. Society has painted death's door black, but in your story the other side was bursting with vivid colors. It was as breathtaking as a vibrant sunset and warmed my heart.

The writing was so exquisite- so different to what I had read before, and expressive in a magical way. The words seemed to form poetry that could barely hide itself in prose. While reading, I felt like I was right there with the little girl: feet blue, hands numb, tiny frame shuddering in the frigid weather, and flitting between reality and fantasy.

Your book caused me to think about humanity and life in general in a completely different way. To me, the message embedded in the flowing black ink of the book hit me hard, and has stayed with me since. I am so lucky to be where I am now.

In all honesty, I have nothing to complain about. My family and I are healthy, I never go to bed hungry, I have a roof above my head, and access to so many amazing opportunities as I grow up. The little girl in your story had none of these, and my heart ached so deeply for her. It seemed like she was trapped in the prison of her frail body. When her grandmother came to finally set her spirit free; she broke all the heavy chains binding her to life and flew. She left worries, cares, and her small frozen body behind.

As the daughter of Iraqi immigrants, I grew up listening to stories of my parents' struggles in a war and poverty stricken land. There was one particular story that has stuck with me over the years. My father once sat me and my brothers down, and spun us a heart-racing tale of terror. As we crowded around him and listened with fascination to his deep, lyrical voice, he narrated his experience of surviving the First Gulf War. My father described to us in detail, how seemingly out of nowhere, missiles were smashing into Bagdad, Iraq, the beautiful city where he had lived in all his life. He told us, as we

2016 Maryland State Level 2 Winning Letter by Noor Saleem

gazed up at him, that the bombs looked like crude representations of the Fourth of July fireworks as they destroyed the local market place once filled with quaint and vibrant shops. He remembered feeling the blazing pieces of rubble burn through his clothes and skin as they rained down from the sky. We were caught up in this tale of destruction, where the thick air was filled with the gut clenching smell of singed flesh. I felt like I was living the experience, through my father; I saw through his eyes the unforgettable image of a woman hugging her only child close as the bombs erupted in front of them. I witnessed the force of the eruption throw the couple to the ground and saw them lying there stunned, defenseless, and hurt.

My parents were lucky to immigrate to America and have the opportunity to build back their lives piece by piece. I am so privileged to have so much more than the basic necessities for survival; your book has inspired me to envision and strive for a peaceful and better world, where the raw goodness in people's hearts prevails. My father's experience and your story both have impacted me immensely and have reminded me to put my life in perspective of the world and people around me.

I constantly think about how so many meaningful and special things were brutally torn apart in the war. But for what? Nobody really won. People lost their homes, the country was stricken with extreme poverty and chaos for decades, until now, and almost five million children became orphans as a result.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for writing this amazing piece and making me realize that I could have been one of them.

With utmost sincerity,
Noor Saleem