A watercolor illustration of a tree with autumn leaves in shades of yellow, orange, and pink, framing the text. The tree's branches are brown and textured, with some leaves still attached. The background is white.

Once Autumn Leaves


By

The Shottery Young Writers

Volume II

Autumn/Winter 2015

Anthology Cover by Amy Li



Editor's Letter

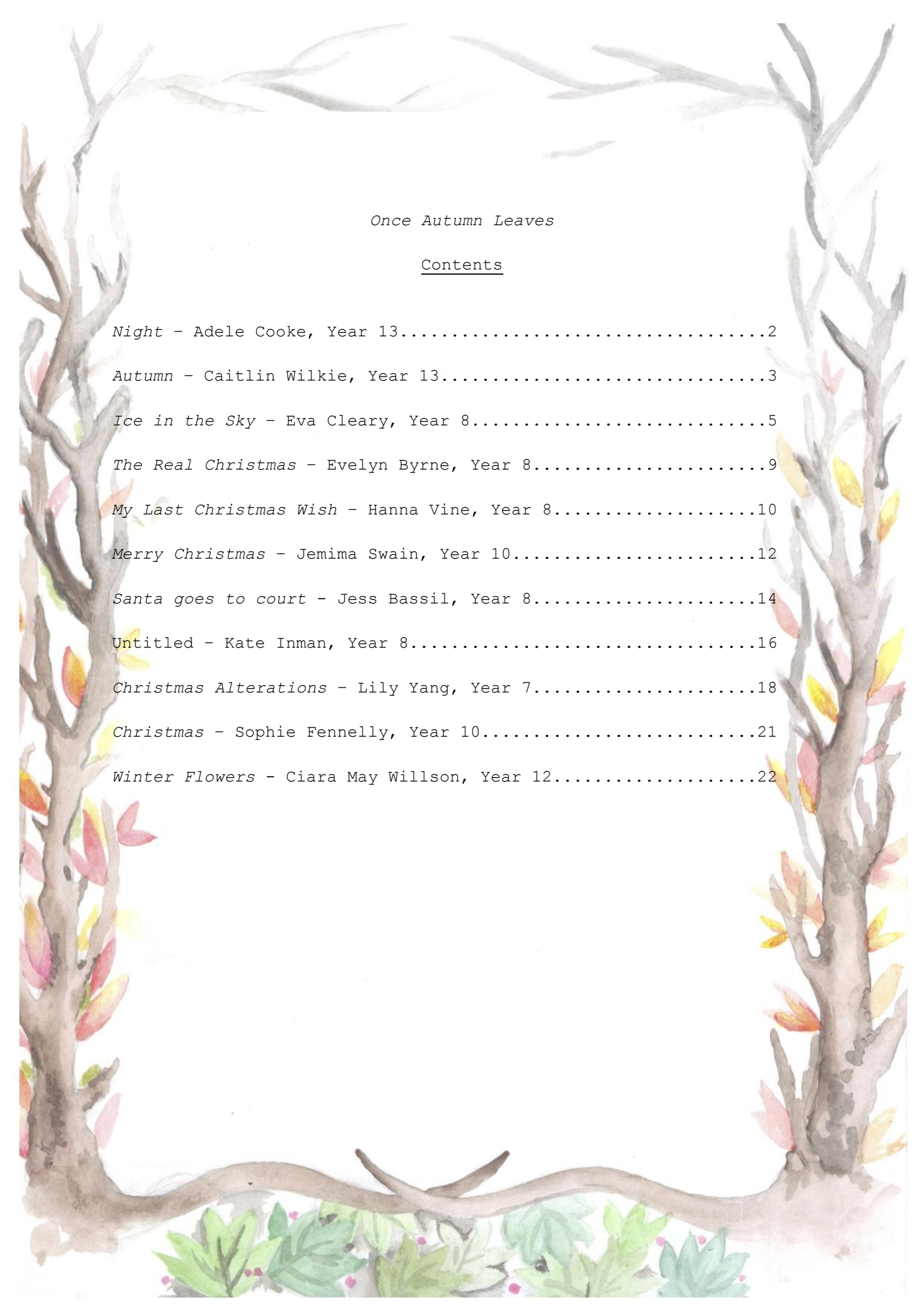
Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Shottery Young Writers' second anthology of creative work! Coming back to school after the summer break can really be a drag. The leaves are falling from the trees, the wet and windy weather is settling in, and the nights get increasingly longer. However, at the Young Writers' group, we have been trying to channel these feelings into creative inspiration!

Our first thoughts were to write a series of festive tales exploring the wonders of the Christmas season. However, as I am sure you can imagine, these tales of joy and good will suddenly started to transform into works with a slightly darker edge. So, the group have created a fantastic collection of poems and short stories inspired by the changing of the seasons.

I sincerely hope you enjoy reading these and perhaps feel inspired to come along on Monday lunch times in G15.

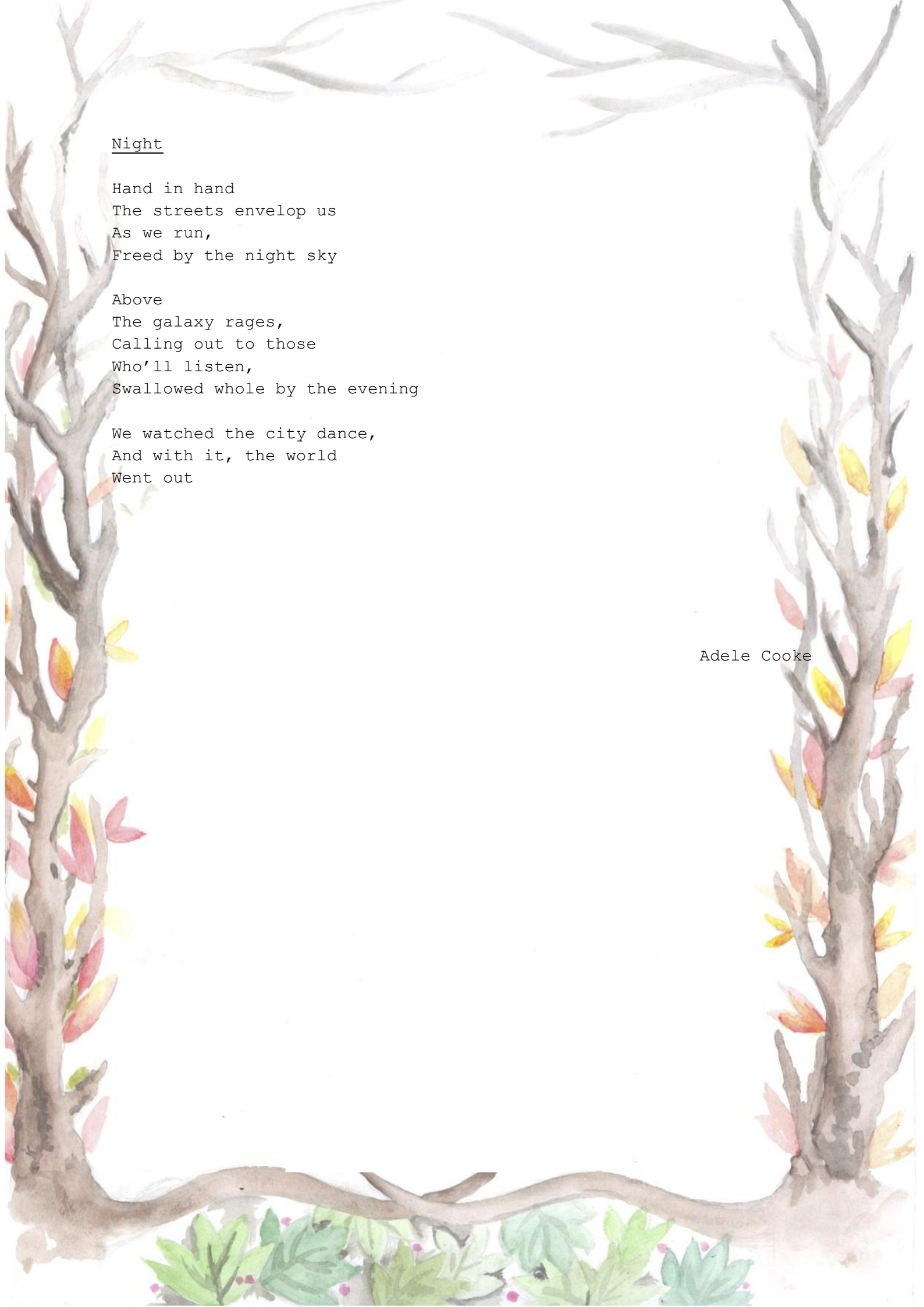
Mr Cooper

A watercolor illustration of two trees with bare branches and some autumn-colored leaves (pink, yellow, orange) on the left and right sides. The trees are connected at the bottom by a thick, brown, wavy trunk. Below the trunk are green leaves and small pink flowers.

Once Autumn Leaves

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A watercolor illustration of trees with colorful leaves in shades of pink, yellow, and orange, framing the text. The trees are drawn with soft, blended colors and have a natural, organic feel. The leaves are scattered along the branches, some appearing as small, delicate shapes. The overall style is gentle and artistic.

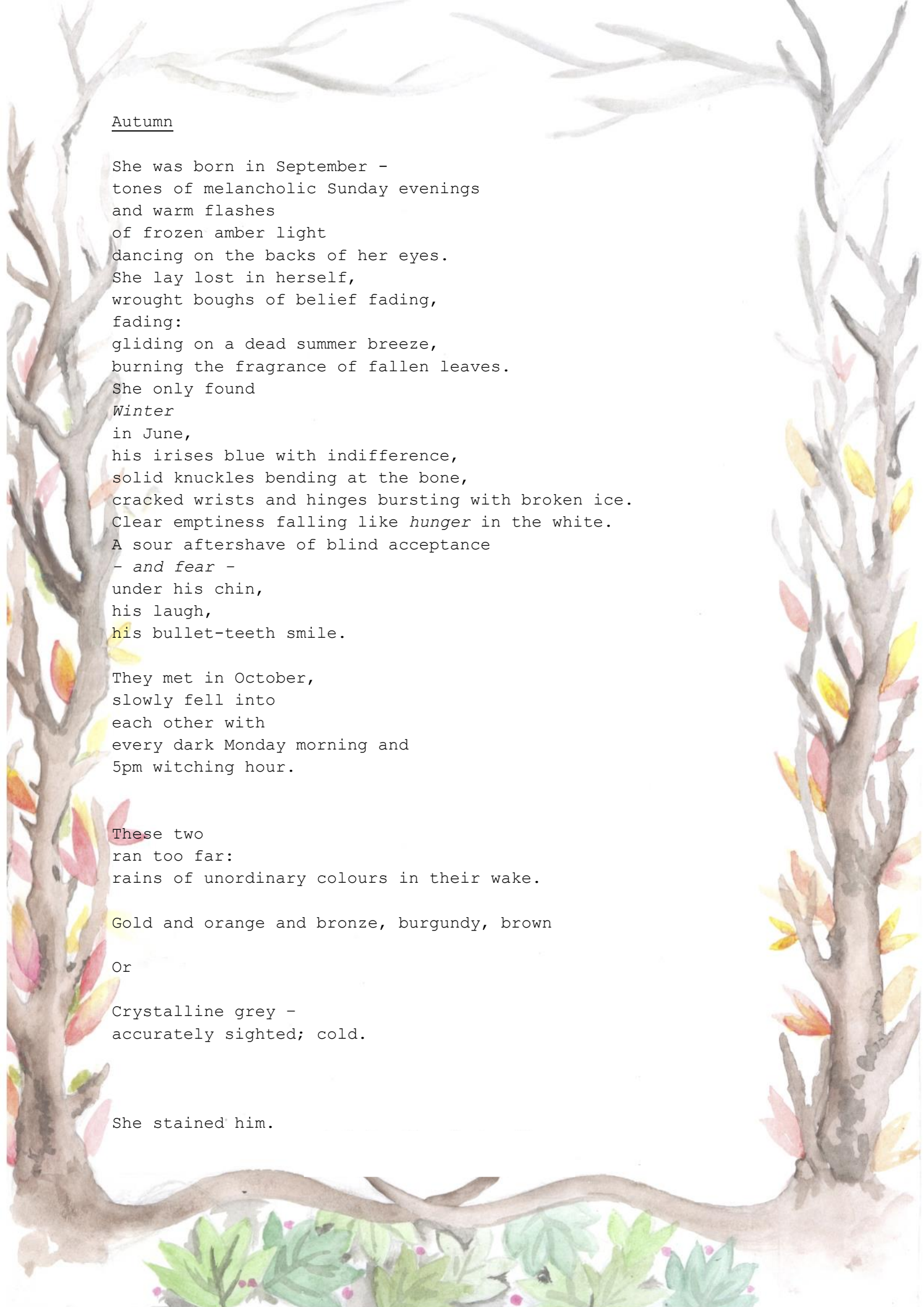
Night

Hand in hand
The streets envelop us
As we run,
Freed by the night sky

Above
The galaxy rages,
Calling out to those
Who'll listen,
Swallowed whole by the evening

We watched the city dance,
And with it, the world
Went out

Adele Cooke



Autumn

She was born in September -
tones of melancholic Sunday evenings
and warm flashes
of frozen amber light
dancing on the backs of her eyes.
She lay lost in herself,
wrought boughs of belief fading,
fading:
gliding on a dead summer breeze,
burning the fragrance of fallen leaves.

She only found

Winter

in June,
his irises blue with indifference,
solid knuckles bending at the bone,
cracked wrists and hinges bursting with broken ice.
Clear emptiness falling like *hunger* in the white.
A sour aftershave of blind acceptance
- *and fear* -
under his chin,
his laugh,
his bullet-teeth smile.

They met in October,
slowly fell into
each other with
every dark Monday morning and
5pm witching hour.

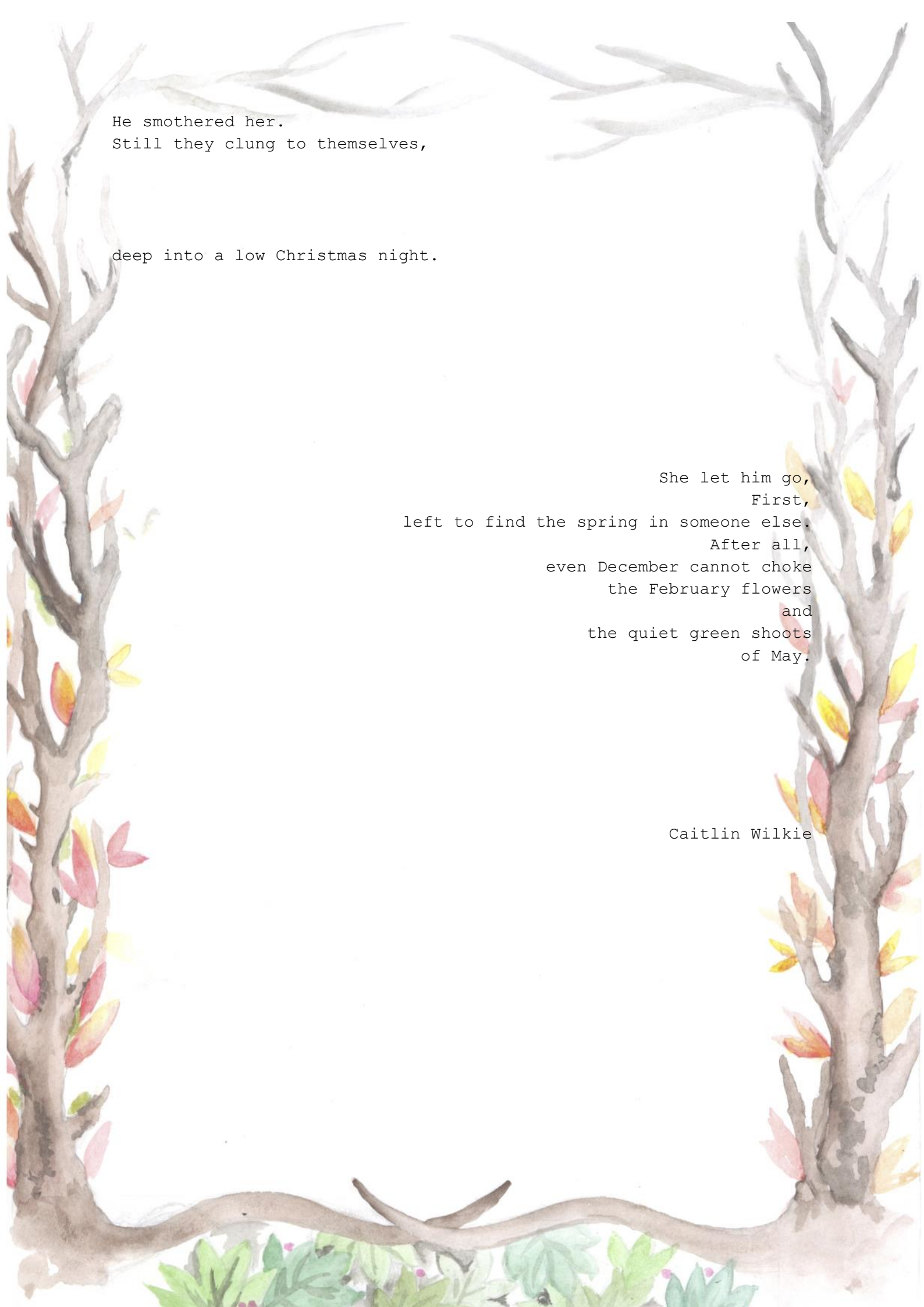
These two
ran too far:
rains of unordinary colours in their wake.

Gold and orange and bronze, burgundy, brown

Or

Crystalline grey -
accurately sighted; cold.

She stained him.



He smothered her.
Still they clung to themselves,

deep into a low Christmas night.

She let him go,
First,
left to find the spring in someone else.
After all,
even December cannot choke
the February flowers
and
the quiet green shoots
of May.

Caitlin Wilkie

Ice in the Sky

There is something in the sky, something watching us, every minute of every day, waiting to strike. And it strikes at Christmas. There's a reason it's cold at Christmas, coldness is a cover. And under the cover, something hides, searching for the right moment.

Eliza stared at her clock. Midnight. She looked out the window at the deep night. She shivered and pulled her duvet round herself. There was something out there. There was no other explanation for all the cold. Suddenly there was a big bang downstairs. She tiptoed across her room and then down the landing. She creaked down the stairs and opened the door to the living room. There was a man holding coloured parcels, a man with a white beard and a scarlet suit. It couldn't be. "You!" Eliza said. The man turned around in surprise. "Me!" Santa said, "Sorry Eliza, I know it's been your dream to meet me for precisely 8 years, 3 days, 4 hours and 59 minutes - oh, that's 5 hours! - but I really have to go. There are plenty of other children to deliver to!"

"Santa, please, you're the only one who I can think of that could tell me, is there something out there? Is there something that makes everyone shiver?" Eliza asked.

"Eliza, you're right that I'm the only one that knows, but I can't tell you here. But I will if you come with me." Santa said.

"Come with you? I can't come with you! What about my parents? What will they think?" Eliza exclaimed.

"I don't know, I'm Santa not Dumbledore! Leave a note, send a text! I said you could come with me, I didn't say I'd do all the dirty work for you while you relax on my sleigh! Besides, they're not your real parents." Santa said.

Eliza had been adopted when she was just 1, and didn't know anything about her real parents.

"Fine, I'm coming, let me just pack a bag." Eliza said.

"No time. It's now or never Lizzie." Santa said.

"My name is Eliza, not Lizzie and I'm coming with you."

Eliza squeezed up the chimney, her hands covered in soot, her clothes as dark as the night sky outside. She reached the top of the chimney and took a huge breath of the fresh air. Then her jaw dropped.

"Reindeer?" She shouted down the chimney, "You really have reindeer?"

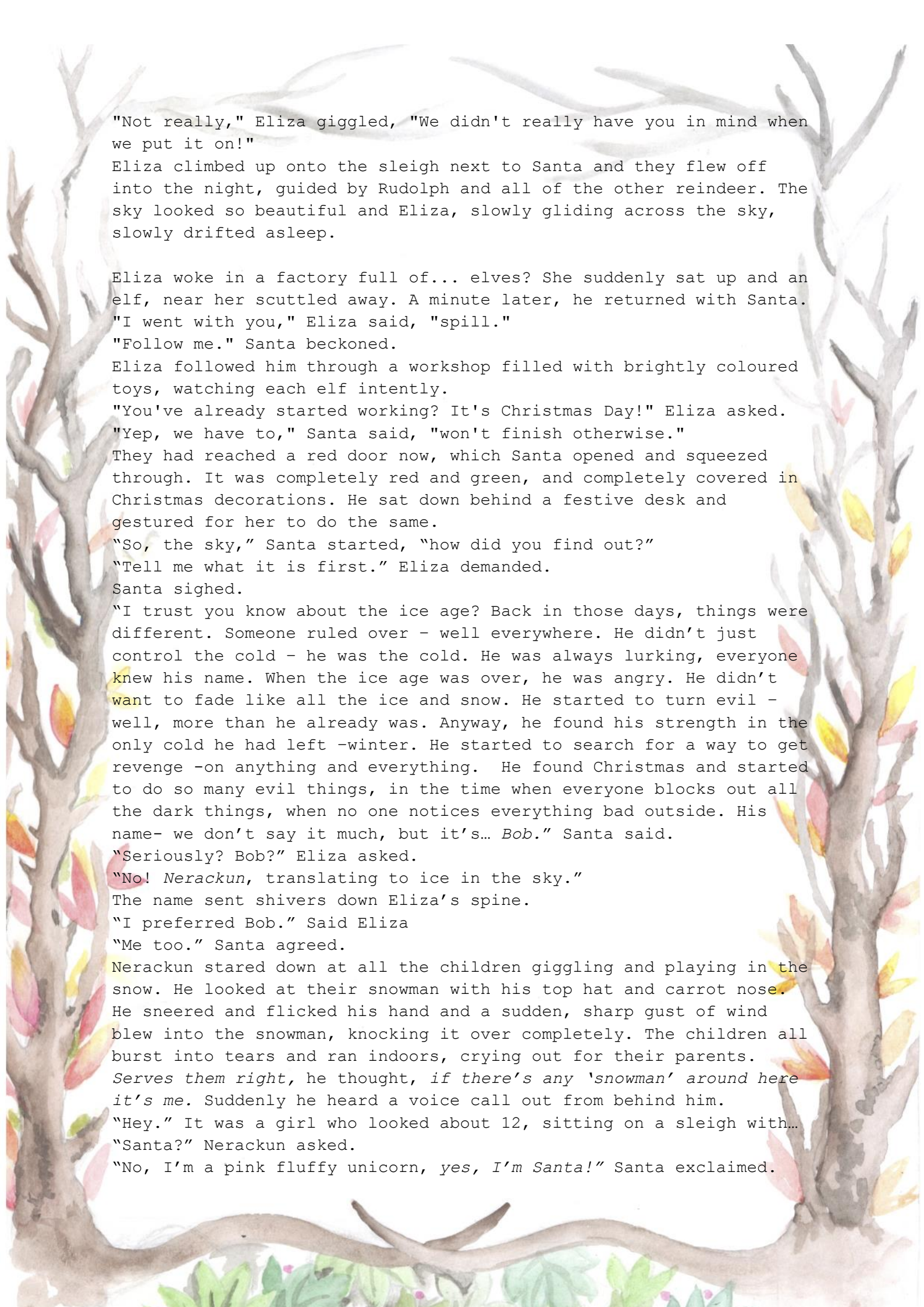
"Yep, Rudolph and all. Keep moving!" Santa yelled from below.

Eliza grinned and hoisted herself out the chimney. She walked over to the reindeer at the front. A reindeer with a bright red nose.

"Rudolph." She whispered.

Santa grunted behind her as he finally got himself out the chimney.

"Ever think of having that chimney enlarged?" He asked.



"Not really," Eliza giggled, "We didn't really have you in mind when we put it on!"

Eliza climbed up onto the sleigh next to Santa and they flew off into the night, guided by Rudolph and all of the other reindeer. The sky looked so beautiful and Eliza, slowly gliding across the sky, slowly drifted asleep.

Eliza woke in a factory full of... elves? She suddenly sat up and an elf, near her scuttled away. A minute later, he returned with Santa. "I went with you," Eliza said, "spill."

"Follow me." Santa beckoned.

Eliza followed him through a workshop filled with brightly coloured toys, watching each elf intently.

"You've already started working? It's Christmas Day!" Eliza asked.

"Yep, we have to," Santa said, "won't finish otherwise."

They had reached a red door now, which Santa opened and squeezed through. It was completely red and green, and completely covered in Christmas decorations. He sat down behind a festive desk and gestured for her to do the same.

"So, the sky," Santa started, "how did you find out?"

"Tell me what it is first." Eliza demanded.

Santa sighed.

"I trust you know about the ice age? Back in those days, things were different. Someone ruled over - well everywhere. He didn't just control the cold - he was the cold. He was always lurking, everyone knew his name. When the ice age was over, he was angry. He didn't want to fade like all the ice and snow. He started to turn evil - well, more than he already was. Anyway, he found his strength in the only cold he had left -winter. He started to search for a way to get revenge -on anything and everything. He found Christmas and started to do so many evil things, in the time when everyone blocks out all the dark things, when no one notices everything bad outside. His name- we don't say it much, but it's... *Bob*." Santa said.

"Seriously? Bob?" Eliza asked.

"No! *Nerackun*, translating to ice in the sky."

The name sent shivers down Eliza's spine.

"I preferred Bob." Said Eliza

"Me too." Santa agreed.

Nerackun stared down at all the children giggling and playing in the snow. He looked at their snowman with his top hat and carrot nose.

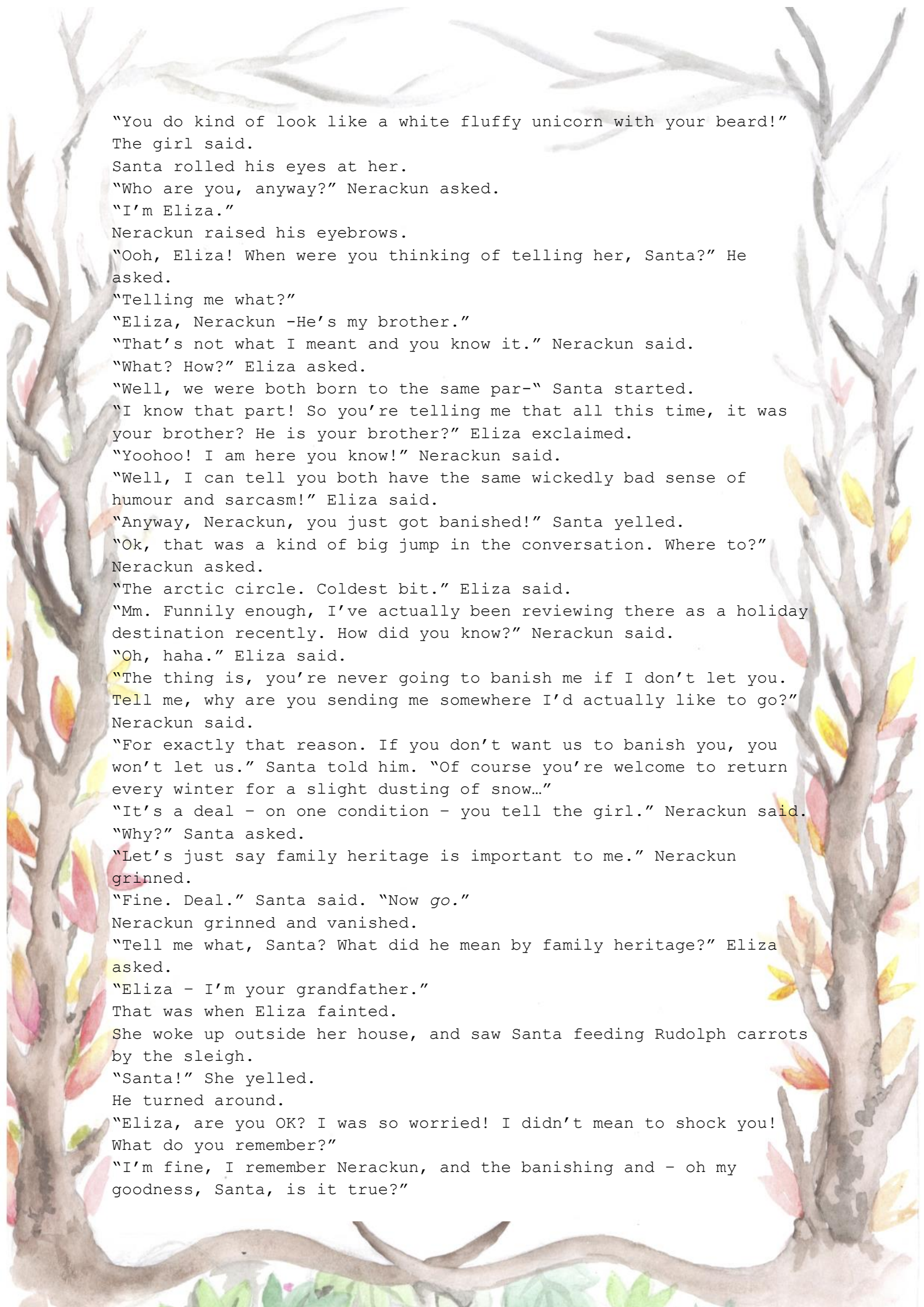
He sneered and flicked his hand and a sudden, sharp gust of wind blew into the snowman, knocking it over completely. The children all burst into tears and ran indoors, crying out for their parents.

Serves them right, he thought, *if there's any 'snowman' around here it's me*. Suddenly he heard a voice call out from behind him.

"Hey." It was a girl who looked about 12, sitting on a sleigh with...

"Santa?" Nerackun asked.

"No, I'm a pink fluffy unicorn, yes, *I'm Santa!*" Santa exclaimed.



"You do kind of look like a white fluffy unicorn with your beard!"
The girl said.

Santa rolled his eyes at her.

"Who are you, anyway?" Nerackun asked.

"I'm Eliza."

Nerackun raised his eyebrows.

"Ooh, Eliza! When were you thinking of telling her, Santa?" He asked.

"Telling me what?"

"Eliza, Nerackun -He's my brother."

"That's not what I meant and you know it." Nerackun said.

"What? How?" Eliza asked.

"Well, we were both born to the same par-" Santa started.

"I know that part! So you're telling me that all this time, it was your brother? He is your brother?" Eliza exclaimed.

"Yoo-hoo! I am here you know!" Nerackun said.

"Well, I can tell you both have the same wickedly bad sense of humour and sarcasm!" Eliza said.

"Anyway, Nerackun, you just got banished!" Santa yelled.

"Ok, that was a kind of big jump in the conversation. Where to?" Nerackun asked.

"The arctic circle. Coldest bit." Eliza said.

"Mm. Funnily enough, I've actually been reviewing there as a holiday destination recently. How did you know?" Nerackun said.

"Oh, haha." Eliza said.

"The thing is, you're never going to banish me if I don't let you. Tell me, why are you sending me somewhere I'd actually like to go?" Nerackun said.

Nerackun said.

"For exactly that reason. If you don't want us to banish you, you won't let us." Santa told him. "Of course you're welcome to return every winter for a slight dusting of snow..."

"It's a deal - on one condition - you tell the girl." Nerackun said.

"Why?" Santa asked.

"Let's just say family heritage is important to me." Nerackun grinned.

"Fine. Deal." Santa said. "Now go."

Nerackun grinned and vanished.

"Tell me what, Santa? What did he mean by family heritage?" Eliza asked.

"Eliza - I'm your grandfather."

That was when Eliza fainted.

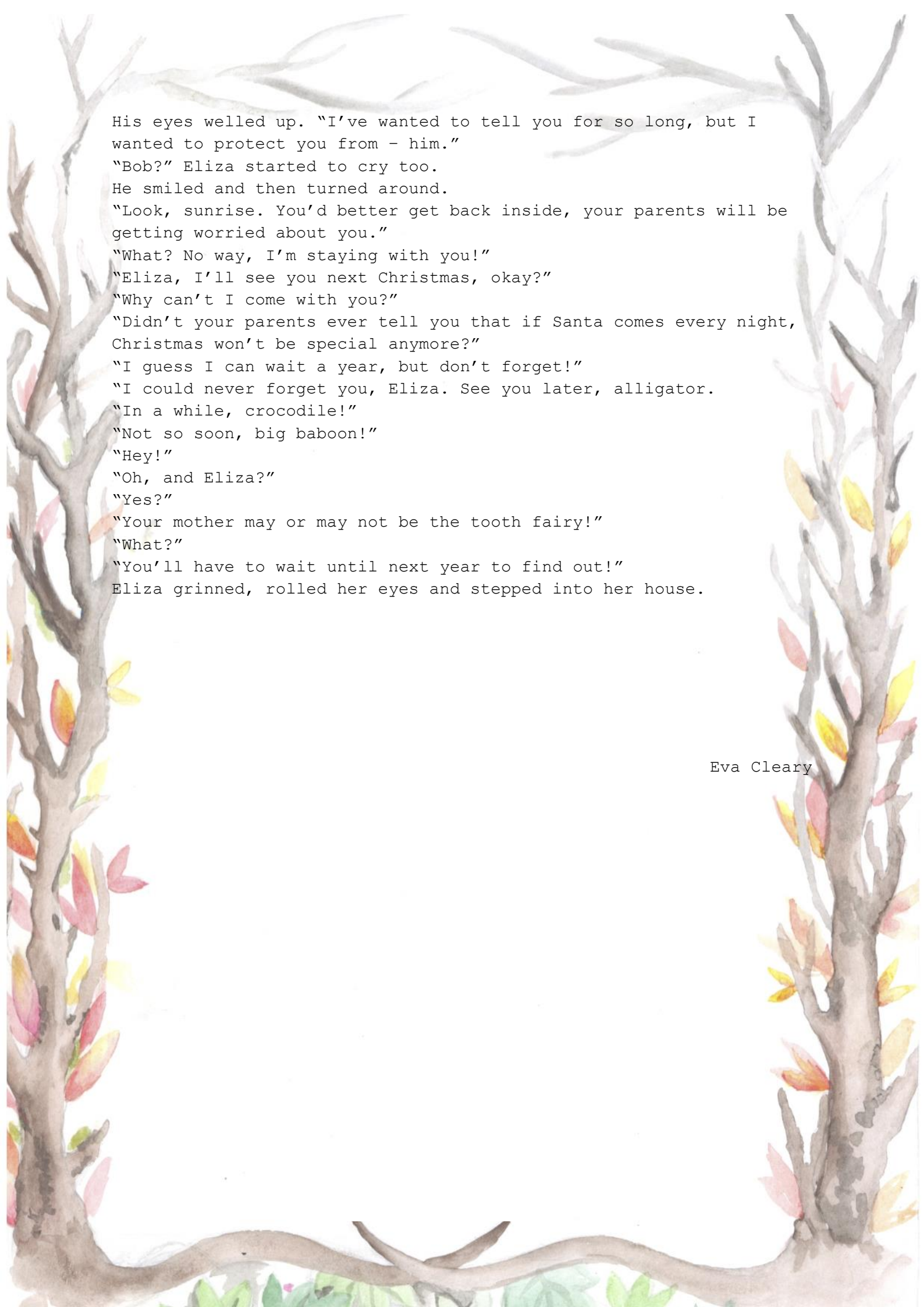
She woke up outside her house, and saw Santa feeding Rudolph carrots by the sleigh.

"Santa!" She yelled.

He turned around.

"Eliza, are you OK? I was so worried! I didn't mean to shock you! What do you remember?"

"I'm fine, I remember Nerackun, and the banishing and - oh my goodness, Santa, is it true?"



His eyes welled up. "I've wanted to tell you for so long, but I wanted to protect you from - him."

"Bob?" Eliza started to cry too.

He smiled and then turned around.

"Look, sunrise. You'd better get back inside, your parents will be getting worried about you."

"What? No way, I'm staying with you!"

"Eliza, I'll see you next Christmas, okay?"

"Why can't I come with you?"

"Didn't your parents ever tell you that if Santa comes every night, Christmas won't be special anymore?"

"I guess I can wait a year, but don't forget!"

"I could never forget you, Eliza. See you later, alligator.

"In a while, crocodile!"

"Not so soon, big baboon!"

"Hey!"

"Oh, and Eliza?"

"Yes?"

"Your mother may or may not be the tooth fairy!"

"What?"

"You'll have to wait until next year to find out!"

Eliza grinned, rolled her eyes and stepped into her house.

Eva Cleary



The Real Christmas

Down the chimney,
Round the bed,
Past the grate,
Your life will end,

He creeps, he crawls,
"Hello little girl" he said,
"You've been a naughty little boy",
And then you're dead.

There's one story pretty much every child in the world knows. That happy, happy man who travels around the world, delivering presents to all the good girls and boys, and leaving coal for all the bad and selfish children. However underneath that sugar coated story, there is a much darker tale.

Every day of the year there is an old man who watches the young children of the world constantly. When they're asleep and awake. Creepy much? But no, when it's Santa, no-one bats an eyelid.

It's the dead of night and a man with a ghostly body, a sharp skeleton glowing beneath his skin and a sickly grin as he sharpens his curved blade, preparing for his favourite time of the year, restocking his supplies. But his smile faltered as he looked down at his list. Not enough children had been bad. He would have to add a few names...

She lay there in the centre of her bed shaking with excitement. This Christmas she'll see him. She had to. As the grandfather clock struck twelve in the hall below, she heard a sound on the roof above her. She sat up, overcome with excitement. He was here.

Evelyn Byrne

My Last Christmas Wish

The snow crunched under my feet. The cold winters' wind swirled me round and round till I was dizzy. I was at my happiest out here in the peace and quiet. Then I remembered, I had to go back, and face him...

It was Christmas Eve. Was it only two hours ago that I was sat in the hospital with mum and dad. Mum was in her bed whilst I was helping her with her water. Then she couldn't breathe. I hit the alarm button to attract the doctor's attention. My hand jolted, the glass flew away, the water was spilling out. Then the glass was in a million pieces all over the floor, just like my heart.

The doctors came rushing into the room. Gloves on, ready to do whatever was necessary to save my mum. Dad had left minutes before so I ran out to find him. I had never really been fond of my 'dad'. He wasn't really my dad. My dad had brown hair and brown eyes. Just like me. Not at all like Tony. He had grey hair and grey eyes, if I had to describe him in one colour it would be simply grey. My dad was a brave and courageous army officer. Tony wasn't, he was a cowardly tax assessor who's day brought misery to the people he saw. Dad was the polar opposite. He stood tall and brought hope and joy to anyone and everyone he saw. Dad was family. Tony wasn't, he was just a boyfriend someone who could up and leave at any time.

I ran through what seemed like endless corridors of sick and dying people. I felt my chest getting tighter with every step. I got to the rusty front entrance of the hospital to see Tony sat having, unsurprisingly, a cigarette.

"You really shouldn't smoke," I wheezed, bent over, with my hands on my knees.

"You really shouldn't be an annoying little so and so," he snarled back at me.

"Not the point, there's something wrong with mum,"

He gave me a glare and ran back to the ward. I followed suit. I entered the side room to see my mum lying there with tubes coming out of her left, right and centre. I was too late. Or was I? The consultant came in. It wasn't good news.

"As you know Annabel is very ill, but if she has something she really wants to live for and you would be able to pay..."

"Where?! How much?!" I asked without considering what I had just said.

"America, £35,000"

Tony said nothing. The silence was unbearable and the tension in the room felt like an elastic band ready to snap at any time.

Tony laughed sarcastically and said, "Well that's that then. She hasn't got that sort of money. And anyway I couldn't be bothered to fight either if all I had was an annoying little brat of a daughter."

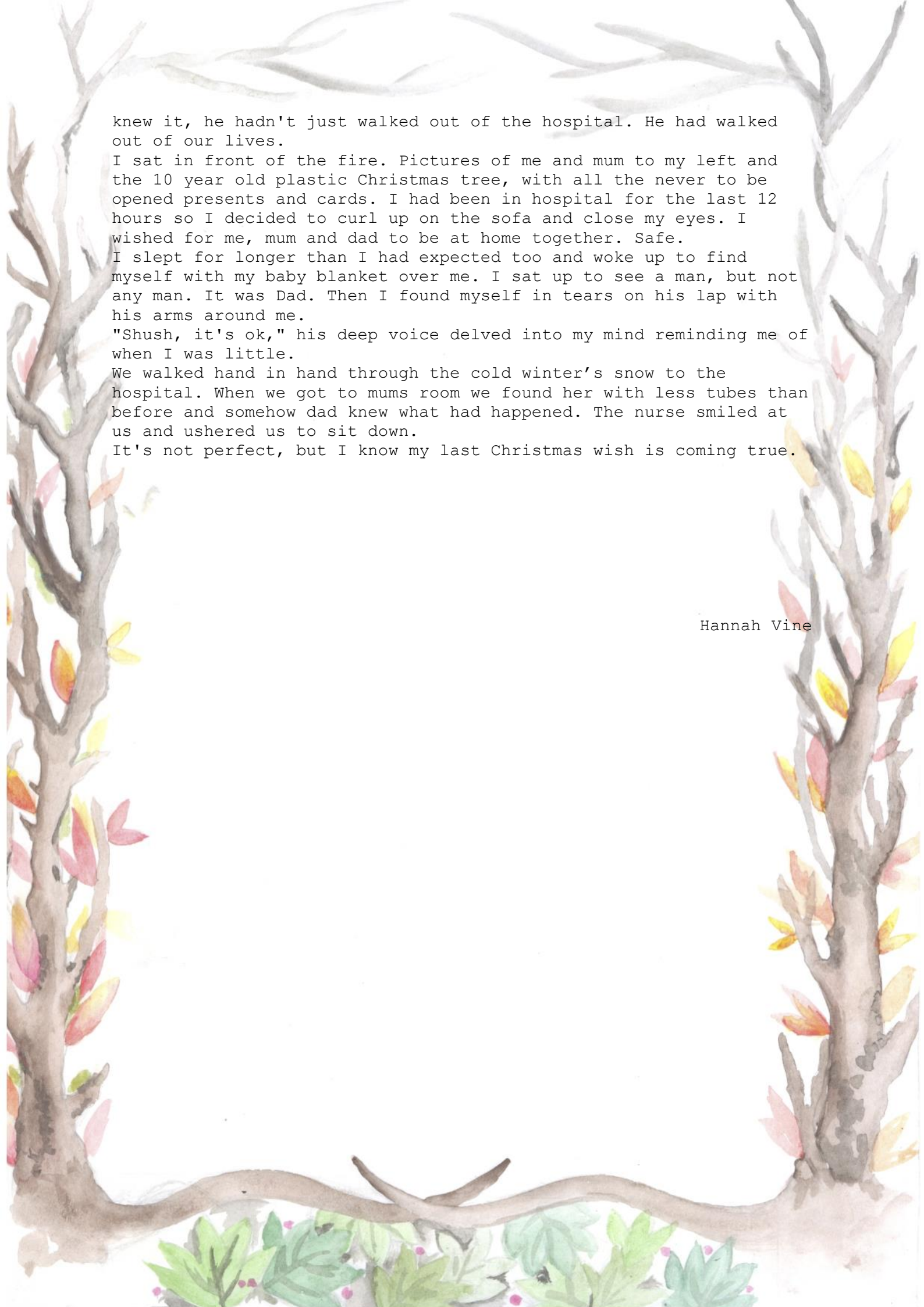
The doctor's expression was beyond words. As the door opened I found my voice.

"You can't just walk out on her now when she needs you," I stuttered.

"Watch me," he said and slammed the door behind him.

I waited until mum was settled, thankful she had slept through the whole unpleasant scene and walked home through the fast falling snow...as I said, now I had to face him, again.

I opened the front door, my palms were sweating even though my breath was frozen. The silence of the darkness confirmed there I



knew it, he hadn't just walked out of the hospital. He had walked out of our lives.

I sat in front of the fire. Pictures of me and mum to my left and the 10 year old plastic Christmas tree, with all the never to be opened presents and cards. I had been in hospital for the last 12 hours so I decided to curl up on the sofa and close my eyes. I wished for me, mum and dad to be at home together. Safe.

I slept for longer than I had expected too and woke up to find myself with my baby blanket over me. I sat up to see a man, but not any man. It was Dad. Then I found myself in tears on his lap with his arms around me.

"Shush, it's ok," his deep voice delved into my mind reminding me of when I was little.

We walked hand in hand through the cold winter's snow to the hospital. When we got to mums room we found her with less tubes than before and somehow dad knew what had happened. The nurse smiled at us and ushered us to sit down.

It's not perfect, but I know my last Christmas wish is coming true.

Hannah Vine

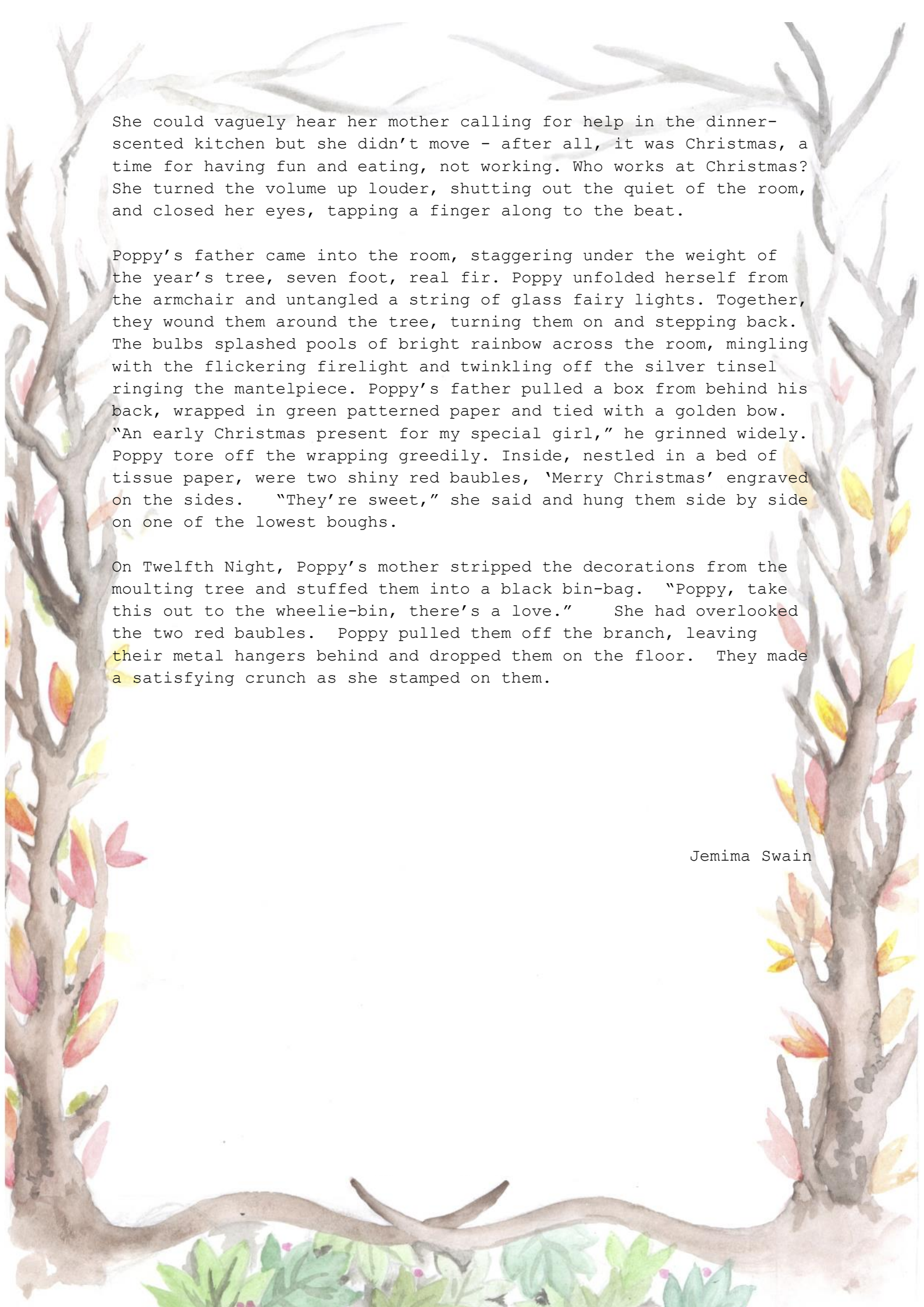
Merry Christmas

Deepa hurried along the street. The hot tarmac baked her bare feet and the blue smoke from early morning cars stung her throat. The sun had not yet risen, but all around her the Indian city Hyderabad was teeming with life. Traffic choked the road: revving cars, spluttering motorbikes. Violent shouting from frustrated drivers echoed across the shop fronts, the heavy, spiced air drowning in noise and smells. She rushed on, ducking around the garish stalls and the bellowing cries of the salesmen calling for the crowd to buy their goods. Too soon and she reached the factory. She wished she knew what it was called, how to read the large letters on the sign. She wished she could go to school endlessly, study maths, languages, science. She wished she could support her ill mother, bring in more money to put more food on their sparse table, but more than that, that she could learn, be free to know.

Noisier than the streets outside, the factory drummed with machinery, the sprawling buildings crowded with furnaces and fumes and grinding machines. The air was hazy, hung with fumes from the plastic. Deepa pulled on her dust mask before crossing to her place on the roaring production line. She attached the metal hangers to the tops of baubles, spending long, exhausting hours desperately trying to earn enough. She didn't know about Christmas decorations, she didn't know where or why the little spheres would sell or why she had to work so hard to make them. She knew her fingers were sore and calloused from the endless repetition, and her neck ached for she couldn't look up for fear of falling behind on her work. Tracing the unfamiliar letters on the surface of a shiny red bauble as she pushed in the aluminium hook, Deepa prayed to herself that across the world where people were rich, they would buy her baubles.

A flurry of snow wandered silently past the window, catching the light from inside and, gleaming, drifted off into the darkening sky. Amber flames crackled merrily from the wide brick fireplace, splashing the walls with dancing sparks and illuminating the living room with their golden glow. The lamps arranged around the room added their soft orange warmth to the peace. Poppy tumbled into the room, her school bag flung to the corner of the polished hall behind her, gleefully thinking of the Christmas holidays. No more lessons. She was free from the endless drudge of maths, languages, science and the constant boring pressure of exams and tests.

Poppy sprawled across the welcoming cushions of the armchair. The fire's comforting heat lazily washing over her, she settled back, bit into a chocolate spread sandwich and reached for her headphones and the latest iPhone; the one she had been given for her birthday.



She could vaguely hear her mother calling for help in the dinner-scented kitchen but she didn't move - after all, it was Christmas, a time for having fun and eating, not working. Who works at Christmas? She turned the volume up louder, shutting out the quiet of the room, and closed her eyes, tapping a finger along to the beat.

Poppy's father came into the room, staggering under the weight of the year's tree, seven foot, real fir. Poppy unfolded herself from the armchair and untangled a string of glass fairy lights. Together, they wound them around the tree, turning them on and stepping back. The bulbs splashed pools of bright rainbow across the room, mingling with the flickering firelight and twinkling off the silver tinsel ringing the mantelpiece. Poppy's father pulled a box from behind his back, wrapped in green patterned paper and tied with a golden bow. "An early Christmas present for my special girl," he grinned widely. Poppy tore off the wrapping greedily. Inside, nestled in a bed of tissue paper, were two shiny red baubles, 'Merry Christmas' engraved on the sides. "They're sweet," she said and hung them side by side on one of the lowest boughs.

On Twelfth Night, Poppy's mother stripped the decorations from the moulting tree and stuffed them into a black bin-bag. "Poppy, take this out to the wheelie-bin, there's a love." She had overlooked the two red baubles. Poppy pulled them off the branch, leaving their metal hangers behind and dropped them on the floor. They made a satisfying crunch as she stamped on them.

Jemima Swain

Santa goes to Court

"And, I think you will find, our evidence clearly shows that my client is forced to move at the speed of light in order to travel across the entire world, in one night. Overworked, unpaid--"

"Objection!" cried a short, red-faced man "It is clear that your client is exaggerating, he is well paid!"

"In carrots, sir, carrots!" replied his opponent

Okay, maybe I should explain. Santa was in a bit of trouble. All right, a lot of trouble. Of the legal kind. Rudolph was pressing charges against Santa, enough said.

"Considering he's a reindeer I'd have thought carrots would be quite good enough!" Santa's lawyer yelled. There was a stony silence.

"Oh great," hissed Santa through gritted teeth "good work Bernard, now they all think I'm anti-reindeer."

"How dare you," whispered Rudolph, he cleared his throat "How dare you! Would you be happy with a salary of carrots? Would you?!"

"Order, Order!" boomed the judge "Mr Reindeer, perhaps it would be better if we heard from your representative."

"Of course your honour" Rudolph's lawyer drawled " Obviously my client has been deeply hurt by Mr Christmas's opinion--"

"It's not my opinion!" Santa interrupted

"Very well, the opinion stated by the opinions stated by Mr Christmas's lawyer. And there are the other charges: poor working conditions, lack of care--"

"Objection! I have cared for Rudolph just as much as the other reindeer, if not more so. It was me who took him in when the other reindeer were bullying him!"

"Please, Mr Christmas," continued the lawyer "How exactly do you travel on Christmas Eve?"

"Why I fly of course," Santa responded.

"In your sled?"

"Yes"

"Pulled by reindeer?"

"Yes!" Santa burst out "What, Sir, are you suggesting?"

"What I'm suggesting is that your reindeer are being forced to fly. Forced to do something against nature."

"Oh for goodness sake! " Santa gasped, "They are magic reindeer!"

"Magic because you made them so, sir. Because you changed them"

"No! Well yes, sort of. But sir they--"

"No further questions?" the lawyer smiled.

"No further questions." The judge confirmed "Mr Christmas you have been tried by the high yuletide court and found guilty. You will be suspended from active service delivering presents."

"But sir" Santa protested, "My job is vital, it's--"

"During which time" the judge raised his voice over Santa's "Your wife or Mr Reindeer will take over your position."

"Yes your honour." Santa sighed.

"Court dismissed."

Jess Bassil

Untitled

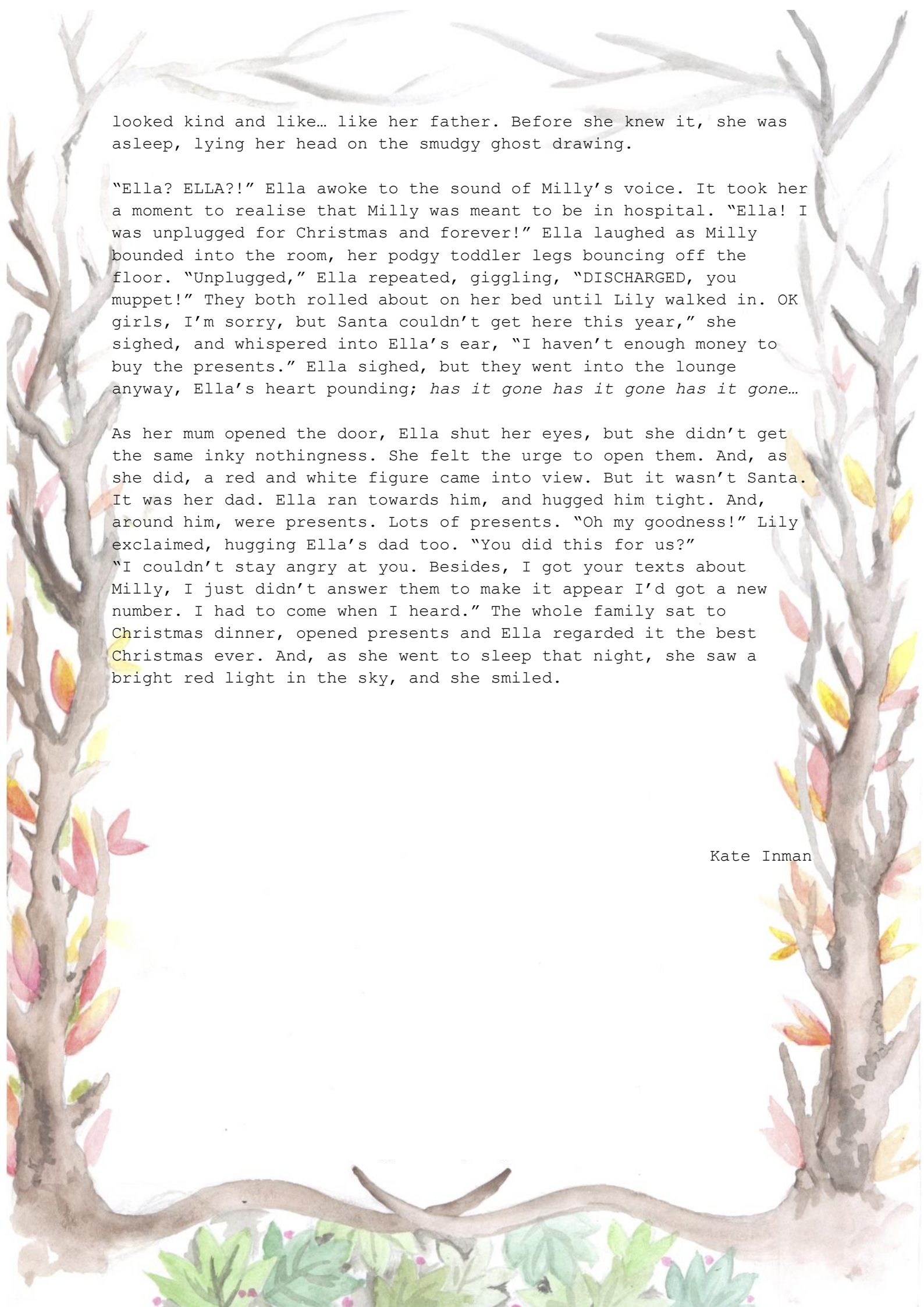
Ella shut her eyes. Even though she was afraid of the dark, the inky nothingness of her eyelids was sort of comforting. Especially since the banging and crashing from downstairs didn't provide much feeling of safety. She tried to convince herself *it's Santa, it's Santa*, but she didn't believe in Santa, and that thought couldn't be pushed from her mind. *It's Christmas Eve, it will be Santa*. Ella scrunched up her eyes, wringing the tears from their ducts. *Maybe it's Mum, putting the presents out*. However hard she tried, Ella just couldn't find a reason for the banging and crashing downstairs.

Despite the fact that Ella did not want to go downstairs and investigate, she was daring enough to adventure into the blacks and blues of the landing at night, to see if her mother was in bed. Slipping slowly out of bed, Ella tiptoed like a reluctant parent in the cold sea across the landing, watching the birds cast intimidating shadows across the wall, through the window. Finally, Ella reached her parents glossy white door. She edged it open slightly, and peered through the gap. Sure enough, there was her mum, fast asleep, curled into the pink and blue flowers on her quilt. Ella's dad had left unexpectedly long ago, leaving no contact or address. Ella's mum, Lily, had been left with Ella and her little sister, Milly. Ella was only three when her dad left, and had loved him dearly for the three years he had been around.

Ella held in her panic, and tiptoe-ran back to her room, leaving the door slightly ajar, snuggling into the purple cave that was her bed. *It's not her... It's not her...* Ella's breathing became heavy. She pulled her quilt closer to her face, listening to the calamity downstairs. Then it struck her. The big question. How does Santa deliver so many presents in one night? Ella had the answer. Santa was a ghost.

At a time like this, being a victim of phasmophobia isn't ideal, therefore, Ella was struggling. She lifted her phone from her bedside table and checked the time. 11:59. *Almost Christmas*, she thought. *Everything's happy and perfect on Christmas*. Except it wasn't. Her dad was gone, there was something downstairs and - oh, I haven't mentioned this, have I? - her sister was in hospital after an asthma attack.

Ella had found that her fear could be settled by drawing the ghosts she imagined, so she set to work designing Santa Ghost. He had a faded white-red outfit, like the Santa she loved long ago, and a long white beard, down from his beady yellow eyes to his black belt. It seems strange, but, despite her fear, Ella loved Halloween. Consequently, when she drew ghosts, she aimed for them to look daunting and evil. However, even with his yellow eyes, Santa Ghost



looked kind and like... like her father. Before she knew it, she was asleep, lying her head on the smudgy ghost drawing.

"Ella? ELLA?!" Ella awoke to the sound of Milly's voice. It took her a moment to realise that Milly was meant to be in hospital. "Ella! I was unplugged for Christmas and forever!" Ella laughed as Milly bounded into the room, her podgy toddler legs bouncing off the floor. "Unplugged," Ella repeated, giggling, "DISCHARGED, you muppet!" They both rolled about on her bed until Lily walked in. "OK girls, I'm sorry, but Santa couldn't get here this year," she sighed, and whispered into Ella's ear, "I haven't enough money to buy the presents." Ella sighed, but they went into the lounge anyway, Ella's heart pounding; *has it gone has it gone has it gone...*

As her mum opened the door, Ella shut her eyes, but she didn't get the same inky nothingness. She felt the urge to open them. And, as she did, a red and white figure came into view. But it wasn't Santa. It was her dad. Ella ran towards him, and hugged him tight. And, around him, were presents. Lots of presents. "Oh my goodness!" Lily exclaimed, hugging Ella's dad too. "You did this for us?" "I couldn't stay angry at you. Besides, I got your texts about Milly, I just didn't answer them to make it appear I'd got a new number. I had to come when I heard." The whole family sat to Christmas dinner, opened presents and Ella regarded it the best Christmas ever. And, as she went to sleep that night, she saw a bright red light in the sky, and she smiled.

Kate Inman

Christmas Alterations

The Elf, Rudolph and Father Christmas

On the eve of Christmas eve, on the stroke of midnight, under a faint but shimmering aurora and a night sky flecked with stars, Prickle, (known to some as Prick-Ears) the elf who was small, as elves go and lean, with jutting cheek bones, rich golden eyes, cropped brown hair, an unruly fringe and a cheeky grin was at that moment trying to clean Rudolph the reindeer's hooves, which he knew was pointless since they were always clean but they appeared otherwise.

Registering that it was useless, and eyeing the disused quarry just slightly beyond reach, he crept away, leading Rudolph to the forbidden, cursed quarry.

So immersed were the other elves in cleaning their reindeers' hooves that they did not notice him all except one, by the name of Peitch (pronounced PEE-ch) who decided to question him later. She had a good memory and was a very good inventor.

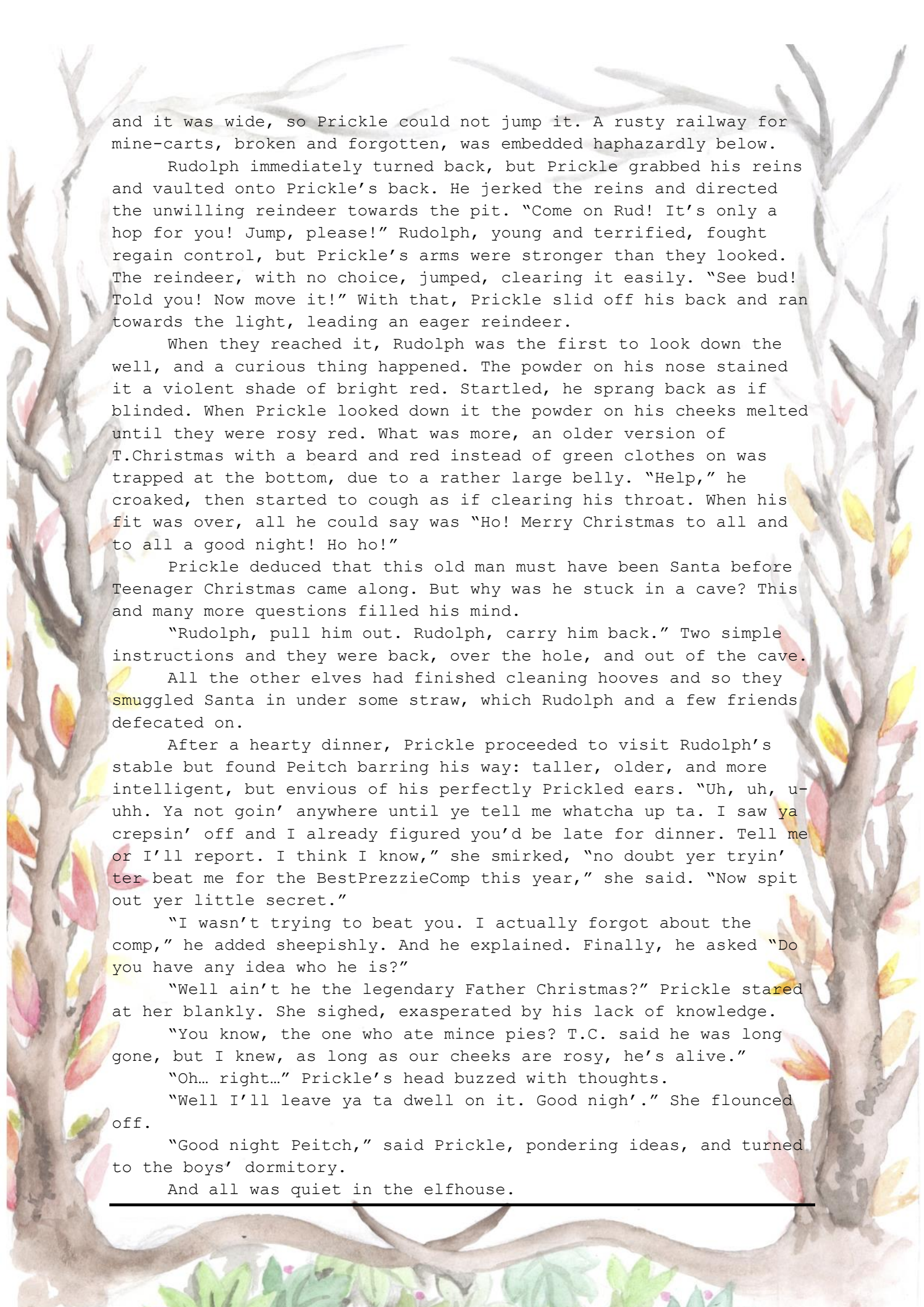
Prickle had always loved risk and adventure, so he set foot onto the quarry's powdery floor, dotted here and there with puddles. He ignored a sign that said 'Beware! Danger!' for, he stated, it did say what danger, and the unknown was too tempting to leave unexplored.

Rudolph the reindeer was one of T.Christmas' new steeds, shy and sensitive to this icy world. The ground was wet and uneven and Rudolph's nose started to tingle as he stepped in another puddle of murk. All of a sudden, "Aaa-a-tchoo!!!" he sneezed, snuffling. Staggering forward with momentum, he bumped into a wall of rock as his nose rubbed against the quarry powder, which made him sneeze again- showering powder over Prickle- who harrumphed, dusting his clothes angrily. Rudolph started to shy away, then froze. Prickle had his back turned and his eyes oblivious to the creakily sliding mechanism of a concealed cave.

Slowly Prickle followed Rudolph's line of vision. Trembling with excitement, he dashed in impetuously. Rudolph cautiously probed inside, decided it was not a dungeon, trap or trick, then plodded into the cavernous space.

The mossy, dank and decaying, displaying centuries' worth of rot, mildew and erosion. Stalactites hung and stalagmites rose either side of a cleared, worn mine path. Trickling, icy underground water gurgling by was their only companion, and silent stillness stretched like a gloved hand. Prickle and Rudolph picked their way towards the back of the cave where a faint light glowed, radiating authority and feeding curiosity.

As they got closer, they realised that there was a long pit with almost vertical steep sides, just the right height for a human but triple that of a small elf. They could not see where it ended



and it was wide, so Prickle could not jump it. A rusty railway for mine-carts, broken and forgotten, was embedded haphazardly below.

Rudolph immediately turned back, but Prickle grabbed his reins and vaulted onto Prickle's back. He jerked the reins and directed the unwilling reindeer towards the pit. "Come on Rud! It's only a hop for you! Jump, please!" Rudolph, young and terrified, fought to regain control, but Prickle's arms were stronger than they looked. The reindeer, with no choice, jumped, clearing it easily. "See bud! Told you! Now move it!" With that, Prickle slid off his back and ran towards the light, leading an eager reindeer.

When they reached it, Rudolph was the first to look down the well, and a curious thing happened. The powder on his nose stained it a violent shade of bright red. Startled, he sprang back as if blinded. When Prickle looked down it the powder on his cheeks melted until they were rosy red. What was more, an older version of T.Christmas with a beard and red instead of green clothes on was trapped at the bottom, due to a rather large belly. "Help," he croaked, then started to cough as if clearing his throat. When his fit was over, all he could say was "Ho! Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night! Ho ho!"

Prickle deduced that this old man must have been Santa before Teenager Christmas came along. But why was he stuck in a cave? This and many more questions filled his mind.

"Rudolph, pull him out. Rudolph, carry him back." Two simple instructions and they were back, over the hole, and out of the cave.

All the other elves had finished cleaning hooves and so they smuggled Santa in under some straw, which Rudolph and a few friends defecated on.

After a hearty dinner, Prickle proceeded to visit Rudolph's stable but found Peitch barring his way: taller, older, and more intelligent, but envious of his perfectly Prickled ears. "Uh, uh, u-uhh. Ya not goin' anywhere until ye tell me whatcha up ta. I saw ya crepsin' off and I already figured you'd be late for dinner. Tell me or I'll report. I think I know," she smirked, "no doubt yer tryin' ter beat me for the BestPrezzieComp this year," she said. "Now spit out yer little secret."

"I wasn't trying to beat you. I actually forgot about the comp," he added sheepishly. And he explained. Finally, he asked "Do you have any idea who he is?"

"Well ain't he the legendary Father Christmas?" Prickle stared at her blankly. She sighed, exasperated by his lack of knowledge.

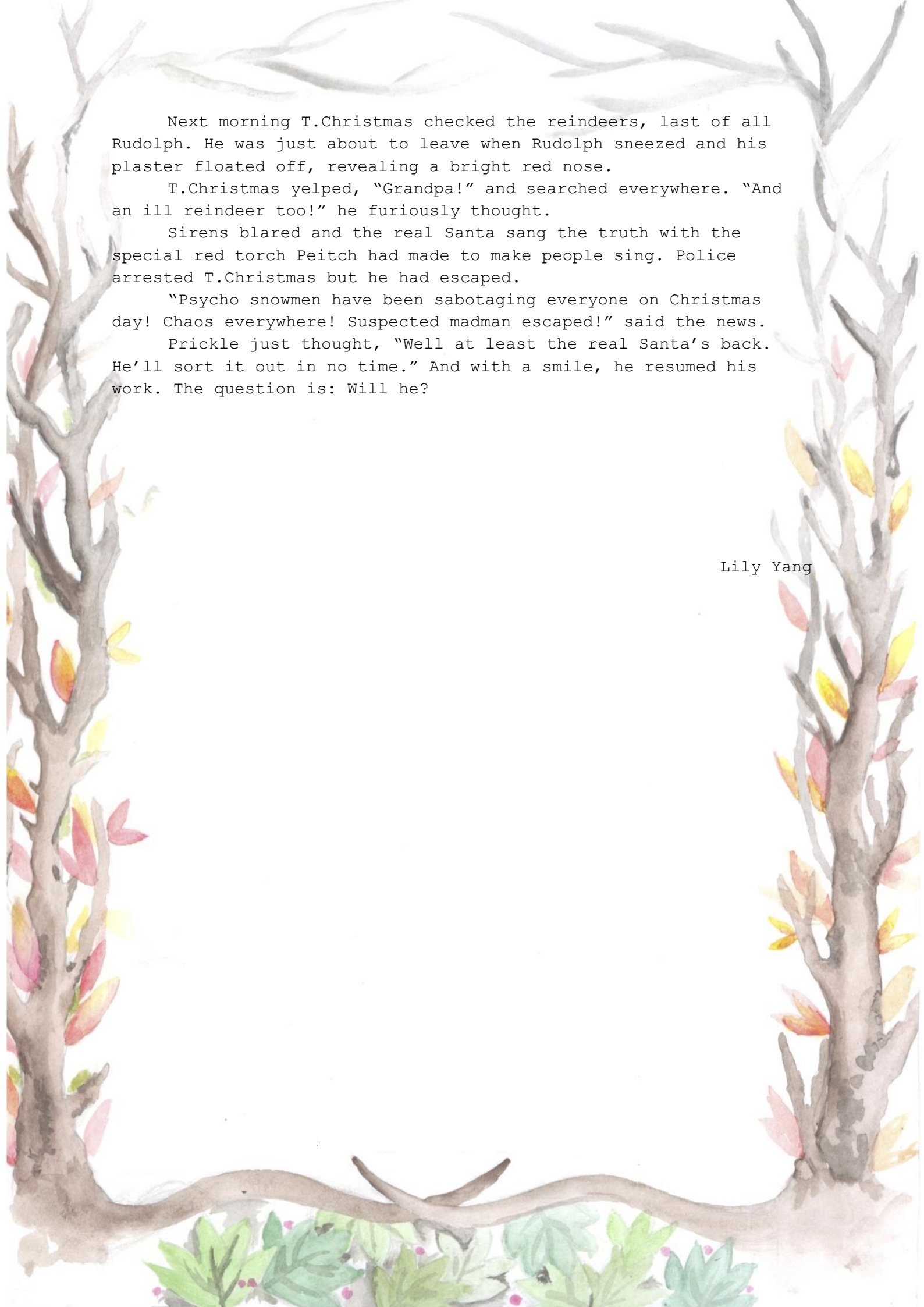
"You know, the one who ate mince pies? T.C. said he was long gone, but I knew, as long as our cheeks are rosy, he's alive."

"Oh... right..." Prickle's head buzzed with thoughts.

"Well I'll leave ya ta dwell on it. Good nigh'." She flounced off.

"Good night Peitch," said Prickle, pondering ideas, and turned to the boys' dormitory.

And all was quiet in the elfhouse.

The page is framed by a watercolor illustration of trees. On the left and right sides, there are tall, thin trees with brown trunks and branches, adorned with small, colorful leaves in shades of pink, orange, and yellow. At the bottom of the page, there is a horizontal branch with green leaves and small red berries, resembling a holly branch. The background is a light, textured white.

Next morning T.Christmas checked the reindeers, last of all Rudolph. He was just about to leave when Rudolph sneezed and his plaster floated off, revealing a bright red nose.

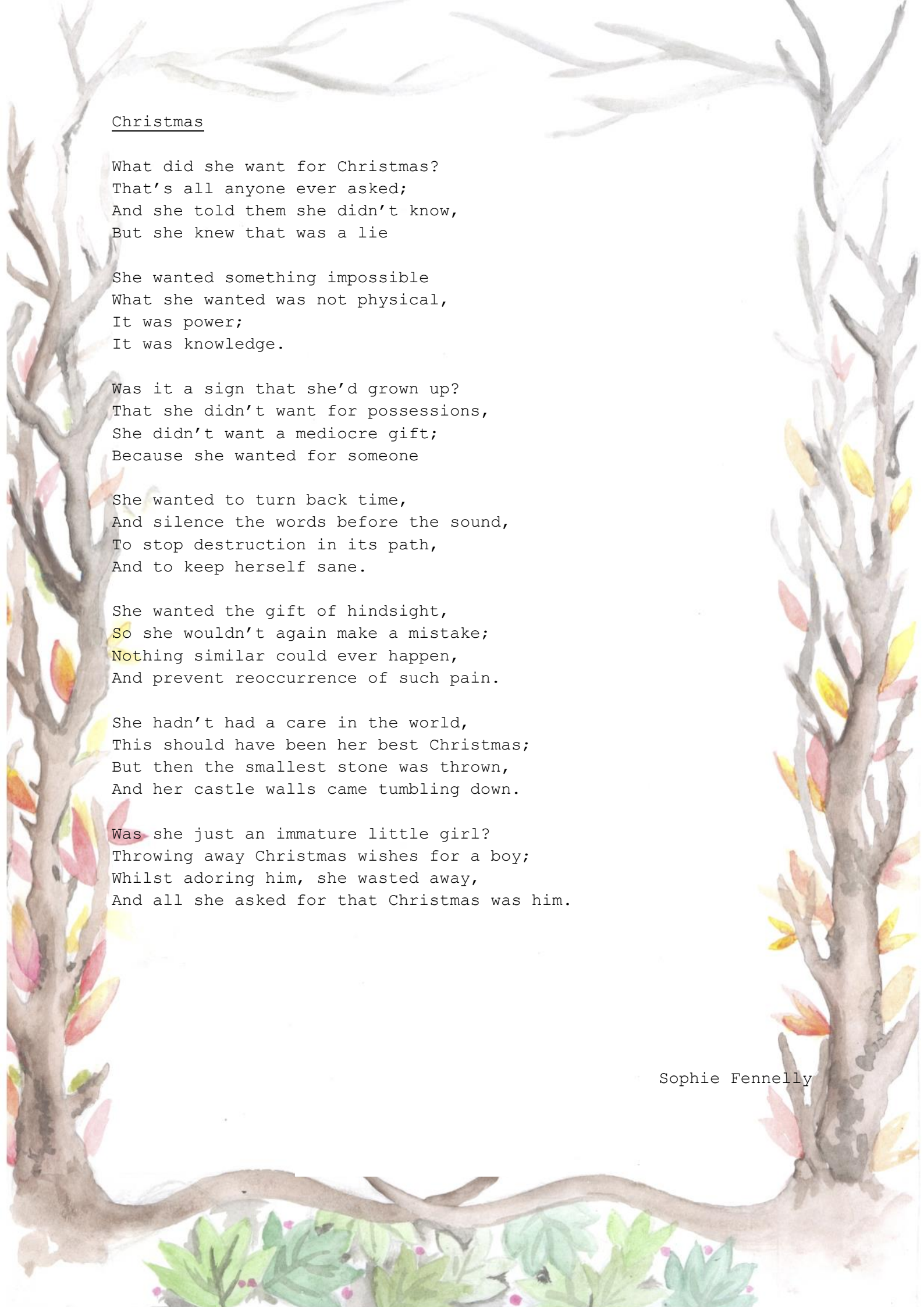
T.Christmas yelled, "Grandpa!" and searched everywhere. "And an ill reindeer too!" he furiously thought.

Sirens blared and the real Santa sang the truth with the special red torch Peitch had made to make people sing. Police arrested T.Christmas but he had escaped.

"Psycho snowmen have been sabotaging everyone on Christmas day! Chaos everywhere! Suspected madman escaped!" said the news.

Prickle just thought, "Well at least the real Santa's back. He'll sort it out in no time." And with a smile, he resumed his work. The question is: Will he?

Lily Yang



Christmas

What did she want for Christmas?
That's all anyone ever asked;
And she told them she didn't know,
But she knew that was a lie

She wanted something impossible
What she wanted was not physical,
It was power;
It was knowledge.

Was it a sign that she'd grown up?
That she didn't want for possessions,
She didn't want a mediocre gift;
Because she wanted for someone


She wanted to turn back time,
And silence the words before the sound,
To stop destruction in its path,
And to keep herself sane.

She wanted the gift of hindsight,
So she wouldn't again make a mistake;
Nothing similar could ever happen,
And prevent reoccurrence of such pain.

She hadn't had a care in the world,
This should have been her best Christmas;
But then the smallest stone was thrown,
And her castle walls came tumbling down.

Was she just an immature little girl?
Throwing away Christmas wishes for a boy;
Whilst adoring him, she wasted away,
And all she asked for that Christmas was him.

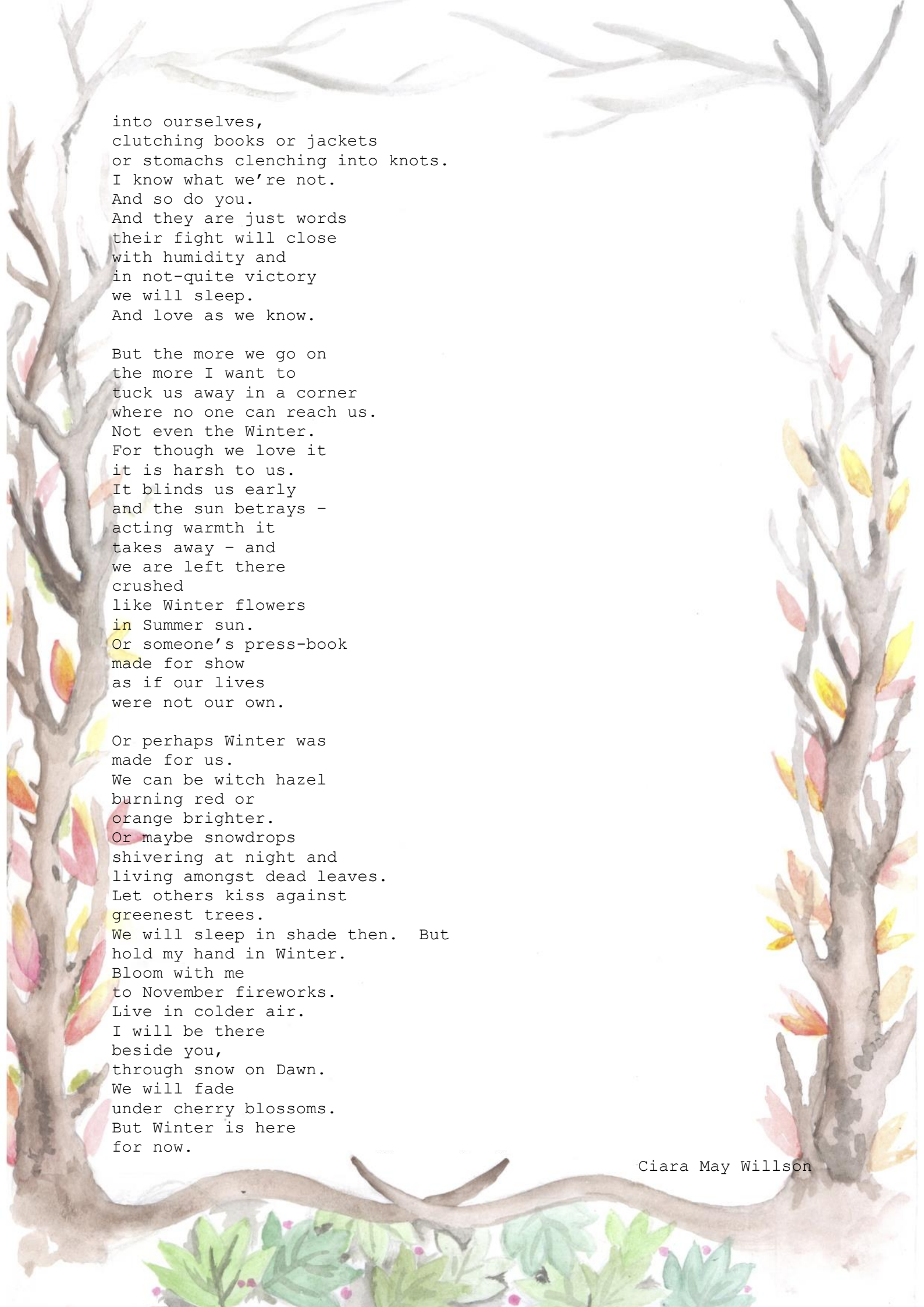
Sophie Fennelly



Winter Flowers

We're together now
like we never were,
though parting hands
creep like frost
from unexpected places.
But I am warm.
You are holding my hand
there is hot chocolate on your lips
and I am warm.
Your cheeks are pink
like Winter's Daphne bholua -
I always thought
that flower was meant
for Spring,
like the citric sweet
of Satsumas.
But it is Christmas
and bholua's punk
and Satsumas burst
on my tongue.
I love your smile.

Unexpected days
are spent together
drawing out longer hours
than our rations should allow.
There are those
who would not like it.
And night must come
and all too often
I am left wondering
if your bed is cold as mine.
Perhaps her words
are colder.
Abeliophyllum distichum
is too pretty for its name.
Of course the word
looks beautiful
printed on a page.
But it reads like it belongs
in laboratories or
quiet bottles,
not shining under
snow as if
it does not know cold.
Of course it does.
Even white forsythia
does not sing
like it should;
and so of us.
Not what they think
and, like forsythia
when Spring turns
to Summer, as
we part we shrivel



into ourselves,
clutching books or jackets
or stomachs clenching into knots.
I know what we're not.
And so do you.
And they are just words
their fight will close
with humidity and
in not-quite victory
we will sleep.
And love as we know.

But the more we go on
the more I want to
tuck us away in a corner
where no one can reach us.
Not even the Winter.
For though we love it
it is harsh to us.
It blinds us early
and the sun betrays -
acting warmth it
takes away - and
we are left there
crushed
like Winter flowers
in Summer sun.
Or someone's press-book
made for show
as if our lives
were not our own.

Or perhaps Winter was
made for us.
We can be witch hazel
burning red or
orange brighter.
Or maybe snowdrops
shivering at night and
living amongst dead leaves.
Let others kiss against
greenest trees.
We will sleep in shade then. But
hold my hand in Winter.
Bloom with me
to November fireworks.
Live in colder air.
I will be there
beside you,
through snow on Dawn.
We will fade
under cherry blossoms.
But Winter is here
for now.

Ciara May Willson