

## Level I

### *Honorable Finalist*

**Aidan Arman Razvi Berard** (Grade 6: Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng)

Letter to author Holy Goldberg Sloan concerning her novel, *Counting by 7's*

Dear Ms. Sloan,

One December morning, a father gave his son a bag. Inside was a festive card wishing him a Merry Christmas. Underneath was a book. That book later helped the son through hardship. Although the father did not realize it at the time, this became the best present the boy could have received, for only months later, the parents told the son that they had divorced. The following weeks were very difficult for the son. He turned back to the book for inspiration, hope, and encouragement. I was the son. You wrote the book.

Having read *Counting by 7's*, where Willow's foster parents tragically die, I am touched by how you portray her feelings throughout the painful ordeal. Willow Chance doesn't give up on life; she perseveres through the hardship and tragedy. At first, she feels grief, so much that she wishes she would perish from an electrical overload. She wishes this, however, when nobody else is in the garage. Even though she wants to die, she reacts openly to others and is not proud and arrogant. She allows Mai to help her and asks the social worker for her belongings from home. These acts help her through the dark tunnel of grief until she steps into the light again.

When my parents divorced in third grade, my dad moved to another part of town. I had to live with my mother half the week and my father the other half. This was extremely difficult because I missed my mother when I was with my father and vice-versa. Moreover, whenever I was in the car traveling from one parent's house to another, my sister cried, making me feel like crying, too. It was like living two different lives where we had to adapt every week, which was painful. Remembering and rereading Willow Chance's story made me feel better, however. I kept your book in the back seat of my father's car, so I could read it when traveling from one house to the other. Willow was hammered with the fact that her parents had died; similarly, I was hit with the realization that mine had divorced. I was able to go through my tunnel by acting normally at school. I didn't even tell any of my friends until weeks later. Even now not all of my classmates know. Your book has helped me stay aboard that train and made me a stronger, more determined person.

Many children worldwide have one or more parents who die from guns, disease, or accidents; it must be such a calamitous experience. From your book, I have learned the important lesson that whatever tragedy may occur, the train of life will continue and we must not disembark. We must learn how to continue and persevere through whatever fate throws at us.

That book was my father's gift to me. However, it was also your gift, not only to me but to many other children as well, I'm sure. I hope it has helped others as much as it has helped me. Thank you.

Sincerely,

*Aidan Arman Razvi Berard*, age 11