

Third Place Winner, Level III

Grace Watkins

Letter to author Holly Goldberg Sloan concerning her novel *Counting by 7s*

Dear Holly Goldberg Sloan:

I am writing this letter of praise to you for your novel *Counting by 7s*. To be honest Ms. Sloan, I contemplated and racked my brain long and hard on how I wanted to write this letter because I really wanted this to be perfect and insightful. However, the deeper I dug the less certain I was that it would be, so instead of thinking up a master plan, I just decided to pick up a pencil and write.

To begin, I must first confess that my personality is greatly OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) based. I have not been diagnosed with OCD but I suffer from repeating dreams both day and night, obsessions, and I am a perfectionist and a germaphobe. Due to this I am always nervous and occasionally twitch and have recently been diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome from my stress and anxiety. To help with my flare ups I took a liking to music where I strum my guitar. I also beat my drums, read, and count in my head which helps me to focus on whatever it is that I might be doing at the time. I first picked by *Counting by 7s* because the title of the book intrigued me but I will tell you, Ms. Sloan, that it distressed me that it was an odd number (I really wished that it was *Counting by 7s*, but I admit it does not sound as good). I did find that when I was reading your book that the storyline blindsided me for when I was reading the novel there was no main character named Willow Chance. Willow Chance was non-existent to me because the book is not about her but *my* past. For me, it all started when I read the seven descriptions of Willow which are:

- 1) She's different (as in strange)
- 2) Almost everything interests her. But some things—like plants and medical conditions—interest her the most
- 3) She has learned (the hard way) that life can be extremely unfair
- 4) She understands that family is what you make it and that people who understand you and chose you in their lives are the most important people
- 5) She doesn't have a lot of friends, but she would do anything for the ones she does have
- 6) She knows that the most wonderful thing in the world is feeling like you belong
- 7) Her story will make you laugh, cry, and appreciate your friends, family, and the things around you in a whole new way

These seven descriptions—*my* seven descriptions—may seem harmless to many people standing on the outside but to me, they are nothing but haunting. My obsession with medical conditions causes me to stay away from extracurricular activities that I enjoy. My obsessions bring me fear that I may have one of these diseases that I have found interesting although I know physically that I do not possess them. I also love plants and plan on becoming a geologist with a minor in forensic archeology, similar to Willow. I have learned in a harsh manner how unfair life is to the point where I accept whatever comes in my direction because in no way could I have prevented those memories from happening in the past. My only hope for the future is that I am

strong enough to handle what comes my way and be brave enough to take it on. In fact, bravery is probably the only difference between Willow and me. I am aware that in your novel Willow says she was not brave but she *was* because she has the knowledge to accept that all other choices are gone. I myself cannot contain this truth knowledge because if I did so, I would not be able to walk this Earth with the little happiness that I had achieved after leaving my crucial past. I must always believe that there is another way out but until then, I enjoy being the vulnerable person that I have become.

Counting by 7s has changed my outlook on myself and confirmed my perspective of this cruel world. I never speak words because the words always taste strange, almost foreign to my taste buds. My silence can be comforting at times but it also eats me up because of the pain that builds up inside me. Not being able to talk about my pain, I shut myself up and locked the doors. I thought that everything would be fine and I would be safe—that is until fear besieged and breached my inner fortress. My past interferes with all my actions and I found that I could not even escape from my bad memories in my sleep because they are manifest in reoccurring dreams that haunted me—until I read *Counting by 7s*. At first I did not know why this was but now I believe it was because my mind believed that Willow's story was actually *my* own. I now do not have to hold the memories that your novel brought to me because they were released in those pages, where other people can read all about them. I find this astonishing because I did not have to speak a word to anyone. It may not have freed my mind completely but I am indeed much more relaxed than before and happier as well. As for the cruel world, there is not much for me to say because everyone's perspective on the world is brought to life by the life that they have lived. "All reality is a blender where hopes and dreams are mixed together with fear and despair," and you, Ms. Sloan, allowed me to know that I am done or almost done with my despair and hope is on the way. Even as I am writing this I can feel that familiar fluttery feeling I have when I have been writing something sincere to me but this feeling is something more, for more weights have just been removed from my shoulders. Although it lasted only briefly, the calm and inner peace that *Counting by 7s* brought to me was the most healing experience that I have had. Thank you for spreading truth and light in the world but mostly for helping me to exorcise my demons.

Sincerely,
Grace Watkins