

GRAND PRIZE, Grades 7–8

“Mother Medea”

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A series of large tears managed to escape from the lady’s tightly closed eyes. They met with her eye makeup and continued the rest of their journey down her face, leaving water-black stains behind. Her red-painted lower lip quivered with great force as it opened to release a single sob. “Oh, Lord, I just don’t know what to *do* with him anymore!” As the lady spoke, she widened both of her pale eyes, and yet another eruption of tears broke loose, pooling at her chin’s tip. The doctor stepped forward to put a reassuring hand on the woman’s trembling shoulder. “And how I’ve tried, Doctor. For *soo long* now.” The lady lifted her head here, looking up into the doctor’s eyes so that he could see the utter devastation in hers.

In a profound voice, he attempted to soothe her. “Now, now, Mrs. Allitt, calm yourself. We’re doing everything possible for Henry, as I’m *sure* you are.”

A fresh peal of gasping sobs.

“Medea, you’re a good mother. No one within twenty miles of this town can deny it. Everything’s going to be fine!” The doctor drew a handkerchief out of his medical coat pocket and handed it to her as he continued. “Just you wait and see. We’ll have a look at Henry’s test results tomorrow and decide for sure.” He asked to see her out the door, and so with her weepy consent the doctor guided Mrs. Allitt from her seat, through an entranceway and into his office’s reception area, where a nurse looked up from her paperwork to watch the passing couple make their way to the area’s frosted-glass door. The brass knob turned back in place with a slight metallic click as it was released and the door swung wide to reveal the white hallway.

Mrs. Allitt warbled a few more “Thank-you’s,” and turned shakily to go.

The doctor twisted around to the seated Nurse Helen Clement, shaking his balding head sympathetically, proclaiming “And there goes the finest mother this side of Indiana. My, that poor, poor woman.”

Nurse Helen watched Mrs. Allitt’s reflection in a curved security mirror hanging just outside the door. At the mention of her name, though the nurse could not be sure, she believed she saw a *smile* flit across the supposedly distraught mother’s face. Not a relieved smile, which might have been acceptable, but a *smug* one!

Medea looked up in time to catch the nurse’s eye. She halted for a second, drawing in her breath abruptly. Mrs. Allitt then quickly lowered her head and continued walking at a now rapid pace.

The doctor's continuing speech shattered Nurse Helen's confused, embarrassed thoughts. "...a *fine* mother indeed!"

"Mother?" Helen half-whispered, still processing what she had seen. And then, "Our report on Allitt says Henry's not her real son."

"Might as well be. My, she takes *such* good care of that boy."

The screen door thudded shut behind Medea as she entered the house she shared with seven-year-old Henry, "my darling baby" in the doctor's presence, but something else at home.

"Henry!" Her voice had become prickly. "Henry, boy, where'd you slink off to?" She knew exactly where to find him, though, and continued her hurried pace to his room.

Waxen and frail, Henry managed to sit up in bed with a faint smile. "Mommy—"

"For heaven's sake, Henry, how many times do I have to tell you to save it for the doctor? Boy, do you ever listen to a word I say?" She began rummaging through the handbag she was carrying.

Henry sank lower into the mattress. He clutched his small stomach, trying to suppress a whimper.

Medea glanced up, annoyed. "What's the matter *this* time? Gracious, Henry, *after all I do for you.*" She dropped her purse with great show and spun out of the room, saying that he'd probably be *dead* if it wasn't for her *kind heart*, taking him in like that.

Mrs. Allitt reappeared soon with an aspirin bottle.

"And eat them *all* this time, you hear? It's your medicine." She thrust it towards the child.

"Thank you, Momm—"

"Hurry up."

The woman stood, leaning on the bedpost as she watched. The child swallowed pill after pill, pausing only to take a rasping breath and chance a look at Medea for approval, which he received, he thought, by way of a wide grin breaking out on her motherly face.

Early the following day, Medea was seated in the bleak reception area again. She hugged Henry, slumped beside her, for the security camera and gave him a tender look when the doctor entered, followed by the nurse, at whose sight Medea looked away.

“Mrs. Allitt, how good to see you!” The doctor squatted down to face Henry. “And you, too, Henry. Your *sweet mommy* came in yesterday *just for you*. You know that?”

Henry half-nodded. “Mommy does so much for me that I cannot know of every act.”

The doctor beamed at them both. “Just every bit as polite as you said he was, Medea! What a fine job you’ve done of raising him!”

Mrs. Allitt looked down humbly. *At least the kid had said it right.*

The doctor cleared his throat as he straightened himself, his manner becoming sober. “Now, then,” he began, “to business. Mrs. Allitt, if you’d step inside my office, I have Henry’s results.”

“But I can’t just leave him—“

“Henry will stay here with Nurse Clement while we discuss.”

Helen stepped forward, keeping her eyes on Medea. She hadn’t liked what she’d seen yesterday.

Medea seemed hesitant to leave Henry with the nurse, but complied saying, “Be *good* now, darling,” while eyeing her son with a severity rarely seen by anyone in the town. Her eyes flicked up to Helen with a warning look, which quickly melted into a sweet smile.

When the office door was firmly shut behind the two, Nurse Clement turned to face Henry. There was a hushed moment, followed by, “Henry, you would tell someone if *anyone* was hurting you, right?”

Henry’s head gave a diminutive bob.

More silence.

Helen sighed. “Do you think Mrs. Allitt loves you?”

Henry looked at Nurse Clement with an expressionless face. “Of course I love Mommy. She helps me get better every time I get sick.”

“How does she help?”

“Mommy does so much for me that I cannot know of every act.”

Helen paused.

“Henry, what exactly does... your mommy... do for you? Does she give you any medicine? Special foods?”

“Mommy give me lots of medicine when I’m sick. And when I’m not, she gives me some to keep it away. But...” He looked at her full in the face this time. “Whenever I take medicine, I just hurt *more*...” He placed a hand over his stomach sensitively.

“What medicine do you take?”

Henry dropped his head again. “A bottle of aspirin every day—for my tummy.”

The nurse stared, trying to realize his impossible words. “An entire bottle...”

Medea burst through the office door, screaming hysterically. She plowed through the nurse to hug Henry. “*No!* It’s not *true*, Doctor, *please!* Not that... he’s only *seven!* That’s too young for a... *a stomach ulcer!* The very thought! *I can’t stand it!*”

Henry’s funeral was quite an affair. The entire town showed up, murmuring lamentations and placing bouquet after bouquet on top of the small white coffin.

Nurse Clement stood to one side, listening to the mourners’ whisperings, which seemed to be more sympathetic towards Medea than the deceased. The townspeople understood *entirely* why the poor lady couldn’t attend: What mother wouldn’t be broken up over such a loss; especially such a *good, caring* lady like herself? That poor child didn’t realize what a *fine mother* she was.

Medea sat in her car, which was stuffed with her belongings from the house she had occupied with Henry. She fingered her new Illinois driver’s license, complete with a new name and residence. Medea had purchased a modest little home, conveniently located near the local hospital, where she would be starting next week as a caretaker in the Children’s Ward.