



Aaron Huang

Aaron Huang, an eighth grader when he wrote "The Sun," has always loved animals. His award-winning story was inspired by a research project Aaron had done about puppy mills and the malpractice that takes place so commonly in the business. Writing, for Aaron, has always been a way to advocate for others and those who have no voice, shedding light on topics that often are not openly discussed. Aaron also loves playing football, basketball, and tennis and spending the rest of his free time with his two-year old dog Mocha. Other writing awards he has won are 1st place in the River of Words Shasta Bioregion Prize sponsored by St. Mary's College in Moraga, California, for his poem "Yosemite Falls" and honorable mention in Palo Alto Humane Society's 2019 Ambassadors of Compassion Story Writing Contest. His work also appears in the April 2019 edition of *Stone Soup*.

The Sun

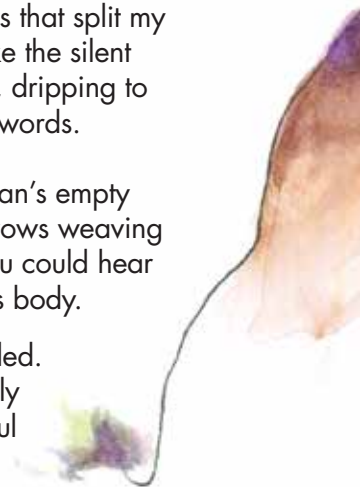
The blades of grass, unkept and sickly looking, were quite common in that beaten-down barn. The weeds and cobwebs, the dust that piled on the barn door handle, they all echoed the quiet tune of loneliness. I lay in a cage three sizes too small, numb to the pain and numb to the thought of puppies crying for their mothers. Each day felt like a year, and each year felt like a millenium, but that's what happens when you spend your life in a cage. Time moves slower, not in slow motion, but slower. I had heard rumors before about something called the sun, a world outside this one, but I don't believe them. Because if there really is another world out there, why are we here?

Every time I closed my eyes, I remembered my first litter. I remembered I was all alone when I gave birth to them, all alone when that man took them at half a week old, all alone when that man never brought them back. As he opened my cage for the first time, and I finally breathed a full breath of dusty barn air, he stole them. One by one he reached in those bony, uncut, hawk-like talons, and took those six parts of my soul. And that other human, the little one who seemed to stand back and just watch, seemed as scared as me.

But this day, this day was different. The little one, the scared one, the hunched over and malnourished one, he said something. Most days he stood in silence, but this day, this rainy day was different. The dog in the cage next to me quietly gave birth as those talons perched above, hawk waiting to kill. Usually those claws would lift the babies out of the barn in silence, but this day, this day was different. This day, this pitter-patter-tapping-above-the-barn day, the boy broke the silence. He broke the silent whines and whimpers that split my six-parts-missing soul in two. He broke the silent tears that rusted the cages and locks, dripping to the ground. He broke it all with four words.

"Can I name them?" he asked. The man's empty charcoal eyes scrunched, his grey brows weaving together. As he turned it was as if you could hear him creak, brittle bones shifting in his body.

"I thought I explained this," he grumbled. "Animals don't deserve love. Especially these. It builds a connection, unhelpful for my work." The boy's eyes stared



into the dirt, scared and rejected once again. And just like that, they turned off the lights, walking away with the puppies.

With each whimper my body broke a little more. My paws, my bones, my fur shook with each gust of wind from the cold night air. Cries for help after cries for help were all there were. Just like always, but then something changed. The hawk-like man entered with his son, turning on the lights as ten rats and twenty cockroaches scurried away. Just like always, but then something changed. They refilled our bowls, took newborns away from their mothers. Just like always, but then something changed. Maybe it was the pitter-patter tapping above the beaten-down barn, or maybe the grass had become a little more green, but I think it was the little boy. I think it was those little meat pieces the boy snuck into our bowls, or how his cheeks raised and his mouth widened when he looked at us when his father was turned the other way. It was some time till I realized what this was, that this was joy.



A week later, the boy came in alone. He slowly walked over, inserting those golden pieces of metal the man always carried into the locks, opening our cages and lifting us up and putting us on the ground. When it came my turn, I crawled to the back of my cage, hoping he wouldn't hurt me. He gently lifted me and lay me on the cold barn floor. My legs quivered, struggling to support my body. I slowly put one paw at a time on the grass. The grass, pointy and ungroomed, pricked my paws every other step. For the first time I could stretch without cutting myself on the rusted steel bar. For the first time I wasn't enclosed and trapped, attempting to gasp for a breath of dusty air. For the first time I could see everything. I could see the hundreds of dogs impounded and barred in, I could see the rows of pain manifesting in cages stacked upon one another, I could see it all.

Time passed faster those weeks. The boy let us out every now and then. He no longer hunched over with eyes to the ground, no longer timid and fearful. But that all stopped. Happiness stopped. When the man walked in on those empty cages. That was the day time stopped again. In the moment it was a blur, a blur of hits, a blur of cries, a blur of the boy screaming for help. After though, it was nothing like a blur. The boy stood bloodied, his face bruised, his cries hoarse, speechless once more.

For the rest of my life time moved slower. I didn't see the boy until my last few days, but he looked different. He still didn't smile too much, but he was different. He had grown a few paws taller and his eyes didn't cry a somber song. As I gasped my final breaths in that beaten-down barn, he gave me a name. "Molly," he said, "Molly." And as I closed my eyes for that final time in the light of that place, I didn't hear the quiet tune of loneliness anymore.

There are approximately 10,000 puppy mills in the US, each with equally awful conditions. They run almost unchecked. Puppies live in cages too small, not allowing them to stand up fully. Most never receiving a name or experiencing sunlight.



Palo Alto Humane Society has
been a leader since 1908
in creating compassionate action
for animals and developing ways
to address their welfare.

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