## First Place – High School – Fiction

## Initiation

By Maya Gosztyla

"Take the gun, boy."

I stare back at him, eyes wide.

"Take it!" His voice is sharper. He shoves the pistol at me.

I force my fingers to grip the gun's smooth body.

"Good." His voice is calm now, approving. He pats my head like a dog. "Now go."

And I go.

It's well past midnight, and the streets are deserted. Not a soul sees me as I approach the tall graffiti-sprayed building.

The steps on the outside of the building are old and squeaky. I go slowly, wincing with each groan and creak as I climb step after step. They're deafening in the cold silence. My heart thumps loudly in my chest.

It seems like an eternity before I reach the rusted old sign reading 'Apt #114'. I fish around in my pockets for the key and jam it into the lock, grimacing as the ancient mechanism groans and squeaks before finally surrendering with a click. I turn the handle and creep inside.

The apartment is as black as gunpowder. From another room I hear a muffled noise. Instinctively I freeze in my steps, my hand poised over my gun.

There's a grunt, followed by a small sigh and then even, quiet breathing.

I slink over to the doorway like a cat. It's so dark I have to feel around in front of me to confirm that the door is open. Then I take a step inside.

A window next to the bed shines moonlight onto the sleeping man. I wish I didn't have to see his face. I could have pretended he was just another target.

I pull out my gun and point it at his head. Then, ever so carefully, I turn off the safety.

The click is very quiet, but he's learned to recognize it, even in sleep. In an instant he's awake. Before I can react he throws a pillow at my head. In the second or two it takes me to swat it away he's got his gun out and is pointing directly at my heart.

We stare at each other, our faces stone-hard. The silence is deafening. Neither of us moves.

But then his face breaks, crumbles like a wall that's been torn down. He tosses his gun

into a corner and looks up at me.

And then he smiles. "We both know it," he says, sounding almost apologetic. "I could never kill you."

"You certainly had no trouble killing four of our guys," I reply coldly.

He says nothing, just continues staring at me with that infuriatingly steady gaze of his. Finally he speaks. "I killed them to save the lives of countless innocent people."

I recite my line like a kid in a play. "We only killed them to remind people we're in charge."

"Yeah, I've heard that one before," he replies icily. "Spare me the lies, won't you? I've heard enough for one lifetime."

I take another step forward. "Shut up or I'll shoot you right through the head."

His calm little smile doesn't falter. "You'll do it anyway, kid. It's your initiation, after all."

"I said *shut up*," I snarl.

He sighs. "Well, I guess if you're really going to shoot me, you might as well do it now. The neighbors get up pretty early for work, and oftentimes Bill stops in here for a little chat."

I stare at him in silence, trying to keep my face emotionless.

He sighs again. Then he gets to his feet.

"Sit back down," I order, but he ignores me. Slowly he walks forward. When he stops his forehead is within an inch of the barrel of my gun.

"Go on," he says calmly, looking into my eyes. "Do it."

My hand is shaking slightly; I hope he doesn't notice. "Any last words you've got, you'd better say them now. And make it quick, before I change my mind."

His smile is about the saddest thing I've ever seen. "Just remember to keep yourself out of harm's way," he says. "You're a smart kid; I know you can manage that. And..." He pauses. "And I hope you know I love you, son."

Years of learning to keep a straight face fail me. A tear escapes my eye and slides down my cheek, cold as ice.

"I love you too, Dad," I murmur, my voice shaking and choked. My index finger is curled around the trigger. For a moment I consider giving it all up, just tucking the gun back into my belt and leaving the apartment room, forever.

But I don't.

The gun fires.