



If I Can Stop One Heart From Breaking

Poem by Emily Dickinson

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one lonely person
Into happiness again
I shall not live in vain.*

RESPONDING TO THE POEM

Discuss the poem. What does the speaker hope to achieve with her life? Who is she reaching out to? Why? What do you hope to achieve with your life that would guarantee it hadn't been lived in vain? Do you agree with the speaker? Explain.

GOALS AT A GLANCE

- Locate ideas in texts to develop interpretations.
- Use oral skills to participate in discussions.

*Can you think of a situation
when cheating might be justified?
In this futuristic story, a young
man must decide.*

And the Lucky Winner Is...

Science
Fiction
Story

BY MONICA HUGHES

The heliolites soared above the river valley, clustering, separating. To Jon, squinting up into the sunshine, they were like a cloud of brilliant butterflies. For just a moment he wished he were up there with them, but only for a moment. The one time he'd soared he'd felt so nauseated that he'd barely made it back to solid earth in one piece. The nausea, along with a hatred of crowds, seemed to be the flip side of his "gift." He'd gladly trade the shameful hidden skill of telekinesis for the chance to soar with his sister and his best friend. To be skilled in telepathy and telekinesis, gifts useful only to spies and other servants of the state, was a burden he would happily cast off. To be like Peri. To be free...

Peri, strapped in her harness, watched the city swing beneath her, a slowly rotating jigsaw of ceramic roofs, solar panels, and streets, with the river cutting a random furrow through its geometric order. Directly below her she could see Jon, a dark dot on the field by the bridge. Kid brother, isolated as usual from the crowd.

She felt the chill of cloud-shadow on her cheek an instant before her heliolite lost power. Automatically she compensated, manoeuvring neatly into the thermal that rose from the hot ground of the bluffs above the river. Around her the others moved smoothly into place on the funnel of warm air.

This was the best moment, soaring like a bird in the silence of the thermal. Without worry, at one with the air, she swung in her harness, leaning into the thermal, following it around. She forgot about her math test, so awful, but totally essential if she could ever hope to work in the space

THE POEM

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GOALS AT A GLANCE

- Analyse the setting of a futuristic story.
- Use evidence to develop opinions about characters.

program, about her brother Jon, more silent and separate from their friends every day, about Nev. Did Nev really love her as much as she loved him? As much as he said... Or was it really only a Senior Year relationship that meant no more to him than trying to beat her at squash or soaring? Everything was left behind in the wrinkled land below, as Peri soared in the silence.

Then the sun slid from behind an obscuring cloud to reactivate the tiny engines on the wing tips. She engaged the jets and soared out of the thermal, away from the crowd, up, up, to that breathtaking instant before stalling. Then she plunged and regained speed in a shiver of nylon wings. It was a tricky manoeuvre, one she had just perfected. Up here she was the best, and it felt good.

Over her shoulder Peri glanced at the others, just breaking free of the thermal like a cluster of firework stars. Something was badly wrong! One heliolite seemed to hesitate at the thermal interface, shuddered, and plunged suddenly toward the ground. She saw its colour, a royal blue zagged with a lightning line of gold. Nev's!

In a single frozen instant she saw the tiny figure of Jon scurry across the field. Do something, Jon! her mind screamed. Reach out with your telekinesis. Grab him. Defy gravity. You can do it!

But Jon wasn't God, and Nev's heliolite continued to spin downward like a twisting maple key. Instinctively Peri cut the power to her props and followed it down in a steep frantic dive.

The nylon shivered and the wind screamed through the titanium frame as she approached the ground. She could see Nev's 'lite, broken below her, Jon running towards it. Now the ground was rushing towards her. She soared briefly to absorb speed and, in a series of roller coaster moves, came to a stop fifty metres away. Her fingers fumbled stiffly at the harness buckles. Come on. Come on. At last she was able to wriggle free, to run stiff-legged across the rough turf towards the broken heliolite. The fifty metres seemed forever.

"Nev! Nev!" She stumbled in the grass and Jon caught her arm.

"He's alive, Peri. I can still sense his life force. But..."

Nev lay still. His eyes were not quite closed and she could see a glint of white between the lids. He looked horribly not there, as if the Nev she knew were in some other place and this was only a shell.

The medics arrived, to slip a rigid collar around his neck, to ease a stretcher sheet under his body, wrapping him carefully and light-zapping the sheet to stiffness. She watched the cocoon that was Nev loaded aboard, watched the copter take off. Then she stood numbly, with the wind drying her lips, until Jon put his arm around her and helped her climb to the top of the bluffs, where the others waited outside the heliolite rental agency.

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They crowded around. "What happened?" "What went wrong?" "How's Nev?" But there were no answers.

Hours later, in the hospital, Peri tried to explain to Nev's mother what had gone wrong. "We'd been trying out a new manoeuvre. I guess he didn't..." She stammered and was silent under the contempt in Mrs. Wright's eyes.

"If it hadn't been for you...you're always leading him on with your reckless ideas. Those crazy heliolites—they should be banned. What if he dies? What if he never walks again? Oh...oh..."

Peri flinched from her anger and her pain. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Wright. I'd give anything in the world for this not to have happened."

"Why do you want to do these crazy things? How come you can't be more like your brother? For all he's a year younger than you, he's got more sense, he's not so foolish as to..."

"That's not fair, Mrs. Wright." Jon stood protectively in front of Peri. "Nev's every bit as crazy about helioliting as Peri, honestly."

Then the doctor came and there were involved explanations about the realities of spinal cord injuries. Nev's mother began to cry, her mouth open in an ugly square.

Peri swallowed her own tears. "Oh, please don't cry, Mrs. Wright. It'll be all right. They've got new techniques. Microsurgery and electric stimulation. It'll be okay." She turned to the authority in sparkling white, the silver caduceus winking in his left lapel. "Isn't that true, doctor? Tell her."

"Indeed, we have made amazing advances in the field of nerve regeneration in the last twenty years. Biochemistry. Electrical stimulation. It's a very lengthy process, of course. Labour intensive. Expensive."

Mrs. Wright twisted her fingers together. "I've got medical coverage. That'll take care of it, doctor."

"Your insurance will certainly cover the tests we've done so far and your son's stay in hospital for the next few days. You need have no concern on that account. Beyond that...well, talk to your insurance agent. You're looking at something in the neighbourhood of a quarter of a million dollars." The doctor's buzzer beeped.

"A quarter of a..."

"Excuse me. We'll have an opportunity to talk later. In the meantime, a visit to the accounting office will make procedures clearer to you."

He hurried away, leaving them standing in the middle of the waiting room.

Mrs. Wright turned on Peri, her mouth tight. "See what you've done. You've ruined both our lives with your stupid reckless games. A quarter of

a million! How will I ever...?" She scrubbed her eyes angrily. "Oh, go away. Get out!"

Peri tried to protest, but Jon took her arm and pulled her along the corridor and through the doors into the sunlit grounds of the hospital.

"Don't cry. Don't pay attention to her. It's not your fault."

"Perhaps it is. I'm much better aloft than Nev. But he always wanted to catch up."

"It was his choice. You didn't twist his arm."

"Maybe I could leave school and get a job. Just to help pay for Nev's treatment."

"Mum and Dad'll never let you. Not in a million years. Besides, what about the space program?"

"That doesn't matter. Nothing matters except Nev getting better. Oh, Jon, what are we going to do?"

Peri put on a bright face to visit the hospital the next day, but it slipped off at the sight of Nev cradled in a paraplegic bed.

"Nev, I'm so sorry. It's all my fault."

He managed a grin. "You sound just like my Mom! I told her and I'm telling you and then let's forget about it, okay. I wasn't trying to copy your crazy stunt, I'm not that dumb. One of the struts snapped, that's all."

"Are you sure?" Relief flooded through her, followed by shame that it should make a difference. After all, it didn't help Nev a bit whether it was her fault or not.

"Quite sure. And the doctor had a bit of good news. Something called the Hi-med Lottery Fund. To help poor slobs like me who can't come up with a quarter of a million to get my legs back."

"Then it's okay?"

"Not exactly okay. But my National Security Number goes into the lottery locally for a bed in the neurological unit here. Every time there's a draw I get a chance."

"There can't be that many people with spinal cord injuries right here in town. The odds must be pretty good, don't you think?"

"I'm betting on it." Nev managed a grin and she grabbed his hand and held it against her cheek, turning her face away so he shouldn't see her tears.

When visiting time was up, Peri went in search of the doctor whose name was on the chart at the foot of Nev's bed. She found him in the cafeteria, coffee cup in hand.

"Please, can I talk to you about one of your patients, Nev Wright?"

"Are you a member of the family?"

"N...no. Not exactly."

"Then I can't discuss the patient with you."

"It's not that. I mean, I don't want to ask you about Nev. But the program...the lottery?"

"Yes? Do sit down, Miss...er..."

"Peri Stanley. I don't understand how the lottery works."

"It's an experimental program. A real step forward in the democratization of medicine, we believe. Any major procedure or experimental protocol consuming over a hundred thousand dollars in excess of medical insurance coverage is supported by the province, the clients being chosen by lottery."

"Yes, I know that bit. But how does it actually work?"

"Nev's National Security Number will be submitted to the city lottery foundation. Every month, during the regular drawings for prizes in the provincial lottery, several numbers are drawn randomly from those submitted by the City hospital system. If Nev's number is drawn, then his worries are over. Free medical treatment, physiotherapy, whatever's needed to get the boy back on his feet."

"And the odds, doctor? What are Nev's chances?" Peri burst out.

"There are enough funds to admit three persons a month to the centre."

"Three people? Out of how many? There can't be that many people with spinal cord injuries."

"You'd be surprised. Several hundred. Of course he can try again, up to two years. The chances of rehabilitation after that time become minimal."

"Three out of several hundred?" Peri choked on the words.

"Better than nothing." The doctor smiled wryly and got to his feet.

"And you can always try to raise the money yourselves. People do, you know. Bake sales, marathons, that sort of thing. Excuse me, I must go. Good luck."

Luck, thought Peri miserably as she left the hospital. That's what it's going to take. Monumental, stupendous luck. Then she stopped so suddenly that the door swung against her shoulders as the person behind her pushed through.

"Pardon me."

"Sorry." Peri walked back home, her mind furiously going over the possibility. Jon. And his gift for telekinesis. Moving things with his mind. Small things, like dice. Or maybe the numbers in a lottery?

"You're crazy!" was Jon's reaction.

"You can change the odds, Jon, you know you can."

"But that's cheating, Peri. I won't cheat. And suppose someone found out. Can you imagine what my life'd be like if I ever let people know what

I can do? The Government'd probably draft me or use me in experiments. I wouldn't have a life of my own. It'd be horrible."

"I know telekinesis is rare, but don't you think you're a bit paranoid about the Government. After all..."

"I've heard stories of people simply vanishing. Sucked into the system to be used. After all, Peri, they use dolphins to carry bombs and mines. Why should they be more fussy about people?"

Peri wrapped her arms around her chest and shivered. "I know, Jon," she said in a small voice. "But what about Nev?"

That was it, wasn't it? Jon thought gloomily, after he'd got away from his sister's pleading. What about Nev? He found himself reliving the nightmare moment when he realized that the heliolite was out of control, that his telekinetic power was useless, that he could no more stop the falling heliolite than he could stop the spin of Earth.

But now there was something he could do. Change the odds in the provincial lottery and undo the damage that his failure to help Nev had caused.

It's wrong, an inner voice told him clearly. Once you start using your powers to cheat, there's no end to it, is there?

Yes, but this is different.

No, it isn't. It's no different from always winning at backgammon, even if you don't try to throw double sixes.

His mind seesawed miserably to and fro between the opposite and irreconcilable facts, and he found himself hating Peri for having had the stupid brilliant idea in the first place.

Three days later the ambulance brought Nev home to his mother's apartment in the same block where Jon and Peri's family lived. He arrived in a flesh-coloured, permeable plastic body cast and a variable slant chair-bed.

Jon tried a light touch. "You're looking great. Apart from that bruise on your forehead." Stupid, he thought savagely. That the best you can do?

"And apart from being numb from the hips down I guess I'll survive." Nev sounded just as unreal.

"You'll be into rehab in no time," Peri burst out. "I've had this fabulous idea to beat the odds so that your number will come up right away."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Telekinesis."

"You, Peri? You've got as much psi ability as a plasti-brick wall."

"She's thinking of me, Nev. It's crazy. The numbers are probably generated in a computer concealed in a sealed vault somewhere."

"But they aren't, Jon." Colour flooded Nev's face. "I asked about it in hospital. The lottery's run in public, with a live audience, and one of those old-fashioned bingo machines that throw up the numbers randomly. Anyone can go and watch. Mostly they give out prizes, but they run the Hi-med Lottery at the same time."

"Nev, are you saying you think it'll work? You really want me to try it?"

"Of course he does," Peri shouted at him. "You can't not. Jon, you're my one and only brother, but I swear I'll never talk to you again if you don't at least try to help Nev."

"Take it easy, Peri. Back off. It's Jon's decision." Nev interrupted.

"I don't even know if I can do it to order, or if it's like dreams, something that just happens."

"It'll be okay, Jon. I'll help you practise. All we need to start working is Nev's National Security Number." She pushed up his sleeve and ran her thumb over the digits tattooed there. "24-2-30...your birthday. I remember that part. Four days before mine. Then 005193...right?"

"Eleven numbers. Think you can handle that many, Jon?"

"I dunno, Nev. But I can try."

Now that the choice was out of his hands, Jon pushed the guilt and worry to the back of his head and concentrated on honing his telekinetic powers. Peri wrote the numbers zero through nine over and over again on table tennis balls and put them in an antique pickling jar that their mother used as a vase, and Jon began to practise plucking out the digits of Nev's security number in order. After three weeks Jon had a permanent headache and Peri was nervous enough to jump out of her skin.

"It's no good. My brain's turning to mush, and my psi abilities aren't getting any better. Like I said in the beginning—I don't think it's a thing you can force." John sighed. "I'm afraid it's hopeless."

"It's my fault. I've been pushing you too hard. Why don't you take a rest. After all it's three days..." Her voice wobbled. "Three whole days till the lottery."

Peri and Jon waited in line outside the convention centre until the doors were opened and the crowd pushed in.

"We've got to get close to the front." Jon warned her.

"I know." Peri gasped, the wind knocked out of her as an elbow-jabbing woman pushed past them.

They managed to get seats in the front row close to the enormous number-generating machine. It was edged with garish fluorescent lights,

red, orange, blue, and purple, which flashed on and off in rhythm with the latest hyperpunk.

Jon groaned. "It'll be hard to concentrate with all that going on."

Peri squeezed his arm. "You'll manage. I know you will." She turned, so he wouldn't see her face and guess how nervous she really was, and stared around the hall.

The seats were filling up fast. Streamers hung from the ceiling, twisting in the air-conditioning. LOTTOLOTTOLOTTO they spelled endlessly. The crowd noises rose to beat the hyperpunk. The lights flashed. She could feel the tension zapping at her nerves, tightening her skin. Her stomach flipped uneasily.

"Surely not all these people have friends needing help?" She turned back to Jon.

"I'll bet not one of them is here for the Hi-med Lottery. Take a look at the program."

"Win a Mazda hovercraft...a home fusion unit...but this isn't what we're here for."

"Down near the end." Jon pointed. "Three rehabilitation places at Healing Hands Medical Unit. Just before drawing the numbers for the Provincial Lottery. That's what everyone's here for, I guess, the big prize—a tax-free year for the whole family."

As he spoke the lights and sound mercifully dimmed and the Master of Ceremonies glided out into the spotlight, a smooth-faced android familiar to Peri from news and weather reports on the local channel. There'd been an occasion, Peri heard a woman in the row behind her whisper, when an irate loser had gunned down the lottery MC, so it was no longer a favoured post for a human, despite the publicity. If there should be another incident, well, androids were replaceable.

"Welcome to the twenty-ninth running of the new provincial lottery. I hope you all have your National Security Numbers on you—har-har. Today it may be your turn to win a home composter, a water purification unit, a super hovercraft. And, as I'm sure you all know, the big prize today is..."

"Jon, what about...?"

"Sh. He'll get to it. Just listen."

"And folks, between the draws for the home composter and the big prize, we will, as usual, draw three places for hospital beds in the rehab unit of the City Hospital. The lucky winners will receive the very latest in scientific treatment absolutely free! So come on, all you folks here and at home watching this program—brought to you by the makers of NoZone, the cream that guarantees freedom from skin cancer—let's begin our

evening of fun and excitement."

An hour and a half dragged by for Peri and Jon. The numbered balls flipped up and down on the current of air in the machine. Randomly one would pop out, and Smoothface would announce the number. As the eleventh and final number popped out, the central computer searched out the name and telephone of the lucky winner. Within a minute the audience was treated to a display of hysterical joy, brought by home videophone to the big screen above the stage. Instant win. Instant emotion. Between the draws the audience ate sushi and fried squid.

"Look, Jon. Something's happening."

Two workwomen in coveralls, who probably earned less in a year than Smoothface's owner earned in a night, wheeled on a smaller machine, decorated with fluorescent H's, which blinked frenetically on and off.

"...and now, folks, for those unfortunate few who have suffered traumatic accidents in the past year, the City Hospital's Hi-med Lottery brings you the Healing Hands Hope Chest! In this transparent container," Smoothface went on, "are the National Security Numbers of all those poor folks in need of a boost—a boost which we intend to give them tonight."

Peri could see that each of the balls in this container was much larger, large enough to have an entire NS number printed on its sides. This was going to be totally different from extracting the right digit from zero to nine, and getting it right eleven times. Finding the ball with Nev's number on it within a container of several hundred was like pinpointing one star in a galaxy with one's eyes shut.

"Jon, what'll we do?" She grabbed his arm.

"It's the dregs, I know. But I'll try just visualizing Nev's number and willing it up. Maybe it'll work. Maybe we'll have to call this a practice run for the next lottery, or the one after."

"But..."

Jon was no longer listening. He closed his eyes. Peri could see the muscle at the corner of his jaw quiver and tense. She doubled her fists in her lap so that the nails dug into the palms.

The balls began to bounce on the current of air within the machine, rattling as they moved randomly around. She stared and caught her breath in a gasp. Up the near rim of the container a single ball wriggled upward, against gravity, to bob on the air stream. She looked quickly around. Had anyone else noticed the unusual movement?

Most of the audience had left the stands for a drink of low-alcohol beer and a sushi snack. To them, this was the boring interlude before the main event. Those who remained were talking, joking, rustling their programs.

Some twisted theirs into paper airplanes and glided them towards the stage. Peri looked anxiously at Jon. Would this nonsense distract him? But it was all right. His eyes were still shut, concentrating.

Then she saw her. A woman dead centre in the front row was staring intently at the machine. Peri remembered her. The woman who'd jabbed her out of the way as they had jostled in the doorway. She could still feel the bruise on her ribs.

In a sea of munching mouths, her face stood out. Her eyes were narrowed, her forehead furrowed. She looked as if she wasn't even breathing.

Peri's eyes darted back to the number generator. Another ball was creeping up the side. It spun against the one she guessed that Jon was guiding and hovered beneath the narrow exit passage. Jon's ball jostled it, they spun apart and, as they ricocheted off the walls of the container, a third ball was hiccuped into the exit and rolled into the MC's outstretched hand.

"...and the lucky winner is...91-07-13-02547. In one moment we will see for ourselves..." A picture flashed onto the screen. A lean man propped in a wheelchair, neckbrace forcing his chin up, someone's hand holding the phone to his ear. Smoothface spoke into his mike. "Mr. James Rierdon. I guess they'll be calling you Lucky Jim tonight, eh, Mr. Rierdon? Free rehabilitation at the city hospital! Congratulations and big hand for Mr. Rierdon!"

As the screen blanked out there was a spatter of applause and then the crowd noise filled the hall like the wind against a diving heliolite. The balls began to bubble on their air jet. Up and over. Down and up. Again one ball edged up to the surface, stayed there, fighting gravity. A second ball rose beside it.

Like two gladiators in the ring, thought Peri. Each feinting, watching the other's move, ready to block it, to be the first beneath the narrow exit. She saw the MC's hand move. Both balls rolled towards the opening. And jammed. Neither gave a millimetre. Sweat ran down Jon's face. Six seats to her right Peri saw the woman's face glisten pallidly under the bright lights.

"Sorry folks." Smoothface smacked the side of the old machine. The woman's body jolted as if she had been hit. Peri heard Jon grunt in pain. "Little jam-up here," the android went on. "A bit more air to stir them up again and...here we are. The lucky winner is 15-11-03-47892!"

Once more a picture flashed on the screen, this time of a woman in her mid-twenties lying in a quadriplegic's harness.

"Congratulations on your win, Daisy Jones. Daisy's been waiting for electrotherapy and nerve surgery for a long eight months following a car accident. Remember, folks, your driving safety depends on a good computer

program. Keep your module checked!"

Their opponent's face was dead white. She looked as if she might faint any second now. If she does, a small ugly voice said clearly in Peri's head, then we've got it made. Now she knew that Jon had the mental strength and the skill to pull Nev's number up. Third time lucky...

But Jon was on his feet, grabbing Peri's arm. "We're getting out of here."

"What's the matter? You're so near..."

At the door he turned and waited. The MC's smooth voice reached them faintly. "...And the lucky winner is...baby Alison Temple. Baby Alison was born with severe cerebral palsy. Now, with the latest techniques of muscle and nerve rehabilitation..." His voice was lost in a torrent of laughter and sobs. "Ladies and gentlemen, right here in the audience, here is Mrs. Temple, little Alison's mother! What a moment! Mrs. Temple, would you like to tell us exactly what you're feeling right now..."

Jon put his arm through Peri's and pulled her through the crowd, past the stalls selling lucky T-shirts, stuffed bean cakes, four-leafed clovers, and vials of moon dust. Tears ran down Peri's face and she brushed them away angrily.

They walked on until they came to the footbridge across the river. It was hung with paper lanterns, and the pleasure boats beneath looked like illuminated water beetles. Here Jon stopped.

"I could read that woman's thoughts, Peri. So strong. I could see her baby, and what treatment could do for her. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. And it'd be the same the next time round, the next lottery, wouldn't it? Always the knowledge that if we cheated so Nev's number would come up it'd be at someone else's expense."

"How are you going to tell him?" Her angry tears splashed on the carpet. "What's the use of your esper skills if you can't even help Nev? I just hate you, Jon!"

He looked away from her anger, staring absently down at the strings of lights reflected in the water. They blinked on and off. White. Red. Green. Idly he switched the order. Red. White. Green. And back again. Suddenly he straightened up and whistled. His eyes sparkled. "Maybe I can do something for Nev after all, Peri." He walked quickly away from her through the brightly dressed crowd.

Three months later, when Peri and Jon were making their daily visit to Nev's apartment after school, Nev grinned at Jon. "I think you can tell her now."

"Really?"

"Tell me what? Hey, you two, what's been going on?"

"I got the idea on the bridge that night, the lottery night, looking down at the coloured lights. And it made me think about the damaged nerves in Nev's spine. And whether telekinesis would be useful. So I went to the medical library and did some reading, and...well, anyway, Nev and I've been working on it for the last while."

"Working on what?"

"This."

Slowly, thoughtfully, Nev wiggled his toes.

1. RESPONDING TO THE STORY

- a. With a partner, replay Jon and Peri's argument for and against cheating on the lottery. Think about what else might have been said, and how they are both feeling at that point in the story.
- b. Why does Jon decide not to use his special powers to win the lottery? What would you have done? Explain your answer.
- c. Do you think it's fair for Peri to blame Jon when he refuses to continue cheating? How would you have felt if you were Jon? if you were Peri?
- d. Do you think holding a lottery for health benefits is right? Explain your answer.

2. WRITING ANALYSE THE SETTING

Find evidence of when in the future this story takes place, and what the future is like. List some of the phrases in the story that show this.

Write a descriptive paragraph that describes the futuristic setting Monica Hughes has created. How is the future different from the present? What changes seem exciting or good? What changes seem bad? How are people different or the same? How is society different or the same? Why do you think Hughes created this sort of society of the future?

SELF-ASSESSMENT: With a partner, discuss your notes on the setting. Were there interesting or important points about the setting that you missed? List three techniques Hughes uses to develop the setting. How could you use these techniques in your own writing?