



# The Lewis Carroll Writing Competition 2021

## A Stroll with The Joker

By Megan Ng (under 16 Competition)

*Megan, from Hong Kong submitted a chapter after "The Lobster Quadrille" in the 'Alice in Wonderland' story.*

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So the Gryphon dragged her on, and Alice tried as best she could to keep up, stumbling over rocks and holes in the ground- until all of a sudden, a hand grabbed hers and she found herself waltzing with a very strange character. On examining him, Alice assumed he was part of the deck; like the soldiers, he was oblong and quite flat. However, instead of the neat patterns they wore, the fellow was decked in stripes and spots and checkers, and wearing a strange hat with bells on each of the five tips. He stopped suddenly, and gave a neat pirouette- the bells on his hat jingled as he did so. Alice clapped, to be polite, and sat on a ledge to watch him. It seemed as if all she needed to do in the present moment was admire, and there were no thoughts of time passing in her head- only the fellow's leaps and twirls. She remembered the trial very suddenly, and leaped up from the ledge in a hurry.

"I'm very sorry," she said, "but the Gryphon had just invited me to a trial, and I really ought to be getting there-" Alice was interrupted by her companion breaking into peals of loud laughter.

"The trial?" he snorted.

"Yes," she said, offended. "An important invitation-"

"They have a trial every Thursday, and nobody's ever executed," he interrupted again. "Important? Pah!" The fellow did another pirouette. Alice stared at him and suddenly the day's adventures of being pushed from rude person to rude person rushed over her like a wave and she felt wearier than ever. Her arm still smarted where the Gryphon's rough claw had pulled her along. "If the Queen's trials are important," the fellow continued, "then I am a hedgehog- and if the Queen was important, then I would gladly become her croquet ball. If-" and here Alice leaped forward and glared at him.

"I know who *you* are," she said. "You're one of the Jokers, aren't you?"

The Joker smiled widely at her. "Finally!"

"I don't see why you should be here, then," Alice continued. "When I play, I always take you out."

The Joker frowned at this. "You're ruder than I expected. And after all the good things I'd heard about you!" Alice wanted a clever remark to give him, but could find none; instead, she chose a direction at random and began to walk off into the forest. The trees around her seemed to be half the size, coming up to her shoulder- yet in the distance, she could see towering leaves and branches that brushed against the clouds.

“Stop,” the Joker called. “There’s nothing but more rabbit-holes that way.” Determined not to listen to him, Alice strode on until with a scream and a desperate grasp at the air she slipped into a large hole that seemed to have popped up out of nowhere. Down and down, she fell. This hole was rather like the last one, Alice thought except the walls were awfully dusty, and instead of shelves lining it, there were shiny wooden doors. Before she could straighten her dress and try to get a hold of her surroundings, one of the doors flew open and the Joker’s chequered arm burst out of it, catching her by the shoulder and pulling her through the door into a bright meadow, not unlike the one she’d walked to with her sister what seemed like so long ago.

“See,” said the Joker. “Nothing but rabbit-holes. You should be glad I know my way around these parts. And this place is quite lovely for afternoon strolls, if you happen to like that sort of thing.” He turned a cartwheel and squashed a few pink flowers with his hands.

“Now look here!” said Alice quite angrily. “I’ve been taken to all sorts of places today by the oddest of people, and-” “I happen to like that sort of thing,” the Joker continued, completely unaware she’d been speaking, “and it’s awfully nice weather. A stroll it is, then!” He linked their arms together like a pair of schoolgirls and skipped off, towing Alice in his wake.

“I’ve never met such a fellow for interrupting!” Alice thought to herself. But these thoughts dissolved in the warm sunshine and the flowers that sprinkled themselves along the ground so uniformly that it was as if the entire meadow was one of her sister’s embroidered handkerchiefs.

Quite soon, she found herself chatting with the Joker as if the two of them were old friends. It happened awfully fast, she told her sister later; at one moment, she’d been faintly annoyed with him, and the next they were skipping together with linked arms and she was saying “Well, if you’re one of the Jokers in the deck, then where’s the other one?”

“Ah,” said the Joker. “Would you like to hear a secret?” Alice nodded fervently. Back home, her nursemaid despaired of her eavesdropping. Alice didn’t think of herself as nosy- rather she enjoyed the warm feeling of knowing things that others didn’t. It seemed to her to be the closest thing to becoming a grown-up. “My brother,” the Joker whispered, clasping his hands together (a difficult feat, as his rather small arms were at different corners of his oblong body), “left a few years ago. Went to that school under the sea and thinks he’s a fish. Hah!”

“I know about that school!” cried Alice. “I suppose he went to learn Drawling and Uglification- and-”

“Nonsense!” barked the Joker. “He went to learn how to swim. I was always the one with brains, you see, and he could never sit still in a classroom for long. I suppose you think he went off with the Mock Turtle’s lot?”

Alice blushed with embarrassment and promptly was struck with an idea. “But how could he swim, if he’s, well, a card?”

“*I beg your pardon?*” asked the Joker menacingly.

“A card,” repeated Alice quietly.

The Joker was silent for a moment, and then walked off angrily. "If you stay around here, girl," he called, "you'll learn that things are not always what they seem to be. And you'll learn that snapdragons and gingersnaps are much more welcomed than snap judgements. Got it?"

"I don't understand," Alice said as she ran to keep up with him. But the Joker was already turning around, a bright smile on his face again, and didn't appear to hear her. The two continued their walk. After a while, the Joker began to point things out to her, waving his hat in various directions.

"If you eat *that* flower," he said, "your nose will grow larger, and if you eat that one, your ears will. *That* one will make your chin as long and as sharp as a needle, and *that* one will stretch your neck to double the length."

"But how can you tell which is which?" Alice asked, staring at the orange petals with great apprehension.

"When you live here, you learn soon enough," said the Joker. "Transformation, that's easy. Everything here was something completely different, once-upon-a-time. That's just how it is. Don't worry, I won't ask you to recite any poetry to me. Left!"

Alice looked up quickly from the flowers as he grabbed her elbow and made a sharp left turn and suddenly they were walking on soft forest mulch, a path of rose-coloured mushrooms leading the way.

The Joker kneeled down, and motioned Alice to do the same. Lounging on one of the mushrooms below them was the Caterpillar and his hookah, who paid them no mind. Before Alice could stop him, the Joker whisked up the Caterpillar and held it between two fingers. "Hello, old boy!" he cried. "How are you?"

A small sound came from the Caterpillar, as if something very tiny was yelling angrily. The Joker smiled and set it down, then linked arms with Alice yet again and cried "Right!" before making a sharp right turn into a grand hallway.

The thick blue carpets were printed with the same pattern on the Joker's back, and the wallpaper was printed with many small hearts. Alice had no time at all to ask "Is this the Queen's palace?" before the Joker gave a somersault and the surroundings changed once more. On and on they leaped, from a delicate crystal forest to a bustling kitchen to the room that Alice had only too recently been trapped inside. Back to the sunny meadow, and then a sandy beach. Alice was dizzy with motion.

"How are you moving like this?" she panted as she and the Joker tumbled together into another rabbit hole.

He thought for a moment, clicking his heels in mid-air, before answering. "It isn't hard," he said. "You just have to know how everything here works. And once you know whose dream it is, going from place to place is as simple as blinking an eye."

The Joker demonstrated by opening one of the doors that they fell past and dragging Alice into the mossy hollow of an old oak tree. "Whose dream is it?" Alice asked. The hollow was rather cramped, and to make space the Joker folded himself into neat halves. Alice

watched enviously. It would be great fun to be able to slip beneath doorways and crumple herself down like the Joker could. Perhaps there was something she could eat or drink to accomplish that, and as she thought this she looked up and saw a brilliant blue mushroom sprouting from the moss above her.

“That’s not as simple to answer as you might think,” mused the Joker. “You see, it’s *your* dream. But then again, it’s also mine. And the Caterpillar’s, and the Queen’s. *We* dream too, you know.” Alice didn’t pay attention to this- she was too busy standing on tiptoe and trying to grab hold of the mushroom. “Then again,” said the Joker, “it’s much easier if you consider it *his* dream.”

And the oak tree broke apart and whisked itself away, and the two landed into what Alice could only describe as the space between two words. It was very quiet, and very white. The Joker looked around and grinned mischievously. “Shh!” he whispered. “This is a secret place. Not even the Jabberwocky is allowed in here. He’d get his head cut off again, snicker-snack!” Alice waited, frightened. Very faintly in the distance she could hear something like some small creature scratching at a door. “Hear that, girl?” asked the Joker. “He’s at it again. Wouldn’t it be interesting if somewhere, someone out there was writing all of this down?” He did a few backflips and folded himself into quarters. Alice listened again. The air smelt familiar- like old paper, and the soft scratching sounded familiar as well. It all reminded her, very suddenly, of her father’s study- a dull place, filled with books cramped with text, and as she thought this, she imagined that the white blankness that filled the space were pieces of paper on a writing-desk.

“Who is *he*?” she asked the Joker.

“I think you might answer that better than I,” he replied. And he reached forward and took hold of her arm. “The trial’s beginning, girl,” he said. “Time shall be angry if you’re late, we’ve already wasted enough of him- and he makes rather a bad enemy. Shame about the Hatter. He was a great friend of mine, but I make it a point not to associate with the mad. Ta-ta!”

The hand on her arm was swiftly changing, the spots on the Joker’s gloves growing larger, and harder, until once again the Gryphon’s scaly claw was holding her arm and the two were running hard. “Come on, come on,” it cried. And Alice confusedly ran along with him, her mind still filled with ink-scratchings and the tumbles and turns of the Joker.

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