“The Transfer” by Anjalee Nadarajan (3rd place winner)

Riding the bus was getting more and more dangerous. The way the driver was braking and accelerating someone could fall flat on their face and break their nose. Frank touched his own nose gingerly. He was on his way to the weekly seniors’ social. Playing-cards, cookies, chit-chat did not appeal to him, but it was better than lying around, staring at the ceiling, waiting to die.

The bus clanged its doors open, and the little Muslim boy and his mother boarded. Frank figured the two were Muslim, because the mother had her hair covered, although he could see black strands curling out from underneath. The little boy was a quiet thing who never uttered a mite of sound. How different this boy from his own grandson, although the two must be near the same age.

Frank watched as the mother turned her coin purse inside out. Though he sat near the front, he could not hear her murmurings to the driver. There was a frown on her face. He became aware of the weight of the change in his wallet. He always carried extra loonies, quarters, and dimes. As he was beginning to stand up to pay for the mother and her son, they stepped off the bus, which began accelerating almost immediately. Frank was forcefully plopped down to his seat. His back pain started up again. But for once his mind wasn’t on his aches and pains. He strained his neck to watch the mother and her son walk down the sidewalk. They were holding hands. Without thinking, he pulled the bell cord.

As soon as he was on the sidewalk again, Frank started walking as fast as he could in the direction of the mother and her son, who were still visible.

“Wait!” he cried hoarsely, his throat chords were unused to yelling. “Please wait!”

Amira turned around. Why was she being hailed? “What does the old man want?” she said to her son who said nothing, who continued to say nothing. The old man was panting in
his efforts to walk quickly. Feeling pity, she tugged her son’s hand, and they walked towards him.

She and Sād were a metre away from him. She didn’t want to get any closer. What could he want? He stretched out his arm and opened his hand: there were coins.

“For the bus.” The old man’s accent was sideways Canadian, but she understood.

“It’s okay. I have a transfer. I just forgot to bring it.”

The old man stared. “Oh.”

She was touched by the old man’s kindness. “Thank you.”

The old man clumped his coins back into his pocket. “I just thought you needed it, because sometimes the driver lets you on, sometimes the driver doesn’t.”

“I know. I left my transfer in the kitchen. Don’t worry.” Amira felt awkward now. Hopefully the next bus would come soon, so that the old man could be on his way. Feeling the need to make conversation, she said, “I am Amira. This is my son Sād. I always see you on the bus this time each day.”

“I’m Frank.” He stretched out his hand. She shook it. It reminded her of her father’s—he could not accompany her and her son to Canada. She should call him soon.

The old man was smiling at her son. “Hi Sād. I know a little boy just like you. If he was here, you two would be friends. Do you like Canada?”

Of course her son said nothing. She forced a jollity she did not feel into her voice.

“He is shy. He does not talk too much.”

The old man—Frank, she must remember—looked at her. “That’s okay. Sometimes I don’t talk too much too.”

Sād looked behind at the old man, as he and his mother walked back to the house. The old man reminded him of his grandpa who used to bring oranges every time he came to their house—their actual house, the home of his memories—where he belonged. If Sād shut his
eyes tight enough, he could imagine the old house, before the bomb. There were so many colours and smells. Here, everything was grey and white. He missed his father. There was so much red after the bomb.

His mother was saying something about the old man, about how nice he was. Sād agreed. People here were very nice. They were especially nice to him. His new teachers always spoke softly to him. They smiled a lot at him, more than they smiled at his classmates, who were also nice to him. Everyone shared their things with him. But he missed his friends, his old classmates.

The day after he and his mother had come to stay at their new home in Canada, he had stopped speaking. He just didn’t want to. There was no point in saying something out loud when he could say it to himself. He wanted to keep his words for himself. All his toys and books had been left behind. He only had his thoughts—and his mother. He squeezed her hand appreciatively.

Amira felt her hand being squeezed. How soft his skin was, how lucky she was to still have him at least in her life. She looked down at him. “We’ll have lunch first, and then we’ll get on the bus. Okay?”

Sād nodded.