1st Place Winner Middle School

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Grade: 7

**Whispers of Freedom: An Eternal Echo**

I stretch and rise on a normal Sunday The shower greets me in a frigid spray

I pull on my Sunday best, and down the stairs I head

Four others greet me, we pile into our car the color of lead

In precisely seven minutes we hop out, Bibles swinging in hand

I turn and gasp as I take in the scene before me, swaying I can hardly stand The tense air nearly suffocates me

Whispers of bitterness and rancor drowning me Raucous shouts, piercing wails slice and shatter the air

Uniformed men shoot indiscriminately as if they haven't a care Smatterings of people I dearly know flee the burning church

It blazes with a horrifying beauty, as if wholly made of birch Stunned, I hear a calm male voice above the din

Pleading the Lord to save his children

His voice galvanizes a young uniform into action

"You filthy idiot of a Christian, submit to the government or die!" he cackles Then click! and he's dead in a second, no, not even, a fraction!

Utterly bewildered, panic and fury permeates my every nerve An unkind hand seizes my hair, I stumble and swerve

A troll of a man with soulless black eyes smacks my Bible away I'm hauled painfully behind him with no words to say

Flung like an expendable rag at the end of a line of others

Two of whom are my sister and brother

My baleful looks condemn the men who abruptly and cruelly stop our worship Then out of the blue, a gunshot, a doleful whimper, and I bite my lip

My captors shoot human targets with a perverse delight They close in on me, and my world is slowly sucked of light All too soon, the metallic shine of death greets my eyes

The curtains close as I gird myself, and the man fires with an animal cry

The whole world stops as the abomination of mankind screams towards my heart I shout and sit up with a start

The illusory image of a gun swims in my head I blink, it vanishes, I realize I'm in my bed

My gratefulness is immeasurable

Because the freedom in my life is unstoppable I can pray, I can worship, I can sing

Without being hunted, caught, and killed, as I was in my dream My rights are inalienable

Unshakeable

A night terror so real but so untrue

"Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

These 16 words are my sword and shield, through and through