Missouri Youth Write
2011
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*Also an American Voices National Scholastic Art and Writing Award Winner  
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### Missouri Youth Write

*Missouri Youth Write* is sponsored by the Missouri Association of Teachers of English (MATE). MATE, the Missouri Writing Projects Network, and Prairie Lands Writing Project at Missouri Western State University joined together June 2008 to form the Missouri Writing Region, a regional affiliate for the national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists Writers ([http://www.artandwriting.org/](http://www.artandwriting.org/)). The winning students’ writings from the Missouri Writing Region for the 2011 national Scholastic writing contest comprise this edition of *Missouri Youth Write*.

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This edition is available online at [www.missouriwestern.edu/scholastic/youth11.html](http://www.missouriwestern.edu/scholastic/youth11.html). For more information about the Missouri Region for the National Scholastic Contest, see [http://www.missouriwestern.edu/scholastic](http://www.missouriwestern.edu/scholastic) or contact Dr. Jane Frick—Regional Coordinator ([frick@missouriwestern.edu](mailto:frick@missouriwestern.edu)).
A Teenager's Denial of Mortality

My little brother wants to die
in a burst of fireworks,
scarring retinas
as he explodes across the sky –
except he didn’t say it
quite that poetically.
I try to be amused
when he says,
“I want to die with a bang,”
because it’s such a cliché
and because I can tell
that he’s lying,
even if he doesn’t know it yet.

But as we sit there
in a basement illuminated
by fake Hollywood explosions
and shirtless movie stars
beating the shit out of each other,
fear stirs
from where it sleeps
coiled in my stomach,
raising its head and blinking.
My brother is energetic, whiny;
wants to marry his classmate,
Rhiannon, when he grows up,
and play professional baseball.
The air around him crackles
with dreams, with life.
My brother is so alive
that when he dies,
I want to believe
that the world will die with him.
No One Is Innocent in This

Conall Donoghue was yelling incoherently at the village residents and shaking his gun in their direction while the scorching Middle Eastern sun pounded down on them. The other ten members of his squad were also shepherding the townspeople to the northern edge of the shanty town which surrounded the one fresh water well for miles. One of the local men at the edge of the group of villagers began to sprint out into the desert, the sound of his tattered sandals drawing Conall’s attention. Cursing at what he knew he had to do, Conall aimed down the sights of his newly purchased and very expensive ACR assault rifle and pulled the trigger four times. As the man dropped, a woman in the middle of the crowd began screaming “Hani!” over and over until she was hoarse. One of the Dutch men dragged the body back to the ditch where the entire village was now huddled together with the ten foreign men standing over them. Once returned, the man’s body was clutched to the woman’s chest in an act of animal desperation, his blood smearing on her arms and chest.

Ed Hoffman, the leader of this mission to find an insurgent cell, walked calmly toward the ditch, as if on an evening stroll, four cans of gasoline cradled in his arms. Conall cursed as he realized what his squad leader planned to do and jogged toward Hoffman. “Son,” his brogue muffled through his protective shemagh head wrap, “you can’t be serious! Those women and children cannot be insurgents!”

“Son, if they aren’t now, then they will be after we killed all their daddies. Now be a good sport and get out of the way.” Underneath Hoffman’s southern drawl was a subtle warning tone, from which Conall backed down. He had seen on several occasions what this man could do. The graying haired man handed out the cans to three of the other men in the unit and began to pour the contents into the ditch and onto the people. Conall couldn’t handle the screaming and shut his eyes; he then felt a hand on his shoulder. “Nobody is innocent in this,” Hoffman said in a knowing tone, lighting a match and putting it to the tip of his cigar. From the sickly sweet smell Conall could tell it was Cuban. After a long pull he glanced at Conall from under his baseball cap. “Not even you, son.” He breathed out the words which were followed by a trail of smoke riding their coat tails. The man was a vision of a demon, Conall thought while the smoke made his eyes water. Hoffman flicked the match into the ditch and walked away.

Something broke inside Conall’s mind. He could not turn away from the blaze inside the ditch or attempt to shut his eyes again. When only ash remained and the sun had drooped deep into the horizon, Conall turned and looked at Hoffman who was planning their next move with the Romanian. The greedy Frenchman had taken all of the metals and belongings that had not been destroyed in the fire and planned to fence them for money. In his rush to ransack the nearest hut, a small metal necklace dropped from the pile in his arms. Conall’s Arabic was shaky at best, and he did not understand the characters. Yet he knew what it meant for him.
He put the chain on his neck, the still hot metal burning and scaring his skin, and dragged his feet to the troop truck.

For the next two years Conall and his unit followed Hoffman as he rose through the ranks of Secure Endeavors, Inc. Eventually Hoffman became CEO and retired his old unit to celebrate, Conall included. But on that day by the ditch Conall had resolved to redeem himself for his sins. He vowed to kill Hoffman.

It had been five years since Conall had been “retired” from Secure Endeavors. He had kept himself busy in his new life in America. By working security for celebrities and politicians, by beating inquisitive paparazzi and “handling” especially obsessed stalkers, he managed to keep his skills sharp. He finally had enough money for the final stage of his plan. He had already killed the four members of his squad that had lived through their tour of duty. The Frenchman had been first, and it had been very personal. If ever Conall felt that he was becoming a murderer, it was whilst bludgeoning the Frenchman. Yet it wasn’t murder, or wrong, or unethical in Conall’s eyes; it had to be done; he was redeeming them all. The Dutchman had been kind for the most part but was guilty nonetheless; Conall had made sure he passed quickly and said a prayer that he passed into heaven, one hand feverishly rubbing the pendant with his thumb and the other pushing the pillow into the Dutchman’s face. Next, the Romanian and Libyan. This was highly personal, yet Conall did not take any joy from the murders and did not want to be arrested before the release of the final soul.

After every murder Conall could feel a little more of his humanity fall to the wayside. He didn’t care. He had to do it for those whose lives had been ruined by his unit. And since Hoffman’s promotion to CEO, Conall knew that he had become the biggest murderer on the planet.

Conall entered his spartan apartment in Beverly Hills, walking to his desk and pulling the hidden drawer open. Inside was a single key to a storage unit and the pendant. Conall reached for the flask in his pocket and felt whiskey blur the edges of his memory of that hot day in the desert and the ditch. After he had drunk enough of his “liquid courage” to silence the cries of those long dead, he placed the pendant around his neck and picked up the key. At the storage depot, after emptying the box of all its illegal contents, Conall drove his SUV out of the lot, headed to eastern Georgia.

Luckily for Conall, Hoffman’s estate was set far away from civilization. However, the estate was built like a fortress with enough guards to dignify that description. From inside a bush on the outskirts of Hoffman’s personal forest Conall had an excellent view of the mansion. Peering through his binoculars, he saw burly men patrolling the grounds with fully automatic rifles. Hoffman had heard of the mysterious deaths in his original squad and had prepared for the attempt on his own life. Conall kissed the pendant hanging around his neck, said a prayer, and prepared for the grisly duty he owed to the souls lost in the desert.

Night fell on the estate, and so did Conall. The first guard’s body was stashed in a bush by the front gate. The second was walking along the eastern edge of the house when Conall struck. After every kill Conall said a prayer in hushed tones and feverishly rubbed the pendant with his thumb. The familiar feeling of its texture was gone, worn smooth by the incessant friction, yet the text still glowed darkly at Conall, urging him on.

An hour later and six guards killed, Conall finally made his way to the door. As he progressed, searching room to room he began to feel increasingly nervous. Then he froze.
Working its way into his nose was a sickly sweet smell that brought back a flood of memories: botched interrogations, kidnapping, extortion, and full on assaults of innocent villages. He shook his head in a vain attempt to banish the demons now flowing through his brain, but there was no hope. As he continued he began to hear the voice of the woman crying, “Hani!” like a chant in his head, distracting him, making him careless. He slumped against the wall and steadied himself with one hand whilst trying to massage the phantoms from his mind with the other. Then he found the source of the smell, a large oak door with a plaque reading “E. Hoffman, CEO.” The flickering light of a roaring fire seeped underneath its frame, illuminating Conall’s combat boots and the bottoms of his fatigue pants.

Ready his silenced pistol he kicked in the door and stopped in his tracks. All along the walls were hundreds of books neatly aligned. There were pictures of Hoffman in nearly every major conflict in the past ten years. And in the middle of the room, in a large elaborate leather chair, sat the man in those pictures and, on his lap, Hoffman’s son. The children’s book fell from the boy’s hands in apparent slow motion.

“Well hey there, son; it’s been quite a while,” Hoffman said in a disarming tone.

“Five years, sir,” Conall gritted, the smell of the Cuban cigar sticking to the back of his throat. He kept his pistol aimed at the man’s head, unmoving. Hoffman placed the stub of his smoked cigar on the desk in front of his chair.

Conall could see the boy struggling to escape from the man’s grasp, to run, to hide, anything to get away! Yet Hoffman kept a firm grip on the boy to keep his only source of protection near.

“You’d be surprised at how many crazies from the old days try to kill me in my own home, son. It’s becoming quite a nuisance,” Hoffman said with a tilt of his head, catching the light of the fire in his glasses, over-lining the smirk he wore on his forged face.

“I’m not crazy!” Conall’s voice cracked, his hand now beginning to shake at its desire to pull the trigger to end Hoffman’s life and his own pain. The pendant began swaying; tapping his hand as if reminding him of what he should be doing at that moment. Yet, the boy was in the way. An innocent. “You know what you did; you know what we all did! How can you live with yourself?”

“See now that’s a simple answer, son. I just plumb well didn’t care.” The boy was shaking uncontrollably now. “If you had any idea how many lives we saved in what we did, how many bad people we prevented from carrying out their sadistic plans, then even a religious nut like you would have come to terms with it,” Hoffman kept his calm demeanor.

Conall shook furiously. This man was supposed to be begging for his life! Asking for forgiveness, pleading to keep his existence whole, to be a sniveling, groveling mess, deserving to die, yet here he was explaining his actions as if he had spilt a glass of milk! In all of Conall’s planning sessions for this day there had never been a boy.

The disarming conversation had caused Conall’s aim to lower, thinking of ways to justify his desire to kill this monster. The buzzing in his head had yet to cease. He had to put his hand to his temple to ease the pain. As soon as the pistol was no longer aimed at Hoffman, an explosion of noise filled the study. Instantly the voices and buzzing in Conall’s head vanished.

The silence permeating the room became deafening. The boy had been shot through and was sprawled on the floor, and there in Hoffman’s hands, previously hidden by the boy was an enormous .357 magnum revolver. Conall looked at the smoking crater in his own chest—the
boy's body had done little to slow the bullet—and felt a wave of dread descend on him. No! Not now! Not when he was so close to redemption!

“See, son, in the end I always win, no matter what it takes. That's why people like you always snap, and people like me rule the world.” Conall raised his pistol to end this beast before him in the leather chair, but Hoffman just laughed and fired. The round tore through Conall's arm, as if Hoffman were toying with the defeated ex-soldier. Conall could no longer feel his legs. In his fading vision he saw Hoffman get up from his chair and walk over to his own crumpled and ruined body.

There was only one thing to do now.

Quickly, without hesitation.

God forgive Him for all of his sins.

“No one is innocent in this, not even you Hoffman!” Conall croaked, blood seeping from his mouth.

Hoffman looked down at the dying Irishman in his study, the nerve of the zealot nut. Even while they were on duty he would see the doubt in the man’s eyes and watch him thumb the pendant from the town. There was always a pious one in a unit like theirs, believing that he had to make up for the atrocities to make God happy.

Turning back he fired three more shots into the Irishman’s chest just to make sure he was dead. When the echo of the blasts faded, Hoffman pulled out his cell phone and began to dial the number that would make this all disappear.

Ping.

Hoffman froze. Looking down at the Irishman’s corpse at his feet, he noticed something olive roll out from behind the ruined body. Dying muscle spasms had allowed the man to pull the pin from the grenade on his belt, causing it to roll out of his hands onto the extravagant carpet now soaked with Conall’s blood.

With the blast, Conall Donoghue was finally at peace.
Samsara

She's been chewing the same piece of gum for hours,
Drinking stale water from a chipped coffee mug,
Wearing his shirt—
*Feeling, thought, will, consciousness...*
W-w-wearing his shirt,
Over her sweatpants,
No shoes.

He has carved her,
Into,
I-into his own,
Whittled away layers of self and skin,
Uncovering the bone,
Pulling off her—
*There are no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue—*
Pulling off her l-lips,
Her dress,
He is blowing the cigarette smoke in her face,
Watching her cough,
G-g-growing inside her,
Injecting, intoxicating,
Injecting intoxicating her,
*There is no attainment of wisdom, and no wisdom to attain.*

Emptiness,
It d-d-doesn't mean what you think it does,
Empty is interrelated,
A state in which nothing exists purely it itself,
If you were to pick her,
Pluck her from her branch,
S-stop his destruction,
She still wouldn't be safe,
She's from him,
He's in her,
A collar around her heart,
Body is empty empty is body exactly is body and empty,
She's from the mirror she stands before every m-m-morning,
Begging things to be different,
Hoping for a ticket west or just to finally understand the sutra,
Screaming gaté, gaté,
Gone, Gone,
Be gone when I get up.

There is no ignorance,
And no end to ignorance.
There is no old age and death,
And no end to old age and death.

When she walks the streets surrounding the apartment,
The young artist sees her,
From behind the wall of g-g-glass,
The window,
The coffee shop window,
He cups the shape of her,
Of her stringy hair,
Of her dingy scarf, fringe fluttering in a wind she doesn’t feel,
He cups these things in his hand,
Captures them with his pencil,
Smudges them with the darkened p-pad of his thumb,
Pulls them in tighter.
He doesn’t know.
He doesn’t know about the other He.

It is the clearest mantra,
The highest mantra,
The mantra that removes all suffering.

And now she’s taking a walk out the window,
But she left the mug of water,
S-s-sitting on the table,
Ripples rioting against the curved walls of their enclosure,
Lip of liquid shaking,
S-stuttering,
Eventually settling.
God.
That cup,
That girl.
Both full,
But, God,
B-but,
So empty.

All things are empty:
Nothing is born, nothing dies,
Nothing is pure, nothing is stained,
Nothing increases and nothing decreases.
Echoes of Moonbeam Beach

It rained that night, too. Of course, things were somewhat different then. But the house looked just as she remembered—a lone woman perched on the sandy shores, the creeping fingers of mist curling around the porch, the light out front faintly illuminating the waves crashing on the beach. Yes, surprisingly little had changed. The sound of Lily’s and Michael’s hushed voices as they parked the car faded to a murmur as she ventured up to the house, pausing for a moment before gingerly easing the door open.

A dusty silence descended, the voices muted by time and neglect. Someone had apparently come long ago to tidy up, for sheets covered the furniture. She had never seen this house quiet before, finding it unnerving. No shoes lined up by the door, no voices floated down the hallway, no stray belongings deserted on the couches and tables. Just stolid, unmoving ghosts, layers of dust, and gloomy silence.

Lingerling for a moment on the weathered doorstep, she took a hesitant step into the gloom. Her shuffling footsteps were instantly swallowed by the thick silence of the house. Trailing her fingers through the dust sleeping on the tables and the paintings on the walls, she wandered through dead rooms. The drawing room hardly seemed the same room without Ruth’s gentle touch releasing singing notes from the piano—and the kitchen; she had never seen it without bustling servants and clanking dishes. It was dim now, away from the open door, and she found herself searching for a light switch before remembering that there wasn’t one. It had seemed frightfully quaint even then, lighting the rooms with gas lamps, though electric lights were a fairly recent development even back in the city. One got used to these conveniences quickly, she supposed.

Coming finally to the master bedroom, she stopped for a moment in the doorway. Someone had made the bed; she was certain she had left the covers rumpled and in disarray when she sprang out of bed that morning. This room had hardly been used, neglected somewhat between the boisterous gatherings and gorgeous beach calling to them. She had often fallen asleep on the porch swing, listening to the waves, awakening to find that someone had draped a blanket over her in the night. Still, it seemed empty and lonely without the suitcases tossed haphazardly against the wall, without the echo of voices floating down the hallway. Without someone thrown carelessly on the rumpled covers.

As she turned to leave the room, a flash of black caught her eye. Sitting on the bedside table was a dainty black hat, a bell-shaped cloche with a bow on the side. Funny, she distinctly remembered the feel of the wind plucking the hat off her head, sending it skittering off the boat and across the water. Perhaps someone had found it for her. The faint murmur of voices
tiptoed into her ears, growing louder and louder. Reaching out to touch the hat, she heard a
car engine rumbling impatiently in the distance...

*  

“Emma! I swear if you don’t come right this minute we will leave without you!”
She didn’t see what they were in such a fuss about, frankly; she was only a few minutes
late. Still, she was itching to get going also. Taking a last bite of toast, she kissed her mother
quickly on the cheek and made to dart out the door.

“Paper predicts a big storm Saturday evening,” her father grunted. “Best be careful.”
She agreed indulgently. An old fuddy-duddy worry, to be sure. Why, a paltry storm
couldn’t ruin their party! They’d simply have to move inside. Though Oliver had so been dying
to try out the new boat. Really, the weather was such a pain.

Armed with a sharp travel outfit and stylish set of luggage, Emma finally made it out to
the car, where her fiancé, Robert, was waiting behind the wheel. She had just tossed her things
into the trunk and was rummaging around to find a scarf to tie over her hair for the ride when a
voice came from behind her.

“Ah, she emerges. Is the queen ready now?”
She looked up to find a pair of piercing emerald eyes fixed on her.

“So nice to see you too, Oliver,” she shot back.

A good-natured smile crinkled up to his eyes as he laughed wryly at her. He bowed,
playful and gallant, and held open the car door for her before slipping into the back seat next to
the dainty blond girl.

“Well, weren’t you in a hot hurry? Don’t let’s take all day—we have a party to get
started!”

The tips of Emma’s words flew off into the wind as Robert hit the gas and the 1926 Rolls
sped down the road. As all words were pushed aside by the roar of the car and the wind
whipping through the open top, the four passed the ride in silence. Soon, the road veered away
from the sparkling blue ocean and into a slightly wooded cove. The house was dark, sleeping at
its perch atop the cliff and waiting patiently for its visitors. The others emptied the car in a mad
flurry of voices and clunking luggage, but Emma stopped to look over the edge of the cliff at
the stretch of sandy beach to the side and the dark waves crashing on the rocks directly below.
Fog shrouded the horizon, obscuring the water past a few hundred feet, and her father’s
warning suddenly popped into her mind. Shaking the sobering thought aside, she turned to
rejoin the gang, only to find those green eyes focused on her again.

“Don’t you sneak up on me like that, Oliver! This place gives me the heebie-jeebies
enough as it is!” she snapped.

“Not my fault you’re lost in thought over here, doll,” he replied, grabbing her arm as
she began to move toward the house. “Wait, level with me here. You’re happy, with Robert?”

Emma couldn’t risk looking into those eyes; she would never be able to tear her gaze
away. And after all, Robert was a wonderful man. She was ridiculously lucky, marvelously
happy, to be marrying him. Brushing aside the little voice beginning to utter a peep at the back
of her mind, she gave Oliver a small smile and began to head toward the house.

“Marvelously happy. Robert is simply swell. Now if you don’t mind, I have to get dolled
up for the party tonight.”
And as she picked her way through the long grass, taking one last look from the doorway at Oliver standing alone on the edge of the cliff, she almost believed it.

* 

By seven o’clock, the desolate little beach house was bursting with light and pulsing with music, voices and laughter spilling out into the darkness through the open back door. People filed every room, chatting on the sofas, leaning on the porch railing, carousing on the sand by the water’s edge. Escaping from one of Robert’s harrowing discussions on the mechanics of the new Ford model, Emma made her way to the fresh air of the porch. She supposed that Oliver was off with Ruth—not that it was any of her concern—at least until she spotted the dainty blonde dipping her toes in the water on the beach, with Oliver nowhere in sight. The wind was picking up, sending the waves crashing onto the beach and against the rocks with more force than usual. She hoped it wouldn’t rain. Not that a little rain would spoil their party, of course, but the little beach house would be frightfully crowded with all those people crammed inside.

“Drat, the music’s stopped,” she muttered to herself, making her way back inside to change the record. Remembering that she had left a new ragtime album in her bedroom, she scooted past a couple valiantly continuing the Charleston despite the lack of music and stepped into her room, only to find Oliver standing by the desk.

“Can’t decide if I like this ragtime stuff or not,” he muttered, running his fingers over the smooth onyx of the record.

“Don’t be ancient. It’s the thing now,” Emma reached over, plucked the record from his fingers, and was just about to stroll out the door when she felt his hand on her wrist.

“Dance with me?” he asked softly.

“Robert—”

“Doesn’t dance. Just one song. I’m allowed to dance with my friend, aren’t I?”

“But there’s no music.”

“Who needs music?”

It was true that Robert didn’t really dance, Emma reasoned with herself, and he would probably be rambling on about motors and gauges and whatnot for a while yet. One dance wouldn’t hurt. And of course, she and Oliver had been friends for years; it was completely natural.

As she twirled around the room, Emma’s shoe hit the door, pushing it gently closed. But neither of them noticed. Outside, someone started the music again, and the record lay on the desk, forgotten.

* 

The next morning dawned grey and rainy, but the clouds lingering ominously over the beach house didn’t chase away the lively young people. Festive music, voices, and laughter bubbled out of the house just as it had the night before. The first fat raindrops began to fall on the people on the porch around eight, and soon the little house was straining at the seams with the spirits packed inside.

Halfway through a Charleston twist, Emma spotted someone venturing out into the furious rain. She couldn’t imagine why anyone would abandon the warm festivity of the cottage for the inky downpour outside, but then, Oliver always had been a bit enigmatic. She
debated going after him—if he wanted to go out in the gloom, he deserved to be left alone out there—but found her feet moving toward the door of their own accord.

“You do realize it’s pitch-black and pouring rain,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“You don’t say. I hadn’t noticed,” he replied dryly. “I was all set on trying out the new boat tonight.”

She should have seen this coming. Once Oliver set his mind to something, there was no turning him off the idea.

“You’re loony! It’s practically a hurricane out there.”

“A little rain, that’s all. Besides, what’s the fun in a mundane little jaunt in perfect weather? Boating in a storm, that’s a thrill. Forget bootlegged rum and the Charleston, I want a real rush.”

And no amount of persuasion, pleading, or scolding from Emma or anyone else in the party (which soon clustered by the door to see him off) could dissuade him.

Pulling the sails into position, Oliver turned to give Emma one last look, his emerald eyes piercing her as he opened his mouth to say something. The wind whipped his words into the abyss, and Emma, following the white speck of the boat until it disappeared into the falling glass, assumed that she could simply ask him what he had said when he returned.

* 

“Tragedy strikes at Moonbeam Beach, young gentleman drowns in storm,” the headline of The Gazette read. Up and down the coast, the headlines the next morning proclaimed the tragic death of Oliver Gerdson, the youngest son of the prominent Boston Gerdsons. Emma couldn’t look at the paper, couldn’t stomach the deceptively cheerful picture taken at the Gerdsons’ charity ball last winter. Hadn’t she told him that it was too dangerous? Foolish Oliver, always so headstrong and arrogant, thinking that nothing could touch him. He had gotten what he deserved, she told herself, flinging the morning paper into the waste basket and pushing away the bitter taste of tears in the back of her throat.

Within a few weeks, the headlines had switched from accounts of the tragic death of the charming young man to the extravagant wedding of young Robert Slater and Emma Beauregard. The presses ran hot with details of the impressive guest list, the bride’s ivory silk and lace Chanel gown, and the glittering chandeliers and expensive hors d’oeuvres of the reception.

The dreams started two weeks before the wedding. Not nightmares, exactly, but glimpses of sadness and wistful possibilities. Emma always rose to the surface of consciousness with a lingering feeling that she had lost or forgotten something, something elusively out of reach. Sometimes pounding rain and battering waves invaded her dreams, filling her head with the sound of a raging sea and splintering wood, but soon the tranquility of the morning after a storm returned and with it again that feeling of inexplicable absence. The doctor’s voice meandered out of a tunnel, lazily reaching her ears with a diagnosis of “shock, brought on by the tragic death of a friend.” Rest, he ordered, and diversion. And so the wedding preparations continued.

She was, as all said, the luckiest girl in Boston. Robert was a catch, a kindhearted, solid man who would support her, whose evident promise in the business world would bring her a comfortable life. It was too much to try to explain the slight prickle in the back of her mind, in her heart, when she could not explain it to herself.
Wedding bells chimed across Boston that summer morning, echoing in her ears long after the car pulled away from the church, long after the ship's whistle died and the land disappeared from the honeymooners' gaze. On the heels of the opulence and festivity, the news of an expected heir was greeted with jubilation and satisfaction. It was a time for joy and scurried preparation, not calculations and investigation—never mind that the baby came weeks earlier than expected.

For the first time in months, Emma felt awake. She gazed at the unbelievably small bundle in her arms, searching her daughter's face valiantly. Something tugged faintly at her heartstrings, but for the life of her she couldn't place what it was. There was no hint of Robert in the girl's tiny face, and over the years, she became more and more the spitting image of her mother. Everything about her was Emma, from the slightly upturned nose to the dark auburn hair to the faint wrinkling of the nose when she was displeased. Everything, except the eyes. Not stormy grey-blue, like Emma's, or deep chocolate brown, like Robert's, but green. Clear, vivid emerald green.

* 

Without the music and clatter of voices, the cottage was eerily silent again. Through the grungy window, a sliver of sea was visible, steel-grey and churning with the beginning of a storm. Michael's voice reached her ears as if from a distance, sounding slightly nervous, followed by Lily's sad but surefooted murmur.

"Maybe in the garden, with all the flowers?"

"No, it has to be the ocean. She wanted to go back to the ocean."

Slowly, their voices faded, swallowed by the silence of the cottage. The stillness filled her ears, seeping deep into her until all she could hear was the faint pumping of her own heart. Somewhere in the distance, a whisper called, "Emma...Emma...Emma..." Strangely, it sounded just like Oliver. The voice seemed to crescendo as she left the bedroom, gliding through the cottage with more grace than she had managed in years. The sound of the ocean, the chirping of birds, the humming of the car had all faded away, and the only sound in her ears was the voice calling her name as she made her way onto the sandy beach and down to the shore without a backward glance.

Lily touched a finger to the dusty picture frame, gazing at the young woman immortalized there, her chic bobbed hair and scandalously modern drop-waist dress. The scribble on the back labeled it "Emma, 1926."

"I never really understood what Gramma had with this place," she commented softly. "Mum said that Gramma had refused to come here since she was in her 20s—she wouldn't even let anyone mention it—but she threw a fit when her family tried to sell it. I can sort of see now, though—it does have a certain feeling about it, doesn't it?"

"There must have been something about it she liked; her will specifically stated that she wanted to be brought back here," her brother pointed out. "This place is giving me the creeps, though; it's like someone's watching us."

Lily knew what he meant. The silence of the house was too full, a blanket draped around the cottage, waiting for something. Or someone.

"All right," she murmured. "Let's do this."

"Maybe in the garden, with all the flowers?" Michael suggested, his voice shaking slightly.
“No, it has to be the ocean. She wanted to go back to the ocean,” Lily replied, leading him out to the cliff overlooking the sea.

A slight gust of wind swept the ashes out of their container and sent them dancing across the sky, mixing with the white-capped crests of the ocean. For a split second, Lily could have sworn she saw the skipping particles sparkle, as if to smile one last time on the people left behind. Then they were gone, swallowed by the gentle arms of the cerulean waves.

“Bye, Gramma,” Lily whispered, brushing away her tears and pretending she didn’t see the crystalline drop tracing a path down Michael’s cheek.

Somberly, they began to walk back to the car, leaving the sea, the cottage, and the memories behind them. As Lily took one last look at the silent, lonely cottage, murmured notes floated out of the house and pirouetted around her ears, a forgotten melody mingling with the sound of the waves.
Stephanie Griffith  
Portfolio  
Park Hill South High School  
Grade 12

This is the title piece of Stephanie Griffith’s portfolio.

The Daily Special

The special on Monday is a cup of coffee and a bagel for $2.35. Not including tax. Tuesday, the special is a cup of coffee and a croissant—plain, not chocolate—for $3.00. On Wednesday, the special is two eggs anyways you want with juice for $3.50. Thursday is donut day or “Dollar a Donut” (long johns are $1.50). Friday is a pancake breakfast—two pancakes, bacon, coffee or juice—for $4.50. The Saturday special is a mega omelet for $4.00. Truly a steal. On Sunday, there is no special, so they are free to order whatever they please.

Melanie’s favorite is Thursday, but it isn’t something she admits out loud. She limits herself to one donut, an action that her childhood self would never allow. This self-control mirrors her slim figure that she never had in adolescence. That second donut always taunts her, but Melanie knows the tricks of sugar and fat. So, on Thursdays, she eats one donut contently.

But, today’s Tuesday. Melanie waits patiently at their booth, folding her paper napkin into smaller and smaller bits. Usually, he isn’t this late. Punctuality, as Melanie well knows, isn’t Victor’s strong suit.

“Sorry, kiddo.” And like a quick, cool breeze, Victor appears and sits down across from her. His graying hair nearly touches his shoulders but is full of tangles as if a brush is a foreign object. As expected, his t-shirt—an old, faded Led Zeppelin concert tee from earlier days—shows stains from lack of washing. But despite ragged appearances, his voice sounds warm and inviting, always reminding Melanie of chocolate. “Stuck in traffic,” he explains. “Some dipshits in this city, I swear. No one knows how to drive a goddamn car.”

Melanie laughs at his criticism because Victor embodies a horrible driver—listens to loud music, forgets to utilize the turn signal, and regards speed limits as suggestions. A teenager trapped in the body of a 53 year old man.

“The car started at least.” Melanie points out. She’s been trying to get him to trade it in, but Victor forms the strangest attachment to objects—his car being one of them.

“Rosa is hanging in there just fine. You already order?” Melanie shakes her head no. He whistles across the room to the waiter serving someone at the counter. “Bruno! Two specials, si’l vous plait!”

“Oui! Un moment!” Bruno calls back. Melaine realizes that it’s been about six months since Bruno started working here. One day, their usual waitress, a ditzy old hippie named Kat who always flirted shamelessly with Victor was gone and in her place stands a polite, professional Frenchman. He doesn’t flirt with Victor, but he does hang in there when Victor gives him an endless stream of shit.
“The service in this place,” Victor murmurs with a good natured smile, “it’s sure gone downhill.”

“The foods still good, isn’t it?”

“Well, sweetheart, you can have good food and shit service. Just because you get a fancy meal with lots of green garnishes and whatnot doesn’t mean the person who gives it to you isn’t an arrogant asshole.”

She always appreciates Victor’s outlook on things, so simple and direct. Her philosophy professor always takes every word anyone has ever spoken and dissects it like a cat in biology class. He digs and picks at the meaning of life until there’s nothing left. Victor’s approach is quite different.

“Enough about this old joint. How’s your life, kiddo?”

“I have class this morning.”

Victor nods knowingly. “Bruno! She’s gotta leave soon, so let’s hurry it up, shall we, mon ami?” He leans across the table and pats her hand. “You know the right people here, sweetheart.” It’s redundant because Melanie’s been coming here as long as she can remember. Theo’s Café knows her as well as she knows it.

“Oui, monsieur! Un moment!” Bruno calls out.

“How’s school treating you? Still looking like straight A’s?” Victor asks with genuine curiosity. His interest in her education stemmed from his lack of one, Melanie figures. When he was young, school and Victor never saw eye to eye. But now that that time has passed, he’s always inquiring about what she studies, what kind of homework she does, and the papers she writes. Victor loves reading her papers for school. He always gives her an A+.

But lately, Melanie feels school slipping away, fading into the background. As of now, she doesn’t sit on one solid A. Statistics is her main endeavor—she straddles the border between a C and a D, and she doesn’t know how to pull that grade up to the land of A’s she’s typically accustomed to living in.

But she can’t tell Victor that, not yet.

“Good,” she lied. “Finals are coming up in a couple of weeks.”

“You prepared? Honey, remember always be prepared for all kinds of shit, but especially school. I’ve always told you that, haven’t I? Always be prepared?”

Melanie smirks, “Since I started dating in the ninth grade.”

Victor lives in a permanent state of smiling, so the transition between a grin and laughter is the type of effortless movement not found in many people. Certainly not in Melanie.

“I did say that, didn’t I?”

“You sure did.”

“Goddamn, well I’m sure you found it endearing.”

“Or mortifying.” Melanie chuckles. “Vic, I was like 15.”

“Sweetie, I was 15 once, too. I remember it.” Melanie knows that’s a debatable fact. Her mother, countless times, told her about the drugs Victor consumed from the age of 14 till rehab years later. He caused so many problems, her mother always complains, my childhood centered on all the trouble Victor caused. But Melanie passes her own judgments.
“Seriously though,” Victor snaps his fingers to gain her attention. “You got your shit together? With your school work and everything?” Melanie nods like an obedient dog. “Sociology, Russian history, Statistics, all of them?”

In all honesty, Melanie expects no better than a C in Statistics, no better than a B in Russian, but maybe if the stars align perhaps sociology can be a shimmering diamond in her otherwise pile of coal grades. Melanie feels as if she holds no control over anything anymore.

“Vic, don’t sweat it. I got it.”

“Two specials,” Bruno announces. “The usual.” In front of Melanie, he places the croissant with a side of butter and a cup of decaf coffee. In front of Victor, he places the croissant with a side of strawberry jam and a cup of regular coffee next to a pile of sugar packets. Theo’s Café knows the two customers well.

“Ah mon frère!” Victor exclaimed, his French accent straining. “Merci! Merci beaucoup!” Bruno’s mouth curves up with the tiniest hint of a smile and replies, “Monsieur, the pleasure is all mine.” After three years of living in America, his accent sounds as thick as ever, and Melanie observes how it delights Victor like a child every time Bruno speaks. “Anything else, Monsieur?”

“Non, c’est bon.” Victor says with pride, and Bruno nods in acknowledgement that he spoke correctly.

But when Bruno turns to Melanie with a questioning, “Mademoiselle?” only English words flow out.

“Thanks, Bruno. I’m fine.”

“Oui, bon appétit.” As soon as he is gone, Victor leans across the table like a teenage girl eager to share bathroom gossip.

“What I told him was—no, it’s good.” Melanie smiles at the way his old blue eyes still light up. “Soon, just wait, I’ll order in French.”

Melanie laughs, “But Vic, we always just get the special. So just learn how to say special and you’re good to go.”

But Victor rolls his eyes at her, shakes his head and replies, “Baby steps, my dear. Haven’t I ever told you that before?” Victor’s told her many things before, and it just seems to be a matter of keeping track of the important ones.

As she makes the gesture to turn her wrist up so she can peak at her watch, Victor reaches across the table and clamps his warm hand around her forearm. “Don’t even think about it, kiddo. Now, eat your breakfast. A genuine French guy brought it to you, can’t you appreciate that?”

Melanie smiles because to Victor time is an object that can be bent and pulled and shrunk to fit his whims and his world, but time means something different to Melanie. When he looks down to spread the jam on his croissant, she looks at her watch anyway. She only has ten minutes. She eats quickly.

***

Next week, they meet on Thursday. Victor knows it’s her favorite, so he always tries to arrive early and order before she can. It’s her favorite food by far but the most painful for her to eat without guilt.
He remembers when she was younger, and true, a bit plumper, the girl devoured donuts as if they were nothing but M&Ms. She never eats more than one nowadays, but she makes that one count. Victor’s never seen anyone take his or her time and savor every moist, warm morsel of a donut like Melanie. He blames Donna for drilling into her daughter’s brain that donuts are the enemy, but he takes credit for teaching her to appreciate every little bite.

Despite his efforts, Victor arrives a little past 8:30, and Melanie already sits patiently in their booth. She holds the same quiet beauty of her mother and as every week passes, Victor sees more and more of his sister in the young woman sitting across from him.

Her dark brown eyes, full of secret longing and ambition, are a mirror image of Donna’s when she was a teenager.

Her hair falls in loose curls around her face, reminding Victor strongly of his sister when she graduated from college.

Her smile, that’s what gets Victor. He almost forgets the sweet, innocent smile his sister used to show when she saw a family of ducks or listened to the Beatles or ate really good Chinese food. Seeing that smile is even more rare in his niece, but he catches glimpses.

“How’d you get here so fast?”

“I get here early,” she retorts with the good humor Donna never quite fully grasped.

“You know what early means? Means you’re always on time.”

Victor finds coffee and a mountain of sugar packets waiting for him. “Aren’t you a little smart ass this morning? Where’d you learn it?”

“The Great Victor Stellek, of course.”

When he feels like a complete and total waste of air, molecules, and space Melanie waves her “I still love you Victor” flag and suddenly, the world brightens.

“Damn straight you did.” Victor snaps his fingers in the direction of Bruno leaning by the coffee machine. “Garçon?” With a rolling of the eyes that Victor knows is all for show, Bruno saunters over to the table. “Bonjour mon ami!”

Bruno, who knows this pair so well, still nods his greeting. As of yet, Victor notices that he hasn’t fully integrated himself into the American way of casualness, but Victor isn’t giving up on him quite yet.

“Bonjour, monsieur. Ce matin est trés beau n’est pas cela?”

Victor laughs because the words sound so beautiful, but that’s it. Bruno could be calling him an arrogant son of a bitch, and it would still sound beautiful. “Slow down, mon ami. What did I tell you last week, Mel?”

She always remembers—“Baby steps.” It makes Victor proud.

“That’s right. Baby steps. Now, a couple of long johns s’il vous plaît and a couple for Melanie, too.”

She coughs pointedly, and Victor hears the nervousness in her voice he hates. “I actually ordered already. Still just one plain glazed for me.”

“You used to love the long johns.” She merely shrugs, although Victor can’t see how she does it because her shoulders are nearly touching her ears—the typical position she assumes when the wrong type of food is brought up. “It’s a dollar a donut, kiddo. Why not get a few?”
Melanie’s laugh is the type of uncomfortable sound that makes Victor cringe. Every Thursday when they meet it seems as equally painful for him as it for her. She grapples with the talking head of her mother resting on her shoulder, chirping in her ear that being fat is one step below being a murderer. No wonder she’s so tense, Victor muses. But then, he is forced to watch her struggle. And no matter what he says, his words are powerless. She eats one donut and savors every last crumb.

***

The shrill sound of the bell above the door, signaling her arrival, pierces her skull similar to how Melanie imagines a hot blade would. It’s her second clue that this will not go well. Her vomit that splattered into the toilet with full force this morning was the first.

Seeing a chipper Victor sitting at their booth serves as the third clue. They’ve met for breakfast since she was 13, and not once, has Victor arrived first. To add to her nervousness—and still uneasy stomach—the usually lulled restaurant feels overrun with the rush that Saturday morning brings. But Victor complained last week that they hadn’t experienced the Theo Café mega egg omelet in a while. Why she let him pick the Saturday following her last final of the semester is beyond her.

Cautiously, careful of sudden movements, Melanie makes her way across the room to her smirking uncle.

“Nice shades, sweetheart.”

“It’s bright out,” she explains. “Plus, my eyes are all swollen from allergies.”


The smell of egg invades her nostrils, and Melanie realizes that she forgot to think through the part of actually eating breakfast. She just knows her intestines will fight her till the end. “He’s busy, Vic.” She tries to distract herself from the headache, the exhaustion, and the nausea. “Cut him some slack.”

“But this is a monumental moment. He needs to recognize it. How many times are we gonna get to see you hung over, anyways?”

Anger—quick and throbbing—flashes in Melanie’s gut. What room does he have to talk? She wonders but says nothing because Victor’s life from the old days is not something she ever feels bold enough to bring up. Through her sunglasses, she sees a sympathetic smile grace his scruffy face, and the anger fades. “You need to shave,” she tells him. “You’re getting that hobo look again.”

Victor scratches his chin, pondering momentarily. “Hobo, eh?” Melanie nods slowly. “Hobos are typically pretty hungry, Mel. Garçon?” He calls out, and as if by command, Bruno appears. Even in the rush, his composure remains. “Bon. Two mega omelets with ham, s’il vous plaît.”

Bile shoots up Melanie’s throat, but she forces it back down. Bruno glances in her direction with soft eyes and asks in even softer voice, “A mega omelet for the mademoiselle?” The question sounds strange but Melanie assumes that she’s just still a little drunk from last night.
“Of course, she’ll have one! We always get the special and the mega omelet is a cornerstone of this institution.” Bruno, bound by the manners of personal service or the embedded cultural respect of his elders, simply nods and takes the order as it is. Once he’s gone, Victor leans onto his elbows and asks, “So how’d finals go?” His eagerness hurts a bit because if he knew the truth, Melanie is sure he would not want to listen as intently.

“They were...stressful.” It’s the most honest answer she can muster. In reality, the idea of finals was stressful, but the tests themselves felt like gliding over icy water. She never put her foot fully down because she knew she’d break the surface, fall in, and drown if she did. He leaned further over the table, and she took it as her cue to continue. “I don’t know how I did. I mean maybe...maybe I did okay.”

Behind the sunglasses, she shut her eyes. But Melanie still hears the confusion in his voice as he asks, “Okay? Why the hell would you say that?”

Her bottom lip quivers slightly in the way it does before she cries, but she’s been holding back vomit for the past 20 minutes, so she can hold back a few tears. “It’s just a test, Vic.” School, college in particular, is not this existential learning process that she thinks Victor pictures it to be. “Tests are just pieces of paper with grades on them, right?” He hasn’t told her that in a long time, but Melanie remembers.

Victor cocks his head to the side, puzzled for a moment before nodding. “That’s true. Life shouldn’t be dictated by a test.”

“Then why should my grade be dictated by one?”

He shrugs. “Kiddo, that’s the way of society. They’ll feed you an endless stream of shit so you can pass a test and move on. But, you still need school. I get it, okay? Your teachers throw a lot of bullshit at you, but it’s the little stuff in between that counts. That’s why school’s so goddamn important and sometimes people forget about it.”

“Alright, Vic.” Her head pounds too hard for her to form more questions or comprehend fully what he just told her. “You want my omelet?” She smelt the eggs coming, the chopped up pieces of ham and cheese melted in the middle, and the need to do anything but eat breakfast consumes her.

Again, he gives her a sympathetic smile. “Us hobos you know, we’ll take all we can eat.” Bruno sets one mega omelet in front of each of them, mutters a quick, “bon appetit” and hurries back into the mass of customers. “You sure, kiddo?”

Melanie pushes the plate toward him. “Go for it.”

As Victor begins to eat, Melanie leans back in the booth. She lets the sounds of the café surround her, wrap around her like a blanket, and melt her muscles. Behind the minty taste of mouthwash, she still tastes vomit and it forces her to remember the endless cups of brown liquor and, vaguely she recalls, the shot glasses filled with a bitter, strong drink that burned her throat. It’s all a blur. The café keeps her grounded. She rests her eyes, and Victor eats both of their omelets.

***

It rains next Wednesday. Big buckets of crystal, blue drops fall from the sky and pool in the streets. Rosa decides she wants to sleep in, so Victor ends up taking the bus. When he arrives finally, at nearly 8:45, his shirt is soaked and his hair drips onto the floor. Luckily, he put on his boots this morning. Wet feet always equal a bad day.
Theo’s Café is warm and inviting and quiet. Wednesday morning always seems to be a slower than other. Usually, it’s just the regulars.

Melanie’s bag sits on the table, but she is not. Before walking over, he shakes his hair out like a dog. Water sprays on to the empty alumni tables nearby. “Il pleut ce matin, monsieur.” Bruno stands there holding a large dishtowel out to him. The only word Victor understands is matin—means morning.

“Merci, mon ami.” He takes the towel and begins to dry off. Melanie appears a few moments later wearing a plain green shirt two times too big for her that droops down to her denim clad knees. “Damn, Mel. Where’d you get that thing from?”

Self consciously, she looks down, “I walked this morning. Then God tried to drown the city. Bruno was nice enough to lend me a shirt because I was dripping all over the place.” Victor turned to their waiter, curiously taking in the way he bows his head in embarrassment.

“It was nothing,” Bruno speaks softly. “You are such good customers, and I keep an extra shirt in my locker. It is the least I can do.”

To ease the tension because the three of them rarely interact while standing, Melanie takes Victor by the arm, “Let’s sit, Vic. Get us some coffee, Bruno?”

“S’il vous plaît,” Victor adds and hands the towel back.

“Toute suite.”

Together, Melanie and Victor walk to the booth almost like they’ve arrived at the same time.

“I thought it was May flowers, not May goddamn showers.”

“Why are you so wet?”

“Rosa didn’t feel quite like getting out in this weather,” he explains. In the oversized shirt, Victor sees how small she is. She practically drowns in the dark green fabric.

“Maybe it’s time to let Rosa sleep for good. She’s worked hard for many years.”

Victor shakes his head. He knows when Rosa’s ready, and she’s not quite ready yet.

“Melanie, I know you aren’t suggesting euthanasia on poor Rosa. Shit, she took you to your volleyball games.” He recalls the day Melanie called him crying. Donna didn’t want to go to the games anymore because Melanie never played and looked horrible in spandex. When she called, Victor doesn’t think she meant to ask for a ride but he took her anyways. He sat in the bleachers amidst uptight parents who took things too seriously and cheered on Melanie louder than all of them combined when she played for only a few minutes. Afterwards, for good measure, he took her out for ice cream.

Melanie cringed slightly, which leads Victor to believe Donna didn’t find their volleyball ritual too pleasing. But when Melanie decided volleyball was never going to be her sport, they choose a new ritual. “That was kind of a long time ago, Vic.”

“Still a good time. Who was that little blonde bitch on your team again? The one who always acted like she walked on water?”

Melanie rolls her eyes, “Celeste Norris. She goes to Brown. Mom always liked her a lot.”

“Still a bitch?”

Melanie shrugs, “Last time I saw her, yeah.”

“Then who gives a shit?” Melanie laughs and doesn’t sound uncomfortable at all. It’s music to Victor’s ears. “Oh garçon!” Bruno approaches the table, setting their coffee down.

“Merci beaucoup.”
“De rien. The special?”
Victor nods, “Oui.”
“And what kind of juice?” Victor turns to Melanie. Silently, they weigh the options. When a conclusion is reached, he signals across the table to Melanie.
She answers, “We’ll go with cranberry.”
“Oui, merci.”

While they wait for their food, the pair glances out the window. The rain pours, rushes into the gutters and forms unavoidable puddles. A woman with a polka dot umbrella walks past the window holding the hand of little girl, perhaps her daughter and together they stop and hop over a puddle and continue on walking and laughing down the sidewalk. Victor sees Melanie smile. It’s that smile, the one that reflects the young girl Donna used to be. When he sees this smile, he misses his sister.

As if reading his mind, Melanie asks him, “Are you going to Mom and Kevin’s anniversary party this Saturday?” The idea of standing around making small talk and wearing a tie doesn’t exactly appeal to him. “Vic, I saw the guest list. I know she invited you.”

“Why was the invitation so plain?”
Melanie shrugs, “She wanted something classic. I did offer to design something for her, but she said she already had something picked out.” He imagines Melanie, terrified and trembling inside, walking up to Donna and offering to design the invitations. Perhaps, she already had a design to show her, but Donna doesn’t listen and certainly doesn’t see. He can see the scene perfectly.

“Your design was probably ten times better than that boring piece of shit she sent out.”
“Victor…” It’s her feeble attempt at sticking up for Donna. Victor doesn’t blame her for doing it. In fact, he would find it completely out of character for Melanie to let go of any emotional attachment to her mother—she just isn’t that kind of daughter.

“I’m serious, honey. You got a goddamn talent. You should use it more often.”

“Well, did I tell you I’m taking some art classes this summer?” Victor smiles in surprise, and she continues. “School this year...I just realized I wasn’t taking subjects I had any interest in, but I love art you know.” She’s good at it, too. Victor’s apartment displays several different pieces of her work. Of course, that’s the only place it is displayed. “So I just figured it would be refreshing.”

“Where?”

“I know Mom won’t want to pay for them, so I signed up for some classes at this little art school on the other side of town. It’s not too expensive.” Victor takes a sip of his coffee, feels the warm liquid run down his throat and begin to spread to the rest of his body. Or maybe, her news is what warms him. He isn’t quite sure which it is. “But that’s totally off topic. Nice try, though. Are you going or not?”

“It’s at the country club,” he grimaces. “Country clubs are a part of my childhood I blocked out for a few goddamn good reasons.” He remembers being dragged there every Saturday with Donna to take tennis lessons or something else like horseback riding that he found idiotic. Victor always preferred their visits into the city. It came as no surprise that when they were all grown, Donna settled near the country club and Victor planted himself in the middle of downtown.
“Please, Vic. I think it would mean a lot to her.” Melanie looks like a child begging for one more bedtime story, and Victor is never one to refuse his niece one more story. “You can keep me company, too. Kevin’s kids are so boring.” From a previous marriage, Kevin brought two kids into the picture. The eldest, Louis is 25 and studying to be an engineer. His shirt’s always tucked in, and he’s been dating the same girl for nearly three years. Both Melanie and Victor are convinced she’s only in it for the money. The youngest, Thomas is a year younger than Melanie and never says much. His shirt, also, is always tucked neatly into his pants.

“Please?”

He sighs heavily, “Do I have to eat the caviar?”

Melanie chuckles, “We can work around it.” Bruno approaches the table with a platter full of eggs. This week, Melanie’s eyes perk up at the idea of food. “That smells delicious.”

Bruno sets two scrambled eggs in front of her and two sunny-side up eggs in front of Victor, followed by two cups of cranberry juice. “Merci, mon ami.”

“Bon appetit.” Victor catches Bruno’s quick glance at Melanie, but she’s too focused on the eggs to notice. First the t-shirt, then the little glances, Victor knows a crush when he sees one. Mentioning something like this though would only embarrass his niece, so for now, he’ll keep it to himself.

They eat their eggs in silence, wash it down with cranberry juice, and warm themselves with their coffee. When it Victor scoops the last bit of yolk into his mouth, Melanie is already finished.

“Alright,” he tells her. “I’ll go.” She smiles that smile again.

***

Monday follows quickly. As Melanie and Victor wait silently for their bagels—multi grain for Melanie and Asiago cheese for Victor—scenes from Saturday play on repeat in her brain. Melanie can’t get the image of Victor and Kevin fighting out of her head. She still doesn’t know what exactly her stepfather says, but the next image flashes quickly into her mind: Victor cocking his fist back and swinging. Her mother threw a fit, yelled at Victor to leave, to get out, why did he even come? Melanie didn’t understand where all the animosity came from, but she felt it radiating off her mother and uncle. The party ended on a sour note, and Victor refused to answer her calls.

That seems as if it only happened five minutes ago.

Yet, here they sit, and Melanie is still not bold enough to ask questions, not the hard questions at least.

But Victor is a master at breaking the silence first. “When do your art classes start?” His voice, she almost doesn’t recognize it, sounds tight and uneven. He doesn’t sound like her charismatic uncle. She doesn’t know this voice almost as much as she doesn’t know this hunched over figure in front of her.

“Next week.”

“You nervous?” She shrugs. This isn’t what they need to talk about. Thinking about it, Melanie realizes most conversations revolve around her. Victor will pull and tug things out of her—dreams, secrets, fears—that no one else takes the time to do. Yet, she’s never done the same for him. “Don’t be nervous,” he keeps talking as if that will cover the thick air of questions and uncertainty. “Nervousness gets nobody anywhere. I’ve told you that before, haven’t I?”

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Right now, she can recall nearly everything Victor has told her, but how much of it has been concrete? “Kiddo, don’t sweat it. You’ll be great.”

The words jump out of her throat, “Why did you hit Kevin?”

He takes a sip of coffee and silence persists. Even Theo’s is unusually quiet. Mondays typically bring a crowd of business people, mom’s with strollers, and the occasional cheery niece and uncle. But not this Monday. “That guys a prick,” Victor states as if that’s reason enough. “You know that.”

“No, I don’t. Kevin’s always been nice to me.” She does like Kevin. He doesn’t talk too much, and he always tells her she looks beautiful when she gets dressed up to go out dinner with them.

“Well, now you know—he’s a shithole prick.”

Melanie isn’t convinced. There’s more to the story because with Victor there’s always more to the story. Boldly she retorts, “Am I just supposed to take your word for it? The great Victor Sellek thinks Kevin is a prick and that’s all the evidence I need?”

He leans back in the booth surprised by her assertion. She can’t tell exactly what he’s thinking, and now, more than ever, she wants to know. “Melanie,” he pauses before continuing, “have I ever told you that there are years of my life I can’t remember?” She doesn’t answer, doesn’t move, so she doesn’t tip over the edge the two of them now balance on. “I don’t ever want you to have bits and pieces of your life you can’t remember, or don’t want to remember. That’s not life. That’s wasted time.”

Melanie doesn’t want to remember her mom handing her the brochure to Promise of a Better Tomorrow, a weight loss summer camp.

Melanie doesn’t want to remember hiding in the linen closet listening to her parents fighting, throwing vases and cursing the day they met each other.

Melanie doesn’t want to remember the one, uncomfortable, awful Christmas she spent at her dad’s house in Texas with his new wife.

How much time has she wasted already?

“Drugs were my life,” he states simply. It’s strange when something she’s known all along, that’s gone unspoken, is thrown into the air and suddenly, Melanie can see the words clearly. “You name it, I tried it. I lived in alleyways after your grandpa cut me off. I stole and didn’t eat. What a life, huh?” His attempt to lighten the mood receives nothing. She sits, silently and ready to absorb. “I didn’t even go to his funeral. I remember that day. I snorted coke in one of the bathroom stalls at Lymen Park. And Donna…I don’t think she ever quite forgave me for that. So we didn’t talk for a long time, not until I was sober, and she was pregnant with you.”

“How’d that happen?”

Victor coughs, scratches his chin like he always does when thinking about what to say and takes another sip of coffee. “You can thank your dad for that.”

“My dad?” Melanie can’t hide her shock. “What? I thought you two hated each other.”

“You can respect someone and not like them. We just didn’t see eye to eye on many things, hardly anything at all, except perhaps you and your mother, and even then, it sometimes was sketchy. But we were bound by our love for you two, I guess. It’s the strongest thing to tie two people together.” Hearing that her dad loves her, Melanie wonders what he’s doing at this moment and wonders if he ever thinks about her. “And your dad, I know things
are shit with him, but he can be a good guy. He picked me up off the streets and got me into rehab. I think he said something about Donna being too stubborn to admit she was worried about me and missed me—which she never actually told me by the way. But I understood. Things between us were never the same, though. Even without the drugs, she didn’t exactly approve of my lifestyle. Too many uncertainties, my small apartment and low paying job and definitely not enough suits and ties, you know?” Victor looks at her, asking without words if she wants to ask a question. But she continues to sit and return his gaze and wait. “Kevin would never do anything like that, though. He’s a prick. Nice guys can turn out to be pricks, you know that right?”

Melanie ignores the question. “But why did you hit him?”

“That’s not important, Mel. People lose control of their anger sometimes and that’s just a fact. What sets them off doesn’t always—”

“They’ll throw you a lot of bullshit, but it’s the little stuff in between that counts.” She quotes him perfectly. His face is suspended for a moment as he processes the fact that she’s just used his own words against him. “Stop streaming bullshit at me, and get to the part that matters.”

Victor isn’t the type of person to shy away from anything. He’s the type to maintain eye contact throughout the entire conversation, yet for a moment, he looks down and tears at the edge of his napkin. “We were making small talk, and I told him the story about how we went fishing when you were ten, remember that?” Melanie nods. She didn’t catch anything but a sunburn. That day, Victor told her lots of stories about lake monsters with different voices for each character. They ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch.

“I remember.”

Victor’s voice tightens and his fist clench for a moment as he continues, “And that prick had the guts to make a joke.” Just the memory of it, Melanie tells, angers him. It makes her nervous because suddenly she thinks she doesn’t want to hear what he’s about to say.

“What kind of joke?” Her voice sounds hoarse but moving her hand to take a sip of coffee is an impossible motion right now. All she can do is wait.

“He said,” the words are careful and cautious, “something along the lines of ‘from what I hear, I’m surprised the rowboat didn’t collapse.’” It’s harsh, not the worst Melanie’s ever heard, but it stings. She met Kevin after being forced to attend Promise of a Better Tomorrow. At their wedding, her dress was a size six. Quickly, Victor reaches across the table and grabs her hand. The warmth of his skin grounds her in the present, so she doesn’t wander back to the days when she wouldn’t wear a bathing suit or her mother would make her eat a salad for all three meals. “Kiddo, he’s a prick.”

“So you hit him?”

“No, not then. I just called him a prick who didn’t know one goddamn thing about you.”

“Then you hit him?”

“No, not yet. He told me that I was being disrespectful, that I was his guest and you were his daughter. I told him that he can shove any respect I have for him up his ass and you were his stepdaughter and that didn’t mean shit. I hit him after he told me that he was more of a role model to you then your drug addicted fuck up uncle.”

The scene she witnessed on Saturday looks clearer. Now the sun is shining, and every little detail and crack becomes apparent. Kevin is kind of a prick, Melanie thinks. But Victor hit
him. He ruined the party, and Melanie spent the rest of the Saturday listening to her mother scream and cry because it always had to be Victor and for once, why couldn’t it be about her? He isn’t as selfish as her mother thinks, but—and she can’t get this out of her head—he hit Kevin. On Saturday, she watched him pull back his fist and swing in one fluid motion. Can that action be clarified, erased and forgiven, by something as easy as that guy’s a prick? The subject hurts her conscious, her mind, and she wants to banish all thoughts of it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Bruno approaching with a tray. Their bagels, warm from the toaster, smell delicious, but her stomach feels knotted.

“Merci, mon ami.”
“Bon appetit,” Bruno says. He smiles at her, but she can barely return it.

They eat their bagels, but no more words come up. For now, Melanie thinks, she knows enough.

***

Victor told Melanie he would meet her on the following Tuesday—croissants. But she finds herself at nearly 9:20 still sitting alone at their booth. Bruno walks past the table, asking if she wants more coffee, if she wants to call, if she wants to go ahead and eat. But she feels sick and strangely lopsided at the idea of eating breakfast here without her uncle.

“Mademoiselle,” Bruno speaks gently, “you must be getting hungry. Perhaps Victor overslept. How about I bring you your usual, yes?” She thinks about it. Maybe he did oversleep or maybe she asked too many questions last time. “Melanie?” With his accent, her name sounds fluid like a river, and Melanie isn’t too far gone in thought to not recognize it. Or rather appreciate it, as Victor would probably tell her.

“No Bruno,” she tells him. “No, thank you. I’ll wait just a little longer.”

She waits, and at each passing second, feelings of loneliness give way to anger. Sitting quietly in the bustling café, Melanie thinks of Victor, about Victor—about him doing drugs, about him and her mother posing together at her mom’s high school graduation, about him living out of a dumpster, about him snorting cocaine instead of going to Grandpa Tyler’s funeral, about him and her father having a civil conversation, about him taking her to volleyball games, walking in the park, eating ice cream, always being there. Victor, Melanie understands now, always seems like some superior being. She puts him up on a pedestal, this god-like uncle who does no wrong, who lives this carefree life that Melanie envies.

“Mademoiselle?” Bruno questions. She glances up and sees Bruno, not as the French waiter who entertains her uncle and brings her food in a timely manner, but as man. He’s quite handsome, and Melanie questions whether or not he’s always been that handsome. Carefully, Bruno sets a croissant—a chocolate croissant—in front of her. “On the house.”

She smiles and tries not to think about the extra calories the chocolate adds but instead focus on this small act of kindness. “Thanks, Bruno.”

As she eats, alone and in silence, Melanie realizes that Victor’s human. She figures she knew it all along, but there’s a sting in knowing that Victor has forgotten or chosen not to come and therefore, confirming her suspicions. It’s like finding out Santa Claus isn’t real. She’s heard rumors about it for years, but now it’s Christmas morning and there are no presents under the tree.
He knows he fucked up. Victor is under no false screen of hope that what he did was okay. But he leaves Melanie a message, more like ten messages, and asks her to please come on Saturday. His lame attempt at lightening the mood was a joke, “At least now your stomach can handle the infamous mega omelet.” She didn’t call back, which he supposes he deserves but that didn’t stop him from showing up on Saturday.

His chest feels warm. As soon as he walks through the door, the first thing he sees is Melanie sitting in their booth. Her face is unreadable. The only conclusion Victor can draw from across the room is that she isn’t smiling and most likely will not let him get away with what happened on Tuesday, or more precisely, what didn’t happen on Tuesday.

“Monsieur,” Bruno greets him, somewhat coolly. “Comme ça va?” Victor isn’t lost on the fact that in the business of Saturday morning Bruno is taking the time to speak to him, but it’s as if he’s trying to tell him something without actually saying it.

“Ça va…mal.” Bad. Not good. With respect, Bruno nods in agreement. He lifts his arm up and gestures for Victor to take a seat. “Merci, mon ami.”

“De rein.” He answers in a more usual tone.

Victor never was one for the army, just didn’t have the stomach for it. When Vietnam came around, he hid out in the back alleys of New York City, places where no one looked for soldiers. Yet, as he walks across the café, he feels like he’s going into enemy territory, and he realizes that’s all his fault. By not showing up, by being scared, he broke the code. He tainted the booth. His goal for the morning—because being a recovered drug addict is all about having goals—is to make it right.

But, he doesn’t have the slightest clue how.

She looks up at him and nods her greeting but doesn’t quite let herself smile. “Nice of you to show up.”

He takes a seat across from her and notices that’s she’s already torn up her napkin into little pieces. So, Victor just jumps right into it. “I’m sorry, Mel.”

Her eyes flicker to the table to avoid eye contact, and she shrugs. “I got a free croissant.”

“You’re shitting me?” Although, it doesn’t surprise him. Victor guesses that Melanie would get a lot more free meals if she came here by herself.

“No,” she shakes her head. “I’m not shitting you. It was a chocolate croissant, too.”

“Those any good?” She gives an affirmative nod. “I’ll have to try one sometime.”

He watches her swallow, obviously nervous, and so he waits patiently for her to say what she wants to say. It only takes a moment, and then Bruno sweeps in and asks for their order even though he already knows it. But, Victor figures, Bruno is going for as much face time with his niece as possible. Once the waiter is gone, the air thickens like before a storm. It’s heavy and ready to burst with rain and thunder and lightning. So, Victor waits.

“Are you going to tell me where you were?”

“I just overslept, kiddo. Then Rosa wouldn’t start so it was nearly lunch by the time I could’ve gotten here.”

Her eyes narrow, giving him a vivid of image of Donna, and she calls out his bluff. “Bullshit.” And really, Victor can’t deny it. But he doesn’t feel like he can tell her the truth, either. How was he supposed to tell her that he realized that maybe Kevin was right? Maybe
Victor wasn’t the right role model for her. Maybe he was just her drug addicted fuck up uncle. How was he supposed to tell her he spent the last week fighting off old habits? “Vic, I thought we’d gotten past the bullshit.”

“I’m sorry, Mel.” He says again. But it doesn’t change the glint in her eyes. “What do you want me to tell you?”

Like he expects because that’s how he taught her, she replies without even pausing—

“The truth.”

“Truth ain’t always pretty, sweetheart. It’s goddamn ugly sometimes.” She doesn’t say anything, and Victor wishes she would. Sometimes, it’s tiring to always be the one talking. “I had a moment of self-doubt.”

She raises her eyes brows, “A moment?”

“For former drug addicts, a moment usually equates to a week at the very least.” He watches the information sink in, and he watches her scratch her chin as she thinks of what to say.

“You’re not perfect, Vic. I know that.” It shouldn’t sting to hear her say this, but it does just a bit. “But I spent my life being raised by a woman controlled by the idea of perfection. And I need you to be a little….” She searches for the just word, and Victor can’t wait to hear it. “Cracked.”

She smiles slightly, a teasing smile that tests the water. But Victor can’t help himself—

“Kiddo, you don’t have to worry about that. I’m about as cracked as they come.”

In the hustle and bustle of Saturday morning crowds, Bruno appears and quickly sets their mega omelets in front of them. He looks between his two customers, sees their smiles and asks once again, “Ça va?”

“Mel?” Victor throws the reigns across the table to her. “Ça va?”

She shakes her head, but a smile still graces her lips. “Bien, Bruno. Très bien.” It’s music to Victor’s ears.

“Ah bon. Bon appetit!”

“Goddamn good, on your first try en français. I’m trés proud.”

Melanie rolls her eyes, “I have been listening these past few months. Picked up a few things.” Victor smiles because he knows it’s true. She always listens to him.

***

In redemption for his missed breakfast, Victor insists they come back on Tuesday to get those croissants. So, for the second Tuesday in a row, Melanie finds herself waiting in their booth. Bruno passes by and sets downs their coffee. Before walking away, he smiles at her. On this Tuesday, she remembers his kindness and the softness in his eyes when he gave her that chocolate croissant. So, she smiles back.

Last night, she went to a party with her friend from school. There was a guy there who Melanie was convinced could be her soul mate. Turns out, he was only beautiful from across the room. When he finally approached, Melanie saw his eyes, and she didn’t like them one bit. But Bruno’s eyes, she realizes now, are truly something to appreciate.

“Morning Mel,” Victor announces as he slides into the booth across from her. It took one mistake to rattle the routine, and one sentence to repair it. Actually, when faced with
Victor sitting across from her, Melanie finds it incredibly easy to forgive him. Life just seems to work better with him in it. “Bonjour mon ami!” Victor calls out. The place isn’t too crowded, and Bruno talks casually with another customer at the counter. “Deux specials, s’il vous plaît.” Bruno acknowledges and gives him the thumbs up sign before returning to his conversation. Victor just shakes his head, “The service in this place, I swear.”

“Next thing you know, they’ll be hiring Brits.”

“I would prefer an Italian.”

Melanie smiles, “Oh, Vic, so would I.” They laugh, and it isn’t awkward at all. It’s like they took a wrong turn but are now trucking along just fine on the right road. “Speaking of, Mom wants to set me up with some intern from Kevin’s office. Said we would just be the perfect match.”

“If he’s an intern that means he’s a law student. Trust me, you don’t wanna date anyone from the legal system.” He takes a sip of coffee which for a second makes Melanie try to imagine Victor as lawyer, working in an office, wearing a suit and tie in court. She just can’t picture it.

“Mom says he’s handsome.” Melanie’s actually met him once, and she can’t deny that. Victor scoffs, “Sure, they’re all handsome at first. But then you realize they’re number one relationship is with their work. And since they’re lawyers, they’re making bank and start to compensate by buying you shit like that will replace actual time spent together. You really end up feeling like a prostitute. A well paid one, but a prostitute nonetheless.” Melanie laughs, mainly because she pictures her mother’s face if she gave this excuse for not wanting to go on a date with the intern.

“That’s pretty detailed, Vic. You got some personal experience there?” It’s meant as a joke. Melanie can’t picture Victor as the type to date lawyers.

But, he surprises her. “Ryan McHale, junior partner at her firm. Don’t let the name fool you, kiddo. She was all woman.”

“Are you serious? When?” At one point in time, Melanie might have felt like she was intruding into forbidden territory. But not now. Not after everything.

Victor shrugs, “Long time ago. You were in middle school, I think. Wanna know something kinda cool about it?” Melanie nods. She always wants to know. “Ryan was the first woman I fell in love with…well sober that is.”

“Did she break your heart?” Even Victor looks a bit surprised that she has the guts to ask something like. “Sorry,” she quickly begins to backtrack. “I didn’t mean to—I mean I understand if you don’t wanna—”

He chuckles slightly and reaches across the table to pat her hand. “Breathe, sweetheart. It’s okay. I don’t mind. But to answer your question—yeah, she broke my heart.” Yet another piece of evidence that proves Victor’s human. His heartbreaks just like everybody else. “Caused another moment of self-doubt. But I got through it.”

“So you don’t think I should go out with him?” Melanie asks because it’s all she can think to say.

“I think that you’re gonna get your heartbroken one day. But I don’t think it should be by an intern that works for a prick like Kevin.”

Melanie realizes that once again Victor has opened up a little door to her. She takes a deep breath, and finally, returns the favor. “Vic, I gotta tell you something.”
His eyes darken with concern, but he remains calmer than her mother would if she told her the same thing. “What is it?”

“I didn’t get straight A’s this semester.”

There’s a moment of silence, and Melanie thinks that she finally did it. She has finally disappointed him. But then he nods just like he already knew. She wouldn’t doubt it if he did. “That’s okay, sweetheart.” Sometimes, Melanie wishes Victor raised her, wishes he was her father. Sometimes, she wants it more than she wants anything else.

“What if I want to drop out and go to art school instead?”

He smiles, “That’s okay, too.” She tries to picture her mother’s face if she ever decides to follow through with her dream. She can’t see it. But Melanie knows it won’t be Victor’s response. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Bruno approaching with a tray. He sets the two croissants—plain, the chocolate apparently was a treat only for her—in front of them.

“Bon appetit,” he tells them. He smiles at her again. She tries her best to return it.

She begins to spread butter on her croissant and begins to think a little too much about what she just admitted out loud.

“Mel,” Victor interrupts her thoughts. “You okay?”

No, because she finally said out loud what she wants to do with her life except she doesn’t know what that is, and now that she’s said it she can’t take it back. “I’m trying to be, Vic.”

He smiles the most genuine smile she’s ever seen. “That’s all that matters, kiddo. That’s all that matters.”

Melanie tries to believe him.

***

Next week, their breakfast isn’t until Friday. Victor loves the pancakes. He loves licking his sticky fingers after drowning his meal in maple syrup. Melanie hasn’t used syrup since her senior year of high school.

The moment he sets his eyes on his niece, Victor senses something different. Her gaze flutters around the café without any particular focus and her fingers thrum restlessly against the table. He stands there a moment and just watches. The urge to walk over and wrap his arms around her, tell her everything’s okay, sweeps through him, and Victor remembers this feeling of helplessness well. He hates experiencing it again.

Melanie looks up and sees him standing there. Her smile isn’t forced but it doesn’t expand across her face like he knows it can. In rehab, they tell you take it one day at a time and set goals for that day, that hour. Victor sets a goal for this morning: make Melanie smile.

“Bonjour monsieur,” Bruno greets him. The waiter juggles two trays but still manages to move gracefully between tables and people. “I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

“Take your time, Bruno.” Victor tells him. He takes a seat across from Melanie, suddenly feeling older than he has in a long time. “How you doing, kiddo?”

She shrugs. “I think I’ve been better.”

“Me too. Good thing it’s pancake day.” Melanie chuckles. Her eyes, still beautiful, are tired. “We can talk, Mel. If you want to.”

She only shrugs again. “I talked to Mom last night.” Sometimes, Melanie will do tiny things that surprise Victor.
“Yeah?”
“Yeah. About everything, well not everything. Lots of things at least.”
“Like what?”
“Like the party. She defended that prick, can you believe that?” Yes, he actually can. But now it’s her turn to talk, so he says nothing. “Remember when I was in high school you told me that being who I wanted to be would only happen once I stopped giving a shit who that person was? I get where you’re coming from, and sometimes it makes sense, but I think that I’m only gonna be who I want to be when I stop giving a shit who everyone else wants me to be.”

Victor remembers when her father moved away with his new wife. Donna pretended as if her daughter wasn’t in pain, and Victor picked up the pieces. He took Melanie to lunches and plays and the park, and he talked her ear off. He talked and talked to fill the silence and help her understand the crazy world she now lived in. It seems hypocritical because he didn’t understand the world. He still doesn’t.

“The way I see it is that I didn’t want to be fat, and Mom didn’t want me to be fat. So, we decided that I wouldn’t be fat anymore. Well, I don’t want to be a lawyer or a teacher or a doctor or whatever the hell I’ve been studying to be. So, I’m not going to be that.”
“What are you going to be then?”
Melanie tilts her head to the side and stops thrumming her fingers. She scratches her chin, a mannerism Victor bets she probably doesn’t realize she does whenever she thinks about what she wants to say. “I don’t know, Vic. Maybe an artist or graphic designer or something, but really... I haven’t the slightest clue.”
He smiles, “What did Donna have to say about that?”
“Oh she had lots of things to say.” The corners of Melanie’s mouth start to lift in a smile.

Bruno arrives in front of them cutting into the static air. He gives his usual glance to Melanie that she still remains oblivious to and nods. “Ça va?” He asks as he fills their coffee mugs with fresh coffee and sets down a small bowl filled with sugar packets.
“Bien. How you doing?”
“My parents actually are visiting.” Bruno mentions and in doing so revealing a third personal detail. They know he’s French, a waiter, and now, they know he has parents. “They haven’t been to America in many, many years. My father hates to travel.”
Melanie smiles sweetly at him, and Victor thinks that if Bruno were not such a rigid person by nature his knees would buckle a bit. “That’s nice they came so far to see you.”
The Frenchmen nods, standing erect with one arm bent behind his back. He’s by far the most professional employee this place ever got. “I’m their only son,” he comes close to a joking tone, “they have no choice in the matter.” Victor laughs because he always appreciates something worth a good laugh. Bruno attempting humor is definitely something worthy. “Your order will be out shortly.”
“Merci, mon ami.” Victor tells him. After he leaves, the pair sits in silence. Typically, Victor doesn’t mind their occasional silences because Melanie is the one person who he doesn’t mind simply sitting with. But there still is much to be said. “Mel, you know I got your back. If you need me to talk to Donna, I’m not scared.”
She nods and he notices that her shoulders have finally relaxed a bit. “I think I need to get my own back for a while, but thanks.”
Reaching across the table, dancing on the line between uncle and father, he squeezes her hand. “I’m proud of you, kiddo. Really goddamn proud.”
She laughs and the smile begins to peak through. “I haven’t done anything, Vic.” Victor knows he alone cannot convince her how amazing she is, how much she can accomplish, how much the world deserves to know her, but he can make a start.
“You just keep being Melanie and that’ll be enough.”
He sees the smile.

***
Melanie waits patiently in their booth. It’s Sunday, and in front of her sits an actual menu. They only get menus on Sundays. She always thought of Sundays as being taken into a candy store and being told to get whatever she wanted—possibilities endless.
Victor’s running later than usual, but she knows any minute now he’ll come through the door in complete disarray. “No Victor yet?” Bruno asks. Every day, he talks more and more. Every day, Melanie finds herself enjoying his French accent more and more. She’s beginning to understand why Victor lights up whenever Bruno speaks because it is quite beautiful to hear.
“He’ll be here soon,” Melanie assures him. “Are you parents still in town?”
“They leave on Thursday. Would you like to meet them sometime? I don’t care to introduce them to any of the people I work with, but I wouldn’t mind introducing them to you.”
Melanie laughs. Oddly enough, meeting his parents sounds like fun. “Victor too, right?”
“Oh I don’t know if my parents are quite ready for Victor.” They laugh together, maybe for the first time, and Melanie decides she likes this new Bruno.
Victor does arrive soon. His shirt’s still stained. His pants don’t match. And a brush is still a foreign object. “Goddamn it, some chicken shit cop pulled me over for speeding. Can you believe that shit? On a goddamn Sunday! What if I was going to church? He was real asshole about it, too. That’s the last time I take your early advice. I leave early and this is where it gets me.”
Biting the inside of her cheek, Melanie attempts to hide her chuckle. “Sorry to hear about that, Vic.”
“Oh please honey, contain your sympathy.”
“Let me buy you breakfast.” Victor glances at the menu, confusion written all over his face. They don’t eat here a lot on Sundays.
“What are we having?”
“Anything we want.”
Intrigued by the idea, he scratches his chin. “Anything, huh?” Melanie nods. The day when Victor will no longer sit across from her flashes through her mind. It tugs at her heart, but she pushes the thought away as he smiles like little child in a candy store. Besides, Victor wouldn’t want her thinking like that. He tells her to appreciate the moment right in front of her, or else the rest doesn’t matter. “Alright, kiddo. Let’s go for it then.”
Melanie orders the eggs Benedict. Victor orders the French toast. On the side, they get a few long johns.
Fetus Frenzy Sweeps Across America

NEW YORK, NY-- It's here; it's there; it's everywhere. Fetus frenzy is sweeping the nation. Just a little over a year after the discovery that an aborted fetus' skin can be harvested and cured to make a fine long-lasting leather, fashion designers from Milan to Paris began designing new belts, shoes, and purses to sell to the American public. This latest fashion is worn by a wide range of stars and celebrities. Oprah recently handed out custom fetus purses to everyone who attended her show. Naturally, after the show aired, it was only a matter of time until every woman in America was lining up to buy their very own hand-crafted accessory made from genuine fetus leather. Celebrity Paris Hilton asked Daddy for some fetus boots and has been sporting them everywhere she goes. Even her dog (God rest its soul) is rocking four hand-crafted shoes made purely from this fine material.

"It really is just the best material I have ever used!" explains Franz Lauren, a fashion designer from Milan. "The newly developed skin makes it soft and perfect for any type of leather accessory. I am just ecstatic that people wised up and stopped using such a valuable fashion material for stem cell research. Especially because they were being so foolishly used when adult stem cells work better." Franz is just one of many fashion gurus who are in love with this new type of leather. Hansel Powell started his career designing handbags made from cow hide but quickly switched to fetus leather. "I can't believe the difference," he says. "All this time, the answer to the perfect leather was in our bellies."

Fashion accessories, however, were not the beginning of the now huge cash crop which is the aborted fetus. It began in laboratories where they were collected to extract stem cells which can help create the cures for many diseases. This market went down the drain as science proved that adult stem cells are more effective and safer. Still, many entrepreneurs were looking for ways to rebuild the mass market that came with the sales of aborted fetuses. This is when the idea to use the newly developed skin from a fetus as leather first arose. The freshly aborted fetus is kept on ice so it doesn’t spoil (nobody wants a spoiled fetus). It then goes into the skinning process, treating it with chemicals to prevent bacterial penetration, and then dried. All of these carefully preformed steps create the final product.

As the market began to grow, each fetus became more and more valuable. Now, the price for one fetus is at an all-time high. Many are using this to their advantage and becoming pregnant to acquire quick cash for their family. "This is my second pregnancy since the fetus became valuable in the fashion world," says Martha Deer, wife of a Nebraskan farmer. "It is best to wait as long as possible 'cause they increase in value as they are more developed. And thank the Lord if you have twins! That just may mean enough cash for a new TV." Martha intends to continue to get pregnant to keep the money coming. "The more I can get pregnant, the less I have to work!"

Due to the increasing demand in the product, many wonder why babies are continuing to be born. Streets outside the hospitals in New York and San Francisco have been fanatical
the past few days with picketers and news trucks. Three days ago many picketers outside of the NYU medical center were angry due to the birth of newborns. They believe that the unborn babies should have been aborted and sold for leather. Some signs being flashed read, “WE NEED US SOME FETUS,” “PURSE NOT BIRTH,” and “ABORT AND EXPORT.” These fashion lovers continue to picket and protest the women choosing to have their babies.

This craze looks like it will be slowed by nothing and will carry on until the next fashion trend is worn by Lady Gaga and instantly deemed popular. Fashion designers unanimously agree that this is the best material they’ve ever used for such products. So, make that little gift from God important by donating it to leather manufacturers around country and then spoil yourself by using that money to buy some hand-crafted, genuine fetus leather accessories.
In the world, a number of people have the habit that may earn them the name “hand writers.” Whether because they are forgetful or they hold words in a high regard or because they grow bored, you'll always find these people with scribbles on their hands. Nonsensical phrases and random little doodles are commonplace.

These people have no organization. There are usually a few in every population. When you meet one, you make a small connection. It may only be for that one second, but you know this person shares something with you. High-fives are the signature greeting.

This is a story of two such people. Both were revolving in the same world. Neither knew the other existed. But one day, their paths crossed...

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Tara sat in a corner in the back of the bookstore, a pile of “I-might-buy-you” lying in front of her. She was flipping through one, trying to find the basics, to determine whether the book was worth the read. She curled up against the bookcase behind her, her head bent over it. A few strands of hair fell forward as she read. She paused, annoyed, and blew them out of her eyes.

Tara carried a blue mini pen in her pocket at all times. It came in handy, especially in places like this. She would find a book that she didn’t want to buy, but might get next time, or an author she particularly liked and wanted to research, then wrote down the title or name on her hand. She put it to much less practical uses as well, of course. She could be reading something and admire a concept or watching someone that triggered a thought that she might want to continue and would write a few words to remind her of that thing to consider later.

She was even more of a writer than a reader. The thoughts she wrote down turned into ideas, which turned into stories.

Every day before she went to sleep, she’d take out a notebook and read her hand and then ink as much of the page as she could. The ideas were washed off every morning, with a fresh start to a new day.

She plucked her pen from her pocket and scribbled a note to herself as a thought sprung from what she was reading: “To every lock, there is a key.” Writing the entire sentence would take too much space, she figured, so she just drew a key.

---

John liked his job, usually. It had a good atmosphere, unlike most behind-the-counter jobs. He even was paid well enough. Ah, yes, hidden amongst the books and the book-dwellers was the perfect place for him to be, because he hated conflict. And how often do you find conflict in a bookstore? Not very often.

The counter in the middle of the building gave a good view into the nooks and crannies of the aisles, the places where people were prone to sit down when they couldn’t pull
themselves from the pages long enough to meander over to a chair. John's attention drifted to these spots when he wasn't busy answering the questions of book seekers or looking up a certain author for someone. The expressions on people's faces were amusing to follow as they read. Some moved their lips with the words; some changed their face to match the characters'.

Sometimes he wondered what they were reading about and tried to make up a story line to correlate with a reader's reactions. It provided an entertaining pastime.

_Let's see..._ His attention was drawn to a girl curled up in the corner, her hair falling into her eyes as she read. _She's not a lip-mover, but those emotions sure do show on her face. Must be a sad book. Maybe a mystery? An innocent wandering girl left the safety of her inner city house, not knowing the dangers she could fall into, and accidentally wound up in the hands of a murderer. Or maybe it's more of a fantasy book? She looks the type. The murderer wasn't a murderer, and she wasn't an innocent girl. The antagonist, being the leader of an infamous clan of soul-sucking half-breeds, takes in the enemy spy of the league of Unerring Good, disguised as an unassuming faerie. Ah, but her eyebrows lifted, an exciting turn of events? Perhaps there is a traitor amongst the soul-sucking ha_---

"Excuse me? I'm wondering when a book is coming out," a woman said from the other side of the counter.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. Sorry," John mumbled, recollecting himself. "What's the title?"

"You see, I'm not quite sure...," she said, looking slightly flustered.

"Okay, hmm," how to help the customer without offending her? "Do you know the author?"

"No. Well, I think it starts with a K. Or a C. And that's the first name, not the last," she determined. This didn't help him all that much.

"Is there anything else you can tell me about your book, miss?" he asked politely.

"Oh, uh, yeah, I know some of the characters!" she exclaimed, excited to be of some sort of assistance. He couldn't help but sigh; people expected him to be a card catalog.

"What are they, ma'am?" he asked, opening a search engine on the computer in front of him.

"Well, there's Tori, and, umm, a character that starts with an M...Mavis? Marvin? Marcus? Yeah, that's it, Marcus. He's a boy. But he's not the main character, is he? No, I don't think so," she paused in her explanation to think.

So far, he had "Tori" and "Marcus" typed, and his right pinky was hurting from all the backspacing. He went ahead and hit enter.

To his utmost delight, links actually did pop up. He clicked on the first one.

_Locked_, it read. Locked? Why was the website locked? He had to have a password to get it. Sighing in frustration, he looked at the flustered woman.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but our site seems to be down at the moment. You could try asking someone at the front desk, though." Inwardly, he smiled sadistically. Now _they_ have to put up with her.

As she left, he got out an old ink pen, hidden in the depths of the desk, and drew a lock on his hand, to remind him to complain to his boss about the overbearing security.

It's something he does a lot. With a job like this, you may need to remember something important, but you always have to focus on the next customer, the next task. You can't preoccupy yourself with one thing for too long. Sometimes, he would go home and catch a
glance at his hand before he passed out and think, "Eggs? Three thousand?" and remember that Easter was coming up (he needed to dye eggs) and his history essay had to be 3,000 words long.

Before another customer could stroll up, he handed over the desk to the guy who he was working with that day.

"I'll be back in a sec," he shouted.

It's not that he had something in particular to do; he just wanted to get out from behind that desk. He may have loved his job, but being trapped back there all day long made him feel claustrophobic. He decided to walk around and see if anybody needed help finding a book on the shelves.

While scanning one of the backmost aisles, he noticed the girl he had seen earlier, on to a different book now. Her dirty blond hair fell in lackadaisically around her face. She was easy to look at, even easier to read.

As he watched, she took out a pen.

*What is she doing?* He thought frantically, beginning to walk toward her.

"Ma'am, you can't----" he cut off as she brought her left hand to the little pen, turning her eyes up quickly to meet his.

"Oh," she began, knowing what it would have looked like. But she? Defile a book (that wasn't hers)? Never. "I wasn't----"

"Yeah, uhh, I'm sorry---- I thought----overreacted----" he babbled.

"It's okay, I understand, would've done the same---" she caught his awkwardness immediately.

"I see that you, umm, write on your hand, I----" he started.

"Yeah, it's a bad habit," she said ashamedly.

"No, no, I do it, too, see?" He brought out his hand and showed her.

"Oh, cool," she said, relieved, both that she wasn't a freak, and that their frantically rushed words started to resemble normal conversation. She moved for a high-five.

As he reached to return it, they both noticed what was on the others' hand. They paused, their hands barely a centimeter apart. Looking into each other's eyes, they knew this was a sign. What they only thought could happen in books, something that could only be described as kismet --- so impossible, that it didn't fit within the glass-boxed structure of reality --- was happening to them. How could they let it go, without at least a nod of acknowledgement?

So, their fingers intertwined as they closed that small distance, key meeting lock and opening up an entire new world of possibilities.
My shaky arms felt their way up the trunk, grabbing at the knobs and branches to hold on. Clammy palms scraped at the sides, and I remembered angrily how easy this used to be for me, how I could leap and hold and cling with a certain assurance that only a child has. Like trees were friends, instead of reminders of who I had become.

“Do you need a boost?” my dad’s voice rose from below.

“No.”

Why would I need help? Had I grown so thick and fat in the past years that I couldn’t master a little tree I used to climb almost every day? My body was something I didn’t want to recognize anymore, something society didn’t find pretty. Or maybe I hadn’t paid attention before, hadn’t noticed my scrawny legs grow thick and sturdy like this tree. My feet scratched at the tree, trying to find stable ground. I heaved myself into the flat surface where the branches came from all sides, creating a small pavilion. At least my thick arms and back worked for something.

“Good job, Marth.”

I grimaced. This was not something to be congratulated about. Absently, my hands traced the sides of the branches, sloping outward steadily, imploring me to keep climbing. My fingers felt a rough part, raised bark out on the branch. I glanced down at my fingers and the barked flesh beneath showed me the letters MAR, cut into the tree and grown larger with time. I remembered sliding onto that branch with my father’s pocketknife, marking this place as mine. What an innocence I had when I’d carved those letters, a hope of knowing a place on earth to be only mine. I knew, as I sat there, that some part of my existence was gone, extinguished, flushed from this spot. There had been a homeless man here last week, sitting just where I was now. I’d seen him from the road as I passed the park, and I thought about the tree I used to call mine. There were so many things I once claimed. But up in the tree, the territorial feelings flooded into me; images of my years spent in this tree were true and safe buried deep within me, and I wouldn’t give up this feeling of possession, the almost silly feeling came to me as I clung to this tree. It was mine.

“Can I come up?”

“No.”

“How’s it look up there?”

“Fine.”

I was too old for my dad’s petty conversations. At twelve I knew the world in a way he never would. I knew the scolding looks and irritation of teachers past their prime. I knew the anger and fear that ruled the place I went each day, the insecurities of each child brought out with tests and rules and punishments. In a way, I’d let that part of my life control me, shape me, make me into something new. I know, and knew sitting in that tree, how the mothers felt as they watch their daughters face and be conquered by the inevitable molds of the classroom.
I was already helpless before that. I was already someone the girl who sat in this tree before me wouldn't recognize. I pushed myself out onto the branch.

"Don't go too far out, OK?"
I used to go all the way out on the branch. But now I was too heavy to do that. Too fat.
"Yeah."
"Is your name still up there?"
"Yeah."

I needed to go out on that branch. I needed sit where I used to, fit back into that moment of contentment. I could still be that person. I didn't need to grow up so quickly. Scooting forward, my pulse quickened. I felt my heart, a steady message of don't go, don't go, don't go. I was going.

The branch shook, an almost indignant shake, as if to say "Who do you think you are?" I went farther out, my seat increasingly wobbly and the thumping in my ears reaching a new rhythm.
"Marth?" his voice rose again, more worried this time.
I didn't answer. This was too important. Shimmying and sliding and scratching my thighs, I came to the spot. This was the place I’d always sat, my place. When I weighed twenty pounds less, I’d jovially swung my legs here, reading and talking to my friend. This was it.

The branch gave another groan, and my legs trembled. My body slid sideways, I clung onto the branch, my ally, my resting place. I kept sliding.

I fell.
I remember thinking that this was strange. I’d never fallen before. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. Why had it let me fall? Bewilderment clouded my vision as I stared up, the taste of betrayal parting my lips.
I hit the ground.
My arm crumpled underneath the weight of my thick body, my leg shot out at an odd angle. I felt my father’s footsteps run to meet me.
"What happened? Are you hurt? Is... is anything broken?"
I blinked. This wasn’t supposed to happen. I looked into his face, embarrassment flooding my cheeks. I wouldn’t, I couldn’t get up.
"Martha. Talk to me."

My eyes, looking up in baffled panic at the tree, accidentally met his, and my mouth slipped into a frown. A sob, from the deepest part of me, rose and fought to be free.
"Shh...it's alright." He hugged me to him, and I clung to his arms. How stupid. How childish. How trusting.

We slowly rocked back and forth as I sobbed, the tree looking down on us all the while.
Vivisection

“We can still be friends.”

That was all she said. We can still be friends. Like wrapping a Band-Aid around a severed aorta.

Ethan picked up the narrow blade and set it on the slick, black table. Next to the curved fine point forceps, the angular teasing needle, the chrome mall probe, the chain and hook, the gleaming scissors, and the cartilage knife, the scalpel seemed practically mundane. For a few seconds, Ethan just stared at his lustrous tools, each one lying perfectly parallel to the next. Melanie would have hated that.

She had never understood Ethan’s fascination with order and parameter and precision. Melanie read Plath and let her black bangs fall into her face. Ethan preferred Descartes and had his hair cut every three weeks. She was a poet with a dark laugh and a slow smile; he was supposed to be preparing for his anatomy final.

Ethan walked to the sink and washed his hands with two pumps of soap. He grabbed a pair of latex gloves and shook them, watching the fine white powder disappear into the still air before stretching the gloves over his hands. In the middle of the table an aluminum tray held a fist-sized, purplish lump. Ethan chose the pair of blunt point scissors and leaned over the heart.

He snipped slowly through the pericardium, then pinched the slimy membrane and peeled it off the heart. Such thin skin, he thought. In his hand, the heart was heavy and dense and cold. Ethan could tell that it had been strong once, before it stopped beating. My heart, it don’t beat, it don’t beat the way it used to. The lyrics from that song, the Killers song Melanie used to sing under her breath. The Killers concert at the Garden last September was their first date. She had worn a short gray dress with a spidery lace hem and black eyeliner. He had worn khakis and she had laughed all night.

His anatomy final was not going to be funny, not with Professor Wilson watching his every move as he sliced into the liver, lungs, and heart of a formaldehyde-drenched pig. Ethan turned the heart over in his palm. With a little pressure, he could feel the four hollow chambers. His fingers found the right ventricle, the right atrium, the left atrium, the left ventricle. Ethan set the heart down in the tray and deftly lifted the scalpel. Cautiously, meticulously, he pushed the blade into the side of the pulmonary artery and pulled it towards him, along the right ventricle. When he reached the tip of the heart, Ethan stopped and put down the scalpel. He exhaled and looked around the lab.

Ethan wasn’t used to being in the lab alone. Usually, he was cleaning test tubes for professors like the rest of the freshmen. Boil water. Fully submerge test tubes. Let sit for five minutes. Remove with forceps. Let dry upside-down on rack by the cabinets, not by the
window. Melanie used to tell Ethan that he was a lab rat, that the work he did made him a rodent running through a maze looking for cheese or the professor’s approval. He thought the metaphor was inapplicable. Melanie insisted she was right.

*That was how it started,* Ethan thought. He spent all his time in the labs, helping out or taking classes in anatomy and biology and chemistry and the language of medicine. She came to visit him once. He was cleaning up by himself after class when Melanie came rushing in with her black hair flying everywhere and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him with scarlet lips. Against the white cabinets and white tile floor and the wall of white lab coats, she had looked strikingly beautiful. Ethan glanced at the door, then back at the cut heart in the aluminum tray.

Tentatively, he stuck his thumb into the slit and pulled the right half of the heart wide open. In the bottom of the right atrium was a pool of blackened, dried blood. Ethan pushed the tip of the mall probe into the superior vena cava, then the inferior vena cava. With the point of his index finger, he touched the tricuspid valve. He traced the little fibers stretching across the chambers, the chordae tendinae. He pinched the wall of the right ventricle. It was thick and compact. Ethan remembered what Professor Wilson said in his lecture: the heart is a muscle. *It’s just a mass of muscle,* Ethan thought, *nothing to do with love.*

Still, Ethan wondered about the little piglet whose heart he held in his hands. Pigs didn’t fall in love. This pig’s hopes for happiness had ended with a swift spinal fracture. *Too bad for the pig,* Ethan thought. *He looked down at the scalpel. Or maybe it’s better that way.*

Ethan took the scalpel and started the incision down the left side of the heart. Beginning at the left atrium, Ethan guided the blade towards the apex. With his left thumb, Ethan pried open the second half of the heart. He paused and set the scalpel down. On the black table.

Black. *Melanie.*

That was her name. From Greek *melas,* meaning black. The same Greek word that gave the world melancholy and melanoma. *Nothing good. I should have known.* Ethan grabbed the scalpel.

With two quick strokes, Ethan cut away the flaps of muscle, fully exposing the four chambers. He tore at the chordae tendinae. He carved out the tricuspid valve and the mitral valve with misshapen circles. He hacked at the superior vena cava, the inferior vena cava. He chopped off the base of the pulmonary artery. In his left hand, he seized the angular needle and shoved it down the coronary artery. He scraped violently at the folds of exterior fat and shredded the myocardium. He dropped the needle and scalpel into the aluminum tray and jammed his fingers into the handle of the scissors. He cut viciously across the left ventricle towards the aorta. He pulled his fingers out of the scissors and shoved them into the slit, tearing at the flaps of the aortic valve. He pinched the exposed aorta and stretched the wrinkled tissue until it ripped. Frantically, Ethan clutched at the cartilage knife and sliced straight down the septum, slashing the heart in half. *Damn.*

His eyes snapped to focus on his left thumb, still pressed into the apex of the mutilated heart. A pool of vermilion was forming inside his latex glove. Ethan stared as the blood dripped out of his glove and seeped into the mangled tissues, staining them a lifelike red. His blood, vivid and real, trickled next to the puddled blackened blood that had dried inside the
dead chambers. He let the cartilage knife fall with a clank onto the tray. Scattered across the table were forceps and needles, probes and scissors, tendons and valves.

Ethan shoved the remains into a little pile and carried the tray to the trash bin. He pushed the pieces into the bottomless black bag, shook the tray, set it next to the sink. Ethan returned to the table to collect the dissection kit. One by one, he rinsed the tools and set them in the dirty beaker in the sink. Forceps. Scissors. Scalpel. He peeled off his wet gloves and dropped them in the trash.

Ethan wrapped his right hand around his left thumb and pressed it. He ran the cold water and washed his hands with two pumps of soap. Before he left, Ethan hung his white lab coat on the peg by the door. On it there was not one drop of blood.
Nabokov Sirin;
A Soliloquy

Penning side notes in my lectures, while a mumbled comment falls on the deaf ears of absent seats once—or twice.
There's a cicada at the window, buzzing songs of summer. Just two crickets singing.
Under my feet lays my lapdog brief case, with its opened mouth and lolling tongue of child slang, and firearm notes.
The newest *New Yorker* in its jowls, dog-eared at an editor unmarred Chapter 5; *Pnin*
A Cinderella tinted ashtray piled high with sugary molasses chips, sits in guard on top of a half written letter to Roman Grynberg;

"No one walks around from morning to night remembering their past life—except authors."
And then those Authors turn the quiet reminiscent words in to works of art, all the while belting—*Speak Memory*.
Speak, Mnemosyne. Goddess of Memory, mother of Muses, tell the tale of Émigré Poet, and Author, Father and Teacher, in stil’ Poeta.

Speak Memory, Speak of *Conclusive Evidence,* of how I condone “Poshlost”, as a vulgar and dry depiction of the world, along with all the writings under Stalin, Lenin, Hitler and Goebbings, as well as the teaching of text as a rendering of the social views of the time.

Speak, of how I teach students to read—and read well! To imagine the boundless worlds of literature, drawn up in minute detail, not the social-ecological minds pushing views into it through reviews and criticism.

Speak, all literature meriting any worth, of the old through the new or fall subject to the degradations of philistines pulling “poshlost” views from books colored with “Poshlost” hues. Fill your dry and light and tear-able pages with the originality of Stil’ Poeta, Avtorylyubvi, chitatelifantazii.* 
Invoke the spirit of childlike imagination, and throw off all conventions learned.

Speak, literal artisans of the world, through the stamped black letters expressing the minutiae; teach your audience how to pay attention to details and transform cold words into warm worlds.

Speak, in opinionated rants, in delighted outbursts,
in condescending fits of giggles over illiterate literature
or in the hushed and delicate whispers that tickle the pink skin of Vera’s ears.

Speak Muse, speak of my own exploits on paper,
The very mimicry of God’s- Art, For Art’s sake.
Drawing out robust and heartfelt men through the dead lead scratch of a pencil scrawl.

Lolita—A rowdy nymphet with scab grazed knees,
and dreams of H.H. with the actor face,
lives on scribble faced note cards pleading for their life,
seconds away from the mouth and belly of an up roaring furnace.

Pnin- An unfortunate case of “what can go wrong, will go wrong,”
finds his agonizing (but humorous) misadventures at the mercy of my hand,
as I play character by his side, narrate and draw out the plans of his demise,
a life quick to end with ragged loose ends, then changed on a whim with the strike of a pen.

Krug- A self-made and famous philosopher,
his life revolved around his son and a puddle depiction of his wife,
sees his stage-writ world through the clear thinking of insanity;
his is a novel life with strenuous trials and errors only found in ink.

Speak Muse, of these three—unlikely to really be called hero to heroine—
have unfortunately been cast into separate worlds of type-written paper.
Keep in common the delicate (or in cases sadly brutal) portrait of a purest form of love,
between a Father—a mother, and a son—a daughter,
a love between a parent and child.
My little lizard-boy, clinging to rock precipices he loves.

But speak, tell the tale of silent horror, quietly aghast sitting rooms,
for am I not known for desecrating that love I was so for, so fond of?
Am I not known—not for my own ventures in this nature, though Giriodis would believe it—
but for those of Humbert the Humble – Humbert the Hound, and his precious little Lola,
Lolita, Lo the Bobby-soxer, Carmen—O my Carmen.
“She was Dolores on the dotted line.”

Speak Lolita, My nymphet.
Speak volumes regarding this precious time in our lives—
Childhood and how it ought not to be destroyed by any means.
Speak for me Lo, for “I am in favor of childhood.”

Speak out from under the Wrath of Grapes,
a list of books returning (In Lolita’s case) to the fiery pit,
that once tried to consume the horrid evidence, of a perverse warning.
Speak—shout your secrets to the crowds, though they may scorn you on the street, hungry eyes devour you in safety of their homes, make the people feel the reality of the world through their fingertips grazing a page, and silently, quietly, remind them, No! “Mark, that it is a highly moral affair.”

Speak, or be spoken for by the Kinbote’s or Freudian’s of the world, seeking out their mad truth and ego in the softest stream of words, too high off their own delirium to take any value in another’s life, treacherous or soft. Or worse a Wilson, of the Edmund kind may shake your pages, and declare that only licentious porn falls out, reminding one of the ashes from a branding fire in à l’Histoired’O!

Speak, my Lolita, speak for centuries to come and go, for even when my tongue fails me, and my last breath is drawn, your infamy will be remembered, your story will read on.

1 - Quoted from a letter to Roman Grynberg from Nabokov on 9/11/1950, found in the biography Vladimir Nabokov the Russian years. By Brian Boyd. Page 197
2 - Quoted from Lolita By Vladimir Nabokov
3 – Quoted from an interview with Nabokov in 1958, found in biography Vladimir Nabokov the Russian years. By Brian Boyd. Page 227
4 – Quoted from Nabokov to Edmund Wilson, 1956. found in biography Vladimir Nabokov the Russian years. By Brian Boyd. Page 227
Free Fall

Ben walked into Sanders Science Wing and climbed the stairs for the last time that day. He grabbed the handrail for support, only to find that it was warm and clammy from the wet grasps of hundreds of kids who had touched it just minutes before. His hand recoiled in disgust, and he continued up the stairs, hoping last period would pass faster than expected. He trudged into Mr. Madison’s Animal Behavior class hunched under the weight of his backpack. The room was dark, every person’s eyes glued to the screen where Mr. Madison had nonchalantly splashed a video of two beavers mating. A male voice droned on, calmly explaining the natural phenomena of reproduction. Mr. Madison had his shoulders bent towards his desk, probably asleep. Ben’s brow relaxed when he realized he could catch a few winks in the back row. As he made his way, he chuckled at the faces he could make out in the dark. Mary’s eyes were wide, her mouth hanging slightly open, shocked by the mere concept of what she was being forced to watch. Jack had his lips pressed tightly together so the laughter shaking his shoulders wouldn’t escape. Bernard was staring at the screen intently; little beads of sweat reflected off his forehead in the blue light of the film. Ben didn’t want to know what he was thinking. Of course, the only seat left was next to Bernard. Ben slid into the chair, pulled his hood over his head and sat back against warm metal. It was too hot to be wearing a sweatshirt, but it muffled Bernard’s mouth breathing. Now he could think about how he was going to tell Drew he wanted Elsa to come on the climbing trip too.

She was calm, relatively pretty, the outdoors type, and had climbed a few times before. The only word Ben felt could collectively describe her was “cool.” Nothing impressive or romantic, but Ben had never had a way with words, usually why he ended up with people like Elsa. They had only been dating for two months, but he liked her enough to bring her on one of their trips, a rare specialty for any girl that stumbled into Ben’s life. The only problem was that this was the trip, and he didn’t know if Drew would understand.

Drew and Ben had been planning the trip forever. In their last year at West Terrance High, no better way could commemorate their four-year friendship than doing something they both loved: rock climbing. They had spent a lot of time together out at Smith Rock, sometimes Crater Lake, other times Fort Clatsop. They liked the stiff, orange cliffs of Smith Rock, which often gave them cuts and gashes that could pass for the aftermath of a fistfight. Crater Lake had tougher climbs, but the rock was too rough to climb without gloves. Their first time at Crater, neither had come prepared. They were forced home only an hour later with bleeding hands rubbed raw by the basalt. Fort Clatsop was by far their favorite. Though dangerous and difficult, Ben and Drew liked it because the cliffs were a mixture of rock and red clay and a handhold, if grasped for too long, could easily break off and leave them spindling over open space, attached to the face of the rock by just one hand. It kept them speedily and deftly climbing; both boys liked the thrill when they made the rare visits out there.
They flew southbound down Interstate 101, the hot summer wind blowing onto their faces through the open windows. Hank Jr. was crackling from the old radio, and the boys, who had always thought of themselves as country men at heart, sang along in their broken voices. Elsa joined in every few words of the chorus, not wanting to seem too out of place, not wanting to reveal how little of the words she actually knew. Every few minutes she yanked both sides of her smooth, brown ponytail and tightened the rubber band. She was an Elton John fan. Ben was surprised that Drew had been so nice about Elsa. This was supposed to be their big event, the one thing they had been looking forward to for four years, and Drew had let Ben’s girlfriend walk in at the last minute like it was no big deal. Ben didn’t quite understand it, but he didn’t complain.

They pulled into the dusty lot, unloaded their gear and began the short trek through Fort Clatsop to their favorite climbing spot, Witch Peak, appropriately named after the sharp profile of the rock, similar to that of a witch’s nose. It was sandy and hot, just the way they liked it. Ben and Drew’s hands quickly assembled their gear, strapped their harnesses, and latched their hooks into the rock face. They had to wait for Elsa, but she managed to get all of her gear on relatively quickly. Ben smiled proudly. They jumped up the face, one after the other. Drew was in the lead, Elsa safely tethered behind him, Ben eagerly scrambling up the face behind both of them. They cruised through the first level; that part was always easy. The rocks were big and jagged on that level, handholds made of stiff, reliable rock protruding every six inches. The three of them continued up the face for another hour, slowed by the lack of handholds and Elsa’s novice skill. Ben had to catch her feet sometimes and point out footholds, but he didn’t mind. Drew was doing his best to pull her weight with him, then reluctantly slowed his pace and let Ben do most of the work. Halfway up the climb, they reached a small plateau big enough for the three of them to rest on if they squeezed together. Elsa had scratched up her knees, elbows and hands, so Ben carefully rinsed them off with iodine water from his bottle and used the last of the band-aids in his back pocket. He could see that she had tears in her eyes, so he coaxed her on with soft, encouraging words and a kiss on the cheek.

Drew looked out over the canyon and said nothing.

“Well… we better get going soon if we want to make it to the top before it gets dark. At least at the pace we’re going—” started Drew.

“I think she’s doing fine,” Ben said. “Lay off.”

Drew mumbled something inaudible, and Elsa looked down at her bandaged hands, cheeks flushed.

They continued at a glacial pace, finally reaching the most difficult part at sunset. The clay at the summit was sticky from the heat of the day, making it that much more dangerous.

“We’re gonna have to pick up the pace here guys. It’s pretty bad up here today. Just keep moving no matter what. Don’t let it break, or we’re all goin’ down,” Drew said.

Elsa began climbing faster, occasionally missing a foothold but catching herself with learned hands. Ben tagged along right behind her, a smile on his lips. Elsa was closing the gap between her and Drew, and he climbed faster to regain his lead. Drew had almost reached the top. He had about twenty feet to go, and Ben caught the smirking glance he shot at Elsa. Drew looked for one second too long. The clay hold his hand had been clamped on broke from the face and sent him sprawling through space, clawing for anything his hands could catch. The lead rope swung down as he fell past Elsa, then Ben. Elsa screamed as the repercussion of
Drew’s fall yanked her from the face and left her dangling next to him over four hundred feet of open space. Ben had wisely braced himself against the rock, but he could feel his last anchor dislodging from the rocky clay as it bore the extra weight. He began to tug at Drew’s rope with one hand.

“Just cut me off,” said Drew tossing him his knife, “Your anchor can handle you and Elsa. It won’t hold with me on it. Just let me fall at the right angle. I can catch those bushes on the plateau right there.” His voice shook a little.

“Are you crazy?!” Ben yelled, “We’re all gonna be fine. Just let me think for second.”

“Ben you don’t have a second!” snarled Drew. Ben shot a warning glare at him, but he knew Drew was right. The anchor slipped out another centimeter.

Elsa looked up, silent, her face pale, her lips trembling. Ben stared down at the two of them, Leatherman in hand, wishing he had never brought Elsa. There was nothing he could do about it now. He could cut Elsa, and maybe save Drew, but the anchor probably wouldn’t hold. He could cut himself, but then all three of them would go. He looked down at Drew, who was yelling at him again to cut it. Ben didn’t have time to think, the anchor was already halfway out. He didn’t really have a choice. He swung Drew on the end of the rope until he was set to drop the five feet onto the miniature plateau. With one swift motion he sliced Drew’s rope, and watched his best friend fall a second too late, his hands grabbing at the open air, just grazing the tips of the bushes. Drew’s mouth was clamped shut, eyes wide while he fell into the darkness. Ben wished he would’ve screamed.

His feet hit the ground a second before Elsa’s. Drew hadn’t fallen far from the place they started. His head was turned, resting on his left cheek, neck in place, torso pushed flat from impact. Ben could see the outline of two back pockets below that, as if Drew were wearing his pants backwards. Then he saw that Drew’s toes were the wrong way as well, shoved roughly into the sand. His arms lay at his sides, still clutching the rope. Mossy eyes stared at the sky, a small stream of blood trickled from his lower lip. He sprinted through the darkness to the car, the harness slapping at his tired legs. Elsa was a few steps behind. She blindly fumbled for the keys, which Drew had left on top of the front right tire. Ben was already through the window but his thin waist caught against the frame. His fingers groped the worn leather until he found the phone, and he wrenched himself from the car. He flipped it open with shaking fingers and began to dial the numbers he had been taught to dial since he was six years old. He thought of what the police would ask. He could say the rope broke. No, the cut was too clean for that. What other excuses were there? He had none.

“Call them! Do it!” Elsa pleaded through her frantic tears.

Ben’s fingers didn’t move. They couldn’t. This was his fault.
The Creek

We fell down the hill beautifully. I remember it felt like an ocean, green wave after green wave pushing us forward, under the lush tide. Rolling down, I opened my eyes and lost track of where I was, an endless cycle of green and blue. The three of us lost our momentum and began to settle in a clearing next to the hill. At the end of the voyage we lay breathless, panting and giggling. We rested at the bottom of the hill as I wondered the ways of this world.

I looked over to Luke and saw a furry moustache had just appeared above his lips. Its black hue clashed with his sun-shocked locks. He shook with a squeal of laughter as it moved and twisted above his mouth. David lay seemingly dead next to me, fixated on Luke’s wiggling stache. He tried in vain to replicate his own.

“How’d you get it to stay there?” David was entranced.

“Pinched it between my nose and lip, stupid. It tickles!” Luke’s feet kicked with delight.

The caterpillar crawled up his cheek and ended its journey on Luke’s forehead. We lay there for a century or two, breathing in the summer. I drank in the dandelion’s brew, leaving a sticky scent stuck to my tongue. The plants grew around us, inviting us to a cool slumber. But our adventure was not over; we had to get to Nymhil creek.

After more wandering, our eyes met each other, and we decided silently to leave our brush beds. Luke leading as usual, we started our trek deeper into the trees. I couldn’t wait to finally see Her again.

* * * * *

We were under a wooly, scratchy quilt. I could barely see as we tore through the brush downwards. I was ripped rudely from my nostalgia and thrust into a jungle. This blanket of blackness was smothering me; it wrapped around my body. My sweat boiled in the August night. I could hear the dirt beneath me calling out in pain. No. That was my feet. Or was that just in my head? I couldn’t figure it out, and I snapped back to reality. I was chasing a shadow. It darted in and out of the trees without hesitation, a dark stag bounding. I called out to the shade ahead to stop; I needed to catch my breath. The blanket lifted.

The moon lit the lampshade of clouds overhead. It seemed to pulse on and off, a slight flicker to call the night closer. It was a late-night motel sign advertising for the courtiers and clockers. Come get your fix here, whatever you need. The bugs weren’t fooled, though; they had learned their lessons from the same traps on the porches of summer. They were content with the feast they had found in the three boys below. Taking in my surroundings, I found we were in the same meadow we had been in so many years before. It couldn’t really have been that long ago, that day we rolled down the hill as kids. This clearing meant a good thing though. This clearing meant that we were on the right track.
David, now a giant, was wheezing in front of me and leaning against a tree. The shadow ahead of us turned around and approached us. It let out a laugh when he saw David coughing. “Jesus Christ David! You sound like a dying horse. We used to run to the creek all the time, getting too damn old?” Luke said, snickering cruelly, I winced at the foul exclamation. “You know I’m not supposed to run anymore... ’Cause of my asthma... And watch your language.” David snorted back, inhaling from the device in his hand. “Shit, you sound like virgin ears here. Always getting his panties in a knot over what I say. You guys just need to chill, why do you think we’re out here?” “The usual reason, but wasn’t that about a decade ago?” “Hey I don’t know about you, but I still feel 7 years old out here.” Luke said winking, “You’ll see when we get closer. Let’s walk from now on so Bigfoot here doesn’t hyperventilate.”

David and I looked at each other and sighed. It was always the same, Luke leads and we proceed. We had been used to this over the course of our life; Luke was always pulling us into bad situations. Whether it was playing rock ball near Mr. Lanchester’s residence or using his ID from Hawaii for our parties, Luke knew exactly what he was doing. We knew better than to listen to him by now, constant groundings and a night in the county pen had taught us that. All I knew was that this time he wasn’t dragging me along for the ride. After all this had been my idea.

As we trudged through the darkness, I began to remember the last time we had been here again.

* * * * *

I was a kid again on that fateful day. We had just left the hill and we’re going deeper into the woods. Luke was trailing a jagged stick behind him in the dirt. It wasn’t needed though; we always knew how to get back home. A squirrel was leaping from branch to branch above us, raining fresh acorns down on us. We bathed in nature.

In front of me, David was getting anxious. He gazed straight ahead, ready to spot her. “Uh hey guys, shouldn’t we have gotten there by now?” he asked fearfully.

Luke paused and contemplated for a moment, tapping his stick in the dust. “Yeah, you’re right. Last time it was right past the hill wasn’t it? But the time before that wasn’t by the fallen tree? Doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe She moves it, so the others don’t ever find it.” I realized suddenly. Both David and Luke looked puzzled for a moment. Their clear eyes turned towards me. “I mean, wouldn’t that be normal for Her? Nobody else believes us or has been there. Maybe that’s why.” I fumbled over my words.

“Mmhmm,” Luke nodded “sounds good enough for me. Now let’s hurry up slowpokes, She won’t wait forever.”

David and I chuckled; I didn’t realize how true that was until now.

I began to think about Her. I was there at Nymhil creek, kicking my pruned feet in the glass water sitting next to the other two. She was in the water, like She always was, laughing at our ways. Her hair wound around Her body like kelp and seemed to wiggle in the creek. Her laugh was the sound of water crashing along the rocks. But every time I looked up to see Her smile, I just saw a glow, no face. I panicked - had it always been that way? Or was I forgetting? I
didn’t want to ask David or Luke about it, they would just laugh. But something told me that David thought that too.

She had always been mysterious, there was no doubt to that, but we never wanted to ruin the moment. To ask Her what we had been longing to. So we didn’t and we kept going back and going back. Hoping to get the answer from Her someday. The answer to what She was.

A soft melody lifted me out of my thought, and I looked up to see Luke running. He called for us to hurry and me and David took off. We thundered through the trees and tore down the path. The sun began to shine again above us and the sounds of the forest were rising to a crescendo. The clicks of the cicadas grew to a chattering roar. A wind blew us toward Her as the forest swallowed us. She was still waiting.

* * * * *

“Shit.”

I rubbed my eyes and slapped myself out of the trance. I needed to focus. We were lost. Luke had failed us, again. He looked around embarrassedly and we all stopped to take a breath. I was reminded of the weekend before when he managed to get us caught drinking in his dad’s basement.

“Oh, it’ll be fine guys, my dad won’t even notice he’ll be too drunk himself,” he had assured. That night I woke up in my room with a headache and a note taped to my stained shirt. No car for a month it had read in my mother’s best handwriting, with some tear drops at the bottom for a signature. “What had we become?” I asked myself. Luke was our serpent in the garden, giving us our delicious apple one day and getting us expelled the next. As I squinted in the moonlight, I pondered something. We were tainting the place of our childhood, polluting it with ourselves. Maybe She would understand, maybe She could fix it. That’s what I had been thinking when I got the idea to return here. Maybe She could bring out that boy inside us. The one who enjoyed lying in the thick weeds of summer rather than smoking a bag of weed. The one who enjoyed splashing his feet in the creek, not splashing his Coke with vodka. That boy got me to tell Luke during lunch that we needed to go back. That boy kept me awake at night.

David felt better now; his asthma had retired for the moment.

A noise began to overshadow the cricket’s slow song. A dull buzz filled my ears, like that of a highway. It wasn’t the usual graceful tunes we heard when She was near. The mosquitoes had backed off, apparently afraid of what we were to find. Luke and David went on not noticing the change in the forest’s mood. It seemed frightened. A whisper blew through the branches, but the buzzing was too loud for me to understand it. It was a warning, a caution for us.

Luke, ahead of me, began to run. It was the usual ritual whenever we approached Her. I wanted to stop him, to call him back before it was too late. The whispers were making sense now, they were almost screaming. Something was wrong, very, very wrong. It reminded me of an earlier time.

* * * * *

I was back with Luke and David as kids. We burst out of the brush and fell into the cradling creek bed, sinking to the bottom of that wondrous pool. We swam along the floor, determined to catch Her off guard. She was drying Her mossy hair on the rocks when we snuck
up on Her. Just as Luke was about to splash Her, She turned around and jumped in. The water turned a shimmering white and She emerged barely clothed in a white dress, sending a jolt of electric sex through the creek. We were too young to understand Her body, but we knew well enough that She was more than beautiful. Her snowy skin dripped water as She stepped onto the shore and turned to face us. She sat on the rocks and wrung Her dress and hair out.

“So how are my boys today?”
“Good!”
“Great!”
“Wonderful!”

She smiled, knowing we loved that same reply. A breeze blew over the creek, warming our shivering bodies.

“Do you guys have anything you would like to do today? Or is it just to relax?”

We nodded to the latter; we didn’t want to wear Her out, especially with what we were going to say. On past visits we had numerous adventures, but today was going to be different. We didn’t know whether she’d mind but we did know one thing. She loved us with a power we couldn’t comprehend, that was no question.

Luke broke the silence.

“So we came here to ask you something today. We were wondering if you could answer it.”

She nodded softly.

“Will you always be here for us?” he asked quietly.

A solemn time passed, the whole world was waiting for the reply.

“Yes. And no. It all depends on how you live.”


“I can’t say. You’ll have to decide for yourself. I have given you what I can, and I hope you appreciate the time we have together.” I noticed Her face had gotten wet, even though we had left the water.

“I’m sick of your stupid puzzle answers!” Luke shot out. A twinge of pain passed over Her calm face. She hid it as soon as it appeared, but not well enough to go unnoticed.

“Lucas Vandelay. You know better than to say that to me. I only want to help you all.” Her hair rose about her, elevating with Her voice.

“You’re not anybody! We don’t even know what you are!”

Tears began to well, blurring his green eyes.

David stood riveted, his face locked in a blank stare. I looked towards Her and to this day I still don’t know if I really saw what happened. She blurred. The image of Her blinked suddenly. My fear was being lived through. Her face was just a glow now. Those perfect eyes were a pool of sadness, swirled with disappointment.


“Go to hell. Just go.” He spat.

She turned herself away, and I heard a slight cry. She dove into Nymhil creek, leaving not even a ripple, not even a word. The only sign of Her passing was the water turned into a vortex of mud. The tornado began to turn a dark black, pulling in the tiny fish and plants nearby. It slowed to a turning halt, leaving a thick blob that floated to the top.
The blackness spread thin on the surface. We climbed out quickly, scrambling to the shore. She was nowhere to be seen as the dark waves climbed the shore. It stopped at our toes, too afraid to inch back.


That black oil filled me, oozed through my veins, pumping my hatred for Luke and his ignorance. I felt it on my tongue and filling the back of my throat, clogging it like a drain. It filled me as I tried to yell at him, to spit it and my frustration into his stupid damn face. I couldn’t. I just stood there as that oil filled me. Luke turned his eyes toward me, now stained like the forest around us. He could sense my resentment and challenged me, staring into my face.

“You wanted me to do that. Both of you did. Don’t deny it to yourself, ever. You’ve been waiting for this, and I did it for both of you, I broke the spell She had us under. The wonder, the excitement, the adventure, it was all fake. You’ll thank me someday for it. I know you will.”

His mouth was all that moved as his eyes bored into me. They became two truthful lanterns that lit the oil deep in the well of my soul. Burning with fury, I stood there, fists clenching. She wouldn’t want this, this violence. The best thing I could do was leave. I turned away from Luke, his lips pursed in a demonic sneer. He and David took one last glimpse at what was left. We walked away and never turned back. I haven’t seen Her since.

I wiped a tear from my eye as I remembered that day. It streaked down my cheek and tickled my chin, stopping on a single hair. It was pure and clear and reminded me of Her creek. As it fell, I pictured it leaving a black stain on the ground. Surely Nymhil creek must be better by now. That little boy inside me from that day needed to be free. He needed to forgive the little boy inside of the teenager beside me, Luke. He needed to be at peace. That’s why we were here.

The roar of that strange highway ahead of us was deafening now. A light shone through the forest’s cracks, brighter than the soft moonlight. Luke was bounding, long strides, racing to get there first. Luke fell, and I ran up to see if he was ok. I grew nauseous as I approached him, a wave of sickness passed over me. My knees buckled, and I landed next to Luke, gasping for fresh oxygen. My hands landed in the sand and a rhythm was pounding through them. Lub. Thud. Lub. Thud. I looked up mortified.

A deathly beating thing was rippling in the black sludge of Nymhil creek. It was the pulsating heart of the forest, beating a disease throughout what had been water. Oh God the buzzing! Millions of flies and filthy mosquitoes swam through the air, thick clouds of pain. I yelled for David to turn around, not go nearer. It was too late; his body broke down on the shore. I looked around for some sort of life, some sign of Her. I called out for Her, but the pulsing drowned it out. And then, I saw the grotesque crown to the ghastly scene.

A white dress hung quietly from an overhanging branch. It was torn on the right side, giving it a look of a white flag. It blew loosely in a wind we couldn’t feel. The dress rose higher and higher above the water. An invisible line pulled it towards the canopy. I knelt there puzzled, next to Luke sobbing, screaming out for Her to come back. David was weeping and beating his huge hands on the tainted sand. I just knelt there with a curious smile, staring up at that glorious flag as it surrendered what was left of our youths to that awful corruption. We raised that flag to the heavens.
Laura Van Genderen
Personal Essay/ Memoir
Parkway South High School
Grade 12

One New Message

“So, do you just not talk?” he asked me, smirking, as I wiped down the McFlurry machine. I rolled my eyes, knowing already what he was after, and amused that he even thought he had a chance. Really, I couldn’t believe I was being hit on in my oh-so-sexy McDonald’s gray and black oversized polo, shapeless black pants, old tennis shoes covered in grime and grease, and a drab visor that smushed my hair. I was just a vision of radiant McBeauty.

“Well, good sir, you did just share with me your long list o’ misdemeanors. I mean, you went off-roading. Onto the school baseball fields. So basically, I don’t know what else to say to you besides, ‘Oh...wow.’ Because there’s no way I can even try to compete with that.”

He grinned. “What, you never been in trouble before? Because you totally come off as the heroin-dealing type.” Somehow, even though he was wearing the exact same uniform, he managed to look good in it. His messy brown hair made him appear almost rugged, and the sleeve of the shirt did much to show off his well-defined arms as he poured ice cream mix into the machine. And even under the yellow light of the menu board, his flecked hazel eyes drew me in. Frick on a stick, I thought – he had managed to be attractive with a Big Mac reflected across his face. But I knew who he was and the kids he affiliated with. Stoners and losers.

“Oh, yeah, you know us debaters so well, don’t you? One tub for evidence, one tub for the goods.”

He laughed and high-fived me. As he stomped back to the grill after our manager screamed at him to get back to work, I looked after him quizzically. Being rightfully skeptical about guys my age, I told myself he probably did this to anyone with two X chromosomes. After all, I knew how guys like him were. Womanizing stoners, wanting nothing more than to party and get laid. Uncaring, unmotivated, selfish, irreverent, immature, and not going to amount to much in life. I cynically reminded myself that I’d been burned before, and I wasn’t about to let it happen again. He was cute and easy to like. But he wasn’t going to get me.

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June 28th, 9:29 PM
1 New Message from Logan:
“I know you’re hesitant, and I know you’ve been hurt before. But be like a turtle. Stick your head out. And if you sense danger, just pull away, no hard feelings.”

***

My weary summer dragged on, forty hours a week of serving, cashing, hauling, standing, cleaning, apologizing, running, greeting, smiling, tongue-biting, scrubbing, cooking, and various other forms of monotonous work, made bearable only by my unsinkable team of coworkers. He, against my will, quickly became the one I looked forward the most to seeing. Through the high-fives and joking that helped us retain our sanity, he charmed his way
past my initial complete cynicism. For the first few weeks, I remained distant and denied his romantic advances at every opportunity. My teachers, my friends, my classmates – I knew what they would think if I were associated with him. In a nutshell, “WHY?!” And my parents-well, they would probably shoot me on the spot.

Yet the playful joking became meaningful conversation, which soon turned intensely personal as we would find ourselves staying up talking past midnight, 2:00, 3:30 am. I had to accept that I had reached a whole new level of lame as I admitted that I was popping Mountain Dew in the middle of the night just so we could philosophize like the two bored Midwestern teenagers that we were. Though I knew it could have easily been him putting on a front for me, the chance for something resembling a meaningful connection thrilled me. We talked about life after death, whether we believed in God, what our futures would be like, where we found meaning in it all. We stumbled into territories that prompted an inexplicable vulnerability as we spoke of battles with depression and loneliness. Gone were his emoticons, his flirtatious quips, his silly banter – our connection was frighteningly real. I faced the reality that Logan was more than just the stoner, loser, rebel; Logan was a complete person, thoughts, ambitions, insecurities, and a history. But more than that, Logan had depth.

With a vocabulary larger than a National Merit scholar and a thought process peppered with references historical, scientific, and popular, he was ridiculously bright. It was alarming. How could someone so rawly intelligent, someone who could genuinely think on his own, end up so apathetic and unmotivated, and with a group of friends who couldn’t even begin to keep up with him intellectually? Why had he fallen into a lull of complete shallowness? What could have possibly shoved this kid off a path to inevitable success?

Logan wasn’t even a shadow of the proud and fearless stoner I had perceived. It seemed to him that he had failed and was just a hopeless loser who would never amount to anything. All the things he’d wanted to become, and dreams he’d had as a kid, derailed, because he was “a nobody.”

I was utterly floored – not only by his sense of hopelessness despite evident brilliance, but from the wave of shame over my own initial judgment. The disclosure of his more vulnerable side had caught me completely off guard, forcing me to come to terms with how much I really did care about him.

***

July 12th, 2:21 am

1 New Message from Logan:
"Don't be sad...no sense crying over spilled milk. And that's all I am, 80 cents of vitamin fortified spilled liquid."

***

I had to prove him wrong.

Summer ended. Logan and I began to drift as I went back to school and he started community college. But the lenses through which I viewed my enormously diverse public high school changed. I looked at my classmates, from the ones who stood sketchily in the woods by the school in the mornings to the ones who came in at 7am to get physics help, and wondered.

I wondered about their lives, and their thoughts, and their fears, and their insecurities. About their experiences, regrets, dreams, struggles. About who they were beyond who they were perceived to be. Logan was everywhere, and my once-shallow world
had caved in on me. He had changed my view, and I had to change his. He needed to know what I had seen in him and what he had done to my life. But being eternally awkward, I didn’t know how.

My answer came like skywriting one Tuesday morning in my AP Lit class. The teacher handed out a list of sample Ivy League essay prompts.

“Tell us about a person who influenced you.”

That was exactly what I had to do.

Eventually, I’ll send this paper to him. He needs to know that he is somebody, and that the influence he had on my life was undeniable. Though we never worked out as a couple and though we eventually went our separate ways, I still see him around, just beneath the hardened exterior of almost every person I know.

***

September 1st, 1:38AM
1 New Message from Logan:
"As you look back on your life, I'll be a man with no lines, smiling softly in the background, forever happy to have played a part."
The Fish and Bear Paw

“Minmin.”

I look up as I hear the sound of my family nickname. Is that the oh-so-familiar contemplative tone I detect? Alas, it is time once again for my parents to bestow upon me the gift of a piece of ancient Chinese wisdom. At this moment, the proverb of choice is “Fish and bear paw cannot both be gained,” a loose English translation. Growing up in a household in which parenting techniques are governed by aphorisms of another era, I have often been introduced to this particular axiom, the two of us far closer than mere acquaintances.

While I hold no resentment towards the proverb, I struggle constantly to grapple with the issue of my cultural identity. Moreover, I am concerned with the role my cultural identity is to play in my overarching definition of self. Who is Jiemin (Tina) Wei? How much of “me” is defined by Jiemin and how much by Tina? Or, as my great-aunt, an ex-journalist who finds conversation starters in her pool of interrogation questions, asks, “Do you see yourself as Chinese or American?”

Unfortunately, quandaries are not so easily answered. My cultural identity is shaped as much by my conscious decisions as it is by experiences and circumstance. In a perfect world, I would choose to retain both influences, my identity becoming a synthesis of the two cultures. However, living in a world in which no genie resides in my lamp, I turn to my Plan B, to retain my Chinese heritage, which is precious to me, attempting not to yield to the formidable onslaught of the pressure to assimilate. The solution? Find balance between two worlds—resolve cultural polarity.

Since our backgrounds play an inextricable role in shaping who we are, I must not examine my identity without considering my “context.” Born in Kunming, China, to parents whose childhoods coincided with the infamous ten-year Cultural Revolution, I was fortunate to be provided with the best my parents could afford. Three years later, my family moved to Thailand. As a disoriented toddler, I was immediately enrolled in school because kindergarten began at the age of three. With a native-like Thai acquired, I moved to the U.S. at seven-and-a-half, promptly forgetting all the Thai I had learned. Five years’ worth of memories of being discriminated against has a funny way of erasing linguistic ability. Three countries and seven schools later, I find myself in Kansas suburbia. Climbing the globalized ladder of advancement, the international-version of the American Dream, came at the cost of my childhood sense of stability.

It’s not really that I mind being constantly uprooted. The story of one’s life is merely the compilation of obstacles and the ways in which they were overcome. I appreciate the proverbial hand that I’ve been dealt and would not have it any other way. Throughout the process, I have matured—really all I can ask for.

Although not at the heart of my identity crisis, throughout my life I have intermittently been ashamed of my heritage, a fact that I am reluctant to even admit to myself. Recollections
of my stay in Thailand flash through my mind like movie stills. I see myself picking up crayons that have dropped onto the floor of my first grade classroom and hearing a boy yell, “You should just go back to your country; just go back to China!” I turn around and cannot identify the speaker of those hateful words. Yet, their sting remains.

Flash forward to a self titled Upper-Middle Class Kansas high school in which classroom “discussion” is merely a practice in a mob-like expression of hatred of a targeted enemy: China. Had the teacher posed the question, “in what ways might we revel in our superiority complex?” the response elicited would be no different. Listening to the students who know nothing of which they speak, I silently wonder, “What have the citizens of China done to these teenagers to deserve their relentless contempt?”

I recall once being addressed as “China” by a fellow student. Whether that was a premeditated attack or just a slip of the unconscious, it revealed much to me. If the latter was the case, then the remark truly bared the view a white-majority high school has of its minority students, a view that these students represent nothing more than their ethnicities and countries of origin, that a person’s layered identity rests solely upon the superficial strata of skin color.

One day, following a PowerPoint-presentation I gave my class on Chinese culture, a boy who knows only a life of privilege (and who, I have no doubt, will continue to perpetuate that cycle of privilege) was called on to ask a question. “Um, I know this is completely random, but...how are you still alive?” “What do you mean?” “I mean, since Chinese people, when they have girls, either hang them on trees or drown them in rivers, how are you still alive?”

I was dumbfounded, but my Social Studies teacher, rushing to my defense, said matter-of-factly, “Well David, that’s because she came to America!”

From then on, I joined my Chinese American peers in loathing Social Studies class. An answer to my own question, I realized that these prejudiced views are cultivated within prejudiced household, whether they exist in the impoverished Thai countryside or in the self-entitled American Mid-West. In the cultivation process, parents transform children into machines that view life through a color-sensitive lens, programming the automated process in which their children stamp the heads of their peers with the words “WARNING: FOREIGNER.”

While identity is commonly viewed as an internal conflict, I view my conflict as both internal and external. My context and experiences of interactions with others fulfill the external component of this two-fold dilemma, serving as the background of the problem. In the foreground is the internal struggle of the languages. Immigrating to the U.S. relatively later than other Asian American families I’ve encountered, I was able to witness the phenomenon that would eventually happen to me. I had always told myself that I would not become a “banana,” as is the name given to a subset of Asian Americans, the ones who are yellow (Asian) on the outside and white (American) on the inside. It pained me to watch them throw away the second most precious gift their parents had given to them, their Chinese heritage—the first being life itself. They lost the ability to speak Chinese and with it the cultural context of being Chinese.

My epiphany came one day when I found myself having a Chinglish conversation with my dad. It was the Chinglish occurrence of the most abundant variety: the child speaking
English and the parent speaking Chinese. When had I been transformed into the quintessential Asian American, the very image that I had not-so-long ago held simultaneously in pity and contempt? Instead of doing the logical thing of retracing my steps and rediscovering my cultural identity, I decided to take a round-about approach. After all, where is the enjoyment in life without a couple of detours? Furthermore, the truth was, with my mother living in Michigan and my dad and I in Kansas, the Sunday learning with Mom sessions have been frequently put on hold to make room for the other hectic components of my life. The drive I once had to learn Chinese was absent in a learning environment in which I had no students to compete with. Perhaps what I needed to do was reignite that passion. While this was not the main goal I had in mind when I had first envisioned the Linguist-in-Residence Chinese Workshop to be taught at Johnson County Public Library, I hoped that perhaps teaching others Chinese would remind me of the enthusiasm with which I had once approached my heritage. Furthermore, I knew that misunderstanding was decreased by understanding, and I planned to promote understanding by means of teaching the workshop. I was also told that the single most effective way to decrease prejudice against a culture was to be taught about that culture.

Throughout the six sessions of the workshop, I studied the children. I was horrified to find that the kids were younger versions of me, easily bribed by candy and arts and crafts and confronted with the difficult task of learning a language that was not of the environment they were currently in. I realized if I wished to retain my Chinese, I would have to work at it and reorder my priorities. Another insight gained from this experience was I was able to better empathize with my mom. I was able to experience the frustration of teaching students who did not wish to learn. While our personal obligation to teach stemmed from different sources, I understood and mirrored the grudging reluctance and determination with which she approached teaching me Chinese.

While my cultural identity crisis has not been resolved, I have gained the valuable insights of understanding and perspective. With this newfound knowledge, I will be able to once again continue on this journey of self-decoding. I have come to terms with my identity and have worked to help those around me come to terms with it as well. With an appreciation for what I have and what is to be gained, I have found one piece of the puzzle that is the soul search. Last, I reflect back to the proverb that is a favorite of my parents, “Fish and bear paw cannot both be gained.” Asserting that one cannot obtain the best of both worlds, this food analogy draws on ancient Chinese cuisine, in which the fish and the bear paw were both regarded as two of the best foods available, both equally nutritious and valued. For whatever reason, the proverb insists that people must choose between these two most prized foods and that in life, one must similarly choose between two excellent options. If I had to choose between Chinese culture and American culture, I would choose the former. However, I will forever remain hopeful and beg to differ with the ancient Chinese philosophers. Perhaps with hard work, determination, and a meaningful solution, I have begun to find a place for both cultures in my life.
A Good Man

In the end, it all starts because of John Brown. John Brown (poor man, good man), a quite ordinary office clerk who had done nothing extraordinary in forty years except have fifteen bullets pass through his body, courtesy of a myopic assassin.

“John Brown,” the Federation President declares at the funeral, and through either sleek, private hearing tubes or the rusted, electronic clarions upright on every street, ten thousand million ears listen, “was a good man.” Large, perfectly rounded tears gather at the edges of the President’s eyes, glossy drops captured and magnified a thousand times by a thousand pre-planted news cameras. They fall, in slow, slow motion across a hundred thousand panels in a hundred thousand dusty streets.

And all around the country, the men murmur as they shuffle, some barefoot, outside the great television panels. The snow falls softly all around, and solemn children stare, whispering, committing the words to memory: “A good man, a good man.”

“He was,” the President continues, pressing a small button underneath his coat to replenish the tears, “courageous. Selfless. Loyal.” Beside the President, John Brown’s body lay, in a coffin of glass flanked by tall, serious guards. A wreath lay on his chest, where the bullet holes have been covered by black spider silk, and his thick, brown eyebrows pulled down in a face that is a doppelganger to the President’s.

“We shall never forget him.” And all around the nation, the panels broadcast the sorrow in the President’s eyes, the tears that shine, like glass, in the artificial sunlight.

That day, the President declares a national day of mourning. And the country mourns.

The next day, he declares war.

When the inevitable protesters start, the President is calm. As the mobs crowd the streets, millions of gaunt men and women, he is calm, sipping chamomile tea in a china cup and watching the riots from the sleek panel in private, gold-gilded chambers. He watches for a few moments and then, pulling down the long speaking tube handing from the ceiling, gives the orders to shoot.

After all, he explains afterwards, it is all necessary. Difficult situations call for difficult solutions – and this is an exceptionally difficult situation. Loraaria is dangerous – after all, look at what the Loraarians have done! Look at John Brown. Money is needed. Men are needed, if only to tend the machines. Think of John Brown, he pleads. Such a good man.

It is a good speech. Decades later, film students will study the President’s careful blend of dignified disappointment and exuberant earnestness, write papers analyzing the subtle use of light and shadow.

Throughout the streets, the rioters divert their eyes, suddenly ashamed. Feet, many covered in only blood-tattered stockings, shuffle in the soft snowdrifts. A few mechanical Gendarmes roam the streets, short, clumsy cylinders of bronze with now docile red eyes glowing through smoke billowing from still smoking guns.
That week, two hundred thousand men are drafted.

And when the armies have overrun the rogue providence and forced, at gunpoint, the Loraarian king’s surrender, a hundred thousand celebrations erupt as the poor stream into the streets – the war is over! The war is over! Streamers fly. Champagne corks soar. Firecrackers crackle throughout the night.

It gets so bad that the President almost resorts to the Gendarmes again.

The battle, he reminds them, is only begun. Loraarian is only one province, and there are still fifteen of them, rogue states, dangerous in their independence.

The next day, the armies push on.

“Honesty. Fairness. Democracy. I stand for these things,” the opposition leader tells the cameras. “I will fight for you.” His technique is masterful – almost as good as the President’s – and all around the Federation, in their marble manses, the rich gaze at the face in the panels with shining eyes.

A few feet away, the President sits, quietly listening to the opposition leader’s bluster. He does not respond to what he says, only sits calm, so still that he seems frozen in place: a mannequin masquerading as a man, a corpse.

Just look! The opposition leader pleads. Look. For a few moments, the panels are covered with an amalgamation of numbers and lines, esoteric codes that cause those on the street – dirty men and women, too poor to vote but braving the late summer haze out of curiosity – to squint in confusion. But soon the leader’s voice rematerializes, leading them through the morass of numbers, and the statistics have meaning, are millions of dead, billions of dollars.

“These,” the opposition leader says, the panels suddenly full of his face, “are the costs of war.” He shakes his head, sighs. “Such waste,” he says.

He waves his hand, and the cameras pan to the President, who smiles, brown eyes cool and emotionless. Slowly, languidly, he stands up, stares placidly at the cameras. On the other side of the panels, two thousand million eyes follow him, suddenly apprehensive, suddenly unsure.

Then the President begins to speak...of loyalty, of sacrifice, of trust, of many, many things.

Years later, fledgling film students will watch the speech. Will marvel. Will weep. Flanked by Gendarmes and guards, the President walks through the crowds, smiling and waving laconically. High above, the panels flash purples and blues, smokeless fireworks in party colors.

The President is charming. He shakes hands with passersby, throws candy to the children. But the men and women remain silent, unsure of how to respond. They only stare with ragged reverence, as fall leaves skitter across bare feet.

The President stops, turns to the crowd and leans forward, hands on knees. At this, Gendarmes are suddenly alert, warily swiveling in half-circles, but they relax, lower bronze guns when they see the reason for the President’s halt.

A boy: a small, filthy ragdoll child with a face rosy from cold and excitement. On one shoulder, he carries a plastic rifle – a child’s toy, one of the millions made by the government factories.

He smiles at the President, a wide and earnest grin, and the President smiles back.
“What’s your name, young man?” The President asks.
“Shad, sir!”
“Ah. Chad.” The President pauses, smiles as he points at the gun. “That’s an odd thing to carry. Who bought it?”
“I did, sir, with my own money and everything! So I can be a soldier, sir!”
“Oh?” The President smiles indulgently. “Good boy,” he says, patting the boy’s head absentmindedly, in approval. “Just like John Brown.”
And Chad smiles, lifts his toy rifle a fraction higher in pride as the President walks on, the crowds parting before him. As though he were Moses, as though he were Aaron, a savior bringing them into the Promised Land.
Rain Dance

The air is thick  
With the aroma of water,  
A promise of things to come.  
The small girl  
Emerges from the shadows  
And begins to dance,  
Fluid movements flowing from within.  
Her brilliant hair billows back  
As a kite would on a summer day.  
Her dark legs move rapidly,  
Naked feet barely skimming the ground.  
She laughs as the rain pours down,  
Beating out its own rhythm  
Onto the earth  
And into her soul.

Five Minutes After

Three days before
I am cross-legged on the cold stone floor of the hut, staring blankly in front of me, waiting for a feeling to register in my chest. This morning, I had gone to work on the wharves as usual, taking orders from the merchants and recording different imports and exports, much of it military supplies. Something was off this morning, however. The air was pregnant with something resembling fear, horror, and, surprisingly, pity. I couldn’t put my finger on it. When I got to work, I found that rumors were flying around that the United States, one of the countries involved in this horrible world war, had finally dropped the dreaded atomic bomb on our sister city, Hiroshima, a good 260 miles from my hometown, Nagasaki. Although some of us had suspected some sort of attack, we had never dreamed that the Americans would use atomic weapons on us, as poor as we are. Even though many of us have to work for the government to survive, we are all honest workers who have nothing to do with the war. Few of us even liked this bloodbath. It makes us work longer hours with less pay and forces us to live in constant fear of our lives being torn apart. Besides, it has always been the younger workers
that liked to talk about these different conspiracies against Japan. I have more important things to worry about.

However, that does not mean I’m not on edge. When I was let off early today, I rushed home to be with my two children, my wife, and my aging mother. Dashing through the crowded streets, I dodged the steady stream of people that flowed between the crammed-together shops. When I stepped in the front door of my modest home, my entire family was crowded around the tiny television in the main room, one of only four in our small house. My wife and mother are now sitting tensely on the threadbare couch, their thinly clothed shoulders pressed together, while Hiroki and Ayaka huddle on the bare floor side by side. At four and nine, they are as close as a sister and brother can be. I drop down beside them, but no one can seem to tear their eyes from the flashing screen: “Atomic Bomb Dropped on Hiroshima- Enormous Number Dead.” I feel my stomach turn. The rumors were true.

Two days before

“No. I’m not going to do that to them. Everything they know is here,” Natsuki says to me. Her long, choppy black hair is carelessly brushed over her dark brown eyes, but that doesn’t do anything to lower the intensity of her gaze.

“Natsuki! There’s a good chance, now that the Americans have bombed once, that they’re going to do it again! Hiroshima was a manufacturing city, and we’re not far from becoming one. We import military supplies, and if they bomb again, we’re most likely the target! You need to take the children and get out while you still can,” I shoot back at her.

“No. We’ll take that chance. If we die, we die together.”

“Fine.” I’m done arguing with her. I’ve never been able to win an argument against my wife. It looks like for now we’ll be staying at home. Secretly, I had wished that she would insist on staying, but I had to try for the good of my children.

“Hiroki? Why don’t you take your sister outside and play? There are many things for me to do here,” I tell my son. He nods obediently, pushing his dark brown hair out of his tan face. Hiroki grabs Ayaka’s hand and pulls her out the wooden door, accidentally slamming it on the way out. I turn back to my wife.

“I need to go to work, or at least run an errand. I can’t stay holed up in the house for any longer today,” I tell her. I can see the disappointment in her eyes. I feel horrible, but I know, if I don’t get out, the worry will consume me from the inside out. So, I slip out of the house and start walking. I don’t know where I’m going, just that my feet will lead me where I need to be. I end up back at the pier, right where this all started. I plop down on one of the old unused docks and stare out at the water. The breeze is cool today, just enough for the deep blue of the sea to be broken by the occasional wave. Thoughts and worries mix together in my head, creating a blur of anxiety that I can’t see past. I can’t imagine what to do, so instead I stay on the splintered wood deck, my bare feet grazing the sea, and, while I can, just be.

One day before

I wake to an incessant knocking coming from our front door. I slide out of the low bed carefully so I don’t wake Natsuki. Before heading to the main room, I glance at the other bedroom across the hall. Thankfully, Hiroki, Ayaka, and my mother Anani are all still peacefully asleep, Ayaka and Anani cuddled in the large bed together while Hiroki is curled up on his own
bed off to the side of the room. I smile to myself while traipsing through the main room to answer the door. I pull it open, interested to find my neighbor, co-worker, and best friend, Umi. Before I can say anything, he gestures at me to be quiet and ushers me out into the growing light of day. Silently, we pad through the streets, not stopping until we’re at the very boundaries of the city.

“Umi! Why are we all the way out here?” I demand, looking around in distaste at the dirty buildings, abandoned for the new center of industry when it moved south.

“I didn’t want anyone else to hear what I have to tell you. It’s not really common knowledge, and I’d like to keep it that way,” he calmly replies, dropping down onto the hard-packed dirt. I look around suspiciously, and after a moment of consideration, follow suit.

“Okay, so this is the deal. These past four years during the war, the government has been worried about bombings. Long story short, they’ve created a few bomb shelters, also called fallout shelters, in case of an attack of any kind—even atomic.” He stops and waits for my reaction. I nod at him to keep going.

“Basically, the government has built some shelters in major cities here in Japan, cities like here, Osaka, Akita, Hakodate, even Hiroshima. When the Americans bombed Hiroshima, many people’s lives were saved because of the five shelters that were present in their city. The estimated number is between 500 and 1000, when taking deaths from radiation afterwards into account. Long story short, they’ve built some here. Only three, however. Which makes what I’m going to tell you even more unlikely. But it’s true. One of these fallout shelters is under my home.” Once again, Umi pauses nervously, brushing his short black hair out of his large brown eyes.

“Anyway, they’ve told us that there will probably be another bombing soon, probably in the next week. They’ve instructed those of us whose homes have the shelters that if there’s anyone we’d like to protect, we need to warn them. So, Isamu, I’m warning you.” Now, he looks at me with so much intensity that I’d like to glance away, but somehow I can’t seem to break the connection. “I have no wife or children, and you are my closest friend. If there’s a bombing, the government will try to warn me ahead of time, and if all goes right, I’ll have time to get those whom I care about into the shelter before the planes come.”

I look straight at Umi, and I can see in his eyes that he’s telling the truth. I don’t want to believe it, but somehow I know I have to.

“Don’t tell Natsuki or the children about this. Just be ready. I’ll get you when it’s time.”

“Thank you, Umi. This means a lot to me. We’ll be ready,” I reassure him. “What do we do until then?”

“Nothing. All we can do is wait.”

Twelve hours before

The house is silent. Only the cat and I are still awake. I move quietly through the house, packing bags, grabbing only the necessities. I get changes of clothes for everyone, food, water, Anani’s medicine, Ayaka’s doll, Hiroki’s play cars, a few of Natsuki’s books. The last items may seem frivolous, but I know if we’re all crammed together for days, they could be a godsend. I push the bags into a closet so Natsuki won’t find them, and fall into bed. I’m tired from the day that seemed like a year. However, I’m grateful for the physical exhaustion; maybe I’ll be able to sleep a little tonight.
Four hours before

“Isamu! Please wake up!” Natsuki calls to me from the main room. The unmistakable odor of green tea wafts under the door and envelopes me, and for a second I forget what had happened the previous day. That only lasts a minute, though, and I quickly jump out of the bed and pull on some clothes.

“Make sure you grab a jacket. It’s getting chilly out there,” Natsuki reminds me through the wall. I take her suggestion and then stride out into the room, where Anani is holding Ayaka while they eat their breakfast.

“Where’s Hiroki?” I ask, curious.

“He finished eating and went for a walk. He’s going to meet Anani, Ayaka and I at the market in twenty minutes. I need some things for my sewing project, and we’re out of bread and vegetables. Afterwards, I think we might just get lunch in town. We won’t be long,” Natsuki answers.

“Papi! I don’t want to go to the market! I want to stay here with you!” Ayaka whines.

“Natsuki, is it okay if I keep Ayaka home with me? We’ll play together,” I say, winking at Ayaka.

“Sure. We won’t be gone too long,” Natsuki responds. “Anani? Are you ready?” Anani nods in assent, and rises from her chair. Natsuki grabs her small woven bag and heads out the door, Anani close behind. As the wind pushes the door closed, I turn to Ayaka and grin.

“We’re going to have some fun.”

Two hours before

I throw the ball to Ayaka, who catches it without hesitation. For a four year old, she has surprisingly good reflexes. She runs toward me with the little red ball, her halo of chestnut hair bouncing and shining in the sun. We knew when Ayaka was born that she was special. First off, she had amber eyes and reddish-brown hair, which also appeared chestnut in different light. Both were nearly unheard of in the Japanese heritage and even more unlikely because both Natsuki and I were bestowed with the traditional black hair and dark-brown eyes. When Ayaka was a baby, she would always sit up straight and never lean back against her seat. She’s unnaturally intelligent for a four year old, too. Ayaka can sense things that no one else can, like the location of lost items or where everyone in her family is at a given time. I love her more than anything.

“Papi? It’s your turn,” Ayaka calls. I snap out of my reverie and catch the ball that she throws to me.

One hour before

“Look! It’s a cow. Moo moo!” Ayaka says. She points up at a particular cloud in the azure sky and then looks at me. “Do you see it? Look!” I look up with her and nod.

“I see it, Ayaka. Do you see my butterfly?” She starts to nod, but then her face goes rigid. “Ayaka? What’s wrong?” I worriedly ask.

“Papi. We have to leave,” she says urgently.

“Why? What’s wrong, sweet?” I look around at the field, perfect in its lush August glory.
“There’s something coming. Something bad. I want to go home,” Ayaka says, starting to cry.
“Okay, baby. Come on. We’ll go home.”

Thirty minutes before
I rush through the house, grabbing food and bottles of water. Suddenly I remember our bags, and pull them out of the closet. I slam the door on my way out, my arms full of supplies. I run back to Umi’s house, head to the backyard, and go down the stone stairs into the small, dimly lit chamber where Ayaka is waiting. I drop our provisions in the corner, next to the food and water Umi has waiting.
“Where’s Umi, Ayaka?” I ask.
“He went to go warn his other friends. I think he believed me,” she solemnly replies. I almost didn’t believe what she told me herself, but then I remembered how she has been right about every premonition she’s had so far. All Ayaka could tell me was to take shelter, that she knew something bad was coming. I don’t know where or how she gets these feelings, but I’m grateful for them. Even if it turns out that nothing happens, it’s better safe than sorry.
“Ayaka? I’m going to go find Mama, Nani, and Hiroki. You need to stay here,” I tell her.
“Okay. Hurry back,” she says, her eyes widening in worry.

Fifteen minutes before
I sprint through the streets, calling my family’s names. Weaving in and out of the people and stalls, I hunt desperately through the market for the three people I need to find. I’m not seeing them. If I don’t find them soon, I’ll have to go back to Umi’s and hope that they get to shelter before Ayaka’s disaster happens.

Ten minutes before
My last-ditch efforts to find the rest of my family make me resort to going door to door in the marketplace, asking shop owners if they’ve seen them. As I poke my head into the fourth one, the last three having no information, I hear my name being called.
“Isamu! Isamu! Where are you?” I look up and see Umi, red-faced and carrying Ayaka.
“Papi. We need to go to Umi’s now.” Umi grabs my arm, and we break out into a run, the mile between us and the neighborhood disappearing quickly.

Five minutes before
“Ayaka told me we had to find you. She wouldn’t tell me why, just that we needed to get you to safety,” Umi pants to me as we reenter the fallout shelter. Five others are present now, a wife and husband with a little boy, an elderly man, and a young woman. I’m too upset at the moment to pay them much attention.
“I couldn’t find my wife, mother, or son,” I tell Umi, crestfallen at my failure.
“It’ll be fine. We just have to pray that after whatever happens, they’re still fine and healthy.”
“Papi. You need to tell everyone to get down. Fast,” whispers Ayaka.
“Everyone! Get down! Now!” I yell as loud as I can. And then I hold my baby girl close as I shut my eyes and hope for the best.
Five minutes after

I don’t know if the shaking’s stopped. I feel completely deaf, not that there’s anything to hear. All I can focus on is the small girl in my arms, my dear Ayaka. All eight of us in the shelter are on our backs and sides, thrown like rag dolls when the explosion racked the earth. Only now, a while after the impact hit, are we starting to move.

“Papi..... Please let go of me,” Ayaka whispers. I unwillingly release her from my embrace. She crawls forward to where Umi is laying, still and unmoving. A piece of brick is on the ground near his head, and I fear the worst.

“Umi? Umi? Please get up. Please!” cries Ayaka, starting to become hysterical. “Papi. What’s wrong with him? What’s wrong with Uncle Umi?” I move to where my best friend is on the ground. I place my fingers on his neck, searching for a pulse, listening for that breath of life. I feel nothing, only the chill of death slowly spreading through his body. Silence awaits my straining ears. I close my eyes for a moment, praying for peace for Umi. Then I turn to my daughter.

“Ayaka. Uncle Umi has left this life. His soul has gone to a better place. We’ll always remember him,” I tell her, trying to be as subtle as possible. I can deal with death, but I’m not sure how well Ayaka will do with this cruel realization. What she does is immensely worse than screaming or crying. Ayaka looks up at me, her large, round eyes betraying her sadness.

A Sick Oncologist

When Martha died, Dr. O'Connell was sleeping on the left side of his queen sized bed. He woke up at 6:30 a.m. He showered and shampooed what little hair clung to the sides of his head. The Doctor prepared himself two eggs over easy, one piece of rye toast with one and one-half cups of black coffee; more than that and he would get jittery. Dr. O'Connell completed his dental hygiene ritual with the aid of toothpaste, “wintermint” mouthwash, and extra wide dental floss. Dr. O'Connell did not have extra wide spaces between his teeth, but struggling with the dental floss made the completion of this daily ritual even more meaningful. Dr. O'Connell had discovered his penchant for extra wide floss completely by accident. He had purchased it as a contingency plan when his usual brand was out of stock. He thought it was funny how you could discover something completely by chance, which, unbeknownst to you, is gravely important; then he saw Martha's body.

The Doctor called in sick and cried for some time. Martha was a little over a month old; now she will always be that old. Dr. O'Connell fashioned a coffin for Martha out of a shoebox and buried her in his backyard. He said a quiet eulogy: "I have to wonder if it's my fault, due to negligence or idiocy. Maybe it's God's fault for making us mortal. Maybe blame is irrelevant." The Doctor was quiet, wondering if there was anything left to say. "I will miss you eternally."

The Doctor cleaned Martha's bowl by hand. He scrubbed her castle with a toothbrush; she had loved that castle. He bought a new bag of pebbles, some fake coral, a new castle. He swore never again. Still, while he was mixing all of this into Martha's bowl, he was thinking of names for his next goldfish. Jeff if it was a boy, Jeffina if it was a girl.

Dr. O'Connell's fireplace had never housed a fire. It existed solely for its mantle, which had become a memorial to goldfish past. It was a crowded miniature city filled with castles, houses, and Eiffel Towers.

Dr. O'Connell thought of Martha as a sort of mom, even though he was older than her, and his own mother had been dead for a very long time. "This looks a bit odd," Dr. O'Connell said while examining Martha's left nostril. "What does it look like? Am I out of remission?" "No, nothing that serious, however, this is peculiar."
"I thought you said the odds of it coming back were small? Very small. You said you were 99.9% sure I was fine."
"That's just the thing Martha, you're more than fine, you can't even tell you ever had surgery! You literally look too good to be true."
Dr. O'Connell smiled, Martha exhaled.
"So is that all Dr. O'Connell?"
"Oh please, call me Mr. O'Connell."
"Is that all, doctor?"
"Almost. It's just, Martha—I'm beginning to wonder if you've forgotten to send me a Christmas card. It's the middle of November and I haven't gotten a card, a pre-card notification, or anything really."
"Mr. O'Connell, I'm going to give you a Christmas card, I just haven't taken a Christmas portrait of my family yet."
"Ah yes," Dr. O'Connell chuckled, "I guess I'll let it slide, this time."
Martha wasn't smiling; fortunately Dr. O'Connell was smiling enough for both of them.
"So when am I going to be done with these check ups?"
"Oh Martha, you're not trying to get rid of me are you?"
Dr. O'Connell laughed.
"Of course not, Mr. O'Connell. It's just, I wanted to know when I'm going to be in the clear, you know?"
The Doctor stopped laughing.
"There's never an 'in the clear' with cancer Martha, we both know that."
"Well, I suppose you're right."
"Alright then," Dr. O'Connell's smile returned, "now that that's settled, I'll see you in two weeks."

Dr. O'Connell didn't eat fast food, he preferred to cook his own meals. He liked how it kept him occupied.

When Dr. O'Connell first met Martha, he thought he might have been in love. Moments later he found out she was married. This was when he realized that he wasn't in love with Martha, he just loved her like someone would love a mother. Dr. O'Connell was very clumsy with love, he seemed to fall in it quite often. Whenever he found out it wasn't going to work, which he always did, he just reassured himself that it wasn't true love. After all, he had loved all of his goldfish, but that wasn't true love. He had become very skilled at laughing off a broken heart. Sometimes he could fall in and out of love as much as two or three times a day.
However, when Dr. O'Connell met Lila, he knew within moments it was true love.
"Lila Harris, it says here your maiden name is Pavone, is that correct?"
"Yes, it is."
"So may I presume you are married?"
"Well actually, my husband passed away three years ago."
"Do you mind if I call you Lila Pavone?"
"I don't see why that matters."
"It would just make me more comfortable."
"Oh, alright then."
"So what is it we're looking at today Ms. Pavone?"
"Well I've been noticing—"
"Pardon me, Ms. Pavone."
"You are pardoned."
"But this all just seems too formal, doesn't it?"
"It seems like a visit to the doctor's office."
"And that's exactly it Lila, may I call you Lila?"
"Umm, I suppose."
"Lila, I don't want you to be just another patient. I want you to be special. I want your health to be of the utmost concern to me, and I can't do that if you're just some name on a piece of paper. Lila, to be an effective oncologist I have to go beyond the paper."
For a moment there was nothing for either of them to say.
Lila said, "That sounds good Dr. O'Connell, but my—"
"Oh please Lila, how can I work under these rigid formalities? Call me Mr. O'Connell."
"Dr. O'Connell, I'm concerned about this mole on my neck."
"Are you sure it's a mole?"
"No, that's why I'm here."
"I see, a wise choice," Dr. O'Connell began to examine the mole.
He said, "Are you sure this isn't just an Adam's apple sprouting Lila? It's certainly in the right place—Ha! Seriously though, you're a picturesque example of femininity."
"Well... thank you very much."
"Can you please look up?"
She looked up.
"This is definitely cancer."
"What? Are you sure?"
"Very."
"How can you be so sure? Don't you need to run some tests or..."
"Well certainly we'll run tests, but I'm telling you right now this is cancer. Basal cell skin carcinoma to be exact."
"How serious is it?"
"It is cancer."
"Oh God."
"But it's the least serious kind of cancer."
"Thank God."
"But it's still cancer, and cancer is never candy. That's my personal motto." It wasn't his personal motto, it was his attempt at small talk.
"Oh God."
"You don't like my personal motto?"
"No—I mean, yes—I mean, I was talking about the cancer, my cancer."
"Don't worry, you'll be alright."
"How do you know?"
"Years of medical training and subsequent field experience. Now let's get the wheels in motion for a biopsy."
Dr. O'Connell watched a lot of cooking programs, and court TV, and soap operas, and crime thrillers; he watched a lot of everything. As a result of watching the world so incessantly, he was an amateur expert on everything. He was filled with useless information, and void of anyone to share it with.

The pizza boy had taken thirty-six minutes to deliver Dr. O'Connell's pizza, which was insinuated, but not legally bound to be delivered within half an hour of ordering. Dr. O'Connell thought this was a good opportunity to let the pizza boy know that, "Time is not linear, we just perceive it to be linear. So, who am I to judge if a pizza is late."
The pizza boy was glad he was being talked to instead of yelled at.
He said, "Sorry about the wait, I went to Pine Drive instead of Pine Avenue. Here's your cheese and onion," and handed Dr. O'Connell his pizza.
"If your eyes are watering when you cut onions, you can cut them near an open flame and that'll fix your problem right up."
"I just deliver."
"Oh, of course. It's just a little something that everyone should know."
They were quiet.
Dr. O'Connell paid and tipped well. He picked the onions off of his pizza then started eating.

"I told you it was cancer."
"I never doubted you, I just sort of hoped you were wrong."
"Lila, if I was wrong then I would be incompetent, which would be good for you, but bad for all of my other patients. However, since I am right and you have cancer, I am quite competent and therefore able to provide excellent treatment for you and all of my other patients. If you think about it, your cancer is for the greater good."
"I'm not sure that makes sense."
"Lila, who's the doctor here?"
"You're right, sorry."
"Don't be sorry. Your behavior is completely understandable. You must be under a great deal of stress. Would you like some coffee to soothe your nerves?"
"No, thank you."
"Alright, there will be time for pleasantries later. Now let's move on to your treatment. Basal cell carcinoma can be treated with techniques ranging from cream to surgery."
"But which one is the most effective?"
"Surgery, but I try to avoid cutting into the necks of patients whenever I can. We'll start with the cream and see where things go."
"Are you sure about the cream? It sounds like surgery would be--""
"Lila, I'm sure enough for the both of us."
Dr. O'Connell removed a box that looked appropriate for toothpaste from his lab coat.
He said, "Just apply this topically once a day before sleeping."
Lila examined the box.
Dr. O'Connell said, "To be sure you're regularly applying the cream, I would like for you
to call me every night before application. I will also call you if it's past ten o'clock and you have not contacted me yet."

"Is that really necessary?"
"It's essential."
"But this box says to apply twice a day."
"I know."
"Then why am I using it once a day?"
"It's a really complicated medical reason, it'd be easier for you just to trust me. Or I can tell you about it tonight."
"That's alright Doctor."

...  

Dr. O'Connell was sitting upright on the left side of his bed. He had been watching TV, but as time passed he became fearful he would miss Lila's call due to some sort of auditory tunnel vision.  
So he waited.  
He stared at his digital alarm clock then checked his analog wristwatch. It was 9:59 or 9:57. She was about to be late, or punctual, depending on your perception of time.  
The phone rang shortly before 10:00pm.  
"I applied the cream."
"That's good, I was worried."
"Goodnight."
Dr. O'Connell turned off the lamp on his bedside table.  
He said, "Goodnight," as he gently laid the phone on the pillow on the right side of his bed.  
The Doctor slept well.  

...  

Dr. O'Connell was the designated driver; he was always the designated driver.  
Sometimes on Fridays his co-workers would go out for drinks. This Friday it was Dr. O'Connell, his assistant, and his nurse; this was a good turnout. Both of these large women were married, at least this was what Dr. O'Connell thought. Mary, the smaller of the two large women, was actually a lesbian. She informed the Doctor of this six years ago, though it hadn't stopped him from anonymously giving her Valentine's Day chocolates and cheap, checkout isle knick-knacks.  
In his mind he still had a shot. Later Mary told Dr. O'Connell that she had gotten married over the weekend.  
He said, "To a guy or a girl?"
She said, "It doesn't matter."
This ended Dr. O'Connell's perpetual minor unprofessionalism.  
The two ladies were talking about significant others, Mary's girlfriend and Ann's husband.  
Ann said, "You can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em."
Mary said, "Yes, you certainly can't live with them."
Dr. O'Connell said, "Men can be so difficult sometimes. Just because I'm a man doesn't mean I don't notice it. Actually, I think I notice it more because of that. Women are simply
biologically beautiful creatures who try to put up with us."
To break the silence he paid for another round of drinks.

When leaving, Mary and Ann called a taxi. They said they didn't want to trouble the Doctor.
He said, "Nonsense, that's what I'm here for."
They insisted.

It was Monday.
"Mr. O'Connell, I think you made a mistake."
"What's that now?"
Mary laid Lila Pavone's file flat in front of him. She read to the Doctor while following along with her finger, like she was teaching a child to read.
"Take once daily? I've never heard of anyone prescribing this for just once a day."
"Yes, and I'm the only oncologist you've worked for."
"And you've never done this before."
Dr. O'Connell paused, then sighed.
"If you are really that interested in cream, I read in a medical journal that reducing the amount of prescribed medication for mild cases of basal cell carcinoma is a smart way to cut costs."
"Cut costs for who?"
"It doesn't matter, it's what all the doctors are doing now."
"Are you sure it won't harm the patient?"
"I wouldn't do it if I wasn't sure."
They were quiet.
Dr. O'Connell said, "Mary, you don't have to impress me. I know how valuable you are. You're doing a great job; is that what you needed to hear? Well, I said it, and I mean it. Why don't you go take a break. You look exhausted."
Mary took a break.

"Dr. O'Connell, I think it's getting bigger."
The Doctor held a ruler perpendicular to Lila's neck.
"I don't believe this has grown, not even a millimeter."
"But—it looks bigger."
"Ms. Pavone, do you really have an appropriate vantage point to make that judgment? Have you been applying the cream once a day?"
"Yes, I check in with you."
"Just making sure."
She gingerly touched the mole housing her cancer.
He said, "I'll tell you what, if you are that concerned with growth then you can start applying the cream twice a day. Right when you get up you'll need to give me a confirmation call, then you can apply your medication."
"Should I wait until after my shower?"
"Intelligent question Lila; however, it only takes moments for this cream to burrow
deep into your skin. Water won’t have any effect.”

“Thank you, I really appreciate it.”

“My pleasure.”

After Lila left, he made a copy of her file and put it in his examination room. He charted two millimeters of growth and stored it inside a magazine.

... It was day and night, and hello and goodbye, and cream twice a day for twenty days. Dr. O'Connell knew their love was growing, even if she didn't know. He wanted to proclaim his love from rooftops, write it in the clouds, print it on his skin, but he didn't have anyone to listen to him. He couldn't talk to Mary or Ann about it, and he was between goldfish. He settled for a picture of his mother.

He said, "You're going to get all of those things you wanted. I mean, I'm going to get all of the things I wanted, which is what you wanted; you always wanted me to get what I wanted, which was to be happy—is to be happy. I wish you could see me now, see how happy I am. You died when I was very unhappy, and I always regretted being the last thing you saw. I was such a very unhappy thing to die seeing, and I've tried looking happy and being fun and being friendly, just in case you were watching me somehow. I wanted you to think I was happy. But now I don't just look happy, I am happy. I bounce out of bed and smile while I sleep. Sometimes I think I'm so happy I'll burst and then I don't burst, which makes me even happier. It's so wonderful to not have to pretend anymore. I've been waiting so long for this, it's hard to believe it's here."

He paused.

"I hope you can hear me."

... One of their phones was broken. It was 10:06 and there was no call. No call meant no cream. No cream meant no treatment. Was she doing this on purpose? Did she want to die? Had he angered her in some way?

No. This was just an overreaction, probably. But maybe it wasn't. How would he feel if he had deduced correctly that she was committing suicide and did nothing to stop it?

So at 10:07, he called. Then there was this beeping, a beeping that was trying to tell him the line was busy. At least, he thought that's what it meant. Maybe it meant the phone was broken. But if the phone was broken, maybe it wouldn't make any sound. Maybe it was his phone that was broken. Maybe he was the one with the busy line, and she was trying to call him right now. What if she had called him at the exact same time he had called her and currently he had her on hold, but he didn't know it.

The Doctor pressed buttons, and said hello, and pressed more buttons. He hung up the phone to be safe. He dropped it like it burst into flames, and gathered around it as if seeking warmth. He just wanted her to be okay. He certainly wouldn't be able to be okay if she wasn't okay.

Then the phone rang.

He said, "You're late."

"Sorry, I was—."

"I'm just glad you're okay. I thought something was wrong."
"Nope, nothing was wrong. I just had a phone call."
"From who?"
"Some guy I met this morning."
His heart hurt.
"A guy with some sort of romantic capacity?"
"Is this medically relevant?"
"Certainly. In your condition there's no way you should be dating. Have you ever heard that stress kills? Well, you probably heard that because it's right, stress does kill. And one of the leading causes of stress, besides lack of control in the workplace, which women are more prone to than men, is romantic involvement."
"I know my cancer is 'not candy', but I'm being treated. Is stress really going to kill me?"
"Lila, stop thinking about it. Thinking about how stress is going to kill you is going to induce enough stress to kill you. I am not going to let you die."
"Alright."
"Okay. Goodnight."
She had already hung up.

... Her mole had grown 2.5 millimeters; Dr. O'Connell rounded it down to two millimeters in his private file. He rounded the growth down to zero in her public file. While he was charting her growth, she said, "What are you writing?"
"Nothing."
"You can't be writing nothing."
"It's not nothing, but it's just doctor stuff. Really boring doctor stuff."
"But there shouldn't be any doctor stuff to write down. You said everything's fine."
"Everything is perfect. I'm just putting you on a different cream."
"Why are you doing that?"
"Doctor reasons."
"Is it a stronger cream?"
"It's a different cream."
"But is it a stronger cream?"
"It's... more cream."
"So the other cream isn't working? It's too weak?"
"No, this cream isn't stronger or weaker, it's just different. And this particular cream requires more cream to do the same job because it works differently. It is a different cream."
"Why are we changing creams at all? The other one was working perfectly. You said perfectly."
"Sometimes doctors prescribe one medication so we can see if you will be a good candidate for another medication. The previous cream was just a precursor to this cream. The other cream stopped the growth of the tumor, now this one will shrink the tumor."
"...Why don't they just make one cream that does both?"
"Greedy corporations—someone should really write them a letter."
She sighed, "Yeah, someone should."
Dr. O'Connell was making coffee. Ann was drinking the last of the coffee. She said, "That's one bad case of basal cell carcinoma."
The Doctor lost count of the scoops he put in the filter.
"What?"
"That Lila Pavone, she's got a pretty bad case of basal cell, don't you think?"
"It's not that bad."
"I haven't seen it any worse."
"It's nothing I can't handle."
"I'm sure you can handle it. I'm just saying that usually basal cell's a quick thing, you know? A prescription or a little surgery and—."
"I know how basal cell carcinoma usually is. I am a doctor. I am an oncologist. And as an oncologist I know everything's going to be fine. Just because we are encountering one case of abnormal basal cell carcinoma doesn't mean I don't know what I'm doing. I know exactly what I am doing, and I know exactly what is going to happen. There is no possible way that I am going to lose a patient to the cancer with the lowest mortality rate of any cancer. That is ridiculous and that is not going to happen."

Dr. O'Connell left the room. Ann sat in silence then poured herself a fresh cup of coffee. It was bitter.

"Who are you?"
"I'm Stephen, it's a pleasure to meet you," he extended his hand to Dr. O'Connell.
"I suppose I asked the wrong question, Stephen. Why are you here?" The Doctor's hands remained at his sides.
"I'm just here to look around, you know."
"That is the problem, Stephen. I do not know in the slightest. I know what looking around is, I know how to look around, I can describe the path of stimulated synapses to and from the occipital lobe which would constitute 'looking around.' However, I have no idea why you are 'looking around' here."
"I'm sorry, I was under the impression you knew I was coming."
"I was never under any such impression."
"Oh. I'm a standards auditor, I received a call requesting a voluntary audit from this office. Am I in the right place? Are you Dr. O'Connell?"
"I am Dr. O'Connell, but you have the wrong place. Please leave."
Mary cradled a bowl of candy, "Butterscotch?"
Stephen said, "Why yes, thank you."
"No Mary, he doesn't get butterscotch. The butterscotch is for people with appointments, and as this gentleman is in the wrong place, he certainly cannot have a butterscotch. Perhaps on another occasion, Stephen, we can eat butterscotch and talk about standards and practices until the cows come home; which I have never personally seen but assume is very late at night, however, now it is time for you to leave, Stephen. Goodbye, Stephen."

Stephen left.
The Doctor said, "What a pompous man with a pompous name. As soon as I heard his name I should have told him to leave; I bet he spells it with a 'P-H'."
Mary was eating butterscotch, "Ann's son is named Stephen."
"How unfortunate for him."

... 

"One of you betrayed me."
Mary and Ann looked up at the Doctor like children being scolded.
"One of you thinks I've lost it. One of you thinks I'm an idiot, or crazy, or both. Or both?
Maybe both of you think I'm a crazy idiot whose lost it."
Ann said, "I think you're taking this too personally."
"So you were the one who called Stephen?"
"No, I just think you could be misinterpreting things."
"People aren't audited because someone suspects they're doing a great job. People get audited because other people think they need to be audited because they think that I can't do my job."

Mary said, "We're just concerned about you Mr. O'Connell."
"So both of you called Stephen? Together? Like a conference call?"
Ann said, "I didn't do anything."
"She didn't."
The Doctor said, "Why did you do anything?"
"I'm worried about you, you've been acting strange."
Ann said, "You haven't had a goldfish for two months."
"A man shouldn't lose loyal comrades because of fish."
Mary said, "I'm sorry."
Dr. O'Connell said, "So am I."
"What do you mean?"
He sighed, "Never mind."

Lila was calling Dr. O'Connell; it was 4:02 p.m. The Doctor excused himself from his patient's presence. He waited until the second ring and tried to sound casual.
"Hello?"
"My neck is bleeding."
"Who is this?" he asked, casually.
"Lila Pavone. How many people call you when they're BLEEDING FROM THE NECK."
"Calm down Lila, that was just a joke, a bad joke."
"I'm not in the mood for jokes Mr. O'Connell."
"Mr. O'Connell?"
"Isn't that what you wanted me to call you?"
"Yes, never mind that. How much are you bleeding?"
"Just a little, but is a little a lot? I feel like this is a bad sign."
"Lila, have you ever had a pimple burst?"
"Yes."
"Has that ever been a bad thing?"
"I guess not."
"Lila, slight bleeding is just a normal part of the healing process. I'm sorry, I should have warned you about this. It's just you were doing so exceedingly well I didn't think you would..."
have any bleeding. I suppose I was wrong."

"So... this is a good thing?"

"Not good, but not bad. It's just a thing Lila. It means that the treatment is working."

"Alright, what should I do about it?"

"Just a bandage and some antiseptic, if you want to come in I can do it. I'm not doing anything right now."

"No, I think I can handle it."

"Alright. Tell me if the bleeding gets out of control." He laughed. "But seriously, that won't happen."

"Thank you."

"You are more than welcome."

They said goodbye. They hung up.

For a moment the Doctor didn't move. For a moment his other patients didn't exist. He didn't want Lila to die; he didn't want to kill her.

... it was 10:00 pm.

Dr. O'Connell asked, "Did you apply your cream?"

"My neck hasn't stopped bleeding."

"Is it bleeding heavily?"

"It is bleeding more heavily than my neck bleeds normally, which is not at all."

"Lila, we've been over this. It's a good sign."

"That's just it, I don't think it's a good sign. I've been researching this on the Internet and—"

"The problem with the Internet is that the Internet didn't have eight years of medical training. The Internet hasn't been practicing oncology for nearly two decades. And the Internet certainly doesn't have a patient mortality rate of zero for all its cases of basal cell carcinoma."

"I guess you're right."

"I am right Lila. Trust me, I will not let you die. I am going to do everything humanly possible to keep you around as long as I can."

"Thanks, Mr. O'Connell."

"You're welcome. Be sure to apply your cream. Oh, and Lila?"

"Yes?"

"We need to have a talk tomorrow."

"About what?"

"About the next step in our relationship."

"What do you mean?"

"Surgery."

..."Thanks for inviting me back."

"It's the least I could do, Stephen. I apologize about the other day. I had two cups of coffee instead of one and a half, and you know how that is."

Dr. O'Connell chuckled, Stephen nodded.

"So, you were going to show me the patient," he checked his notes, "Lila Harris?"

"Lila Pavone, actually. And yes, I certainly am. Lila and her stubborn little skin cancer."
They walked to examination room one where they found Lila Pavone, dressed for surgery.

"Hello Mr. O'Connell, and...?"
"Stephen. His name is Stephen."
"That it is."
"Stephen is going to take a quick peek at your neck, but not in a weird way. He's going to examine your tumor."

Stephen peeled back the dressing on her neck, "What's the diameter on that? Three, three point-five millimeters?"
"Four actually."
He whistled, "You picked a good time for surgery."
"I know."
Their mouths smiled but their eyes didn't.
Dr. O'Connell said, "Well, let's begin."
Dr. O'Connell began sterilizing his hands, "What I'm about to do is called Mohs surgery. It has a 95 to 97% success rating and excises the minimum amount of tissue."

Lila said, "I know Mr. O'Connell. You already explained all of this to me on Tuesday."
"This is actually for Stephen's benefit," Dr. O'Connell smiled.
"I know what Mohs surgery is."
"Alright then. We're all on the same page. Now Lila, I'm going to give you a local anesthetic, which will allow you to remain awake during the procedure. This is going to pinch a bit."

Dr. O'Connell stuck a needle into Lila's neck. Lila flinched, which made the Doctor frown; Stephen yawned. Dr. O'Connell created a small incision in Lila's tumor, and expanded it to create a circle with a diameter of 5.5 millimeters. He cut like he was cutting himself.

The Doctor placed the excised tissue between two glass slides.

He said, "I'm going to have to stain and freeze this. We'll know if we need to expand the incision in about an hour."

Stephen yawned again, "I'm going to go look through your records," and he left.
Dr. O'Connell looked at Lila. Their time together had an expiration date.
He said, "Would you like something to eat?"
She did.

... They each had a paper plate and a Styrofoam cup. The plates carried miniature chocolate donuts and the cups held black coffee. Lila was still dressed in a hospital gown, sitting on butcher paper, cutting bite sized donuts with a plastic knife and fork.
She said, "So this is it?"
"The end of cancer."
"The end of my cancer."
"Right."
She finished chewing a donut and chased it with coffee.
"I like the coffee."
"I think it's a bit weak."
It was quiet while she took another drink.
She said, "I was never worried."
"I was."
"Really?"
"I'd be a horrible doctor if I didn't worry about my patients. I worried about you every day. I thought of the worst every day."
"Well, cancer's never candy."
"That's right."
"At least all that worrying is over."
"I'm not sure what I'm going to do without it."
"Can't you worry about me while I'm an outpatient?"
"Actually, I'd like to refer you to Dr. Rothbaum for any additional treatment."
"Why?"
"I think I'm tired of worrying."
Stephen knocked twice on the open door and entered; it was a rhetorical knock.
"I'm going to get going. You have a fantastic operation here Dr. O'Connell."
Lila said, "He certainly does."
"Anyway, best of luck to you and your future endeavors."
And he was gone.
The Doctor said, "Your test results should be done."
And he was gone.

Dr. O'Connell examined the stained, frozen slice of tumor under a microscope. He saw the clear evidence of cancer in the tissue, even to the edge of the sample. He wondered if he could live without Lila. He knew Lila would live without him.

"We have another layer to extract."
"Oh, so you didn't get it the first time?"
"If I don't extract tissue until I've encountered entirely cancer free tissue, the cancer will come back."
"Okay."
"Exactly."

When the procedure was over they had another hour to wait. The Doctor got them both another cup of coffee.
Lila said, "I hate this part. It feels like the slowest hour of my life."
"Maybe it is."
She sipped from her cup.
"I think I see what you were saying about this being weak."
He took a sip.
"It tastes sort of bitter."
"Bad coffee for bad hours."
"You couldn't be more right."

...
When Dr. O'Connell said goodbye he gave her a piece of paper with a phone number scribbled on it. The phone number was that of Dr. Rothbaum. The goodbye was shallow.

The Doctor called in sick and cried for some time. While he cried he thought for some time. He bought a goldfish. For days he watched the goldfish like a television.

The Doctor shut down his medical practice. He was no longer Dr. O'Connell. He applied for a janitorial position at a nearby aquarium. He had to explain why he shut down his medical practice. It was because he “lost a loved one.” He got the job. He worked nights, alone. If he finished cleaning early he would sit on a bench and watch the fish.

One day he brought his fish bowl with him to work. He opened his favorite exhibit, one with innumerable small colorful fish. He slowly lowered Lila's fishbowl into the water and held it immersed until she swam out. He dropped the bowl in a dumpster on his way out. Mr. O'Connell didn't buy another goldfish, he didn't need to.

He had all the fish he could ever want.
Last Breath

As I'm sitting alone,
On the cold bathroom floor
I slice diagonal while in a daze
staring at the lines on the door.
As I watch the glistening red
Cover my arm.
I think to myself
How much
I missed your familiar ache of relief.
MISS.
Like how I miss my sanity
And happiness.
Which left
With a quick exhale of breath
Which felt like
My last.
LAST.
My last real smile.
The day I lost
My rock,
My best friend,
My whole heart,
My Uncle Bobby.
Or the last time
I saw my grandma's red hair
Or smelled her scent
Of security and love.
And trying,
Trying to recall
The last time
I heard her say
"Ceira Nichole!"
And knowing,
That while she was sick,
Because of my own
Selfish reasoning,
I didn't go visit her.
While she was sick
And taking her own last breaths,
Or how I didn't
Express my love to her.
And for that,
I'm further broken.
BROKEN.
The way I go
Through each day now.
Because he never,
NEVER.
Showed he loved me,
Just did what a
"Daddy"
Should do.
Enough to fool me.
But I opened my eyes
The day he watched
Her use my weaknesses
In public
Against me
And joined in on the fun,
Resulting in me
FINALLY knowing
I really am
Unwanted.
Unloved.
Killing me
Enough
To feel empty
For the remainder
Of my years.
MISS.
LAST.
BROKEN.
Let it all sink
In as the red
Spreads.
Solving
All my problems.
With my last breath.
The gentle rays of sunlight crept in surreptitiously through the blinds tenderly, brushing Lena’s face, seeming to bid her awake and prepare for the big day. She jumped out of bed and hurried to wash her face and tidy her hair. Oh, what a glorious day it was to turn fourteen! She ran downstairs. Aunt Celia, who had arrived from Cambridge the day before just for this special occasion, and her mother greeted her with hugs and smiling faces. Lena beamed, kissing them both on the cheek, and ran to greet her father. Breakfast was served—buttery toast and eggs cooked sunny-side-up just as she liked—but Lena could hardly eat with all the excitement bubbling inside her. She could only think about when the guests would start arriving, but the afternoon seemed so far away.

“Mother, did you remember to ask for pink icing on the cake?” Lena wanted everything to be perfect for her party.

“Yes, dear. And little pink roses around the edges,” replied mother. Lena smiled. It gave her a warm, tingly feeling to think how wonderful her cake would be.

“Why don’t you try on your new dress and tell me if it needs any trimming?” Aunt Celia suggested after they had finished breakfast.

Lena sprang from the table and bounded upstairs to her bedroom. In her excitement, she had forgotten all about the lovely new dress Aunt Celia had given her. She delicately lifted the dress out of its box and held it in front of the mirror. It was simply gorgeous—the perfect shade of sky blue—fit for a princess. Lena put it on and twirled around. As she glimpsed her reflection in the mirror, her eyes darted to her neck. Her heart gave a sigh. Somehow, a little something was lacking to make her appearance absolutely perfect. She tried to convince herself that she really could look no better, but the sight of her bare neck reawakened a longing that her excitement had temporarily stifled: ever since Susie Edwards had worn to the New Year’s Eve dance the lavish pearl necklace that, as she never failed to remind her friends, was bought in Paris, Lena had wished that she too could own a necklace like that. She would often, gazing idly out of the window, dream of herself in that string of pearls, imagining her friends whispering among themselves and pointing in admiration as she passed. She rummaged in her bureau for some of her old necklaces—none so beautiful as Susie’s—and tried them on one by one, but in vain. Deep down inside, Lena knew that only a pearl necklace like Susie’s could perfectly complement her dress. She resignedly put away the necklaces and took off the dress, taking great care not to crease it anywhere, and laid it on the bed to wear that afternoon.

“Lena, come and help us set up the chairs in the garden,” she heard her mother calling.

She rushed downstairs in an instant, glad to have a diversion to take her mind off the necklace. Outside, the crisp March air embraced her, and the twittering of two blue-robins in the backyard oak made Lena feel ever so lighthearted and merry. She cheerfully helped set up for the party, and soon her longing for the pearls was forgotten.
The hours rolled by; the afternoon finally came, and the guests began to arrive one by one. First came Uncle John and Aunt Sally with little Betsy and Margaret, who, although very young, shrieked with glee upon seeing Lena. Then came her cousin Peter with his pretty fiancée whom Lena greatly admired and looked up to. Elizabeth and Lily-Marie arrived next, and Lena immediately took these two friends upstairs to show them the wonderful book she had just finished reading. It seemed the doorbell would never stop ringing. A wonderfully festive atmosphere pervaded the house, and soon the guests filled the rooms and spilled over into the garden.

“My, Lena, how dazzling you look in that dress!” exclaimed Isabel, Peter’s fiancée. Lena beamed and gave Isabel a hug.

It was time for Lena to cut the cake, a veritable masterpiece, decorated exactly as Lena had specified, with rich layers of creamy vanilla icing. How awful Lena felt at having to sink a knife into it. As she blew out all fourteen candles (she needed two breaths to do it), Lena felt so grown-up, and her heart swelled with pride.

Before long, Lena sat down to open her presents: a new set of paintbrushes from Elizabeth, a book of modern poetry from Lily-Marie, and a lovely bottle of perfume from Peter and Isabel. Lena smiled when she breathed its delicious fragrance, and admired Isabel's good taste. And then there was a pen-set with hand-carved ivory clips, a desk-lamp with a mini chandelier inside, and a hundred other gifts. She worked through the huge pile of presents, eagerly tearing off the wrapping paper to see what each one contained.

Finally, only one unopened gift remained, from Great-Aunt Harriet—a small package wrapped, rather unattractively, in brown paper. Knowing that Great-Aunt Harriet was very old and couldn’t possibly have much idea of what young ladies liked, Lena unwrapped the brown paper, not hoping to find anything marvelous inside. Nevertheless, she would remember to show her appreciation and thank Great-aunt Harriet for thinking of her. But what was this? She had ripped off only a bit of the brown paper when her eyes caught something shiny inside. Lena keenly tore off the rest of the paper and nearly swooned with delight at seeing its contents. There it was, her dream so unexpectedly come true: a necklace of gorgeous white pearls that glistened madly when they caught the light. Pearls so perfectly pure and round—too splendid for mortal wear. They were even nicer than Susie Edwards’ string. Overwhelmed and giddy with pleasure, Lena could only whisper “Thank you” to Great-aunt Harriet.

The rest of that evening Lena was so entranced by her necklace that she could not stop thinking about it even for a moment. She felt she would rather sit and muse about it than spend time with the guests. Indeed, Betsy and Margaret’s cries of indignation when she did not play hide-and-seek with them (as she usually loved to do) made no impression on her; neither did Elizabeth’s and Lily-Marie’s amazed looks when she said she didn’t care to listen to the story of how Jerry Jones had cheated on Mary Stevens. She didn’t even seem to care if Isabel was offended because Great-aunt Harriet’s gift was appreciated more than her carefully chosen perfume. Lena was too busy imagining herself wearing those pearls to the next dance, where she was sure to be the envy of all eyes.

***

And so she was. By the time the dance was over, the story of Lena’s new necklace was buzzing on everybody’s lips. Never before had Lena felt so proud, so important, as now, when
she walked through the crowd, her pearls flashing ostentatiously round her neck, and the other girls casting longing, envious looks in her direction.

***

On a November evening, a few months after the day of the dance, Lena carefully took her most prized possession, her string of pearls, out of her drawer and put it on. There! Now she was all ready to go to Lily-Marie’s party. She checked her hair one last time in the mirror, nodded approvingly at her reflection, and went downstairs. At the party, Lena noticed that Lily-Marie was wearing a strange-looking thing around her neck: a sort of light scarf, black all over. Lena thought it looked absolutely ridiculous, but said nothing, lest she should hurt Lily-Marie’s feelings, and merely smiled to herself, fingerling her pearl necklace lovingly. But the next week at school, Lena noticed that Teresa and Bonnie were also wearing the same black scarf as Lily-Marie. “Whatever is the matter with these people?” Lena wondered, much amused, for she failed to see how people could go around in such absurd-looking things! But everyone else must have thought otherwise, for by Wednesday the next week, more than half of the girls at school were sporting such scarves! Those flimsy things, as Lena found out after inquiring from Bonnie, were a recent invention, and could be bought inexpensively at any fashion store. And they seemed to have become the latest fashion, for nearly everybody owned one now. “Well,” thought Lena, “they don’t have exquisite pearl necklaces like I do,” and smiled to herself every time she passed a black-scarved girl.

***

Lena was late to the annual school concert. When she entered the hall, the soprano was already on stage and had just begun her solo, a lovely aria from Robert le Diable. Lena tiptoed over to where her friends were sitting, and slid into a chair behind Elizabeth. As she did so, she caught snatches of the conversation two older girls behind her were having. She could not hear every word over the soprano’s voice, but a few distinct phrases caught her ear: “… clumsy thing she’s got on … so unstylish… such ugly white pellets…”

For a moment, Lena was bewildered. Then, as the sudden realization dawned upon her that those girls were talking about her very string of pearls—her precious pearls—Lena’s ears turned crimson. The soprano sang on, but Lena was unable to enjoy the beautiful music, for humiliation and anger were welling up inside her. She spun around (the girls behind her immediately stopped whispering) and stared. The two girls smiled pleasantly at her, and one of them lightly touched her own black scarf with an air of superiority. “Confound them!” thought Lena, and turned back around. After the concert, however, when she tried to talk to Elizabeth, the latter was strangely unresponsive and made an excuse to drift away quickly. Lena noticed that Elizabeth’s eyes had darted a few times to her pearl necklace before the latter had walked away. Lena didn’t understand it: why was Elizabeth, her best friend, avoiding her? When Lena saw Elizabeth again, she was standing with a group of strange black-scarved girls, giggling and gossiping with them. Lena, therefore, found it no surprise that Elizabeth too had a black scarf around her neck next morning at school. But at lunch when Elizabeth chose to sit with the group of girls she had been with after the concert the previous night, Lena felt miserable. It was not just Elizabeth—nobody else was talking to her, either. Why was everybody avoiding her now? Was it because she didn’t wear a black scarf like them? True, nearly every girl in the school wore one these days, but did they really think those stupid scarves were nicer than her pearl necklace? It could not be so! The same girls who now wore black scarves had admired...
Lena’s necklace so sincerely at the last dance. To prove this once and for all to herself, Lena resolved to dress up her prettiest for Mrs. Stevens’ Christmas party the next week, where she would strut among the foolish black-scarved girls, wearing her pretty pearl necklace and drawing looks of envy and admiration.

And so Lena arrived in a merry mood at the party the following Sunday; unsurprisingly, every girl there had a black scarf on, except for Lena, that is, around whose neck the string of pearls gleamed as brightly as the sun on the freshly-fallen snow outside. She made her way conspicuously through the room, expecting to see people gaze at her in awe. Gaze they did, but, to Lena’s bitter disappointment, instead of looks of jealous admiration, mocking smiles played on their lips when they saw her. Lena was crushed. So they did not think her necklace was pretty anymore. She shrank away to a corner and sat down to watch the other guests enjoy the party. To add to her wretchedness, no one even asked her to dance that night. As she wistfully watched Lily-Marie waltzing by with Thomas Harrison, Lena felt that she had been cast irrevocably into the depths of despair. Why, oh why, she pondered, was everyone so unkind to her?

Suddenly, the cause of all her sorrow flashed into her mind. It was the hideous necklace around her neck that prevented her from being happy! Oh, how ugly and cumbersome it was! And look how beautifully those soft scarves adorned the necks of the other girls—what a nice, deep shade of black they were—so much better than those horrible flashy pearls! How stupid she had been not to have realized this earlier! Unable to bear it anymore, Lena rushed out of the Stevens’ house without saying good-bye to anyone, intending to go straight home and hide that revolting necklace somewhere she would never have to look at it again.

Something smooth and dark on the snow-covered lawn caught her eye. Lena stooped down to see what it was—it was one of those glorious black scarves that somebody must have dropped. Mad with glee, Lena picked it up and held it in her hands for a moment, unable to believe her good luck, and caressed it as though it were a priceless treasure. Then, in an instant, her hand flew to her neck and tore off the necklace with a vengeance. The clasp broke, and the pearls scattered all over the snow like a myriad twinkling stars. Far from bothering even once about them, Lena marched home exultantly, the wet scarf clutched in her hand.

***

The next day at school, Elizabeth sat with her again, and at the New Year’s Eve dance, Bobby Spenser and Thomas Harrison (the latter much to Lily-Marie’s dismay) fought over who should be the first to dance with her. At home, Lena smiled at her reflection in the mirror and lovingly stroked the black scarf around her neck, thinking how much wiser she was now, to do what everyone else did.

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On the Stevens’ snowy lawn still twinkled the lost stars of individuality.
The Reason for Terror

"The highest priority, after faith, is to repel the incursive enemy which corrupts religion and the world. We are all servants of God, and he has prescribed for us killing and fighting... Our battle with the Americans is larger...we are sure of Allah's victory against the Americans as the Prophet promised" (Bin Laden, Interview with ABC News). Americans question why many Muslims feel this desire to kill and hate the United States. Americans generally believe that they have done little to harm the Muslims and to encourage the attack of September 11, labeling the Muslims as cruel, unjust, and unsound in their attacks on and hatred toward America. The claim that Muslims hate America out of pure spite and false motives is not necessarily true, for history indicates that Muslims have some clear motives for despising specific actions of the United States.

Though America claims 9/11 to be an example of the Muslims' hatred towards Americans' lives, multiple incidents in history America has demonstrated the same indifference towards the lives of Muslims. Too many Americans assume that the conflict began only at the time of 9/11 and the war to follow, but the tension between the Muslim and American people began years before this incident. Osama bin Laden refers to the Gulf War as a time in history in which Muslims were mistreated and slaughtered due to the sake of America's involvement in their communities. After the Gulf War of 1991, Saddam Hussein killed thousands of Shiite Muslims who refused to follow his rule. These Shiites were encouraged by the United States to overthrow Saddam, but when they were in crisis, American troops did nothing to intervene or stop the mad slaughter. The needless deaths of Muslims during this attack has given Osama bin Laden and al Quaeda the belief that they have grounds to kill American civilians. Osama bin Laden justifies this belief when he states, "Just as they are killing us, we have to kill them so there will be a balance of terror. This is the first time that the balance of terror has been close between Muslims and Americans in the modern age... If they kill our women and innocent people, we will kill their women and innocent people until they stop." The horror this statement brings is extremely significant. The idea that many Muslims feel this way toward America is hard to fathom, but Americans do not acknowledge the terror brought to the Muslim people in the war today because it is overseas.

The death of innocent American people in 9/11 seems significant to the United States, but Osama bin Laden's next statement really hits hard: "The killing of innocent civilians, as Americans claim, is really very strange talk. Who said that our civilians and children are not innocent and that shedding their blood is justified...Who said our blood is not blood, but theirs is? Why do we not hear someone condemning... or condolence...How come millions of Muslims are being killed?" Although America experienced heartache when the Twin Towers were attacked, the Muslim people experience terrorist attacks and death every day, but it goes unnoticed by the West. Does America truly value the lives of Muslim people? It does not seem to because for years in the past American troops transformed the Arabian Peninsula into a
more western area, defiling the intended holy atmosphere, and today the troops are in Iraq trying to westernize their culture and transform the Iraqi government. If America longs for the war between terrorism to stop, it seems logical to begin demonstrating proper care toward the Muslim community immediately.

America has brought hatred upon itself by supporting the leaders of the Muslim communities who inflict terror and rule cruelly upon their own civilians. This is especially visible in the support America has towards the strict Saudi Arabian government. As revealed by the Fact Sheet of Saudi Arabia, the Muslim people live extremely strict rules: “Movies are not allowed;” “Women may not drive, ride a bike, or operate a motorcycle;” “A husband can divorce his wife simply by saying, 'I divorce you' three times;” and “Saudi women are excluded from studying journalism, engineering, and architecture.” America's support of a corrupt Muslim government is also visible in Egypt. In the 1950’s Gamal Abdel Nasser became the ruler of Egypt and gained the voice of the Arab world. His desire for modernization was cut short as the government invested all its energy and reconstruction in the worst ways imaginable. The invasion of Kuwait, led by Saddam Hussein, broke the last remaining string of Arab unity and sent the government of Egypt on a downward spiral. America supports this country's government but does nothing to help the economy, as 75% of the population is without jobs (Why do They Hate Us, 26). It seems logical that Osama bin Laden and other Muslim people are frustrated with the American government because it does nothing to help restore the unity and peace between the Middle Eastern governments and the millions of civilians.

Muslims have been continuously humiliated by the involvement of Americans in attempting to thrust Western values and priorities upon them. The American troops have been accused by Osama bin Laden as taking over and destroying the Muslims' holy land. In Osama bin Laden's fatwah of 1998, he describes this act as a deliberate goal of humiliation when he states that “the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its neighbors, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples.” Muslim people value their religion above all else, and when American troops occupy the holy peninsula and thrust western modernization on the civilians, many Muslims see this as an attempt to humiliate and mock their culture. Some of the Muslims believe they are judged by lower standards than other countries are, “both in what is expected of them and what they may expect- in terms of their financial well-being and their political freedom” (Lewis 6). This is humiliating to the Muslims because they feel belittled by the Americans and of less value to the U.S.A. than well off nations such as Europe. Many Muslims also believe that although they look up to and admire the United States and its government, the United States only looks down upon the Muslims and sees no hope for their future. This causes humiliation in Muslims because they believe Americans consider them to be the lowest of the low.

Another source of resentment is that Muslim extremists envision dominating the world under their Islamic religion, and America is the main world power standing in the way of the fulfillment of this vision. This is the most frightening threat to the American people and the world. The radical Muslims believe it is their calling to annihilate every individual who does not believe in Allah. Sayyid Qutb confirms the previous statement when he explains, “There are two parties in all the world: the party of Allah and the party of Satan-- the party of Allah which stands under the banner of Allah...and the party of Satan, which includes every community,
group, race, and individual that does not stand under the banner of Allah.” This should strike fear in the souls of America because the United States is a nation which claims to be built upon the foundation of Christianity. These two religions are seen almost as polar opposites by much of the world. Sheikh Safar Al Hawali of Saudi Arabia describes the drastic difference between the foundations of these two opponents are built upon: “Relations between America and us differ from the relations between us and all other nations... One is a nation that was chosen by Allah...Allah is using that nation in order to wave the banner of truth and justice on the face of the earth. There is also a tyrannous nation that Allah is manipulating...until it reaches the end to which it is sentenced.” As terrifying as these beliefs are, many Muslims do see America as the sole world power holding them back from creating a world ruled under the Islamic religion. Osama bin Laden and the other extremists have this goal of a one-world religion and are determined to bring an end to any nation which stands in the way.

It is of utmost importance that both parties, Muslim and American, are able to understand the events in history which brought the tension among the two groups. As easy as it is for the American people to ignore the idea that the radical Muslims have a reason for their action, it is necessary that the United States does come to grasp the thought. When this is fully understood and America knows how to make the Muslim community feel loved and treated as significant individuals, the war on terrorism will be that much closer to being solved. Though it is likely that it will never totally subside, it would be a miracle to be on better terms with the civilians if not for the terrorist themselves.
Baby Face

Joseph (Joey) Atlee Doss, age 2 months 5 days, passed away Monday, November 29, 2010. Joey was the son of Justin and Rebecca Doss of Lee’s Summit. Visitation will be Sunday, December 5 from noon to 2:00 p.m. at Langsford Funeral Home, with a memorial service at 2:00. The family will have a private burial the next day.

I wringed my hands in my lap as my sister, Leanne, drove down the winding highway with her friend, Anna, in the passenger seat. The day was sunny and bright, though it deceived us with a chilling wind. My black attire warmed me, and my mind was somewhere else. One thing you have to understand is that band students have a different relationship with directors than other students do with their teachers. The directors get to know you on a personal level, whereas the line between teachers and students is fuzzy and uncertain. We are with these people for six years of our lives almost every day, so when tragedy strikes the younger of the teachers, the students are offered the opportunity to show their support. Well, where does that line fall for the band students? There are only so many words in the English language that say, “Condolences for your loss” or “I’m very sorry.” It’s awkward, but it would be rude not to go. So now, here I am on the way to Lee’s Summit trying to figure out what would be appropriate.

All too soon, Garmen announced that we had arrived. I raised my eyes to scan over the parking lot, and although there weren’t many students that had arrived yet, the parking lot was nearly full. My stomach turned over as I huddled against the stinging wind. We followed a young couple in through the double doors where giant blossoming wallpaper covered the walls and light mossy green carpet muffled our footsteps. Leanne, Anna, and I stood there in the lobby for a moment, taking in the scene. A line of people wrapped around the corner of another entryway, leading into the viewing area. We shuffled forward, and I was handed a program with Joey’s face smiling hauntingly at me. Finally, we came to the third. Pictures of him and Mr. Doss were forced into my vision as we passed. Wow, I thought. He looked like he was a really good father. My heart pulled a little bit from my chest, and my eyes felt the stinging, though I promised myself that I wouldn’t cry. Not here. Not now.

We finally came around the bend. The room opened up, and family members were everywhere, crying. I shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. I didn’t belong here; this was a private family-and-close-friends matter. But I was here and there was no going back now. A line of older, unknown people were first in line and then Mr. Doss and his wife. I looked at him...
curiously. He held his composure well: his eyes weren’t red like all the others, nor did he seem drained of life; though the trained eye could tell that he was carrying the load in his shoulders to stay strong for everyone else. Then, as if he knew I was there, at that moment, thinking it, he looked straight at me. All the pain and in the world was right there in those two little specks of hazel. The stinging came back in that one instant, and I nearly lost it but held back again. We came to the first man in line.

“Hello,” the man said. “Are you friends...?”

“Students,” Leanne said quietly.

“Former students,” Anna corrected.

I simply nodded.

“Well, we’re very pleased you could make it. I’m sure it will mean a lot to him.” He shook hands with us firmly and gave us a small smile. I replied with a grimace. We went through a few more people, with each conversation along the same lines. I quickly grew weary from nervousness. Then I finally saw it: the casket. It was an open casket. Oh, heck no! I screamed in my mind. That casket was too small. I didn’t even know they made them that small! A blanket was draped around the lid and a teddy bear lay at the end of it. A helpless little infant dying of what? No one would know for a few weeks. That must have been the hardest, not knowing what had happened.

Leanne, not seeing Mr. Doss for at least four years, and uncomfortable all around with death, shook hands with him and said, “How are you doing?”

_How are you doing? How are you doing? That is the worst thing you could say at a time like this, you moron!_ I shot dagger looks at Leanne.

“Well...you know....” he said uneasily.

“Yeah....sorry,” Leanne mumbled.

Anna had a better shot though. He shook hands with her, and she said, “I’m really sorry, Mr. Doss.”

“It’s good to see you again.” Unfeeling, rehearsed, numb.....

“I miss having you as a teacher.” Trying to make the situation on a lighter note, though that won’t happen.

My turn. Oh, crap. What do I say? What do I do? I'm not prepared for this—too close to the line, that fuzzy, indeterminate line. I knew I was on a tightrope slicked down with oil; one false move can send that special bond between composer and musician falling. My heart thumped in my ears as I approached. Should I smile? That’s how I usually greet everyone, but this is a visitation; you’re not supposed to smile. What was it that I was supposed to say? Oh, right. I hadn’t come up with anything. My head rolled up, and my eyes fell upon his, and I couldn’t help but break my composure a little. A breath came out of my body as one does in their last moments of life; though I wasn’t the one dying. I unfolded my hands—still shaking, might I add—extending my right as my left fell limp to my side. But, unlike the company before me, he opened his arms wide, and enclosed me in an embrace.

“Thanks for coming,” he murmured in my ear. Not rehearsed, not uncomfortable, but heavy with sincerity and gratitude that I had never heard in his voice before.

I relaxed, seemingly at ease. I closed my eyes as I hugged him back trying to communicate that I was happy to be here to support him. And for lack of better words, I said,
“You’re welcome.” He let go and just looked at me for a moment. “I’m truly sorry.” He shrugged and nodded in response.

“I hope to be in class again soon,” Mr. Doss stated. “Permitting, of course.”
I shook my head. “Take all the time you need. We’re doing just fine.” His half smile broke through the solemnity, and I couldn’t help but half smile back. Leanne and Anna had moved onto the viewing, and I nodded again in his direction to signal my good-bye.

We were only at the casket for a few moments, but the face of little baby Joey is engraved. His pacifier lay on his stomach, the bear I saw earlier rested at the foot of the casket, and he was dressed in a hat and a light blue and white onesy. But his face! There was no hiding the fact that his eyes were sewn shut—I shuttered. His long lashes brushed his chubby cheeks that were full of make-up to cover up the gray and blue. He looked like a porcelain doll. A baby! I tried to tune everything out and concentrate on not crying, but my ears amplified everything. To my horror, the sweetest, most saddening lament rang from the speakers: the tune of Rock a by Baby. I bit my tongue in response, and the taste of warm iron lathered my mouth.

I didn’t have a right to cry. I didn’t know this baby; perhaps this was the second or third time I had seen him. I wasn’t a close friend of the family. I felt like everyone would look at me thinking, Why is she crying? It’s not like she knew them anyway. It wasn’t my place to cry. I couldn’t help but cry. For what? I don’t know. Perhaps because maybe I did have a more personal connection to this director. Maybe because it was the first time I had gone to and seen a baby’s funeral.

Perhaps I cried for what I saw in the program as the song played: The Music played during the visitation today was the music Mommy and Daddy played for Joey most often, both when he was still inside Mommy’s tummy and when he came out to be with us.

Purple Tulips

February, 1998

I held my mother’s hand as I was guided across a large room with hundreds of colorful flowers everywhere, tall adults dressed in black, and pictures of Great Grandpa Burkhart were ubiquitously placed. A large toy chest stood in front of the room. This must be another family reunion! The moon bounce must be outside. Though why would Mom dress me up in my black velvet dress and pretty shoes? My eyebrows furrowed as I looked at the grown-ups around us again. Why is everyone crying? No one usually cried at the family reunion, except perhaps the newborn. What is going on?

September, 1997

The white gravel crunched beneath the grey van. I gazed out the window as I looked for the sign that indicated we’re finally at Grandpa’s house. There! The old yellow school bus! At the top of the hill a small house looked over the rolling hills and grassy planes of untouched land. Mom unbuckled me, and I hopped out of the car, eager to be showered with love. Hundreds of purple, red, and pink tulips, white daisies, and other unknown flowers swayed lethargically in the lazy wind. The screen door opened, and I shuffled inside while a thick
fragrance of Hungarian Paprika and a faint whiff of cologne swirled around my head until I was engulfed in it. I took a deep breath and smiled to myself, running up the steps.

February, 1998

“Stay here,” Mom had said. She and Dad had gone away to go talk to Grandma, also giving her a big hug. Auntie Peggy was carrying Olivia around, and Leanne was nowhere to be seen. Hopping down from the hard wooden pew, I wandered around for something to do. I wonder if the toy chest has any good Barbies, I thought. I walked up to the massive structure and placed my foot in the metal X at the bottom, my hands on the metal bars on the sides, and I hoisted myself up, just barely able see over the top. My eyebrows furrowed together as I tried to piece together the facts presented to me.

September, 1997

“Grandpa!” I squealed as I jumped into his arms. His throaty laugh welcomed me, as did a kiss on the head.

“Meine enkelin,” he said in throaty German. Mom waddled—from being pregnant with my sister—over to Grandma to work on dinner, and Leanne went to go raid the caramel candies in the living room. Grandpa crouched down low to my height and pulled out a gold candy especially for me. I giggled and took it eagerly, popping it in my mouth. “Listen,” he said. I covered my mouth and strained my ears to listen past the kitchen noises, to catch what he was hearing.

“What do you hear?” I whispered.

“I’ll show you.” He got on all fours, as did I, and lead me over to the stove. He looked under the stove for a long time. “There’s a kitty under the stove,” he stated. I got on my tummy and looked into the dark crevice.

“I don’t see anything.”

“You’re not seeing, Enkelin, you’re looking. You must see.”

I looked under again, confused by his words, trying to see what he describes. Then, after a moment or two of staring at blackness, the darkness moved and two glowing black orbs blinked and disappeared. I gasped from excitement. “I saw him! I saw him!” I shouted. Grandpa laughed the throaty laugh and got up of his knees.

“Keep looking,” he said. “The kitty is bound to show up again soon.”

February, 1998

Grandpa’s face was so still it hardly seemed like he was sleeping. He wasn’t even snoring! Grandma must’ve given him medicine for that. The corners of his mouth were slightly tilted upwards as if he was having a good dream. I clasped my hand on the edge so I could get a better look. He was dressed in his best Sunday suit and his hands were folded together.

“Grandpa,” I whispered. “The party has started. It’s time to wake up.” I reached in and pushed lightly on his shoulder. When he didn’t stir, I grazed my fingertips gently on his cheek. His skin was waxy and cold; though it didn’t startle me. The deathly silence and unmoving body calmed me in a way in which words cannot describe. “Grandpa,” I whispered more urgently.
September, 1997
I stroked the brush across the rough paper trying to paint the scene before me. My tongue peeped out of the corner of my mouth in concentration. I looked over at Grandpa’s and his whole page was filled with millions of different colors blending together to create the garden before us. I pursed my lips in frustration comparing the two.

“Grandpa,” I said. “Why are you painting blue in a purple flower?”
“Because the flower isn’t just simply purple, Enkelin, there are hundreds of colors on the flower. It is our job as artists to capture the colors.”
“How do you find the colors?”
“There’s no need to find them, they’re already here in front of you.”
“Where?” I picked up the tulip and twirled it between my fingers.

Grandpa put his hand over mine and crouched down behind me and looked over my shoulder. “Start seeing with your eyes and stop looking with your mind. Not everything’s always what it seems to be.”

February, 1998
A pair of gentle hands found my waist and lifted me up so I could finally see him fully. I looked over my shoulder and found Mom gazing past me and at Grandpa. Her eyes were rimmed red from crying. “The party’s started, and Grandpa won’t wake up,” I said to her. “Will you help me?”

“Grandpa’s not asleep, Lex.”
“Then what is he doing? Why are his eyes closed? Why is everyone crying when there’s a party?”

Her arms wrapped around me tighter with her lips to my ear. “Grandpa’s gone to heaven, Lex. God decided it was time for Grandpa to leave and go with him.”
“Grandpa didn’t leave, he’s right here.”
“His body is here, but his soul went with God. That’s what made Grandpa who he was. His body was like a seashell for his soul.”
“And he’s gone?”
“Yes.”
“For ever?”
“Not forever. Someday you’ll be in heaven with him. Then you’ll see him again.” She gathered me up and turned away from the corpse. I looked curiously back at the box that held Grandpa. If that’s not really him, then this must not be me. I shook my head, frustrated and not understanding my own reasoning. People began to sit down next to us. I grabbed the pencil and paper in front of me and began drawing. I drew Grandpa in the casket with a cross hanging over him. I tugged on Mom’s skirt and showed her the picture. She gasped as she timidly took the picture.
“I understand,” I said quietly. “Grandpa’s gone.”

September 2010—Present
“I want you to paint the drink shaker on page 56 of the Watercolor Book. Try to see past the plain grey,” Ms. Barati said during Painting class. I sighed as I pulled out the watercolor pad and pallet. The watery paints were definitely not my strong point yet, though the assignments
just kept coming. I opened the book to the page and groaned to myself. An array of grays evened through the shaker. It’s just going to look like a massive gray, watery blob. I looked around the room, irritated. Though through the frustration, a purple tulip lay alone on the table. Grandpa’s voice swam through my mind…the kitty…the garden…the tulips… I smiled to myself and began painting.
The Demise of a Demon

Numb, tired, defeated, we line up to go again. Every time we go, our bodies scream. Oxygen deprivation twists our bodies into a self-destructive machine. The demon grows stronger with each lap we swim, feeding on our desire to give up, to take the easy way out, to breathe. As swimmers, we are taught to deny ourselves the body’s most valuable asset. We are taught to beat the body, tricking it, fooling it into no longer needing air. The goal is to create an elite athlete, one that no longer requires the substance of life.

The feeling is unlike any other. I’ve played sports of all types and conditioned for all of them. In none, however, have I experienced simultaneously such physical depletion and mental fulfillment. Physically, the task is simple: I must swim from one end to the other without breathing. Mentally the task is daunting: I must convince myself that I no longer need the oxygen I was built to crave. Preparing my body for this definitive paradox involves severe discipline and a twisted thirst for victory.

After what seems like hours of being told breathing makes us slow, we prepare ourselves for the mission. We are determined to go. The push off the wall is smooth but strong, propelling my body through the water. I morph my body into a giant fin and kick in one fluent continuous motion until I break the surface. The strokes are slow but deliberate. Each time my hand slides into the watery surface it twists and closes in order to grab the water, to get the upmost pull, to use what oxygen I have left to get myself across.

The finish greets me and serves as a place of solace, allowing me to catch my breath. Finally, the feat is over, I am victorious. Momentarily.

At the conclusion of the drill, the coach tells us we may leave or try to conquer two laps without breathing. This is pure madness. There is no way, I think, that I can move from this wall to that wall and back without breathing, but after being coerced into it by my teammates, I decide to try.

Desperately, I start gorging on air, struggling to compensate for the deprived state soon to come. The push-off seems similar to that of the single lap—nice and long and smooth. At the half way line, I am filled with confidence. As I flip on the wall heading home, however, my mission seems unfeasible. In attempt to prevent water from rushing into my nose, I blow out precious air. I hate myself for wasting such a vital substance. Despair fills my mind, and doubt builds like a broken faucet filling an overflowing sink.

At this point, the demon of despair rears its ugly head. It convinces my brain that I will drown, causing my body to panic. Mentally, I try to hold onto what determination I still have. Desperately, I try to remove myself from the situation and focus on something irrelevant. Snapshots of my depleting life flash through my head like lightning in a storm. As in a storm, the blackness that is my doubt remains ever present. I realize that my efforts are in vain. My throat begins to contract in an attempt to gasp for air, even though my mouth is closed. I panic. I fear that my life is fleeting and that I will never return to the fun filled days I had just
previously seen vividly before my eyes. But finally, I see the line splitting the pool into halves.
Closer to the ending wall. Determined as ever, I convince myself I can do it.

It is as if the demon, too, is inspired by the line. My legs are stubborn children, refusing
to kick without air. At which point my momentum ceases to exist, and my arms have to drag,
to pull, to fight for every inch. The water is no longer a miracle substance of which life requires,
instead it is an executioner wielding a dull blade. Every stroke I take feels like being struck by
the executioner’s axe. The blows do not kill me but rather inflict such pain that I wish I was
dead. I feel their thuds ripple through my whole body. Instead of blood, lactic acid fills my
pulsing veins, the poison melting my muscles. I toil to finish as my muscles burn.

I can't stop. I am too close, too tired, too driven to stop. My lungs scream, begging for
the torture to subside, to let them fill with air. But I drive on. My heart races to compensate for
the lack of oxygen. My body sends out adrenaline helping my muscles suck the last oxygen I
have from my body like a child sucking the last drops of juice out with a straw. Under the flags,
I get dizzy—only fifteen feet from the finish I begin to convulse from lack of air. My eyes fade
out as if entering a dark tunnel. All goes black.

I touch. I breathe. I am victorious. I am filled with ecstasy. I have won my Olympic gold,
slain my dragon, overcome my obstacle. The demon slinks away into to the dark crevasses of
my soul. I have conquered my body, proving to myself that I am capable of much more: doing
what nature had not intended, surviving without air. I am reborn.
Turn of the Tide

As I loaded the last few boxes into the bright yellow moving van parked outside my house, I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I thought about the unknown ahead of me. New school, new house, new friends—I had a lot to think about. At the same time, I knew that I was about to make a new beginning; a chapter was about to close in my life, and for that, I was grateful.

Looking back on the past few months, I had anticipated the move with excitement and dread. From the moment my mom met Mr. Wrong, my life took a quick turn down the steep hill of extreme sadness. Daric, my soon to be step-father, wasn’t all sugar and sweetness when he first met my mother. I suspected that there was more under the surface of his smiling mask. Daric courted my mom with expensive watches and jewelry to lure her into his trap. My mother accepted these gifts not knowing what she was getting herself into. She thought that he was everything she needed and wanted. Why was I the only one who could see through his veneer? He courted my brothers and sisters too, with his debonair ways and his false admiration and love. I knew that the only thing that I would get out of this deal would be a soon-to-be cold-hearted stranger as a step-father. The icing on the cake was that I would be sharing my space with his two apple-doesn’t-fall-far-from-the-tree children who would become my siblings-by-law the day my mother said “I do.” I saw that my mom was filled with happiness, and I couldn’t bring myself to say, “I don’t.” I swallowed my objections to this union and put on my own false veneer.

The dreaded day approached, just as my mom, Daric, and the calendar promised. I knew that dread was paralyzing me, but I couldn’t shake myself out of it. I couldn’t blame my mom. She became pregnant with me at the tender at of sixteen. She never really knew love the way that it should be experienced. She was rushed into adulthood and parenthood all at the same time. I blame myself for this even though I was only a by-product of passion. I was never allowed to see or meet my bio-dad. Every sentence my mom uttered about him began with, “That no-good, two-bit, two-timing, druggie...” I’ll never be one of those girls on television who go through the process of tracking down her parent only to realize that her biological father rose from the dregs of teenage parenthood and became a famous entrepreneur who was looking for her for years and wants to gift her with a dream house, new Jeep, and a 4-year college education. My father just may be the pan-handler on the corner looking for a buck so that he can have another cigarette. I pray he doesn’t come looking for me.

As that dreadful day approached, I just sat there thinking how my life would be ruined after today. There was nothing I could do to stop this approaching snowball of catastrophe. It kept rolling and rolling and rolling toward my sweet family, gathering speed and velocity ready to break us apart. The last few weeks before the wedding were terrifying. The days just kept getting worse and worse.
My own “bad-girl” behavior increasingly got worse due to his appearance in my life. I’ve always struggled with self-control on the best of days, but this new situation was stifling me. I would sneak out of the house after Daric grounded me for arguing with him and hang out with my boyfriend David. We would cruise our small town and go to the restaurants and have coffee and talk just to get away from our collectively bad home lives. We knew that the inevitable would come: first the snippy comments, then the small arguments, then the full-blown shouting matches, and eventually a punch or two and hidden bruises. One day, not twenty minutes after I had hopped into David’s truck a block away from my house, I noticed a black Ford truck that looked pretty familiar. I had David turn left, and then right, and then left again. As we sat at the stoplight, Daric roared by looking left and then right with a sinister look on his face. I ducked and then began to cry. As David consoled me, we heard a motor gunning from behind us. I looked up and Daric tore around David’s truck, rolled down his window and gave me a stare that will live in my heart forever.

“Get out, and walk home!” he roared.
“But I’m three miles away...” I sobbed.
“Get out now if you ever want to see your boyfriend again. You’ll get the punishment you deserve when you get home.”

I did as he said. I knew from experience that this was the kind of person you don’t say no to. David mouthed, “I’m sorry,” to me, and I silently said back, “Call me, please.” I knew that Daric was ready for me to pack my bags and get out of his house, but how could I? I was thirteen years old.

The day has finally come. I look at my mother looking at herself in the mirror. She’s the happiest she’s been in a long time. I know now that I’m not going to ruin this for her. I can stand anything that man can throw at me as long as she is happy. She deserves this happiness. Mom puts the last finishing touches on her gown and turns around to look at me. This is what her life should have been like from the beginning. She motions for me to come to her, and we hold hands, smiling at each other. She gathers around my brothers and sisters for an impromptu prayer before we head downstairs to our future.

We line up at the top of the stairs and begin our descent to the sanctuary. My grandfather smiles at my mother the same way I do, hoping that this is a future of happiness for all of us. He’s been through the worst of times with all of us, and I know that he is hoping for the same thing we all are.

We walk down the aisle two-by-two, and I try not to look at Daric. My eyes focus on the bride’s side of the aisle. Everyone has an expectant look. The soft music stops playing, and we focus on the doors at the end of the aisle. My grandfather beams as he walks down with my mother. I catch Mom’s eyes, and we smile; then she focuses on Daric, and our moment is gone. My grandfather gives his baby girl a peck on the cheek before handing her over to this stranger he just met a few months ago. Mom turns to Daric and gives him a smile so sweet that it would melt anyone’s heart. It’s obvious that he has her right where he wants her.

I shake myself out of my daydreams as I hear the preacher say, “Does anyone object? Speak now or forever hold your peace.” That’s my future. I can either speak up now and break her heart or never speak against him again. I open my mouth to say something, but just at that minute, Mom turns to me. I close my mouth, smile, and give her a little nod. I pull myself back into reality, and everyone resumes were they left off. I see my older sister leaving the sanctuary
with my little niece, my grandma tearing up as she realizes that her baby girl has finally found someone she loves, and lastly, me – me, just sitting up there trying to hide my tears from everyone. My mother says something very unusual to the pastor, “Wait one moment please?”

“Okay,” says the pastor with a question in his eyes.

She turns to her almost-husband and says “I want all of our kids to be up her at the alter with us as we say our vows. Can we do this please?”

“That’s a great idea, honey!”

They turn to the audience and say all of our names “Megan, Antonio, Austin, Olivia, Lauren, Norah, Morgan, join us up here as we are all united as a family?”

As we all stand by our parents in front of our friends and family, our new parents say their vows.

“Do you, Daric, take this woman to be your lawfully-wedded wife?”

“I do.” Daric says as he turns to smile at my Mom. I feel anger boiling up inside me as he stares at my mother.

“Do you, Jennifer, take this man to be your lawfully-wedded husband?”

“I do,” my mother says joyfully.

“Then by the power vested in me and the state of Missouri I now pronounce you man and wife.”

“Daric, you may kiss your bride.”

As my mother and my new step-father share their first kiss as a married couple, my new siblings and I stand with smiles on our faces. Everyone in the audience begins to clap and stand as my mom and her new husband walk down the aisle. Once outside the small church, my mother and her new husband get in his truck and drive off while we pile into our grandparents’ cars and get ready for our own new life.

The reception is small but rowdy with Daric’s friends looking for love in all the wrong places—mainly my family tree. I attempt to head off any other budding romances between Daric’s friends and family and my own cousins and aunts. At the end of the night, I am exhausted from all the planning and plotting, and as we drive to my grandmother’s house, I say one last prayer that this man who is now my stepfather will be exactly what my mother wants and needs. I can put my own hopes and dreams on the back burner for her. She did exactly that for me, and I now want to repay the favor.

A week later, Mom walks in the door of Grandma’s house, and I can tell that the honeymoon is literally over—in just one short week. She looks tired and out of sorts and, after giving us a weary hug, tells us to pile into her car to drive to “their” new house that my family owns. Even before we get into the car, Daric, with a week of beard stubble and another inch around his beer-belly, is not pleased with the way that we have clamored over to my mother and given her all the attention.

“Hey there! I’m here, too!” he yells from his car window. “Come and give your new Daddy a big hug and kiss.”

There is something menacing in his voice, and I just wave and say, “Welcome back!” and quickly duck inside Mom’s car.

The fights start almost immediately. If it isn’t about money, it’s about us—the kids. Antonio got into another fight at school. Olivia’s teacher called today about her grades. The list went on and on. It didn’t seem as if there was an end in sight to our troubles. I remembered our
family as happy—poor, but happy—without a man in our house to wait on and cater to. I dreamed that we would go back to the way we once were, but it looked as if Mom wanted to give this relationship a chance. I cried myself to sleep at night—my heart ached for her and for my brothers and sisters.

A few months later, I could hear Daric and my mother arguing in their bedroom. I heard what sounded like furniture being moved and stumbling. Lots of stumbling. I could hear my mother crying. I didn’t know whether to race up the stairs to her rescue or wait until she came down.

Crash!
That did it. I wasn’t waiting around to see what happened. I kicked open their bedroom door and saw my mom with tears streaming down her face, looking at her jewelry box in pieces scattered all over the floor.

“Get out of here!” Daric roared.
I ignored him and went to my mother and put my arms around her. She was shaking to her very core. She sat down on the bed, and I went to pick up her jewelry box.

“I said get out of here, little girl!”
“Do as he says, sweetheart.”
I couldn’t believe it. Mom was siding with this big lugnut. Later, I found out she agreed with him to keep him quiet and to keep him away from us.

Daric stormed out the door, hopped in his truck and sped away. Mom grabbed me and said, “Quick, get everything together—we’re leaving.”

We didn’t have to worry about Daric’s children. They were with his second and third wives, respectively, that weekend. We only had to worry about us—and getting to safety. I threw everything I owned into a suitcase and a box or two. The little ones did the same. Mom took our things over to a friend and quickly explained the situation. When she returned, we piled into our car and drove away. To safety. To a place he wouldn’t or couldn’t find us. Mom explained that we would come back when Daric was at work and get everything that was ours.

After we settled into our new home, enrolled in our new school, and reconnected with our cousins and aunts, life began to become normal again. The divorce papers were signed, sealed, and delivered, and it looked as though we could begin our new life again—just us, the only family I had really ever known. I began to relax, and the nightmares stopped. I had left my friends and my first boyfriend, but this peace was worth it. Knowing that my mom was safe and that we didn’t have to tiptoe around the raging emotions of our stepfather was sheer bliss.

One evening, about three months after we were settled, Mom walked in the door. She looked beautiful. Her cheeks were rosy, she was smiling, and she had on a new outfit. She looked a little bit flustered, as if she had just run up the stairs. She had phoned earlier and told us that she would be a little bit late from work, so I went ahead and started dinner for all of us. She called all of us into the living room and had us sit down on the couch. She left the door open, and as I went to shut it, she said, “Leave it open sweetheart, there’s someone new, waiting outside, that I want you to meet.”
Sailor, Who?

The words “service” and “project” used in succession on that assignment sheet bashed me in the gut like the closed-taloned fist of a Harpy. The paper read “individual assignment,” and there I sat: all Jason and no Medea, on the island of Colchis, with two fire-breathing brass-hoofed bulls in front of me, set to cleave me in two from head to toe and scorch my remains into a pile of ash. How was I, a completely selfish teenager, going to pull a service project benefiting the community out of nowhere? I had never participated in an act of self-perpetuated service, and the vague prompt was not really of much assistance in the ways of ideas.

In addition to the pressing problem of an attic full of empty light bulb boxes, I also found myself cultivating no desire to benefit anyone besides myself. My senior year in high school had heaped a lot on my plate up until this point, and my eyes had been forced to be gluttonous in the face of my shrinking stomach. How to help anyone aside from myself was beyond me. This Talented and Gifted Literature and Humanities class was about to be the only high school class to ever challenge my intelligence.

For weeks I meandered about, dodging the points, mulling over vague ideas, drinking scalding hot tea to ease my mind of the aching presence of responsibility. The deadline for service gold loomed, and I was no Rumpelstiltskin. The incense burning on my desk seemed to waft in increasingly noxious drafts rivaling the auditory crescendo of my clanking watch hands.

“Tick-tocK, Sailor. Port’s on the horizon and the crow’s nest is antsy,” spewed the laughing waves of the digital computer screen clock.

Groan, quoth I. My mind told me to serve, but this, the burden of my soul’s will to a physical counterpoint, irked my tired eyes even more. Ever onward I pressed, toward harbor. A ship with no anchor on which I was captain surged to the bay named My Stern Fear of Failure, ME. Maine was gloomy that time of year, but the sails must make way. And way they made. And helpless I sat, sole passenger of a one-man torpedo.

On a particularly grotesque day, the Sun closed the cloudy curtains on His sky window to the World – even He realized that I was in a bind and that I would not let His warmth cheer me, so why waste the effort when He could just take a little catnap? Even the seas, from shore to shore, brewed in furious protest at His absence, but what was He to do? Only I could save myself from my predicament, and He knew that the only light to shine on my world should come from within myself. Although the birds weren’t very chipper and the sidewalk creaked sadly from the early October frost and the trees whispered to one another like agitated schoolgirls at a particularly full lunch table in the presence of a newcomer, He turned a blind eye.

“It’s his problem!” I could hear Him booming about me as I trod into the school building. The world was not pleased with me, and I was none too happy with it either; that day I forced the Sun from the sky. I think it was a Thursday.

After having endured the school day, I sloshed along the hallway in the language arts building until I came upon room twenty-nine. This seemed like the only good idea I’d had for
weeks. I pushed open the door and slumped into Ms. Meyer’s room. She knew something was
wrong, but — unlike the Sun — she was oblivious as to my staggering position.

“What seems to be the matter with you, Mr. Frank?” her genuinely concerned voice
danced toward my sullen direction.

“Krrnmf... nmglgnfmser viceproject...” I managed.

“Well what about it?” She asked calmly.

“What not about it?” I gasped, exasperated. “Everything in my head right now is about
it. I can’t think about anything else! I don’t want to let myself down on this one. I know I often
do things half way, but that isn’t an option for this. But I’m so stumped! All I know is that I want
to provide an intangible service. I’ve never done community service or things of the sort for a
good reason; I don’t like the physicality of ‘normal’ community service. Anyone can get some
canned food together. Granted, it’s for a good cause, but that’s not exactly original enough for
me. I need to challenge people, ask them, ‘Hey, who are you? What do you believe? Make this
world better with me.’ This isn’t just about them, though, it’s about me too. I need to do things
for me to find out who I am and what I want before I can help anyone else. Or maybe I can do
both simultaneously. If I’m going to be a teacher, don’t you think I’d be better at thinking of
stuff like this?”

“Well, first things first, what are your plans, if any, for the physical aspect of this
project? I know you’ve got it in here,” she motions to her hear

I’d planned on graffitying chalk messages around town to bring people together to a
central meeting place where we could gather and...and do what? That’s where I’m stuck. I have
such a vague outline after that point. And complete strangers is a big step. Plus there are no
real great places around town to tag with messages as big as I want them.” I had been pacing
profusely for minutes by now.

“Well, use your peers. As for the chalk, I stay stick with it. And why not at sc

“Huh. Good point. I mean, I do have some stuff I’d like to say to the group of people, but
I wouldn’t gather them just to talk to. Who am I to sit there and just try to...influence people
with my words? I mean, I’m a writer, so I suppose that makes sense, but I’m always afraid I’ll
come off as pretentious or something.” I jittered.

She politely sat and let me continue.

“I want to know who they are, because knowing that is the first step in knowing what
you want to do with your life. I desperately need to find that out about myself. I guess that’s
why I’m gravitating toward this group approach; I have faith in people.” I scribbled a bit of
writing down onto a spare piece of paper nearby.

“What was that?” she asked, intrigued.

I handed her the paper which read: “Tell the world who you are.”

“I think that’s it!” I grinned, “I’ll have them all speak to the world. Give hope. I’ll instruct
them. Maybe I can see what it’s like to be a teacher, like you.” Then I smiled.

I’d thought at first that the Sun came back out because of my epiphany, but it became
clear to me later that her jubilant smile had coaxed him out of his hiding place. I was finally a
sailor with a compass, for once in my life.
Imagine attending the funeral of a loved one who served in the armed forces. The grief is tremendous, but a few hundred yards away, strangers stand picketing the funeral with hateful signs that read, “Thank God for Dead Soldiers.” For Albert Snyder, this was reality at his son Matt’s funeral in the spring of 2006. The Westboro Baptist Church is infamous for protesting at soldiers’ funerals. It is their belief that because of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, any member of the military could be homosexual, and that God’s punishment for this very limited “tolerance” of homosexuality in the military is sending home soldiers in flag-draped caskets. Matt Snyder was not even gay, and his family had great difficulty mourning their beloved son with the heinous distraction of dogmatists waving signs that say, “Thank God for 9/11” and “You’re Going to Hell.”

Under the First Amendment, all Americans are entitled to the freedom of speech. But every time bigots like the Neo-Nazis or the KKK take to the streets protected under the idea of liberty, the founding fathers roll over in their graves. With the guarantee of that freedom comes the subsequent ignorant masses that can safely take shelter behind the Bill of Rights. Snyder couldn’t stand this idea. His son died defending this country and its ideals, including the right to freedom of speech. That strangers had the nerve to ruin Matt’s memorial unsettled him. Snyder is suing Westboro, and the case has traveled all the way to the Supreme Court.

Many media organizations like the Associated Press are siding with Westboro, despite its hateful actions. Placing bans on freedom of speech is a dangerous game to play. If Westboro can’t stage a protest, who’s to say that the Pro-Life movement has the right to march on Washington D.C.? Common sights at a Pro-Life march are grotesque pictures of mangled embryos. Should this be deemed offensive? What about peaceful protesters who counter protest Neo-Nazi events? Are not all of these demonstrations implying that one’s ideas are superior to another’s? Can the Supreme Court decide for America which assemblies are deserving of the right to speak? If the Supreme Court restricts Westboro’s rights, who’s next in line?

The Bill of Rights assures freedoms for all Americans, including ignorant people who use their free time to besiege funerals with words of hate. Imagine Nerinx limiting our free speech. This school paper wouldn’t be allowed to print an article like this. If one group is banned from speaking, other groups can just as easily be targeted. What if those admirable revolutionaries like Martin Luther King, Jr., Harvey Milk, or Sojourner Truth had been stopped from speaking out? To ensure the rights of those who wield free speech for purposes like civil rights or women’s rights, the law must also protect those who wish to spew hatred.

Bibliography:
Kara Galbraith
Poetry
Blue Valley, KS, North High School
Grade 9

Balloon

With the help of some aim, I was won from a game, and she thinks that she's oh so wise.
I'm just a ball of helium but a happy medium in a cleverly-made disguise.
She ties me to her finger and promises will linger but no she won't ever let go.
I'll stay her best friend; her life I will mend. Of this I'm sure that I know.
With unhidden glee, I get to see all of these fun new places.
For the people forlorn, a smile I will form, and adorn on their once lonesome faces.
But then comes the day when her grip then gives way and I float up to the sky.
And as I look down at the girl's lonely frowns, it seems she's about to cry.
She made one mistake, and her fingers did quake, and oh I think we all know
That needless to say I was up, up, and away to a tango into the wind's flow.

Silence

A frail mirror shattered by the echoing thunder of a single cry
Breaking the everlasting assurance of a tomorrow, promises broken and fallen,
Lingering in the air.
A piercing stab at existence.
Life
So quick
Innocent
Fading vibrant colors to pale grays
Uncertainties firm in the concrete world
Quaking beneath weak feet
Minds closing, collapsing horizons.
Dreams crumbling, overwhelmed and fallen
Terror of indecision, hesitation
Until all has fallen, a world defeated by our very existence.

Alone

When you're alone,
All by yourself,
Hiding in the closed
Dark
Corners
Of your unwinding mind,
Think of the reasons
You have to live.
Your life means more
Than something
To pass the long
Meaningless hours.
You have touched
My life
And made me
And taught me
What it truly means
To love,
To love so much
It hurts,
To love so much
That I need you
To be there in the morning
When I wake up
Because I can’t stand the thought
Of your absence.
So when you go to those
Dark
Corners,
Call on me
And I’ll bring
You
Home.
At the Lincoln Memorial

Going up the steps of the Lincoln memorial on a blistering day in July feels like ascending into the presence of a god. If ever there were proof of devotion, it was this climb over tier upon tier of blinding whiteness. The marble throws back light and heat like a mirror, roasting unfortunate worshippers. The staircase is steep, and the steps themselves are painfully perpendicular.

These, at least, were my impressions when my school trip arrived at the Lincoln Memorial as the last stop on a comprehensive tour of the Washington monuments. Budget cuts had shortened the trip until it was only two days long; we’d spent one of these making rounds at the Smithsonian Museums and the other—our final day—seeing what seemed like every statue and plaque in the city. We were absorbing history through every pore, discovering all at once that national consciousness which had been absent from years of social studies classes. It was real, at last, and exciting. But it was also exhausting. And it was hot.

I kept my head down, climbing the steps, watching one marble slab turn into the next identical marble slab until the shade of the inner part of the memorial descended blessedly over my sunburned shoulders. I leaned against a thick marble pillar, startled by how cool it was, and looked up. There he sat, the great emancipator, the man who had, with superhuman strength, put his broken nation back together. I knew from pictures in history books that he had not been a very handsome man, and I couldn’t help but smile when I noticed that the classical grandeur of his statue had made his face supernaturally beautiful.

I turned away from the statue, to the right, and strolled over to the alcove where Lincoln’s second inaugural address is engraved on the wall. My classmates milled around it, glanced at the first few words, grew bored and went back outside to sit on the steps. But I kept reading. I felt myself transported to the ruinous burning battlefields of the Civil War. I read of Lincoln’s hope for victory and his iron determination to fight on until the scourge of slavery was eradicated. Yet, I also read of his deep compassion: his call to help the families of the soldiers and “bind up the nation’s wounds.” Years of hatred and bloodshed had failed to embitter this man. His vision was one of “malice toward none; with charity for all.” Throughout the horrors of America’s bloodiest war, he always kept before him the dream of peace.

Do such patriots still exist today? I wondered. Where can we find leaders courageous, resolute, compassionate? I looked to Lincoln’s giant statue for answer, but the marble face was blank. With a sigh, I went back out to the steps.

A breeze had sprung up, clearing the hazy sky, and I could see all the major monuments from where I sat: the Washington Monument, the Reflecting Pool, the World War II Memorial, and the Vietnam Memorial. The pillars of the nation’s past shimmered up at me in the cheerful July sunshine.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” said someone sitting beside me. I turned and saw a young man in a pink polo shirt, munching pensively on a carrot stick. I smiled.
“It is,” I said. He saw me looking at his carrot sticks, cut neatly into a little plastic bag. “It’s weird, I know,” he said, with a self-deprecating grin. “This aunt I’m visiting sends them with me whenever I go off around D.C. She says I’ll get hungry, and I never believe her; I’m not a little kid. But she’s always right.” He took another happy crunch of his carrot stick. I laughed. “How long have you been in D.C.?” I inquired. “Two days.” He looked out at the view again. “It’s such a lovely city.” “I know. I wish I could stay longer, but I leave tonight.” “Really? Are you with a trip, or something? It seems a little crazy to come to D.C. just for a couple of days.” I watched his tan, handsome face and wished I didn’t have to tell him I was only in high school. But there was nothing for it. “I’m with a school trip. Two days was all we could manage.” “So you’re in high school?” “Well—yeah.” “You know, I remember high school so well. I can’t believe it’s been four years. I just graduated from UCLA,” he explained. “So what now?” “I’m joining the Navy.” “That’s so cool! Are you excited?” His face glowed. “I am. I’m going to officer’s training school directly after this trip. I can’t wait.” “That’s incredibly brave of you.” He shrugged, shook his head. “Why did you decide to do it?” I asked him. He took off his sunglasses and turned them over in his hands, squinting down at them. “There were two reasons, really,” he said. “The first was—well, I interned with a businessman once. Guy who owned, you know, a chain of pharmacies or something. And everything in his whole life, every minute of every hour of every day—it was all about making money.” I looked at him curiously. “You didn’t like that?” “I couldn’t stand it. I wanted to do something bigger than make money for myself. There are more important things.” “Like the military?” “That’s right.” He was quiet a moment. “Well?” I prodded. “What was the second reason?” He spun his sunglasses around his fingers again. “I know our military’s not perfect. But it does so much good. It protects this,” he said, gesturing at the sun-streaked panorama of memorials and green grass. “And it does more. It frees people, helps people. When I am a member of our military,“ he paused, straightening his shoulders, “when I am a member of our military, I won’t only be defending my country, I’ll be defending the ideals that make this country worth fighting for—the same ones Lincoln fought for, the ones those Americans down there died for. What greater purpose could there be?”
Before I could reply, my teacher tapped me on the shoulder and told me it was time to go. Behind me, my classmates were rising and dusting themselves off. I rose, too, and gave the young man my hand.

“Best of luck,” I said, trying to communicate in the warmth of my grasp the pride and hope I could not articulate. “You will be a wonderful officer.”

He gave me that grin again. “Enjoy high school,” he said.

“I will.”

I turned and walked slowly back down the steps, noting how much easier it was to leave a god’s presence than to enter it. At the bottom of the staircase I turned, remembering the question I had asked Abraham Lincoln after reading his second inaugural address: Where are the compassionate, courageous patriots of today? Where are the leaders?

Far away, at the top of the steps, I saw a young man in a pink polo shirt raise his hand in farewell. I met Lincoln’s eye. I had my answer.
My Place

Blue skies cry out, beckoning a call,
Stirring the reigning sun from his slumber.
My place is where spring coaxes life from darling buds,
Awakening a dawn of new passions and possibilities,
Where a wisp of wandering wind,
Dancing about the vaults of heaven
Catches a stray dream
And glides ever fluently into the horizon.

The soul of my place renews,
Can you sense it?

Angels stampede across a celestial night,
Leaving stardust impressions on the galaxy.
My place is where the moon and stars forge a shield of radiant light,
Defending my meek heart
From the hatred of a scornful society.
The light is my only guardian
Against the ambiguity of a darkened road,
Plagued by evildoers and nay-sayers.

The soul of my place protects,
Is it clear?

Mountains charm single snowflakes,
Baiting them to rest upon their outreached peaks.
My place is where I stand proudly on mountains of triumph,
Look to the valley of the past,
And revel at how far I’ve come,
Where man atop the summit,
Casts his view towards the glacial lakes
As he now sees the wonders of the world
Without obstruction,
With a clear heart.

The soul of my place enlightens,
Can you see it?
Defeated in body,  
I am reborn in my place.  
Battered by time,  
I am sheltered in my place.  
Lost in a haze,  
I am illuminated in my place.  
Chained in reality,  
I am freed in my place.

After your hope is left to dwindle  
You must create to overcome.  
And from your pains unraveled,  
A beacon shines.  
From here,  
Create  
Your  
Place.
A Four-Year-Old’s Nightmare

For a four-year-old, spring is a time of wonder, excitement, and new beginnings. For me, it was no different. One such spring day would change the way I viewed the world and introduce me to a concept unfamiliar to a child. Along with the new life associated with spring, death also came creeping stealthily into my carefree world.

In the quiet calm of one brisk spring morning, after my brothers had gone off to school and the breakfast dishes were being cleared away, I skipped out the door to embrace the fresh spring air. Normally I would play on the swing set or pick delicate blossoms off the cherry tree, but today I had only one destination in mind—the barn. Our barn, while not a spectacular site on an average day, held something amazing today. For I was going to see the newly-born kittens nestled there among the hay bales.

I ran barefoot across the freshly mown grass, breathing in the scent of soil permeating from our neighbor’s recently plowed fields. Shoving the heavy barn door open, I was greeted by the musty smell of hay and wood. I was not terribly unnerved by the silence. Usually the kittens were mewing vociferously, but it was early morning, and perhaps they were still sleeping. Creeping further into the darkest corner where the bales of hay were stacked, I carefully pushed aside the foremost bale. Beams of sunlight fell upon the most gruesome scene I had ever witnessed in my four years of life. I stared in horror at the nightmare before me. Six tiny bodies lay mutilated in their nest made of hay, all headless and bloody.

Tears were streaming down my face as I sprinted back toward the house, shocked and terrified by what I had just seen. I ran directly to my mother whose arms were submerged to the elbows in sudsy dishwater. “Mom!” I wailed, throwing myself into her soapy embrace. “The kittens are all dead!”

“Oh, poor thing,” she murmured stroking the top of my head and wiping away my tears. “Maybe they’re just sleeping.”

“No, they’re d-d-dead. All of them,” I sobbed, trying and failing to erase the image of their tiny bodies from my mind.

“Shhh, don’t worry. It will be alright. All the little kittens are in heaven now, playing with the angels.”

“I don’t care!” I shrieked and wrenched myself away from the comforting arms of my mother. I spent the morning locked in my room crying and sucking my thumb, clutching the stuffed cat I had received for my birthday. I refused to let anyone in, cowering under my blankets from an image that refused to stop haunting me.

“Erica,” my dad’s voice came softly through the door, “do you want to tell me what happened?”

“Something ate them,” I whispered. “Something ate the baby kittens.” I had come to this conclusion while replaying the repulsive scene of the dead kittens in my mind.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come in?” Dad asked.
“No, not yet.”
“Okay.”

I could hear my parents’ whispered voices through the door, but I didn’t care what they were saying. All I could think about was how unfair it was that six sweet little kittens should be mangled out in the barn, only days after being born. I heard the front door slam, then a gunshot. I retreated further into my blankets, crying even harder. Fear gripped my heart. I knew guns caused death, and I was not ready to deal with any more death at the moment.

A knock on the door. “Erica, let me in.”
“No!”
“Come on, sweetheart. We need to talk.”

I skulked to the door, opening it to allow admittance to my dad, and stomped back to my bed, sitting with my arms crossed. “What else did you kill?”

“What?” my dad asked bemused. “I didn’t kill anything. I just used the gun to scare off a tomcat. That’s what attacked the kittens. He’s just a bully. He was fighting with the kittens’ mom, Snowflake, but he’s gone now. There’s nothing to worry about. Why don’t you find a shoe box, and we can bury the kittens when your brothers get home?”

“Okay,” I mumbled, sniffling but filled with relief that we still had our friendly farm cat, Snowflake, to keep me company. I had just finished lining a box with my favorite blanket when my brothers returned from school. Glad for an excuse to use the small workbench given them by my father, they hastily set about fashioning a cross from scraps of wood salvaged from the shed. We decorated the cross with crayons and markers, embellishing it with pictures of kittens and angels and the sloppy handwriting of my six-year-old brother. When finished, the cross proudly displayed the words “Six kittens” and dazzled with all of the colors a 24-pack of Crayola crayons could offer.

Dad left to retrieve the kittens from the barn and hid them away in the carefully prepared shoe box while my brothers and I dug a tiny grave with plastic shovels from our sandbox. With the help of our father and an adult-sized shovel, the grave was soon sufficiently deep enough to house the shoe box and hide any smell from critters. “Do you want to say anything to the kittens before we bury them?” Dad asked.

I nodded, sniffling. “I hope you have fun up in heaven with the angels and with Jesus and Great-Grandpa and the turtle that got hit by that car,” I whispered and lowered the tiny cardboard coffin into the grave. “I love you, kitties.”

When our little funeral was finished and our homemade cross was pounded into the fresh earth on top of the grave, our little gathering dispersed—my brothers to their video games, my father to the barn to clean up the nest where the kittens were killed, and me to the swing in the front yard where I sat cuddling Snowflake who had been tamed by the constant affection of my brothers and me. After all, I thought, she must be mourning the loss of her babies even more than I was.

“Erica!” Dad called across the yard, clutching something in his hands which were callused from years of farm work. “Look who I found hiding all by himself.” I rushed forward to see what treasure I might find, and there, cradled in my father’s large rough hands, was a tiny tabby kitten, mewing helplessly with eyes squeezed shut. I took him into my hands where his tail curled around my finger and rubbed him against my cheek. I laid him beside his mother who proceeded to rub her face against his, a sign of love. I smiled.
Lucky, as the kitten was later called, grew up to be one of the sweetest cats we ever had. He was one of the few males who never became feral and was always there waiting for me when I got off the bus the year I started kindergarten.

That day the six kittens died was a terrible day for a four-year-old, but it taught me that good things are always present, even when bad things happen, that death is a necessary part of life, and that life goes on, even when misery is dark and overpowering. I will always remember that day, when God gave me Lucky to help me get through my first experience of death.
The Warden of My Life

When I was young, my mother would tuck me into bed, pull out a tiny pink book that was older than I was, and begin to read *Brenda’s Private Swing* by Bernice Chardiet. It’s a rather unknown book – nobody I know has even heard of it – but somehow it fell into my family’s hands. I absolutely adored it. The book had a fairly simple storyline. It was about a bully named Brenda who had a brand new swing set, and anyone who wanted to swing had to “pay” her with candy and other goodies. Brenda was a complete 5-year-old militant about it – if your treat wasn’t good enough, you didn’t swing. Period. The end. Goodbye. Growing tired of Brenda’s regime, a stereotypical sweet girl named Bunny (fitting name, right?) decided that this was unjust and stood up to Brenda one day at lunch. Having gotten her comeuppance, Brenda stormed away, and all the neighborhood kids decided to not return to Brenda's private swing ever again. Bunny wins; Brenda loses – the classic story of good versus evil.

Having read this story a good ten years ago, I had to delve deep into the depths of my own 5-year-old memory and scrape a summary together. Though the story wasn’t clear, the character of Brenda remained crystal in my mind. The other characters I couldn’t even remember the names of, but the mean, 5-year-old bully stuck out. It took me years to figure out why this was true, but I had an epiphany: I wanted to be Brenda. Okay, so I didn’t want to be exactly like Brenda. I just wanted to possess some, if not all, of the strong qualities she has. Brenda was, to put it simply, a rebel. She didn’t take no for an answer, and I’d be surprised if she didn’t purposely pick a fight for fighting’s sake. She was confident, strong-willed, stubborn, and talkative – which made me almost the complete opposite of Brenda. I don’t stand up to many people, I’m quiet, fairly shy, and, most of all, nice. Even Bunny stood up to people.

Brenda is one of the most assertive characters I have ever read. She has naturally what I struggle with on an almost daily basis. I do strive to make myself more self-confident, but Brenda nailed that characteristic perfectly without much turmoil. She also made her choices and stuck to them. Only until she was called out did she back down but not without a fight. I wish I could do that with confidence: take control of a situation, make my own choices, and not be afraid to be proven wrong.

These lessons I learned at a very young age, but it wasn’t until recently that I had to literally force myself to apply them. It started with me growing up with God being the seventh person in my family of six. I lived in St. Louis my whole life, my parents taking me to a church that was only ten minutes away. Like the perfect daughter, I went every Sunday and never complained. That all changed when I became a teenager. God and church got pushed aside by more pressing matters – school, friends, music, work. I could see it in my mother’s grey eyes every time I argued with her about my choices versus her own; her view of me was changing, and rapidly so, but she never did anything to stop it. I seemed to be straying down a different path than what both my parents had intended while their values and priorities remained a constant.
Then Wycliffe happened.

I was fourteen at the time when my parents became dead-set on being missionaries and signed up with an organization called Wycliffe Bible Translators. We had moved to Florida, the falsely named “sunshine state,” a year before, and the world headquarters for this organization was only an hour and a half away. It seemed perfect, a "godsend." But it also shoved God and religion back in full view again, so I could no longer escape facing the most repressed part of me.

I don’t believe the whole situation ever set well with me, but, figuring it was just another part of growing up, I was supportive. At first. So, I took myself out of school, making it easier for me to tag along on all of my parents’ adventures (and that didn’t work out too well). I started going to church more; I even got confirmed, but then I found myself becoming miserable and longing for the only home I had ever truly known: St. Louis. I got to thinking, “What am I still doing down here, unhappy? Why can’t I go back since there is, quite literally, nothing holding me here?” That was the breaking point; I couldn't hold onto my Bunnyness anymore; I was transforming into Brenda. I started conversing with two friends of mine, and as they were getting more and more excited by the idea, I was, too. They each offered their house to serve as my new home, and, surprisingly, both sets of parents were on board as well.

It took a little more effort to convince my parents, but they eventually agreed, figuring that if they were going to “ruin my life,” I might as well be happy about it. There were many times when my mother would hug me to her and say, “But... but I’m going to miss you!” I would pull away, stare at her determinedly, and reply, “Mom, this is my life. This is what I want. Sorry it doesn’t include you.”

Maybe I was a bit insensitive, but in order to triumph, I had to think about myself and not worry about my mother’s feelings. Brenda taught me that. I took control of my situation and made the final decision to return to St. Louis, despite what bad consequences may have arisen. I had to remember the jerk 5-year-old from my favorite book and put her on a pedestal. She was the reason for doing this -- the confidence, the stubbornness, the assertiveness. She was my example of someone who could make it through this. Brenda could live without her parents. Now so could I. With this new attitude, I ended up at one of my friend’s house, living with a family entirely different from mine. And I have yet to regret it. Today, I’m not a Brenda-clone by any means, but I am constantly changing to the point that I maybe resemble a distant relative of Brenda’s. It’s a steady battle, but, as Brenda would do, I’m willing to face it.

Adapting to this new way of life is like the new swing set in Brenda’s Private Swing. I must become the keeper of my swing set in order to grow. Though I still have a long ways to go before I can truly accept this experience, I am taking it day by day, facing each little challenge that presents itself. I have to be the warden of my life, the Brenda of the swing set.
I pulled my thin jacket sleeves down over my palms and checked that the zipper was all the way up as I stepped off the bus. A chilly wind seemed to knife through the jacket and t-shirt underneath, and I fought back a shiver as I eyed the overcast skies. My stomach, empty as my pockets, complained faintly as a delicious aroma of fried chicken drifted across the street from a dilapidated restaurant. I was almost home.

It had been years since I was “home.” The last time I had left in a hurry with everything I owned stuffed into my pockets or a beaten-up backpack, my mom’s husband hurling obscenities and random objects after me. I had been so confident then, a smart nineteen-year-old high school student graduated with all the honors my teachers could bestow on me. I was more than ready to make my way in the world.

Bus stops. Shelters. An empty recycling dumpster. I’d slept in all those spots and others in the last three years. Tonight, I hoped, I would have a more decent place to sleep, even if it was the kitchen floor or living room couch at my mom’s place. If that phone call wasn’t some sort of daydream or trick. If she still wanted to see me. I wasn’t expecting much, yet at the same time, my hopes were high enough to motivate me coming across the state hitchhiking and getting a bus ride when I got the money. Anyway, it was too late to turn back now.

Not much had changed. Same old sagging fences, piles of trash in the gutters, rusted junk mobiles that didn’t look as though they actually ran. I didn’t see many familiar faces, and that was fine with me. Our neighbors were never the award-winning kind you see in movies anyway. I hadn’t hung out with any of the kids in our apartment complex since I was in Middle School.

The gate at the entrance was a joke; rusted open and missing so many bars, it couldn’t keep anything from coming in or out. The three middle-aged men sitting in broken lawn chairs on the patio eyed me suspiciously from behind their cheap beers and stale cigarettes. A handful of dirty children were kicking a soccer ball back and forth across the courtyard, pretending not to notice me and chattering in rapid Spanish that I could barely guess at interpreting. I acted like I was ignoring them all and climbed the stairs to my mother’s floor, two levels up.

I knew without thinking which paint-chipped door opened into her dingy apartment. A number was missing, and another hung crookedly by one nail, but the area in front was swept clean and a ragged mat lay on the ground proudly proclaiming something about a house, but dust and grime left the rest unreadable. I stood there for several minutes, assaulted by memories, before I knocked.

Several seconds passed, and for a moment I feared there would be no answer - maybe she was out, or she was ignoring me, but then I heard a deadbolt slide, and I squared my shoulders and cleared my throat. I wanted her to be proud of me, to be impressed by me, a foolish idea, in my holey jeans, stained jacket, and tattered all-stars. But it was not her door
that opened; instead, I heard the door behind me open, and my mother’s neighbor “across the way” timidly call my name.

I spun around, startled, and examined the neighbor. She was a petite, dark Hispanic girl, but I could see how pretty she was under the exhaustion and worries of the neighborhood. She called my name again tentatively, softly, and I nodded my head. She seemed to relax for a moment before her guard shot back up and she eyed me coldly. “Your mama is working,” she announced. “She will be home at 8. She say you are a good boy. You can come in and look at TV while you wait. It’s warmer.” The last words were emphasized by a sudden gust of wind, and I nodded after a short pause and stepped towards her. She retreated into her apartment, holding the door open for me.

The apartment was dimly lit, but tidy. An old television sat on some nondescript article of furniture in the corner, in front of a sagging couch. The girl disappeared into the kitchen. “Do you want something to drink?” she asked. “A bottle of water or a coke?” I sat gingerly on the couch and examined the clean walls, and the piles of freshly folded laundry stacked in front of the TV.

“Just water, thanks,” I replied, experimenting with the remote I found half-under the couch before abandoning it and rising to turn the TV on. She reappeared with a bottle of water and picked up the remote.

“It works, you just have to hold it upside down,” she said apologetically. I accepted the water thankfully and settled back while she flipped through the channels.

“Do you watch NFL?” she asked hopefully. I nodded, although I was really too tired to care. It had been a long day. She left it on the sports channel, while the Cowboys kicked off against whoever it was. The girl went back into the kitchen and rattled dishes around, cooking something. I tried to stay awake, but the sounds of the kitchen and the TV blended together, and I dozed off without realizing it.

I woke up as the halftime show was ending. I sighed groggily before I remembered exactly where I was. I scanned the room. A young boy sat at the kitchen table, poring over a workbook, pencil in hand. I could hear a man and the girl talking in the kitchen, but either they were speaking Spanish or they were talking too quietly for me to hear, if not both. I stood slowly, stretching and trying to ignore the hunger I felt. I edged into the kitchen, nodding to the girl and the older man who were standing at the sink. The girl nodded to me and said something to the man, who walked over to me and offered a hand.

“Welcome into our home. It’s just me, my wife, and our three children,” he said. “You already met my oldest. My middle child is a good boy in High School, and my younger son is at the table. My wife works with your mother; they will be home soon.”

I shook his hand an introduced myself. “What time is it?”

The girl nodded to an old clock propped against the wall on the counter. “You slept for an hour and a half. It’s 8 now. Do you want some food? I made soup.” She lifted a plate from a bowl and presented me with a warm bowl. “I made bread yesterday, if you want.” Without waiting for an answer she pulled bread from a cupboard and cut off a slice, setting it on the rim of the bowl. I carried it to the table and sat across from the boy, who acknowledged me with a grunt and then continued his studies. I dipped the bread in the soup, scanning his paper. His handwriting was sloppy, but I could read the titles in his textbook.

“You’re taking French?” I asked, surprised.
“I already know English,” he said with a shrug, “And Spanish... well, I grew up with it.”

He smiled. “I thought if I took French that I could learn something.”

“What grade are you in?”

“I’m a Freshman this year,” he explained. “I’m young for my class, but my mom helped me learn to read, and I studied hard. My papa said working hard at what jobs you get is your real value, not how much money you have.”

I nodded, musing. How much was I worth? I haven’t worked hard on anything since I graduated, and I definitely don’t have any money. The girl sat beside me, diverting my attention.

“Is the soup good?” She asked expectantly. I lifted a spoonful, letting it cool in front of my mouth, and sipped it.

“Amazing.” I hadn’t realized how hungry I really was. The food disappeared in record time. The girl beamed.

“I’ll get you some more,” she offered. I refused half-heartedly, but she didn’t wait around to listen. In moments I had another bowlful and a fresh slice of bread. “When was the last time you ate?” she joked.

“Yesterday I had a bag of chips and a pop-tart,” I admitted. “You should start a restaurant.” I grinned back at her.

She laughed. “Only if you come and eat.”

I promised I would. As I rose to carry the empty bowl to the kitchen, the door opened and a middle-aged Hispanic woman walked in, followed a moment later by my mother. I stood there for a moment, holding my dishes awkwardly. The girl reached out and took them, and I crossed the room slowly. My mother studied me for a moment as I stood there, unsure of what to do next. “Do you have any things?” she asked.

“Oh a backpack,” I said. I turned to the girl and her father. “I don’t have any money,” I said, “But thank you for your hospitality.”

“De nada,” the girl replied. “You are your mother’s son, and she is a neighbor.”

“But still, thank you,” I said. “I’ll see you around.”

“Of course,” she said as we went out the door. “Buenas noches.” She closed the door behind us, and I heard the deadbolt lock.

I looked at my mother. She stared into space as we stepped across the walkway and she fumbled with the apartment key. “It’s good to see you,” I said, my voice cracking with the maelstrom of emotions I felt. “It’s been a while.” I sounded like an idiot.

She unlocked the door and opened it without responding. I stepped into the room I had said I would never come back to three years ago. It seemed like two physical forces were acting on me: some strong feeling of love and family tugging me in, resentment and pain barring my entrance. I had come too far to quit now. I gulped and stepped in.

The living room was not only clean, it was bare. The attached kitchen and eating space was sparsely populated with two or three chairs in various states of repair and a table with three legs and one stool under the back corner. Mom weary set her purse down on the table and brushed her greying hair out of her eyes. She looked older than I remembered. “Do you need anything else to eat?” She asked. I shook my head and she turned abruptly and went back into the kitchen. I sat down at the table, the chair creaking tiredly. The dim lighting flickered as
something boomed overhead. In the kitchen, there was a crash, and mom swore. She came back in seconds with a bowl of cereal and set it on the table.

“T dropped the stupid cutting board,” she sighed, turning back to clean up. I rose quickly.

“I’ll get that,” I volunteered. She looked at me for a second, then nodded. “Thanks.”

The cutting board lingered on the floor, alongside a scattering of silverware and a wicker basket. Several bananas had rolled off the corner. I gathered up everything that had fallen and set it back on the counter. Water dripped slowly from the sink faucet. The light fixture was broken and a single naked bulb lit the kitchen. Not much had changed in here since I was gone.

I closed my eyes and tried to shut out the memories I had made in this apartment. There were good memories, nostalgic visions of birthday parties where my friends gathered to eat cake and play soccer in the courtyard. The Christmas when Mom surprised me with a bike and Grandma was still alive and came to visit, bringing me cookies and candy and a soccer jersey. Singing with my mom while I helped her clean the kitchen. This was home.

But there were darker memories too. Fights, screaming. My mother’s husband, the man she had married when I was thirteen. He was not always bad, but when it had been a hard day at work or he had not gone to work at all, I had to stay out of his way. The Christmas Grandma died. The time five boys from the apartment across the street had caught me outside and beaten me until one of the big boys from my apartment saw and came running. I tried to shut the painful memories out of my mind, when Mom spoke.

“You can sleep in the living room, if you want. I have extra blankets and pillows. No couch, but his mattress is still in the bedroom. You can drag that out here.” She stood by the sink, empty bowl in hand. “I go to work in the morning at ten. You can go out if you want, but I only have one key to the apartment, and I’m locking the door when I leave. You remember how to get to the library?” I nodded. “You can always go there if you like. I’ll leave it up to you.” She left her dishes by the sink and went into her room. I stood there, thinking.

A few minutes later I heard water start in the shower. I washed her dishes and put them away; I knew which cabinet the bowl went in, knew how the silverware should be set in the basket on the counter. Some things never changed. I sighed and went into my mother’s room, flicking the light switch on and off several times before deciding the light was out and letting my eyes adjust to the darkness. The mattress was against the wall in the back of the room, so I grabbed it and dragged it out into the living room.

Mom came into the room in pajamas and a robe. Her hair was up in a towel, and for a second with the wrinkles gone from her face as she looked down at me, I felt like I was ten again and everything was all right. “I’ll get you a pillow and some blankets,” she said and left the room again. When she came back, her arms were full of the pillow and blankets and something else. “When he threw out all your things, I kept this,” she said, handing me the bear the firefighters had given me when I was five and someone had started a fire in the apartment. My eyes watered as I took it. She smiled for the first time all night. “It’s good to have you home.”

That night, for the first time in a long time, I had no trouble going to sleep. Outside the air got colder. Someone had a drunken argument with their girlfriend. Sirens wailed the next block over, but I was used to those noises, the sounds of night in the old neighborhood, and I slept through them. I was home.
Never Soon Enough

She sat on the edge of the dock, her knees pulled up against her chest, her arms wrapped around them. Her fingers brushed the planks of wood accumulating grime and salt dust. She closed her eyes, and the breeze wrapped around her like a cloak of salty air. She tasted each wave that lapped up against the dock and sprayed them. She opened her eyes and felt herself falling down the stairs and gently landing in the hum of the usual conversation and clinking bottles. In the darkness the miniature orange sun that glowed at tip of his cigarette illuminated the edges of his face just enough for her to see the strong line of his jaw, his straight nose, even the moss-like stubble surrounding his lips and mouth. It lasted only a second; his hand was at his mouth and he casually took the cigarette, tapped his forefinger by the butt. The ashes glowed as they fell towards the planks then the tiny sparks went out as the wind carried them away. The little sun was back by his lips. She watched the sun, maybe the heat would warm up the air. In one deft movement, he put out the cigarette leaving a little gray spot on the bleached wood. He stood, ambled over to where the bottles were, fixed himself a drink, and grabbed another brown bottle.

"Do you want another?" he said.

She shook her head and glanced into her half-full plastic cup. She could hear the music coming from the beach and the others laughing and singing along. They were spinning, twirling in the dark, laughing more, yelling more, dancing more. Ballerinas missing their music boxes. He was among them, spinning the fastest, dead center. She stood up and spun along, sang along, danced along. They collapsed into a heap on the damp wood. The latest catch of fish, released onto the docks from their big net, ready to be sold.

"I'm bored," said a voice from the heap.

"I'll get my grandpa's car. Let's head over to town," said another.

They stood up. They were groaning and giggling and moving all at once. She saw him grab one of the black plastic bags. They gathered the remaining bottles and let the bags blow out across the water. She saw the silhouettes of the empties lined up along the edge of the dock, just like the outline of the city. She never knew how she made it into town; she just ended up there every other night. She'd want to stay on the beach all night, but something pulled her forward. That something was walking ahead of her with a plastic bag in his hand. His shoulders moved under his loosely buttoned shirt. She should stop right here. Just stop walking. After this lamppost, I'll say goodbye and go home. She moved ahead. After exactly twenty steps, I'll turn around. She moved ahead. By that big tree, I'll stop walking with them; I'll go home. She dug her sandals into the cobblestone street hoping something would catch, something would hold her back, keep her from moving in the wrong direction. Nothing. The little sun was back in his hand, its gravity pulling her stronger than ever. There was no more trying, no more indecision as she neared the red Volvo with its rusty paint and dented doors.
One of them had brought his brother’s car, and everyone piled into the two vehicles. He got into the back of the Volvo; she stood outside until his hand reached out and grabbed her hand, pulling her in. They were completely packed in. The music blared and the warm air rushed in and out the windows as they hightailed down the road. Her hand was out the window, so she stuck her head out too. The wind tossed her hair around her face, and she closed her eyes as her lips curled up. His face flickered in the occasional light as they sped past the dim lampposts. She smiled, and he smiled back, resting his arm along her shoulders. The ribbon of cobblestone stretched ahead of them, squirming through fields of sunflowers and tomatoes, winding over the bridge, wrapping along the coast, and finally snaking its way into town. The two cars raced one another, two searchlights in the front of each, lighting the path ahead and leaving everything behind submerged in the darkness.

They parked one street below their favorite stretch of shops, restaurants, cafes, and clubs. The town was glittering and shining, a diamond in the black coal of night. She glanced at her watch and saw the same cold digital numbers on her phone. She should have been home twenty minutes ago.

“Jim! It’s already past my curfew.”

“We just got here,” he groaned. “Once you’re late it doesn’t matter how late. Relax and enjoy it for once.” Jim put the keys to the Volvo into his pocket and walked into the crowd.

She followed his head among the myriad of people. Their favorite table was set aside just as it always was, and they all crowded around. The waiter came and went. The DJ played, and they danced. They laughed and lost themselves in the lights, in the crowds, in the drinks. They were spiraling, so were the hands on the clock. Before they knew it, it was late, or early? She wasn’t sure.

“Let’s start heading back. I have to have the car back before my brother notices,” said a voice from ahead.

As they headed outside, the wind picked up along the coast. The air was colder in the early morning, and the sharpness woke her up. Her head was spinning. They were running ahead, shoes off, faces pink. Someone had taken the glasses from the table and smashed them on the road. They roared with laughter at the sound of breaking glass and sight of shards scattering across the stones.

Up the hill, the cars were parked, and he was half-running, half-stumbling ahead of her towards them. Jim, too tired to drive, was asleep in the backseat; that’s why he would be driving them back. Everyone piled in, and she looked into his red eyes as he smiled lazily back at her. She wanted to grab the keys out of his hands. She wanted to call someone, anyone. She wanted to slap every one of them raw until they stopped laughing and started making sense. He opened the passenger door and held her hand in his flaming grasp and helped her in.

As the car roared to life, she glanced at the numbers climbing on the dashboard. The windows were down again, and the music was playing. They were dancing and yelling, passing the bottle around. He was going faster now and had left the other car behind. He was weaving along the road, even driving in the middle. The road was empty, and he grinned as he floored it.

The car lurched forward as the engine moaned. A familiar song came on the radio and his lips curled further up as he reached for the dial. One hand was out the window, the other, on the steering wheel tapping in rhythm with the song. They were on the narrow part of the
road now, just before they crossed the bridge. Her heart was racing, two beats ahead of the song blaring from the crackling speakers. He brought his hand inside, resting it on the wheel, the other hand moved toward her neck, which was caught in a cold sweat. She glanced at the dark outline of his face, his eyes shining, looking clearly at her. His calloused hand moved to her face, and he pressed his thumb between her eyes, smoothing the deep crease. His head rolled back, and he chuckled; every illusion of his lucidity flew out the open window.

He shifted into fourth gear, and the car grumbled. They came around a turn, the lights probing forward into the fields. A car was coming from the city, throwing dark clouds of dust up around it. It had its brights on; the lights shown on the Volvo, blinding them all. He cranked the wheel to the right as they made the turn. The car flew off the road. They bounced around within its ancient frame as it soared through the air, landing with a final huff in the dirt strip between the road and fields. Moments of silence followed. She couldn’t breathe; it wasn’t the cigarette smoke filling the car; it wasn’t even the car; it was his face. He was suppressing a smile. A deep raspy chuckle seeped out of his mouth and broke the silence as he pulled the keys out of the ignition. He was laughing. Actually laughing. Tears in his eyes, forehead resting against the steering wheel, laughing. They began to chime in from the back seat. Laughing, clinking bottles, laughing harder and louder, thankful that they still could laugh.

She couldn’t smile; her face was cemented in shock. She unbuckled her seatbelt and shoved the heavy door open. She crawled out and sat in the dirt leaning against the tire. The brunt rubber smell scorched her nose, and her stomach began to churn. She gazed up, watching the smoke from the front of the car spiral into the sky. Her head was spinning, and her hand was shaking as she groped in her pocket for her phone. Another door creaked open. He stepped out of the car, still laughing.

“Won’t start. Can you believe it? The car’s fine, just won’t start. Leave it up to Jim to pick this piece of shit to bring.”

She pushed her hand against the dirt and stood up. She glanced at him for a moment, leaning against the open door in his invincible glory, then slammed the door shut, turned and began walking towards the gate. The dust was blowing up around her, moving in front of her, paving the way.

“Baby, where are you goin'? Come back. I told your old man I’d take you home. Come on, we’ll figure it out. Just get back in the car.”

She kept moving forward, and he wasn’t laughing anymore. He moved out from behind the door towards the front bumper but did not follow her into the darkness.

“Seriously. Get in the car.”

He was getting fed up. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Every inch of her wanted to run back. Back to the car, back to him, but every inch of her was also moving towards the gate, the early morning air whipping around her.

“You know what? Fine. Suit yourself.”

She kept walking, down the road, around the gate, and finally into town. The sun started to cast its first pinkish glimmers along the even rows of houses. The dew clung to the blades of grass, covering front lawns in diamonds. The palm trees lined the road, and the cars were all wet from the night’s humidity. The porch swings and hammocks swung idly in the breeze on the empty porches. The sprinklers hadn’t started, and the street lamps weren’t
turned off yet. She could see the beach from the road; the wind was blowing north, so there wouldn’t be any large waves today.

She thought about the beach, the sand, her tan line, the bottle of nail polish remover she had left open on her dresser, her parents asleep at home, anything to keep her from thinking of the Volvo out on the road. Her head was spinning, so was her stomach as she made her way up the stone path to the screened entrance of the porch. She pushed the door open and glanced around. Streaks of golden light were beginning to enter between the leaves of the palm trees, and her vision was becoming clearer. She could see the white tablecloth with the pink flowers, the striped seat cushions, yesterday’s paper neatly on top of the stack, the vase of roses in the center, next to the crystal ash tray. Nothing had changed. The house slumbered as she made her way up the wooden stairs, skipping the eighth step so it wouldn’t squeak under her weight.

Her parents’ door was conveniently shut as she made her way down the hall to the last room. She turned the knob and stepped inside. The balcony door in her room was still open and the long white curtains blew around the doorway. She took off her jeans, tossing them on the chaise that was covered in last night’s possible outfits, and pulled on some shorts. She flung herself onto layers of down comforters, blankets, and soft white sheets. Her head was still spinning when she wedged it between the pairs of feathery pillows. The pale blue walls seemed to open up around, her lids grew heavy, and she fell asleep.

“Suzan, dear. Suzan, wake up!”

Suzan’s head felt enormous as she lifted it from under the cloudy layers. She rubbed her swollen eyes, and her hand came back covered in glitter from her eye shadow. She opened her eyes and saw her room basked in the bright sunlight, a pair of French-manicured hands and crisp green apron tied around a narrow waist. Her throat was dry and scratchy as she formed the words to greet her mother.

“Dear you’ve slept an awful lot, it’s already afternoon. Are you feeling alright? You’re probably just tired from all the fun you and Emma had last night.”

Suzan groaned and buried her head in the pillows; the curly locks of hair were the only things that could be seen.

“Suzan, are you listening? I think you’re oversleeping. It’s terrible for your complexion. Anyways, that nice boy Adam from the club is here. He says you left your cell phone in his beach bag yesterday afternoon.”

Suzan sat up slowly. Every inch of her body was sore.

“What is that on your arm dear? It’s practically black.” She said.

Suzan hadn’t noticed the large, swollen purple mark wrapping around her elbow. She tenderly prodded it with her finger, and watched the white mark appear. It would be at least a week before it even started to fade; it was throbbing now that she had noticed it.

“It’ll be fine, Mom,” Suzan said.

“Okay dear. Make sure to rub some Arnica cream on it so it won’t be too noticeable,” she said as she walked towards the door.

Suzan straightened her shirt, smoothed out her hair; she rested her face in her hands for a moment and felt the familiar pull from the front porch.

“Mom? Go ahead and send him up,” she said as she went to brush her teeth.
Edgar Pelene’s Case of Writer’s Block

Scene 1

Two old ladies (Victorian clothes) are sitting in rocking chairs talking back and forth in front of a fire in a log cabin (Victorian setting). A man (Edgar Pelene) is sitting and writing in a cell on stage left he is writing on a notepad vigorously. (The notepad, pencil, and Edgar’s close are modern.)

Etheralda: Have you heard that Celestia is marrying that awful Gale man.
Diana: Yes, I know. If half the things they say about him are true then there might be trouble.
 Etheralda: Most definitely, did you know that he scratches a living off rocks, off of scratching rocks.
Diana: Yes, scrapes rock off diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. He only owns a mansion (she says sarcastically).
Etheralda: Well still he’s a horri... They both stop moving.
The man in the corner breaks his pencil tip (right as they stop moving). He sighs in frustration; he pulls out another pencil and starts writing again. Then a block of stone (Styrofoam) falls from the ceiling. The man jumps up and yells an exclamation of surprise.
Edgar Pelene: Leo! Come here! Leo!
Edgar taps his foot on the ground a couple of times.
Leo runs in.
Leo: What is it, sir.
Edgar: What is that?
Edgar points to the block.
Leo: Well, sir, I’m no expert but it looks like writer’s block.
Edgar: NO! Not writer’s block. How can this be happening to me?
Leo: Well, sir, it might be because you can’t think of anything more to write.
Edgar: I must find a place to get rid of this... this writer’s block.
Leo: Maybe a quarry or a park.
Edgar: Perfect, let’s go to the park.
They exit off right stage left leaving the notepad and pencil on the chair. The curtain closes.

Scene 2

Etheralda and Diana are still frozen in their rocking chairs. Etheralda gets up and heads toward the notepad and pencil. It looks as if she is fighting through a blizzard. Etheralda grabs the notepad and pencil (the tip still broken). It still looks as if she’s fighting through a blizzard though she writes something down hastily. Diana and Etheralda can move freely.
Etheralda: Yes! I’ve done it!

*Diana gets up and walks over to Etheralda*

Diana: It’s amazing! What did you do?
Etheralda: I simply wrote more to the story.
Diana: Brilliant! Wait, does that mean we can make ourselves young again?
Etheralda: Good idea!

*She writes on the notepad. The lights go out. When they come back on the old ladies are young. They laugh evilly.*

Diana: Look at us!
Etheralda: This is amazing! How about we turn this log cabin into a mansion now?
Diana: Yes.

The curtain closes as she writes on the notepad.

Scene 3

*Edgar and Leo are walking through a lush green park. Leo is carrying the writer’s block as though the block is heavy. Two teenagers in the back of the stage sit and talk (or text) on a bench. Edgar and Leo stop walking.*

Edgar: I just love this fresh air.
Leo: Me too, sir.
Edgar: The birds and trees are very inspiring.
Leo: They are, sir.
Edgar: Leo! Hand me my notepad and pencil. I have an idea.
Leo: Um, sir, you left your notepad and pencil at the cabin. But just in case, I always carry a spare set.

*Leo puts down the writer’s block and pulls out the paper and pencil. He hands them to Edgar who starts writing vigorously. He keeps on writing for about 5 seconds when his pencil tip breaks. He howls in frustration, goes over to the writer’s block, kicks it, and yells in pain, grabbing his foot and hopping around. He goes back over and picks it up, chucking it at the teenagers (not on purpose but just because of blind anger). The block lands in front of one of the teenagers.*

Edgar and Leo simultaneously: Uh-oh!

*The teenager yells “hey,” grabs the block, and throws it back at Edgar and Leo. Edgar ducks and the block hits Leo in the chest. Leo’s knocked backward and onto the ground, he groans.*

Edgar: Come on Leo, there’s no way I’m going to get rid of this writer’s block here.
Leo grabs the block and follows Edgar off stage right. Curtain closes

Scene 4

*Edgar and Leo are in a mall. Leo is carrying the writer’s block. People are milling about buying stuff at different booths.*
Edgar: Look at this Leo. It’s amazing, I mean I’m so inspired by the shops and people and... Leo! Give me my pencil and paper. Leo pulls out a new pencil and a piece of paper. Edgar starts to write, but his pencil tip breaks once again. He throws the pad down, stomps over to the writer’s block, picks it up, and then throws it off stage. About five seconds after he throws it, it comes flying back out. Edgar ducks; it hits Leo in the chest, and he falls backward to the floor and groans "Not again."

Edgar: That’s it! I’m going to go back to the cabin and wait until my writer’s block goes away. Come on, Leo. Leo grabs the block off his chest and gets up to follow Edgar off stage right. Curtain closes

Scene 5

Edgar and Leo walk in from stage right. They are in a mansion (it used to be the log cabin). They look around in wonder.

Edgar: This doesn’t look like the cabin. Does it? And where’s my notepad? I know I left it right there. He points to where the notepad was before he left.
Leo: No idea, sir.
Edgar: And what happened to the two old ladies?
Leo: I don’t know.
Edgar: Hmm, this is myst...
Etheralda interrupts. She walks on stage with the notepad in her hand. Edgar and Leo stare. She is young.
Etheralda: Look at me! I’m young again.
Edgar: Where’s Diana?
Etheralda: I killed her.
Edgar: You can’t kill people or build mansions unless I write that you do.
Etheralda: Incorrect. I, in fact, can—with this. She holds up the notepad.
Edgar: How did you... Wait! I’ve got an idea! Hand me my notepad.
Etheralda: No!
Edgar: Please!
Etheralda: NO!
Edgar: Please with cheese and a cherry on top?
Etheralda: Ew! No!
Edgar: Oh come on, just for a couple of minutes. A couple seconds of silence features them staring at each other.
Edgar: It’s mine, so give it back.
Etheralda: Finders keepers, losers weepers. Now you will die.
Edgar: You can’t kill me! You’re fictional.
Leo: Sir, you do realize that you’re fictional too, right.
Edgar: No, I’m not. I’m a great playwright.
Leo: Um, sir, you’re fictional because if you notice we’re stuck on the same subject, so obviously...
*Edgar completes Leo’s sentence.*
Edgar: ...the writer who is writing this play has writer’s block.
*Curtain closes.*
A man writing on a notepad walks across in front of the curtain, stops in the middle, his pencil tip breaks and he says “awww man.”

The End
SCENE 1

(Lights up on classroom. Students are seated at desks as the teacher starts writing on the board: Senior Theology, Mr. Vanders)

MR. VANDERS
Okay, everyone, be quiet. Welcome to Senior Theology. I see many familiar faces, but for those who don’t know me, I am Mr. Vanders. Now according to Piraticus 13:7, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was ‘Arrgh!’” I want you all to take notes because the topics I’m going to ask about are going to be elaborated on throughout the school year. According to the Gospel, who is our common ancestor? Sam?

SAM
Chimpanzees.

MR. VANDERS
It is true, according to scientists, that we share roughly 95% of our DNA with chimps, but who do we share 99.9% of our DNA with?

TOMMY
Pirates!

MR. VANDERS
Exactly! Now doesn’t it make more sense and seem much more likely that we are ancestors to creatures we share 99.9% of our DNA with than just 95%? And, of course, pirates are His Chosen People, which is just more proof. Now who can tell me what has happened to the climate since the beginning?

PETER
Global warming?

MR. VANDERS
Precisely. Now.... Sam. Why is this?

SAM
CO2.

MR. VANDERS
Good guess, but that’s just what some scientists want you to think. What has really happened is there has been a significant decrease in the pirate population over the past couple of hundreds of years (drawing this diagram on the board). Now, Peter, why is it that there has been such a drastic decrease in pirates?

PETER
He’s punishing us because of (pauses & looks over at Sam) non-believers.

MR. VANDERS
Now the counter-argument is that global warming exists because of humans putting a lot of pollution and CO2 into the air, as Sam said. Why was this disproven, Peter?

PETER
It’s been disproven because of the average temperature drop in the past few years due to the rise of the Somali pirates. So it’s scientifically proven that as the amount of pirates is depleted, the global temperature rises.

MR. VANDERS
Thank you, Peter. Now would you…. Sarah, please summarize gravity for the class. Oh, and please do take notes. I just want to make sure you guys have the basics written in your notebooks. Okay, please continue Sarah.

SARAH
Gravity happens because He is pushing down on us with his Nodely Appendages.

MR. VANDERS
And how does this, as it has been observed, relate to height?

SARAH
Umm, I don’t know?

MR. VANDERS
Chelsie?

CHELSIE
Well, there’s more people?

MR. VANDERS
Could you elaborate, Travis?

TRAVIS
Um... I don’t know?

(Sam and Travis exchange looks.)
MR. VANDERS
Chelsie?

CHELSIE
Wouldn’t it be that because there’s more people, He’s having to push down on more people than ever before and is not able to give us each the amount of loving push he used to because there’s so many of us?

MR. VANDERS
Correct!

(School bell rings, students begin to pack up their notebooks and leave.)

MR. VANDERS
Now everyone remember, What Would a Pirate Do (writing WWAPD on the board) and R’amen!

STUDENTS (a few, scattered replies):
R’amen!

(Students leave classroom into hallway, Sam & Travis walking together.)

SAM
I don’t even see why it matters. Why does it concern anyone if I don’t believe in the Flying Spaghetti Monster? It’s no big deal.

TRAVIS
Yeah...

SAM
You don’t care, though, right? I mean, it’s not like I’m a she-devil who thinks murder and rape are okay. I do have morals.

TRAVIS
Like, it’s… not a bad thing. But I do sort of get where everyone is coming from. It’s just a bit… unorthod-

(Stopping in the middle of the hallway, faces him.)

SAM
Really? Really? You have GOT to be kidding me!

TRAVIS
It’s not a big deal, really, it’s not! It’s just that, you know, he’s kind of important. I just don’t get how you cannot believe in him.

SAM
Whatever. (Pushes past him, off to class, lights down.)

SCENE 2

(Lights up on a kitchen scene. Sam enters as Sam’s mom is cooking. Flings backpack onto a chair, starts to head out of kitchen when mom interjects.)

MOM
Sam, (Sam doesn’t respond, keeps on walking) Sam, come here.

SAM (still annoyed from earlier, turns around to face mom)
What? I have to go study Pirocracy.

MOM
With your backpack down here? I was just going to ask you to pour milk for everyone since my hands are busy with this spaghetti, but are you okay?

SAM
No, but it’s no big deal. Just don’t worry about it.

MOM
What happened? Another detention?

SAM
Why are people so dumb? The moment someone hears that I don’t believe in his great noodliness, I get automatically thrown in the trash like burnt pasta.

MOM
Well, it’s just something different that people aren’t used to. You know it took me a couple of years to get my head around the idea of you not wanting to go to church with us anymore, but I’ve accepted it. Give it time. It’ll get better, I promise, honey.

SAM (grabbing backpack)
No, it won’t. Kids are stupid and always will be stupid. Stupid and ignorant and intolerant and bigoted and obnoxious and... (ad lib)

SCENE 3

(Lone light up on Sam’s bed. Bookshelf filled with books. Laptop sits on bed, notebooks and papers on floor and desk. Walks in, tosses backpack on floor, flings onto bed)
SAM
What the hell is their problem? Yeah, I’m not “touched by his noodly appendage.” So what? Does that make me a bad person? Does that mean that I have no ethics? Does that mean people have the right to say things about me behind my back? I am a good person, I have ethics, and just because I don’t believe that the I-Wish-You-Wouldn’ts in the gospel were dictated by Him himself, I do not deserve to be ridiculed in whispers as I walk past people in the halls.

You know, 80% of Americans would not vote someone who does not believe in Him into office. Between 60% and 70% of Americans think this is a Pastafarian nation. We were founded on religious tolerance, but nowadays religious tolerance means “I’ll tolerate you if you say R’amen on Fridays.”

Oh, not to mention the absolute “love” I get from my dearest mom and dad. All I did was ask if I had to go to church anymore when I was 11 because I didn’t think it was very likely that a gigantic ball of spaghetti was floating over the planet, touching and watching me. It was the best and the worst decision of my life. Yeah, it meant I didn’t have to go listen to someone talk about being touched by his noodly appendage for 3 years, but it meant I lost the status of being the “good” child in my family. Stupid Toby is now the prodigal kid. Who’s the one in the family who gets all A’s? Me. Who’s the one in the family who is going to Yale next year? Yale! Me. Who’s the one who has been dedicated to music since they were little? Me. And who’s the one who gets all of the support? Toby. With his C’s and 2.9 GPA and letterman jacket with his baseball and football letters and pins and his future life as a missionary spreading the word of the noodle. It really is not fair whatsoever. But since I didn’t want to go to church anymore, I am officially in need of being sauced.

And then at school where I can’t even begin to count how many times I’ve been asked (in a mocking tone) “So... when did you decide to believe in nothing? That doesn’t make any sense.” Well, asking me that doesn’t make any sense. I believe in a lot of things. I believe in equality; I believe that the sun will rise every morning and set every evening; I believe I will wake up and the grass will still be green; most of all I believe in myself. I believe in a lot of things. (again in a mocking tone) “But you don’t have any faith! How can you be happy without any faith!” How do I not have faith? No, I don’t have religious faith, but I have faith in myself. And I am happy! I am a very happy person! I have great grades, I am going to an amazing college next year far away from here; how could I not be happy?

(Cell phone rings)

Hello? Oh, um, hi Travis (flustered). Yeah, the homework was just reading pages 345-376. Okay, is that all you called for? Oh, okay, well I’ll see you tomorrow then.

(Hangs up cell phone)
Not even Travis sees past my non-belief. All anyone ever sees is a girl walking around with a sticker on her forehead that says, “Hello, my name is Blasphemy.”

(lights out)

INTERCOM (in dark)
Attention Valley High seniors! Homecoming Queen nominations are due this Friday by 3:30. If you think you or your friend has what it takes to win, snag an application packet from Ms. Billows sometime today. Voting is in two weeks, so get your campaign started!

SCENE 4

(Lights up on classroom, FSM posters & pirate fish are on walls and board, bell rings, students sit in their seats. On board: “Government. Today’s objective: religious freedom.” Sam sits quietly in first row, surrounded by other students busy chatting amongst themselves.)

MS. BILLOWS
Alright, be quiet so we can get this started. Today’s objective is religious freedom. (pointing at the board) For extra credit…….. Sarah, can you tell me which amendment grants this freedom?

SARAH
Umm… the first?

(Travis passes Sam note)

MS. BILLOWS
Correct. Many people believe that there should not be a separation of church and state, which is what the Constitution calls for. What do you guys think? (pause) Well, should the government have any say in religion at all? Should there be a set national belief system? (ad lib, in this fashion)

SAM (to herself, note as the teacher says prior line)
“Talk after school today? –Travis”

(Sam nods to Travis with confused smile)

MS. BILLOWS
Now, let’s see, who else can I pick on…. Sam, why did the founding fathers put that in the Constitution?

SAM
Well, the Founding Fathers were secularists, though some were Pastafarians, Deists, and even some (with disgust) Christians, and they believed in separation of church and state, which is what our nation is founded on.
MS. BILLOWS
Correct. Is it still that way today? Peter?

PETER
We’re a Pastafarian nation. There’s plenty of scientific proof; like gravity. (Sam urgently raises hand, desperate to put in her two-cents on topic and correct him. Kyle, looking at Sam, continues.) Sam’s just biased because she doesn’t believe in anything. This is one nation, under his noodly appendage. It says it on all of the coins. He BOILED for YOUR sins!

SAM
Coins say that because we wanted to show the communists in the 50’s that we were the complete opposite of them because Communism is a noodless form of government that hasn’t been “touched.”

SARAH
Would you just shut up? You’re the only one here that thinks that and trust me, none of us want to hear about your ANTI-pasta beliefs. At this rate, you’re going to hell, so why not just accept Him as your lord and savior and save yourself so you can go to Heaven and enjoy his beer volcano and stripper factory.

SAM
Because I’m not religious and I don’t see why it even concerns you, Sar-

MS. BILLOWS (cutting Sam off)
Both of you stop or you’ll both have saucing after school. Personal beliefs aren’t important in here.

(Bell rings, students rise to leave, teacher moves to desk, gets on computer. Sam approaches desk, teacher looks up.)

MS. BILLOWS
Yes, Sam?

SAM
I was interested in running for queen and the announcement said to talk to you about the appli-

MS. BILLOWS (snatching paper off desk)
Due Friday back to me by 3:30.

SAM (taking paper)
Thanks. See you tomorrow.
(Sam exits, lights out.)

**SCENE 5**

(Lights up on school hallway, Sam is alone hanging election campaign posters/taping fliers to lockers. Travis enters.)

TRAVIS
Hey.

SAM (startled)
Oh, hi!

TRAVIS
It’s been a week and you’re still serious about running for Homecoming?

SAM
Yeah, so? It’ll look awesome for college applications.

TRAVIS
You know I love you to death, but you do realize that nobody’s gonna vote for you, right? No offense.

SAM
I don’t care. I’m running anyways. Sarah and whoever else can spread all the hate they want, but she’s not going to stop me.

TRAVIS
It’s going to be like homecoming sophomore year and prom last year. You’ll be nominated, everyone will see your face on the ballot, and they’ll automatically pick someone else.

SAM
But you’ll vote for me.

TRAVIS
No one else is going to.

SAM
So?

(Sam goes back to hanging posters, upset.)

What’d you want to talk about?
TRAVIS
Oh, never mind. I... forgot. Sorry. (Walks off, awkwardly.)

(lights down)

INTERCOM (in dark)
Two more days until Homecoming and the announcement of your 2010 royalty, Valley High! Check out all the campaign posters around school and vote at lunch today!

SCENE 6

(Lights up on hallway. Lockers plastered with homecoming posters/fliers. Kids clamoring around. Sam realizes one of her campaign posters is vandalized. Reads: “Sam ANTI-PASTA for Queen!”)

SAM (rips it down)
ANTI-PASTA for Queen? Antipasta!? Ms. Billows! Look what someone did to my poster!

MS. BILLOWS
Just post new ones. It’s no big deal. Everyone’s entitled to his or her own opinions.

SAM
But this is cruel vandalism! You’re the one who’s been talking about religious tolerance. The first amendment! This violates it!

MS. BILLOWS (annoyed)
Well there’s nothing really that can be done about that. We can’t watch your posters and give you special treatment. If you don’t want your campaign posters noodled, you might want to consider another way of advertising your face.

SAM (dry sarcasm)
Thanks. (Walks away, ripping down her campaign posters.)

TRAVIS
Hey, Sam, wait up! Hey, I’m really sorry about everything this week. You know I wasn’t trying to be rude, right? Anyways, um, (nervously) I know we haven’t talked since that fight, but since you’re running for queen and all, you’re going to homecoming for sure, and I was just wondering if you had, like, a date yet? I mean, I’m sure you do since the dance is two days away and all, but...

SAM
Nah, I was thinking of going stag considering no one wants to dance with burnt noodles.

TRAVIS
Yeah, stag, cool..!
SAM
I mean, I was planning on going stag, but if someone asked me, I’d be totally cool with that too.

TRAVIS
Yeah, I know what you mean.

SAM
Want to go?

TRAVIS
Yeah!! Um, I mean, yeah, that’d be... cool.

SAM
Awesome. You know, I don’t know what I would do without you here. You’re like my only friend and I... I mean... just thank you.

TRAVIS
Yeah. So which way are you heading (nervously)? I’ve got Bently’s class this way.

SAM
Well, I have Greg’s this way, so I’ll talk to you after school, k? Text me!

(Lights out)

INTERCOM (in dark)
Valley High students! Homecoming has fast approached and today was the last day to vote for royalty at lunch! Hope you cast your ballot! See you at the dance. Remember, be safe! R’amen!

SCENE 7

(Lights up on homecoming dance. Noodle decorations span walls, huge poster of the FSM on wall above stage. Sam’s standing off to the side. Travis brings cup of punch.)

TRAVIS
So do you “royalty” have any insider info on who’s going to win or are all of you in the dark too?

SAM
No idea. I just want to win so I can beat Jenna. She’s so.... ugh!! You should hear her in my Rice & Udon class! Once we were talking about how th...

MR. VANDERS (on stage, cutting off Sam’s rant)
Hey, hey, Valley High! How’s the dance!? (Students yell.) Are you ready to have your royalty crowned!? (Students yell.) Your Junior prince is... Chris Griggs! Junior Princess is... Ashley
Polisky! (Applause as crowned). And now, what everyone’s been waiting for! Will our king and queen nominees please come up to the front!

SAM (to Travis)
Oh noodles! This is it! Wish me luck!

MR. VANDERS
Your 2010 Homecoming King is… Peter Fitzsimmons! And your 2010 Homecoming Queen is…. Sarah Quickel! Now, your royalty will have their dance. Please make room on the dance floor.

(Slow music begins, king/queen dance, Sam crosses to Travis.)

TRAVIS
Hey, I’m really sorry you didn’t get it. I know it was a big deal to you and all.

SAM
I expected it, so it’s not much of a blow. But Jenna didn’t win, which is good.

TRAVIS
So, we haven’t really danced yet. Wanna dance or something?

(Sam smiles as they start dancing. She leans her head against his chest. They kiss and continue dancing. As the music changes to fast upbeat music, everyone starts jumping/dancing. When the music goes down, people continue dancing, and Sam approaches front of stage.)

SAM (to audience)
I knew I wasn’t going to win, and I’m fine with that. But I got 18 votes. Eighteen. Eighteen people voted for me. Well, seventeen if you take out my vote. You know, no matter how cliché this sounds, I may not have won queen, but I’m not the loser in this situation. I didn’t lose anything. In fact, I gained something that I thought was impossible to gain at Valley. Even though no one, including my family, accepts me and my beliefs, Travis doesn’t care. We may not agree on that, and that’s fine, but he’s accepted that. He’s accepted me.

Told you it was cliché.

So, hello world. My name is Blasphemy.

(Lights down. Sam walks back to Travis, dances with him.)
Dear Reader,

I made this piece when I was in the throes of severe depression and anxiety. I learned long ago the therapeutic and empowering idea of creating beauty out of pain and uncertainty. When your mind is not a safe haven, you have to fight to create a space where you can be yourself, where you can throw the black bile that mental illness makes you think.

However, as I wrote this piece, oddly enough, I wasn’t thinking of myself. I was thinking of the hundreds of thousands of people with the same struggle. I was thinking of the 1 in 4 teenagers with this affliction, the 75% who never get treatment in their lifetime. I was thinking “God DAMN it this is hard, but I have to.”

I had to because depression and anxiety are serious diseases. We live in a culture where not much stock is put into mental health, where we need to be constantly doing something, to get somewhere, where we don’t realize we can say “enough, I need a break,” and take the afternoon to enjoy the lives we have.

I am not saying that I’ve created this sweeping piece that covers all the facets of anxiety and depression. Far from it. These diseases have many faces, and I am only one of them. My goal is to create a better understanding of a not-often-talked-about subject. I want the reader to think about the value in knowing oneself and the value of knowing you can always have a sacred place where you can be you.

**Symptoms:** bubble wrap  
**Diagnosis:** can’t live to utmost potential  
**Prescription:** books

**Bubble Wrap** [buhb-uhl rap] *n* trademark for a packaging material made of clear plastic sheets with small bubbles of air to absorb shock; the sense of one’s mind being encased in bubble wrap, creating a foggy sense of unreality that protects from emotional trauma -- prominent among those with depression.

**Tension and Trauma**

6 hours of homework per night  
5 work nights per week  
31 minimum needed on the ACT  
8 A’s expected  
3 family members with cancer  
1 in Hospice for failing heart
2 writing rejections
1 family history of anxiety
50 lbs. overweight

Combine in a skull and blend into coarse chunks. Attempt to mold into a serviceable shape. Bake under extremely high heat and pressure. Pray for no combustion.

Makes:
1 severely depressed teenager

Serves:
0

Act 1 Scene 2

A girl walks into the room, hunched over, clutching a book and a journal to her chest. She scuttles over to one of the two cushioned chairs. Both patient and therapist settle.

Therapist: How do you feel you are coping with your stress?
Eve: Not well at all.
Therapist: Do you have any mechanisms to help you deal in stressful situations?
Eve: Umm… reading? Day dreams? I'm not schizo. Of all my problems, that isn't one. But I could swear that's me over there.

The girl glitters. She's unearthly, effervescent, pale as a star. For all her unworldliness, she has my poor posture, my hair – riotously curly in the thick fog—my bent pinkies. Yes, as unbelievable as this all is, that girl is me.

I would never sit in this Empty with green as far as the eye can see and grey. Grey sky, grey fog, grey thoughts. Yet there she remains at the base of the white stalk of a windmill. The exactness of the giants is eerie, as if they are lined with precision to war against nature, with me – I and she – caught in the turmoil.

She is rooted to the grass, fingers braided among blades. I know she is immobilized here, feeling the warm earth below her, watching the sky high and chilling and proud above her.

I step forward.

Symptoms: bubble wrap, loneliness
Diagnosis: romantic pressure
Prescription: romance novel

Act 1 Scene 23
The girl walks into the room cuddling a book and journal to her chest. She makes a straight line towards her usual chair.

**Therapist:** How are you feeling this week, [Eve]?  
[Eve]: I’ve been better.  
**Therapist:** Have the exercises been working?  
[Eve]: I haven’t had time to work on it much.

As I take a step towards the girl, a prickling sensation overcomes my entire body. Every inch of my skin is asleep. With my sudden movement into the fog, I awake my limbs. I glance down.  
Droplets sweat through my pores. I bring my arm up to my eyes for closer inspection. No... The water is attaching to me, magnifying the words nestled in each drop. The effect is startling, as if this sheen is illuminating the thoughts running through my veins.

My thoughts aren’t this dark, aren’t this negative... are they? This seems domain somehow.

The air, formerly brisk, turns sweltering. As the last of the condensation soaks into my skin or evaporates – I’m at a loss as to which way it is – I register something strange at the corner of my eyesight.

**Symptoms:** bubble wrap, insecurities  
**Diagnosis:** unrealistic expectations  
**Prescription:** literature  

---

Act 1 Scene 95

The girl walks into the room, her posture worse than ever, if possible. She runs her hand through her hair as she heads towards the chair, managing a weak smile at her therapist.

**Therapist:** Why don’t we switch things up this week, [Eve]? Writing and art make you feel better. Why don’t you write or draw what you think goes on in your brain?

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Symptoms: bubble wrap, ruminating
Diagnosis: can’t leave mind alone
Prescription: captivating YA fiction

There is no God.

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I glance up from my arm, alarmed. The green grass is gone. The white turbines are brown like branchless tree trunks. They’re rooted in sand. The trees wilt in the same direction. She is missing.

I run to where she was before I looked away. There’s no fog. No prickling. And no girl.

The ground is the slightest bit spongy, has the slightest give.

Only when I get to the trunk do I see the markers infused into it. I’m at a crossroad.

According to the tree I am on Corpus Callosum Court. Odd name, but I shrug it off. I look left and right. The road extends in both directions as far as I can see. I look back at the signs.

Left: Frontal Lobe Location.
Right: Parietal Lobe Location.

This is like no map I have ever seen. I start scanning, looking for a familiar name.

Temporal Lobe, Cerebellum, Occipital Lobe... and with an arrow pointing straight through the ground: pons, medulla oblongata, and spinal cord. Click. It all makes sense. The parts of the brain, the ground, the tree trunks... Only they aren’t tree trunks. It’s hair.
I’m on a scalp.

**Symptoms:** bubble wrap, worn out
**Diagnosis:** need to recharge
**Prescription:** write

Pause

Be kind.
Rewind.
Remind.

Then press play.

These are the instructions I instinctively feel as I force myself onward.
Twelve Bowls of Cereal

In the dim, flickering light of the dining room chandeliers, twelve bowls of Cheerios stretch across the entirety of the great table. Meticulously placed in a slightly swerving line, they create a mysterious path from the kitchen doors to a poised, pensive girl. Draped in a grapefruit pink cardigan and a flowing, patterned dress, she sits in a chair midway down the table: Lillian.

Lillian’s parents called...her grandma passed away this afternoon. Ivy’s words from earlier in the evening resonate in my mind as I soak in the situation. Four teenagers, all of whom I met four days ago, sit cross-legged on the ground next to me, and together we create a crescent around Lillian. As I slowly scan my surroundings, a sense of silent solemnity seeps throughout the room. Although we all certainly mourn the death of Lillian’s grandmother, the sentiment is not quite pity; rather, I detect a collective yearning to understand the magnitude of the situation, to understand the divine circumstances that united us all here in the dining room of a Texan sorority house at 2:00 a.m.

“What do y’all think happens after you die? What do you suppose this life is really about?” Lillian shatters the silence with her soothing, South Carolinian drawl. I have heard these questions posed by numerous people before, yet the nature of Lillian’s question seems...different. She is not pleading for answers out of desperation; the tone of her inquiry does not provoke a debate on philosophical intellect or religious rhetoric. On the contrary, the power behind her question pierces into the hearts of every person in the room and forces us to contemplate our own beliefs on the matter. “I mean, what do you or I or any of us even believe at all?” Silence permeates the room once more.

“What do I believe?” Lillian’s question seemed to be the underlying theme of my six-week experience at the Telluride Association Summer Program, or TASP. Living in a house with seventeen brilliant teenagers from across the nation (and Germany!)—all of whom were from starkly different backgrounds and complete strangers to me when I first arrived—unveiled a world of unfamiliar experiences to me. Best described as the lovechild of intellectualism and diversity, this Telluridean community was every nerd’s utopia—and I was in the middle of it. Being immersed in such an environment, I dared myself to better understand my peers along with myself.

“I believe in the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him,” Asad offers after several long minutes of deep consideration; he proceeds to describe his faith in Islam and its influence on his views on the afterlife. Two weeks later, I would remember these words as I witnessed a Muslim prayer service in Asad’s room one Friday afternoon. Sitting next to a Pennsylvanian boy from a homogenous hometown like mine, I would be astounded by the unfamiliar movements the Muslim TASPers habitually perform, fascinated by the poetic Arabic that fills the air. Enticing my senses with the familiar, yet
mysterious divinity of the moment, the practice of Islam would no longer seem so foreign from my own religion.

Following a dip of contemplative silence, Aparaajit—in his characteristically wise, dignified manner—adds his own insight: “Perhaps after we die, we’re reincarnated into a new being, a new self. That is, until enlightenment ultimately breaks that cycle.” This very idea would be the catalyst of future conversations between Aparaajit and me, often lasting into the wee hours of the night. In discussing our journeys in our respective faiths—Aparaajit’s Hindu beliefs and my Christian faith—my perception of other religions, along with my own, would gradually begin to reshape.

As I mull over Aparaajit’s comments in my mind, Lillian’s curious stare and heartwarming smile egg me on to speak. Overcoming my fear of inferiority in the presence of such thoughtful individuals, I decide to vocalize my perspective, or at least attempt to: “For me, Christianity is more than just a religion in my life; it’s the foundation of my community, my family, and even my values.”

As I attempt to reify the thoughts I have never voiced before, the intensity of interest in my fellow TASPers’ eyes induce me to continue: “At my little brother’s funeral, I still remember my mom telling me that we weren’t mourning, but rather celebrating a ‘Homegoing.’ That someday we’d see my brother again in Heaven. While I didn’t really understand her when I was five, I now think this is why I believe in my faith. I want to believe that there’s a greater purpose to life, even beyond death. The Gospel reminds me that living should be a meaningful experience, an experience shared among all of us.” As my last words drift into the air, we all glance at each other in the distinctly unawkward silence. Gradually, I realize that even though we all view the death of Lillian’s grandmother through diverse lenses shaped by personal beliefs, we are sharing a night together that is a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience. More powerful than the understanding gained of each other is the bond we have built through discussing our differences. I smile in awe.

“Thanks, guys,” Lillian whispers with a smile. “Thank you so much. For this, for everything.” Replying “You’re welcome” through comforting smiles, we slowly stand up to groggily retire to our beds. As I begin upstairs, I notice Lillian sitting alone in the diminishing dining room light, staring curiously once again at the twelve bowls of Cheerios strewn across the table. Lillian’s rationale for placing cereal bowls on the table, in this order, will always remain a mystery to me—as will the answer to why God took the life of Lillian’s grandmother, in this manner, on this day. Yet in our collective attempt to understand these complex ambiguities, my fellow TASPers and I discovered in one another a mutual connection unlike any other. The salience of that discovery is no mystery at all.
Gold Rush

We’re exhibitionists—
dream-cartographers;
famished hands explore
chasms
between nape and collarbone,
the bracing stream of
extended spine.

Our rabid (rapid)
heartbeats-jackhammer-flesh,
pulse for beauty
like treasure-hungry Spanish explorers.
We discover
goldleaf eyelashes,
sapphire lips,
diamond-dust handprints.
We bottle these jewels,
shroud them in stone
(our secret riches
encased in sediment).

After the search,
it’s us (and the waves),
and your breath on my neck is
the roar of the sea;
your tears (and mine),
the flowing salt-stream
deposited
on flushed cheekbone.

I dis-
solve
(into you),
plunge
into ocean arms.
We are
the sea—
natural love, in(finite)
beauty.
A northern gale swirled around my frame and flirted with the tatters of my dime store coat. I squinted my eyes into a diminutive sliver to form a shield from the biting wind. About my feet swirled a crazed helix of dirt and loose pieces of urban trash. My hands were plunged deep into the baggy pockets of a coat that enveloped my chilled body as I shuddered out a fog of breath into the cool, icy air. Even in the metropolis’ heart of heated, raged crime, the cold had stretched its fingers. I removed my gloved hands from wooly pockets and reached into a corduroy satchel; from it I snatched a scarf, stretched it out to its full length and twisted it around my neck. Though it was now decades old, the scarf provided me with the same comfort, the same heat that it had provided for me as a child. No matter that I would be spending tonight on a concrete bench in the Bronx’s subway tunnels- it would still keep me warm. No matter the way those tunnels screeched and sighed as rusty, cumbersome trains arrived, stopped...waited....and then departed again into an eternal, underground void - this scarf would provide me with comfort, even from those harrowing noises. I breathed in its familiar, dingy scent - clinging to the memories it provided me with; memories that not even the moth holes could take away. I closed my eyes.

My sister and I traipsed about the house; singing and dancing to a song composed of our own hushed laughter and childish babbles. The house creaked in response to the late December winds of northern New York State, but, inside, the fire hissed and popped, raising a soulful chorus up the chimney in unison. The ornaments on the Christmas tree tinkled with the reverberations of two pairs of excited feet pounding across the hardwood floor, waking our parents.

Soon after our parents begrudgingly made it down the stairs and slumped into the couches around us, we headed for the presents. Shredding ribbons and bows and paper (red, white, gold, green), our youthful fingers constantly searched for the next present, our eyes filled to the brim with cheery, warm sparkles. Then the inevitable came: all the presents were gone, save but one to me, from my grandma. Slowly, I unwrapped the brown bundle, wondering all the while what exactly my grandma had been thinking when she decided to use an old grocery bag as gift wrap. The final piece of tape removed, I pulled out something wooly and woven: a scarf.

Casting it to the side, a note fell out. Penned in my grandmother’s perfect penmanship, it read, “Merry Christmas to a beloved granddaughter! I know this scarf seems a bit useless to you, but, as a child it brought a great sense of security and warmth, even on the coldest of days. I hope you know that you have brought me greater joy than this silly old scarf could ever communicate to you. I love you always.”
I opened my eyes. I clenched my eyes shut, trying to save that distant memory but the scream of an arriving train reminded me of where I really was: homeless and living on the streets, alone. But, something about that night—was it the din of Christmas songs in the city above me? the chiming of the Salvation Army bells?—caused me to hold onto my daydream just a little bit longer. I buried my hands deeper into my coat pocket, finding an ancient note sent to me on Christmas day many years ago. Always...I thought. And fell asleep.
Achieving Life with Animal Experimentation

Claude Bernard, the father of physiology, once stated that “the science of life is a superb and dazzlingly lighted hall which may be reached only by passing through a long and ghastly kitchen.” He brilliantly stated that the beauty of the preservation of life, the necessity of the upbringong of society and culture cannot be achieved without taking a slightly dark path. Animal experimentation, a highly debated topic, is the obligatory path which we as people must take in order to ensure that most people can reach the “dazzlingly lighted hall” and stay there. Indeed, we owe much of our lives to research on animals, and billions of people have been cured with this essential medical component. Despite the clear benefits of medical animal experimentation, many people believe that experimentation is not the most ideal method and that it should be avoided. However, with clear evidence, I support using animal experimentation for clinical purposes. Experimentation of animals for medical purposes should be continued due to the radical health advancements from testing, the moral standpoint of the issue, and the progressive rate and practicality of animal testing compared to other alternative methods. My solution for this controversial topic is simple: keep the use of animals as our first and main contributor to medicine for society today.

First, the breakthroughs of compiled medical history are great in number. According to the Foundation for Biomedical Research, “Animal research has played a vital role in virtually every major medical advance of the last century – for both human and animal health. From antibiotics to blood transfusions, from dialysis to organ transplantation, from vaccinations to chemotherapy, bypass surgery and joint replacement, practically every present day protocol for the prevention, treatment, cure and control of disease, pain and suffering is based on knowledge attained through animal research.” Also, according to Dr. Conn of Oregon and Health Science University, “Polio, smallpox, and tuberculosis are but some of the ailments that have largely disappeared thanks to animal research. Research has resulted in a multitude of medical advancements from pregnancy tests to the H1N1 vaccine.” We have depended on animal research to a remarkable extent, discovering cures for a multitude of ailments.

A common misconception that the frank and ignorant public of the world possess is that we as people are simply using supremacy to force animals to benefit our health and well-being. This is not true, for animals are also being benefited through the same journey of progress. Vaccines for rabies, tetanus, *pirvo* virus, and others were all found from animal research, according to *The Animal Research War* by Tom Holder. About 5% of all veterinary medicine is based on the experimentation on animals. Not only does testing discover new treatments to diseases, but it helps construct new safe tools to help the world’s qualified doctors. According to Animal Research Info, “Diagnostic tools such as scanners, and implants such as heart pacemakers or artificial hips, are safe and effective only because they were developed and tested in animals. Many surgical techniques, such as open heart surgery and heart transplants, rely on methods and equipment that were developed using animals.” These
advancements that have saved millions of lives including lives of fellow animals should be kept and maintained with the continuation of animal testing.

Despite the immense list of benefits, some people argue with determination that animal testing is an unneeded and cruel option. One of the most crucial components of their arguments, when analyzed, is the fact that it is supposedly immoral for us as humans to exploit animals the way we choose to, without consent, to further our purposes and well-being. They support these statements with animal rights, and that animals should also be treated equally. However, the views of these people have been misguided by the views of extremists, for animals tested with minimal suffering is perfectly just in terms of morality if the common good is benefited. For instance, what is a right? The Oxford English Dictionary defines a right as “A legal, equitable, or moral title or claim to the possession of property or authority, the enjoyment of privileges or immunities, etc.” The most critical term of this definition is the word claim. In moral sense, a right is simply a claim that one party can make against another resulting in mutual agreement. The right of safety (I won't hit you, so you shouldn't hit me) is a simple example. However, what if a person were to walk in the African bush and claim their right not to be attacked by lions? This seems absurd even to the most common of people.

Another piece of support is what determines a moral agent. A moral agent must be able to reflect on their opinions and know whether their actions were wrong or right. Moral responsibility therefore is held, so punishment can also be inflicted upon moral agents. As far as we know, animals can not reflect on whether actions were wrong or right, but more importantly, we do not hold them responsible with fitting legal punishments determined by their actions. This is also ridiculous. Why then do we foolishly claim that animals have rights? It should follow smoothly that because animals are not autonomous, are not morally responsible, and cannot claim their own actions of morality, they must not have basic rights, including unalienable right to life. Alison Hills, an Oxford lecturer in the Philosophy department and author of Do Animals Have Rights? States, “Defenders of animal rights are correct to say that a prejudice towards your own species is wrong, just as racism and sexism are wrong. They go on to conclude that animals and humans have equal rights. But this is a mistake. Humans of all races and all sexes have equal rights because they are equal in ways relevant to having those rights: they can use their vote, they can do the same jobs, and they can give or withhold their consent to what happens to them. Animals are not equal to humans in these ways.”

This, however, does not mean that murdering animals for our own entertainment is justified. According to Pro-Test, an Oxford group advocating animal research, when the common good is benefited and benefits outweigh the costs, it is morally justifiable. As long as you use just means to obtain the common good of society, the process is morally acceptable. Animal testing therefore has no moral inhibitions when the common good of society is enhanced with life and well-being of medicine. Animal testing is certainly legal, and is benefiting the greater good of the world with the sacrifice of animals.

Finally, the practicality and rate of progression of animal testing is far greater than alternative solutions, because alternative solutions to animal testing do not work to the same standard. According to the website Animal Research Info, alternatives such as cell cultures, skin testing, and others are very limited with almost no progress. Also, the Americans for Medical Progress website states that “computers are only able to provide information or models of known ‘phenomenon.’ Because research consistently seeks answers to unknowns, a
computer is unable to simulate how a particular cell might interact or react with a medical compound, or for example, how a particular human system such as the circulatory system will react to a new drug directed to improve organ functionality.” Indeed, alternatives cannot make the same rate of progress in medicine as the use of animals.

The website of Understanding Animal Research states that animal research is being used today to discover cures for Alzheimer’s disease, spinal cord injury, and multiple sclerosis, where there is no alternative method that is useful. Still, some persistent individuals might state that progressing medicine in a forward way along with the minimal sacrifice of animals would largely make up the “horrors” of animal testing. When alternatives are used, progress is slowed to an unacceptable rate of medicine development, whereas the use of animals has helped the greater good of humans and other animals. The World Health Organization stated that 7.9 million people died of cancer in 2007, with the number growing annually. If research on cancer alone is delayed 5 years due to the use of alternatives, how would a doctor explain to a distraught parent that their recently deceased child could have been saved years ago? If you delay cancer research 5 years to obtain a clean alternative way, you kill 40 million people due to the lack of prompt cures. Obviously, this is unacceptable, and should not be considered to be taken into effect. Combined with the previous argument that confirmed the legality of animal testing, it is shown that animal testing is the clear cut winner among all practiced methods. Animal experimentation is the most progressive and the most practical way among all alternatives.

In conclusion, the use of animals for medical purposes should be advocated and continued. Reasons for doing so would include the remarkable health progressions made, the confirmation of morality, and the lack of equally competent methods. Therefore, I assert that animal testing is the best way to progress for the greater good. Conductors of in vivo testing are experimenting with veterinarians in the current system are doing the best they can to ensure the minimization of pain and suffering of tested subjects. Experimentation on animals still has flaws and improvements needed on the system. For example, ways to reduce the amount of animals tested with the same progression would please all the persons of the general public. Better housing of animals and care for the creatures would not only benefit the animals but would advance our progression in life further by producing better and more consistent data. I am confident, however, in the system of animal experimentation, and when improvements are adopted, animal experimentation should be the world’s method of research for medicine. Claude Bernard recognized the fact that the life science has no pure solution, but upon passing the long and ghastly kitchen, the prime goal of well-being can be achieved. Millions of rats today may die; in the future, billions of people and animals will be saved from suffering.
This is the title piece of Stephen Moore's portfolio.

The Dreamer

The room was an assembly of dull colors. It was also large, as well as cluttered with meaningless junk, the only things that were of any specific value being an upright piano, and its bench. There were two lights perched upon the piano, their backs bent over, their suns shining down upon the player.

The player had nimbly maneuvered around the clutter to sit here, and whatever he had encountered throughout his day, and would undoubtedly encounter tomorrow, now, he was happy. His day had been long and dreadful, never did he put forth enough accuracy, and so he failed. But here, his bony hands did not stumble, they did not spit failures from his pen. Here, they were graceful, they were relief rather than anguish. They sang together and danced across the white and black, calling together the clouds and rain, which washed away the room, but for the piano, the player, and the birds with shining faces. The birds watched attentively, little did they think this child-like fancy should be slain.

A joyous, fertile field germinated and stretched and grew outwards from the center, the piano. And this revived the weary player, and he felt he could go on through the next day, weeks, even the years ahead; because of moments like these, the pleasure and calm of the vibrant, open field. Sunflowers grew from behind the piano. The field began to sprout slowly with all sorts of wildflowers, and many dandelions. Snapdragons burst into bloom around him and at his feet. Ivy crawled up the piano, and the bench, where it moved as if to embrace the player. Around the piano a wide trench formed, one that filled with water. Water lilies began to grow and open their blossoms. The sides of the piano were covered in ivy, as was the chair. Small, bonsai-like sakuras stretched and blossomed in between and on the sides of the birds.

The plants heard not Orpheus, as the trees had, but they heard this song, which could have moved Hades, as it moved them to bloom.

Sprigs of ivy hugged his hands like cuffs, and spiders wove him a cloak to match, and dandelions made a crown upon his head. His mood rose slowly to jubilant as he played on, and the two birds began to sing along with his song, and his song seemed to be eternal joy, growth, always spring and warm. Here, no wrong had ever been done him, nothing pained him here. And it would always be that way, here.

His mood began to be euphoric. Nothing could ever touch this beautiful world, nothing could destroy it! His fingers danced as few ever have, or ever will. A smile lit his face, his thin body no longer down-cast, but up-turned, looking toward the beauty of it all! Why did no one else have a refuge like this? A wonderful home like this? Why wouldn't they?

Off to the side, a door appeared, opening. And a man entered, or was he a devil? He had an answer like a match, “Because escapism and childish fancy are not good things, just like every stupid thing you are so fond of!” This answer set the door to ash, as the man, if he was
even human, strode across the room in a rage, and flew at his child! The trench dried and the lilies withered as he passed. Every step he took spread desolation. This man broke apart into many flames as he struck, as if he was the match, and these flames took to destroying the beauty they did not know. They devoured the grass and the wildflowers, and the rain began again. The boy had fallen off the piano's bench, the rain was his own. His adornments burned as well, as the field began to shrink. The ivy burned, the snapdragons and the impatiens made lifeless ash. The sakuras no longer rained their petals, but rather their charcoal. By now one could see all the piano clearly, and the field was gone. The birds burned, leaving but their skeletons and their still brightly burning skulls behind. The room was there again, the player, at the foot of the piano, was sobbing on the ground, but the man only turned out the two lights as he walked out. The player lay there for some time, as if imprisoned by His junk. But eventually, he rose, picked himself up, and stepped over the garbage of his father.
Blame

Disaster. It’s one word, but in that eight-letter word, is a load of heartache and pain. We’ve all heard the phrase, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” but that is a lie. Words lead people to make decisions, to make mistakes, to kill. You never know what kind of effect you have on people until you’re the one they have their gun trained on. You never know the pain they feel or the pain you’ve caused until you’re the victim of their unmerciful revenge.

It seems so odd that it takes years to build your life to get it to where it needs to be, but it only takes seconds for it to be destroyed. Do you know what it feels like to be emotionally punched in the gut so many times that you just need to throw up so you can get rid of the pain?

I’ll never understand why people say that they’ve “lost” someone. To the world I’ve “lost” my brother, but not really. I know exactly where he is. He’s six feet under in a cemetery. I haven’t lost my brother, what I’ve lost is the ability to touch him, the ability to speak to him, the ability to remember with him. That doesn’t stop me from thinking about him, about what I wish I could’ve said, all the good times that we’ve had. I haven’t lost my brother. He’s dead, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

I am a mask. I say what people expect me to say and feel what people want me to feel. It’s not what I want to say, and it’s not what I want to feel. Behind the mask is a tortured soul just waiting to escape the jaws of Death. Whether it’s emotional death or physical death, I can’t yet tell.

I pretend to be alright, but deep inside I know I’m not. As the people around me laugh, I grow envious because I know that their smiles are genuine while mine are forced. I try to lead a normal life and pretend that I’m not emotionally wrought every moment of the day. I pretend that I don’t wake up pinned to my sheets in terror from a nightmare. I want to be real. If only I knew how.

I want a second-chance. I want the hands of time to rewind. I want to live again. Yes, I breathe, and my heart beats, but I don’t find joy in life. Life is just a remembrance of the good before it all took a turn for the worse. I can blink, and I can eat, but I constantly keep my eyes open so I don’t have to face the dark echo of my past. I don’t want to eat because it’s just nourishing a monster.

The newspapers say that he killed all those people, but we all know that wasn’t it. Yes, he physically shot them, but it was in self-defense. We were the ones that emotionally shot him first. I’ll admit it: I wasn’t one of those people, but I didn’t try to stop them. I was an accomplice, for lack of a better word. I knew what was going on, but it didn’t affect me because I knew I was innocent—innocent of initiating the pain but guilty of not preventing it.

I cry the tears of a lifetime of pain. I wonder how many silent tears he cried in that bedroom. Did he bury his head in his pillow to muffle his screams, much like I do? Was he begging for help, and I just wasn’t willing to notice, like so many people around me don’t notice
my constant pleas? Did he know that he was going to die, much like I'm aware that I'm going to
die? Was he planning on being killed, or was he just too late to do it himself?

Here I am, begging for help, begging for forgiveness, but everyone's turned their backs so they don’t have to see me, don’t have to listen to me. People look at me and burst into tears, not because they pity me but because I remind them of the monster that ruined their lives. He wasn’t a monster, though—not in the beginning. People don’t start out as monsters. They start as innocent babies. It’s what the world does that changes them. So am I mad at myself? Am I mad at those who didn’t stop the pain or those who inflicted it? Or am I mad at the world?

Blame is another word that is filled to the brim with emotion. It’s full of hatred, full of sorrow, full of denial. Everyone blames him for his actions, but no one’s willing to admit their part in the shooting. My parents argue all the time. Mom says it was Dad’s fault, and Dad’s blaming his only son. No one asks my opinion, of course, because I’m a mask. Masks don’t have opinions. I know deep inside that I’m to blame. So blame me already and leave him alone. He’s dead. Let him rest in peace. I’m alive, or so they say. Let me deal with the agonizing torture of blame

I was sitting in class doing the ordinary – taking out my notebook and turning to a new page. People chatted nonchalantly unaware of the danger lurking around them. That’s when it happened. The alarms wailed overhead, piercing my eardrums. I looked around to see the reactions of the other people in the room. Some were confused, others horrified, and there were those that didn’t really care because they just figured it was a drill. I clasped my hands over my head in an attempt to dull the sound. Mrs. Jones rushed to the door to shut the blinds on the window and turned out the lights as we all cowered in the dark. The only light coming through was that which managed to seep through the cracks in the blinds.

Despite what had been previously drilled into our brains, I found myself edging even closer to the closed door. I moved stealthily, not wanting the teacher to notice. One inch was all I needed, and I would be there. I tried to tell myself not to, but the curiosity kept eating at me until I knew I had to look. I peered through the blinds and could see a guy walking slowly past each individual classroom as if looking for a certain one. I turned away to make sure the teacher wasn’t looking, and when I looked out the blinds again, I found myself face to face with a pair of gray Nikes. My gaze drifted higher past the faded blue jeans and the black long-sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled up. My eyes traveled upward until I saw a glimmer of something. My gaze was fixed on a small, black handgun. A cry of terror escaped from my mouth. It wasn’t long before I was staring into the eyes of the shooter.

I had seen those pale blue eyes before, and I had gazed into them with admiration. But now I peered into them with pure, unfathomable fear. His once-kind eyes were engulfed in determined rage. This person had once been my hero, but now he appeared to be the enemy. I couldn’t stop looking at his short hair the exact same auburn as mine. I wanted to reach out and have him reassuringly hold my hand. Too bad the gun was in the way.

I blinked rapidly trying to convince myself that this was just a hallucination. I wanted to wake up, but I realized it wasn’t a dream. It was much worse; it was reality. I hadn’t realized it, but I had been holding my breath. I tried to slow my heartbeat, but the task was
unmanageable. As terrible as the situation was, the fact that the shooter was standing in front of me made it much worse. For you see, the shooter was my brother, Tony.

When he recognized me, he smiled sadly. He aimed his pistol at the window and the glass shattered. I ducked trying to protect myself, but it was useless. The glass embedded itself into my skin, cutting like razors. I watched as Tony raised the gun and shot at the students in the room. Blood splattered everywhere – the counter, the desks, the walls. Students cried and screamed as they tried to find escape, but there was no escape. Tony was blocking the only way in or out. An unfortunate boy had tried to run across the room to hide behind the teacher’s desk and, instead, ended up getting shot in the head. The blood slid down his face like a crimson tear before he crumpled to the floor. I felt a scream work its way up my throat but was unable to make any sound. One by one, they all dropped like flies. I waited for them to get up, to even move, but they didn’t. They never would again. I was the only one in the room that was still alive – besides Tony.

This was not the same brother that I knew; this was a demon. I looked into his expressionless eyes. His face resembled the stone statues on the Notre Dame, still and unmoving, showing no emotion. I wanted to blink my eyes and wake up in bed, but I knew that it was useless wishing. I racked my brain trying to remember a time when his eyes used to be filled with compassion and his lips curved into a smile rather than a sinister smirk, but I could not. I burst into tears as I became consciously aware of the fact that I would probably never see my brother again – outside of prison, that is.

My head jerked up at the sounds of other sirens – police, ambulance, fire trucks. My thoughts immediately went to my dad who would be on duty right now. I could imagine the shock and horror on his face as he acknowledged the fact that his son was the cause of all this violence. It would break his heart just about as much as it broke mine, if not more. I glared coldly at Tony, and then I produced a question to which I couldn’t live without knowing the answer.

“Why?” I whispered inaudibly. His eyes softened for a moment, but with a shake of his head the softness vanished as if I had only imagined it. I forced myself to look away from the gruesome scene. I once again found myself staring out the blinds. This time I was not looking at the killer, but at Officer Winters– my father. That same exact shock I had imagined riddled his face. He hesitated a second before remembering his duty and withdrew his gun from its holster. The sound of Tony reloading his gun caused me to look toward him again. He aimed at one last person. I instantly felt the excruciating pain that followed. I instinctively clutched my leg, feeling the bile rise up in my throat as hot, sticky blood coated my hand. I readied myself for another bullet to come, but it didn’t. Another shot echoed through the room. Tony fell to the floor. My head snapped toward the window as I tried to see who had fired the shot. Standing there, red-faced and dripping sweat was my father.

I cried out to Tony, begging him to move, to open his eyes, to respond. He didn’t. Crimson blood squirted out of his barely beating heart and onto my face. I didn’t even bother to try and wipe it off. As his pulse slowed, so did the flow of the blood. I wanted to run to him, but the pain overwhelmed me. I knew I shouldn’t move, but I couldn’t sit still. It took all the strength I could muster just to crawl over to his lifeless corpse. My gut wrenched as I fell, my body weak from loss of blood. I managed to lean against the wall but was thrown off balance by an explosion. I toppled over and felt the impact of the tile floor on my chin right before everything went black.
Introducing Meatarianism and the Ideas Behind It

Recently, a new diet/belief has risen to compete with all those animal-protecting plant killers (AKA losers). Although there is still not a significant amount of meatarianists, Carrie Nivore, the head of the ASKP (Association to Stop the Killing of Plants) predicts, "It will catch on. People will realize the harm of their ways and turn to an all-meat diet."

The explanation behind meatarianism was a bit hazy at first, but after intense conversations with the ASKP, the haze lifted. It turns out, many benefits to becoming a meatarian exist, including health benefits. Meat has numerous necessary vitamins and nutrients, like B12, which studies have shown can only be found in animal carcasses. Previously, scientists had thought that eggs, beans, and milk products also had B12 and other essential vitamins. However, that theory was disproved when humanity remembered that cavemen and Neanderthals, our ancestors, only ate meat, and came to the conclusion that it was the natural thing to do. Anyway, we took it to mean that slaughtering plants is BAD.

Carrie Nivore also explained that deforestation is caused by vegetarians. Since vegetarians eat plants, the constant need to fulfill their food needs is destroying tropical rainforests. In addition, more deserts are springing up. If the image of a chainsaw ripping through a giant tree doesn't just make your soul weep, then I honestly don't know what will.

Yet another pro for meatarianism is that, by switching to an all-meat diet, men now need to hunt. Harvard studies show that in 2010, 87% of men feel more masculine and wholeheartedly better after they hunt. This feeling of superiority can only be associated with meatarianists, another bonus for meatarianists because a boosted male ego is always swell.

Even though the meatarian diet has overwhelming advantages, people do challenge this (probably those pesky vegetarians and omnivores). People claim that there is conflict with the meatarian diet: it kills animals. Often, omnivores and vegetarians try to poke holes in the logic behind meatarianism. They say that the annoying and smelly animals deserve to live just as much as the cuddly, soft and cute shrubs and bushes. However, those people are clearly misinformed because animals can't even photosynthesize, while plants can. Therefore, plants have earned their right to live.

Another disadvantage of vegetarianism is its link to violence. Throughout the years, many philosophers have said that the savageness necessary to kill a plant is the same kind of savageness necessary to kill a fellow human being. In fact, new studies have shown that human beings are almost identical to *Hobo Serpians*, a plant species. Humans regularly consume *Hobo Serpians*, so it has become a concern that, since the plant species is so similar to Homo Sapiens (even more so than the chimpanzee), humans will eventually turn to cannibalism. Will humans submit to killing each other for food? Or will meatarianism save the world before humanity consumes itself—literally?
“Gymnasium” Is Spelled With a “G”!

It was a great day for an eighth grade spelling bee, the second day back from winter break. Everyone was excited and still talking about the gifts they had received.

When second period came, I was excited when I saw on the board that today would be the class spelling bee. I knew that this year would be different from past years. Last year’s spelling bee was disappointing. On the first round, one of my classmates before me received the word ‘allowance’.

“A-l-l-o-w-a-n-c-e,” she spelled.

It became my turn. “A-l-l-o-w-a-n-c-e,” I immediately sat down in my chair for I knew that I should have said “a-n-c-e.” I was mortified. I knew how to spell allowance.

The year before that, when I was in sixth grade, was also disappointing. I received the word “roller coaster.” My teacher had told us that if the word had a space in it, to say the word “space.”

“R-o-l-l-e-r-c-o-a-st-e-r,” I spelled. I couldn’t remember if there was a space or not. I decided that there wasn’t. “C-o-a-s-t-e-r,” I said. I was humiliated when my teacher said there was a space between “roller” and “coaster.”

I knew this year, my eighth grade year, I would never spell rollercoaster or allowance, wrong again. In second period communication arts, we had a journal prompt every day.

“Today, your journal prompt is to write about a time when you were certain of something,” my communication arts teacher told us. I immediately began writing on my paper. I knew what I was certain about: that I would not win the class spelling bee today. My reason was that I had never won before because I had made stupid mistakes.

“Oh,” my teacher started. “Today we will have our class spelling bee.”

“Why?” asked one of my classmates. “We already know that she is going to win,” he said, pointing directly at me. I was certainly embarrassed that there was already pressure being put on me by him saying that.

“No,” I said. “I can’t spell under pressure.” That was my extremely lame excuse. Well, it was true. I thought. I had messed up on easy words in years past.

“Oh,” my teacher said.

“Do we have to participate?” a few kids asked.

“Yes. You have to participate,” our teacher answered. “Let’s start in the back corner where Jake is. Jake, your word is ‘frigid.’”

“F-r-i-d-g-i-d.”

“Sorry, that is incorrect. It is spelled ‘f-r-i-d-g-i-d.’ Colleen, your word is ‘library.’”

“L-i-b-r-a-r-y.”

My teacher went up and down the rows of the class. My row was the very last one.

“Katie, your word is ‘musician.’”
Katie was the newest girl in our class. She sat directly behind me. We had been talking before our turn about how nervous we were.

"M-u-s-c-i-a-n."
"Sorry, that is incorrect."

Next it was my turn. I was nervous. Please be an easy word, I thought. Please be an easy word. Please be an easy word.

"Your word is ‘steady.’"

Yes! I thought. This is easy!

"S-t-e-a-d-y."
"Correct."

My teacher continued on. She went up and down the rows. Into the fourth round, I was left with five other people. When it came my turn, my word was “frankfurter.”

Oh great! I thought. Is it a ‘u’ like ‘furt’ or an ‘o’ like Kentucky?

“F-r-a-n-k-f-u-,” I began. I paused. I couldn’t think. Everyone was staring at me now.

“This word is too hard,” my teacher said. “People have been messing up on this one earlier too. I’m going to give you a different word. Your new word is ‘gymnasium’.”

Yes! I thought to myself. This is so easy! I got this! Thank you! I was so relieved. Maybe I actually would win for the class this year!

I took a deep breath. “J.” I felt my face instantly redden. Wait! Did I just say “j”?! I, the smartest girl in the class, the one who got called a teacher’s pet because she always knew the answers, had just spelled “gymnasium” with a “j”! I immediately sank down in my chair as the class began to laugh. I was humiliated, embarrassed beyond all other embarrassing moments. Who else in the history of eighth grade spelling has spelled gymnasium with a “j”?

“Aww, she’s a good speller too!” my teacher said. A look of embarrassment and total shock was upon her face. I could see that she felt really bad for me.

I felt worse when the rest of the words were spelled wrong. They were not hard for me. I could have spelled every single one of them right. I could have won for the class. I should have thought longer. I shouldn’t have just thought the word was too easy.

For the rest of the day, I was teased for spelling “gymnasium” with a “j.” At the end of the day, before the last hour, I ran into the communication arts room, went up to my teacher and spelled “gymnasium” as fast as I could. She laughed and told me how bad she felt that I had spelled it wrong. From then on, I wrote “gymnasium” and “g” all over my communication arts papers. I also wrote about gymnasiums in my journal prompts.

I will never, ever, ever, spell “gymnasium” with a “j” again for as long as I live. I will always think before I spell.
Silver Bullet

I was relaxing in my crib enjoying some time off, but I knew that wouldn't last long because I'm Silver Bullet, private eye here at Rainbow Acres. I never get a moment's rest, with all the other kids pestering me. Someone stole my doll. Jimmy took my blankie. If pay was decent, I'd be living it up in a crib twice this size. But you don't become a detective for the money; you do it for the thrill. It's a tough job, but I'm a tough guy. You had to be at Rainbow Acres. It wasn't some pretty private daycare where all the children are perfect angels. The bimbos in this place are all whiners, and the men are mostly thugs working for a crime circle. My real name's a secret, and I intend to keep it that way—dangerous to let my identity slip.

I rolled over and groaned. I had three slugs in me. Two were spent foam darts, the other a juice box. Those were my two essentials. Juice to keep me going and the nerf gun to keep me alive. The business wasn't pretty, but it paid the Bills: Bill, my landlord, and Bill, the juice guy.

As I was reclining to enjoy the down-time, a scream rent the air. I flinched as the screech reached my crib, followed soon by the dame who emitted it. Classic, a brunette with a problem. But I had to help whether I wanted or not.

"Whadaya want?" I barked, reaching for my dart-gun and slipping it into the waistband of my pants.

"Someone stole the toilet paper," she simpered. I motioned with my hand; she reluctantly gave me the necessary pay, two cookies and a lollipop.

"Tell me more," I said impatient to finish this so I could focus my attention on a tall box of Hawaiian Punch.

"Well, Andy went to the bathroom, potty-training and all, and when he got there, the toilet paper was gone. He just now told me outside. He would have come to you himself, but he had to relieve himself in the bushes, so I came instead. Where are you going?" I kept walking without looking back. I'd heard all I needed to hear. I was going to find Andy.

I scoured the playground looking for a squealer who might know Andy's whereabouts. As I scanned the sandbox, I spotted someone who looked soft. Katie Meyers was playing with her dolls in the corner. The girl was a bit odd, like she lived in the sandbox. Every day she sat in the corner and played with her dolls, so I wasn't surprised to see her. Luckily for me, she was alone. I sauntered up, trying to look nonchalant, but being a known private eye, I didn't think she was buying it.

"Katie." She looked up and smiled tentatively. It was a polite smile, but her eyes were definitely suspicious. Nobody trusted a snoop. Katie was weak and a bit of a dog. She couldn't break your legs, let alone your heart. I was sure she'd be an easy nut to crack.

"I want you to help me, okay?" I asked tersely. She nodded, and I continued. "Earlier today, the T.P. went missing. Andy was the first to see it, and I need to talk to him. Have you seen him?" I cut straight to the chase. With Katie, you had to practically spell it out.
“Sure,” she said, “he’s on the swings.” I thanked her and started to walk away, but she continued to speak. “You know who it was, don’t you?” I turned around. She was smiling smugly, thinking she’d read me correctly. “I can tell. You’ve got that look on your face. Who was it then? Leo? He’s always getting in trouble. Or Tommy the quiet one? I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him.”

*Not very far then.* I didn’t answer, just thanked her again and walked away. It was a little disconcerting how overconfident Katie was for a dame who spent her time with dolls and not much else. I made my way to the swings. Andy was sitting on the swing farthest from me. He hadn’t seen me yet, so I stopped and watched him for a moment. He sat and surveyed the playground. It looked like he was waiting for someone.

I started walking towards him, and he jumped at the sound of my boots on the mulch. He almost fell off the swing and had to lunge for the pole to catch himself. I waited silently as he regained his composure. He looked up and smiled, gesturing for me to sit on the swing next to him.

“I knew you’d come eventually,” he said nervously, making quick glancing eye contact. “I made sure people knew I was at the swings. So what do you want? Some kind of witness statement or something?” He laughed, obviously uncomfortable. “I’ve never done this kind of thing before, but you probably already guessed that.” I produced a sucker from inside my jacket and placed it in my mouth, regarding him coolly. Andy was a nice person if such a thing existed. He was really soft, the kind of guy that couldn’t hold his juice, if you know what I mean. I didn’t want to rough him up too bad, but I still wanted answers. I had to handle this delicately.

“Just start with when you went into the bathroom.”

“Okay, well I was finger painting and then felt nature’s call, so I walked, in not really paying attention and locked the door. Everything seemed pretty normal; nothing looked out of place except for some feathers on the floor. Then I realized that the toilet paper was gone. I wasn’t sure what to do, I mean I still had to go, but no one tells you what to do when there’s no toilet paper, so I told Lucy and went in to bushes by the dumpster,” he said.

“Is there anything else you can remember?” I asked. So far what he’d given me was of no help. So what if there were feathers? Some bimbo probably tracked them in from the arts and crafts table. That was a downside of having a coed bathroom, even if it was a single. The dames seemed to practically shed glitter while they were in there.

“No that’s it, I swear.” He said, holding up his hands in the universal sign of innocence I’d stopped believing ages ago. “Can I go now? Some people are expecting me.”

“Sure, go ahead.” I replied, waving him off. “Thanks for your help Andy.”

“No problem.” He said over his shoulder as he walked away, in a hurry to get somewhere. I started off in the other direction, it wasn’t my problem if Andy was late to wherever he was going. I had other things to worry about. Who took the toilet paper? Where was it now? Why did they need it? I had a feeling that before this thing was through; I’d wish I’d never asked. At that moment, what I needed was a quiet place to think and a few juices to toss back. Luckily, I knew just the place where I could find both.

“Hey Marty,” I called to the bartender. I sighed as I lowered myself onto a cheap stool with a plastic cushion. The stool creaked under my weight, and I gave a discreet, uncharacteristic smile. It was good to be there. Marty smiled and gestured that he’d be over in
a moment. Marty was the owner of Rainbow Acre's very own Pot O' Gold. The Pot O' Gold was an inconspicuous tavern that not many people knew about. It lay outside the property-line of Rainbow Acres, and the only way to get there was through an obsolete hole in the fence behind the slide. After that it was a short walk in the woods until you came to a large abandoned tree house that Marty himself had fixed-up until it was ready for business. Marty was the closest thing I had to a friend, and the Pot O' Gold was the closest thing I had to a place I belonged. The quiet atmosphere and Marty's great service fit me.

“So, what'll you be having tonight?” Marty asked, coming over and leaning on the bar across from me.

“Hmm,” I scanned the selection he had leaning against the back wall and decided that the red one looked good. “Give me the Cherry Passion,” I said.

“Good choice,” said Marty, walking to get it. He picked up the box and, waving at the new customer that just walked in, popped in a straw and slid it down to me.

“Is she good-looking?” I asked, low so only Marty and I could hear. He nodded, his eyes still fixed on the pretty dame. I turned, watching her sashay to a table. “Don’t get your hopes up.” I paused to take a sip of my drink. “She’s taken.” I smiled as Marty turned protesting eyes on me. “Rueben’s girl.”

“Then she’s probably dying for a man with more culture.” I laughed inwardly at the thought of Marty being cultured. But then again, compared to Rueben, he’s as classy as they come.

“Probably is not something I would go off of,” I advised him even though I knew it was falling on deaf ears. Women weren’t something I wasted my time on, something that couldn’t be said for Marty.

“Give me a break,” he scoffed. “You solve half of your cases on probabilites. You’re lucky so many assumptions prove true.” He cast a last forlorn look at the girl before turning to me. “Speaking of which, what’re you working on now?”

“Someone stole the toilet paper,” I answered. Confusion clouded Marty’s eyes.

“Why would someone steal the toilet paper?” he asked incredulously.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I talked to the witness, but that came to nothing, so I walked here.” With a long, obnoxious slurp, I drained my juice box and slid a chocolate bar across the counter in payment.

“Well’s there any chance another person might have seen something?” Marty asked as he stuffed the chocolate bar in his pocket.

“That, my friend, is a great question.”

I pulled the brim of my hat down against the wind. I’d just walked back through the hole in the fence and left the sheltering trees behind. The clouds seemed to be having a turf war in the sky, using wind as a weapon to blow the others to shreds.

I walked across the playground towards the tall form in the middle. There was one person in Rainbow Acres who had eyes and ears everywhere, and she used this imposing structure as her fortress. A rock wall led directly to the room she operated from, but scrambling up a wall would be a less than dignified way to enter, so I circled round back where a small staircase would take me to where I needed to go.

I ascended the stairway and knocked on a pole at the top. I felt that just barging in would bring things to a bad start. A dark-haired dame sitting alone at a table in the semi-
enclosed room looked up at the rapping noise. She looked up and her face broke into a smile when she saw me. It was an elusive smile. A smile that could mean anything.

“Hello, Bullet,” she said, standing up and walking over.

“Hello, Shade.” Shade and I had a mostly friendly relationship. Most of the time we struck it off, but sometimes we struck each other. She’d moved here a while back and had enrolled after everyone else. She’d entered a world where the hierarchy had already been established and no one welcomed a newcomer. She was different than other dames. Almost as if she had been threaded with a different warp and weft.

Unlike most outsiders, she wasn’t resented. Even in the beginning she was almost respected. Almost, but not quite. In the chauvinistic society of Rainbow Acres, being female was appreciated but also held against you, and no one forgot Shade was female. Even so, without anyone noticing, she’d demolished our hierarchy with her own subtle tactics and reassembled it with herself on top. She didn’t order people around, but no one messed with her or the close group of people she trusted to keep tabs on the happenings of Rainbow Acres.

I’d first met her when I was working a case on a missing teddy. I was at the Pot O’ Gold with Marty when she walked in. She sat down at the bar and wanted to know what “us boys” were talking about. Marty told her without hesitation, and I wanted to strangle him. In the end though, she turned out to be helpful. As it happened, one of her people had seen something that broke the case. Since then, she’d worked with me on several other occasions, and it looked like I was back again.

“So, Bullet,” she said motioning for me to be seated. “What’s going on in the world this time?” I chose the chair closest to me and sat down.

“Well,” I began as she slipped into the seat across from mine. “Someone stole the toilet paper.” Her brow wrinkled.

“That’s odd,” she said. “I wonder why anyone would do that.”

“I was hoping one of your people had seen something.”

“No one reported anything odd.” She said racking her brain. “Who saw it anyway?”

“Andy.” I told her, wondering why it mattered.

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Don’t you think Andy’s been acting a little...strange lately?” she asked, a quietly intense meaning in her dark eyes.

“Only if by strange you mean perfect.” I said, slightly impatient.

“Men are so blind,” she muttered. “You honestly didn’t notice when he threw finger paint on the walls last week? Or when he pushed that guy off the teeter-totter? I think he’s sick of being the good one.” She said meaningfully.

She allowed a pause while that sunk in. “I’ll tell you if one of my guys hears something.” I nodded my thanks.

“Bye, Shade.”

“Goodbye, Bullet.” I left, my mind in a daze after that brief, but overwhelming glimpse into the world of women’s intuition. The way they liked to analyze things, I wondered how they didn’t go into an information overload. I decided it was time to go to the scene of the crime for answers. I cracked the door and walked inside, shutting it quickly behind me. I wasn’t sure why I was jumpy, but I had a bad feeling. Everything seemed to be in order as Andy had said. The
The stepstool was still pressed against the cabinets beneath the sink, and the annoyingly cheerful froggy soap dispenser still perched by the faucet. The only things out of place were the empty toilet paper holder and three feathers on the floor.

I bent to take a closer look at the latter. The feathers were white except for the tips of the plumes, which were blood-red. After seeing those feathers, everything clicked into place. Unfortunately, at that same moment, a much less welcome click resounded in the room.

The sound of a nerf gun being cocked behind my head sent my blood rushing the way only that sound can. I sucked in my breath and dropped the feather I’d been holding.

“Don’t move buddy,” came a voice to the left of the thug holding the gun against my head. My body remained frozen, but my mind moved rapidly, trying to figure a way out of this.

“I think this private eye needs to learn to keep to himself,” spat the guy with the gun. “Keep still or I’ll practice my nut-cracking skills on your head.” I lunged for my gun. “Wrong choice.” He struck the back of my head with the barrel of his gun. Blackness ebbed at the corners of my vision, then washed over me, a sticky, all enveloping tide.

I leaned back against a pillow in my crib resting my aching head. It was good to be back. The case had wrapped up well. I had woken up to Katie standing over me, a worried look on her face. Once I had gotten a drink of water, I explained to her how I had recognized the red tipped feathers as a sign of a gang, the Blood Tips. Every time they stole or vandalized something, they left a red tipped object at the scene in an arrogant show of pride. That didn’t fully explain it though. Normally, stealing toilet paper would be pointless and not worth the Blood Tips time, but as an initiation task it was perfect. It was still a thievery, but it was so small scale, that it wouldn’t blow up in their faces if the initiate were to mess it up.

And who at Rainbow Acres could be the initiate except one that had had a recent change of heart, one that had been acting out, one that would be smart enough to go back after stealing the toilet paper and report it to throw off suspicion, the one who no one except Shade would suspect since he was such a teacher’s pet.

After I got Katie to turn him in, the teachers hunted Andy down and gave him a thorough lecture on taking things that didn’t belong to him, and now he’s sitting in time out until lunch. I couldn’t care less what happened to Andy; after all, my job was to find out who did the crime, not to make them do the time. That’s why I was perfectly happy to be sitting there alone in my crib with a tall box of Hawaiian Punch, even though I knew that it wouldn’t last long.
Cardinals

Times were best
when my mom could carry me,
into the ballpark,
draped across her shoulder.
My arms clutched the back of her neck,
and my head buried in
her soft shirt.
My dad would be right beside us,
carrying his orange bottle
of cold Hawaiian sunscreen.

They snuck me in,
pretended I was too young for my own seat,
and it worked if I hid my face
and my coffee colored freckles.

I listened to the blur of noise,
"Buuuuud Light!"
"McGwire! McGwire!"
"Booo!"
and the scrape of light brown peanut shells under tennis shoes,
as I sat on my mom’s strong freckled thighs.
The yellow sunlight
flooded my eyes.

My dad held my mom’s peach-colored hand
and tossed me his cap.
I loved its golden World Series,
its silver All-Star,
its Cardinal pins,
and I loved how it slid over my face,
smelling of cherry cough drops
and mint tooth picks,
covering my eyes,
until all I could see was
red, red, red.
The Children

The children are home,
sick
with colds.
One perhaps has a slight fever.
They sit at the kitchen table,
the eldest running her feet,
bare,
against the cool tile floor,
and the other’s hands clutch around a glass
of cranberry juice,
his lips dripping and red.

Their hair is still tangled from rolling in bed,
and they look up at me,
their eyes wide like grey rocks
that sit patiently at the bottom of a lake.

“I’ll run to the store,”
I said,
“pick up some coloring books,
rent a Disney movie,
if you’d like.”

“Coloring books?”
“A movie?”
And then I see their eyes drift,
to the sublime window,
see how they yearn to lay on their backs,
feel the crisp touch of chestnut colored grass
on the underside of their feet,
stick out their tongues
and lick some blue from the morning sky.
The leaves have just fallen,
are beginning to pile
orange and red in the streets,
and I cannot resist their young faces,
and the yearning in their sweet eyes.

“Zip up your jackets,” I shout to them both
as I swing open the front door.
For moment I feel on my left cheek the old breeze
that I only know to be my lost companion.
Elizabeth Berkeley’s hazel eyes fluttered above the angry red scars uniformly lining her thigh. Her lips pursed. She fingered, in her favored hand, the shattered piece of a long forgotten Christmas ornament. Its chilling weight smiled into her fingertips, whispering into her pulse promises of release. Elizabeth held, in her other hand, a beaten cell phone. While she scarcely registered its presence on her palm, the phone had subtly infused itself into her anguish.

How many times had she desperately clutched the phone to her ear and poured out tears of hopelessness as harsh and desolate words corroded her innocence? How many times had Elizabeth balled her hands into fists, hoping, praying, pleading that the phone would ring, that he would be on the end other end, apologizing, that the phone would be witness to his undying pledge of love? And how many times, when the phone had failed to ring for Elizabeth, had she lifted a blade to her flesh and carved out her pain? She could think of nothing now she wanted more.

The scars Elizabeth obstinately buried beneath layers of clothing were testimony to her once ecstatic peace of pain. But her last release had come long before. As the self-inflicted wounds on her body had, over time, healed, so had the turmoil that haunted the tangled mess of her mind. His words became sharp enough to pierce her skin on their own, but her heart had been scarcely able to bear the shock of torture at its beloved’s hands.

As Elizabeth had assured herself throughout every haunting day, the heart was a muscle. And when the dedication was put into a daily exercise routine, a muscle could grow stronger and stronger still. So she lost herself in a routine of banality, gradually piecing together from the fragments of her shattered heart immunity to him and respect for herself. For a while, she successfully fled thoughts of self-inflicted pain that stalked her every move.

And it had worked—until now.

Elizabeth’s tenacity wore down beneath a heedless eye. The muscle had softened right under her nose, and she hadn’t realized she’d let her guard down until he had seeped back into her life through the cracks of her soul. He had filled her desolate, dry carcass, occupied every free inch inside of her, and now she was going to burst. Which is why she held the tool of her release in her favored hand.

The ornament glistened mockingly beneath the unrelenting fluorescents of the barren basement.

And her phone scorned her pain.

She could feel his memory stirring inside of her, coiling around her heart, slithering under her skin, screaming to be let out. A quick swipe to the wrist, she knew, would lift the pressure. He would seep out with her blood, and his presence against her skin would cease. She nearly melted into the musty loveseat with pleasure. She could picture it perfectly.
She would sigh as the beautiful crimson decorated her porcelain skin. And she would pretend, for awhile, that it would not stay with her forever—that there would be no proof of her weakness, no scar to show that she had been too scared to ride through the pain alone. Suddenly her phone rang, bludgeoning her fantasy—and it was him. The truth crashed into her as the first rays of sunlight burst through the grimy windows. She remembered his birthday. He’d wanted her, and she’d refused him. His hands had found her body, pushed against the soft spots. Her head had collided against the wall, and she had cried out, hoping, praying, pleading, that he would stop. And her phone had gaped in terror as the velvety darkness of his basement concealed the violation to all else.

While Elizabeth’s back had, that night, arched in a flurry of desperation that wounded the soul to merely ponder, the Christmas ornament awaited her return, shining a glittery smirk into her darkest hour. It had swayed her, as she squirmed under his satisfied sweat, that she could not—would not—endure the burn of his influence of her own strength. Its laugh had echoed into her ears, intertwining with his grunts, as it felt the victory of her belief. That night, Elizabeth, had for the first time, embraced the ornament, peeling back the layers of her blackened skin. Soon she’d fallen into an affair with her own misery. She had madly loved the perfect chaos of uniform red lining her body and became desperate for the only control of pain and abuse inflicted onto her that she possessed.

And still, her phone cried out as it witnessed Elizabeth spiral into a paradox of pain. It watched the ornament convince her that she deserved the force the boy exerted on her, that she deserved to be punished for the abomination of life she had become. When her deed was done, and Elizabeth stained snow-white tissue crimson, the ornament would whisper so lightly into her ear that she was revolting for what she had done, that Elizabeth had faith she’d come to the idea on her own. And she thought that if she could harm herself, he deserved that door to be open to him as well.

Thus the cycle continued.

Elizabeth began to drown in the vortex of exploitation and suffering. Until, one day, the current slowed. In a moment of sheer strength, heart plunging, absolute adrenaline seeping from her tired limbs, she’d cut things off with him on a whim. The moment, unlike the broken nights she’d pleaded to deaf ears, was unremarkable—no defining moment when she realized she had had enough. Her words had surprised her as they had slipped between her lips, but they had empowered her.

And for the longest while, the cycle had ceased. Her body healed, and her heart, though dragged through the dust of time’s current, trudged onwards. And her phone had smiled. It had rested snug against her scarred leg as new lips brushed against her neck and new words made her breathe heavy. It had watched in a dazed fascination as Elizabeth carried herself high through her new life, braver than before.

Until now.

He wanted her back.

Now, all the words she had longed to hear he was speaking. All the promises she had dreamed he’d pledged were being made. Thus the healing wounds of her heart were ripped freshly open. So she’d unearthed the remembered Christmas ornament and held it, delicately, lovingly, between her fingertips, imagining a trip back down the path she’d only just escaped. Then the phone rang.
Then the truth crashed into her.

An epiphany, Elizabeth felt the rush of the phone’s love. She re-lived through its eyes the horror that had been inflicted onto her. And she knew that the phone had never really been intertwined with her pain. She wanted to blame the malicious shard of scarp weighing down her palm, then. But, as the phone shrieked its second cry, cringing as it did so, hating the caller, Elizabeth knew that the blade was not to blame either. It had merely seduced with the temptation of antagonist control and took pleasure in the loss of her virtue—but it was inanimate. The most important truth that seeped into her bones was this: She was not to blame. Though she’d naively chosen an exacerbating solution to his anger, she was victim to his wrongness.

She was strong.
She was stronger than him.

Elizabeth scooped her wailing phone and rejected the incoming call. Immediately, his pressure inside of her ceased. She dumped the long forgotten Christmas ornament into the plush white carpet and sighed in relief. Elizabeth, painted pink by the colors of the rising sun, was ready to face what had happened. She smiled at the challenge.
I Am Nature’s Way

I am but a hexed, mossy, crumble of earth, never really understanding the ways of humans,
   A barefaced whisper of moonlight in a child’s liquefied eyes.
I am an alluring, winter’s wolf, a rogue and sleek in my demise.
   I am a passing mutter of goodbyes the ear may never hear,
   An eclipse of twilight, crisp with life, piercing the soul.
I manifest myself, a dark angel, howling with longing into a weeping willow’s cracks,
   A licking flame undergoing a cutthroat whirlwind.
   Watch me sprout my leaves and fly.
I will become that determined oak that stands among the forest.
   I am growing, coughing into my skins,
   Immature in this time warp but soon a dying eye.
I am early, watch me become a dream in an eagle’s wing, the love in a mother’s grasp.
   I am nature’s way.
My Zombie and Me

I don’t exactly know how it happened. All I know is that one minute, he was there, and the next, he was not. I was sitting in the driver’s seat of my green Sunfire, with Damon (my wonderful, awesome boyfriend of over a year) sitting in the passenger seat beside me, and then suddenly he was outside, on the pavement, his hand holding the arm of an old man who had fallen down. That was just like Damon, to help out someone he didn’t even know. As Damon got him back on his feet, the man turned to look into Damon’s face. I gasped and recoiled when I saw his yellow and bloodshot eyes and his mouth, smeared with blood. That blood had not come from falling on the sidewalk.

Damon jumped back, letting go of the man’s elbow, just as the man lunged for him. He grabbed hold of Damon’s arm and bit into the skin, leaving a crescent-shaped, bloody mark. Damon yelled out and kicked at the man, then dove back into my car. I was screaming at this point, putting the car into drive and peeling out from in front of the bank, where we’d been depositing some money. I glanced in my rearview mirror, and saw the old man running drunkenly after us, dragging one leg. Damon swore loudly.

“What was that?!” he cried, trying to stem the flow from his forearm.

“He must have been crazy,” I gasped, focusing on not looking at Damon’s arm. Blood makes me extremely nauseous. “I hope he didn’t have rabies!”

Damon laughed nervously, chewing on the inside of his cheek as he pushed a paper napkin from my glove box onto his wound. “Do you want me to take you to the hospital?” I asked, pulling on to the freeway.

“No, I’ll be fine.” He muttered, staring out the window.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“It looks pretty nasty…”

“I’m fine.” He snapped, grinding his teeth. It wasn’t like him to get so angry. He never got more than agitated.

“Sorry,” I muttered. He ignored me. We spent the rest of the ride to his house in silence. When we got there, I turned to receive a kiss from him, but he was already getting out of the car. “Alright, then,” I snapped, throwing the car into reverse.

“Sarah…” he said, turning back around. He bent down to my window.

“What?”

“I’m sorry…”

“Yeah?”

“I shouldn’t have snapped. It just freaked me out, you know?” I nodded, smiling slightly. He bent in and kissed me. As he pulled away, he sniffed my cheek. “You smell like…” I looked up at him questioningly. “Meat.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, incredulously.
“Sorry, but it’s true. You smell like…steak.”
“Gross, Damon!”
“Sorry! Your hair smells like a steak!”
“Whatever,” I laughed, starting to back down the driveway. “Text me later, okay?” He nodded, looking after me, almost hungrily. I shook off the weird feeling it gave me and drove away. I lived three streets down, so the drive was a short one. When I got home, my cell phone buzzed in my purse. I opened the text from Damon, and smiled.

**Miss u already. Wan2 meet 4 dinner? Im starving all of a sudden.**
I texted back, **um, sure? How bout u come over here?**
**k. b there soon... ily**

I tossed my phone back in my purse and turned on the television. It was around fifteen minutes before there was a knock on the door. I rose, walking over and opening it, smiling in anticipation of seeing Damon’s sweet smirk.

When I opened the door, however, I didn’t see a smile. I hardly even saw his face. He was on his knees, panting heavily.

“Damon?” I bent down at once, trying to pull his arms away from his face. “Damon, what’s the matter, hon?”

“Something’s...wrong...” he gasped, his chest heaving.

“Did you run here?” I asked sharply. There was sweat pouring down his face and onto his neck. He nodded, almost imperceptibly. “Damon!” he had slipped sideways and was lying on the ground, convulsing. I tried to sit him up, but his eyes rolled back, and I screamed, trying to grab my cell phone that wasn’t there. I’d left it in the house, in my purse. “I’m going to call an ambulance!” I ran inside, seized the phone, and dialed 911. As I ran outside, I moved to kneel by Damon, but he was gone. My front porch, bathed in yellowish lighting, was bare of everything save the white porch swing.

“Damon!”

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“DAMON!”

“Ma’am. What’s the problem?”

I hung up and shoved the phone in my pocket, and jumped down off the porch. I saw no sign of my boyfriend: everything was eerily quiet. I was turning in slow circles, trying to see him in the shadowy yard.

“Damon, this isn’t funny!” I shouted, now really spooked. “If I find you, and you aren’t really sick, you are in major trouble!” I backed slowly onto the porch, suddenly noticing how dark the yard was, and how grotesquely the tree branches swayed in the wind. I felt behind me and grasped the doorknob. Still squinting into the black mass of shadows, I opened the door and stepped back through the frame, closing the door in front of me. As I turned around, I felt something behind me. I could sense someone looking at me. Slowly, I rotated on the spot. Damon was crouched in the corner of my living room, digging his nails into the flowered wallpaper my mom had so carefully selected.

His eyes had a ghoulish, yellow hue to them. There were streaks of dirt across his cheeks, and greenish saliva was dripping from his lips. He looked like a zombie from one of those low-budget George A. Romero movies.
“Damon, this is not funny. I don’t think my mom will think it’s funny either, when she sees that wall.” He growled a low, guttural noise from deep in his throat.

“Rrrrr…ruuuuuun,” he moaned. His shoulders started to heave, his arms shook, and his eyes rolled. Then, just as suddenly as it started, it stopped. His face snapped up to look at me. His lips pulled back in a snarl, and he jumped to his feet. He let out a yowl, and leapt over the sofa towards me. This couldn’t be a joke. I shrieked and ran for the door. As he snarled, spit was flying from his mouth and his filthy feet left streaks of rust-colored blood on the white carpet. I threw open the door and hurdled down the steps towards my car.

“Somebody!” I yelled, getting to my car and throwing open the door. “Help!” But there was nobody outside at this moment; it was dark, and the only living thing I could see was my boyfriend, who was right on my heels, only a few feet behind. Well, he was sort-of living. As I passed the trash cans on the curb, I threw one down behind me. I heard a growling oof! as he tripped over it. When I reached my car, I threw myself into it and locked the doors. I then reached for the button to ignite the headlights, but instead popped the trunk. I cursed aloud, trying to find the right button. Wham! Damon’s fists had slammed into the side of the car, making the whole thing shake. I screamed, frantically turning the key in the ignition. In the otherwise quiet night, I heard a sudden, shrill barking.

My head whipped around as I hesitated to put the car in Drive. Buster, our neighbors’ hairless (and brainless) Chihuahua, was standing just feet from Damon, growling like it was a Doberman. I watched in disbelief as Damon turned his attention from me to this stupid little animal. Buster whined, backing away. Damon snarled and started to advance. As he moved towards the little dog, I heard a shrill wailing from a few streets down. A police car was on its way, its lights and siren in full swing. Of course, I thought. Of course, they’d send somebody to check out the location. But, this was bad. I didn’t want them to arrest or beat up Damon. He was my boyfriend! So, without thinking, I jumped from the car and grabbed Buster. Before Damon had time to make up his partially-functional zombie mind, I had thrown Buster in the trunk of my car and shoved Damon towards the opening. Damon dove towards the little dog (whom I had always hated), and I slammed the lid down on him.

“Goodbye, Buster.” I muttered, climbing into my car and driving quickly in the opposite direction of the police. I could hear a sick whining from the back of the car, and a slurping noise. I gasped, shuddering, and tried not to gag when the whines stopped. I drove aimlessly, talking aloud to myself.

“I’m sorry, Damon, that it’s had to come to this. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you from becoming a zombie. Who even knew zombies existed? Not me. I never would have thought that today would end up like Dawn of the Dead or some crap like that.” Damon growled in the trunk. “I know, I know. I’m upset too. I really wanted to spend forever with you.” I started to cry, thinking of all the times I’d envisioned Damon and me living out the remainder of our lives together. Now, that could never happen. I’d just heard him eat a dog. You can’t come back from that. “I’ll bet you are starving; that’s probably why you decided to eat me? Well…you just ate a dog...maybe you’d like raw hamburger?” there was no noise coming from the trunk. I sighed. “What will Mom think of you now?” I didn’t expect him to answer, but to my surprise, I heard a small whimper from the rear of my car.

“Buster?” there was another whimper, but this one was definitely human. “Oh, Damon...” I started crying all over again, wiping my eyes roughly on the sleeve of my jacket. I
pulled into the nearest Hy-Vee, and after shouting ‘I’ll be right back!’ over the growls in the trunk, I hurried inside, and navigated my way to the back of the store, where the meat department was. After selecting a very bloody slab of steak, I walked quickly to the front and paid, then hurried even faster to my car. People were glancing at my car fearfully as grunts and grumbling yells issued from the rear.

“It’s just my dog; he’s in a kennel,” I laughed, waving them away. Damon yowled, sounding very human. “Hush, Buster, I’m here,” I said loudly, as they moved on, looking unconvinced. I glanced over my shoulder at them, tore open the disgusting meat, easing the trunk open with one hand. As soon as a sliver of light from the overhead poles hit him, Damon growled and thrashed at the lid, trying to get to me. His gruesome, blood stained hand was thrust from out of the trunk, scrabbling for mine. I pushed the steak into his hand, and he quickly withdrew his fingers. I heard a terrible sucking sound, and the bone inside cracking, then being chewed up.

“Oh, God, Damon, sick!” I groaned, tossing the rest of the steak into the trunk and closing the lid. “How am I going to get rid of you?” Damon banged his hands against the lid, howling. I felt bad for him. I really loved him, and truly wanted to save him. But I didn’t have a gun—No! I would never shoot my boyfriend! I placed a hand on my car, feeling his movements. He grumbled, and I bent over, listening to what he was doing. I heard a series of crunches, and figured he had found the other piece of steak.

I moved to the bumper, listening. I glanced around. Nobody was in sight. I bent down to eye level with the taillights, and opened the trunk a sliver. It was too dark to see him. I opened it a bit farther. Still, I couldn’t see him. When I’d opened the top about a foot, I saw his ragged, bloody face, his yellow eyes, and his dirty hair. We stared at each other for a few seconds. I thought I saw the old Damon in those green eyes. Then, just as I was debating reaching out a hand to him, he lunged at me.

My reflexes have never been great. I couldn’t have snatched my hand back even if I’d wanted to. When Damon bit into my wrist, I screamed in pain, trying to pull away. But I knew the damage was done. When he let go, my wrist was throbbing; a slow, rough burn was spreading up my arm and into my chest, making my heart beat a wild scale against my ribcage. My eyes unfocused, and I dropped to my knees. Damon had bolted from the car and had torn off into the night, hurdling over cars and heading towards the store. I could hear, very distantly in my head, as though from far away, people screaming and yelling.

My head ached, and the fire had spread throughout my whole body, making me shake. My head felt as if it would explode. My last tangible thought was of Damon; now, we could really be together forever. Or, at least, until someone shot us before zombies could take over the world. With one final burn that raced through my lungs, the blood flow stopped, my heart quit pumping, and my spirit died. With a low, guttural growl, I jumped to my feet and raced after Damon into the night.
Pride in the Step

While I looked through an old yearbook, a flashback to eighth grade crept into my mind: a quiet girl sitting at her desk reading, not saying anything at all, rarely looking anyone in the eye. A bright red target soon formed on her back, each day a new reason to pick on her. Not the right brand name, the right hair style, the right anything. But a few weeks into high school, that girl disappeared and was replaced by someone else. A girl who sat up a little straighter, spoke with more certainty, walked with a little more determination—often times catching herself walking in step with others. At the time, she didn’t know who or what to credit for this newfound confidence.

The first day of marching band I remember timidly stepping onto the field, hugging my saxophone at my side and staring at the weeds sprouting from the ground. This was where I was going to be for ten hours a week till the end of marching season. Mixed in with upperclassmen, I was absolutely terrified. Everyone formed a block as Mr. Becker grabbed his headset and microphone. From day one, he talked about our upcoming competitions and how we had to be better than the previous year. He spoke mostly of the Valhalla competition in Springfield, Missouri, which the band had come close to winning last year. This year he wanted us to dominate.

The week before the Valhalla competition was hell. Becker was tougher than ever, continuously yelling out orders over the speakerphone to get our toes up, keep our abs tight, look above the skyline, and for god’s sake, play like we were on our deathbeds and stop “half-assing” everything. He challenged us to stand at attention for two minutes, starting the timer over if someone flinched, stone still and the arches of our feet burning. Two minutes turned to ten. I clenched my jaw in frustration.

I could’ve quit. I could’ve just thrown my saxophone down, ripped up my coordinate sheets, and stormed off the field. But I didn’t. I stood there, sweat inching down the sides of my face, the muscles in my legs cramping, my endurance growing. I wasn’t going to be the inexperienced freshmen who passed out. I was going to be the last one standing.

Day of the Valhalla competition: I strode onto the turf field and stood at attention, glancing up at the metal bleachers, sunlight blinding me. As the echoes of the announcer filled the football stadium, a surge of adrenaline suddenly rushed through me. A swift “Dut! Dut!” from the lead snare drum player and the show was on. A sense of power slid into my feet as I marched, quickly turning corners and playing tricky runs, my fingers dancing along the pearly keys of my saxophone. Low brass belted out deep cords, flutes trilled in high pitches, trumpets zinged each staccato note like there was no tomorrow. It was a jumble of music that fit together like a puzzle, creating something amazing. I lived in the moment, focusing only on what had nearly become second nature after hours of hard work. The final note rang with pride in the air. The crowd burst into wild applause. I stepped off the field smiling, hugging my saxophone on one side, confidence on the other.
Three years later, I am now the field leader of the saxophone section, teaching kids how to march and push themselves to be the best. I work with them individually, encouraging them to keep trying when they want to give up. A few weeks after band camp, I look onto the field at the freshmen in my section. I see Marissa go from the new girl in town to a chatty freshman. I see Sam with a little dance in his step, playing the show tune he couldn’t play weeks ago. Seeing how far they’ve come in such a short time and how much more confidence they have makes me smile.

Opening my eighth grade yearbook, I hardly recognize the girl who let others push her around. It takes so much inner strength to overcome that. Something only the daily routine of marching band practice and Mr. Becker’s booming voice over the speakerphone could make me understand—something I learned with each competition, each win, each loss. And now a new definition of strong self-worth comes to mind: It’s standing with your head up, eyes piercing the crowd, full of pride knowing you conquered and prevailed.
It was 6:24 a.m. when I felt Cupcake raking her claws down my left leg. I sat up, blinked the tears from my eyes, and angrily pushed her off the bed with my bleeding shin. Cupcake landed gracefully on all fours and padded toward the door. She stopped in the doorway, turned back, and, I swear, smirked at me. I hate that stupid cat, but at least I can always count on her to wake me up on time.

I threw my covers off, swung my legs off the bed, and fastened my watch to my right wrist. With a sigh, I got up and limped to the bathroom, leaving a trail of bloody droplets behind me. I'll just have to clean it up later. I pulled the last few Band-Aids from the box and made a mental note to buy more, before pulling my starchy white shirt over my head and carefully tucking it into my khakis. I twisted my hair into a low bun, just how Eunice demanded it look every day, and checked my shirt for wrinkles. Bleach had ruined the logo on my shirt so the N.O.H.H. was now a yellowy brown instead of black. It stands for New Oaks Home Help, but I like to think it means Number One Hell Hole, because that’s what Eunice’s house is.

I walked into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and grabbed a stale biscuit for myself and a yogurt, banana, and spoon for Eunice. I set her place at the table, putting the yogurt bowl in the center, the banana on the left, and the spoon and napkin on the right. The coffee machine began to tick slowly, and I knew her coffee wouldn’t be ready in time.

I walked outside and down the cracked driveway to check for mail. None as usual. Eunice didn’t get the paper either.

Gladys was sitting on her front porch drinking iced tea with her cat, Muffin, on her lap. I waved and she glared back. Every old woman in this neighborhood named their cat after some type of baked goods. I hated every single one of them. Rose had a calico cat named Brownie, Martha had a tabby named Cookie, Betty had an American Bobtail named Shortbread, and Anne Marie had a Burmese named Biscotti. Eunice brought Cupcake to tea parties with the rest of the women and their cats every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. Today, Eunice was hosting the tea party so she would be in an especially horrid mood. I’d have to take Cupcake to get groomed so she looked her best. I reminded myself to ask that she have the pink satin bow tied around her neck because the purple one they used last time clashed with the napkins, and Eunice would throw a fit. Again.

I opened the screen door and checked my watch; Eunice should have been up now. I walked in and saw her sitting at the table, dropping tiny bites of yogurt onto her tongue and staring straight ahead at the wall. Her head turned slowly to look at me; she blinked and turned back to the wall. God, I hated her. I plastered a smile onto my face and brightly asked her how she slept and how her breakfast was and explained that the coffee would be ready in just a minute and that I was terribly sorry that it was late. She responded with a haughty, “humph!” and turned to look out the window. The coffee machine clicked off. I grabbed her mug and her box of pills, and politely set them in front of her, reminding her that it was Thursday, so she
should take the pills in the compartment with the big TH written on the top. She craned her neck to smirk at me, opened the compartment with FR written on it, and popped them into her mouth before I can say anything. It was almost like she was asking to die, and sometimes—actually most of the time—I wished she would. I cleared her dishes and watched her struggle into the seat of her Stair Lift chair. Just as I always did, I asked if she needed help, and I got the same response: a cold glare. She went up, one slow click at a time, shooting laser-sharp looks at me through her thick glasses.

I started preparing for the tea party, getting out the ingredients for Eunice’s special recipe scones, cookies, and tea. As the afternoon approached, I realized I have forgotten to take Cupcake to the groomer. I rushed out the door with Cupcake clawing the lining of my purse and ran down to New Oaks Groomers. I dropped her off on the counter saying I want the usual treatment and ran back to get my scones before they became burnt and useless. I folded napkins and polished silverware, laughing at the irony of the work I was putting into the presentation—a majority of these women were so old and senile that they didn’t know the difference between a pink napkin and a blue one. Pink napkins. Shit. I had forgotten to tell the groomers we needed a pink bow, not a purple one. There was nothing I could do about it, so I moved on, setting the place cards of each woman and her cat at their individual spots. Back in the kitchen, I heard the coffee machine click back on, setting the place cards of each woman and her cat at their individual spots. Back in the kitchen, I heard the coffee machine click back on, splattering all over the counter. I yanked the cord out of the socket. Instead of stopping the drip, the machine let loose its whole water supply on the counter, staining freshly folded napkins, soaking place cards, and ruining my stiff white shirt. Every curse word known to man was boiling at the tip of my tongue, but I remembered the words of my instructor, Lauren, from the first day of training: “Whatever you do, don’t scream, yell, or curse. We are classy, dignified, and kind, and we respect those whom we care for.”

The Stair Lift began clicking, and my chest tightened. Eunice was going to see this mess and was not going to like it. I needed to get out; I couldn’t sit there and hang my head in false shame while she smirked in delightful disappointment again. I couldn’t fight back because she was a frail old woman, but if she was so helpless, how does she have so much power over me? It killed me. I couldn’t do it again, I just couldn’t. I shoved the coffee-ridden trash into the waste bin with shaking hands and quickly tried to mop up the mess on the floor with a hand towel, but the click of her shiny white shoe heel on the hardwood floor told me she’d already seen my blunder. I whipped around wearing the mask of guilt on my face that was so practiced it was almost real. “I’m so sorry Eunice, I—”

Her hand cut me off. She always did that, silenced and punished me without a sound. She slowly stepped closer, her fat ankles bulging out the top of her shoes. I wanted them pop and her to fall on the floor, helpless, frail, needy for once. She took another step, but her flashy white shoe clipped the rug, and suddenly she was falling, just as I imagined. My hands shot out by instinct, but I pulled them back just as fast. Eunice managed to roll onto her back, but her eyes weren’t searching for help; they were laughing at me.

Something in my chest snapped. Sirens, bells, stereos, screeching cats filled my ears, and I squeezed the water out of the dirty towel in my hand. I started to laugh at her. The laughing grew into cackling, and I let loose the string of curse words that I had suffocated earlier. The ringing in my ears grew louder. I took her face in my shaking hands, demanding to know why she didn’t appreciate me, why she couldn’t be nice just once. But her eyes were
closed. Her face was cold. This was all wrong. I was in complete power now, but it didn’t feel the way I imagined it would. My ragged breath was cold, and my mouth was dry.

“Check for pulse, airway blockage, signs of a seizure...” The words echoed in my head. I slid two fingers down the right side of Eunice’s neck. Cold silence. Blood rushed through my ears. I barely heard the phone ring in the kitchen. It was probably the groomer saying that Cupcake is ready to be picked up now with her purple satin bow. A bow that didn’t match the napkins.
This time she was grateful her husband hadn’t noticed that she was wearing her new dress. It was much too formal for the lunch date she was supposed to have gone to. The dress was unfamiliar to her—though she thought nothing of it—she was still afraid that her husband would. She imagined the soft brown curls she had put up in a bun early that morning; it had been perfect, and she knew that the meeting she had attended was vital to her escape. She hurried up the stairs, past her children's bedrooms, to the master suite. She never liked the color of her bedroom, a ghastly shade of grey, stuck somewhere between blue and green. The light that bounced around the room only gave it a ghoulish sense. She shivered out of the dress, picked it up, and reached under the bed. The box had been there only hours before; the box that contained her name and the paperwork she had been hiding from him. For a moment her face flushed red, while her bony fingers became white. If her husband knew, she would never see the light of day again.

The door to her room opened slightly, the squeaky hinge startling her.

She kicked the dress below the satin skirt that rimmed the bed. Her husband stood, his scruffy beard and dark green eyes, pointed at her. She swallowed, reaching for her bath robe, which hung on the door of her closet. Her husband’s breath was deep and loud. He stood, still and calm; the tension scared the woman. “How was your appointment?” he asked; his throat barely moved. She felt her heart thumping stridently in her chest.

“Is everything okay?” he was more specific.

She smiled. “Yes, it was fine.” He nodded and took a step forward. She wanted to back up but couldn’t bring herself to do it. Her husband had always had a grizzly look about him; he was tall, thick, and barely ever wore the smile that she used to love. As he wrapped her in a hug, she stayed still, waiting for the knife to plunge into her back. He had killed people before. She knew it. She had seen the black bags in the back of his truck once. The bags shaped like squishy pillows, but when she peeled back the casing, a corpse’s pale skin, bloodied clothes, and eyes glazed over with death had laid before her. The lawyer she had spent her lunch with was planning her escape from him.

As he released her, she sighed. She lived to breathe another breath. “I have something to show you,” he urged. Once again her heart began pounding. The box. It had the letters that she had exchanged with the lawyer: her escape plan and her new identity. But none of that would matter anyway; she was sure that she would never see the sun rise again. He grabbed her hand and pulled her down the hall. He stopped in front of her daughter’s room. Lindsey was four, her blonde curls and blue eyes stood out in her memories. Suddenly, thoughts of blood, splattered across her pale pink bedroom walls, filled her mind with terror.

He pulled the door open slowly, steadily. Her hands were shaking. He stepped inside first, blocking her view. She didn’t want to see. She didn’t want to face it. “Honey?” he coaxed, “What are you doing?” She opened her eyes and reluctantly stepped forward. She breathed easy; her little daughter and her son were playing. Lindsey and Dalton were sitting around a bucket of blocks, helping
each other build a town around a toy train. “Isn’t this great?” her husband asked. She crossed her arms and smiled down at her children, who paid no attention to her as they worked.

“It’s fantastic.” She slid her hand through her daughter’s hair. Her daughter turned a moment but went straight back to playing. That was odd. She stood up and examined the room. “When did we re-paint this?”

“What?” her husband’s tone was confused. “Honey, it’s always been this color.” She remembered painting this room a dusty rose color; she remembered the trip to the store and matching the paint to her daughter’s favorite teddy bear. Now the room was purple, with little sparkly butterflies in random patches. The woman turned to her husband; he must have seen the confusion in her eyes as he smiled and said, “Let’s go downstairs, I’ll make some coffee.” Without much argument the woman’s expression changed, and she followed him down the stairs.

She smiled at her son, who turned on the coffee maker. She wasn’t sure how long she had been standing there. She must have been daydreaming, she thought. She took a step toward her son, who poured water into the machine. He reminds me so much of his father, she thought. Though her son was a kind young man, the similarity scared her. Her husband had been sitting in prison for years, just rotting, and she still didn’t feel safe sometimes. She was notorious for having dreams of him coming back; her son’s resemblance didn’t help the situation. She gazed around the room; the kitchen looked identical to the one she used to have, except for the stale white color on the wall. Even the bedroom she stayed in reminded her of a small version of her master bedroom. Her son had been through trauma as a child and found comfort in the layout that he used to, and now, called home. Even the children’s bedrooms were placed in the same melancholic style; she couldn’t even stand to go in her granddaughter’s room.

“How are you this morning?” she asked, swallowing away the memories that burned through her mind like hot smoke. He frowned, “Mom, it’s afternoon.” Confused, the woman looked up at the clock on the wall. He wasn’t lying. She had her doubts still; she was in her bath robe; he was making coffee, and the grandchildren weren’t anywhere to be seen. “Oh,” she pursed her lips, agreeing, instead of fighting him. The box of medical information was sitting on top of the cabinet, where it belonged, someone kept moving it under her bed.

“I think I’ve missed my doctor’s appointment.” she frowned. Her son turned, “You’ve just arrived home from that, Mom. Not ten minutes ago.”

“Oh,” she lied, “that’s right.” She hadn’t been remembering things well lately. Only what seemed like a few minutes ago, she was waking up, stepping out of bed and brushing her teeth. She had no memory of visiting her doctor. Peculiar, she thought.

The dripping of the coffee machine finally stopped. The woman looked up at her husband; he handed her a cup. Poison, she thought. She looked around the room; there was no one else but her husband and herself. She smiled softly and took the cup with shaking hands. As she pulled the cup away from him and began to lift it to her lips, he watched intently. The phone rang throughout the house causing a loud echo. The sudden noise had caused her to jump and spill a little on the floor.

“Oh, I’ll get a napkin,” her husband suggested.

“No!” she said, “I’ll get the mess. You answer the phone.”

He shrugged, “Alright.”
When he walked out of the room she ran to her drawers. When she opened the silverware drawer she was shocked to find nothing but stamps and pens, a junk drawer. She panicked, hurrying through each drawer, quietly. Everything was different; he had moved her things around! Finally she came upon a large butchering knife, in a white case. She couldn’t stand the thought of killing her husband. She slid the knife out of the case; the thick blade gleamed from the window light. Her husband yelled, “It’s your doctor.” She didn’t see a doctor; she only saw a lawyer. Her husband knew that she wasn’t sick. He would gather suspicions. He would kill her now, surely. Footsteps made her stomach flop as she slid to the door frame and waited. She saw the tall shadow on the floor. She clutched the knife; her knuckles flashed white as she lunged for the silhouette.

She held a bloody knife. The silvery knife dripped as her own musky reflection shone at her, her grey hair pulled up in a bun, like she used to wear it. Her son was on the floor, gasping, and spurting blood from his lips. What had happened? Only a moment ago she was watching him change the filter on the coffee machine. “Mom, how could you do this? Why Mom, why?” he cried. A deep gash in his chest was flooding his nice blue shirt that she had bought him for Christmas one year. The crimson fluid was running down on the linoleum. She grabbed the phone off the floor and whispered, “What have I done?” She dialed 911.

The doctor knew that it was true. He had to call and warn the family. He had been studying this woman for a few months now, and she was sick, very sick. He dialed the number, and waited patiently for an answer. He tapped his toes and became shaky. Dual personalities were dangerous, but he just had to examine her a few more days, which turned to weeks, and now he had to get it off of his chest before someone got hurt. This woman had been through a traumatic experience. I mean, her husband had murdered her small daughter many years ago, leaving her with the son who looked after her. He had posed as her lawyer, letting her follow her second life, even though his better judgment told him to bring her to reality. Now, his time was running out and he had to tell someone.

“Hello?” The doctor recognized the voice of the son. “Yes, this is Doctor Harold; I have some news on your mother’s condition.” If he acted like he hadn’t known, maybe everything would be okay. He heard the son call out to his mother. “Yes, I’ll get her for you.”

“Actually, I would like to talk to you.” There was a loud crash and then screaming.

The woman was screaming, the boy was moaning, and then there was silence. The doctor heard the rustling of the phone as the fear built in his chest. “What have I done?” the woman whispered. The dial tone played.
Not So Different

I still remember my first day at an American school. I was seven and had just come to the USA from China. It was rumored in China that all Americans had blond hair, blue eyes, a straight nose, and were very tall. I couldn't wait to see how they really looked. Several times, I tried to picture how they acted in my head. How did they dress? What did they eat? Curiosity was burning inside me until I was ready to burst.

The merciless winter wind was blowing fiercely in my face when my dad and I finally arrived at the school. I felt an unfamiliar uneasiness in my stomach, and my body gave a nervous involuntary shudder. My dad and I arrived about twenty minutes before the school curfew, so the only one there was my American teacher. Someone who fit the Chinese stereotype of an American! She was a fairly tall woman with blond hair, kind blue eyes, and a straight nose on which rested a pair of glasses. She and my father bantered in rapid English. Of course, I had no idea what they were saying. Occasionally, she would look at me with a smile like sunshine, and her soft blue eyes would sparkle like the stars at night. Her smile was just like my mom’s. Although their faces looked so different, the same affectionate look was present. Like an obedient dog, I stayed put while words unknown to me were spoken.

My eyes were restless, keenly taking in every detail like Sherlock Holmes. The classroom was like a wonderland in my mind. Instead of rows of rectangular cement tables that had acted as the armrest for 70-80 students in China, there were only six blue round tables with 22 matching chairs serenely awaiting the students’ arrival. Brightly colored bean bag chairs and soft fuzzy pillows were scattered in the cozy corners of the room. Posters of all sizes and colors decorated the plain white walls. Surprisingly, what I loved most about the classroom was its floor. The multicolored carpet was soft to my touch unlike the hard cement floors I was used to. It also looked clean! The idea of rolling on it all day without getting my clothes dusty was so pleasant I could laugh out loud.

Finally, I learned the teacher’s name was Mrs. Bedi. She even spelled it out for me.

Eventually, my classmates started to fill the classroom. I was surprised by their appearances. Only a couple of students had pure blond hair and blue eyes. Most had brown hair and eyes. One was even a ginger! Most girls had their hair down. Their nails were covered with layers of bright nail polish. I was shocked! In China, painted and unclean nails meant a detention, and girls who had long hair were required to keep it out of their face in ponytails, braids, etc. Slovenly hair was scorned and ridiculed. Lots of my classmates glanced my way, drinking in every part of me. I just sat there in my assigned seat, unsure what to do under the staring eyes.

Before class started, my home room teacher, Mrs. Bedi, beckoned me to her and handed me some English coloring books with simple captions underneath each picture. She then handed me some colored pencils and crayons. I got the message. She wanted me to color the pictures and learn the English words in the captions. After our little visit, she walked swiftly
over to a comfy revolving stool and sat down, prepared to teach the class. It was then that I did something very strange. I am still not sure why I did it or what the motivation for my action was. I guess I was just young, naive, and very curious. Clutching my coloring supplies, I walked over to my teacher and asked one simple question. But since I didn’t know one word in English except for “bathroom” (my parents didn’t want me to have an accident in school), that question was said in Chinese. Suddenly the commotion in the classroom stopped. Every single head, blonde, brunette, and red head turned to face me. The looks on their faces expressed how awed they were, like that simple sentence was the coolest thing that ever happened to them. Then, the teacher did something that took me by surprise. She hugged me and said something in that odd language of hers. In China, teachers never hug their students. It’s just not done. When she let go and I recovered from the shock, I quickly made my way back to my seat. Later in fourth grade, one of the boys who was in that second grade class asked me what I had said. I shrugged and said I asked Mrs. Bedi why she sat down to teach the class when teachers never did that in China. He just grinned and said Chinese is too awesome.

I spent the rest of the class coloring one of the English coloring books as the class listening attentively. Mrs. Bedi sat in the stool and showed the class different English words on a big screen in the front of the classroom. I later learned that the big screen was called an “overhead projector.” Since we now have Smart boards, the overhead projectors have lost all their previous glory in my book, but back then, I thought it was the greatest technology ever invented for school uses. I had never seen anything so modern since the teachers in China were still using plain old black board and chalk. Suddenly the bell rang, and my classmates jumped from their seats. Some went to their backpacks and snatched out bags of all different colors, sizes, and designs. I later learned that the bags were called “lunch sacks.”

The lunch room or “cafeteria” was abundant with students. Girls were giggling; boys were giving each other high fives. Altogether, they were having a jubilant time. I had never witnessed a scene like this. In China, students have a two hour lunch break between the morning and afternoon classes. That allowed us to walk back home, eat lunch, take a nap, and walk back to school just in time to prepare for afternoon classes. I had never seen so many students jumbled up in a big group like that, and, man, it was loud! Conversation was all around me, and no matter where I turned, I couldn’t escape the noise. I didn’t mind though. I liked all the commotion, because at that moment I understood that school isn’t just about studying until our brains turn to Jell-O, it’s also a place to have fun with friends.

My classmates in front of me each grabbed a “lunch tray,” so I followed their example and pretended I knew what I was doing. When we reached the milk section, I noticed that all my classmates grabbed the little brown carton. There were three colors of cartons: blue, pink, and brown. Of course I didn't know that the colors stood for different flavors. I didn’t even know what the cartons contained. Thinking the brown carton enveloped the best drink, I also grabbed one. I sat down by an Indian girl and an American girl. The Indian girl kindly showed me how to open my chocolate milk carton, but when I tasted it, I nearly puked! The liquid was a disgusting substance I was unfamiliar with. The lunch tasted dry in my mouth without water, but I just couldn’t find any. I was desperate for water! Looking around, I spotted an adult who was monitoring us. Usually, I would have been too shy to ask for anything, but my thirst propelled me as I marched up to the lady. However, I did not know how to say “water” in English. Suddenly, I came up with an idea. I tried making waves with my hand hoping the
American lady would understand I was in need of water since waves are made up of water. To my frustration, she frowned deeply. Beckoning another adult who also walking around monitoring the lunchroom, they tried to work together to understand my sign language. After a moment of discussion, one of the lady’s eyes brightened with understanding. Turning around, she curled her fingers in towards her palm, an international sign for “follow me.” I was so glad she understood my awkward sign language, I could barely keep the happy grin off my face!

My relieved smile slowly changed into a confused frown as the lady walked in the direction of the bathroom. I heard from my dad that water from the sink was drinkable, but drinking water from the bathroom sink was a little disgusting to me. I was hoping for cleaner water, but if America only had bathroom water to offer, then what were my choices? Maybe all the other kids drank from there too. However, when we reached the bathroom, instead of giving me a cup, the lady lifted the faucet and rubbed her hands together, while nodding her head encouragingly. I understood and suddenly felt an urge to laugh. The lady thought I had to wash my hands! Discouraged I shook my head and walked back to the lunchroom. There, filled with disappointment, I forced down my lunch with a parched throat.

After lunch came a pleasant gift—recess! In China, recess was something we had in kindergarten but not in elementary school. It was a treat I yearned for every day, and now it looked like my prayers had been answered.

The playground was awesome! The slides were mountain tall, and the swings danced in the wind. There were so many alien things that I felt overwhelmed in such a big world. Chinese people almost never move in their life. They tend to stay in the same town where they were born—sometimes even the same neighborhood. Therefore, almost every kid knew each other. Every face was familiar. Senior members in China watched us kids grow up, or even our moms and dads. In America, I was not sure I knew where I belonged. It was then that the Indian girl and the America girl who sat next to me in lunch welcomed me to play with them. They led me through the playground and showed me the cool slides and basketball hoops. Through their patient guidance, I learned several things, including what a tire swing was. When I first saw it, I was appalled. I have never seen the wheels of a car used as the seat for a swing before. Jeez, Americans must be really creative. My two faithful teachers urged me to try the very wobbly tire swings, but I refused, thinking about the food in my stomach and how I didn’t want it to travel back up my esophagus.

What happened next is now a little fuzzy in my memory. I just remembered we had such a wonderful time, and I would choose to live through it again without any hesitation. That recess also made me realize something else besides that American kids are really nice and friendly. It made me see that in reality we are just like colorful Easter eggs. We all look different on the outside. Some eggs have purple strips; some have pretty green polka-dots. Some kids have brown skin and brown eyes; some have white skin and blond hair. But when someone peels the hard shell of the egg, he will discover that we’re quite similar on the inside. I discovered that just because people live on the other side of the world, it doesn't mean they’re aliens. We all laugh when we’re happy and cry when we’re sad. Even though we were unfamiliar with each other’s language and had completely different cultures, we still found things we had in common. I knew little Chinese girls like dolls. Well, it turned out little American girls like dolls too. So, we’re not so different after all.
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My Family and I Are Cat People

Ogden Nash once famously declared that, “The dog is man's best friend.” Sorry Ogden, but I'm going to have to disagree with you on this one. I mean, this is mankind you're talking about here. Don't you think that statement's a little bold, a little overreaching? Not everyone is a dog person; the people in my family certainly aren't dog people. It's not that my family hasn't tried to own and love and keep a dog. Believe me, we've tried. My family has owned four dogs, but none of them have lasted.

It all started with Chubby. Just weeks after her arrival, she began growling at strangers. Assuming Chubby's territorial snarls would lead to more aggressive behavior, such as attacking me and my brothers without reason, my mom returned her to the pound. She remembers the commemorative sign I created after Chubby's demise. Decorated with a carefully drawn crayon portrait of Chubby and me, anchored to my bedroom door with a piece of Scotch tape, and most likely stained with tears, it read, "Chubby, we will never forget you."

Contrary to my promise, I have completely forgotten Chubby. Besides her name and her dirty blonde fur, I have absolutely no recollection of the dog I once so deeply mourned. If asked, I couldn't even tell you whether she was actually chubby. For all I know, she was a petite, well-toned canine simply named by some irony-loving animal shelter employee. Or, maybe she was in fact rolling with fat, had doggie cankles, and could barely make it to her food bowl before succumbing to the weight of her own obese body and passing out on the kitchen floor. I don't know; I'll have to ask my mom some time.

Ever since, we have tried in vain to fill Chubby's void with various shelter dogs. Our second dog was Bailey, a black lab who sent my dad into an asthma attack with her profuse shedding and tried to eat our guinea pigs. She only lasted a night before my mom returned her to the PetSmart entrance where she was guilted into adopting her just eighteen hours before.

After Bailey, there was Nikki, a gross-smelling, socially awkward miniature poodle. She was around long enough to get comfortable—that is, comfortable enough to pace around on our kitchen table and urinate on a variety of household surfaces. But she never got comfortable with the concept of a human holding her. So, when I forgot and rudely attempted to pick her scrawny body up, she politely reminded me of her freaky phobia by mauling the right side of my face...alright, mauling is a slight exaggeration. Her bite was more like a nip, and it didn't even break the skin. But the emotional wound ran much deeper; ever since then, I've had serious trust issues with poodles. Anyway, after treating my scratch and checking Nikki for rabies and demonic possession, my dad returned her to the shelter.

Our last attempt at owning a dog came in the form of Tex, a mix of Labrador, Australian Sheppard, and Satan. Nearly a year into his stay with us, Tex went after the hand of a construction worker helping to remodel our house. Not wanting to admit that Tex's obedience classes and doggie boot camp sessions had been an expensive waste, my parents blamed the construction worker's shifty and possibly threatening appearance, but when he tried to go
after his next victim, a four-year-old girl dressed in Lilly Pulitzer and bows, my parents were out of excuses. My mom told us she took Tex to a farm. However, seeing as this is the lie parents tell their kids after having to put down their dog, Tex is probably dead, reigning in doggie Hell alongside those pit bulls that attack children riding their bikes.

Looking back on my family's history of traumatic failures in dog ownership, it is no surprise that we now own a cat. His name is Pago, and he has lasted longer than all our past dogs combined. While he hisses at you if you accidentally step on his tail or slam his head in the door, he has yet to reveal aggression to match that of Bailey, Nikki, or Tex. Unlike a dog, we don't have to walk Pago or teach him how to sit and stay. We've taught him to go to the bathroom outdoors, so we don't have to deal with a litter box. We bought a special food dispenser that refills itself, so we don't even have to feed him for weeks at a time. He doesn't slobber on us or constantly beg to be petted. In fact, he is content sleeping in a dark room without human contact for days. He is the easiest pet ever.

My family has tried rescue dog after rescue dog, but we are finally happy with our rescue cat. Pago may not be our best friend, but we enjoy his presence and don't mind petting him every once in a while. Not everyone can be a dog person. And, while I'm embarrassed to admit it, my family and I may actually be cat people.
Clarisse on the Hunt

Her skin is white-washed. She paints cherry red onto her lips and smears midnight onto her eyelids, making her skin all the more pale. She carries this air of cynicism, hatred, smiling, grimacing at the mirror, kissing its frame for the thirty-sixth time. She loves lace but had a lover once say she was tough as leather after slapping him, breaking a nail. She pours herself into second-skin polyester. Her jeans suck themselves in, air tight around her hips. The grainy, black denim is stark against the rosy pink top. She adorns herself with a dozen rings, one on each finger, one in each ear. She shakes her hair out, the earrings clanging against each other. Her hands scrunch the forced-curl bob. She sighs, leaving the blush dusted rat-hole.

She loves the silence of the back alley. It's just her and some tired old shop. She sniffs the rain-drenched steam the city calls air. The odor weighs down the corners of her mouth. Her ankle-short stiletto boots clatter against the rise and fall of unpaved cement as she heads to the same old place, that lonely little club that stabs into the street with a line of drug-soaked loons begging to get by. She eyes the bouncer and can't recall his name, but he knows her, yeah, they all know her. The rope slips aside, and the three inch thick metal-plated door slams open without anyone asking her a syllable. She tosses a smile in a random direction, and the mice outside quiver with lust.

The club is one room, drowning in the smoke of secondhand cigarettes ground from one wall to the next with a low, steel on flesh sound. Her eyes penetrate the crowd, silver bullets piercing the back of some lost college boy. She smirks, and again the mice quiver. Her spider legs trace a way to the poor child's personal space. She slips into his vision, licks her lips in slow motion and sinks her claws, painlessly, into his naive heart. He winks and thinks himself the instigator of good fortune. She slinks up to him, twirling every inch of her body into his sight. His mouth goes dry. Then their skin touches. He feels her breath on his neck, traveling up to his ear. She whispers something unintelligible. Her hands frame his face. Goosebumps dance across his nape. He can hear her singing in his head. She presses her lips to his, her body gluing itself to him. His heart thuds one final echoing note against his chest.

She draws herself away, leaving him standing there, awed. His mouth stands open, his eyes glazed over. She smiles, and the mice outside, they fall over dead. She tickles under his chin and feels his pulse start back up. He stares at her, slack jawed. She kisses his cheek and flicks her eyes towards the door. He nods and follows the sway of her hips all the way to her place. She smiles to herself as she hears the latch click with the turn of the knob. She bites her lip, it pushes against her smoky teeth. The boy smirks, stretching a hand to slide against her hip; it meets air. She retreats into the room, one finger bending, begging him to follow. He chases her, his anticipation boiling over onto his face. The door moans shut.

It's a pretty good deal, she thinks. He gets the best night of his life, and if he happens to lose his wallet and its innards, well, she's sure he won't mind. None of them ever do.
Freedom in the Waves

For now, it exists in memory, as miles upon miles separate me from the only true peace and calm that I’ve ever known. The world was silenced, and the wind pulled at my hair, my clothes; it breathed against my skin and whispered in my ears. My feet sunk into the soft, grainy, white sand, helping me keep my balance as the sea-foam waves laid themselves at my feet and around my ankles, as if they were welcoming me into their corner of the world. The clouds parted to reveal the splendor that hid behind their ashy forms, those sparkling stars whose brilliance spoke of a journey. The moon hung suspended next to them, shining with a type of subtle brilliance that cast its light across the dark and everlasting waters of the sea. Seagulls soared overhead, calling to each other, gliding throughout the sky with magnificent ease. The sky was dark, a freeing kind of dark, as if I was alone from the prying eyes of the rest of the world, as if I was one of the only ones who was privileged enough to breathe in that salty air and feel the soft caress of the wind. I opened my mouth to scream, cry, breathe, shout, or sing. I could not make a sound. I didn’t dare. Who was I to disturb the gentle beauty placed in front of me? It was a gift.

Fewer and fewer people crossed my path along the water’s edge. Time wound down and finally paused. It was late. The world was sleeping. And there I was, standing, next to my best friend, arms outstretched, welcoming the stories nature had to tell. The stars twinkled with a humorous memory, the waves applauded a reconciled relationship, the birds cried for the men and women who had come and gone, forever passing through and never taking in the moments that could have taken their breath away. They spoke of the trials and tales they had witnessed that summer, the silence that dared to be broken in the hours after people began to sleep, and they offered me an escape.

For once, there was something bigger than my problems. For once, I could truly escape from the pain and the suffering and the work—even from the happiness. For once, I could just be. I was alive. Rejuvenated. Free. I wanted to run—run and keep running until I hit the fading horizon. I looked over at my best friend and saw the contented smile spread across her face as her hair swirled around her head. She knew how I felt. She felt it too. We stood there, for who knows how long. It didn’t matter, time had ceased to exist. We stood there until the far lights of the pier turned off, until the distant sounds of cars dwindled to nothing, until the silence became as overpowering as the beauty.

“Should we go in?” Speaking felt wrong, as if I was placing a blemish on the perfectness that surrounded me.

“Sure...”

And so we did. We smiled at each other and slowly turned. I felt the wet sand squish through my toes one last time, felt the wind kiss my skin, felt the water splash onto my legs as if it was giving me its own goodbye. As we trudged up the sandy bank towards our apartment
complex, I turned to take one last look at the sea and its friends. That mental picture will never leave me.

By this time the sea and the sky blended together with a rich darkness that would only be separated by the rising of the glowing sun in a few short hours. It was crazy to think that in no time at all, that majestic beach would be crowded with men, women, and children, with noise and chaos and worldly things. And not until all of those children were fed and put to bed or before all of those adults had welcomed rest would the beauty emerge again. Yet, I was able to take comfort in the fact that it would come again, that it would emerge and re-emerge long after I was gone, that someone else, at some time, would experience the same freedom that I had experienced. I will visit that beach again one day. I will feel that breeze. I will hear those waves. And I will smile, knowing that there is a power watching over me. I don’t need to worry, if a god can create such a place and give it to me to learn from, he can surely take care of me and my trivial problems. He can free me. And for that I am eternally grateful.
Xiao Chi Yi Tiao Jie

Rough cement sidewalks outline the cracked cobblestone streets. The shouts of men and women selling fresh fruits and vegetables mingles with the blaring honks of cars and bicycle bells as they weave their way through the street. The smells of freshly fried zi ma bing and yo tiao is pungent in the air, lingering around me wherever I go. These are the little alleys of China, the hidden beauties of Chinese cities. In Chinese, we call these alleys Xiao chi yi tiao jie, which translates roughly to “Small alley of foods.” They are microcosms of life, pulsating with the energy of the thousands of 8 a.m. commuters making their way to work in the morning.

The sides of the streets are bombarded with kiosks and stands lined up one by one, right next to each other, careful not to waste a single inch of real estate. At the corner of one of the sidewalks, directly under my grandparent’s looming apartment, a crowd has gathered around one of the stands. A dirty white cloth drapes over the front of the stand. On the cloth are three Chinese characters scribbled in rich black ink. It reads “xing li chi,” which loosely translates to “Food cooked from the soul.” The cloth itself reeks of age, sadly draping over the stand, like it has been used one too many times. A little boy, momentarily escaping the restraint of his mother, makes his way through the crowd to the front of the stand and starts innocently tugging on the bottom of the cloth, gradually pulling it to the ground. For a second, I see the mother’s eyes flash. “Fan fan, stop!” she cries out, turning towards the store owner with fear. But the old man behind the counter simply smiles and looks on as the little boy flings the draped sign from out under the table and tosses it merrily onto the littered street, laughing infectiously as the wind ripples through the dirty white cloth, like a miniature river. My grandma and I look on, amused.

“Come on, Jeffrey” she says, “Let’s go buy some fresh yo tiao.” Yo tiao are my favorite food, freshly deep fried strips of dough seasoned with crunchy white sesame. We wait patiently, and after about 15 minutes it is our turn to order. Standing up close to the counter I get my first look at the old man. He wears a bright red apron that clashes harshly with the browns and greys of the apartment building that loom behind him. The apron tries its best to cover his old oversized white t-shirt, which by now is more black with soot and dirt than it is white. I watch as he slowly wipes away a bead of sweat that has crept its way onto his forehead. “Two yo tiao please,” I pipe happily. He nods at my grandma and I in acknowledgement of our order and goes to work, tackling the dough for what is probably at least the thousandth time that day. Punch, pull, punch, pull. His hands are wrinkled with age, vivid blue and green veins running from the tips of his fingers, yet they labor at the dough with the strength and energy of a 20 year old man. Those hands work magic, turning what used to just be a hunk of white flour into something elastic and alive, punching and pulling as the dough dances and stretches into the familiar shape of a yo tiao.
Finally, he drops the strips of dough into the hot bubbling grease. The second the dough hits the fryer, the perfectly cylindrical shape of it contorts and twists itself until it is no longer a smooth strip of flour but, rather, a rough and textured golden-brown Chinese snack. The fumes from the fryer mix in with the air, making it thick and heavy to breathe. As the yo tiao continues to fry, the old man stops for a second and pulls out a cigarette. He looks on proudly as the dough continues to fry, swelling with a sense of accomplishment for the thousandth time that day. He takes a long draw of his cigarette, before tossing the dough out of the fryer and handing them over to me and my grandma.

As I walked home, munching on my freshly fried snack, I see the old man out of the corner of my eye. There he stands in his red apron and dirty white clothes, punching and pulling at the dough under the hot Anhui sun, smiling and laughing to himself while a little boy continues to play with the dirty white sign flinging it into the air so that the whole crowd go see those three jet black Chinese characters: “Food cooked from the soul.”

The Battle With Grades

As I was growing up, my parents had a very stern approach to academics. From childhood, I had been force fed expectations of academic excellence to the point where I had become grounded into the idea that if I didn’t do good in school and if I wasn’t “smart,” I would be letting them down. I was a showpiece, constantly being compared to peers who excelled and whose report cards would be filled with a crisp line of one A after another. Sometimes at dinner parties, when my parents’ friends would engage in the Chinese-American pastime of bragging about their child’s grades to each other, I would watch sadly as my parents sat in silence, and I would wonder why I couldn’t be more like Bobby or James or Sue, so that my parents would show me off too. I had been born into a world where everything was hyper focused on grades and academia, and starting from as early as elementary school, whenever my parents would look over my grades, I could sense either their swelling pride in my accomplishments or blunt disappointments in my failures. My pure and impressionable youthful mind began to draw mental connections between A’s to rewards and happiness and B’s and C’s to verbal rebukes and punishment. All throughout my childhood, I catered myself to this concept, striving to do well in school in order to please my parents.

This mode of thought continued all the way through my middle school years and even early into my freshman year of high school. I became the kid in the back of class, who would always be asking questions not about the material being covered in class but, rather, which parts of that material we needed to know for the test. By the end of my eighth grade year, I had completely devoted myself to a policy where I had become completely disinterested in any learning and what was actually going on and instead focused all my attention on getting A’s in school to avoid discipline from my parents. However, discipline was unavoidable, and as I continued to plow my way through each new school year, my parents began to push me even harder to do better. To them, there was no such thing as satisfactory, and there was always room for improvement. As the pressure to do better continued to build up, I began lashing out at my parents, wondering why it meant so much to them that I do well in school. My parents began to catch on to my method of thinking, and told me that I had to change the way I thought about school and that I needed to realize that I was learning for myself and not them.
“We don’t gain anything from your grades!” my mom would exclaim, standing there, begging me with her eyes. “Can’t you realize that you’re only hurting yourself by not listening to us?” However, like a typical teenager, I never listened to what my parents had to say and never even gave their pleas a second thought.

My thinking created a rift between us. I no longer told them how school went for me, and they stopped asking. Arguments became a frequent occurrence at home. Most of the time, the tension stemmed from the constant pressure to always do better and maintain straight A’s in school. I had become a machine, spitting out grades with the sole purpose of subsiding the pressure I felt and avoiding punishment from my parents. I lived off the simple truth that if I did well in school, I wouldn’t cause conflict and arguments. Twice a year, when the report cards arrived in the mail, those familiar looks of either disappointment or happiness would reclaim my parent’s faces, but other than that, school for me had become a habitual cycle of homework, tests, and the same complete lack of any actual learning.

One day, I remember, in my ninth grade US History class, I had received a C on a test. Now in the strict world of stereotypical Asian parents, getting a C was something unheard of. I remember coming home that day, trembling with fear of the punishment that awaited me. As I walked through the front doors of my house, and my Mom greeted me with some freshly fried spring rolls, I murmured something along the lines of “I’m not hungry” and made a beeline for my room. I sat on my bed, wondering how I should reveal the news of my horrendous test score to my parents. I was a chess player, strategizing and planning out my every move down to the tiniest, most trivial detail. Should I tell them at dinner? Should I wait until I get an A on the next test so that maybe they won’t be as angry? What if they find out about the C before we get our next test back? I tore through idea after idea in my head, discarding them one by one. Eventually, I got the guts at the dinner table that night to break the news to them.

“Mom, Dad” I whimpered, trying not to look into their eyes. “On the history test that I took last week…I g-got…”

Silence. Awful, fragile silence.

I took a second to compose myself before continuing. I tried my best to avoid those beady, black eyes. “I…I got a C.”

They were furious. They couldn’t imagine how it was possible for me to have done so poorly on the test. My dad told me about how back in China, he was always first in his class, starting from first grade all the way through his senior year of high school. My mom told me how if she had been given the opportunities of getting a high quality education like the one I was so blessed to have here in America, she too would’ve been the top of her class. I got an earful that night, from dinner to bedtime about how I needed to try harder in school, how I needed to pay more attention in class, and how I needed to study harder for my tests.

It’s almost ironic how sometimes the tiniest and seemingly most insignificant moments in our life end up making the biggest difference. The very next day, my mom got up first thing in the morning and went to a local bookstore and bought me a workbook on American history. I remember the effect that had on me. It was a little thing, and having grown up with my Mom for the last thirteen years of my life, it was nothing out of the ordinary. But it got me thinking. The very fact that she was willing to sacrifice her morning to buy those books for me and make it a first priority for her made me realize how much she cared and how much she truly wanted
me to succeed. I think it was on that day that I began listening to my parents when they reprimanded me. If they care so much and are willing to take sacrifices in their own lives for me, I thought, then there must be some truth in what they had to say.

Three years ago, I entered into my freshmen year of high school, which in many ways was my saving grace. Along with high school came a whole new wave of thinking. I thought about college and my future. I thought about how little time I had left to spend with my family at home. I thought about how grades were different in high school and how they would go onto my college transcript, which made me question myself on why I wanted good grades in the first place. Because I now knew how much my parents cared about me, I started to give some thought to what they said. At first, the arguments with my parents continued, but as I thought about these things, I gradually came to acknowledge that they were right. I realized that grades, school, and everything else were things that I did for myself, and my parents only pushed me because they wanted to see me succeed and learn as much as I could. What I learned at school was knowledge that only I gained, and, therefore, that learning was not something I should do for other people but for my own enjoyment and enlightenment. This realization came with no epiphany but was instead a gradual process that I drove forward a little bit more every time I listened to what my parents had to say.

Now, looking back, overcoming this backwards mentality and conflict with my parents was probably the single most educational experience for me, not only in the sense that it changed the way I approached and learned at school, but it also taught me a lot about myself. After realizing all of this, school became something much more enjoyable, and I actually started learning a lot more in class. I became fascinated by much of the material that was covered and have learned more in these three years of high school than the eight years that preceded it. The most surprising thing was that the less I focused on working solely for the grade at the end of the semester, the better my grades became. Not only did I start excelling and enjoying school even more, but I also learned the invaluable lesson of listening to others and giving their criticisms or opinions weight, regardless of whether or not I felt they were correct in their judgment. I think the mentality of getting good grades to avoid punishment is a problem that plagues many teenagers in school today. My personal experience with my parents has taught me that if we simply open our minds, and just listen, we can make our lives for both ourselves and those around us much better.
Shards

What in the world is that smell? Where am I? What’s going on?

These are the only questions I asked myself. Because what I am about to tell you is the story of a man who risked everything for his own life. He risked everything, and it all started with these three questions.

That smell. It’s a thick, coppery, smell. I could even taste it, as if I were chewing on a penny. I touch my face on instinct to see if I’m really here. I feel my cheeks; my lips, my nose, and my closed eyes. I feel it all. This is real. But what in the world is that smell? It’s almost like – blood.

I’m barefoot, because I can feel the cold concrete. Upon walking forward, I step on something very, very sharp. I yell and take many steps back. Shards of glass? Maybe. Razor blades? It’s a possibility. The air seems heavy, muggy, humid, which makes everything uncomfortable. I notice my T-shirt sticking to my skin from the sweat. I must be dehydrated.

I feel nauseous, have a migraine, and I’m dizzy, even though I can’t see. There are no sounds. No machinery, forms of air-conditioning, no one talking. Dead silence lingers in the air. The only thing I hear is my heavy breathing. Am I even breathing? Or am I dead? I must be dead.

Lights flash on and a voice comes on over an intercom system. An eerie voice; deep and gruff.

“I’m guessing you want to know where you are. You’re scared. No, not scared – curious. You want to know where you are. I’ll answer that. You’re in a room; it’s small and black, with one door. That door is locked. However, you are in possession of a key. Check your left pocket, it’s there. I wouldn’t try to unlock it though. Or rather, hear what I say before unlocking it. Look to the far left corner. There’s a clock. At the moment, it’s one o’clock in the afternoon. Listen closely to what I have to say. You may die in eleven hours unless, of course, you follow my instructions.

Feel free to roam this room, just, watch your step. It appears my last victim, erm, subject, got a bit messy and didn’t feel like cleaning up after himself. I guess he was pre-occupied for the time being. You never mind that and listen to my directions. You must finish a series of tasks before midnight. If not, the exit to this building seals forever and you’ll be left to its confines to rot away. You can leave this room at any time, just be careful of the consequences. I have a test for you. Once you leave this room, you will need a way to unlock a door. I sliced open your arm, in parallel lines. Slid in a stretched out paperclip – a basic form of a lock pick, and then sewed it up myself. Don’t worry, you were heavily sedated during this; you didn’t feel a thing. Although, I’m sure if you cut it open now, the pain would be excruciating. Look at the floor; there are plenty of sharp objects to choose from. There’s even a mirror for you to check your arm, if you don’t believe your eyes. Now, I’m going to be watching
you from cameras I have placed all around this building. Obtain that device in your arm before opening this door. I’ll give directions from there. Remember: nothing goes un-noticed.”

While the man is speaking, I survey the room – small and black, just like he said. Four sets of lights hang above me, a large digital clock with red letters, and a long mirror. It looks as if I could be on the other side of that mirror; on the other side and out of this room. Many objects glisten on the floor – ice? No. There are many shards of glass. At the far end of the room, a door. There’s one more thing here with me – blood. It’s everywhere – in a puddle, a foot away from me, splattered on the walls, on my face and torso.

I turn and look at the door, my only form of escape. A trail of blood leads from the door to where I am standing. I notice a grate on the floor, almost like a sewage grate, but, in this case, disbursing blood. I walk around, blowing off that there’s glass slicing open my feet, but concentrating on why I’m here. What did I do to deserve this?

I check the clock. The man didn’t lie. I take the key from my pocket, walk to the door, and stand there. I walk away, deciding to follow the rules of the test. Upon looking in the mirror, I examine my right arm. There’s a slice alright, about five inches long and caked in dry blood. I pick up a thin piece of glass and pace around the room, thinking if there’s anything internal in that area - anything I can bleed to death from. Oh, who am I kidding? Just two cuts and barn! All done! It’s worth a shot.

“Alright!” I yell. “I’m going to take the key out now!”

I press the glass to my arm, then start sawing in small motions. I stop, wipe most of the blood off with my shirt, take a breath, and then start again. The pain is almost unbearable. The tearing sound makes me puke. Imagine tough beef jerky tearing with a slight ripping sound; add the smell of blood and the sight of your own arm being sliced open with dirty, broken glass, and you get one deranged man trying to escape a room. One side down; forget doing another side! On impulse, I slide two fingers in my arm. The feeling is horrible. Sweat from my fingers burns the gash, and the feeling of my arm is enough for me. I latch the clip between my fingers, but too eager to get it out, I don’t slide my fingers out. I pull straight up, tearing off a chunk of skin the size of a large padlock. I holler in terrible agony. As soon as this is finished, the man starts talking again.

“You see where being too eager gets you? Nowhere! Before you open that door, have your lock picking device ready, it might just save your life. Walk in that room and instantly look for a porcelain doll. There will be a switch somewhere. It will save your life. As a member of Park City Bomb Squad, you should be familiar with nail bombs, correct? That room is filled with them. You have ninety seconds to pull the switch; otherwise, you know what happens. Of course, you can always sit in this room and wallow in your own misery. If you plan on living, I suggest you make good time and progress. You’ve done well so far. Don’t stop. Finding the doll won’t be a walk in the park. This building was an Insane Asylum in the 1900’s. It was named Blackwood after the forest surrounding this building. At night, they go completely black and your best hope of getting out of them is with a good light source.

There are many boxes and crates and other useless items in there. Focus on your main objective. I’ll give you a hint: Peasants will certainly run for the exit. Under the floor lies the door. Wrapped in a sheet, lies a key. To find the key, learn to sing. This is all I’m telling you. Now go, quick! You have no time to waste! I’ve set 180 seconds on the clock. It starts when the door opens.”
So, sit alone in a creepy room filled to the brim with shattered glass, or fend off in a room of nail bombs, ready to explode. Death A or Death B. Let’s go with B. Without thought, I tear off a piece of my sleeve, wrap it around my wounded arm, and tie it. Afterwards, I dodge glass shards and make my way to the door. Bracing for what needed to be done, I unlock the door.

As soon as the door unlocks, I thrust it open, hearing a loud snapping sound and a ticking. The door slams shut behind me with an audible click of the lock. The room has a dark look to it, the lights being painted teal. On the far left wall hung a large digital clock. The room looked like it was used for storage, stacks of wooden boxes and crates everywhere. I only had around 145 seconds left and needed to move.

I had no idea of where to go first, so I dashed to a crate with Blackwood Insane Asylum printed on it in red ink and tore the top off. Inside I found straw and hay, but no porcelain doll. This room is about three times smaller than the previous room and the stone walls are white, not black.

I sprint over to a new box, tear the top off and find about five nail bombs all stacked on top of each other. I slide the back over the crate and turn to face the clock. I’m sitting at 95 seconds. At the far end of the wall, there is a tall stack of crates – possibly seven or eight. That’s where the doll is. That’s where my salvation is. I tear past all the bombs and old beds without mattresses, to find my crates.

“If I were to make this an inconvenient as possible, where would I put the doll?” I ask aloud.

The bottom crate is where. All of the boxes in here are black. So why is the very bottom one red - because that box is significant. That’s my box. I push with all my might to get the boxes off the red box, although with no prevail. I try once more, but they will not budge.

“No!” I scream. “No! This isn’t fair! You’ve nailed the boxes together!”

Just then, I notice the red box has a black band around it. I run over and put my ear up to it. Coming from inside the box is a loud ticking. A bomb. I glance over at the clock and see 30 seconds.

“I can’t wait any longer!” I yell.

Smashing my elbow into the crate repeatedly until it was completely busted, I reach in to find a very smooth bomb. Whoa, a smooth bomb? Then it hits me - my doll is in there with the bomb! I clasp it between my fingers and pull out, only to have my arm scraped and splintered by the broken wood.

The doll has straight black hair, coal black eyes, and a sliced up face, but no key, no switch, nothing. I turned the doll and looked at its back. How do dolls talk? With batteries, of course! I rip off the back panel and find two switches: one labeled “Survive,” the other labeled, “Die.” At 5 seconds on the clock, I quickly press “Survive,” and all the lights turned off.

I am dead. I really am dead. I will never again see the light of day or my niece’s bright, shining smile. I’m dead.

Then, the lights turn on, temporarily blinding me.

“Ohay, can we cut it out with the sudden bright lights?” I mutter to myself.

The voice comes on over the intercom.

“Congratulations, you survived. But, this is not over, oh, no. Not yet, at least. I must say, very nice job with my red box. Clever of you to actually think outside the box,” he says, chuckling at his terrible joke. “Now, listen closely, you have not won yet. You still need to get
out of this room before a gas enters that will cause you to bleed from every orifice you have. Do you remember my small saying from earlier? Here, let me refresh your memory: Peasants will certainly run for the exit. Under the floor lies the door. Wrapped in a sheet, lies a key. To find the key, learn to sing.

As you can see, the clock has reset. Now you must find a key. This key just so happens to be wrapped in a sheet. You have many boxes and crates left to check. You have 120 seconds. Let the test begin.”

“No, not again!” I scream.

Knowing this did me no good, I run to the stack of crates and start busting into them with my elbow, which feels shattered, bruised and splintered. On the brink of devastation, I give the crate one final blow, reach my hand in and feel something soft — soft? Shouldn’t it be hard or hay-like? No, sheets aren’t like that! I clasp it and tear it out, ripping a long slice of skin from my arm because of the wood. I would be in shock, were I not so excited. I glance at the clock; 90 seconds left.

The key is completely black and is larger than a normal key. Now where does it go? I need to find a door. I recall the saying: Peasants will certainly run for the exit. Under the floor lies the door. Wrapped in a sheet, lies a key. To find the key, learn to sing.

“Under the floor!” I yell.

Just then, I notice under the red box was a hole smaller than the box, but big enough for me to get out. I push the crate, but it moves enough to only let me barely slide through the hole. Then I fell.

I fell for what felt like hours. I can’t see anything. Wonderful, I’m going to be blinded for the third time! But I haven’t been. Not yet. I open my eyes and stand up, still shrouded in darkness. My body feels weak. I am weak. My arms and torso feel moist. Sweat? Blood? Blood. The gas must have made its way down here. I’m guessing it’s mostly evaporated, but very little may have gotten to my lungs. Then the voice comes on over the intercom.

“Well, well, well, Gabriel. Look where you are now. Down in a hole. You see, there’s one simple step you missed in escaping. You didn’t learn to sing. What this means is that, had you yelled into that hole, you would hear an echo. You would know that the drop is much farther than you would think. You will also know now something very important. You lose. You’ve been unconscious for fourteen hours. In this time, the doors to this building have locked – forever. This is your home, your sanctum, your grave. The shards of your life will forever be scattered around this world. The convalescence in your arms will get better; but you’ll starve to death. Or, well, we can let insanity get the best of you. After all, this is an insane asylum. This is where you were meant to be. This is your fate. Goodbye, goodnight, for good, Gabriel.”

Then the static from the intercom shuts off and I am left in the cold dark.
supernova

we're stars, baby, fizzling in the sky,
so caught up in our own bone-crushing mass
and obsessed with our own intensity
that we keep forgetting

even stars die, but we're not gonna fade
when we croak, we're gonna explode
like mentos in a coke bottle,
bleeding plumes of rainbow smoke
bursting with light so brilliant,
your eyes will sting for years after

when we're done blowing ourselves the hell up
you'll wade into that glittery ashtray
as it smolders with stardust -
the birthplace of another star

and what do you think is gonna happen to that star?
another red giant, another supernova
another burn out

call us reckless idiots,
but close your eyes and picture us
in all our shining, arrogant glory

and when you're still years away
from winking silently into oblivion,
we'll see who
remembers
whom
The Secrets of the Past

Prologue

For the past twenty five years, the human race has been at war with a race of extra-terrestrials only known as the Aliens. We are losing. The home world of the humans, Earth, has been destroyed along with almost all of the human colonies. The only remaining colony stationed at Terra X is all alone and is preparing for the eventual invasion. The fate of the human race hangs in the balance. Now, the starship Aspiration carrying survivors races to jump to hyperspace as it is pursued by an Alien warship...

Chapter 1

Starship Aspiration Armory

Richard Smith was worried. As the Aspiration raced from the scene, the Alien’s warship kept blasting their shields down to zero. Soon, the Aspiration was going to take a fatal blow, and the Aliens would board. Their already slim chance of escaping through hyperspace was quickly diminishing to zero. Consecutive explosions echoed through the ship as the Aliens kept hunting them, hungry for blood. As Richard put the final touches on his body armor, he heard and felt a massive explosion, rattling his very bones. He looked over at Tyson, his friend and squad brother, who was wearing the same fearful expression as Richard.

“So,” said Richard forcing a grin, “How much do you want to bet that that was the shields giving out and our engines being hit?”

Just then, a metallic voice came over the intercom saying “Attention all personnel, the engines have been destroyed. The Alien warship is bearing down on us. Prepare to be boarded.”

“Yep,” said Tyson, “We’re all dead.”

“Don’t be so negative,” said Richard, as he pulled on his helmet. “There is still the small, infinitesimal chance that we’ll live.”

Just then, their squad sergeant, Sergeant Snow, came in and said, “Come on boys, let’s go blast those aliens back to where they came from!”

Richard looked over at Tyson who was pulling on his helmet and smiled. “Alright brother, let’s go run these aliens back, just like Snow said.”

As they walked out the door, Tyson again muttered “We’re all dead.”

As they ran down the corridor, Richard kept feeling that Tyson was right. In every case when the aliens had boarded a vessel, only once had the humans succeeded in defending themselves, and that had been thanks to a planetary cannon. Here they were, in the middle of space, with no planetary cannon in sight. The nearest thing they had had to artillery was their support ships, but all had been destroyed.

The Alien warship kept on blasting away their defenses. Soon, they would board and wipe out all the survivors.
I wonder, thought Richard, why they even bother to board ships if they can just blow them away?

Then another message came over the intercom, this time from the Captain. “Attention all personnel, man your battle stations. We have Beamers incoming!”

*Dang it!* thought Richard, even though Tyson and Snow spouted more profane things. Beamers were the Aliens’ vehicle for boarding ships when they didn’t want to drill through the hull. A Beamer’s bulky solid metal hull could withstand massive amounts of firepower, so the aliens used it as a teleportation bridge into a human ship to teleport from their ship to wherever they wanted to go without damaging whatever units may be invading the human’s ship.

As they came to the end of the corridor leading away from the armory, the three soldiers met up with the rest of the squad.

The two remaining members just stood there. Allen was cursing under his breath something along the lines of how they were all going to die (not much different form Tyson). Meanwhile, Jack was keeping the rifle ready for anything.

"I’m just saying what everyone is thinking,” said Tyson looking around at all the gloomy faces. “We’re all going to die.”

“Well Tyson,” said Snow, “if you think we’re all going to die, then you are going to come fight alongside me when we split up.”

Everyone looked at him in shock. They had never practiced exercises with a split up squad.

“I know that we never did this during training, but I don’t care. It’s our only shot. I still expect you to give your all during this fight. For all we know, we could be the first starship to repel the aliens’ attack so just stick to the plan.

“Team one will be comprised of me, Tyson, and Richard. We will cover hallway thirty-seven on the upper decks.

“Team two will be comprised of Allen and Jack, who will cover hallway forty-two on the upper decks.

“Remember men, we aren’t just trying to save this starship, we are protecting the only remaining survivors of the planet Earth, our homeland. So just remember that and keep on fighting. Alright, MOVE OUT!”

We took one last look at the newly-founded team two; this might be the last time we would ever see them alive.

Arriving at the corridor, we were the only ones there; the next part of our squad, who were at least a couple hundred meters away in corridor forty-two, were the closest people around.

Then the Captain came over the intercom again. “Here they come!”

Everyone tensed. We couldn’t hear them, but that didn’t mean anything. They could be anywhere. They could be beamed right into this hallway and overrun us. Richard just hoped this task force wouldn’t have the members of a small squad that had been sent to attack the human base during the battle for Earth. That squad had been wiped out except for its leader who he swore he saw breathing, even though he had hit the alien in the eye.

While he was thinking, he looked at the end of the hallway. An alien warrior, about three or four feet tall with gleaming silver armor covering its entire body, ran into the center.
As soon as they saw it, Richard, Snow, and Tyson all raised their guns as one and fired. As soon as they started firing, the thing vanished. It had been in the center of the hallway and had just disappeared.

“Where did it go?” asked Tyson uneasily.

“That’s a Vanisher,” said Snow, “they have the ability to disappear and sneak up on their opponents. They get close and stab their enemies. Either that or maybe they just stay there and spy on us.”

As soon as Snow finished his sentence, a knife with a blade of pure energy appeared in the center of his chest. His eyes widened with the sudden exposure to such pain and the shock to know that he had been beaten after surviving for about five years against the aliens.

As Snow began to fall to the ground, the act of what had just happened suddenly hit home for Richard and Tyson who raised their weapons and started firing in the area that they thought the cloaked alien may be.

Suddenly a splatter of blood appeared in the middle of the air.

“Yea,” said Richard, “that armor worked real well, didn’t it.”

Tyson sprang his weapon to that point and just opened up with everything he had and desperately tried to hit the fast-moving blood stream. Tyson decided to up his bullet rate by holding his rifle one-handed while pulling out his sidearm forty six caliber pistol for the other hand.

Richard just stood there gawking at his brother as Tyson finally hit the thing in the leg, causing it to fall. He walked up to it as it was scrambling to get to its feet; trying to run away even though its cloaking device had somehow deactivated.

Tyson walked up to the downed alien and raised his pistol.

“Night, night, you alien scum!” A deafening sound erupted as the gun fired. The Vanisher stopped squirming.

Richard finally got a good look at the thing. There were two holes in the front of the helmet it wore but there were no air holes. Instead, Richard knew that there was an oxygen tank that helped them breathe but not reveal themselves in cold weather. Judging by the density of the armor, this thing was pretty high up in rank because the less dense armor was worn by the common alien warrior. The higher ups had such dense armor that no human weapon could penetrate. This thing’s armor was at least penetrable but almost not. The joints that had injured the thing when it had been shot because he could see where the armor had stopped the bullets. The only reason Tyson had been able to kill the thing was because he had hit it right in the middle of one of its golden eyes.

“We got lucky that time, brother,” said Richard.

“But Snow didn’t,” said Tyson. “Let’s contact the rest of the squad to let them know that he didn’t make it.”

Richard opened his radio to their frequency and was suddenly bombarded with noise. It was mainly gunfire, but you could hear the aliens roaring with rage.

“Allen!” shouted Richard. “You guys alright?”

“Good of you guys to finally call in!” said Allen, “We came under heavy alien firepower when they beamed right into our hallway. We killed about five aliens before they realized we were there waiting for them, and we haven’t had any kills after that. So, how are you?”
“A Vanisher came into our hallway and took us by surprise,” said Tyson, “Snow is dead, but we bagged the little bugger.”

“Wow, the old sarge is dead. Wow. I took a hit to the leg before we got behind cover, but I’m still fighting. We actually lost someone.”

“Incoming, Jack!” said Allen, “Captain just told me there are some more Beamers incoming. We are about to have some more aliens flooding in to greet us.”

“Roger that,” said Jack. “We are going to be out of communication for a while, but don’t worry about us. We’ll be alright.”

“Good luck out there, boys,” said Richard, “and good hunting.”


There was a faint crackling sound that let them know that the radio line had been cut.

“We can’t hold this hall forever. We need to move Snow’s body over to the wall and put him into one of the compartments so the aliens won’t find him,” said Tyson.

“I agree,” said Richard.

They grabbed their dead sergeant by the arms and half-carried, half-dragged him over to the compartment.

“We should remove the knife,” said Richard.

“Yeah,” said Tyson as he carefully pulled out the weapon.

Tyson held the enemy’s knife in his hand for a moment, but then he held it out to Richard. “Take it”

“What?” Richard couldn’t help the surprise in his voice. “You killed the thing, you keep it.”

“No,” said Tyson, as he forced it into Richard’s hand, “I just killed the thing. I want you to have its weapon.”

“Fine,” said Richard, “and one more thing, I…”

Richard never got the chance to finish his sentence because at that moment both Richard’s and Tyson’s radios crackled as the connection was restored.

“MAN DOWN!” shouted someone on the other end that they couldn’t identify because of all the weapon fire in the background.

“Who?”

“Jack is down,” said Allen. “The aliens have overrun our position and…ARRGH!”

The radio then went dead.

Richard and Tyson looked at each other in horror. They were the only ones left.

After a few moments of silence Richard said, “Wow. Even I can’t make a joke at a time like this.”

Tyson finally looked up at him, pure hatred in his eyes.

“I’m going to kill them all,” he said.

Richard held up the knife and activated it. “I will kill as many aliens as I can before they can kill me.”

“Now, let’s hold this hallway.”

Richard deactivated the knife and looked down each corridor on either side.

“Tyson, you watch down that hallway,” said Richard, “and I’ll watch your back coming from this hallway.”
They both raised their weapons and waited. For two minutes they waited, just standing there. Nothing was happening, but they knew that the aliens could be standing there right now, watching and waiting for the moment to strike. These creatures could be very patient and very aggressive, even if they weren’t provoked.

Then it happened. A spike about three inches long and made of pure steel flew passed Richard’s ear missing by a mere inch.

“DOWN!” shouted Richard as both he and Tyson dove for the same cover position.

“What type?” asked Tyson.

“A Spiker.”

This was one species of aliens that both of them had fought before. Big old things with two arms and two legs. Even though they were about seven or eight feet tall, they were equipped with a cloaking device, and the weapon for which they were named threw massive spikes at any unsuspecting soldiers.

“Let’s go,” said Tyson.

Richard gave him the thumbs up, and they simultaneously came from behind their cover and opened fire into the hallway, making a blanket of unstoppable deadly bullets that found home inside the Spiker. Unlike the Vanisher, the Spiker has very weak armor and could be penetrated by most bullets. Blood splashed as the thing was hit, and the cloaking field finally gave out. The massive alien fell to the floor with a thud that would be surely heard for decks below.

Richard and Tyson gave each other a high five.

“Yeah,” said Tyson, “That’s one down, only three thousand more to go.”

Richard looked at Tyson in astonishment.

“Was that a joke I just heard from you? The last time I heard a joke from you was when we first were assigned to this squad. Something about how the base was on a desert planet and that our sergeant’s name was Snow. You remember that?”

“Oh yeah,” said Tyson, “that was a pretty good joke, wasn’t it?
They broke out laughing. It was kind of strange, considering their situation.

“Yeah,” said Richard, finally calming down from his laughter, “We need to get back to watching for any activity.”

“How right you are,” said a raspy voice at the end of the hallway.

The two soldiers wheeled around. Standing at the end of the hallway was the worst fear of a soldier in the field. It was a Superior. The Superiors had some of the thickest armor of the entire Alien army and were able to withstand any bullet impact unless you got it in the eye, which was its vulnerability. In the entire running of the war, only five had ever been killed. At a height of six feet tall and armed to the teeth with two energy guns that are said to be able to kill you before you could even blink, and two full length plasma swords that could cut through just about anything, and of course, a cloaking device like all the others.

“Your deaths have arrived,” said the Superior, in that raspy voice of his.

“Yeah,” said Richard. “We bet that’s what every other alien coming our way has thought. And each one of them has failed to do so.”

“But I will not,” said the Superior.

And then with speed faster than a human blink, the Superior had run down the hall and had Tyson by the neck.
It looked over at Richard. “I told you I could.”

And then, without even looking, the Superior brought out his energy gun. At that point, Tyson screamed. Total fear in his voice, he tried to get out of the neck hold but the Superior had him. Still without looking, the thing raised the energy gun and fired it directly into Tyson’s chest. Even without his scream being cut short, Richard knew his friend was dead.

“You killed him,” said Richard, his anger boiling into his voice, “So I am going to kill you.”

“Hmph,” said the Superior, “You will try…”

The thing had Richard in a death grip but jumped away. Its eyes full of pain, it looked down at the hilt of the plasma knife buried in its chest. It looked up one final time and fell to the floor. Dead.

“That makes six,” said Richard.

“Your chances of survival would have been better with him,” said another raspy voice behind him. The only was problem was that he knew that voice. He had tried to silence it. It was that survivor he had feared would be on this attack.

“Because now,” it continued as Richard wheeled around to face his opponent, “you’re MINE!”

He turned just in time to see down the barrel of an energy gun erupting blue from inside. The color engulfed him, and he felt like he was on fire until the point that the blue turned to a bright white. And then there was nothing; only a solid black oblivion.
Song of the Rain

I do not know which to prefer:
   A painted sunset
   Or the budding blooms,
   The melody of a thunderstorm
   Or the silence just after.

It was twilight all morning.
   It was raining,
   And it was going to rain.
   The shadows took over
While the light struggled to fight back.

I know regal languages
   And beautiful, repetitive songs,
   But I know, too,
   That the thunderstorm is part
   Of what I know.

Why do you imagine a clear day?
Do you not hear how the storm
Weaves its music together,
Unbroken and unwavering?

You

As I hold you close,
   Your bare head
Against my soft cheek,
   I can feel the life
Slowly beating its way free
From the deep confines
Of your body and mind.
I know this is goodbye,
   Yet I do not want
   To let go.
Night after night,
I lie in bed,
Fighting the images of you
Flooding through my mind.
Over and over,
I see you die.
I wish for you
To come and save me,
But it is also you
That I wish
To be saved from.
Curiosity. Simple curiosity started my reading adventure. I would see my older brother clutching a small rectangle and would insist on knowing what it was. A book! After making this discovery, my brother and I would sit for hours, adventuring to different worlds together: the wonderful oasis of Curious George, the playful house next door of Junie B. Jones, or the strange and exciting marvels happening in the Magic Tree House.

My brother and I continued this way for years, growing and reading our familiar volumes until one morning my brother returned from a sleepover with some intriguing news. He had found a new book. At the sleepover, my brother’s friend’s mother had read a chapter to the boys from a book entitled Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. My brother begged my mother to buy this book. I grew curious once more. What could possibly be so intriguing about this book that my brother insisted that he have his own copy after having only read the first chapter? At this point, I could never have understood how important to me that very book, and the ones that followed, would become.

I read the Harry Potter books as though they were water and I was dying of thirst. Over and over, I read them, each time relishing the minute details I had somehow skimmed the time before. And each time I devoured them, I would feel a small glimmer of pride. Who knew I could finish an 870-page book in only three days?

It feels silly to say that these books changed my life, but they did. Without Harry Potter, I’d be a much different person. I connected with the characters in the books sometimes more than my actual friends. As Harry, Ron, and Hermione grew up, I was right there with them through their many struggles and bittersweet triumphs. A bond with truly magical characters, however, is not the only thing J.K. Rowling’s books offered. As I read and reread these books, I could practically feel my vocabulary and comprehension expand. In addition, my first academic debates were with my brother, arguing over the details in the latest installment and what was likely to happen next.

These discussions with my brother even sparked my interest in forming my own opinions about various other topics and developing arguments in defense of them. From my first and favorite topic of Harry Potter, I expanded my causes to include environmental, political, and human rights issues. I wrote letters to everyone from the editor of the newspaper to the president of the United States, expressing my concerns about local construction, illegal hunting activities, and the genocide in Sudan. These first real writing experiences were a crucial step toward developing confidence in my writing abilities.

This confidence was not to last, unfortunately. As my brother reached middle and high school, he began to write more and more for school assignments and projects. After snooping in his room one afternoon, and reading his poems hidden in the bottom drawer of his desk, I knew that I would never have talent like that. His sentences seemed to flow in a fashion that seemed musical, and he had a knack of choosing exactly the right words. I was amazed by his
work, although, I’ll admit, a bit concerned about the dark nature his writings took. I had a new favorite writer. Each time I heard him grumble about his latest writing assignment, I would wait eagerly to sneak into his backpack and read the final copy. He never failed to impress.

When I reached high school, he would reluctantly consent to look over my clumsily constructed essays and offer bits of advice. During these moments, I’d like to revive our old Harry Potter debates or sometimes get his opinion on the latest book I had just read in school, anything from Fahrenheit 451, to Animal Farm, to the Odyssey.

When I reached high school, my schedule became filled with sports, AP classes, and friends. As a consequence, my reading and writing became an almost purely academic pursuit. The leisure reading that I pursued avidly in middle school all but vanished. Although, I was always sure to save time for Harry Potter. But, as I soon discovered, reading from a book, even if it was Harry Potter, can be difficult when crunched for time. So I found a solution. I convinced my parents and grandparents to buy the Harry Potter books on tape for birthday and Christmas presents. Sometimes my brother and I would sit for hours listening to Harry Potter on tape and doing our homework.

From my early years, spent following the adventures in the Magic Tree House, blazing through the Harry Potter series, engaging in playful arguments over dinner, and enduring stressful nights making frantic revisions before deadlines, I have never lost my passion for reading. Throughout all the reading, I have even gained a hesitant acceptance in my role as writer.

My journey into reading began with curiosity, and from there it has continued unabated. One must always stay curious, for what can the apathetic mind achieve?
Light Speed

The young pilot stared off into the darkness of space. He looked down at the velocity gauge. Three-eighths light speed. Accelerating too fast in a class four space ship could have terrible consequences. He remembered a time back when he was still in Basic Star Pilot Training, at the beginning of the Martian Revolution. The old training officer had instructed him to simulate a routine acceleration from standard velocity (three-fourths light speed) to full stop. The meager training ship (which was often called Ol’ Scrappy by the students, due to its composition of scavenged parts from various decommissioned ships) had just slowed down to the minuscule speed of seven hundred meters per second, when seemingly out of nowhere, a Martian battle cruiser came within range of combat. Instinctually, he pulled down the accelerator at its maximum. Before he could even realize the consequences of this mistake, the inertial stabilizer gave out, resulting in the left ion engine being ripped out of the holding station. Luckily, the primary ion engine managed to stay intact, allowing them to arrive safely to Sigma Three space station for repairs. He would never forget, however, how his instincts made him act before he thought.

Three-fourths light speed, the velocity gauge now showed. This was the standard speed that star pilots were allowed to travel at. On rare occasions, when absolutely necessary, seven-eighths light speed was allowed, but never more than that. A few ships in the history of the fleet had completely disappeared, never to be seen again. It was believed that these ships accelerated to the speed of light. A pilot would have to be mad to do such a thing; a jump to light speed could have unexpected outcomes, perhaps sending the ship into the future, or even into the past.

The pilot continued looking through the view screen. Did he forget something? It seemed as if there was something important to remember but maybe not. A quick feeling of déjà vu overcame him, as if he had already been here. For a moment everything was blurred, and he felt thin and spread out. It was probably nothing. Space played with one’s mind. One could easily fall victim to one of space’s cruel paradoxes, because in space, the known laws of physics bend. People could easily take a wrong turn, only to realize that they are stuck with that decision for eternity.

The pilot had just recovered from the momentary dizziness that plagued him earlier, when he felt an impact jolt the ship. An explosion came from the bottom cargo hold, right beneath him. The first thought that popped into his mind was that he was under attack by Martian Confederates.

He pushed up on the reverse thrusters. In a matter of seconds, the ship accelerated to a complete stop. The perimeter sensors showed no signs of a foreign ship in the area, but that would have to be the least of his worries. The deck computer came on-line, as it usually did during emergencies.
“Ship has sustained heavy damage to the cargo hold. Ion engine propulsion reduced to approximately 23 percent,” sounded the computer in its non-emotional monotone voice. “Detecting high amounts of gamma radiation in the cargo hold. Repair of lower deck radiation shield is imperative. Suggesting that auxiliary power be switched to…”

“That is getting annoying,” said the pilot as he shut off the computer with one deft motion.

With no radiation shield to protect the cargo hold from excess gamma ray emissions, the pilot would have to abort all radioactive cargo. He took off his safety harness and stood up from his chair. He walked over to the cargo bay control interface. Uranium was running short, but he knew what he had to do.


“Authorization granted,” the computer responded in its dull voice.

“Release uranium ore cargo from primary holding bay. Set a high frequency gamma ray to fire on the cargo thirty seconds after release.”

“Acknowledged.”

The pilot walked over to the communications interface. He set a distress signal in all radio wave frequencies. Now all he had to do was wait and hope someone was in the area.

“With my luck, I’ll get attacked by some damned Confederate war ship,” he said aloud to himself. Although he had never met any Martian Confederates, he already knew that he hated them.

Many stories circulated about the Martians. While he was still in the academy, an instructor told him of the Martians’ foul attitude and degenerate appearance.

“I do not understand why they would be so different in appearance from us. After all, the Martians originally came from Earth, back in the late 2100’s.”

“That is true,” the officer had answered, “but after they established their Martian colonies, they eventually regressed back into some of the most savage humans you could ever imagine. Heck, I wouldn’t even call ‘em humans. They were animals. My old captain told me about how they would interbreed brothers with sisters, even fathers with daughters. If you are ever faced with one, you kill it; relieve it of its pathetic existence, for the Martians are nothing but an aberration in the image of mankind.”

He would never forget those words.

Several hours passed, and a small ship came into proximity.

“Hello. This is Mira Yash. I am answering your distress signal. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, Mira. My ship has been damaged and is currently inoperable. I believe that I hit a piece of space debris as I traveled at three-fourths light speed. If it would be possible for you to help me fix my primary ion engine, I would greatly appreciate it.”

“Very well then. Permission to board your ship?” she asked.

“Granted.”

After a few moments, the main vacuum hatch opened, and out came a beautiful young woman with sparkling blue eyes and long, light brown hair. The weirdest feeling overcame the pilot: a feeling of intense infatuation which he felt was love at first sight.

“Let’s take a look at that ion engine, Mr.….?”

“John!” he answered with excitement.
“Okay, Mr.... John,” she said with confusion.
“I mean, Ketra. My name is John Ketra.”
“Oh, I see Mr. Ketra,” she said, smiling. Such a beautiful smile. “What class of star ship is this?”
“Class four,” he replied. He felt like he was in a partial daze. This woman was very pretty, probably the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen. Yet, something seemed familiar about her, almost as if they had already met, perhaps on Earth.
“Excuse me, but have we met before?” John asked.
“I do not believe so,” she answered.
“I don’t know; you seem very familiar. Are you from around the Boston area of Massachusetts, back on Earth?” he asked.
“No...,” she answered slowly. “I am from... New York.”
This answer sparked curiosity in John’s mind, because New York did not exist anymore. It was renamed over fifty years ago to Station Port, but he shrugged it off. It was no big deal; some people still called it New York, depending on what section they group in.
“Well, it looks like the ionic stabilizer has been fried, probably because of too much strain on the matter-energy converter. Let me guess, you accelerated to a complete stop from three quarter light speed in under twenty seconds?”
“Yes, actually it was ten seconds. How do you know so much about ion engines?” he asked.
“I am chief engineer with the fleet. I have worked on many engines through my training, including ionic, photonic, and anti-matter.”
This too, sparked curiosity in John’s mind. This woman couldn’t be over twenty-four, yet she was already a chief engineer. Most of the chief engineers John knew were in their fifties.
“If you don’t mind, I’m going to go back to my ship and get some parts.”
“Oh, yes. Go on ahead.”
Mira left the ship and came back with a box full of spare parts and tools. John stood back and watched her repair his engine. It was amazing how such a young and beautiful lady could have more knowledge about ship mechanics than he did.
Mira stood up and brushed off her pants.
“All the tests are complete. This ion engine should be running better than ever,’ she said. “I am sorry, but have business I must attend to, so good-bye.”
“Thank you, Mira. Please, tell me what ship you are piloting. Maybe we could meet up again.”
“The, uh... the Newton,” she said. John didn’t notice the nervous quiver in her voice.
“Oh, I’ve never heard of that ship. Perhaps you could give me the transit code, along with the name of the docking bay and regulations officer.”
“I’m afraid I must leave, John. Nice meeting you.”
“Wait!” John shouted. His uncontrollable instincts started setting in, similar to the ones that had taken him on the Ol’ Scrappy. Without thought, his hand went down to his side, above his phaser.
“Show me your star pilot identification!” All emotion was gone from him.
“I'm sorry, John. I saw your distress signal... and I wanted to help. I lied. I'm not in the fleet. I am... a Martian.”

At the sound of that, he pulled out his phaser and aimed it at her. A feral look was in his eyes. He no longer saw the beautiful, kind woman that he fell in love with. He now saw the enemy: the person he was trained to avoid and, when confronted, to kill.

“Please! Don’t hurt me, John. I just wanted to help! I don’t agree with the conflicts our people have! I am just a simple Confederate engineer!”

“You are a Confederate spy!” John shouted. Without thinking, he fired his phaser on her. The words of hatred the old officer had told him still went through his mind. She fell down with a lifeless thump; her beauty remained, save for the dead expression on her face and the charred black burn where the phaser beam hit her, right in her side.

John stood above her dead body, suddenly realizing what he had done. She had no desire to kill him or even bring harm to him; he was blind. His hate for an enemy that he didn’t even know—still didn’t know—had cost him the potential love of his life. She had been perfect: smart, beautiful, kind, and with the same interests, but now she was dead. Dead by his own hand.

“What have I done!” he yelled at the top of his lungs. He fell to his knees. Tears started to form in his eyes. He had killed her. He had killed a sweet Martian woman who had no desire to harm anyone. It was all a lie; the Martians were not animals. They were people, human beings that shared the same passions, exploration, self-improvement, and love. How many from both sides had died over insignificant political differences? How many lies had been made to perpetuate an ongoing feud?

She was dead, dead forever. But, John knew better. He could change it; he could go back. John could accelerate above the speed of light, creating a temporal rift in space through which to travel back in time. Forget the rules and regulations; they meant nothing to him now.

John was aware of the risks; it would be nearly impossible for him to accurately travel to a specific time in the past, but he was willing to give up the rest of his entire life searching for that second chance to change this horrible outcome. He could not live with it on his soul.

John strapped himself to the pilot chair. He pulled on the accelerator gradually. He reached half light speed. He gazed off into the reaches of space with the open eyes of a mad man. Three-fourths light speed. Mira had fixed the ion engine well; the ship traveled more smoothly at this velocity than ever before (or so he thought). Seven-eighths light speed, the fastest he had ever gone. To his surprise, the inertial stabilizer adjusted to the velocity perfectly. And finally, the gauge read light speed—a speed at which no man should travel. He looked through the view screen. A hole appeared in front of him. The ship went through it. It seemed as if the very fabric of space-time shaped this tunnel. He had been through this temporal wake many times beyond counting, yet this was his first time ever going through. He would change things. Mira would be alive again, and no matter what, when he got back, he would remember to change things—to alter the course of time.

John continued looking through the view screen. Did he forget something? It seemed as if there was something important to remember, but maybe not. A quick feeling of déjà vu overcame him, as if he had already been here. For a moment, everything was blurred and he felt thin and spread out. It was probably nothing. Space played with one’s mind. One could easily fall victim to one of space’s cruel paradoxes, because in space, the known laws of physics bend. One could easily take a wrong turn, only to realize that they are stuck with that decision for eternity.
Moksha

Breathe in.
Let the cold air
Explode your lungs,
Sting your skin
Through the thin cotton.
Watch the stars
Become my pupils.
Now,
There is no light around,
Except
The street lamps with their bug sweaters
Illuminating
The pavement you walk down,
Glide, with no legs.
Hear,
The slap of your freezing toes on the pavement.
Blackout.
Let the world take you over.
From
Carnage decay
Within the sun beams
Your shirt caved in,
Inside your chest,
Whispers buried in the soil.
With my tears to help your last friend grow,
Shield your sunken eyes.
I have always considered myself to be a liberal—gay rights, pro-choice, evolution—the whole shebang. My actions thus far accurately reflected these beliefs; I wore buttons for the appropriate candidates, entered heated debates regarding separation of church and state, and have been known to hug a few trees. There was only one flawed aspect of my liberal convictions: my religion. I was raised as a member of the Catholic Church amongst God-fearing citizens and countless creeds. Even basic Catholic doctrine condemns my central philosophies; Catholicism calls for staunch opposition of gay marriage, abortion, and the theory of evolution. It seemed natural that I should seek a church more accepting of my beliefs. Distressed and unsatisfied, I would ask my mother, being equally liberal, why she was still Catholic. “Well,” she would say. “It just feels like home.”

How could she possibly feel at home with these people? The congregation at St. James Catholic Church is the stark opposite of my family, or at least, my ideal family. These are the kind of people who love George Lopez but want to clamp down on our borders. They feast on a mediocre breakfast buffet at Hy-Vee after morning Mass. And if there’s a Chiefs game on Sunday night, don’t expect anyone to show up to church. It almost feels sacrilegious to be a God-fearing person and enjoy George Lopez’s comedy. Everyone knows he’s the antichrist of all things funny. If the congregation hears that I am watching a Chiefs game, they will know the Apocalypse is upon them. I had no common ground with my fellow Catholics—except the mediocre Hy-Vee breakfast buffet—it is marginal and delicious.

It always humors me when a family comes to church at St. James for the first time and tries to break the mold of the Midwestern Caucasian Catholic. Last week, I noticed one such family. The husband and wife had peaceful smiles plastered on their faces and their three children were in matching outfits. Whenever the priest said something insightful or they sensed a gap in their perfection, they would look at each other and smile as if to say, “Isn’t life just perfect?” And I found myself wanting to smile with them and say, “Yes. Yes it is.”

I zoned out during Father’s homily and my eyes wandered back to the Catholic Cleavers. The wife started to do her gaze-and-smile routine when I saw her eyes widen in horror: Ward was dozing. She quickly regained her composure and lovingly put her arm around her husband. She discreetly pinched his arm and sure enough, he came to and got the memo: gaze-and-smile. I tried to stifle my laughter. Good effort, I thought. You almost pulled it off. I knew at that moment that I would see them next week in Wal-Mart denim and old team jerseys like the rest of us.

At this point, I had almost lost my faith in humanity and decided that no one could break free of the inevitable cycle of the Catholic initiation. I thought back to my childhood—such a lovely view of life. My twenty stuffed animal children and I would have tea with my sister, Sarah, and her stuffed animal family as we discussed our most recent endeavors. My world was a blend of Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter. My successful husbands alternated
between Legolas and Ron Weasley. I'd say to Sarah, “Oh, I hired that old sitter again because Legolas and I are off for our second honeymoon in Lothlorien,” or, “Oh, don’t wait up for us at dinner in the Hamptons tomorrow. Ron and I are taking the children to an educational safari of the Forbidden Forest.”

My children were being well-educated thanks to our efforts. We whisked them away to their various lessons and activities where I would boast about Bootsie's prowess in ballet and Corduroy's first French lesson. Sarah and I made our fortunes alternating between being world famous artists, creating masterpieces in Veggie Tales coloring books, and famous Irish dancers, kicking up our heels to the Chieftains and Riverdance. Pure bliss. I can't remember when I first started realizing that I hadn't really been around these kinds of sophisticates before—certainly not at church.

I thought all this might change when my dad announced that he would be taking Sarah and me to his Unitarian-Universalist church. He gave me the background: they don't worship a god, the members can believe whatever they want, there is no religious text, it's a very liberal religion . . . aha! The word “liberal” had piqued my attention, and I was immediately persuaded to attend. Left-wing scholarly people joining together to grow in their spiritual faith? It seemed too good to be true.

We entered the church on a Sunday morning, and I was shocked by the number of people in suits and dresses. I heard people talking about the Democratic National Convention and Ralph Waldo Emerson. I experienced a sort of elitist euphoria that was totally foreign to me. The sanctuary, oh, pardon me, the place of worship looked more like a coffee shop or a dinner theatre than a solemn place for reciting hymns. I suppose the coffee shop comparison is most accurate; people were, in fact drinking coffee. Then again, the theatre is good too: the minister was a former actor. My dad and his wife, Harmony, began explaining the appeal of this church once again, noting how welcoming and hospitable its members were. *It must not take long to feel at home*, I thought. Dad's only been to church twice.

“There is a large GLBTT demographic here.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transvestites, Transsexuals,” he replied, as if stating the obvious. “You see a lot of these couples here, and that’s very important to us.”

Just then, a large woman sporting a gay pride shirt and short choppy hair moseyed into our aisle. She grunted a word definitely not appropriate for church as she plopped into her chair.

“I always get seated next to her,” my dad groaned. “For Christ’s sake, I think she has Tourettes. She’s always hooting and hollering, and God-knows-what-else.”

I wanted to remind Dad that we don’t identify “God” by name as Unitarian-Universalists, but I held my tongue. The service commenced with a children’s story read to us by a child of the congregation. I was naturally expecting a Bible story, or at least something with a moral, but all I could gather from the story was that there was a cat, a parachute, and a piece of buttered toast. The little girl who read the story had impeccable diction and highly rehearsed hand gestures and flourishes. She tried admiringly hard not to break character when she stumbled over her words that one time, and her parents cheered for her when she performed their choreography correctly. The lesbian with Tourettes guffawed and literally yee-hawed the entire time. Then we were instructed to, “sing our children off,” and we sang some
cheese-tastic ditty about watching them grow and flourish and bud, etc. People read poetry and essays and we sang a few hymns. Then the minister delivered his sermon, and I was seriously impressed. Not only did the sermon sound like a college lecture but his entire theme was on Stephen Colbert’s definition of “truthiness.” My Catholics never would have absorbed the sly puns and developed theology. I was in heaven.

After the sermon came to a dramatic end that resembled one of Shakespeare’s soliloquies, a man in a pink button-up began to sing “My Way” by Frank Sinatra. He had a full baritone voice, and although I was a little confused about the musical interlude, I was enjoying his rendition when a gigantic woman burst through the curtains and began an off-key, belting (drunken) verse. I was now thoroughly bewildered when a man in a scarf and paisley button-up burst through the curtains. I thought, this man is gay. No hard feelings. Just the truth. Sure enough the man practically did a time step during his falsetto verse, and I know there was double meaning when he sang the lyric, “I bit off more than I could chew.” At last, when I thought the shimmying catastrophe might take his bow and leave, an old coot came on stage in Debbie Reynolds (post-Singing in the Rain) fashion, sporting a pink ball cap and feather boa. Her voice shook with a warble that practically made me seasick by the time the song finally ended with an ear-splitting chord. The audience loved it. My dad was looking quite smug next to me, only flinching once as the lesbian with Tourettes shouted and stomped her approval.

The service ended soon after, and we left the room for some refreshments outside.

“Why did they sing Sinatra?” I asked my dad.

“Didn’t you listen to the sermon? The lyrics of “My Way” directly summarize what the minister was talking about . . .” He went into an in-depth analysis of the similarities between the song and Unitarian-Universalist principles. Yet, my question went unanswered. Why in God’s name did they sing Sinatra? Oh—pardon me; why in the unidentified all-encompassing religious leader did they sing Sinatra?

The organizer of new members introduced herself to Sarah and me. Her name was Lori.

“Was the service… interesting enough?” she inquired after our introduction.

“Sometimes young adults find it difficult to sit through the service,” she added, turning to Dad and Harmony.

Oh really? I thought. You think we were bored? I wanted to tell her that until she had sat, stood, and kneeled through a Catholic Mass then she had no room to be talking. But I had no time; Lori started rambling off about how she feels safe letting her daughter interact with the children at this church because their parents share her ideals.

“Bridget came home the other day from a friend’s house and told me that her friend’s mother said that if you eat McDonald’s you would go to hell! Imagine! I told Bridget that she would just have to find another friend because she was no longer allowed to associate with these people.”

Apparently, McDonald’s had recently sponsored a gay pride parade and other functions of questionable repute according to these people. But then I had a thought! “These people” Lori was talking about were my people! My Catholics would be boycotting McDonald’s to avoid satanic behavior! How dare she talk about my Catholics! It was one thing to be poking fun from the inside, but this elitist yuppie seriously needed to be knocked down a few pegs before she went criticizing my people. We all feel that we are better people than those who disagree with our beliefs, but in reality, all people harbor prejudice and at times, their biases blind them. In
my fervor, I suddenly felt myself craving mediocre Hy-Vee breakfast buffet. I realized my mom was right. I may not share the same political convictions with the majority of St. James, but it feels like home, an honest, un-staged, well-meaning home. I knew at this moment that I belonged at St. James. Don’t expect to see me watching George Lopez or football anytime soon, but eating a mediocre Hy-Vee breakfast buffet? Eating it and loving it.
For Whom the Whistle Blows

I taste it. It’s odd; before I smell its soft aroma, hear the brush hog crunching happily in the background, or my eyes even register what they see, my taste buds detect the rough texture of the emerald turf between my teeth and mouthpiece. I have difficulty dislodging it, and I find this irritating. I can chew up and spit out a 250 lb. defensive tackle, but a blade of grass manages to elude me, staying just out of what I can control.

There is something else, gritty, insubstantial. I automatically think dirt before coming to realize it was a bug, a rather large one I believe. This will bother me to no end, not knowing what it was, as by now I’ve already swallowed my finely shredded antagonist.

The quarterback’s cadence shakes me out of my reverie, and I become aware of every detail of my molded plastic body armor. The strap on the left of the shoulder pad is too tight; it’s counterpart too loose, and somehow they are never balanced. I make a mental note to attempt to fix it later, although I’ve come to recognize and even enjoy the pain it causes across my ribs. The helmet doesn’t fit either; such a small space is grossly inadequate to place my extra-large sized head in, but it is all there is and will have to do.

In this way I feel even more like a modern day knight or gladiator. Like me, they had little choice when outfitted. When they fought however, it became a different story. They chose to fight for their honor, glory, pride with all they had. Perhaps I am even more the same as the latter warrior, fighting to survive the arena with no code of conduct, no tiresome ethics, the will to live sorely tested against another man’s with no quarter given to the fallen rival. Our tools of war must become an extension of who we are, right down to the last stitch of my gloves. Man and metal become one to create the perfection that lies in the thrill of sport.

All of this takes place in mere seconds, less time than it will take to actually snap the football. There is a three and an eight technique, I’m uncovered. A linebacker flits in and out of the top of my vision. He’s not showing blitz; there will be no threat I tell myself, block down. Rather than hear, now I feel it. Movement registers in the corner of my eye, and I fire off the ball to bury the opposing lineman five yards down field, knowing my brothers to the right and left of me do the same.

We act as a single entity, an unstoppable force; it’s what I love about playing line. At this point the running back should have already made his cut and passed me. Back at the now distant and long gone line of scrimmage, the whistle blows. Coach yells, the play is over, and I innately know I was wrong. Sure enough, the backer came over the top to make the play.

Which coach is yelling? Is it Coach Thompson or the lingering voice in my head of my father? Am I a sophomore or a boy trying to gain praise that was such a rare commodity? I come out a play, my thoughts drift once more. As I catch my breath on the sideline, I wonder how I ended up here at two-a-days, earning my place among the other members of the varsity in blistering 102 degree heat. The heat-pressed numbers of my white number 64 practice jersey tremble under the afternoon sun as they rise and fall rhythmically in accordance with
each ragged gasp I take, vainly attempting to claim air. I recall the first day I laid eyes on it, and the pride we both felt swell up in our chests. How can so much emotion be tied to such a ratty piece of faded cloth and mesh? While my game day uniform boldly displayed a gleaming 77, the first indication of my increasing prowess bore the numerals my hero had worn when he played some twenty-odd years before. The sweat pours out of me like rain, my head swims, and I hear him, softly now as a whisper on the wind, “How bad do you want it?”

My eyes temporarily glaze, and the film before them is one of my youth. I was not born an athlete, and I have never had anything easy. Blazing speed or colossal strength were not gifts I was given. Intelligence was my only God-given talent, and that could only take me so far. No, I received the most important traits a man can possess from my father: hustle, passion, a desire to win, and above all else, heart.

Someone once said all children want to be like their fathers. I would tend agree. In the beginning, I never loved football—I loved it because he did. He watched, I watched. He had played, I would play. He coached, I listened. My dad didn’t play football until high school. Deep inside him though, he knew it was part of something he wanted, something more. He put into it all he had and played with a team that never missed the state playoffs, the best in Republic’s history.

He earned a scholarship to a small college, but like George Bailey in the classic Jimmy Stewart movie It’s a Wonderful Life, he returned to help save his father’s family business and never graduated. In doing so, he earned ruptured disks in his back, rendered useless and irreparable by the passage of time. He met my mother and together started our family. With my birth, the dying embers were stoked, that old fire was rekindled, and the flame of a dream came alive again.

My father would coach me for six years, from the third grade through middle school. My best was never good enough, and I always felt like I failed him somehow, no matter how small the mistake. Last year when he was no longer my coach he sat me down and told me how proud of me he was. With all the effort I gave everything, he said I could never disappoint him.

It was a profound revelation. I was shocked, dumbfounded, and found myself utterly baffled by his short statement. I had never known until then what my playing meant to both of us. Without warning the veil was lifted, the curtains parted, all the pieces fell into place, and suddenly it clicked. I realized I play for me as much as I do for him. I’m never alone because it’s us out on that field. We stand together, unafraid.

I go back into the game. The same play is called. This time when the final whistle blows, I smile. I know where to go and how I got there.
A Giant Step (With Apologies to Henry Louis Gates Jr.)*

“What’s this?” the sergeant said to me as he eyed my cane.
“My walking cane,” I said.
“That’s not a cane, man,” he replied, holding it to the light. “That’s a weapon. Why, you could use it as a bayonet.”

We had been together since 1975, that cane and I. It had given me a more or less balanced gait for all these years.
“We have report there’s been a break-in,” the sergeant said.
I’d just returned home from China when, out of the blue, this rough-and-tough police officer presented himself and announced a crime in progress.
“What are you?” he demanded.
I said my name.
“How do I know you are who you say you are?”
Now, that was a profound question, one befitting my graduate students at Harvard. Were it not for this headache that I got in the flight I’d have loved to enlighten this guy with a gentle discourse on its connection to existential surrealism. For now, however, I thought of a rather mundane response. I showed him my ID.
“This ID has no address.”
I produced my driver’s license.
“Come out on to the porch.”
“No, I won’t,” I said.
Then he arrested me, in my own home, for “disorderly conduct.” It was instant agony, and from that time on nothing in my life would be quite the same.

I was handcuffed and transported in a police cruiser to the Pambridge police station. At the police station I was made to sit in a chair. As the cop changed my handcuffs from the back to the front, he asked about my schoolwork.
“Boy,” he said, “I understand you are a professor.”
I said, “Yessir.” By now I learned that I should always say “sir” to cops, unless you were trying to get shot.
Had I read a lot of books?
“Yessir. I wrote a few, too.”
“Are you good at it?”
“Yessir, I believe so.”
“Tell me, who was the father of our nation?”
“Oh, that’s easy, George Washington.”
Then he asked who the father of black history was.
Carter Woodson.
And who gave the Gettysburg address?
Abe Lincoln.

The interview went on like this, and I thought my answers might get me a pat on the back. Actually, they just confirmed the crime they charged me with. I was fingerprinted, photographed, and scheduled for an arraignment.

The officer stood me on my feet and insisted that I walked without my cane. With difficulty, I took a few steps. The cop shook his head. “Look,” he said to Oltree, my friend and lawyer (who had come to see me there), “the problem’s psychosomatic. He should do well to keep his mouth shut, or we may charge him with smuggling a weapon of mass destruction ... er ... penetration from China.”

I did not know that my cane was such a formidable instrument. But the officers, well, their words were scripture.

I was held at the police station for four hours, during which time they made some phone calls and received some more, and then they told me to go home.

I limped through the next few days, trying to salvage what remained of my self-esteem. Never before had I known what it was like to see one’s own mug shots and handcuffs-shots splashed all over the Internet. Five days after the incident, I experienced a delicious sense of relief as I discovered that the charges against me had been dropped.

Later that evening in my home, over coffee, Oltree and I were going over the technical details of a potential lawsuit when the phone rang. It was our leader, Mr. Babama, who had heard the story and who now wanted to have a chat with me and the sergeant.

On the appointed day, the leader met with us in an informal setting in his backyard. Initially I felt a bit awkward, but Mr. Babama -- bless him -- put us at ease. We all exchanged pleasantries, drank beer, talked, and had a good laugh. The sergeant and I agreed to disagree. “It is unwise,” as Gandhi said, “to be too sure of one’s own wisdom.”

That night I tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. I fought with myself the whole night.

Oltree came in at six in the morning, a sheaf of papers in hand. “I figured out the technicalities. Just sign here,” he said. I told him I was not sure I really wanted to proceed with the case. He looked hard at me for a few seconds. Then his eyes softened. My good old Oltree understood. I’d fought for freedom from anger – and won.

The next day, I walked over to the police station, and took a long look at the handcuffs they used on me. The handcuffs were a grain of sand in which I saw my whole life, the lives of my parents, and also new, joyous, harmonious lives – lives that will inherit this earth when we are gone.

Andie jerks up in her bed, the sheets wrapped around her, constricting her like a snake does before it kills its food. Her heart is still pounding from the nightmare she had just experienced, and she starts convulsing in her efforts of getting untangled from the blankets. She finally gets free from her cocoon and falls onto the floor by her bed, her breath rushing forth like air from a balloon. She hadn't even realized she'd been holding it. She lays there for a few seconds, her heart still pounding in her ears. She closes her eyes and in the next moment a thin chill crawls across her skin and raises gooseflesh. Her eyes pop open, and she flies up from off the floor like a bullet shot from a gun. She looks around, the eerie feeling still engulfing her like a hurricane in her mind. Then her eyes meet a neon green pair of eyes from the window, and a scream crawls in her throat threatening to explode from within, before she realizes that it's only a fiery auburn cat. Her breath rushes from her lungs in a thin laugh. *Only a cat.* She walks shakily over to the window and examines the cat through the glass. It looks well fed and has a lot of thick red fur that reflects the color of fire consuming a house. Its green eyes seem to shine like a light is behind them projecting the neon color out. She wonders how long it has been watching her from its position on the window sill. Perhaps all night, maybe the feeling of being watched had triggered the nightmare. She bites her lips, and her mom’s voice rings through her head: *The poor dear has nowhere to stay. We can give it a temporary home.* That’s what she always says when she comes home with a stray animal. Andie has always objected to the animals, but there was something different, special about this cat.

She opens the window and the cat sidles in, his purr vibrating her hand when she pets him. He is really soft, radiating heat. Her hand slides slowly, nervously, around his stomach, and she picks him up tentatively, not sure if he likes being held. But he does. When she pulls him to her chest he rubs his head under her chin, his whiskers tickling her neck. She chuckles quietly and walks slowly out of her room. She turns in the dark hallway and pads to her mom’s room, jumping over the creaky section of the floor. She steps into the dark room and tip-toes over to the bed, poking her mom’s shoulder. The older woman startles awake and blinks the sleep out of her eyes.

“Andie?” her mom whispers sleepily.

“Hi, mom. Guess what came to my window!” Andie says, realizing now how cool it was she found a stray instead of her mom.

“I’m guessing you found this guy,” her mom whispers in her *for-animals-only* voice the second she sees the cat. She scratches her fingers under his chin lovingly. The cat stands and walks over to Andie’s mom and rubs against her. Andie frowns. Of course, the cat loves her mom. All animals do.

“Yeah, he was outside my window.” She stands, angry. “I’m going downstairs, I can’t sleep. Night mom.”

“Uh huh, sure,” her mom says, giggling as the cat licks her cheek.
Andie backs out of the room, steps over the creaky board and slowly walks down the rickety stairs into the living room of their hundred-year-old house. She flops on the couch and closes her eyes fuming inside. Suddenly something brushes against her cheek, something soft but rough and very warm. It is skin. She gasps and jumps up. Her gaze roves around the room and lands on the cat. He is staring intently at her. She looks around the room again. Nothing. There wasn't a soul there except for her and the cat. Uneasy she walks into the kitchen. Something is missing. She ran her hand over the icy cold black and silver granite, her fingers dipping into nicks in the stone. That's when she sees it—or rather doesn't see it. On the counter is a dark spot the sun hasn't reached before because an object has always been there, the knife block. She presses her hand in the spot it used to be. The spot is strangely warmer than the rest of the counter. She jerks away and twists around. The amber cat is sitting at her feet.

"Gosh, you scared me," she whispers to the cat. She steps around it, and it jumps around and grabs her ankle in its fangs. She yells in surprise, kicking the cat away from her. She freezes when she hears the squeaky board from upstairs screech. Her mom never steps on that board for fear that she may fall through, her mom is very whimsical and superstitious. No way she would have stepped on that board. Andie steps to the doorway of the kitchen and glances up the stairs. A shadow falls across the wall. It is way too big to be her mom's. She looks back at the cat, his smile is evil. Heavy footfalls descend the stairway. Andie's heart ratchets up to a thousand miles per hour. She runs to the pantry, throwing herself into it, closing the door behind her. She swallows hard and squeezes her eyes shut. There is a meow from the other side of the door.

The feet get closer. "Good cat," the words are rough harsh. The door creaks open and in doorframe stands a gigantic man with a knife in one hand. She takes a deep breath, but he doesn't give her the chance to let her scream rip free.

One last thought crosses Andie's mind: Did I close the window?
Her

Her name is Brogan. At least that’s what I hear every morning in Art II. “Brogan Pearce,” they call. She normally does a little humming thing to help them acknowledge her presence. I don’t talk to her. She doesn’t talk to me. I don’t mind. It’s nice having someone that doesn’t know about me; someone who can’t judge me.

I can see her looking at me sometimes, but her faded blue eyes never meet mine. Her long, but seemingly gentle, fingers slide along the strings of the acoustic that’s half her size. Her shiny, straw-colored hair is tucked back behind her ears, and the speckling of freckles across her cheeks is barely visible from where I am seated across the room. She is beautiful. I want to introduce myself, but I can’t.

Her crowd is different than mine. She sits with the preps. I’ve never thought she fits in with them; she seems too sweet. I’ve never seen her talk down to anyone, and her feet are always covered in hi-tops, when the other girls wear heels.

I sit with the delinquents. They have dark make-up and the tendency to scare the freshmen, just to see them squirm. I’m the nicest one in the group. I always have to tell the kids not to worry, and my make-up usually includes brighter colors. It wasn’t my choice to be locked up. I didn’t touch the guy. That didn’t matter to my old group, though; they left me.

Here at this party, I feel equal. Nobody here has room to talk. They are doing just as much wrong as I am, sitting here with the mostly empty, red, plastic cup. In fact, they are doing more. I can see the girls with their short skirts crawling all over the guys with the extremely noticeable bumps on the crotch of their pants. Some aren’t too wasted to make it upstairs. Others are too trashed to care if people see.

I just fade into the background. I came for the music. People in this scene usually get the newest releases. My parents don’t really notice I’m gone, so I can be here as long as I wish. It’s a sort of safe haven for me—even with the risk of police appearing and the dumb jocks throwing the glass decorations their parents obviously spent the equivalency of one of my father’s paychecks on.

She seems to be in the background too. None of the guys are under her, and she isn’t talking to anyone. She keeps playing her guitar. I don’t see how she can hear it over the shrieks of partiers and beats of the song pounding out of the surrounding speakers. It doesn’t seem to faze her, though. She is in her own world. Even when she looks at me, she seems alone.

When the lights start flashing through the window, it takes two seconds to stand and run. That blue and red are too familiar. Everyone else is running too. They don’t know what it’s like to be this scared. They don’t know what it’s like to know that if they are seen in a place like this, it’s another three months of sleeping on a lumpy mattress and wearing used underwear.

This is one of the fancy homes. There are other houses everywhere. Some kids hide in them. Others are climbing into trash bins. My house is ten minutes’ drive away. I got a ride here. I have to run. There is a corn field down the road. I can hide in the clearing in the center.
Nobody else had this idea. I am alone within seconds, forging a path between yellowed stocks. Ten more paces, and I am in the center but not alone after all.

She breaks into the clearing at exactly the same time I do. A piece of a husk is caught in her hair, and the guitar is strung across her back. Her breathing is heavy, and I know she has seen me. I still want to talk to her, but my lungs sting, and I can feel the muscles in my legs twitching, begging me to sit. She throws me a blanket she had been carrying and points to the ground before pulling off her instrument. I lay down the blanket and crawl onto it.

Within a couple seconds, I can feel the warmth from her body settle a few inches from me, though my eyes are closed. Neither of us has said a word. After a few minutes, I open my eyes.

The stars are so bright, I can’t help but to gasp. I haven’t seen them for years. Between the prison and the parties till day break, I haven’t had the ability. I can hear her giggle from beside me.

“You act as though you have never seen them. They are beautiful, though, aren’t they?”

“I have seen them. It’s just... been a while.” I turn my head to look at her. She is already staring at me with the tips of her lips upturned. She is looking into my eyes.

“I heard you were in jail. They said you stabbed a guy. I’ve seen you at school. You sit with the bad kids. Is it true?” Her voice had started off strong, but the last sentence was a whisper. She wasn’t like the other people when they asked. They seemed hesitant, ready to run at a second’s notice. She is relaxed. Her hands are folded across her stomach, and the muscles in her face are eased, not forced.

“I was in jail, but I wasn’t the one who stabbed him. I took the fall for my ex.”

Her eyes closed, and I looked away. I knew this awkward moment would come. I had just confessed to being in jail. I had never imagined a conversation with her starting like this.

“You must have loved her.”

“She was my first love.” Another awkward silence follows.

“Why don’t you love her anymore?”

That was unexpected. My eyes trail back to hers. She can read me. Her eyes say she knows more than I thought she could by now. The piece of husk is still in her hair. I want to reach for it, but my shock from her question won’t let me. The memories of times with my ex come flooding into my mind. The good comes first: sitting on the beach with children’s laughter and the waves streaming into my ears, kissing her in the rain, staying up late to watch her favorite movie. Then the bad comes: Holding her while she cried about her puppy’s death, fighting over me getting too drunk, her asking me to take the blame.

“She never came to see me. She promised she would, but I never saw her. When I got out, she was married. It had been three years. I still loved her, but she had moved on and left me in her dust.”

I never talk this much. I never say this much at one time anymore. Everybody used to know my life, but since I got out I rarely talk to anyone. In less than twenty minutes, this girl knows more about my life than any other person I know.

“I knew you didn’t fit in with those kids. You’re too sweet.” She is whispering again.

“I could say the same thing about you.”

There are many silences in our conversation, but this one isn’t awkward. She seems to be picking her words. Finally she speaks.
“At my old school, you didn’t have to fit in with one group; you could be a gothic jock in the marching band. Here, you have to be chosen to have friends. The girls chose me. They looked at my outside and picked me to be their friend. I stick with them because it’s better to have fakes, than to have nobody.

“You hang with the bad crowd because they accept you. You aren’t one of them, but, like in my case, you want somebody to call ‘friend.’ The girls talk about you sometimes. They said you used to be one of them. You had longer hair and wore short skirts and skipped class, just to stand in the bathroom and perfect your make-up. You went to social events, but had a secret life too. At the parties, you would dance around, and go upstairs with the occasional guy.

“They said that when you went to jail, you committed social suicide. They couldn’t be associated with a convict, and you didn’t act the same. You had cut your hair to shoulder length, and let the bleach blonde go to natural black. You never fixed your make-up, and if it smeared, you didn’t care. You would sit at the parties, and never made fun of anyone. In my opinion, you changed for the better.”

We had both looked away from each other while she was speaking, but when she finishes, I look over at her. She still isn’t looking at me. I’m not the only one who has been stopping me from having conversations with people. People rarely talk to me. If they do, it’s to ask for a piece of paper or to see if I know the answer to questions in our homework. This girl not only gets me, she talks to me.

“I didn’t want to change. I was happy before it happened. I had friends then. You are the first person from school that has said more than eight words to me since I was freed.”

Her head finally turns. She looks into my eyes again. It amazes me how she can do it the first time we have talked, when people I’ve known for years, and used to have the ability to talk to anytime I wanted, appear to think I will hurt them if their eyes meet mine.

“If they were really friends, they would have listened and understood. You wouldn’t be alone.”

“If you think so low of them, why do you even pretend to be their friend? Why do you tell me that I am better without them, but you can be around them and not feel bad?” She has started to sound like a hypocrite, but I can still see her point. I just want to know what she says.

She sits up and picks up her guitar. The tune she starts playing is new to me. I can’t see her face, but I can tell she is nervous. It’s in her posture. “I came from somewhere different. I grew up with people who were my friends, no matter what. This place isn’t like that. I wanted to talk to you. You seemed like a good person. They chose me, though, and said you weren’t. I was scared you wouldn’t like me, and by leaving them for you, I would have nobody. You have the bad kids to sit with. I would have to sit in the bathroom stall during lunch. I didn’t want to be alone. I’m sorry. I do sound pretty hypocritical.”

“How could I not like you? I’ve had a crush on you for the past month.”

The music stops. I cover my mouth with my hand and sit up. I didn’t mean to say that. It must be a side effect of the not talking. I probably scared her. My mind races, and the silence is lasting forever. I start to get up. I can’t even look at her. I’m almost to the edge of the circle when I hear her speak. It’s barely more than a whisper.

“Don’t leave. It’s the first time I’ve gotten to talk to you.”
I turn and look at her. She is still sitting like she was, but she is looking up at me. Neither of us says anything. This conversation is too awkward. If what I had said wasn’t true, I would have kept leaving. I was enjoying time with her, though. Even back before all the stuff had happened, the only moments I got like this were spent with my ex. I don’t have to pretend around this girl, and she doesn’t judge me like everybody else does.

Finally she continues speaking.

“I have had a crush on you, too. The song I was just playing was written when I was thinking of you. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to scare you. None of the girls know, and I didn’t know if you were into this sort of thing.”

That was unexpected. Why does this conversation keep being so awkward, yet mesmerizingly perfect at the same time? It truly amazes me.

I sit by her again. “Does the song have words?”

“Yes. Do you want to hear?”

“Of course I do.”

She smiles at me. This time it is a full smile. Her teeth are perfect, and it makes her even more beautiful than before. She starts playing the song from earlier.

When she finishes, I have to remember to close my mouth. Not only was the playing perfect, but so was her singing, and the lyrics.

“Did you like it?”

I lean over and kiss her cheek. “It was the best song I have ever heard.”

She blushes. The bright red on her cheeks only makes her more beautiful. She glances over at me before looking at the ground and smiling.

“I’m glad you like it.”

She glances at her watch and stands up. The look of confusion on my face must have been clear, because she reaches her hand out in an obvious gesture to help me up.

“I was supposed to be home a half hour ago. You can walk me there, if you want. Then I can tell them you were giving me a ride and your car broke down.”

“My car is in the shop.”

I take her hand and get up. She picks up the blanket and starts rolling it up. I help her.

“That’s perfect. So you will walk me home?”

“As long as you promise to call me so I know if you are in trouble or not, and you let me give you a ride to school on Monday, even though it will be in my mother’s car.”

Her smile is genuine. She is actually happy. I might have finally done something right for the first time in a long time.

After six blocks of talking to her about the most random things: favorites, families, and hobbies, I feel like I never want this night to end. It was the most fun I have had in such a long time. I walk her all the way up to her doorstep. When she turns the key in the lock, she doesn’t push the door open. She turns and looks at me.

“Is it strange that I wish we didn’t have to say goodbye?”

I automatically think about how my parents wouldn’t even notice if I wasn’t in the house by the morning. I immediately push the thought away. We just met tonight. I wouldn’t stay if she asked, even if I wanted to.

“I know exactly what you mean.”
She leans forward and kisses me. Her lips are soft and sweet. It lasts only a moment, but it is still enough to make my heart flutter uncontrollably.

“I’ll call you in the morning.”

She walks into the house and closes the door behind her. I still can’t move. For a good five minutes, I keep staring at the door. Finally I turn and do a little dance before walking home.

Her name is Brogan. At least that’s what I hear every morning in Art II. “Brogan Pearce,” they call. She normally does a little humming thing to help them acknowledge her presence. I didn’t talk to her till tonight. She didn’t talk to me, either. I didn’t mind. It’s nice having someone that knows about me; someone that doesn’t judge me.
Jessica Driskell
Poetry
Maryville High School
Grade 12

The Pathway of War

Home: A day no family looks forward to
But every soldier has been prepared
Their orders arrive with no advanced notice
Three months left to spend together
Until my brother and his comrades are flown out
A yellow ribbon around the tree
An American flag flying in the front yard

The Opening Ceremony: Thank you all for comin’ and supportin’ our troops
It is my honor to introduce the 129th Field Unit
The men and women you see in front of you
They’re doin’ a great thing, fightin’ for our country
They’re goin’ to be gone for what seems a long time
We, their officers, will keep them safe
But it is you, their families at home, that keeps them strong

Flying East: Soldiers fill the airport waiting to depart
Saying their last goodbyes to loved ones
A little boy, no older than four, clings to his father’s leg
A mother hugs her son, unable to let go
A girl cries in the back; scared to watch her brother leave
Men and women dressed in fatigues pass through security
Three hundred sixty-five days in Kabul, Afghanistan

Overseas: A dry desert surrounded with snowy mountains
Field marches and convoys almost every day
A bomb threat puts the base on lockdown
A call home three times a month to reassure them all’s okay
A present sent on holidays was our only interaction
I never even said Hello the whole time he was gone
I feared the goodbye that followed

Flying Back: Twelve months later and the phone rings once more
Those soldiers are heading back to the States
First, well-earned rest and relaxation along the east coast
Though they’re ready to be home
A thirty day stay in New Jersey for mental evaluation
Everyone's checked out and finally released
One last flight to bring them home

**The Closing Ceremony:** Listening and cheering for the escort’s siren
   Signaling soldiers coming home
   *After a yearlong tour in Afghanistan*
   *I am proud to say everyone made it back safely*
   *I understand the stress and worry your families went through*
   *I’ve put up with these soldiers enough*
   *It’s your turn to spend time with them*

**Home Again:** Parents take off work and kids skip some school
   Trying to catch up for time spent away
   Bruises and scars, if any, go unseen
   But there’s little talk about Kabul
   And my brother seems more serious
   An American flag remains displayed with pride
   For future soldiers and their families called upon to fight
Beauty Is the Creation

Beauty is darkness turning into light
And the light of day fading into twilight.
Beauty is watching of countless twinkling stars at night
And feeling the radiance of the morning sunlight.
Beauty is enjoying the presence of birds in the sky
And watching flocks of birds migrating south, so high.
Beauty is the ocean waves crashing along the shore
And hearing the intensity of the ocean roar.
Beauty is listening to wind rustle through the oak tree leaves
As each season of autumn, winter, summer, and fall reprieve.
Beauty is the fragrance of colorful blooming flowers
And gazing at their beauty for hours.
Beauty is all of earth’s furry creatures and huge strong beasts
And how humans were made last, but not least,
Beauty is the creation in seven days and seven nights.

Shelter of Darkness

Awakened abruptly by the blasting of tornado sirens, I yelled out into darkness, “Dad! Dad! Dad!” then I heard footsteps moving quickly toward my bedroom door. The door opened, and my father appeared standing in the doorway. He yelled to me, “Nick, go downstairs and wait at the front door! Then we will go to the storm shelter together.” I jumped out of my bed, and as I ran toward the stairs, I noticed the pictures and paintings on the walls beginning to shake. As I entered the family room, I could see the lights on the ceiling fixture beginning to flicker, just like a strobe light. I bumped into furniture because of the acute darkness. This was scaring me, but I just kept moving through the kitchen area to the front door where I waited for my father.

My father grabbed my right arm and shouted, “The tornado is coming, and we have to get out of here!” As my father led the way outside to the storm shelter, I could feel the hail stones hitting my body like rocks, and the cold wet rain soaking my clothes. I stood helplessly in front of the storm shelter and watched as my father struggled to get the doors open. My father could only pry open one door. As he held it open, I walked down some stairs into the darkness of the storm shelter. I sat on the cold, damp floor and remembered that my dog JC was outside. As the door slammed shut, I said to my father “You have to get JC!” he replied, “Nick, please stay here in the shelter and wait until I return!” I sat alone in the dark shelter. I knew that there was a portable radio somewhere on the floor. I began to crawl on the floor
feeling for the portable radio. Then, I placed my hand on something slimy. I screamed out loud, “Oh, my God!” I wiped my hand on my damp pajamas and continued searching for the radio on the floor.

I noticed a small red blinking light in the corner of the shelter floor. I crawled toward it and found the power button on the radio and pushed it. There was loud static and then a man’s voice. The voice began, “This is an automated transmission sequence, a tornado is on the ground two miles east of Richmond, with 90 to 100 miles per hour winds.” Loud static and the man’s voice disappeared. Then the radio went blank; the battery was low. Holding onto the radio, I heard the storm approach because the storm shelter doors started shaking and rattling, and I ran to the doors hoping that my father would be there with my dog, JC. I tried to open both doors, but I could only get one door open. As I stepped out of the doorway, I almost fell down because the wind gust swept me off of my feet, but I held onto the door handle. I turned to look left and saw a dark-grey funnel cloud hanging low in the sky and moving toward my neighbor’s house. I watched the tornado pick up my neighbors’ house as it imploded. The house shattered into small pieces of debris and pieces of wood flew into my lawn, landing next to me on the ground. I turned to my right and saw the large oak tree being uprooted in my back yard and crashing into the swimming pool spilling out water.

As I held on the door handle, I saw my father struggling to carry JC in his arms. Dad tripped and fell to the ground. My dog flew out of my father’s arms and ran toward the shelter just like a bullet firing out of a gun. My father started yelling at me, “Get back into the shelter! Please, Nick, get back into the shelter!” JC ran into the shelter first then I flew down the stairs into the shelter’s darkness, landing on the floor next to JC. Looking up toward the doors, I watched the shelter door slam shut, and then I heard a rumbling like a train coming towards the shelter. Crashing sounds began to intensify over the top of the shelter as the doors began to rattle, and, the walls around me began to shake. I saw the ceiling of the storm shelter starting to crumble and pieces began to fall on top of me. I thought the walls were going to cave in on top of me. JC began to bark wildly, so I crawled to him and placed him in my arms to comfort him. JC started to whimper as I held him closely. Holding my dog, I whispered to him, “Everything is going to be okay!” I stared at the shelter doors, hoping that my father would appear. I waited and waited, but he never opened the door.
What exactly is it that constitutes art? Tolstoy says it’s its communicative properties – the degree to which the art invades you and how much you can relate to it. The more successful the artist is at making you feel what he or she felt at the time of the conception of the piece, the more successful the piece itself is. I agree, to an extent. Art is always more powerful if an emotional connection between the art and the viewer is created. However, no matter how much a piece can be justified from an emotional standpoint, sometimes it’s just bullshit. Harsh, yes, but true. You can converse with me for hours about how the sentimental message “Black, Roughly Painted Square” is hiding behind its simplistic unattractiveness, but in the end, I’ll still find it to be overrated and, well, simply unattractive.

I had a particularly infuriating experience with just such a piece of overblown “art” not too long ago. I remember it vividly. Viewing the student gallery on the website of one of the more famous art institutes in the country, I was contemplating putting a portfolio together, just for kicks, just to see if I had what it takes to make it into an art school so expensive and prestigious. I scrolled through alumni and current work, admiring the ingenuity – everything from photos of a girl splashing milk all over herself to a curtain made of meticulously cut-out typography lace. Art that made me feel whilst also completely quenching my aesthetic thirst. I had so much respect and admiration for the thought process of these talented students of the visual arts. Could I be this good? This moving? This careful and creative? I didn’t know. I’d have to rework my entire body of pieces. I’d have to take new photos and paint new paintings. I had to compare, maybe even attempt to best, the work I saw here.

Happily sitting in an aura of my own admiration, I clicked on the “photography” tab under the “studio art” header. I expected sheer brilliance. I expected a feeling of reverence and inferiority to wash over me, as it had during my entire experience thus far. The first couple of photos were great – exquisite uses of shapes and lines and textures. Abstract, which I never really enjoy, but good nonetheless. I continued clicking the “next” button.

Suddenly, it appeared on the screen.

The title of the piece was “Film Still in Orange.” A relatively harmless name. But the complete taken-abackness I experienced was anything but harmless. I was looking at a rectangular canvas, and printed on it was (I kid you not) a photo of the color orange. That’s all. I could barely distinguish that it was a photograph. There was no shadow. No dynamics. No focus. Just . . . orange. A canvas colored orange. My mind was completely quiet for a moment, allowing itself to comprehend and adjust to what it was seeing. Within this vast and staggering array of captured visual and emotional beauty, this outrage of an abstract piece had somehow managed to slip through the cracks. Was this art? In my head, I put it up against Tolstoy’s criteria. It made me feel nothing but frustration, and communicated nothing – absolutely nothing – but orange. For the hell of it, I compared it to my own standards of what constitutes art. Visual appeal and knowledge of design? Nope. Not unless you really liked orange.
Dynamics? Excitement? No, not particularly. Feeling? To the artist, perhaps, but certainly not to me. I could not connect to this piece. It was blowing my mind. How could this more-expensive-than-Harvard art school consider this striking and culturally relevant enough to honor with a spot in their web gallery clearly put in place to impress and humble future applicants?

I was certainly not impressed. In fact, I was so infuriately un-impressed that I made it a point to show all of my friends and get second, third, and fourth opinions. We all came to a general consensus: the piece was not communicative. It seemed shallow and hollow and lazy. So again this brought up a discussion. What constitutes art?

I am certainly concerned with free expression. If you want to make an entire canvas orange because you feel like it, then by all means, you make that canvas as orange as it can possibly be. However, whether it is art or not will always be debated. To me, “Film Still in Orange” could not be considered art. The fact that it was, by Institute standards, comparable to all of the other pieces in their gallery made me feel a little cheated and sick inside. I can create something more advanced and meaningful than that, and yet I was struggling to find a way for my own art to be considered adequate enough for this school. As Tolstoy said, “Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression.” Art needs to communicate. To create a relationship. To be an extension of our life, much like our breathing. “Film Still in Orange,” in my eyes, did none of this, and therefore is filed away in my memory banks under “Bullshit” and will forever be associated with a huge lack of artistic impression.
The End of the World

It is ten o’clock in the morning on a cool Saturday in June. The sunshine is yellow, and the air smells like cut grass and flowers. It is the most beautiful morning of the summer. It is the morning of the end of the world.

Nobody knows for sure why or how the world is going to end. But they know when. It will happen at three o’clock this afternoon. Since last night the places of worship have been overflowing with people, the devout and the agnostic, the orthodox and the atheist. They kneel in the grass and the parking lots because there is not even standing room inside the buildings.

Others, those with families, have stayed home. The youngest children do not understand, and their parents try to go about ordinary business. But all the children know there is something wrong: their fathers are grim and their mothers cry in the closets and hug them too tight. Outside, people crazed with panic sprint down the streets in an effort to escape the inescapable.

In one little house, an old man awakens. He puts on his slippers and pours himself a cup of coffee. Then he sits down at his kitchen table and looks out at the rose bushes that his wife planted before she died. He remembers how she’d go outside and water them first thing every day. She’d get down on her knees in the rich warm earth; tap the tender pink buds with gentle fingers. He sighs and picks up her old watering can, its handle worn smooth. Then he steps outside and waters the roses himself.

The old man knows that today is the end of the world, but he does not show it. Just as he has done every morning since his wife died, he makes himself the breakfast they used to share: scrambled eggs and toast and orange juice. He washes and dresses and picks up the old leather-bound book of poetry she gave him many years ago. Then he goes outside and walks for almost an hour in the warming summer afternoon. When he reaches his destination, it is already two o’clock.

His destination is an oak tree which stands in a field at the edge of town. He sits slowly in its shade, stopping as he squats down to find the place where his initials are carved in the bark. Hers are there too and a clumsily rendered heart. The old man traces it with his fingers and then sets his back to the tree and opens the book on his knees. Inside the front cover is her loopy script: “To Rick, with love from Annie.” The old man examines the curve of each letter as if he had never seen it before, as if he had not sat beneath this tree and read those words a thousand times since she died.

He turns the page and begins to read. He reads Thoreau and Longfellow and Wordsworth. He mouths the words, feeling their rhythm, tasting them almost as he used to years ago when he read them to her under this tree. He reads and reads and reads. The last hour before the end ticks by.
At two-fifty, he comes upon his favorite poem. “Whose woods these are,” he whispers, “I think I know.” Suddenly the earth beneath him gives a great heave and the tree begins to shake. A vicious wind rips through the stillness. The sky darkens, but there is still enough light to see the words. “His house is in the village, though,” the old man murmurs. “He will not see me stopping here”—there is a growl of thunder, and the sun is red against the darkness. It is two fifty-nine. “To watch his woods fill up with snow. Annie, Annie,” he calls softly, weeping, as the sky explodes in white.

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The little girl puts down the snow globe she has been shaking and watches the white particles settle on the figures inside. She has always liked this snow globe best of her whole collection. There is something beautiful and sad about the little old man with his back against the tree and a book in his hand, whiteness swirling all about him. She gazes at him for an instant more and then turns and skips outside, into the sunshine of a new day.

My Dresser

My dresser is made of wood painted a soft cream color, fluted and carved all over with those old-fashioned shell-shaped patterns never seen on furniture any more. It has three drawers and six iron drawer-pulls which look like little pieces of lace. My mother calls it “a little girl’s dresser,” but I find something charming in its incongruous anachronism among the pink “pod” chair, efficient white desk, and postmodern Lucite end table which constitute the other furniture in my room.

The top of my dresser is cluttered, sprinkled with odds and ends whose use is gone or forgotten—pencils without lead, snapped hair elastics, an empty water glass. These objects are constantly in flux, as I lose them or throw them away, but a few unprepossessing knickknacks I never discard.

One of these is a tiny wooden stand with a glass ball positioned atop it. The ball has a hole in the bottom, through which Chinese artists threaded miniscule brushes to paint pandas eating watermelons and bamboo inside. You can tell it is handmade because you can see the places around the hole where the brushes smeared little daubs of accidental color. My friend Rowena gave it to me as a gift from her trip to China when we were both small. Back then, I used to be in and out of her house every weekend. It has been a very long time now since I visited that house, but I remember it as a study in contrasts. Her grandparents—tiny, wizened people who came from China to help with the baby sister born when we were ten—liked to sit on stools by her kitchen table, cooking. Her grandmother would twist and chop a sizzling pork rope in the pan hot off the stove and serve it up later with eel and seaweed and cucumbers pickled in vinegar. Rowena’s house was filled with the odd smells of these foods and with the tinny, sibilant sounds of that utterly foreign language, Mandarin.

And yet in the same kitchen, there was a refrigerator covered with magnets from all the cities the family had visited in the United States: Minneapolis, Chicago, Detroit, D.C., Los Angeles. The mail was always stacked in a neat pile on the counter, complete with free makeup samples from Mary Kay. In the pantry, strange rice chips and the Chinese version of beef jerky jostled for space with a large bag of animal crackers and a box of microwave kettle corn.
I have always been intrigued with the way traditions flow into American culture in the lives of new immigrants. To me the process seems as delicate and difficult as using a tiny brush to paint patterns inside a glass ball, but somehow families like Rowena’s carve out a place for themselves here, find equilibrium between assimilation and isolation, walk the line between constancy and opportunity. They grow roots in the soil of this strange new world while at the same time cherishing their culture, their history, their identity.

I know all about identity. I keep a reminder of mine in a little box which also sits on top of my dresser. It is a beautiful box, covered with enameled rosebuds and doves and Jewish stars. The gold clasp opens to reveal a black velvet interior and what appears to be a rock. The rock comes from the Kotel, the last wall, the Western Wall of the ancient Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It is two thousand years old. I picked it up and bought the box on my first trip to Israel when I was six. I have been back every summer since then, reaffirming each time my connection with the land and the people.

Last summer, on our way to the Kotel, we got lost in the Old City of Jerusalem. We ended up in the Muslim Quarter just as the loudspeakers atop nearby mosques were calling the men to prayer. Politics aside, it is generally considered a bad idea to be a Jewish-American tourist wandering through the Muslim Quarter without a guide, and during the call to prayer it was simply terrifying. Hundreds of men swarmed through the tiny alley-like streets which are covered so you can’t see the sky, and in the sweating dimness we were half knocked off our feet by the jostling crowd.

We came out at last into the scorching July afternoon and found ourselves at the very place we’d been seeking: the plaza surrounding the Kotel. The Jerusalem stone, polished by the footsteps of the ages, shone like gold-tinted marble in the sun. We descended a long flight of stairs, and I put my fingers against the warm ancient wall, the wall which had waited so faithfully for the return of my people. Through a long and bitter exile the Jewish people have always cherished the vision of Jerusalem and Israel. Standing at the Kotel that day I felt thrilling through me the realization of their dream—of our dream. This is my identity, my piece of the past, my stake in the future.

I keep one other piece of the past on my dresser, a piece of a very different past which is mine all the same. It is a 1953 Lincoln copper penny. The penny has faded to a dull honey color and has sheaves of wheat on the back. I found it when I was eight years old and liked to take inventory of the money which accumulated from my allowance, diligently counting up each coin. I saved this one apart from the rest because I thought it was pretty and didn’t want to spend it. It was years before I even looked at the date.

When I did, I was shocked. Our family has few heirlooms and besides my rock from the Kotel I had never owned anything so old. As I gazed at Lincoln’s eternal profile, I wondered how this penny of the Cold War had made its way through five decades of history to me, in the new millennium. It was already old when Sputnik was launched, older still during Vietnam, practically antique when the Soviet Union fell. What journeys it must have made! What conversations it could have overheard at the cash registers where it changed hands! What exalted pockets it could have traveled in!

So, even my modest old penny has a past. It, too, has taken long journeys; it too has made its own individual experience from the turmoil of history. This penny, like each of us, has
an identity. Mine is rooted in Judaism and Israel; Rowena’s, in a rich Chinese culture. Our different identities define us, and yet as Americans our celebration of identity unites us.

The back of my penny bears the inscription, *E Pluribus Unum*: Out of many, one. Our founding fathers foresaw the power of a nation of individuals united by a common love of the freedom to stay individuals. *We* Americans all have our own unique identities, and we are different, one from another, but that is our secret strength. That is something that should make us proud.

My mom has been telling me for a long time now that I need to clean off the top of my dresser, get rid of some of that clutter. Somehow, I never get around to it.
Verity

The night glittered with hidden potential. The Nboanos were lax today and had let us off early, scurrying back and forth in preparation for some holiday. Nobody called on us during the early afternoon. Fear? Well, it did not matter to me anyway; they were a much higher class of peoples who didn’t care about my measly existence.

Soon, the early afternoon transformed into a scarlet evening and eventually a speckled, frosty night. The Sobelians (including myself) huddled close together for warmth. The hut of Nothing we lived in did not do anything but keep us in the barest scrape of misery possible for life to exist. Almost as one, we shivered. Something was not correct. The blackness of the Nothing seemed to lilt a little… Boom!

The green tentacles broke through the Nothing like it was bamboo, the weakest of all wood. Gigantic, suctioned, and fluorescent green, the tentacles were a Sobelian eating machine. Frantically, I dove to the ground, and watched with horror as all my companions were eaten alive. Like a nightmare, the tentacles slowly swept the room, but left me unscathed, fit to live the rest of my life in misery. I sank into a fitful sleep on the ectoplasm floor, all alone in this horror story of a night.

Like I feared, nobody woke me in the morning. For the first time ever, in my whole life, I slept through sunrise. When I finally brought myself to a wakeful state I was alone. Cautiously, I wandered out of the shattered Nothing, viewing the surroundings on the miserable planet that choked me into life for the first time. What I saw surprised me. Actually stepping out of my working sphere, I viewed a planet full of wonders. A forest of coral waved gently in the sunny morning. The sky glittered a radiant royal blue. The Nboanos had vanished. The Sobelians had been desecrated. A solitary tear floated down my face. I was alive, here in this beautiful planet, with no food, supplies, knowledge, or people. What was a loyal working beast to do?

At first, suicide sounded tempting. Since everyone was gone, why did I, a tiny serving wench, deserve to live? I floated around the beautiful seascape, old feelings long forgotten imploding in my turquoise body. No Sobelian had ever been out of the Nboano’s settlement, and I was sure nobody had ever had tingling sadness in their body either. Ringing with ‘emotion’ I sank onto a piece of scarlet coral. Gently I closed my silver eyes.

When I was born, I remember distinctly the eyes of my mother. Instead of the usual gray, they were bright blue. Every Sobelian had exactly the same identities, except for my mother and me. I remember that for the first two years of my life, we were an inseparable pair. Each and every moment I spent with her drew the line between me and the other “blocks” that constituted my peers. My mother gave me the one thing I could not have lived without, emotion. I loved deeper, sang sweeter, and sighed harsher than any other Sobelian I knew. Still, my mother and I were outcasts. We were different, and the Sobelians knew it. Before long, the Nboanos began to notice too. That’s when ‘Sorrow’ happened.
The night was unusually clear. Unlike the previous steamy, cloudy nights, this blackness caused a chill to reach into the pit of your soul and grab you with a chilly hand of steel. In the hut of Nothing, the Sobelians packed together for warmth. Restlessly trying to sleep, I laid apart from the others with my mother. Before long, a slow scraping sound was heard. It seemed to come from all sides of the hut; causing a feeling of dread to overcome my being. Mother was not afraid. Instead she seemed resigned, melancholy. Ever so slowly she got up and drifted out the door. I rose to follow her, but the wild look in her eye locked me in place. Like a restless spirit, she drifted outside. Loneliness spiked through me. I waited a tense moment then heard the worst sound in my life: a piercing scream. I sprinted out the door in panic only to find a Nboano sticking a spike of coral through my mother.

The emotions seemed to be sucked right out of me as a huge Sorrow spasm thrashed through my body. I doubled over and crawled back into the hut of Nothing only to join the other Sobelians in their fearful huddle. After that I was just like any other serving block. I worked, lifted, and asked no questions. At first, the Nboanos and Sobelians were wary of me and excluded me as much as possible. But over the course of two years, they seemed to forget what had happened and let me join their dead circle of servitude. My emotions slowly crept back. I took note of the Nboano's “talking” when I served, and drew differences between them and us. I formed an opinion of the back-breaking work we were forced to do. I opened my mouth and drew out a sound. That was only the day before the next clear night came, and we were ‘Attacked’.

My body jerked up in a passion. Why had this apparition come? Mother! A tsunami of pain and anger coursed through my body. I started running. Away from all this nothing, away from the cruel Nboano's evil settlement. I sprinted and let all this confusing ‘emotion’ drain out of my short-circuited mind. I ran and let my mind wander like it was supposed to. I felt the painful agony leave me...

Smack! I ran straight into a glass wall. I staggered around blindly for a minute before realizing that I was trapped. In a drunken daze I wandered around the perimeter of the enclosure and wonder what I did to deserve such harsh treatment until I realized that this wasn’t a punishment, wasn’t special treatment. This was reality.

It had to be done. I had come this far, and I had to go all the way. Sobelian was I no more; I was real. And I was breaking out. I who had no name, who had no family, who had no existence left, was breaking out. As I said before, it had to be done. Slowly the goo on my hands began to send me higher and higher up the wall of reasoning as I now called it. Ever so slowly, I began to see amazing things. The puffy clouds were really little fish. I could see the other side of the world. The sun came from a hot leaky bulb. The blue was from pigment. I was breaking out.

After a long afternoon of climbing I could see the lip of the world. What was I doing? As I neared it, my fear grew but so did my courage. Verity (as I now called myself) would go out with a bang. In about ten minutes I had reached the lip. Made of a solid, smooth, obsidian-like material this thing was unlike anything I had ever seen before. Mechanically, I looked at my world one last time. From here I could see everything, our camp, the big fish, the market, and even the octopus. Silently, I forgave it for causing me to kill myself. Slowly, I steeled my resolve and lifted my tiny body up over the edge.
I was falling, choking, landing, dying. I was part of a whole new world, and it was killing me. Sobelians were always incompetent. As the minutes dragged on, I felt the time begin to suck the life out of me. Verity’s beautiful fins made of sea green nut grass pigment began to turn the color of grey. And did I mention that I was choking? My breath came quicker and quicker as the wound at my side grew larger and larger and as I looked up for the last time I saw that my life was a giant glava [glass] tank that was a total scapegoat. I was going to die nothing but an apparition.

The little girl returned home with a smile to check on her fish tank. “I wonder how the crazy fish is today, mommy,” she murmured as she skipped up the wooden stairs. When she reached her room, a haunted scream resounded in the air. Her favorite fish was on the floor, dead. Frantically the little girl stuck it in some water and swung it back and forth to try to force some life back in it. But it was too late for that now. All at once, the little girl started choking, sobbing, crying. What had she done? This fish tank was her world and her mom’s livelihood and she had killed her greatest success. All of her successes. Now all she could do was stare blindly at her life, her hope through a translucent wall of tears.

The new world was one of shining colors, bright lights. I did not understand what was going on, I had died, I had found out the hoax. Yet here I was, staring out into a new world of hope and potential. As I slowly forced open my groggy eyes, the first thing I saw was the creature. It was a giant, towering above me and all I had ever known. But it seemed gentle and kind almost, like the mother I had loved and lost. Ever so slowly, it lowered a paper in front of my foggy gray eyes. It took me a moment to capture the words:

*How does it feel to breathe in the sea?*
*How does it feel to not know eternity?*
*How does it feel to be able to swim and not sink?*
*How does it feel to know not the cells that dwell amongst you?*
*How does it feel to die and come back to life?*

The words whipped my insides with lashes of thought. What did this mean? Did the creature write this? As confusion spun about inside my being a response came to mind. Lucky for me, before Mother had been killed, she taught me the, “basics of life,” as she put it. Still, the girl’s writing was something beyond whatever I had attempted before. My response was:

*Verity: to live is to breathe is to see is to feel is to hug is to love is to live.*

Whatever the thing was, it let out an excited screech once it read my words and rushed to get an ever bigger Creature who came with a huge grin. I could barely make out its watery words, “Valentina, you are amazing.” Once before my mom had said, “You are amazing.” Even though I had lived within the confines of a tank, had seen everybody I know die in agony, had discovered a hostile world, and had died. I had reason to live again. Verity is to live.
“Chris Loves Innocent Emily”

I proceeded to walk towards the steps, all of my insides numb and my head spinning with confusion and fear. I was moving my legs, one foot in front of the other. The one thing I feared most was for him to call out to me. I hoped he would leave things alone so I wouldn't have to face him any longer.

I had almost reached my floor when I heard his voice.

“Where you going?”

I tensed, adrenaline pumping, muscles refusing to move. His fake gentleness made me hate him even more. How did I not see this before?

... 

“Come on mom, you know I’m mature for my age! I could easily pass for thirteen, they won’t even suspect it!” I whined. I was trying to convince my mom to tell the lady in charge of the Cruise’s teen center that I was old enough to be there. Even though I was twelve I felt pretty mature, and honestly, who would want to hang out with a bunch of naive preteens that don’t get jokes and walk around without a cause. I got jokes. I was mature. They would love me.

“Alright”, my mom gave up. Yay, I thought, I’m finally going to see what it’s like to be a teen.

The first night at sea, I walked into the teen center expecting to see kids talking and laughing with extremely loud music playing in the background. Instead, there were kids being quiet and the music was playing to drown out the awkwardness. The “teen captains” began to explain the wonderful activities we were going to do. Finally, they told us we were going to play a game for “ice breaking” and handed everyone a sheet of paper.

After the ice breaker, when everyone had made a few friends, we all headed to the main deck for a game of Guitar Hero on a fifteen foot screen. I had played Guitar Hero for a few months, but I wasn't good enough to play without embarrassing myself in front of strangers. So instead I hung out by the top of the stairs with some new friends.

As I was finally beginning to be my outgoing self, a kid I hadn’t seen before walked up the stairs and stopped in front of the group I was in.

“Hey guys, my name’s Chris, I wasn’t able to make it earlier so I thought I’d introduce myself now.” He was tall with spiked, chestnut hair and a strong New York accent. He had a friendly vibe to him, but it was more than that. He seemed sweet and gentle.

“Hey, I’m Emily,” I said first and he turned to me with a big, pearly white smile. After that, everyone told him their names. Someone asked him his age and when he told us he was sixteen, I added, “That’s perfect! We have a thirteen year old, a fourteen year old, a fifteen year
old, a seventeen year old and now a sixteen year old. You should hang out with us!” There was something interesting about this city boy and I wanted to know him.

“Haha,” he laughed, “maybe later, but right now I should get to know the rest of the crew,” he winked and walked off.

The next day, we were still on board so I hung out with my family until 1:00 p.m., then left to go to the teen center for an ice cream party. When I got there we all went to a different room in the buffet that overlooked the ocean and was reserved for the teens. I sat with a girl named Amanda who was really pretty and from New York. She was sixteen but she understood me and I understood her. One of the teen captains sat with us and talked about how it was like being on a ship almost all of the time.

Suddenly, mid-conversation, I was distracted by something in my peripheral vision. I glanced toward the door and saw Chris walking in with a huge smile on his face. He came to my table to see how everyone was doing. This was when I noticed how cute he was and how everyone loved him. He wasn't afraid to be himself, and he was nice to everyone. He had the personality I wish I had, and instead of envying him, I chose to admire him.

On Monday of that week, the teens played dodge ball on the main deck. Chris was on my team and when we won, he picked me up and spun me around. The next night a bunch of the teens were at a table in the buffet sharing stories and cracking jokes. Chris sat next to me. Right when he placed his hand on my thigh, my dad walked up, gave Chris a stern look and told me to get to bed. Getting caught letting him do something he shouldn't didn't make me feel ashamed like I thought it would. It made me feel daring, and if this was what it was like being an ordinary teen, then I loved it.

Thursday night, the teen center was hosting a pool party. When I had announced that I was leaving to change into my bikini, Chris offered to take me to my room. Luckily, it was just the two of us in the elevator. A second of silence passed by before he asked me for a hug. Looking in the mirrors of the elevator's wall, I smiled with pure joy that came along with butterflies resting deep in my stomach. In the split second of pulling away, Chris' lips somehow forced themselves upon me. Not wanting my first kiss to be bad, I moved mine to match his and was surprised when he went further than I expected... way further.

“DING!” the elevator doors opened and I was suddenly released. We got off, and all I could think about was how to get away from him. Fortunately, two girls passing by began to flirt with Chris.

I proceeded to walk towards the steps, all of my insides numb, and my head spinning with confusion and fear. I was moving my legs, one foot in front of the other. The one thing I feared most was for him to call out to me. I hoped he would leave things alone so that I wouldn't have to face him any longer.

I had almost reached my floor when I heard his voice.

“Where are you going?”

I tensed, adrenaline pumping, muscles refusing to move. His fake gentleness made me hate him even more. How did I not see this before?

“To my room,” I called softly, still weak and vulnerable.

“Oh, no goodbye kiss?” Chris teased.

I thought for a moment.
“No,” I firmly replied, walked to my room, walked in, and shut the door. I went into the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. The person I saw wasn’t the person who came on this cruise, nor was she the girl she wanted to be. But isn’t this what I had wished for?

Five minutes later I went back to the party wearing the same clothes as before. Unable to talk to my sleeping parents, my little brother, or my no-where-to-be-found older brothers, I had to find Amanda.

When I got to her I told her everything and her reaction wasn’t what I wanted. She felt bad, but it obviously wasn’t that big of a deal to her. I wanted her to see how hurt I was. I thought the importance of being a teen was having that someone to hold your hand and make you smile. However, I had experienced the part everyone dreads. I was taken advantage of, blinded out of excitement that what was happening, was happening to me. Then, right when I thought it was something special, he turned around and showed his true colors.

Not too long after, I went to bed feeling sick to my stomach. The next morning was bright and I decided to cling to my dad. In line for a drink, I saw Chris coming in my direction. I was hoping he wouldn’t speak to me now that I was with my dad.

“Hey,” he winked as he passed by.

“Who was that, your boyfriend?” my dad tried to play around with me like usual.

“No, it’s not like that,” I looked at the ground. I had wanted to tell him last night immediately after our scene, but he was asleep. Although he was giving me the chance now, I just could not do it.

“Ahuh,” he acted skeptical, but definitely kidding with me.

The same night, the teens got t-shirts and signed everyone’s before saying goodbye. I avoided Chris and held onto my t-shirt unless it was being signed. In the crowd I found Amanda and hugged her goodbye.

The journey ended.

On the plane back to Missouri, I pulled my signed shirt out of my bag and smiled as I read the signatures. A signature on the bottom right corner made my smile fade away. This signature was mocking me. I got you good, it screamed at me. I wanted to take my stupidity back. I was the naive preteen I thought I wasn’t and I would never forgive myself for it. Horror filled me because, in dark blue pen, it read, “Chris Loves Innocent Emily.”
A Plea for Passion

This is not an attempt to indoctrinate. I have no desire to shove the remnants of an idea down your proverbial throat. I only wish to bring to light a very threatening and compromising fate for the spirit of adventure in my generation. Too many times have I seen an individual's dreams demolished because of one terrifying adjective: unrealistic. My case is not that of an elementary school counselor, convincing as best I can that children can grow up and be whatever they want. That self-contradicting position is already filled. There comes a point in our lives when the world that originally offered so many opportunities to explore is now telling us that this is not so. No, my plea is not for the malleable to defy the expectations of the world— we must live up to the standards set before us. This is simply the way our society works. As long as humanity lives under such constraints, this will continue until action is taken. Action must be taken against the tyranny that is the oppression of passion.

I mean no disrespect, but I am too aware to be silent. I am too aware of adults going into jobs day after day, just because of the salary. I am too aware of the world expecting us to climb the ladder of success, hopefully retiring after a jam-packed career of surgery or court victories. I am too aware of relatives expecting the “brighter” kids in the family to end up as doctors or engineers. What an awful phrase: “end up.” I don’t want to ever have to end up as anything. I want to do what I love and know that I’m happy with my decision, despite the salary. With some influences today, that is nearly impossible.

Please don’t mistake this for my own lamentations of being suppressed. I speak first and foremost for those with a dream, using this example: I heard a student speaking of his dream to play major league baseball. I love that. He’s a high school student, and he’s not afraid to speak openly about this great aspiration. He has the grades. He has the talent. This goal is completely attainable. That is, of course, until his teacher reminds him to have a few other jobs to pull out of his sleeve, because the dreams of the MLB rarely come through. I understand that in today’s economy, a backup plan is simply a suggestion from those who care about us, because we want our youth to be healthy and happy and financially stable. However, I have found that a backup plan is an equivalent to saying, "I just don’t think you’re good enough; having something less talent-based to fall back on might not be a bad idea." Preparations such as the backup plan are squelching dreams and creative explorations waiting to happen.

I feel very strongly that people with a passion can learn so much from that internal journey itself. Passion is discipline and respect, and it’s selfless. It is so many great things that offer such tools in life, and sometimes it’s never allowed to express itself because some goals just aren’t tangible or realistic. In some cases, because of a family tradition or great expectations from authority, we as humans will take the easiest way into a profession to escape the pressure of taking a risk we’ve always wanted. We associate convenience with good and pressure with bad. In order to be happy, we must be as comfortable as possible—financially comfortable, that is. Passion is terrifying. It’s full of risks, but it’s a driving force in
life when nurtured properly. Let us be terrified. The necessity is no longer for encouragement in children to pursue what they love. The encouraging guidance counselor is obsolete, now. We can acknowledge what we love and want. That, I know, is God-given. It's when the realism of society tells us otherwise, consequently, that the dream, driven by the instilled passion, is suppressed.

Look at all that a nurtured passion has to offer. I would rather live in a world of disciplined, dedicated, loving individuals living on actors' and writers' salaries than in a financially stable concrete jungle of day-in-and-day-out bloodshot eyes and therapy. There's no escaping it. If you create this world for us, we have no choice but to live in it.

I beg that the oppression ends. Tell us our dreams are unrealistic, and, even though we defy you at first, we are humbled by your toils and experience, dear World. Let passion be whatever it must be. Let it be different for each individual. Let us have a journey, an exploration. Please. Let the smart kids be athletes, and the bad singers be singers, and the chubby girls, the ballerinas. Make nothing unrealistic. It's time that we stop contradicting ourselves by instilling such hope in youth, then merely crushing checkpoints with fears of financial instability. Let us dream, and dedicate ourselves to something completely petty in your eyes. With all due respect, despite how petty it may seem, it's still our dream to live. Willy Wonka said it best (though a British poet said it first), "We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams . . . We are the movers and shakers of the world, forever, it seems." It's time to move and shake. It's time to make the music, and dream the dreams. Move and shake with us, World. Forever. We are our dreams, and we're not going away.
A NOT So Happy Halloween

The light blue eyes stared at me with intense hatred and distrust. He stood there watching every breath I took and every flinch I made, waiting for me to mess up. One false move and I would be trapped forever in this hell-hole. I felt hopeless and angry. No one was going to believe me! There was no point to try and defend myself. I could feel the Chief’s hot sticky breath on my neck and smell the black coffee surround my pale defiant face. “I know you did it. I know you killed her!” yelled the balding old man, slamming his short chubby fingers on the stainless steel table. I refused to make a reaction or remark; that’s what he wanted, what he needed. I knew for a fact he had nothing on me. “Not gonna talk, huh? Fine! But if you’re not the murderer, then you just sitting here giving me attitude is letting the real one walk. Did you even love her?” His words cut through my tough exterior like glass, shattering what was left of me. I thought of Jolie for the first time since Halloween night. The more I thought about her, the more I realized I needed to swallow my pride and tell her story. I looked right up at the tall stalky man, focusing on his beer belly as I began her horrid story.

It was October 31, 2008, Halloween night, and I was driving five hours to Rolla to pick up the girl of my dreams. Jolie was a beautiful Greek goddess with long wavy mocha locks that flowed across her heart-shaped face. When I gazed into her caramel almond eyes, I swear my heart skipped a beat every time. Jolie and I had been best friends for eight years; we had been boyfriend and girlfriend for three years. Then in September of our junior year, she was forced to move to Rolla with her mom Tracy and her step-father Paul. We both tried to visit each other as much as we possibly could throughout our junior year, but with the distance, we only saw each other two days in the whole year. It killed us to not be connected at the hip. Our frequent phone calls and texting were soon not enough; we desperately needed to see each other. So during our senior year, I planned a great date to show her that no matter how many miles of road separated us, we could make our relationship work. I wanted so badly to show her that we could be more than just friends, that nothing could ever split us. My voice cracked on the last sentence, and my eyesight began to get foggy. I used to tell myself that the day anything weaseled its way between me and my girl, would be the day pigs fly. If I looked outside right now, I wouldn’t be surprised to see a pig in the sky, flying to its heart’s content. “Soo…? Where did you take her for your date?” pestered the impatient cop. I took a moment to recollect my emotions and pick my broken heart off the table before I continued.

I decided to take her to a creepy, abandoned, corn maze down in Rolla. I found it on the web. It was only sixty miles from her home on Maple Drive. It used to be called Dave’s Corn Maze when it was open. “I can’t believe you took her to that ratty, horrible, rundown corn maze! Did you not think something might happen to her there?” the chief grunted. I know it doesn’t sound like a good first date at all. It wasn’t romantic or sentimental, but trust me, Jolie loved everything Halloween and spooky. It was the perfect date for her. “Hmm,” he replied, I knew he still thought I was crazy for taking her to this corn maze. It was obvious he didn’t know
Jolie well; she loved to get scared and killed for the adrenaline rush she got from it. Plus this scary corn maze gave me the perfect chance to be the big, manly protector, with her holding on to my arm for dear life. “So, your manly ego is more important than her life?” he huffed. I would have given anything to take her place right now. I was more of a scaredy cat than she ever was, but I was determined to make this the best first date of her life. Even if it meant me being scared out of my wits, all I cared about was her having fun and being happy. This was the first time he stared right at me, not in anger or disbelief, but in trust. He could see and feel the pain I felt. It was plastered like cement on my face. I held his gaze until I saw the sympathy come into his eyes. My eyes flashed down, for I was not the one who deserved sympathy.

As I was driving down the curvy, dark, empty roads leading to her large home, I thought about how perfect Jolie was for me. She was the nicest person, funny as a clown, and always there for me. Her Elvis impression was pure genius and could always brighten my day. Her jaw-dropping smile was brighter than any star in the night sky. I absolutely adored everything about this girl. As I stopped at an intersection, my stomach began doing flips, for I was minutes away from Jolie’s yellow colonial style house and seeing the love of my life. I pulled up my forest green, Ram truck into her gravel driveway. I saw her running out of her front door to give me a huge bear hug. The smell of sweet roses filled my nose, and her soft body wrapped around me like a glove. She was wearing the snow white turtleneck her mother had bought her for her sixteenth birthday and the golden heart-locket I had given her before she left for Rolla. Her hair twisted and turned around her lovely face, and her black scarf blew in the wind. “You look gorgeous. You ready for our date, hun?” I asked. I couldn’t take my eyes off her stunning face, the face I had memorized so well. “Thanks! And YES! I’m so excited. I missed you a lot. My ’rents want me back by twelve-thirty, lame, I know. I told them we were going to catch a film and not to go see some abandoned maze. I didn’t want them to worry. You know my mom is such a worry-wart!” Jolie said planting a small delicate kiss on my check. “You idiot! How could you not tell her parents!” hissed the male cop, trust retreating from his eyes. I wasn’t comfortable with her parents not knowing where we would be. I hate deceiving people anyway, but I hadn’t seen Jolie in months. I couldn’t bear wasting my time with her arguing. I pulled the left silver door handle and opened the door for Jolie, and she jumped up and into the warm truck. “Then what?” asked the cop, clearly upset at my answer.

After thirty minutes of catching up, reminiscing about old times, laughing, and making out we approached the lonely corn maze. The field was covered in a blanket of darkness and an old, half torn-down barn with chipping maroon paint tilted by the side of the corn stalks. The smell of wet hay filled the air with a musty stench. “Omg! This is sooo creepy. It’s perfect Adam! Let’s go!” Jolie slapped my arm. I soon felt worry wash over my entire body. Something felt weird about this place; something was off, more than the creepiness or scary atmosphere. “Adam...? Come on! You’re not going to just sit there are you?” she playfully teased. “No, I’m coming. It’s just not how I...how I pictured it...” Jolie jumped out of the car and began sprinting towards the spidery field. Ignoring my instincts, I slammed the car door behind me, forgetting my keys and our cell phones on the leather seats. “Now you are the king of stupid! Why in the world would you leave your phones and keys!? Why didn’t you turn the truck around Adam! You could have saved her life.” Disappointment settled into the cop’s eyes as he stared at me. His burning eyes killed me. If only I had turned the truck around, if only I had been able to say no to her, if only I didn’t love her as much. I would have told her parents; we would have gone
to the movies. All the regrets drowned me in sorrow, and only the need for the story to be told could bring me out. I convinced myself I would have time later to wonder about the “what if’s.” Right now though, I couldn’t afford them. I gazed blankly at the ground as I finished her story.

I raced after Jolie, listening to her small footsteps race through all the corn. The small pitter patter of her run was getting farther and farther away. “Try to catch me!” yelled Jolie. I could barely keep up. I decided to hide in between the corn stalks. Knowing that when she realized I was not behind her anymore, she would come back searching for me. I would then jump out and attack her with a massive hug and smooch. I had terribly missed kissing and hugging her while she was in Rolla. So, there I was in the corn as quiet as a corpse waiting for my prey to come, when I heard a blood curling scream similar to the ones in horror movies. At first, I thought Jolie must be playing some practical joke on me. Then I heard that awful, vomit producing sound again, and soon after it, the thud of something hitting the cold muddy ground hard. As I remembered her scream, I felt the vomit coming up my tight raw throat. I couldn’t stop it on its tracks up to my mouth, and soon the officer was covered in the nasty chunks. A flash of disgust and then sickness reigned his face. He excused himself to change, before placing a small paper cup of water before me, reminding me to relax. My throat felt as if someone had put a knife down it, but I refused to drink the water. I deserved to be in pain. I could tell from that scream that Jolie had been in a lot of pain before her death. The door opened, and the officer came back into the investigation room. “Can you go on?” he stated, rather than asking, gazing at the still full cup. “You said you heard her scream, then what?” I gazed into the pool of water surrounded by the off-white rim and began to retell the horrific scene.

Before I could even breathe again or go out to find Jolie, I saw a thin man strolling through the corn maze. With light blue faded jean overalls on and a red and black plaid shirt underneath them, he wore a straw hat over his thin, straw colored hair. His nose was jagged and pointy and his crow eyes small and beady. His teeth were butter popcorn yellow, and were more crooked and slanted then the leaning tower of Pisa. In his long, thin, snow-white fingers, he flipped a bloody kitchen knife over and over. Then he stumbled through the maze, across the small dirt road, and into the trees across it. The cop stared at the cup in silence. I wasn’t sure if this was because he remembered the man or if he was just being polite. This silence gave me strength, and I continued.

I couldn’t control the tsunami-sized wave of emotion that hit me after the man left. I knew right then and there that Jolie was dead. I sprinted one hundred feet from where I was and saw Jolie’s scarf stuck on a stalk of corn. I carefully stepped three more feet and saw her. Her ghost-like face was covered in mud; her fingers were gripping her locket around her neck in a death grip. The beautiful caramel eyes that use to make my heart jump were now lifeless and distant, her soft lips cold. She had been brutally stabbed, three hits to the chest and once more in her abdomen. A crimson red covered her toasted almond skin, and her turtleneck was soaked with her own blood. I crashed into the ground as hard as a plane crashing from the heavens and began sobbing uncontrollably. I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t even bear to leave her and retrieve my cell to call the police. I sat there cradling her in my arms, holding her tight to my chest. Rubbing her hair out of her face, I told her how sorry I was and how much I loved her; then I heard it, the snap of a twig inches away from us. My neck snapped up to see what would disturb us at a time like this, to see the thin frame of the man. He stood there, his eyes full of
joy, his small goblin-like hands holding the dripping kitchen knife. I wasn't scared of him or his knife; I had already lost Jolie. The only thing I could live for now was to kill the bastard who took her from me. I took off my jacket and laid it under Jolie, then stood up to face the demon that forever separated me from my girl. As I glared at him, he let out a small laugh looking down at Jolie. Then, I tackled him to the ground in one swift movement; my adrenaline rushed through every vein in my body, all my anger radiated through my muscles. I reached for the weapon and tossed it like a football across the field, blood splattering all over. Sitting over Satan himself, I began throwing punches left and right. I was going to beat this man dead if it was the last thing I did. When I saw his bloody lip, broken nose, and black eyes, I thought I would feel better, but it couldn't block the pain I felt. I was so crazy with anger that I barely noticed the sirens going off or the flashing lights.

Men started grabbing me and ripping me off the old man, but none of them could keep me away from him. I ran at him like a lion about to pounce on its prey; my eyes full of fury. I began kicking, scratching, and clawing at this devil. Then from the corner of my eye, I saw a police officer take out his Taser and shoot me. I don't remember much else about that night.

"Ah, I remember. And I had to shoot you, boy; you were insane, and we didn't know who the real killer was." How could you not know it was him? "You know as cops, we have to double check everything; we can't assume anything. Plus, you had blood splattered on your shirt, boy. Added to the way you were going at it, the old man would have been dead soon, the only eye-witness." I sat at the table for a moment processing what he had just said, wondering if he believed me now that I wasn't the killer. He looked down at me and then said, "Don't worry boy, while I was cleaning the vomit off my shirt, the old man, Roger, had just been released from intensive care. We brought him in for questioning, and he admitted to everything. He told us he planned to dress up as a scarecrow, hide in the field, and kill people who went there for Halloween. I didn't tell you before because I still needed to do a report on your alibi. He is going to go to jail for life, or worse, get the death sentence. So you're free boy, you can leave this place any time you want."

This should have eased my anger, softened my sorrow, and comforted my guilt about not protecting Jolie better, but it didn't. I still regret so much of what happened that night, and it will forever haunt me. I should have listened to my instincts and not doubted my gut feeling. If I could go back in time, I would make sure Jolie was nowhere close to this horrible man. I promise you: I would have made sure he never harmed her or anyone else in that lonely corn maze. I wouldn't be sitting under this hot lamp, spilling my guts out to an over-aged cop. If only...
“Fluidity” and “Sauntering”

Who am I?—To be marked by a clock—
whose perpetual indifference spins
and detracts from my mortality.
I gasp—cling—for—to—
that which had kept me spry—kept me breathing—
kept me for the Dream.
Now—I am left—wondering: What is right?
And wandering. An aberration. An apparition
of myself—and all whose animus had been—
or is—or will be—lifeless.
Sauntering, I matched my gait
with the cadence of ebbing scapes,
As soft rain, summer wind,
whispered from the trees, and recalled the events of my childhood.
Songs I once sang came again,
mellifluous and flowing—through
my own self and our conglomerate past.
For I was so long in this outer brightness—
where prosperity means contentment—
that I missed the growth of myself;
and when, frightened and disillusioned, I fled away
to be amongst dreamers, I hardly recognized the hues of living.
The shadows of walls and of uncounted journeys
crossed my path and enticed me to contemplate
the tenderness of my solitude:
Part of a human experience,
not my own,
but of the world.
But the winter of my discontent and the fallacy of spring’s promise
echoed in my step—
and drew me in—to taste of the fruitlessness
of living in one’s past
and of reviving those nestled near the heart of the good earth.
I continued until my path turned into the dark,
and death allotted me no time to consider such matters.
Creatue of the Pond

I am the love of all people,
The envy of my peers.
My heart often weeps for those beneath me.
Upon my entrance to the welcoming halls of a mundane education,
How often am I greeted with the sounds of derision?
The other children's smirks collectively directed towards me—
As, naturally, my aura brings cheer.
Creature of the pond, large in your size,
This must be the case,
As I have wished upon the stars of outer nebulae wide,
Begging,
Begging that this be the case.

I sit, oddly perplexed in the hectic cafeteria room.
What an honor I bestow upon the lowly—
Granting them the beauty of my presence.
Albeit, my dining is spent unaccompanied.

What causes, I have considered, such an opportunity to be squandered
By the ones who should worship my feet.
Am I at fault, freckled creature of the pond?
Ha! Certainly not
How dare I doubt my magnificence?!
My presence like fire,
Undoubtedly, a grand marvel to behold.
Yet, too close, and someone may be engulfed.
I am the humble star as I make haste towards my classes,
Skillfully maneuvering to avoid those of lesser stature.
Yet, my attempts are regularly thwarted,
As many tend to pursue me to the point of near obsession.
Like the glare of a blazing sun upon the foliage of strong oaks,
I am helpless to escape them, and only the presence of my physical being
Can quell their mad cravings.
In their efforts to touch the splendor of my essence,
A group of four or five
Leave me bewildered in pain.
Most certainly confused in the chaos of the crowd,
More adoring fans that aggregate around us,
They must have mistaken me for a ravenous admirer,
As they claw and strike—
Each blow, I assure myself,
Intended for another.

*Would you not agree, foul creature of the pond?*
*A mistake it was, I am sure.*
With the crowd finely thinning, the school bell sounds
sending them into a flurry.
They make their way into the building,
The sounds of their footsteps hushed by competing laughs of pleasure.
As I lie there,
Basking in the warmth of my own blood,
A smirk overtakes my face.
Oh, how this has been the story of my life.
Ignored by the girl of my dreams,
Clearly for her feelings of inadequacies—
As none are truly deserving of me.

*I sleep well knowing this to be so, pale creature.*
*I sleep all too well believing it is so.*
How I am hunted by the lowly star jocks—
The intimidation they must feel fuels their rage.

*Oh! I entreat, hideous creature of the pond,*
*Let this fact speak true to all.*
So often is my name falsely accused and maligned—
Those envious will do all they can to tarnish me.

*Please, meek creature, assure me of its certainty,*
*For I fear my world is ripping at the seams.*

For years, I have inquired how any human could be loved so fiercely,
Adored by so many and envied by all.
I've determined it is simply not possible.

I am of another world.
Of gods that walk among men,
Of kings condemned to peasants.
Like Hercules, I will face my labors.

Wielding a club of vindication and deeply adorned in truth,
Shall I be revered as divine as is my destiny?

Creature of the Pond, I know not why you don my visage,

*But as I stare down into the murky waters*
*All is made clear.*

*Yours is the hideous face they see,*
*You, creature of my misery, are me.*

*May we abandon this life that blurs our sight?*

May our corpses be left to wither on the banks of this reflective pool?

*Let us meet again in the world of gods,*
*Where everyone is seen as divine.*
Where I can finally become the idol
That I have always played so well.
Dying Love

This unbearable feeling kills my insides. Sitting in this dark, cold room. Seeing pictures of you and me in my mind makes my heart sink. Without your love, I have no reason for existing. Living in this lonely world all by myself is a drag. When I lost you I felt like my soul was ripped out.

Writing all these thoughts down makes me realize I have something to live for. I can express my emotions through my writing. Writing is mostly what I have been doing since you left. It makes me feel so good about myself. I always look forward to my writing because I know I can come home and work on something.

Without you here kills me. You never left me alone like this before. I won’t ever find someone else. Why did that drunk driver have to hit on our way home? Why did he have to hit you on your side? Now we are sitting here in this cold hospital. The saddest part about it is that I am alive. You are right beside me. You look cold and lifeless.

I will miss you; I know I won’t ever find someone else like you. I never even really told you what I felt for you. I was going to tell you that night of the car accident. I was going to tell you, that after nine months of being with you, I realized you were the one I wanted to be with for the rest of my life.

You always were the one for me. You still are. No one on this earth will ever replace you. I love you, and that is all that matters. I will take this to my grave.

Dearest Love,

Maria
The school year had just started: new clothes, fresh notebooks, different teachers, stress over assignments, and all. While I was glad to get back into an academic routine, I also wanted to enjoy the languor of the evening. I could not avoid the homework that lay unfinished on my desk, but I could take it somewhere else. I pondered this for a moment, finally reaching a conclusion. Decidedly, I picked up my homework and walked out the door, and ten minutes later, I found myself in front of the town’s public library.

I walked inside, eager to finally have the luxury of a peaceful environment. The scent of ancient pages washed over me like waves on beach, washing away the day’s frustrations. I slipped through the quiet atmosphere, walking past a table strewn with various unoccupied backpacks, lunch boxes, and textbooks. I made my way through this clutter to the chairs beyond it, stepping over yet another unattended backpack before sitting down. Across from me sat a woman who, at first glance, seemed to be your average middle-aged bookworm. Deeply involved in what she was reading, her finger scanned the page as she analyzed it closely. As I settled myself into the chair, her eyes immediately strayed from the text and met mine. They were warm and expectant, and I could not help but smile as a slight grin appeared on her face. Greeting me with a soft, high pitched voice, her tone held undeniable sincerity. I replied, and she paused for a few seconds before going back to what she had been reading.

Glancing down at my homework, I realized the need to procrastinate for just a few minutes longer and enjoyed the setting.

I paused for a moment, taking in the surroundings. Seemingly endless rows of books stood to my right, and a small children’s book room was on the left. The area of padded chairs and the table at which I sat was nestled closely but comfortably between the two. I felt as if I could spend weeks in this spot, completely content. After taking an exaggerated but sufficient break before beginning my assignment, I finally pulled out my calculator and opened my textbook. Minutes slowly passed, and the numbers in my notebook seemed to grow more complex with every attempt to make sense of them. As I stumbled through each daunting equation, my attention was gradually drawn from my notebook to the woman across from me. She was still dissecting her reading material intricately, but I noticed something peculiar. While she was reading, she had taken up the habit of whispering, I assumed, for further engagement in the text. I found this strange, but effective nevertheless. After a few minutes, she looked around as if giving her mind a quick rest. Her voice nearly startled me, and I looked up to find her beaming at the scattered arrangement of numbers in my notebook.

“It’s good that you do your work,” she pointed out, her head nodding towards my notebook. “It’s important that you do well in school.”

I agreed with her, smiling, and her head soon lowered to continue her reading, her face still glowing.

It wasn’t long before I met the owners of the numerous backpacks setting by the table behind me. They made their way over to the table in a form that was anything but single-file, and most of them sat down to work. Pages turned, and books thudded onto the table as they
began to carry out their good intentions. However, this didn't last for long; soon, books were slamming shut, and chattering was erupting as the idea of doing their work became stale. They became increasingly louder and troublesome as all children do when given no other entertainment but the company of others. The woman across from me seemed to be paying as close attention to their actions as I was, yet her eyes remained fixed on the text. Her whispering continued, and she looked up every now and then, towards them, then towards me, as if she was checking on us.

After about fifteen minutes of the children’s unceasing distraction, the lady checked her watch and began putting her book into her bag. She stood up hesitantly, as if she was unsure if she really wanted to leave, and began walking towards the door. After only a couple steps, she stopped and began searching through her bag. I continued to do my assignment, paying attention to it with about half my brain and leaving the other half to my surroundings, as I had been doing all along. Moments later, her soft, high-pitched voice drew my attention towards her outstretched hand. It held a small, plastic coin.

“You can have this if you want,” she said quietly. Her eyes strayed to the corners of the room, and she went on. “You can pass it on to someone else, or you can keep it.” As she gently pressed the coin into my hand, her eyes finally centered and met mine. I thanked her, and she paused before turning to leave. “God bless you,” she whispered.

I was left in utter amazement. This woman had never seen me before, and yet, I felt like I had known her for years. Turning the coin over in my hand, I was almost brought to tears. It was light and had a silver-colored coating, and my eyes were drawn to its face, which read “Where will you spend eternity?” Curiosity prompted me to flip it over, and the other side read “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Intrigued by the impact this well-known quote had over me, I paused for a moment. The table of children continued to chatter behind me, seemingly in slow motion, and I simply sat there in an attempt to let my brain catch up with me. This woman had unknowingly given me more than any library or peaceful setting could have given me that day. She had given me hope, security, inspiration, all in one little coin. Through her actions, I was able to dip my oar into the river of life and move forward instead of letting the wind blow me toward the murky waters of uncertainty and frustration.

After several dead, silent minutes, I pulled out my notebook and turned to a clean page. My insides were bursting with emotion, and I needed to turn them into words. I needed a release. Minutes passed by slowly, painfully, until I felt as if I would explode. Finally, two sentences flowed onto the paper: “The ability to affect someone’s life doesn’t lie in one’s ideas, one’s logic, or even one’s example. It lies in their direct actions toward another person.” Satisfied, I got up, walked past the table which was still occupied by the bickering children, and walked back out the same door I had entered just an hour before thinking that what I needed was a peaceful environment. Walking through it this time, I knew that what I had really needed was hope. I needed that woman to show me that I wasn’t alone.

This woman chose to take action. She didn’t simply expect me to follow her example and hope I picked up on her values. She had courage. Because of her bravery, I was able to look at the bigger picture and attack life in the same way she did. By approaching me, a total stranger, and attempting to make a difference, she gave me inspiration in its purest form: through action.
The Secret behind the Obvious

Inspiring new life from long barren and empty minds,
Inside each student, great potential a teacher finds.
Carefully molded and shaped is the future of this talent,
Each grueling assignment purposeful in every line of its content.
And so closely watched is the vacant mind as it starts to fill,
A great change taking place as it constructs every new skill.

A unique gift put to use in the best possible way,
A teacher’s touch can bring new light into anyone’s day.
Indeed, a special person it takes to fulfill this position,
And skill lies with every aspect of completing this great mission.
A teacher does much more for students than help them learn and grow.
She helps them make a difference wherever they may go.

Among all the lessons, purpose the student may not find,
But the best for each student a teacher has in mind.
Its effects unknowingly imprinted in their lives,
In the end, each and every student is able to thrive.
For a teacher is not simply an educator of facts,
But rather an interpreter of brilliance.

Fourteen Minutes Left

Against the walls reverberates twenty little voices.
It’s the first day of kindergarten, and each rejoices.
Their whole day’s work is coloring inside the lines,
But for some in this project, interest they do not find.
From this comes the tapping of the crayon upon the desk.
Its rapping is silenced, but their minds cannot rest.
Soon they are absorbed in the circle hanging on the wall,
The unfamiliar numbers still too new to recall.
Carefully they listen to its ticking and its tocking,
And all the while, their crayons they cannot keep from knocking.
As stupefied they are as a miner discovering gold,
And again the tapping begins, despite what they were told.
From the other students, their attention its beat does draw,
And the classroom turns to jungle while the teacher stands in awe.

All around the classroom, not even a whisper is heard,
And the student’s boredom worsens with writing each word.
From this comes the tapping of the pencil upon his desk,
And soon to everyone around, it becomes quite a pest.
The tapping ends, and he looks to the clock on the wall,
The hands slowly ticking as he watches them rise and fall.
He wills them to move faster, but even still they persist,
And the same urge out of boredom, he simply can’t resist.
A sharp tip and a dull thud ring out through the soundless room,
And only until the noise is stopped can their work they resume.
Yet again he is left to spend his time watching the clock,
For no pencil he has to tap to the tick and the tock.
He can think of no reason for this bizarre confinement,
Only that the teacher must want to finish his assignment.

In the dark of night, intently, she sits while writing,
Words flowing onto paper, with only a lamp for lighting.
Eventually the stream of words comes to an end,
And with the blank space in her mind she does fiercely contend.
From this comes the tap of the pen upon her notebook,
Hoping that its distraction will bring a new outlook.
Nervously, she glances up at the dimly lighted clock,
Her time slowly fading as she listens to its tick and tock.
Its rhythm a lullaby that slyly wills her to sleep,
But its hypnotic hold on her for long it does not keep.
For soon comes the pen onto the notebook with a pound,
Her mind now awakening to the clash of its sharp sound.
But soon of it she tires while it fades into the distance,
And her mind lays to rest in spite of all her resistance.
Shooter

“Ready?” James asked Scott as he finished packing his equipment.

“Yeah,” Scott replied. Scott and James had been asked by the president, John Kennedy, to assassinate a drug dealer by the name of Pablo Sierra. He was in charge of drug cartel with a base on the mountain named Aconcagua in the Andes Mountains. Sierra has dealt drugs all over South America, Central America, and lately in the U.S.

As Scott and James approached their drop zone the pilot said, “We’re going to drop lower.” Just then, an AA gun mounted on the side of the mountain shot at their plane. A shell met its mark and tore off half of the left wing.

The co-pilot screamed, “Oh my God! We’re hit, we’re hit! Going down!”

“Grab on to something,” commanded Scott as he and James held onto the seats.

The plane spun out of control and rammed against the side of the mountain. Scott and James were thrown out of the plane into the snow-capped mountains of the Andes. Scott was thrown against the rock wall of the mountain and fell into the snow below.

Scott looked around, trying to gain his senses back. He was dazed from being thrown around so much. Searching around, he saw James lying motionless next to a ledge. Scott crawled over to the other man and dragged him away from the ledge.

“James,” he said, “James, wake up.” James slowly opened his eyes.

“Get up,” Scott told James as he lifted him. Every bone in his body told him to lie down again as he stood, but he had his orders.

Scott explained, “The base isn’t far.” No one had checked the plane for survivors—there was no need—but maybe it had a couple of guns. “The plane is to the right. Get what supplies you can and get back here quick, before a search party comes.”

James and Scott traveled to the cartel’s base armed with silenced Commando assault rifles and silenced ASP handguns. They arrived at the base in a couple of hours.

Scott said, “Alright, find Sierra and get out.”

James nodded in agreement. The two moved to the edge of the tree line. Two armed guards were patrolling the entrance to the drug cartel’s base.

“We’ll have to take them out at the same time,” said James. “On three. One, two, three.” The two guards dropped as the guns emitted a cough as the bullets pierced their skin.

“Hurry,” said Scott, “hide the bodies.” They brought the bodies inside the tree line. The two snuck into the base and hid behind a building in the complex, sliding around the left side of the building and slithering through the shadows. People were everywhere. Some armed. Some not. Either way they couldn’t be caught. At last, the two spotted the target building in the distance. Sierra is in there, thought Scott, and we’re going to take him down.

James unpacked the binoculars and scanned through the windows.
“He’s on the fourth floor, three rooms to the right.” Scott and James stacked up near the bottom door, and Scott quietly opened it. A guard was asleep in a chair near a desk cluttered with documents.

“I’ll do it,” volunteered James. He stalked up behind the guard and stabbed him in the chest after covering his mouth. The soldiers made their way upstairs with little contact with the enemy. Finally, they reached the fourth floor.

“Breach and clear each room silently,” Scott told James. Scott pulled back the door, and three enemies dropped as four bullets slid through the air and killed them. The group moved on to the next door.

“Same thing,” said Scott. He pulled back the door. Empty. No one was in the room.

“This is for all the money,” said James as Scott pulled back the door. Four armed guards just happened to be facing the door as Scott opened it. James popped two of them before he had to take cover behind the wall. Sierra dashed out a fire escape at the right side of the room as the guards handled Scott and James, just like any coward would.

“Dang it! We need to catch him. James, handle these guys. Meet me at the rally point. E.T.A. three minutes. It won’t take long for the whole base to figure out we’re here,” ordered Scott as he dodged enemy bullets and dove out the door. He jumped down the stairs and turned around the corner. Sierra was trapped on the edge of a cliff, out of business.

Scott pulled out his ASP. “It’s over. Nowhere to run.” He aimed through sights and lost his balance just as he shot. He started to hear a deep rumbling noise. Scott turned around and saw an avalanche roar down right behind them. Both Sierra and Scott started towards the edge of the cliff. Ahead of Scott, Sierra stopped and glanced down at the sheer cliff in front of him. Scott didn’t stop. He leapt as far as he could away from the side of the cliff just as the avalanche swept across the ledge, taking Sierra off the side of the mountain. Scott pulled the string on his pack and out exploded a parachute (just in case, he had insisted) and drifted down, down, down, feeling the wind bite his frost-bitten face. He glided down to an armored helicopter and, as soon as his feet hit the ground, rushed to the chopper. He found James sitting on the first seat on the left.

“After that, I could need some time at home,” joked James, as they took off. Scott laughed, “Yeah, me too.”
Time

She’s drunk.
He drinks more, and now he’s drunk again,
   Annoyed, hateful, and provoked.
He’s not going to stop till he gets his way.
   I become impassioned and turbulent,
I will not allow what I know will happen—
   Not tonight, not today, not ever again.

   As I sit heroic and disturbed,
   I watch his every move.
   His annoying way of showing her,
   His love and his pain.

   As I sit in the living room alone,
   Listening to the echo of the thoughts they verbalize,
   I become offended.
   I become embarrassed,
   Mortified, and ashamed.
   More echoes pierce my ears
   As they go on,
   As he slowly breaks her pride,
   Her womanhood.

She expects me to sit here and listen to the harsh,
   Mind blowing words that fill his mouth
   With hateful names,
   Screaming, yelling.
   And more pain.

   As I defend her she stands strong,
   Strong by his side.
   She always goes back,
   Back to him.
   He has the control.

I can’t take it anymore.
   I fight,
I fight for her,
For her safety.
She pulls me away.

It’s time to choose
Choose now.

As time lapses, I close my eyes
And listen to the vibrations.
My mind goes blank.
I listen to that one,
That one touch,
That one feeling, that one idea that will
Set me off.

It begins in the kitchen and ends right here.
The one touch begins,
As she cries,
My teeth compress;
I start to stand.
My rage building,
I begin

Yelling,
Shoving.
She gets hit once, twice, and then again.

I freeze as if paralyzed from the neck down.
I snap.
I stand.
I stand in his cowardly face.

My heart drops,
And I begin to end these moments of time.
The streets of Toronto flashed past in streams of bursting light and color. Tucking my chin into my hand, I leaned against the armrest to peer out the window. The city beyond the glass overwhelmed me with its bustling activity; throngs of people were everywhere. I caught fleeting glances of people hurrying down the streets before they slipped past my view: high-heeled women chattering with multiple bags in arm, a tattooed man with a little girl high on his shoulders, a high-school couple walking hand-in-hand, an elderly lady waiting at a bus stop.

The street car we rode rumbled down the road, clattering noisily along its tracks, streaking past the traffic of honking cars. Skyscrapers loomed overhead, high enough to graze the cloudy sky. Countless street shops and vendors slipped in and out of sight, flashing bizarre names like: Lemon Grass, The Mad Italian, Elegant Garage Sale, Second Cup, and Bump to Baby to Tot.

My cousins, native inhabitants of the city, were unfazed by their surroundings, tuning out with their mp3’s and cell phones. On the other hand, my suburban siblings and I gawked at the sights beyond our windows, snapping pictures and pointing enthusiastically like the ignorant tourists we were, while the other passengers conveniently ignored us.

“Look! That guy has a purple Mohawk!”
“Oh, there’s another Vietnamese noodle place! Let’s go try some!”
“Hey! I found a mime!”
“What’s a ‘boulangerie’?”
“Hey guys, look at the camera!”

The street car finally drew to our stop in Chinatown. It was during work hours on a weekday, yet the streets were still full of liveliness and activity. Tiny older women sat under shade selling their vegetables while youngsters ran wild through the streets. A man with a thick accent was calling out the items on his menu. Huge groups waited impatiently for the walking signal light to change.

We were hustled and jostled along with the current of the crowd, aware only of the direction we were heading. A variety of smells bombarded me: fresh bread from the bakery, cheap perfume wafting off of someone’s hair, the horrifying reek of dumpsters and city pollution. Pigeons wandered freely through the streets, indifferent to the close proximity to the human passerby. Deciding where to fixate my eyes was difficult: at the swarming diverse crowd surrounding me, the towering heights above, or the layer of gunk below my feet.

As we crossed the street, I saw him.

At first glance, he was seated on a messy pile of newspapers before an electronic keyboard at the corner of the intersection. When the next wave of people hit the sidewalk, a
background track began, and he started to play. Only, he was limbless from the elbows and knees down.

I immediately averted my eyes, horrified for staring. A few people tossed him some bills, some coins, into the coffee tin resting on the keyboard, mostly out of sympathy, I suppose. My family shuffled along with the crowd, nudging the younger ones to stop their gaping. I started to follow them, but something made me stop.

It was something about him – his attitude, his smile, his simplistic yet upbeat tune – that held me back. Even though he would never stand on his own, even though he could not feed himself or embrace a loved one, he was still smiling. The uplifting, jazzy piece he played was repetitive and elementary yet filled with an outpouring surge of joy.

I looked him in the eye and smiled. I told him his playing was beautiful, inspiring, that I never heard anything like it. I gave him the crisp twenty dollar bill from my wallet, the bag of warm bread from the bakery freshly bought. I told him that he was amazing, keep playing, God bless you, peace be with you, have a good life.

It would have been great: the iconic scene from a movie, something the audience would stand up and applaud for. It would be the heroic event I could congratulate myself for being so gracious, so selfless. It was that wonderful story to go home and feature a journal entry on, telling everyone along with the mail man what gallant and benevolent act I performed.

Only, I did not. I lowered my eyes and walked away.

I wish I could say I had not. I had the chance to do something great, something noble, not for the sake of bolstering my résumé or inflating my self-righteousness, but for someone else, another human being in need. I could have done something – anything – talk to him, smile at him, give him something, or acknowledge him.

Instead, I lowered my eyes and walked away.

Months later, I found myself in church on a still Sunday morning. Comfortably settled on a cushy chair in the foyer, I watched the early-comers enter the church through the glass doors. The elderly were always prompt to arrive, one of which included Grandma Hong, a sweet petite woman reaching her triple digits.

Her daughter, Auntie Margie, always drove her to church early each Sunday morning, helping her unfold her walker and setting it aright, walking alongside her as she teetered towards the building. Their shuffling pace was slow to the point of mind-numbing, and her hearing was far from its prime along with her fleeting memory, yet they continued to laugh and smile with each step they made together.

Seeing her difficulty with shuffling up the sidewalk struck a chord within me. In a burst of nostalgia, I immediately returned to that instant in Toronto where I let fear and suspicion overcome me, a moment which I had all but forgotten till then. I remembered the pangs of guilt as I turned away from that man, while I passively allowed my circumstances to carry me with the crowd and continued along my way. Nevertheless, the image of that man playing his keyboard with so much enthusiasm in spite of his circumstances lingered.

I could be the same as him, with an ironic twist of fate. Any unexpected event could happen in a moment, and suddenly I could be the one on the street, playing a keyboard for a handful of pocket change. I could be the same as Grandma Hong in a few decades, being so weak and frail that I would need to rely on someone else’s patience to shuffle along with me.
However, there is more than simply pitying the less fortunate. The point is: they are no different from me. They still breathe, still see; they can laugh and cry, feel pain and joy, enjoy ice cream, sing off-tune, crack a hilarious joke. They are still human—we all are.

It is those little tiny acts of compassion that keep us together as humans—whether it is smiling at the man playing his keyboard with uncontainable joy, patiently walking Grandma Hong into the church, striking up conversation with a stranger, reconnecting with a distant friend, or simply reaching out to the lost, the broken, the lonely. True, they are only tiny, small acts, but each brings us closer together. The moment we stop having compassion for each other, we stop being human.

I wish I could describe the clothes that pianist was wearing, what color his eyes were, or even just his face. I wish I could remember the sound of his laugh—I honestly wish I could. Except the only trait that stands out in memory is his impairment.

It makes me wonder which one of us truly is the crippled.

I found myself leaving the snug chair, bounding across the church foyer floor, holding the door open just in time for Grandma Hong to teeter in.

“Morning, Grandma Hong! How are you today?”
“Let’s get moving!” the man shouted over the moaning. It was a snow storm, and six large trucks were stuck in the middle of the road, inside each truck were groups of battered, bleeding, naked humans. The man stood outside of a red truck with the words “Fear the Reaper” graphitized on the side by its driver, “Wolf” Jenkins. Wolf currently was trying to figure out what had happened to his truck.

The man held a lamp over his head, his features hidden by the shadows and snow. He could have been fat or wearing a large coat; he could have been young or old. He was a shapeless blob in red. He drove the second car in the line, one with the words “BAD” scrawled across the side with spray paint. The trucks looked like an odd mix of a semi and a large horse trailer. Cold fingers stuck out from the holes, the fingernails yellowed and long. The man went over to his car and hit a couple of the fingers with his lamps. The beings within yelped and pulled back. A couple other drivers came over, asking the man, “Hey Red, what’s the matter?” “What’s with the hold up?” “Can we get a move on?” They all held their machine guns close to their bodies.

Red answered each one: “I don’t know. We’re trying to figure what’s the matter with the damn thing.”

“That’s a new truck. What could go wrong?”

They all knew each other; they had been driving the Nameless Cargo since they had a trucker’s license. Of course it was illegal. Human trafficking had been illegal for decades. After the plague of 2050, when some men turned beast, they needed to do something with all the blistered, bloody humans running around. Soon the creatures could become dangerous. That was what they all feared, the creatures breaking loose. The government knew what was going on, yes, but they didn’t stop it, because it helped the nation. When the plague spread, Iran was wiped out, Australia went next, and soon America lost contact with the rest of the world. A couple people went into Europe to find dead bodies, some few Nameless being roaming around, and a lot of buildings burned to the ground. That wasn’t America… yet. So the trafficking started, they brought the beings to a remote location where they were fed and taken care of. It looked like a person, but the truckers never saw inside; they just backed the truck into the entrance where the guards let the Nameless creatures out and into the facility.

Wolf liked his job.
Red liked his job.
Tommy liked his job.
Woody liked his job.
Allen liked his job.
Weed liked his job.
So, they didn’t ask questions.
They loaded the beings, drove them over, and let them go. Red held up his lamp, and reached into his jacket, feeling his machine gun. An un-easy feeling went to his marrow.

“Damn thing better get started Wolf.”
“Red!” Wolf cried.
“What?”
“There’s nothing wrong with the car!” Wolf screamed.
Red shook his head. “If there’s nothing wrong with the car, then why aren’t you moving?”
“I have no idea, Red. No idea at all!”

Wolf was a country boy, grew up in Texas, and wore a cowboy hat, all that sh-bang. Red went over to him.

“What are you saying, Wolf?” Red screamed over the howling wind.
The Nameless Cargo screamed and moaned.
“I’m saying that this truck should be moving! But it isn’t.”
Red looked around, wondering, praying that there was an explanation to this. There wasn’t. The engine looked fine, perfect, in fact.

Then he looked at the tires.
“Aw, hell.” Red moaned.
What!” Wolf screamed.

“You didn’t notice that you’re tires exploded! That’s what’s the matter! How do you not see?”

Wolf looked; indeed, the tires had turned into scraps of rubber, clinging to the metal wheel.

“Well, those guys was moaning. I guess I just didn’t hear anything, plus I can’t see less than two inches out my windows, so I couldn’t have seen something that would break them. And I...” Wolf sighed. “I came to a halt... nothing screched, nothing like that. It didn’t feel like I had lost my tires. The truck... stopped.”

Red looked at him. “Damn it, boy, you had better not be lying.”
Wolf held up his hands. “Cross my heart... hope to die.”
They didn’t see a shadow crawl out from under the truck.

Woody’s went on down the line to his car. The Nameless Cargo screched and squealed inside the truck. He hated that sound. Woody sighed, took his machine gun and broke some fingers with the butt. “Damn you!” he screamed over and over again. The things yowled. Woody hit the side of the truck, denting the metal. It was cold, it was boring. Woody couldn’t stand it any longer.

He screamed: “Hurry up!”

Weed put in his earphones. Allen turned on the radio. No one heard Woody scream. No one saw a shadow grab his heels and yank him against the truck, and no one saw him get pulled under the truck. No one saw the truck start to rock back and forth. Woody screamed, then there was a snap, and his screams ceased.

The shadow left Woody’s body and moved up out from under the truck, he got inside, and started the motor.

“Wolf, you can ride with me.”
“Leave ‘em. They’ll freeze to death. Who’ll care?”
In no time at all, the four trucks resumed moving. They left Wolf’s truck. Days later, the truck would be found empty. Woody’s truck followed close behind. Woody was slowly buried by the snow, covered in growing blisters and mutilations, the snow stained red.

The trucks crept along. Wolf and Red sat together, barely speaking. Red could see that Wolf was nervous. He could get in a lot of trouble for losing a car.

“Are you hot?” Wolf asked.
“IT’s freezing.”
“I know, but I’m sweaty.”
“If it’s because you left the truck, don’t worry, I’ll take full responsibility.”
“No, I’m just a little warm.” He coughed and scratched his cheek.

The Nameless Cargo moaned. Some beat at the steel wall with their bleeding fists.

An hour passed, and Wolf spoke again. “Have the Nameless ever broken free?”
“What kind of question is that?”
“If the Nameless ever got loose, what would happen?”
“Well, they would run around, destroy things. The problem is if they bite or not, because that spreads the disease.”

Wolf nodded. “Didn’t people used to talk about the Nameless before they existed?”
“The Nameless are legendary. It’s one time since after Jesus that a prophet spoke truth. It’s been found that someone spoke of two groups of the Nameless were introduced to the entertainment market years ago, before 2050, except they were called Zombies and Vampires.

Wolf looked up at him, “Two groups?”
“Yeah, Zombies are more like what we carry; they are slow, dull, and dim. But a vampire... he’s smarter, quicker. And some believe they can change shape.”
“Has anyone come across Vampires yet?”
“Thank God, no. Why are you worrying about this? We are nearly finished, just one more mile.”

Wolf went silent.
They drove on.
“Do you hear that?” asked Wolf.
“What?”
“The moaning stopped.”
Red listened. “You’re right!”
He stomped on the brakes.

Everyone stopped behind them. “What now?” Tommy shouted.
Red climbed out and went across the side of the truck, banging his fists against it and shouting. No fingers broke through the small holes; nothing screamed back.

Oh, I hope they aren’t dead, I hope they aren’t dead. No moaning came from the other trucks. “Come on, you bastard!” He yelled.
Allen jumped out. “What’s the matter?”
“The Nameless aren’t moaning!” Red returned. Allen listened and then realized he was right. He held up his machine gun.
“Red...” He started.
Red looked and saw that Allen was pointing. He looked and saw the Facility. It was only a brief glimpse through the curtain of snow. The place was burning, the guards were gone, and smoke was rising. Something wasn’t right. Something hadn’t been right. The whole trip wasn’t right.

“Oh God... please God... don’t let this be happening.”

They heard a fist pound the wall of the truck, the truck wobbled.

“Get everyone out of their trucks!” Red screamed. He started back to his own. “Wolf! Get out of the truck!” Wolf didn’t respond. He opened the door and Wolf toppled out, and landed with a plop on the snow. Red bent over him and turned him over, black liquid was foaming in his mouth and his eyes were bloodshot. He spewed more black liquid out.

“Wolf? What on Heaven and Hell happened?”

“Bite me... bit me when I opened the trunk... he was living in the car... shapeless. Vampire.” Red stepped away from his friend. Wolf started to convulse. The black stuff started to spill out of his skin and leak out of his eyes. “Vampire,” he muttered, and then screamed. All the cars shook, machine gun bullets popped. Weed’s truck started to shake, and Weed screamed. Black liquid oozed out like the Blob in that old fifties horror film.

Red started to back away, slowly, muttering. All the cargo had transformed, they were turning into Vampires. It was like a frog, they start as tadpoles, and move on to frogs; they start as zombies and end in vampires, but what if the processed kept going? What if vampires weren’t the last stage?

Weed’s car exploded and the black things flew out. Red closed his eyes. Darkness swarmed over him.
A Day with No Paddles

My head is as big and red as a balloon ready to explode from trying so hard to hold in my anger, but I don’t care. I want to go paddling in the boat. Today is what Mommy calls a “family day,” but no movies this time. No, no, no, we decided to go someplace different and just found boats we can rent. But, I can’t get in the boat.

Crying and crying with old saltine cracker tears in my eyes, I scream, “Let me go! Let me go!” My mommy is holding me back while my brothers and father get in the boat. My baby brother hides behind Mommy’s legs, as if it is his great castle and he is king. He doesn’t go because he doesn’t want to, he is happy in his kingdom. But, I really want to go.

I am a girl, and that is why I can’t go, because girls wait while men do. But, no one asked me if I wanted to be a girl, and right now I don’t want to be one.

“Please! Please!” I scream as if I’m begging for my life, but no one hears me. This makes me angrier and hurts more than that time I fell on prickly grass, like a dungeon of knives, as I attempted escape from my big brother. He still caught and hit me, all because I caressed that soft velvety fur of his cat in my hands. Joshua always gets what he wants; he even got to be a boy.

I’m scared of this man I call Father because he’s always mad and yells too much, so I only cry to Mommy. He looks scary when he says, “NO.” His eyes make me think of the evil clowns that pop out of boxes, and I just want my Mommy to hug me. He already said I can’t go. As far as He’s concerned, that’s that, so He ignores me while Mommy holds me. I’m yelling my lungs out, but right now no one cares. No one has ears for me. The boys are thinking about the paddling. Mommy’s thinking about the baby. Father is tired from work. And I’m screaming. I’m the one who doesn’t fit in the picture, but I don’t want to fit because I want to go paddling too.

The water moves in small green Loch Ness monster waves. They get in the boat and leave, pretending I don’t exist, but no monster comes from the water. John looks back; he’s the only one who looks back. Even though his eyes say, I’m sorry; you would have gotten in the boat, too, if you were me, I’m still mad because I wish I wouldn’t get in the boat if I were John. It smells like wild grass, but not the good kind. The sad kind.

Everyone’s saying, “Shut up. Shut up. Shut up! SHUT UP!” because they say their ears hurt. “Tora, hazle que pare en este instante.” He tells you to make me stop crying right this second. They’re back from the boat, and I want their ears to hurt. It’s your fault, and I hate you, and I always have! I know better than to say that to the man I don’t like called Daddy. Mommy is worried because I won’t stop crying and inside my nose it looks like a waterfall, like that picture in the magazine she bought, the one with a lot of water pouring down that Mommy said separates two countries, just that with buggers instead. But, no one has tissues for us.

Mommy, why do you always let him choose everything? It’s always what He wants not what you want or what I want. Remember the time I asked you to stay at school with me because I was scared and I didn’t want to go anymore? I remember. You wanted to stay, your
eyes said, *I want to stay and I’m going to stay with you, sweetie.* The teacher said you could stay. But that was the day I discovered you lie, Mommy; you lie and you tell me not to. You said I’d never be all by myself. John says it’s bad when people do things and then tell you not to do them. He used a weird word for it that made me laugh because it made me think of a hippo.

You left me all alone, and you said you’d never do that. I begged you not to. I held on to you as hard as I could, and you let that guard take me away into that prison anyway. But I didn’t do anything wrong. I thought people only went to prison when they did something wrong. When the teacher lifted me by the arms, she wasn’t careful like you are. Her fingernails that helped me peel an orange yesterday hurt me today. You noticed, but you didn’t do anything. You left me with different tears now, sour like those candies that make my mouth hurt.

All because He said, “You are not staying. We’re leaving now.” In that voice that makes anyone who hears it want to run and run and run and never stop running because you just want him to stop doing whatever he’s doing. Even if he’s not doing anything. But you don’t know how to say, “Your voice is scary, Mister.”

You listened to Him and not to me and not to you and not to John’s eyes that always tell the truth. They said, *Don’t leave; you don’t want to.* But, you always do what he wants.
Sara Mathews
Poetry
St. Joseph Central High School
Grade 12

Mining For Rainbows

I’ve been called special.
I’ve been named
Hellbound,
but how is it so when we all bleed
red?

We sculpt self-portraits:
crystal deities
among driftwood demons
with fire-orange glares;
we paint ourselves perfect
(does this color make me look human?)
until we’re blind
in yellow Utopia...

(Myopia?)

We never chisel
beneath granite,
excavate imperfections for the glow
(green hope
under igneous fear),
and our feet
fumble from foundation,
crumble into churning
blue waters—
we’re tempted by destruction,
attempt inhalation...

but we slow.
We survive.
We realize
we’re human,
with hearts (that trill
with chilly winds),
hands (that carve
away the dirt),
and spirits
(burning wild),
painted purple.
Phoenix Mayer  
Personal Essay/ Memoir  
Republic High School  
Grade 11  

Art Is My Reason to Write

Neck aching, fingers freezing, and eyes straining from the bright, blank Word document staring back at me, my mind struggles to form thoughts. My fingertips continue to lay lifelessly on the home row of the keyboard. The lack of words being typed creates dead silence throughout the whole house. With my mind empty and my body tense, I minimize the word document and walk over to my bed. I sprawl on top of my soft, plaid pink and lime green comforter and let my muscles relax from sitting too long on my leather, black office chair. The feeling of the plush comforter against my skin releases the stressful energy from my body, leaving me in a comfort zone, a place of security.

I look up, watching the ceiling fan twirl continuously counter-clockwise, and my head begins to feel dizzy, making me turn to the left to notice my yellow, worn out cover sketch book. Perched on top of it sits a green wooden HB graphite pencil. Both journal and pencil sit stacked upon my nightstand. I reach for the book and pencil with my right hand and sit Indian-style in the middle of my full-sized bed. While flipping through my old sketch book, searching for a clean sheet, I skim through some of my older drawings. I see some of my old sketches of characters for my comics. I analyze the detail of their faces, the color of their hair, the shading of their skin catching the light, and the progress I had made since freshman year.

Looking back at some of my best pieces awakens me out of my confusion and depression. When I find a clean sheet, I feel myself wanting to draw. I know exactly what I want to draw. With every line, I feel happy and overjoyed by what I am creating. With every detail or shading added to the piece, intense excitement rushes through me just thinking of the final draft.

I continuously add more and more to my drawing until there is nothing more I can do. As I look over my work, I am satisfied with the results, but I am also confused when I study the piece a little more. What is this supposed to be? Who is this character? Does it have a name? What is its story? More and more questions pop into my head until I find a solution for my problem.

I shuffle my feet toward my computer desk. Once I sit in my chair, I immediately maximized my word document and begin a story. My brain is bulging with ideas; I imagine smoke coming from my fingers as they rapidly press each key without pause. My thoughts overflow onto my computer. I can't stop. I need to keep adding information and detail to this story.

While continuing with my writing, I realize something. Before, my mind was vacant, not an idea nor a thought existed in my head. Because of my artwork, I am now inspired to write a short story of the character I have drawn. When I read an interesting book, I am inspired to draw my own characters, really making them come to life. The same works for me when I am trying to write. I have to physically draw the characters and scenery for the background story to be told. Just as others inspire me to draw, I inspire myself to write.
Listening to the clacking of my fingers flying over the keyboard and the voice in my mind telling me what to type, everything is coming into place. With every word I type, my adrenaline kicks me, telling me to keep going. Each detail written of the story’s setting brings the aroma of nature and the flowers as I picture them in my head. Reading the text as I type makes me want to find out what is going to happen to my character. I am hooked.

My character’s adventure has finally come to an end. My story, blank in the beginning, nothing but the title, is now alive on my document. When I take the time to create my ideas through my sketching, the story comes naturally to me. A story must exist in physical form before it can be shown through words. This is my way of creating a story. This is how my artwork gives the writer in me life; it’s the center, the main influence, the soul of my writing.
Please, don’t look at me. Don’t notice me. For the love of God, don’t call on me to speak. And, no, that wasn’t my hand raised; I was simply scratching my head. Constantly replaying in my mind, these are the thoughts that forbid me to open up and make my voice heard. They are the basis of my personality, away from the safety and certainty of my home and family. To that world, I am shy. But to a world of self-expression, fantasy, and enjoyment, known as writing, I am free.

I wasn’t always like this. I used to have a life where I wasn’t suppressed by my own insecurity. A life where I liked to talk. Scratch that. I loved to talk! I loved to ramble about the most insignificant things that had absolutely no value other than to be said—like I am right now. Oops, back on point. The years before I joined the teenagers, who are by definition self-conscious, I was a free spirit, willing to share my story with anything who moved. This was not limited to walking up to random strangers in the grocery store and engaging in conversation with them. Even though they probably had far better things to do than listen to me, they didn’t show it. I would entertain my “new friends” with exciting stories of a new coloring book or how “so and so” stole my Play-doh®. Behavior such as this continued until my mother impressed upon me the socially undesirable nature of what I was doing, planting the first seed of insecurity in my mind.

Progressing through school, I realized more and more each day that “freedom of speech” was a flawed interpretation of how we could live our lives. By the time I hit my early teen years, all hints of the meaningless babble of an innocent child were gone. My speech had, by that point, matured into words that had an impact upon the world and a consequence for everything said. During an incident of my twelfth year, I fractured a vertebra in my spine. As an already insecure sixth grader who was just starting middle school, I was so very pleased (sarcasm intended) to sport a back brace as the hottest new accessory of the school year. I also had to see a doctor whom I despised with every passing breath. Now I find that I only hated him because he made me wear that loathsome brace. But, at the time, rational thinking wasn’t an option, and pure instinctual hatred was all I had to help me survive. All of these emotions bottled up inside of me came to a peak. I stormed around in the safety of my home for months, and I do literally mean stormed. I hit things, threw things, and screamed at the top of my lungs, hoping it would make me feel better. It didn’t. All the while, I kept this side of me locked away from my friends and the outside world.

One day, my mom, having had enough of my self-pitying act, gave me a journal to write in. At first, I thought it was, well, for all intents and purposes, stupid. Really stupid. I mean we may have had a few encounters but never anything permanent. That was so until the day I sat down to write my first journal entry. And to say I “wrote” would be putting it lightly. I scribbled. I jammed my pen into the paper, my fist brushing tears away from my words in an attempt to make what I was writing legible.

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was a futile attempt, but that didn’t matter. What mattered were the heart-wrenching and painful emotions that spilled onto my paper. What mattered was the fact that I had allowed myself to open up and breathe.

As I grew older, and my light of innocence continued to dim, the world appeared even less welcoming to my emerging opinions and unique view on life. Because of this, I found myself recoiling into the safety of my mind, afraid that by leaving my thoughts and feelings out in the open, they would get dismissed as nothing more than the stupid ideas of an ignorant freak. By the time I hit high school, I had taken this thought process and set simple rules that would remove vulnerability. Rule #1: Never speak negatively about anything or anyone. By doing this you are defining yourself and therefore giving people reasons to dislike you. Rule #2: Agree, Agree, and, well...Agree. People love to hear that you like and encourage what they are doing. Even if they are asking for your “true opinion,” all they really want is a “Yes!” or an “Of course that doesn’t make you look fat.” And last, but certainly not least, rule #3 (or as I like to call it, the rule that is right up there with not talking about religion or politics at a group discussion): Never, I repeat NEVER, speak about matters that, well, actually matter. By this I mean anything personal, private, or hard to talk about; that is, I assure you, just as hard to listen to.

By following these rules, I realized that I had begun to lose a part of myself. So, I did what experiences in the past had taught me to do in a situation such as this. I wrote. I expelled every repressed feeling, every negative emotion, and twisted them. Morphed them. And before I knew it, I had created a story. A story about a girl with a charmed future. A story that forced her to overcome many adversities. A story that became my release.

Writing is always there for me, despite what life has in store. It allows me to vent my innermost thoughts when it seems they don’t belong anywhere in this world. Writing helps me survive major crises in my life and permits me to dump unwanted feelings into a bottomless pit of understanding. And even as I write to you, my reader, I allow myself the freedom to reveal, on paper, who I really am.
Leap

Only one place in the world exists where I can truly be alone, physically, mentally, spiritually at peace. A place where no matter what is going on in my life, I don’t have to think. I can be whoever I want, or nobody at all, and it doesn’t matter. I am myself, calm and serene. This magical place is Lover’s Leap.

I can recall every detail from my first experience at The Leap. It was one of those hot, sticky, torturous July afternoons. A friend and I were walking down an old white gravel road by my grandma’s lake house. The heat was miserable, but we kept on following that unfamiliar road lined with trees.

“I bet this leads to the lake,” I broke the silence, “It had better, anyway.”

“Look at that trail over there!” Sydney shouted, “I bet that leads to the lake!”

“I’m not really in the mood to walk through the woods right now, maybe there’s a beach up the road some more.”

“Bailey, come on. We’ve been walking for, like, ever! It’s hot!”

We argued for a few minutes. I lost. So, we started following this thin, nearly invisible, trail into the woods. We maneuvered through brush, over logs, across slick rocks coated with moss and mud up to our shins in flip-flops. With every step I took, anger was building inside me. Just when I was about to burst, the trees cleared off to one side, and our so-called trail started cutting into a damp gray cliff.

“I can smell the lake!” I rejoiced. The excitement of relief from the heat cancelled out my anger. “I love that smell.”

I could feel the soft lake breeze wafting up our path. Just thinking about jumping into that cool, clear water made me dizzy. Sydney followed me closely as we made our way up the cliff. We were expecting to cut through the rocks and open up to a small stretch of shoreline, but when the stone walls to our sides began to diminish, we were standing on a mossy stone ledge. The water had to be 40 feet below us and civilization 40 miles away. It was so silent that we could hear the sound of water droplets rolling over the edge and, sometime later, plop when they met the lake. The evening sun on the water gave it a soft honey-like glow. It seemed like a shame to disturb it, but you only live once.

I think Sydney started to ask me if I was going to jump, but it was too late. I was already over the edge, free-falling through three stories of air. My stomach turned, and all I could think was that I had done it. I could feel my chest tighten and my mind clear as I watched the water inch closer. It was like I was falling in slow motion. Take a breath! I thought to myself, just as I plunged into the water. The liquid enclosed every inch of me in an instant. I slid deeper and deeper down into the darkness, all of my thoughts disappeared as I slowed. When I stopped moving I waited. I let myself drift around in my own abyss until it felt like my lungs were collapsing. I tried to stay under as long as I could. I was trapped, but somehow I was free. A minute or so later I had to come up for air.
“I thought you were dead!!” Sydney screamed.
“Sorry,” I laughed, “I was just really relaxed.”
“Yes, yes, I’m sure,” she said dripping with sarcasm. “The nearest hospital is almost fifty miles away! What’s so relaxing about that!?”
“Just shut up and jump!”
“I choose life,” she teased.
“Oh HA HA,” I mocked, “I’m perfectly fine. You have to try it. The rush is unbelievable!”
Sydney wasn’t convinced, but I was totally and completely sold. We left that night and didn’t come back, at least not together anyway. For the rest of my summer days, whenever I was sad, mad, or upset, I went to the leap. It was almost like the wind flowing through my hair flushed out all my worries and fears. Even if I was at home, if I was stressed or anything, you could find me making the hour and a half drive to The Leap; just to clear my head.

Wyatt’s Story

“Just calling to check up on you. Mark and I are going to bed, but that doesn’t mean you can be late: home by one, Bailey Kay, and I mean it!”

By then it was almost two. I was walking to my car as I listened to the voicemail. I had been at a friend’s house since I got off work, watching movies and exchanging gossip. I had lost track of time. Luckily my parents were in bed; that message really put me at ease. All I had to do was make it in and back to my room without waking anyone up, and I was out of the woods.

When I reached the car I unlocked my door and sat inside. I fumbled through my messy purse for a while trying to find my iPod. The drive to my house wasn’t that long but long enough to need music for sure. I had finally found my buried treasure and was picking out a song, when I got this crazy cold feeling. You know that spooky feeling like someone is watching you or maybe hiding in the backseat of your car? That thought that bursts into your mind in an instant, is immediately repressed, then slowly and steadily grows until your heart is racing, breath is short, and goose bumps cover your flesh? That is exactly how I felt: very, very, unjustifiably afraid.

I looked around for a minute and convinced myself that I was being ridiculous, but I shut and locked my door, just in case. I took a deep breath and started for the house. On my way out of town I reached a four-way stop. I had been there a million times before, at least half of which during those still morning hours. It was always the same: no cars, no people, no sign of life at all until the truck stop up the road, but this time something was different. I could see something moving up head. As I approached I noticed a man walking towards town, the opposite direction I was going, holding a plastic sack. He didn’t seem threatening, just odd and out of place. Looks like he had to make an emergency run to the truck stop, I thought to myself, that must suck. I continued out to my house, listening to some country and smoking a cigarette.

A few minutes later I pulled into the driveway; there was no one around. My mom’s car, brother’s truck, and step-dad’s vehicle were all in their assigned places, their drivers inside sound asleep. It couldn’t have been easier; I just had to slip inside through the garage and tip-toe down the hall to my room. I could make it. I just couldn’t wake anyone up.
I turned my lights off, grabbed my things, and reached up to push the button on my garage door opener: nothing happened. “Wow really?” I said out loud to myself. I figured the battery must be dead. I had had it for a while, after all. I sulked for a minute and started searching around for my house keys. It didn’t take long to find them, and I was heading for the front door. I moved carefully through the leaves around to the house; my brothers’ room was by the door, and I didn’t want to scare them. I had just climbed the steps to the front porch, propped open the screen door, and lifted my key, when I got that feeling again. I choked down a childish whimper and told myself to grow up; my imagination was running wild. All of the sudden, the leaves I had waded through pierced the silent night air with a deafening crunch. I paused and started to turn around. My brain shut down. I couldn’t even take a breath; panic hit me like a ton of bricks. There, maybe six feet in front of me, was the man from the four-way. My heart stopped, my muscles tightened, and I knew in that very instant what I had to do. I shoved my key in the door, pushed it open as hard as I could, and took off for my parents’ room. I had to wake someone up.

I took off screaming down the hall, I could feel him grabbing at me from behind. Almost there, just two more strides, I tried to convince myself, you’re going to be fine! They have to be awake by now! Then blackness. I was on the floor. I felt a cold hand slide around my face and mute my cries for help. “You’re too late; they know!” managed to escape my lips. I looked up at their door; still shut? But how? Mark is getting a gun, I reasoned. 3…2…1… still nothing? I could feel myself being pulled away from my only chance. I kicked, bit, and grabbed at anything I could get my hands on. It wasn’t enough. I could feel in my stomach that there was nothing left I could do for myself. I was completely helpless now. I had to pray someone heard me; someone was going to come to my rescue. I passed by the love seat, then the end table, and then the couch. I knew I was out of time. My body slid over the door frame; I could feel hot tears roll down my face. I forced myself to take a last look into my home. There, right inside the door, stood my youngest brother. I reached out and tried to take his hand, but he lifted it out of my reach. The look on his face was distant; he shook his head as he took a finger and pressed it to his lips, “Sissy, shhhhh!” and the door closed.
Soul Mates

“Welcome to The Center’s Library and Public Research Facility, Jade Santoro. Just a reminder: your books are due today. It is 11:05 a.m., and you are visitor number 215,” an automated female voice sounds in my head as I walk across the large entrance hall. The information was effortlessly plucked from the chip in my brain when I entered the library, processed, and then returned. In less than a second, I have become just another statistic in the government’s database.

According to world history class, the First Rulers created the chips to keep track of Asper’s population. By now, they are also necessary to receive medical treatments and to purchase certain items. Each person’s chip is implanted at the hospital immediately after birth and remains there for their entire life, absorbing and permanently storing all of their memories. The chips are reused, however, and the defenses protecting the previous owner’s memories usually do not hold for long.

Intense experiences in my life that resemble those of any of my predecessors are enough to break their chains, but instead of a huge flood that drowns me in the wealth of its knowledge, I only receive one memory at a time. They vary in length and intensity, but each one renders me incapable of sight and controlled speech. As for the momentary invasion of my brain when I enter a public place, the experience always makes me feel uneasy.

The feeling disappears at the sight of Ruth, the head librarian. With her curly red hair and her large smile, she is like my mother in this place, which is often more inviting than my own home.

About six months ago, my parents began fighting, making the house almost unbearable to be in. They quarrel about every topic imaginable, destroying their love for each other and the last of my respect for them. Although their ongoing feud is draining, it seems neither is capable of letting go and getting a divorce. Instead, they are trapped in a continuous game of tug-of-war, which begins anew each day. I take refuge from these battles in the library, a neutral zone. Here the atmosphere is calm, and the air is far cooler than that of private homes. It is also the largest library in Asper, due to its location in the capital. The promise of its countless books and air-conditioning makes the long, hot walk from my house worthwhile.

When I first started coming, I was in dire need of the company of someone who cared enough to listen to me. I would take any excuse to talk to Ruth, just to get some of the attention I wasn’t receiving at home. After several weeks, she finally asked me, bluntly but kindly, if I wanted to tell her about my troubles. At first, I was afraid of divulging the secrets of my private life to a stranger and nervously declined. Soon, however, Ruth’s calm demeanor made me feel comfortable enough to share them. Over the many hours I have spent here, she has become a close friend.
Today I am equipped with the story of a particularly brutal fight, and I walk over to Ruth's circular information desk intending to share it, but as I am dropping my books into the black chasm of the book chute, the telephone rings.

Ruth sighs and picks it up. “Hi, you’ve reached The Center’s Library and Public Research Facility. This is Ruth. How may I assist you today?” Her voice is friendly, but as she listens, the corners of her mouth turn downward. “Oh, hello Mr. Charleston. Yes, of course. It isn’t very busy today, so I have time.” It’s the director of the library, who calls every month to check on the facility. Ruth has complained many times how exasperating this process is; it usually lasts up to an hour. She smiles apologetically at me, and I shrug, trying to seem nonchalant despite my disappointment.

I pick up my bag, and walk through one of the three large doorways that lead out of the entrance hall. As always, the high-ceilinged Adult Literature Room forces me to choose between real and electronic books. To my right are hundreds of shelves filled with a myriad of tiny chrome memory chips, whose contents can be uploaded onto a personal handheld.

The left side of the large room, with its traditional books, holds much greater appeal. Nevertheless, the wealth of information, printed so permanently on paper, is somewhat intimidating. On most days, I stand on the threshold of the room, quietly surveying the colorful shelves before me until I pick one to peruse. To me, finding the perfect book is a prize that can only be obtained after entering the maze in the right place.

Today, I find myself walking toward the center of the nearest section of shelves after less than a minute of deliberation. It’s almost as if I am being pulled toward it. Just to regain a sense of control, I enter between Shelves Eleven and Twelve. I only have time to realize that I am in the Science Fiction section when the memory engulfs me. Usually there is a warning, a noticeable buildup, but this time I am blindsided. I feel myself fall to the ground as if struck by a giant ocean wave.

I am a young, dark-skinned woman, shopping at my neighborhood grocery store. Paranoia sharpens my vision as I quickly pull my choices off the shelves; non-Caucasians are barely tolerated these days, and lingering anywhere is risky. Finally, I locate my last item, a package of ice cream, and break into a brisk walk in the direction of the cash register. I find myself taking a detour through the cereal aisle, and just as I am leaving it, I see him.

With his blond hair, blue eyes, and light skin, he is my complete opposite, but in this moment, his race doesn’t matter. As our eyes meet, rules and traditions seem to fall away, leaving only the two of us. Forgetting where and who I am, I walk forward to close the distance between us, just as he does the same. And then we are embracing, his strong, warm arms in a protective circle around me. The next thing I know, the world truly does fall away, and I am somewhere else entirely.

When I realize that I am about to experience another memory, I try to escape, to pull away, but to no avail.

I am a business woman, tall, blond, and brown-eyed, standing in a large room full of paintings. Their colors are exquisite, but it is their composition, the paint splashed on the canvases with wild abandon, that intrigues me. I think of my husband and two children at home, who have never been able to comprehend my love for art. Truthfully, I don’t quite understand it either, never having been a great artist myself. Nevertheless, I have always enjoyed attending the openings of
art shows. The single painting shown in the newspaper was enough to convince me to attend the show of Luke Bardelli, whom I had never heard of before.

I feel a tap on my shoulder, and my heart jumps. I turn around, and look into the hazel eyes of a man who can only be Luke. A mass of frizzy dreadlocks sticks out from his head, and his clothes are a little worn, a style I have forbidden my teenage son to wear. He is also about ten years younger than me. But I find that I don’t care, because I feel drawn to him in a way that I thought impossible, in a way that I have never even felt about my husband. I realize that, if he asked me to, I would leave my old life and start anew with him somewhere far away.

It is only with immense self control that I am able to whisper, "Can I talk to you outside?" Luke grins, a flash of white teeth that I feel like I have seen before and already love. "I have to give my speech now. Meet me outside in an hour." He seems reluctant as he turns away and disappears into the crowd, taking the memory with him.

There is barely a second’s gap before the next wave washes over me.

I am a young English student, my clothes modern and my hair a deep red. It’s my first day of college, and I am barely treading water in the river of people rushing to their classes. I count the door numbers (101, 103, 105), and finally catch a glimpse of my destination, Room 107, through a space between people. Knowing that I have only one chance, I flit through the first gap available. I am dreading this class, which I have heard is extremely difficult due to its strict teacher, Mr. Samson.

I tentatively enter the room and take in my surroundings. It is occupied by three other students and the teacher, who glances up as I walk in. Mr. Samson’s mahogany hair accents his fair skin, and his eyes are brown behind horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is worlds away from my usual type, I find that I can’t look away. His appearance, the rumored attitude, the age difference, and the obvious illegality of a relationship between us cease to matter. I feel suddenly, inexplicably happy, and my face breaks into a smile. I can tell I am having the same effect on him, but he regains composure first, and seems about to speak.

With immense strength, I pull myself out of the memory before it can proceed. As my vision slowly returns, I notice that I am lying spread-eagled in the middle of the aisle. My bag lies several feet away, and my entire body is damp with perspiration. Surprisingly, no one seems to have heard me fall; Ruth is still chattering away with Mr. Charleston, and the Adult Literature Room appears deserted. Slowly, I stand up and straighten my dress, analyzing what happened all the while.

The flashes of vivid memories, stronger than I have ever experienced, remind me of an urban myth with which I was once obsessed. As I lean lightly against a bookshelf, I remember the first time I heard the story about soul mates. I was sitting on top of the metal jungle gym with Jill, my grade school friend, who was our class’s expert on the matter. She told me that all chips were created in pairs, making their owners soul mates. Jill said people very rarely met their “other half” but swore that her grandparents had done so. She also claimed that when they met, both had left their old partners and started a new life together. I remember asking how her grandparents had known they were meant to be together; I couldn’t grasp the concept of being in love with someone you’d never met. Jill answered that they had seen memories of being together in previous lives and felt an almost magnetic pull toward each other, an undeniable attraction.
For a long time afterward, I read as many books on the subject as I could, some of them by respected scientists who supported the theory. I have always wished it is true, simultaneously knowing it can’t be. Reason tells me that our teachers’ vehement denials about the existence of soul mates are based on fact. Until now, that is. Now, everything is different.

I suddenly feel the need to move, and begin slowly walking toward the opposite end of the aisle. When I reach it, I glance around and enter the aisle to my right. I pull a random book off Shelf Thirteen and flip through it listlessly, my mind racing all the while. Is my soul mate in this room? Am I really about to meet The One, or was it all just a fantasy brought on by the temperature change when I entered the library?

My thoughts are interrupted seconds later, when a boy enters the other end of the aisle. I am so surprised that I almost drop my book, but I am able to regain composure just in time. He is about my age, and tall, with fairly short brown hair. As I look at him, his ice blue eyes stare back from behind black rectangular-rimmed glasses, forcing me to look away. He, too, is holding a book, and seems to be attempting to locate its place on the shelf. As he dismisses available gaps between books, he slowly nears my end of the aisle.

My heart is racing, and I have begun sweating again. I am suddenly, painfully aware that my long black hair is disheveled and my face flushed. I consider sprinting to the bathroom to adjust my appearance, but I find that I am rooted to the spot. Never in my sixteen years have I felt so nervous. Unable to do anything but clutch my book like a lifeline, I try not to stare at him as he comes ever closer. What if I imagined the connection? Or, what if it was real, but he didn’t feel it?

After what feels like hours but can only be a couple of seconds, I can’t wait any longer. I place my book back on the shelf and walk toward the boy, feeling like I am running toward the edge of a cliff. In my mind, my feet hit the ground in time with my heart beat. Then I reach him.

When our eyes meet, my mind goes blank, and my mouth is suddenly very dry as I contemplate the empty space past the edge of the cliff.

Finally, I speak in a soft voice. “Did you feel that, too?”

He pauses, his face impassive, leaving me in a five second long freefall that is simultaneously the most exciting and the most frightening feeling I’ve ever experienced, then murmurs, “Yeah.”

“Did you experience memories? More than one?” I ask eagerly, unable to keep a smile off my face.

“Three,” he says softly, his brows furrowed, remembering. “At first, we were a mixed race couple, and then I was an artist and you were an uptight, rich woman. The last one didn’t last as long, but I was—”

“A teacher,” I finish and find that I am trembling slightly as I realize that I have not landed safely after all, but rather been joined in freefall. When he doesn’t comment, I add, “I’m Jade, by the way.”

“Josh,” he replies quietly. His face, so stony before, suddenly reveals several emotions very quickly. It changes to confusion, pain, sadness, and regret before becoming inexpressive once more.

“What do we do now?” I ask when I realize he isn’t going to say any more.

Josh looks down at me, and for a moment his eyes are the color of rain clouds. Then he glances away, seemingly surveying the shelf behind me for a full minute. I look up at him,
wondering if I should interrupt what seems to be an intense internal struggle. Finally, he looks back at me, and this time there is no mistaking the pain in his eyes.

“Jade,” he says quietly, his voice just above a whisper, “I have a boyfriend.”
I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. “What?” my suddenly sluggish brain unable to comprehend.

“I’m gay, Jade,” Josh says with a small smile.
I step back a little as I realize the implications of this statement. My view of the situation changes again: we were both falling, but in different ways, and for different reasons. But where have we landed?

“Wow,” I say finally.
This makes him laugh, despite the serious situation. He quickly sobers as he sees my face, which is undoubtedly very pale. “I don’t really know what to do either,” he answers my earlier question.

“But what about the memories we both saw? There was obviously a connection,” I say, my voice rising.
Josh holds up his hand, quieting me. “I agree. It’s just that, well…” he drifts off.

“What is it?” I ask softly.
He clears his throat, then resumes even quieter than before. “I do feel a mental connection that draws me to you, but there’s another force working against that.”

“And that is?” I prompt, dreading the answer.
Josh sighs quietly. “It’s physical attraction. I really like you, but I don’t think I can love you, because I’m not attracted to girls.” He speeds up as he talks, his last words almost blurring.

Although I had guessed this, I still feel shocked. Tears threaten to spill from my eyes, but I hold them back. “So you know which force wins.”
Josh nods. “I’m sorry.” He pauses for a second, looking down, and I realize he had hoped for something else, too. “I need to go talk to Ben about this. He’ll be relieved to know that it won’t mean an end to our relationship.” He reaches out and briefly squeezes my shoulder, his touch conveying an infinite number of unsaid things. Then the moment passes and he steps around me. He walks to the end of the aisle, and looks back just before leaving it. “I’ll see you soon. It shouldn’t be too hard to find each other, now.”

I attempt to smile through my tears. Josh stands there for another second, and I think I see his eyes glisten, but before I can be sure, he turns and walks out of the Adult Literature Room.
Case of the Dirty Pom-Poms

I was minding my own business in Mr. Geo’s Math class when the door slammed open to reveal head cheerleader Jenny Lenkins. She was your average cheerleader, the kind with a statuesque body that had the boys drooling for her. She sashayed over and ceremoniously dropped her leather bag onto my desk, obviously to catch my attention. “What can I do for you today, Lenkins?” I gruffly asked her. Most girls stutter in her presence, but she’s really a witch with a pretty face in my opinion. She briefly scowled then flashed a bigger smile than a cat with its paws on catnip.

“Stacy, I need some help, but can we take it outside? I don’t want to be embarrassed,” Lenny sweetly asked. I nodded and stood up. Walking out of the classroom, I could see that the other students were either at their lockers chatting or rushing to class. We stopped in front of her locker, and she started to work the combination. Opening her locker, Jenny took out a hair brush and turned to me. “You see, Stacy, I suspect that my boyfriend is cheating on me with someone, but I can’t say for sure.” I raised an eyebrow at her statement. Her boyfriend, the quarterback Daniel Thames, is anything but a cheater. I smell something funny with this case, and it’s not Jenny’s nauseating perfume. “You think that Thames is cheating on you with another girl?” I cautiously asked, hoping that she didn’t get the implication. “Of course I’m sure!” she shouted back as she brushed her auburn-red hair. “But, I don’t want Daniel to find out, so…”

“You want this to be a discreet job?” I asked, getting straight to the point. Jenny wordlessly nodded, grabbed her make-up case from the locker, and put it in a monstrous, leather bag. Closing her locker, she waved me good-bye and walked off. Obviously to be with her new boy-toy or something, but I couldn’t say for certain. Leaving with that, I decided to head back to class just to make sure I didn’t run late.

“Hey, big sis, are ya working on a case?” June asked as I sat down with my lunch. Although we both wore the school uniform for girls, which consists of a navy blue blazer over a black and white polo shirt, a Navy blue skirt, and black shoes, June still wore her recognizable green bandana. “Yes, if you must know,” I answered, munching on my food. “Basically, Jenny wants me to find out if Daniel is cheating on her, but I think it’s the other way around.”

“So, she wants a valid reason to break-up with Daniel? That’s harsh,” June quipped while chewing on her autumn salad. She put down her fork and rested her head on her folded hands. “But I’m guessing that’s not the reason why you’re sitting with me today, is it?” I smirked at her assessment. Sometimes her analysis of people is pretty scary, even for me. Sipping on my milk I nodded. “Well, Jenny is seeing someone, but I don’t know who he is. I’ll see if I can get more info.” I left her table and dumped the rest of my lunch into the garbage.

I sat in the stands freezing my butt as I watched the football game. They were doing pretty well from my perspective. “They’re not doing so hot tonight, are there Stacy?” June asked. Somehow, Mom and Dad convinced me to bring my three younger siblings along.
“Who’s the quarterback again?” Elizabeth asked, scanning the field. She’s the family cook, fisher, and gardener and she’s only eleven.

“That’s Daniel Thames,” Shannon told her, “he’s the big guy with the number 33 on his back.”

“So, what do you think of the game so far, Stacy?” June asked me.

“It’s alright, but this outing is to scope out the cheerleaders,” I responded.

“Jenny Lenkins?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Anyone want more snacks?” Lizzie, our family nickname for Elizabeth, asked while getting up from her seat.

“I’m good,” June answered. “Can you get some more of that candy cotton?” Shannon asked. Lizzie nodded and left for the concession stand. “Touchdown!” Shannon shouted when Daniel made the throw.

“But the theory that Daniel’s cheating on Jenny is pretty shaky. Plus, him cheating? He’s anything but a backstabber,” June commented.

“You’re right on that account, but I need to find out why she wants to break up with Daniel,” I told her while keeping an eye on the cheerleaders, who were doing a pretty dull routine. The game ended with our team winning, and everyone was in good spirits when we left. Shannon, however, fell asleep at the end of the game, so I had to carry her home on my back.

Saturday, March 26, 1977

I spent a good chunk of my afternoon keeping an eye on Lenkins. She hung out with her cheerleader friends at the mall and, ugh, “shopped till they dropped.” They sat at a table in the food court eating fancy fast-food while I sat a few tables away but still close enough to hear their conversation. The only reason I took up Jenny’s offer is that I want to keep Daniel from getting burned by her as I did when we were in the sixth grade. Sometimes, I miss those elementary school days when we were innocent and not so focused on being the most popular or the...

“Oh, when are we leaving?” Shannon asked moaning from boredom. Somehow June schmoozed her way out of babysitting Shannon, and Elizabeth had to go to the Market place, so I, being the eldest of the four at fourteen, got stuck keeping an eye on the eight-year old.

“When I get some solid evidence,” I told her. She sighed and languidly sipped her drink. A stake out is not exactly my cup of Joe, but it’s necessary when it comes with the job.

I could hear one of Jenny’s friends ask, “Ok Jenny, spill. Who’s your ‘secret admirer’ that you’ve been seeing lately?”

“That’s my little secret,” she told them.

“What’s a secret admirer?” Shannon quietly asked.

“That’s someone who likes you, but doesn’t tell you their name,” I responded. If Jenny had an admirer, that would explain why she wants to break up with Thames. Now the only question is who’s the admirer?

Monday, March 28, 1977

The cafeteria was packed with almost no elbow room. “Over here!” June shouted, waving her arm at her table. I hustled over and sat down. “Man, is this place packed or what?” she asked.
“Yeah, I wonder why,” I mumbled softly.
“I don’t know, but I do know one thing. I haven’t seen hair or hide of Jenny Lenkins this morning. Probably ditched today?” she asked.
“No, she couldn’t have played hooky today, it’s almost impossible to do that. Security’s tight,” I told her.
“Well, I have to get some fresh air. See ya later.” I dumped the rest of my lunch in the garbage and left to get some thoughts out of my head.

Leaving the cafeteria, I noticed Jenny out in the hallway. It was pretty suspicious on account of how she always has someone with her. Sticking to the shadows, I leaned in to hear her having a conversation with someone.

“But Valmont, Daniel doesn’t suspect a thing,” Jenny whined. I peered around the corner to find Mr. Tea and Crumpets himself. Wearing a navy blue blazer over a black and white polo shirt, Navy blue pants, and black shoes. He transferred from England last year and has made it somewhat big here in school. Most girls can’t help but be drawn to his debonair charm and sophisticated manner. The only ones not falling into his snare are me and June. Me, I don’t like the guy, period. He might be fancy with the accent, but that covers up his malevolent nature on the inside. June, she’s his big competition when it comes to school politics. Those two bump heads more often than Shannon, my youngest sister, behind the wheel of a bumper car.

“I know that, Jenny, but we must have patience,” Valmont assures her. “For this to work, Stacy Williams must remain in the dark in order to play her part.”

“Ooh, I can’t wait till I see Daniel’s face when he gets his big surprise,” Jenny squealed in glee. I gritted my teeth in agitation at the thought of another person getting burned by that witch.

“Jenny!” I heard a male voice shout from around the corner. Looking behind me, I saw Daniel Thames racing to get to Lenkins. Turning sharply back, I saw Jenny’s mouth break into an evil smile. My body had a mind of its own when I grabbed Daniel’s letter jacket, exposing me to both Valmont and Jenny.

“Williams, what are you doing here?” Jenny cried in shock.
“It seems that the cat’s out of the bag out, Williams,” Valmont comments coolly. Daniel looked at the three of us with confusion written all over his face.

“Wait, what’s going on? What’s out of the bag?” Daniel asks.
“Jenny Lenkins is my new girlfriend, Mr. Thames,” Valmont replied while wrapping an arm around Jenny’s waist and pulling her close. Daniel staggered back from the harsh blow and leaned against the wall. I stepped in front of him and faced Jenny.

“When did you grow tired of him, Jenny, when he couldn’t give you what you want?” I harshly asked her, a fury building up inside me from my none-too-gentle memories. “Of course you did. You always grow tired of the stuff you have and always want more, don’t you? Is that what happened when you dumped me for ‘better’ friends? Well, let’s all hope that Valmont can entertain you, you little…”

“What happened when we were eleven is old news, Williams,” Jenny sneered, her face marred. “You just weren’t worth my time.”

“Worth your time!” I yelled out. The lunch bell had already rung, and students were starting to circle around the four of us. “Oh, please, Jenkins. Almost nothing is worth your time.
these days. You just want to be the best, so you attach yourself to those that are the best. And when it isn’t the best anymore, you dump them like a month-old sandwich.” The gawkers started to whisper in hushed tones when they parted to reveal the Principal, Mrs. Wong.

“What is going on here!?” Mrs. Wong asked.

“Well, if I no longer have any worth, then how about all those tutors you jilted just so you can continue cheerleading?” I asked her, daring her to answer with Principal Wong near. Her sneer bloomed into a full-blown scowl.

“Yes, I jilted those nerds, and I jilted just about anyone who’s got a brain!!” She yelled out. “And you know what, I jilted all of Daniel’s friends behind his back, too!” Everyone gasped, and I smirked at her confession. When she calmed down, she tensed up tighter than a pickle jar lid. “No, wait... I mean...”

“Jenny Lenkins, for your horrid misconduct as a student, you are suspended for the rest of the semester,” Principal Wong thundered out her punishment. She grabbed Jenny’s wrist and pulled her to her office, probably to call her parents.

“Thanks, Stacy,” Daniel said. I turned to face him and wave him off.

“Think nothing of it,” I told him.

“But, if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have known how...”

“Witchy?” I suggested.

“Yeah, how ‘witchy’ she can get. You’re a real life saver.” I slightly blushed at the compliment but managed to keep the coloring from showing. “Well, better get to class now, see ya,” he said as he walked away. I watched as he turned the corner and disappeared.

“Wow, that was really harsh to remember some things, huh sis?” June asked me as she lightly grabbed my wrist.

“Yeah, but those were some things I needed to get off my chest,” I told her.

“No use carrying a grudge forever, huh?” She nodded, and we both heard Valmont clapping.

“Bravo, bravo, that was a good show,” he said.

“What do you mean by that, Valmont?” I asked him, suspicious of what he had said.

“I mean, how you unmasked the true nature of Jenny Lenkins, but...”

“This was a set-up,” I said as the truth dawned on me. “Correct,” he answered. I frowned at him for fooling me. June tried to tackle him, but I held her back. “Now, I must be going, but I imagine that we shall meet again, Stacy, June,” he said as he casually walked off. Just wait Valmont, one of these days I’m gonna catch you in the act and we’ll see who’s fooling whom.
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Grade 11

Moving Forward in Manhattan

In lower Manhattan on a street called Park Place, plans to replace an old Burlington Coat Factory with a community center were put in place. Open to all people no matter what religion, the center would include a swimming pool, basketball courts and a 500-seat performing arts venue. However, 57.9% of Americans oppose its construction.¹ The reason? The community center, officially named Park51 or the Cordoba house, is being built by a Muslim organization and will include a prayer space for its Islamic members. Consequently, many oppose its construction solely because of its location near ground zero and its affiliation with the Islamic religion. Though it is understandable that so many Americans are still sensitive about 9/11, the U.S. should stand as a beacon of equality, not move backwards on the grounds of intolerance. Unfortunately, we have developed into a society whose inability to engage in meaningful deliberation has caused a continuous cycle of hatred. Worst of all, this retrogression has ultimately begun to inhibit real change and meaningful progress. Caused by mass negligence of reflection and identification of fear, this halt of understanding and dialogue seems insurmountable. However, significant discussion can be restored if self reflection and education occurs in the individual. While a seemingly simple solution, it is one that requires our attention and fortitude if we truly wish to remain a symbol of freedom and a paragon of tolerance.

To discover where we took this wrong turn, we must first recognize the importance of deliberation in society. By definition, deliberation is “discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants,” defined by Gerry Mackie, professor of political science at the University of California San Diego.² Though this concept is simple, it is the meaningful aspect of deliberation that holds such importance in a democratic society. In order to have such discussion, the consideration and discussion of alternatives is vital. One cannot truly deliberate without taking in full thought of the opposition. This idea is imperative even at the basic level. Take relationships for example. Although it is cliché to say that a relationship can only work through proper communication, it doesn’t make the saying any less true. Just as a couple will not succeed without listening to one another and collaborating, a society cannot succeed without deliberation. Likewise, an understanding of the topic at hand must be present, or else the necessary prelude of education to make well supported opinions in the first place is lost. Just as Bloom’s taxonomy describes how knowledge must come before all other types of intellectual behavior, we can see that with


deliberation we must first be educated before we can apply and discuss our opinions.\textsuperscript{3} Discussion loses significance if we do not first understand what we are talking about. Thus, real deliberation occurs when both sides are well versed and can be equally heard.

Yet the question remains, what is the state of deliberation today? Looking at the current trends of deliberation, there seems to be an increasing gap in the communication of opinions through educated and tolerant lenses. The controversy over Park51 in New York is a prime example. Many arguments, specifically of Pastor Terry Jones in Florida who wished to host a “burn a Quran” day, paint a retrogressive picture of peace.\textsuperscript{4} The “debate” surrounding such issues can hardly be considered real discussion. Instead of a real exchange of ideas, opinions were one-sided, and individuals refused to consider all sides. This, in turn, created more hatred and exclusion. For example, when addressing the Muslim community center in New York City, anger became the aura encircling the building’s potential rather than real deliberation of the community center’s purpose. Angry new Yorkers protested the “mosque,” rather than discussing their opinions with the actual Islamic leaders and politicians. According to CNN, 68\% of Americans oppose the building of Park51\textsuperscript{5} whereas only 32\% Americans, according to a Time Magazine poll, have actually have followed the issue.\textsuperscript{6} In fact, most people would not even recognize the name of the community center as it has simply become the “ground zero mosque.” This certainly defies Bloom’s theory of understanding before analysis and shows that people make assumptions on issues without having the knowledge of what the issue even entails. This violates the necessity of education in meaningful deliberation. Amil al-Nimri, a Jordanian writer wrote that “the backlash against the mosque has unleashed a wave of bigotry and hate, at the expense of the intended message of an enlightened and tolerant Islam.”\textsuperscript{7} It is saddening to think that we are portraying this kind of message to our global counterparts because of our lack of deliberation.

Yet, this is made worse by people speaking out and acting on uneducated stereotypes because they are presented as fact. It actually destroys the democratic processes our nation was founded on. Recently, groups in Tennessee protested the development of a new mosque in Nashville. Furthermore, Ron Ramsey, one of the state’s candidates for governor claimed, "Now you could even argue whether being a Muslim is actually a religion, or is it a nationality, a way of life or cult, whatever you want to call it?"\textsuperscript{8} Equating a peaceful religion to a cult is certainly not productive, especially when coming from an elected official. The fact that this

\textsuperscript{3} "Bloom's Taxonomy." Old Dominion University. Web. 10 Jan. 2011


\textsuperscript{5} "CNN Opinion Research Poll." CNN Opinion Research Corporation, 6 Aug. 2010. Web


mindset has arisen should be the real fear for America. The very founding of this country was based upon freedom of religion. But, unfortunately, for many, it has evolved into a country of intolerance. When our own lawmakers cannot focus on real, meaningful deliberation, we come to a standstill: in Congress, in our homes, in our schools, in our minds. As society diverges on the acceptance of minorities, as it refuses to deliberate and reflect on what causes such prejudice, as it continues to close its mind to people who are not like themselves, it undermines the basis of what American life was founded upon.

While the recent discussions over the Cordoba house are seemingly isolated, lack of deliberation like this has been quite prevalent in the last decade. From extreme polarization in Congress to bias and inflammatory news coverage, we have seen an ongoing void of discussion rather than moving towards greater acceptance and equality in the world. Instances like these only perpetuate hatred and prevent real change and progress to emerge. When we fail to see judgment and stereotype for what they are, we fail to move forward. Robert Theobald, the author of *The Rapids of Change*, writes “Only a coherent, shared vision can support a group through the inevitable compromises which are required as we move a vision into reality,” the vision being peace and prosperity. Without communication and discussion and unifying ideas into a common vision, society cannot move forward into an ideal future. Equality and tolerance cannot occur without the compromise and collaboration of opposing ideas. Without unity, and open-mindedness, and real communication, freedom and the ability to transpire as a society is lost.

Such destruction to our core beliefs can be more harmful than we understand, and knowing where this non-communicative cycle began is the first step on the road to recovery. In particular, misguided fear drives the intolerance that hinders discussion. The culture of fear has arisen exponentially in modern years. From such rhetoric of “the war on terror” to the confusion of Islam as a cult rather than a religion, fear has caused the close-mindedness that harms discussion and tolerance. After the 9/11 incident, the fear of terrorism reverberated throughout the country. The war on terror then evolved into fear of the religion itself. The cause of this fear was twofold. First, as a coping mechanism in the attempt to seek someone to blame, the American media and people grouped all Muslims with the terrorist organizations that carried out the 9/11 bombings. Secondly, Islam is different than many of the more common belief systems that reside in America and, thus, is not easily understood. Pew released a poll showing that 30% of Americans “do not know very much” about Islam while 25 percent “know nothing at all.” That means over half of Americans are not well educated on the basics of Islam. The lack of understanding of the Islamic religion makes it easy to simply stereotype all Muslims into one category, rather than try to understand and identify each faction individually. The Islamic religion is a minority in The United States, and 9/11 highlighted a miniscule faction of the religion. As a result, when an incidence like 9/11 occurs, it causes a culture of fear phenomenon. Barry Glassner, author of *The Culture of Fear*, identifies

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that, "False and over-drawn fears only cause hardship." The stigma associated with the Islamic faith stems from the fear of terrorism, which makes sense. Nevertheless, our inability to move forward and learn from the event has allowed this fear to entrench itself into our rhetoric and deliberation. And, although another major terrorist attack has yet to happen since 9/11, this fear continues to rise and cause the hardship of stagnant deliberation. Thus the fear itself is overdrawn and, consequently, causes the hardship of intolerance. Fear causes an almost bubble like effect which traps people in their own close-mindedness. After all, it is easier to simply stay in your own comfort zone rather than branch out into the "unknown." When fear takes over, it hinders the ability for people to discuss and broaden their horizons.

There is certainly hope though. Just as our founding fathers refused to accept their current state of affairs, we can overcome the downfall of democratic deliberation. Yet, the method means that all Americans remember their founding principles and desire to take a step forward. Specifically, it requires self reflection. The need to stop. Think. Identify the fears that drive prejudice. Self reflection is the key to understanding where fear stems from. After that, change can ensue. Furthermore, the desire to reach out and become educated is necessary so that understanding exists at even the basic level. The only way to encourage deliberation is to understand that the problem exists. Then, promote reaching out and communicating in the hopes that minds will be opened. After all, the individual can redirect his/her efforts to tolerance and learning. Especially with the Islamic community center in New York, self reflection and discussion can help the public collaborate and understand each other's ideas. And sure, this essay will not change the status quo and may not even be read by many; however, its writer has found the desire and will to attempt to reverse the direction in which we are headed. As Orison Swett Marden said, “The greatest fear to man in this world comes from himself and not from any outside source.” Only can individuals put forth the effort to confront their fears and work towards eliminating intolerance. Then society can prosper as a whole.

It is apparent that today the public seems more inclined to stay within its own circle of beliefs than to break out and reach towards open-mindedness. As seen through the mosque in New York, people make assumptions without the proper education to support reasoning. Perhaps after self manifestation can an understanding and desire to learn emerge. Not fully a fault of their own, the development of the culture of fear has caused a phenomenon that contradicts the basis of America’s founding—to be a free, tolerant country. Although throughout history there has been this pattern of intolerance, we have recently reached a pinnacle. Now, more than ever, we should strive for equality and acceptance and not resort to past tendencies of discrimination. Fear of the unknown just exacerbates inequality and prevents change. Prior to the 2008 presidential primaries, Michelle Obama admirably said, “I am tired of being afraid,” and continued, “we had to fear people who looked different from us, fear people who believed in things that were different from us, fear one another right here in

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our own backyards, I am so tired of fear.” Similarly, it is time that we as the American people evolve out of this culture of fear. It is time to tolerate and stand up against the paranoia that exists in a country that should stand as an inspiration of hope in equality. May Mrs. Obama’s words echo into the future and through the halls of the Park51. If anything, we can seek to preserve our struggles through understanding one another now and well into the future.
I Am from a Family of Cliché Names

I am from pictures of Jesus, the China Cabinet (from Dorothy), and tiny bits of string.
I am from dusty empty houses and ancient moldy crates.

I am from the warmth of my teddy bear lamp that has survived through sixteen years of moving and changing,
...the warm throw pillows that cover every imaginable surface in my home.

I am from a family of cliché names.
I am a Loretta in a land of Johns, Anns, Gregs, Lukes, and Emilys.

I am from Dollar Store food, too much salt, too much sweet, too many popsicles stuck, all melted to the floor in tiny puddles.

I am from memories trapped in tiny wooden boxes. I am in the ashes of my dead dog, Roscoe, in the rose petals from my mom’s second wedding, in the coins of countries I’ll never see.

I am from perfectionism and polish:
“No slouching, or you’ll grow a hump.”
“Don’t talk like a sailor, or all your teeth will fall out.”
“Crying is meant for the weak; stop it.”

I am from a land of ivy-covered creatures standing heroic forever. Gnomes’ mischievous faces will never change. Frogs and turtles stuck mid-crawl out of ponds.
Children playing and laughing
who will never have to grow up like me.

I am from uncounted houses in countless strange places,
big and beautiful
or small and ready to fall in.
Only home with the people and things that made me
me.
Your Delicacy Weeps

fragile as glass, but my eyes may hide it well
adorned in lace illusory
my delicacy is a tangible difference
painted lips, blushing cheeks
curls so soft you'd cry
skin so fair, a smooth and creamy alabaster
you tell me how beautiful I am
your little doll.

My mouth is closed
sealed shut with a kiss of rouge
I listen every hour
every day
never speak
words are too loud in the ample atmosphere we inhabit
the peace keeps me from
pieces.
My smile never fades,
with you it only broadens.

Sunrise paints my placid disposition with vibrant hues.
I wait for you to wake
to choose me today
play with me today until
the somber tinge of twilight rests on my eyes.
They never move from your face,
my glossy, luminous eyes.

You tell me I'm so flawless
lovely and angelic
but I am not your only toy
so I will wait.
hold onto me forever.
I am your porcelain doll.
The Marionetta in the Mirror

Oh, Marionetta!
Love, your strings
Are showing.
Fraying.
Pulled taut
You are bound so tight
To your master's delight.

Oh, Marionetta,
Your eyes are glass
Devoid.
Pooling hollows
Love, your eyes are made of
All that glitters is not,
Wooden insides are sure to rot.

Oh Marionetta
Your dancing is divine
Floating.
Embellished drifting
Love, your grace instills
A plié so deep
Oil from your hinges seep

Oh.
Marionetta You look
Rather dreadful. There's ink
Dripping down your skull
Don't cry,
Pretty poppet.
All eyes are on you,
Your turn.
Don't keep your audience waiting.

Wind Up, Toy Soldier

Twist Twist Wind
He marches
This hero of war
He marches.
For freedom, for justice.
It's the command.
Tick tick tick Tock
Time is running short
Duck! Hide!
Don’t breathe, Don’t move a muscle.
The dust, it clears
“It’s safe!”
It’s not.
But

Twist Twist Wind
Left Right Left.
Forward on He marches
Our hero of war.
For pride, the homeland.
He follows all commands.

Bang Bang gone
Now He’s just
Bang bang gone.
This wind-up toy is broken
Can we fix it, doc, Can we
Fix it?

Twist Twist No
You can’t fix people
It’s not the people
Not the murdered
Who need the fixing.
It’s you.
Gothic Poem

I feel very gothic, very wrinkled, very old.
Like dark black windmills or blacker still ivory houses.
   Elephant teeth brought in from Africa.
   Their ancient bodies shot and slain to build my house, their pain for my extravagance.
Outside it is neither warm nor cold, but bring a coat—it’s getting dark out.
The dark is like that horrible phase between when your knees hurt and when your prayers stop.
You tremble like creaking trees with iron cables groaning in the wind. Then everything is still.
The grey sky has a migraine today, less light, more fog. The trees are tired too.
   Spindly fingers tap on my window, knocking down dead spiders,
   their crumpled legs folded in a bow.
   The stillness is a silent one;
   my soul is like when the Living visits a graveyard with no one to see.
To kneel before and weep over. Just a stranger’s footsteps passing between the graves,
   stopping at a headstone. Then taking a photograph, of nothing.
   It is quiet, and I am too at peace right now to be lonely. Just old.
I do not wish for sleep, nor living, but somewhere in between. Today is just a dream.
   I’ll wake up, feeling very gothic, very wrinkled, very old.

Nostalgia

Upon discovering my old writing book, I had the sense
   that a dry, dusty drinking glass was being dusted out,
   Splashed, engulfed, filled with freezing cold lemonade—a recipe I remember from Nan.
   Once brimming with refreshment, now parched for a drink.
My insides, dusted out with a soft washcloth, warm and fresh.
After opening the pages, the book that never gave me paper cuts still remembers, faded but waiting.
   Its pages are painted and dripping with my ideas from long ago:
   Before the marriage, before the move.
   All of the colors are still intact. Blues and black were nice.
   But that shiny raspberry-stained ink was always my preferred choice.
   It never let me down for a blemish or a devastating ink mark.
The hand, desperate to prove itself to its holder, stroked the page with ink as dutifully
   as if it were its own blood trailing from the tip of my favorite ballpoint pen.
For me to read now that I have become old, still lies on the shelf, pages stiff, holding their breath, hoping, waiting, for me to write again.

**Saint Chapelle**

You enter into the old-smelling place,
It is a good smell; it is one of trees,
older than history allows.
You long to touch it, to see if it’s real,
wood that’s sleeping, smooth, and ancient.
All is as still as Christmas Eve,
All eyes on the Advent Candles
with their steadfast shining in the cold, December night.
As if in a vast cave, you keep your voice down and gazing head up.
Gold stars lead your way
Skyward you step, now forgetting
and forgiven.
The lights lead only to eyes of God,
looking down on Earth’s history, etched in colored glass,
Shining heavenly power that we can never comprehend,
We see only the light.

**Screen door love poem**

I open the front door, to let the room breathe a bit.
I smell Autumn rush in at me through the rusty-hinged screen door.
The screen door utters its last sound before exhaling a click.
Stubborn and historic, the swinging door never kept the bugs out.
It never slammed back on me, only aged with every other fight.
With me, always turning the knob, gently, back.
Cross-hatched with dull brass wire, it mimicked me as my own
Screen grew long while mother trimmed the curled wires back into a braid.
The door brushed my hair back. The breeze blew back my bangs through the screen.
I slammed back on the chipping oak frame, its body trembled, but never hit back.
Barefoot, open palms, I pressed my hands into the screen,
winning a staring contest with my favorite old dog.
The dent from my hands, every scratch from whining hounds clawing at the paint,
each groove is a riddled memory, etched in our painted, black, oak frame.
Hopelessly in Love

You.
After all this time, I’m still in love with
Sharing hours of pure bliss with one another.
  Now we don’t allow
  Watching each other pass by.
  Instead we spend time
  Laughing and joking and smiling.
  Remember that year defined by
  Shared, embarrassed quick kiss.
  We could never fathom a
  Fight.
  All we ever do is
  Laugh while enjoying the other’s company.
  For over a year now, we can’t
  Disagree.
  We always
  Find a way to make both of us content.
  Still, it’s impossible to
  Experience sorrow.
When you are happy it’s natural for me to
Be happy for you, even at my expense.
  It seems now I must
  Love.
  The time of
  You.

Then one day it’s all reversed...
Sea Shell

The sea shell is one with the white sand, washed
and bathed cyclically by the ocean’s sharp tongue,
its back caked with young flowers of salt
and the grease of black charcoal.
The shell is pulled deeper and deeper
under the sun-rinsed sand,
under the thin sheet of burning white metal,
where it waits,
blistering in the dense humidity,
to be dug up by small hands
and doused in water.
It waits to be placed carefully into a cold, plastic bucket,
where it will finally shed its light green barnacles
and its crisp bristles of sea salt.
And unsoiled, it waits for the light taffy pink of its armor to emerge
and to be touched by the hands of an untrained soul.
Loving Little Alliterations in Literature

My life revolves around English, literally. It’s the language I was born into and speak (although not always correctly); it’s the language that fills every billboard I see and every test I try to pass. It’s the language I am taught in and told to analyze in school, but also it is the language I find so fun to play with.

Yeah, I just put fun, English and play all in the same sentence, and by now I’m sure millions of high school students around the country are screaming to whatever lord they worship for the safe reclamation of my soul. Except, I don’t think I’d want to be saved from the lovely iron metaphors and rock solid syntax that surrounds me. Even though most students balk at the idea of examining a poem by E.E. Cummings, I relish the idea of picking a poem apart line by line and shaking the little details from its pages. The words and phrases that personify a love affair with literature, and life itself; is in Cummings own words:

“we are for each other: then
laugh, leaning in my arms
for life’s not a paragraph
and death I think is no parenthesis” (untitled, E.E. Cummings).

A quote beautiful in its illusion of love and writing alone, but it’s even more profound when paired with the rest of the verse.

It is this depth of love for poetry, for words, that pulled me further into the welcome grasp of language play. At first I struggled to find meanings, as all beginners do. Over time I developed my own style, a flavor not unlike Cumming’s – by now you must realize he is my favorite poet—but with a certain stream of conscious flair, one that tends to tie pieces of lines together and separate them at the same time.

“What will happen when i die?
will i—
    see a flash of white light at the end—
of a dark tunnel
    arrive at golden, pearly gates
with a white feather—
    pen; to write down my name
spend eternity—"

This short excerpt from one of my own poems shows the way in which lines flow together to form meanings entirely new but mesh with the overall idea of the poem, and it illustrates how I cut off my written thoughts to punctuate, to emphasize the importance of themes and images. This patient puppeteer play drew me into writing; it gave me a wide new appreciation for the effort and cunning slid into a poem by its author. Noticing and utilizing this skill opened my eyes into a wider world of wonder as well.
Now I find myself doing this in my sleep. Yes, in my sleep. I’m not lying, the flow of language is so engraved into my soul that my unconscious thoughts are plagued with it. The internal word play is so strong I find myself stopping in the midst of yard work and pondering out loud to my poor mother, the outlet to many of my day dreaming musings, why it is that we turn words like “terrific,” “wicked,” and “awesome” from their original meanings (terror filled, evil, and something of awe) to exclamations of excitement and happiness. While it may have nothing to do with the leaves I am supposed to rake up, it still crosses my mind and stays there for many days.

This epiphany has sent me in a search for more amusing changes of meaning and complex words with precise meanings. Like prevaricate. That fun little word, a word not in the average teen vocabulary, but a skill we all know how to use. To prevaricate, a verb, is easily defined as just a lie but, more accurately, to speak or act in an evasive manner, to tell only a partial truth and not the whole. This fun little word has tickled my delight with the new sound to roll off my tongue and with its precise meaning. Although I may not have found it a home in a poem, I still hang on to it, stealing it away in the well-kept portions of my brains, those areas where I can silently ponder over definitions and letter sounds, wondering why it is I’m drawn to these specific words and when can I use them to their best benefit. Adumbrate, juxtapose, prevaricate, parsimonious, and cardiomyopathy, to name a few.

I don’t just sit around and think about the language. I mean I will, but let’s face it, even I can bore myself with the word adumbrate after a good 32 hours. I write. I am a writer, and I am proud to say that. I focus most of my attention on an incredibly long, in-depth chunk of prose that I’ve been working at strand by strand since 2008. However, whenever the mood strikes me, or rather flares up because I’m always in the mood to write, I toss out a piece of poetry. Or maybe just a poetic thought that in two weeks time could be a full blown 75 line piece. A few of my ideas floating around now are simple lines:

“College;
Four white walls eating away your soul”

and

“I’ve been staring at pale yellow walls for what seems like hours,
And it’s times like these that I realize
That the fast track, crash collision course I’m on;
Has violently blown up”

These two pieces are supposed to go together, but I have yet to tie a knot or build a web interlocking them, so for now they lie humbly in a word document staring at me, waiting to become something grand and intricate.

My inspiration comes from every little thing in my life. I’ve written a poem about a cold Pop-Tart® I happened to be shoving down my gullet, and I’ve written little ditties on the disillusioned exhaustion that perforates many a relationship. I find that I don’t have to go anywhere to get my inspiration, yet I love traveling on family vacations and being able to take in more of the world to paint an accurate picture of my thoughts. As an example, once my mom sold one of our old couches on eBay or Craig’s list, and the man who bought it was such a character he quickly prompted a quirky little snapshot of his life:

“He drove up in a big white van;
The one he used to ship nuclear products around.
A child of the 60’s,
His hair was grey,
His teeth weren’t all there,
But he smiled.
And on that cold and bitter day,
he gladly took our couch away."

I tried to single out the last rhyme to give it the most meaning, but I also urged to tie it in further to the poem. Thus the line grey was to keep the rhythm, to make the poem whole. As if I wasn’t done yet, I added a preferred slant rhyme to the first two lines to incompletely mirror the last two. I had fun trying to synchronize the poem in a way it could accurately catch what I wanted, for this man truly was something special.
Last Conversations

My Story- January 31, 2007-

This Wednesday started out just like any other one but would definitely not end just like a normal day. I woke up to my alarm clock buzzing. That irritating sound echoed in my head as I tried to become fully conscious. I looked into my mom and dad’s bedroom, adjacent from my and my twin brother’s room, to see my father sitting up in his bed waving at me as he said, “Good morning.” I replied back with a tired, “Good morning, Dad” and readied myself just like any other eighth grader: took a shower, ate breakfast, and brushed my teeth. My mom drove Andrew and me to St. Gregory’s. Today I had to practice saying my speech to the fourth grade class in preparation to speak in front of an audience at the Optimist Club Contest. My topic was: What is the most challenging part of your life so far? At that point in my life it was simply choosing what I had to eat for breakfast each day. Ironically, I later found out this status wouldn’t last. Another thing about school I remember that day is during physical education, we were playing volleyball. Andrew and I were smarting off to the teacher, and she made me run laps the rest of the period – around thirty minutes.

I am the twin that gets into trouble, always blamed, never given the chance to tell my side of the story. My mom had a C-section, which meant Andrew and I were born only a minute apart. I was the unlucky one to be pulled out last, being the baby of the family by chance. Once while Andrew and I were watching television, he slapped himself in the face and yelled to my mother in the other room that I had hit him. She sent me to bed without my side of the story. This was typical of us as kids.

After school that day, Andrew and I walked to my friend Coby’s house and stayed there until my mom left work to take us home; since we lived out in the country it was cheaper for us to go to his house instead of paying to be bussed home from school. Playing video games and listening to music while drinking Dr. Pepper was always a highlight of going to Coby’s. Tonight would be different; we stayed and ate supper with his family. I remember Coby’s mom making us Totino’s Pizza. Open gym happened every Wednesday night from 6:30 to 8:30 at St. Gregory’s for middle school kids. A lot of my classmates were there; my closer friends and I were playing a game of basketball when the person in charge, Chris Jacobson, came over and told me my uncle wanted to talk to me. Andrew and I went into one of the pre-school classrooms to see my uncle holding my sister, both of them crying. Andrew and I were confused. My uncle sobbingly told us to come closer. He held us, as Andrew and I still looked on in confusion, not knowing why they were crying. We realized something horrible had happened. Tears rolling down his face, Uncle Doug finally found the courage to tell us. His exact words were, “There has been an accident.” I felt nothing, my body numb with shock. In my head I imagined a car accident, farm incident, something survivable. The whole way home I remember asking myself what had happened. Arriving at my house an ambulance and cars were parked along the drive. We walked inside the front door to friends and family standing
inside the living room. My mom, blanket covering her, stood up from the couch and met us in
the middle of the living room with a giant hug.

My Sister’s Story-January 31, 2007-
I don’t remember a lot from that day. I guess I have blocked it out. When I left for
school, my dad sat at the kitchen table. I know I told him, “Good bye, Dad,” but I couldn’t say if
I told him I loved him. Being a typical sixteen year old, a pissed off mood was usually how I felt.
I’m not a morning person and have never really been fond of school. I remember having an
awards assembly that morning at the Mary Lynn Performing Arts Center at Northwest
Missouri State University’s campus. There isn’t anything significant about the school day that
sticks out in my mind. My friend, Jayme, dropped me off at my house
after school. I looked
outside for my dad’s truck but didn’t see it anywhere.
Assuming no one was home, I went to the kitchen for a snack. After getting something
to eat, I headed downstairs. For the next hour or so, I listened to music and browsed the
internet. I remember laughing and joking with my friends on instant messenger. It is an awful
feeling to think back now and know that while I sat in the basement, carefree, my dad lay dead
in the next room. I didn’t know. I couldn’t have known. But it still hurts. Sometime during that
hour I got up and went over to the love seat. A notebook caught my attention,
and I opened it. There, on yellow writing paper, was a list of things my
dad had written that made him happy.
After skimming his handwriting, I immediately put it back. I figured it was from his therapy and
felt embarrassed as I read it, like it was personal and he’d be upset if he knew I’d seen it.
Eventually, I went back upstairs until I had to go to
confirmation. I remember mom asking where my dad was and me telling her that I hadn’t seen him. It didn’t even cross my
mind that something could be horribly wrong. I wasn’t at confirmation very long when Uncle
Doug showed up at the door. I had just happened to glance up and saw him standing there. He
motioned to me and I walked out in the hall. He was visibly upset as told me there had been an
accident. My first thought, car crash. Foolishly, I asked if my brothers were with my dad, too.
Doug just shook his head no. I didn’t know that the twins had been right next door at Open
Gym the whole time. We grabbed my brothers and headed home after I had to tell my teacher
what had happened.

My Mom’s Story-January 31, 2007-
Bryan stayed in bed as I readied myself for work, sitting up on the side of the bed as I
started to leave for the bank. I remember giving him a hug and kiss, telling him, “I love you.
Hang in there. Everything will get better.” I worked until about 4:15. That Wednesday was
cloudy and snowing just a little. I remember thinking I hoped it didn’t pile up a lot because he
wouldn’t want to work. I had the vacation schedule from the bank and was going to ask Bryan
if he wanted me to take some days off the next week to go to Tulsa with his mom and dad for
her cancer treatment. I thought maybe we could get away for a while.
I arrived home and went downstairs to check the wood stove and to add more oak logs,
but it happened to be already full. I asked Amanda if she knew where her dad was or if she had
seen him after school. Then I changed my clothes and started making hamburger casserole for
supper. I thought tonight I would make a big meal for the family so we could all sit around and
talk to each other. Supper was ready, but Bryan still wasn’t home. I wondered where he could
be but remembered that Grandpa needed a motor or something worked on. Perhaps he went over there. Six o'clock came, and I knew Amanda needed to eat so she could get to Confirmation. I found myself still wondering where he could be and began to worry. After Amanda left I called Vera, Bryan's mom, to see if she had seen him or if he went over there. She said, "No." She even had Bryan’s dad check in the shed at their house. She told me to give her a call when he showed up. I sat down to eat supper and watched Friends. Now really worried, I began to get a bad feeling.

I had taken a few bites and thought I needed to check downstairs again. While he was in the hospital for depression, I had left his truck outside but didn't think about him parking it inside like he typically would have done before. So, I checked the garage downstairs, finding his pickup. Wondering where he could be, I turned and spotted his body on the floor.

Little did we all know, these would be our final conversations and last memory of Dad alive.

Our Minister- February 2, 2007-

Bryan, age 44, died January 31, 2007, at his home in Maryville, Missouri. He was born July 27, 1962, in Maryville to C.B. and Vera and was a 1981 graduate of Northeast Nodaway High School, Ravenwood, MO. He married Patricia on September 10, 1988, in Maryville. Bryan was the owner/operator of a lawn service and he also farmed. He was a member of St. Gregory Barbarigo Catholic Church and the Knights of Columbus. He is survived by his wife, Patricia; one daughter, and two sons.
TAG

“There’s no intelligence like TAG intelligence”

That was my mantra for a long time, weaving in and out of new assignments for my TAG Class. TAG stands for “Talented and Gifted: Literature and Humanities,” and for a while seemed as pretentious as it sounds. Class was like stepping into a think-tank for an hour each day, putting all these problems in a critical and unrealistic view, and then stepping out to go on with the rest of my classes. All of these intense and deep thoughts ended at the door, at which point I would ask “Wait, what was the point of all of that?”

That's how it started, at least. Every day I was changing my attitude for TAG, then toning it back down again for my regular ones. I couldn't explain why or how it was happening, but nothing else seemed to demand that level of thought. And the assignments? I spent hours of the night pounding more thought, more profound and deep thought, into my papers until it seemed like TAG material. It wasn't natural, and it sure as hell didn't seem like my work. The essays I started writing were formal and grammatical and long and... Good.

I didn't know who was writing these papers, doing all the thinking, and raising his hand each day in class. I didn't know who was walking into that room so damned talented and gifted, but I loved him. I wanted to be like him everywhere, making Homeric allusions in the coffee shop, citing Tolstoy on the bus. When I changed light bulbs, I wanted it to be cathartic, I wanted it to birth me and cleanse me like every long-term discussion in that classroom had. I hadn't even taken an honors level language arts class before this, and already I was debating who I'd meet first in scholarly heaven (I decided on Kurt Cobain).

I never felt the sting of guilt that eventually follows pride. It wasn't like past times when I was drunk with the thrill of a well-written paper. I was admiring the work of a distant relative, seen only in that brief passing time as I exited the TAG room door. I was patting him on the back, saying “Good job!” and watching him go down the hall with envy. Then I would go on into my next class and doodle pictures of him accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. He started thanking God, his friends, and then finally me. He was so modest.

Several weeks into it, the 'intelligence' started to bleed together. I was writing paragraphs in Microbiology and sharing allegories in World History. I was recognizing my peers from TAG in the hall, remarking silently in my head “Wait, you're a person too?” The TAG assignments had fluttered down from their pedestal. I met them the same way I now did all homework, with lengthy detail and profound thought. Quotation marks speckled pages with textual evidence and foundation for my outlandishly philosophical claims, now written with conviction and definition: “God is indeed the spirit of philanthropy.” Oh yes, I was brilliant.

At one point I prayed that my idol, this figure of cosmic intelligence, might be me. I would bump into him in the hallway and overlap, feeling the burden of depth of thought, the chains of reason. The sensation was slow in coming, but for once I was starting to feel talented. The more I began to think unconditionally, beyond assignments or grades or point-averages, I
began to feel *gifted*. The sense of accomplishment was not gross and overwhelming, but more subtle so that I felt it alone, catching my reflection in computer screens and imagining it were on the backs of books. What I saw was the face of someone worthwhile, an idol, the kind I had decided I wouldn't need anymore.

"There's no service like TAG service"

I had adopted my new mantra somewhat reluctantly as I dove into the second year of my high school's TAG program. I expected, at most, a rebuffed and recycled version of all of last year's lessons and projects, similar to my poetry class and the one before it. The class I got, on the other hand, was completely new. Every sketchy and difficult assignment from the year before was replaced with new sketchier and more difficult ones. I figured it was a similar process to how Neo-Nazis might make Neo-Concentration Camps, you know, *bigger and better*.

What I found in my second year of TAG, however, was a completely different train of thought. It wasn't a rehashing of our former discoveries but instead a fresh new look into the topic of service. As broad as that sounds, we didn't spend much time in the fast-food or adult sections as I would have liked to, but rather we looked into the selfless kind. It was an awful lot to expect of high school students, yet we collectively turned down our MP3 players and shut our vanity mirrors long enough to hear the assignment. It was well worth it.

The order was essentially that we each perform some type of service, selfless in nature, and relate it to our spiritual compasses (whatever non-biblical passage the class would be reading at the time) in a meaningful way. It wasn't much of a tall order until the implications started to get moral: *we weren't doing the work for a grade*. My mind hit a brick wall at this detail. If the teacher wouldn't be grading our work, then what was our incentive to do it at all? They couldn't expect us to go out of our way for no reason. What's the point?

I writhed on the matter for days. Between drawing myself with a cape and deciding what color it should be, I hardly had time to throw together an actual project. I could have been doing more important things, like finding a way to translate the number of Wikipedia articles I've read into viable ACT score improvements or calling ex-girlfriends to see if they were still into me enough to raise my self-esteem, but none of the alternatives seemed to make me feel any better. How selfless could the damn service be if it was the only way for me to feel good?

With my mantra on repeat in my head and a genuine will to help others, I began work on my project. The details are something I'm not willing to elaborate on, but let's just say I made *blank* for others especially for their *blank* and it made them feel *blank*. I essentially did for them what I'd been doing for myself the past year now, stroking my ego and brooding on all of the fantastic things I had accomplished. It's not an easy thing to celebrate what others have achieved. It's a lot like pride, horrifically shifted in some way that you can actually feel it for another human being. It felt... good, to be honest.

The same methods I had used to praise myself—art, literature, attitude—were all shifted outward for the sake of others, and I welcomed them to abandon their shame and be glad, the same way I had the year before. The reward for my service: not selfless but *invigorating*. It was like eating an epiphany crepe with nostalgia filling and covering it in heartfelt syrup. Deep inside me it birthed a renewal: an interest in the light which exists inside me, shining only when I illuminate others.
“There's no catharsis like TAG catharsis”

I fleshed out and crafted my own mantra, one which I actively spread to others and believe in myself: “See not the imperfection in who you are but rather the perfection in who you will be and the components of that person you make up today.” I was ready to have it trademarked, alongside my likeness, handwriting, and the titles of my seven future autobiographies, when a realization hit me. Through my progression within TAG, from the development of my writing skills to the formation of my attitude, all of the peers and teachers and elements of that organization that had grown and shaped me were just shadows.

The largest figures of my high school career are mere silhouettes in a story that features only one true or even important character: me. No matter their significance or brilliance at the time, by the conception of this writing they are nameless automatons, unremarkable in the broad and overarching ways that I describe them. Within the piece I have no foil, no magnetic north to whom my character adheres, and no antagonist beyond my own meandering thoughts. I am the rising action, the climax, and the aftermath, one simultaneous tale of both self-loathing and narcissistic obsession, and mostly narcissistic obsession.

But that's not how the real story is, and there's not just one character behind it all. There's details beyond the vague and dodgy descriptions, like a school called Alpine High with an absurdly outdated mascot, “The Indians,” that makes other schools uncomfortable to taunt them at football games. It's that same Central High that hosts a TAG class, though others in the district do as well. It's not a shadow-name or pseudonym, though TAG sounds even nerdier when its classmates are tacking on titles like “Tagonites” or the instructors are practicing the “Tagademy Awards.”

Though students do have to qualify as exceptional to take the class, the treatment is far from that of Nazi Concentration Camps and the ratio of intense discussions on Muriel Barbery to that of YouTube videos of cats is a healthy balance. The instructors of the class are the silver-streaked Mr. Roberts and his well-versed successor Mr. Henesy, two men who have earned the title “Mister” so well that it would be a disgrace to list either of them by first name. Though the both of them are near exact projections of one another in terms of spoken intelligence, each represents a pivotal place in the class' often divergent nature between literature and modern media.

Classmates vary from those taking TAG for the first time and its many veteran members, though seasoned returnees such as Elliot West and David Parker are the very same who helped to bridge my own introduction to TAG. Leaps in thought and reason, shared during the class' many Socratic seminars, are key parts of the TAG learning experience. It is not unusual, nor frowned upon, for a student to cry out at the inception of an epiphany, and for the class to urge him or her to uncover the fresh new thought. The class is NOT pretentious; we really do look like gifted kids.

There are other characters who are closer to the main character. There's a girl that he loves who wasn't mentioned in the story, probably because it would be difficult to discern from when he's talking about her and himself. I don't describe him in detail for the same reason, because the heavily repeated use of words like badass and ballsy would probably make for a poor read. Those close associates of mine who I've had the unparalleled delight of knowing and convincing of their own magnificence over the past year will go as the unsung shades of this work, being only noted the greatest fuel of love I've known. I am gifted with a collection of great friends, talented in those relationships, and more human than ever.
Humpty Dumpty

Bright-chop my morning,
Empty yourself on the hard-rock of my wall.
Feel the pungent air as it punches your face.
Everybody bleeds from the inside.
In salt we are buried; in salt
We are returned to our soils.

Sit up where the whole world stains and soils
Your vision, drips lovely in light of morning.
Don’t let wind knock you in the face, salt
In wounds, push you to the ground that is dirty wall.
Everything falls out from the inside.
Amass emotions too great for your face.

There are pieces of you in the face
Of Mother Earth, there to stay in her soils.
For now, you lay peeled inside
Of pain. Yawning morning
Kisses you across your broken self, the sky wall.
They will find you, they will breathe air salt.

But you are still whole. They salt
Their day by saving you. Face
that you are broken inside of your whole self, from wall.
Your sapped red blood soils,
The tracks towards health. By morning
You will be halfway strewn on death’s tender door. Halfway inside.

And all evening they plunge their hands to save you—inside
Of your precious body—but you salt
Their night with bloodied thoughts. And by morning
Everything about you will be snapped in half: face,
Pale white and collapsed in pain that soils
The meals they’ll have later on-memories of you on the wall.

And there is nothing to do to save you; they will wall
You off with futile stitching. You are meaningless. Inside
of final tender days, your cavernous wailing soils
Their existence. Hearts moan for you. Salt
Will preserve your body when you die. Face
Will be a broken thing, in salt-slather. Dead by morning.

I am wall. Not responsible, a witness to what soils
The inside of your fragile existence, and a thousand mornings
Will pass, with no one knowing the salt of your face.
Leather and Oil

“She’ll be scared enough when she wakes up; why did you have blindfold her?”
“I don’t want to see the look in her eyes when she wakes up, that’s why.”
The grogginess was slowly fading from my mind, leaving it eerily calm and clear. The last thing I remembered was walking down the street, window shopping on my break from work. I was eyeing some dark blue heels in the Rue 21 shop window, when I saw a guy walking towards me. I didn’t think anything of it, since the street had been busy only moments ago. I was just about to go into the store to check for a price, when he blocked my path.

“Keelie,” he cocked his head to one side. It wasn’t a question. I quickly stepped back.
“No, you’re mistaken.” I lied, attempting to step around him. He moved to his left, again blocking my way.
“I know who you are. No point in lying to me,” he moved slightly closer, his voice slow, careful, and hoarse. He had scraggly, dirty blonde hair, which shagged down on his forehead, sagging slightly under the sweat from the afternoon sun. He was a good six-three, maybe four. Despite the heat, he had a white hoodie and heavy, dark wash jeans on.
“What do you want?” I asked. “I don’t have any change on me. If I did, I’d be glad to get you some lunch.”
“If you don’t struggle, this will all be easier,” he reached for me. I opened my mouth to scream and felt an excruciating pain right behind my left ear. His face wavered as I felt myself falling and everything went black.

As I awoke, I felt a scratchy blindfold over my eyes, which was tied roughly into my long hair. I tried to keep my panicked breathing under control, breathing slowly through my nose, as if I was still asleep. I smelled leather, not like greasy leather jackets, but those old-fashioned leather working shops that are mainly tourist traps. It was a combination of leather and car oil.
“You know she’ll recognize our voices, even if she is blindfolded, right?” This was the deep, hoarse voice of the man who’d talked to me earlier. I couldn’t determine who he was, contrary to his conviction that I would.

“Don’t be a puss. Even if she does, who will she tell? She’ll be here for a while.”
“I don’t think this is right. You didn’t tell me you were going to knock her out.”
“Jesus. You are such a baby. You wanna buy her an ice cream cone and send her on her way? Grow a pair, why don’t you?”
The wrenching in my gut confirmed my horrible thought; this deeper, huskier voice belonged to Ryder. He was my, well, not ex-boyfriend, as we’d never dated. He was this scary-tough guy from my high school days; he’d stalked me for roughly six months while I worked at Charlotte Russe in the mall. He’d followed me home from work a few times and had called my home phone almost every night. I had a restraining order out against him, and he spent six months in jail for sexual harassment. A day after he’d got out, he’d left a small note under my windshield wiper.
You’ll be sorry, Sweetheart

Sweetheart had been the name he’d first called me when he’d came into the store, pretending to shop around and following me into the back room where he had backed me into a corner and tried to feel me up. Every time he called, every time he came into the store, and every time he followed me to my car, he’d called me Sweetheart. The thought still gave me shudders.

His husky voice, seductive when it shouldn’t be, jarred my reminiscing mind back into the present.

“She really is pretty,” he murmured, and I felt his hand brush back my hair from my forehead. Even though I couldn’t see him, I knew what he looked like: short, black hair, which he usually wore with a little bit of gel, and piercing, pretty blue eyes that had silver rings around the pupils. He usually wore dark wash jeans and black t-shirts and drove a black Silverado truck. Even though the whole stalker thing was scary as hell, he was very hot. He had that bad boy thing going for him and was fresh, not greasy and nasty, with clean, straight white teeth. I hated that I thought he was good-looking. I hated that he had that combined smell of leather, oil, mint gum, and light beer that smelled so sweet. And, most of all, I hated that he thought he could do this to me.

I breathed slowly, smelling the oil and leather again. Shuffling somewhere to my left, became footsteps moving closer to me. I stirred, coughing slightly.

“Keelie.” It wasn’t a question but a statement. I turned my head to the voice. His voice.

“Ryder.” I whispered, sucking in a deep breath.

“Nice to see you could finally joined us.” I felt his hand on my shoulder, and I jerked away, trying to lash out at him. But, to my horror, I found my hands tied under me. He chuckled a little, and angry, hot tears welled under my eyelids. “I’m tired of chasing you around, Keelie. Tired of watching you go to dinner with Mr. Chevy Malibu.” I whipped my head back, trying and failing to see him through my blindfold. He laughed again. “Oh, yeah. I know about your boyfriend. He drives a Chevy Malibu, goes to Harrison Prep, and is the running back on their varsity football team. He likes to take you out to Applebee’s or Mexican. He’s not much of a Chinese fan but takes you there occasionally because he really likes you.

“I wonder how much he’ll like you when you’re with me in the backseat behind the abandoned barn on 13th Highway.” I started to cry then, scared out of my mind. He’d been watching me, even then? Had he seen—“And,” he added, “I really liked when he actually got your shirt off that night in the movie theater parking lot. It’ll be my turn soon.” I tried to fling my legs at him. He pushed them away, cursing under his breath. I felt a cold lump pressed against my temple and immediately froze.

“Don’t move.” He ordered, his voice a deep growl. I silently obliged. “I’m going to take off your shirt. If you move, I’ll blow your brains out.”

“Please, don’t...” He pulled the hammer back, and I tried to keep still. He put a hand to my stomach, slipping his fingers under the hem of my top. He moved his hand up, moving to yank the shirt over my stomach, and I spat in his face. Well, I spat at the place where I guessed his face would be. He froze for a second; he cursed, the trigger clicked, and there was a massive explosion. In the two seconds I had left to live, he ripped back the blindfold and pressed his lips to mine. I saw the splatter of my crimson blood on his lips. Then there was no more.
A Shooting Star

The most prominent memory I possess is that of my Grandma, Beverly Lee Taber. She was one of the strongest people I have known, acting as the glue that held our family together. Whether we were dealing with getting divorces, grandkids going away for college, cousins having babies, or anyone getting new cars, she was the one who kept things sane on Sunday afternoons when all twenty-one of us met at her and Grandpa’s house for dinner.

When Grandma got sick, we never expected it would be the cancer again. She had had cancer when I was a baby; my mom has pictures of her holding me, both of our heads bald and fuzzy, but she had fought off the breast cancer then, which allowed her to watch her family grow for sixteen more years.

Her passing came suddenly. At Thanksgiving, she hadn’t been able to cook which meant something was seriously wrong. I remember her sitting in her recliner, sleeping in front of the television, ignoring the food my aunts had made for us. We knew she was sick, but neither the doctors, nor she and Grandpa had let us in on the diagnosis.

Grandma passed away on the evening of December 10, 2008. The beginning of this horrible night was, and still is, a little blurry. I was home, with my mom, my younger brother, Wes, and our Aunt Judy, who had come down from Iowa with our Uncle Brian because, unlike the grandkids, they knew she was going to leave us soon. As I sat in the kitchen, watching my mom make dinner, Dad called. He told Mom that Grandma had been put under morphine to keep her from hurting; this coma-like sleep was basically irrevocable. I didn’t understand. Why would the doctors put her in a coma? She was just sick; sure, she had cancer, but lots of people had cancer. It could be fought.

So, I called my cousin, Becca who has been my best friend since we were babies, like sisters born to different parents. She had been planning to stay over at a friend’s house that night; nobody had notified her of Grandma’s condition. Instead, she headed straight over to our house. On her way between our houses, Grandma passed away.

Sometimes, it doesn’t seem like Grandma died. I can still smell her soap, still see her hands stitching embroidery for quilts. I can envision her laying out her jigsaw puzzles, falling asleep to the TV and snoring like a freight train, and making fantastic meals for over twenty people. I can hear her voice and see her wink at me when I said something unladylike that thought was funny but scolded me for anyway.

I will never forget the look on Becca’s face when she walked through our front door. She set her things down and walked into the kitchen. Mom took her hand and told her that Grandma was gone. Becca’s face crumpled, and her nose immediately went red. She let out this gut-wrenching sob, and Mom caught her in a hug. Becca’s hands went into a vice-like grip on my mom, holding onto her like the only lifeline she had left. I sat at the kitchen table, bawling, cradling my head in my hands. Becca collapsed at the kitchen table and took hold of my hand. My Aunt Judy sat with us, talking quietly, trying to calm us down. She then moved us into the living room to drink some hot chocolate.

As the hysterics ebbed away, leaving only hiccups and blubbering, Mom told us to pack for overnight; we were going to go stay with Grandpa. We wanted his comfort as bad as he needed ours. When the uncles came home, they told us they had a story to tell. I personally didn’t think I could stand to hear a story about something witty or funny that Grandma had
said or did, but, out of respect for her and the tears that still lingered on all of their faces, I took Becca’s hand and listened.

Becca’s dad, Mike, told us how, after Grandma had died, they were all driving home from the hospital in Kansas City. On the highway, at the exact same time, all four brothers and my Grandpa looked up and saw a brilliant shooting star flying across the black sky—a straight arc, right over their heads, disappearing over Garden City. They all agreed it was a sign, her way of showing them that she was in Heaven and that she wasn’t in pain anymore.

I honestly did not know how to take it. I took our older cousin Amanda’s hand in one of mine and Becca’s in the other and felt like our Grandma was watching us, not wanting us to grieve for her. This story was followed by many more, most of them humorous, talking about funny things Grandma had said or done throughout our lives. The funniest story was told by Becca and me. Once, when we were in middle school, Grandma and Grandpa had taken four grandkids camping in their huge camper: Becca, Jared, Wes, and I. We loved doing this, looking forward to it all year.

Grandma was very old-fashioned in some aspects. She got her hair done once a week and then wrapped her crown in toilet paper to hold her hair in place when she slept. We’d seen Grandma’s hair like this before; her short black curls were hidden behind two-ply bathroom tissue and secured with black bobby pins all over her head. Becca and I thought nothing of it; it was regular to us, since we frequently stayed all night at their house.

She had fixed her hair up and was sitting idly on the small sofa, watching the news on their tiny television, when we heard a crash outside. Normally, this wouldn’t have been a big deal, since we were in a public campground and people were all around us. But this noise came from right outside the door. Becca and I were resting in the bunk beds, drifting off to sleep, when we heard it again. Crash! We both rolled over immediately, staring out of our tiny porthole windows. The large, black trash bag that Grandpa had hung on a seven-foot pole was shaking back and forth, rocking the whole pole. Becca shouted to Grandma that something was alive in the trash bag. Grandpa was snoring away in his and Grandma’s bed, so Grandma heaved herself wearily from the couch and walked to the door.

"Are you going out there?" I asked, but she didn’t reply. She pulled one of the metal sticks used for s’mores from under the table and climbed down the rickety stairs. Becca and I watched, mortified, as she tiptoed over to the trash bag in her white slippers and green nightgown, with her head wrapped in toilet paper.

"The neighbors are going to think she’s crazy," Becca whispered. I stifled a laugh, giggling against my fist as Grandma poked the bag. A raccoon suddenly appeared, climbing lazily down the pole, a half-eaten hot dog in his mouth.

"Shoo!" my grandma shouted, poking at him with the stick. Becca and I were loudly laughing now, both of us imagining what the average passerby would see. "Hey, Phyllis. Check out that crazy woman in Lot 14. Is that toilet paper around her head? She’s playing with that raccoon, look! Man, some people are just weird."

Grandma chased the raccoon away and hobbled back into the camper, glancing at us as we tried not to laugh. She smiled, chuckling to herself. "Goodnight, girls."

"Goodnight, Grandma," we giggled.

Everyone laughed at our story, knowing it was just like Grandma to be funny and daring. Our cousin Jon told a story about how she’s ridden the biggest roller coaster in
*Adventureland* with him, and my dad told about the time she’d beaten him so bad in cards one Christmas Eve that she’d walked around the rest of the night with a limp, telling people she’d been “Kicking ass at cards” all night.

The whole family stayed over, and after the stories stopped, the crying began again. It felt like there was a huge hole in the room; nobody sat in her recliner the whole night. We couldn’t even talk to each other. It hurt to say her name. Sometimes, it still does.

The day of the funeral, we stood at the coffin, each of us placing an item inside next to her, to keep us with her even in the afterlife. My token was a small silver ring. My grandma and I had often gone to garage sales together; we loved to find bargains and trinkets. We had found matching rings at one sale; they were hardly worth any material value, but we had bought them anyway. The silver weaving housed a small, oval-shaped opal. She had not been wearing hers when she had died, but I had found it in her jewelry box at their house. I wanted her to have it always, so I would be able to have a link to her with me. I plan to wear mine on my wedding day.

The hardest part of the entire funeral was when it was my dad’s turn to leave her a token. He had chosen a small, handmade ornament from the Christmas tree at Grandma and Grandpa’s house. He had made it for Grandma when he was a small child. In messy, green-glitter handwriting, it said ‘Mommy’ on the old, red felt.

“I don’t know where to put it!” he had suddenly cried, his voice going higher and his breath becoming shaky, bracing himself against the coffin. My mom had hurried back then, having already walked past the casket. She put her arms around his shoulders and held onto him. I had to turn away, not wanting to see him crying when I had never seen him cry before.

The service was very beautiful with flowers everywhere. We sat off in a separate room during the ceremony, and even out of view of the rest of our friends, I knew the place was packed and everyone was crying. When it came time to go to the burial site, I wasn’t sure I could stand it. The thought of her being lowered under the earth, even in a satin-lined, beautiful mahogany box, was more than I could think about. But, Aunt Marlyce reminded me that it was only her shell and that her mind, heart, and soul weren’t in there. I knew she was sitting up in Heaven, watching us, willing us to not cry for her. We would all see her again someday. I still cry for her occasionally but know that she wouldn’t want me to stop living my life just because she had to stop living hers.
Frosty Red Lipstick

Monday, the day my grandma stopped breathing, I had come home sick from school. I had spent the weekend before getting to know a guy, a potential romance, and smoking cigarettes with him. I was reaching the end of an uncommitted long-term relationship and had tried to sever the tie by finding someone new. The not-so-potential-after-all romance got me a cough and killer nausea. By the time second period had rolled around Monday, I was defeated. I realized that no amount of convincing myself could keep me at school, even if I had put effort into my appearance that day.

I went to the office and called my dad. He rolled up half an hour later in our Chevy Blazer, which we had bought from my grandparents for ten dollars. I got home and crashed, finally waking up around two-thirty. I didn't know at the moment, but around the time I was returning from a cloud of sleep, my grandma was headed to an existence that was slightly different in its haziness.

The phone call from my father came a few hours later. Home alone, I had no idea what to do. The last thing I wanted was to believe him. She had been suffering, and it was selfish of me to want her back, but I couldn't help myself. Taking a walk was the only activity that sounded even remotely appealing in my barely-functioning mind. I threw on a jacket and crawled outside.

Anxiety had consumed me for weeks at the thought of her leaving. I didn't want my Grams to be a concept, intangible even in the darkest and quietest of evenings. In my mind, she wasn't supposed to transcend my physical comprehension. She was my idol, everything I aspired to be and more.

When I finally lay down in the darkening shadows of the grass, I was in a clearing of evergreens. The truth had begun to catch up with me. Curling into a fetal position, I tried to return to the childhood innocence of The Days When No One You Love Has Died Yet. Anyone who would have stumbled upon me would have found a vulnerable, shivering teenaged thing. I doubt I was even recognizable as a person at that point.

Soon it was too cold and dark to stay outside. I picked up as many pieces of myself as I could carry, but I left the majority of them in the dark, green, grass between the evergreens. I wasn't sure if I loved the grass for being alive or if I hated it for being an uncomforting sea of sharp blades.

I walked inside and called a friend of mine. When she picked up the phone after a few tries, I was incoherent.

Oh, god, my role model isn't here anymore. I'm alone and she isn't here anymore and I have to find a new one but I don't want to look and oh god what am I going to do with the things she gave me and why does this hurt so bad and I just want it to stop, everything, right now please.

She took me out for the evening, trying to cheer me. I tried to make my friend feel better about the situation by putting on my happy mask. As the days ticked by, aching and slowly, it felt like things were never going to get better.

Invisible to my blind eyes, though, things already were getting better.
I confessed to my dad that I'd been dreadfully unhappy for several years and that I had thought about killing myself, kicking my own bucket. The game of life had become a daily struggle for air, especially since the abuse had begun. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I couldn't concentrate. I couldn’t relate to anyone else I met. I didn't want to play anymore. I had always stopped myself with the thought that suicide was too cowardly an act and that I could never leave such a weight on my family, especially not my grandma. I don't know what she would have done if I had died before she did. To be honest, I don't want to think it.

For two and a half years, I was involved in an emotionally abusive relationship. I felt trapped, and every time I attempted escape, it felt like I just got dragged in and invested even further. The entire basis of our relationship had gotten messy and vague. I had always told myself I was being naïve. I loved him, and he didn't love me. I knew that. Grams’s death was the catalyst I needed to finally accept the truth of the relationship. I could no longer pretend that everything was hunky dory. I stopped returning his calls and various other extensions. My grandmother was the last person who would have tolerated being called a “cunt,” much less allowing her youngest granddaughter to be called that. I knew that she would have been proud of me as I severed ties and picked up my life.

The thought of my ethereal, stubborn, and independent grandmother gave me courage. I took a leap of faith and knew that her promises of adventure, knowledge, and beauty in the world would keep me safe.

Grams was a woman of the world. She had traveled endlessly, each destination more exotic than the last. Whenever I was down about my friends or school, she would always wink and slyly hint at the possibility of taking a mission trip to Africa, like she had done. I suddenly wanted to meet the natives and eat raw coffee beans. Six-year-olds are like clay, every interaction molds them, and my grandmother could sense this. She instilled in me a sense of adventure and a longing for diversity.

Maybe even more, Grams made me want to learn and to help others. She had gone to college, which was unheard of in the ‘30’s. She was stubborn enough, however, that she wasn’t going to let society stop her independent spirit. She became a math teacher before retiring to volunteer. My grandma, the humanitarian. Looking back, I have no idea how she managed to deliver Meals on Wheels, campaign for the San Diego Coalition for Peace and Justice, and still have time to take me to the beach and bake cookies with me. She always knew how to put things in a way that I would understand, and Grams told me about college, independence, and helping the less fortunate. Because of her I began volunteering, and because of her, education is at the top of my priorities.

The weights slowly dropped off one by one, as the grief became not lighter but more bearable. My eyes opened, and I became happy once again. The sun came up. The ice melted. The flora thrived. I knew that she was, and still is, proud of me.

Each "X" on the calendar is the most beautiful work of art in the world. Every person, every book, every experience. Not an "X" passes without a trace of her frosty rose Revlon lipstick in the ink and that fact makes me so happy to be alive to pass on her memory. Her essence will always be with me, and her strength is the fire that keeps me going even in the darkest of days. She is gone, and I can’t change that. I can live my life the way I want to live it, though, which I know would make her proud. And I will.
“This young lad before you has not hidden any of his actions from you. He has laid everything out repentantly and submissively. As you decide on his fate, remember his honesty. Remember his promise to change. Remember he had no desire to kill in the first place. Remember his youth. Remember his family. We are not asking for acquittal. All he asks for is a chance. A chance someday to live a lawful life. A chance to see the blue sky again. A chance to be with his family once more. And, ladies and gentleman, a chance to grow old. You hold a boy's life, dreams and hopes in your hands. Consider carefully.” The defense attorney meets each of the jurors' eyes one last time and sits down quietly.

“A theft was attempted. A young lady was murdered. Blood was spilled. Honorable Jury, justice must be had. The defense attorney here reminded you of the defendant's family, his dreams and his youth. Jury, I remind you of the young woman who now lay lifeless in a coffin because of this man. I remind you of her youth, her family, her dreams, and her hopes that now lay dashed at his feet. He is guilty beyond any reasonable doubt. It is your duty and obligation to carry out the law and to do justice.” The prosecutor nods and sits.

I clench the chains harder as the jury file out and stare fixedly at the floor in front of me. One tile. Two tiles. Three tiles. Four tiles. Raised muffled voices come from behind the jury door. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. I realize I had been unconsciously counting the tiles to the beat of my pulse. I can no longer keep up with it. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. I can no longer see any more tiles to count. I bite my lip nervously and glance quickly over my shoulder. Everyone's eyes are drilling holes in me. The courtroom clock begins to tick louder. The AC surely must have failed. My knuckles are white from their grip.

The door opens.

The jurors file in. None of them look at me. Juror number one stands. He opens then closes his mouth a few times and clears his throat. For Heaven's sake speak!

“Guilty, deserving of death.” He sits.
Pitch under Pressure

I step to the mound, “This is it,” I think. “It all comes down to this.” The deciding game, winner gets to advance to the next game in hopes of becoming the best in the country; loser goes home without a thing. My team was up by one, but as I know far too well, that can all change in an instant. The other team, probably one of the best, and the biggest we have faced this year was for once, silent. No one dares say a word.

As if on cue, the umpire says, “Batter up!” The whole field comes alive, with the opposite team cheering for our defeat, every parent in the stands cheering for their daughter to do better than the rest, and every player hoping to become the best of the best.

The batter steps up; something catches my eye, and it is her stance. She’s at least a foot away from the plate. “Easy out,” I think. “Throw outside.” Then I notice her feet: the left one is another 6 inches further than the left, a trick. I shake off the catcher’s call for a curve ball; this is the part of the game I love the most, the mental part, one wrong pitch and the game can turn in an instant. The catcher looks at the batter and calls for a screwball. “Perfect,” I think, “she’ll never be able to reach it.” I take a deep breath in and begin. I leap off the mound, and for a split second I feel like I’m flying. Then it’s all over; my glove smacks my legs, and with all my effort I spin the ball. “Inside out,” I tell myself. I release the ball, and just as I had thought, the batter stepped in and missed the pitch. Strike one. I sigh in relief, ahead in the count, which is all I need to win the game. I throw two more pitches each with different spins and movement hoping to mess with the batter’s head which, to my relief, works.

The second batter steps up, she’s bigger than the first, so I know I must pitch carefully. I am feeling confident, but I have a bad feeling that this batter, unlike the first, can hit anything I throw. I throw the first pitch, she swings and within a split second the ball was punished into right field, and due to my error, she is rewarded a base hit. The next batter steps up. I am more nervous and decide to play it safe. My first two pitches, strikes on the outside corner. I decide to finish her off with a change up. I release the ball, and it sails in for an easy third strike, or so I think. She immediately swings, barely touching the rim of the ball. The ball sails to what seemed like 100-feet high. “Easy out.” However, our right fielder misses it. She has to run back to pick it up, and by the time she finally has the ball, everyone is safe.

At this moment I am panicking; my coach comes to the mound and gives me a not so peppy pep talk. “Just relax,” he says, “you are controlling the game. You control the speed of the game and what will happen next.” Despite his efforts the talk only makes me more nervous. The turn-out of the game all depends on how I pitched to these next few batters. I step to the mound, take a deep breath and throw. I get a boost of confidence. “Let’s show these people what a real pitcher looks like,” I think. Before I knew it, I struck the batter out.

“Alright, we only need one more out,” I tell myself. “You can do this.” The next batter comes up, a left-handed slapper. My first pitch is a change-up, and just as planned, she missed it. One strike, two more left. My next pitch is a drop ball; as soon as I release it, I know it is a
ball. It slipped out of my hand, hit the ground about a foot in front of me, and bounced to the catcher. “No big deal, just one ball; I still have one strike,” I tell myself. However, it was a big deal, a very big deal. One wrong pitch can stick in your brain and constantly remind you of your error, possibly the game changing error; one error is contagious, and being a pitcher, you know the game depends on your ability to shrug off an error and not let it haunt you. However, after that pitch, I throw three more just like it, and end up walking the batter.

This is not the reason I pitch: to load the bases in the last inning with two outs, the whole game lying on my shoulders. The last batter comes up. Either I strike her out and win, or she hits it, and they win. I take a deep breath and step up to the mound. The rest is a blur. Somehow, someway, I end up with a full count in the last inning, with bases loaded, two outs, in what could possibly be one of the biggest games in my life.

My body goes numb. I can only hear my thoughts, “The pitch that I throw right here determines the game. If it’s good and she does not hit it, we win. If she hits it or I walk her, we lose.” My coach comes out to talk to me and tells me I should not worry. That this game is no big deal and it does not matter if we win or lose, just if we have fun. I know he is lying.

At that point, everything blurs yet stays clear. The crowd is not only cheering for me to do great, but they also cheer for me to mess up. The opposing team is chanting, trying to get me unsteady, and my coaches are telling me to stay calm. I look around, runners on every base, first and third base coaches staring at me, trying to figure out what pitch I will throw. My team, tired, sweaty, and just wanting to go home as champions. Yes, the weight of the game is on my shoulders, the outcome, determined by my next pitch.

I take a deep breath, my mind racing, which pitch to use? Screwball, riseball, curveball, peel drop, rollover, fastball, or my change-up. I play the mental game; the batter is thinking fastball, so I decide to go with a change-up. I keep thinking, “Fast arm, fast arm.” I release the ball and smiled to myself as it sailed towards home plate. The batter had swung, and gone in a complete circle before realizing the only thing she hit is air. As the batter and I both watch the ball hits the catcher’s glove, the umpire screams, “Strike three! Batter out!”

At that instant, a fifty-pound weight lifts from my shoulders. After I throw the third strike, my team screams and jumps for joy, and everything moves in slow motion again. I can see the other coach yelling at the batter that had just struck out, who is crying as if the defeat is her fault. The other team, tired and sweaty, just as I had seen my teammates to be, now crying and replaying every error they had made through their heads over and over again as if that one bad throw or dropped ball caused them to lose. I can see my coaches running onto the field to congratulate us for our victory and reassuring us that we are going to be the national champions. Lastly, I can see my parents. There is a huge crowd of people watching our game; however, I can only see and hear my parents, screaming in celebration as they realize we had beaten a team from Canada.

I am aware that it is a time of both celebration and defeat. At that point, I think about all of the hours of pitching lessons, all of the thousands of times I had thrown the ball to prepare for a game like this. I think about the late night practices, the early morning summer training, the weight training during the winter months, and I realize that my efforts have paid off. Thousands of times I never wanted to practice or wanted to give up; however, this is the reason I love to pitch, this is the reason I love the game, and this is the reason we beat a team from Canada in our efforts to become the National Champions.
The bell rings. *Finally, it's time for cheerleading practice.* Practice is my haven; the only time I’m not pushed around and made fun of. These girls are my friends, even if the coach hates me. I head to the locker room to change into my sweats. The others are already there. As I open the door, their excited chatter floods my ears. I clear my mind of all the day’s stress and put on a smile.

“Hi, Rachael! How are you today?”
“Great, how are you?”
“I’m good. My mom took me shopping today and I bought a bunch of earrings on sale at Claire’s.” Shelby pulls her hair behind her ear and turns to show me the earrings she’s wearing. “Aren’t they cute?”
“ Totally,” I agree.

We finish dressing and head to the multi-purpose room. We go over two routines before I see my parents walking across the parking lot. If my dad’s here, I must be in trouble. I freeze, fearing what might come next.

The coach tells us to take a break and turns away to talk to my parents. As she nears them my mother’s eyes drop to the floor. I can tell my dad’s upset; he’s tightening his lips while he tries to calmly talk to the coach. She nods, and he continues. My mom can’t meet my eyes. She’s looking at the ground, ashamed of what he’s doing.

The girls are awkwardly looking around, everywhere but at me, not knowing what to do or say. Their lives are easy; their parents get along and let them have fun. They don’t understand why my family is always tense.

My family’s always walking on eggshells, afraid that one small detail might set off my father. Once his temper boils there’s no going back. The other girls’ idea of getting in trouble is being grounded for a week. They have no idea the injuries my father’s caused.

When the coach turns around, she looks at me and points to the door. As she walks back to our practice area, she says, “Rachael, your parents,” meaning my father, “don’t want you on the team anymore.”

I nod and go to the locker room to change and cry in privacy. I wash the tears away and look up into the mirror. *Wish me luck.*

When we get home, my father wastes no time getting his temper flaring. “We got your report card in the mail today.” He pauses to wait for me to explain, then continues, “You need to do better in Algebra. That’s why we pulled you off the team.”

“Tim, she doesn’t understand it. She needs a tutor,” my mother reasons.
“No child of mine needs special help.”
“Algebra’s hard; I can’t do it either.”
“Stop defending her! Damn it!”
He goes to the kitchen and asks “Why isn’t dinner ready?” She follows him to the kitchen.

“We just got home. I’m gonna start making it now.”

My brother and sister walk in the dining room, and my brother asks, “What’s for dinner?”

“Shit!” My father hisses and throws a glass. It lands on the floor between my feet and my brother’s.

“Kids, go to your rooms,” my mother urges us. I wait for the next line I know is coming.

“Not you, Rachael.”

“Tim, I’m gonna make dinner; I need them out of the way.” He nods in surrender, and I hurry to my room before he changes his mind. In my room I listen carefully to their conversation. He sounds frustrated, but he doesn’t have that edge in his voice that means he’s about to get violent. After a while I tune out the words and listen to the tone so I can read. She’s safe for now.

After dinner I go to the kitchen to wash dishes. My father follows to put some leftovers in a bowl for his lunch tomorrow. He puts some food in a bowl then looks for the lid and looks and looks. Crap! This is something that happens often. He’s usually just too stupid to see it, but sometimes dishes melt in our dishwasher; then I’m blamed. When he’s looked through all the cupboards, he turns to me and says, “Find the damn lid!”

I leave the dishes to look for the lid. I look in all the cupboards and look again. He yells at my mom and sister to come help look. We look in all of the cupboards again and again not wanting to find it melted. Inevitably, I open the dishwasher and look in the bottom, and there’s the lid half-melted. I pull it out and hold it up to show him. He slams his fist on the counter and shouts, “Damn it!” storming out of the kitchen mumbling to his self.

I put his lunch in another bowl and go back to the sink to wash the rest of the dishes. The worst thing about today is that it was one of his best days. I don’t understand how my mother could love her kids and stay with a man who abuses them for 24 years. I guess I’m lucky that I haven’t been alive all that time. Life is so not worth this.

I reach in the sink to grab some silverware, and a knife catches my hand. I pull out my hand and look at the blood running down my wrist. I remember Kelsea saying the other day that cutting is like getting drunk or high. That the adrenaline helps you forget your troubles. I pick up the knife and consider it. Nobody would see the scars since it’s too cold in Montana to wear short sleeves.

A stream of blood forms as I press the blade to my wrist and drag it across. She was right; it feels so good to have a release. I watch the blood drip down my arm and into the sink. All of a sudden, I hear floorboards creek. I drop the knife and run water over my wrist. The blood continues to flow, and I stick my hand in the dish water. My father walks in and drops a glass in the sink. When he leaves I drain the water and fill the sink again to continue washing dishes. That was close.

A few months later, it’s my birthday. My two best friends are at my home as well as our youth pastor and his wife. We’re all gathered in the living room talking. My mom brings in the cake, as if it were a surprise, even though I baked and decorated it.
"Make a wish," she says. It seems silly to make a wish since my father always told us there's no such thing as magic or miracles, but I do anyway. I wish this was the last birthday I have to spend with him. I blow out the candles. What a miracle that would be.

I sit down across from my two BFF’s. Sierra is opening her fortune cookie. She pulls out the little strip of paper to read her fortune. “You will soon find a financial gain.” She smiles in anticipation.

I open my fortune cookie. “Within three weeks your fortune will change for the better.” Yeah right. By now I’m sixteen and used to the fact that my life sucks. I doubt that’ll change.

“Maybe your dad will die,” Hayleigh jokes. I laugh. I know she gets me, because she was witness to one of my dad’s fits. Wait, why hasn’t she tried to help?

Three weeks later, still exhausted from listening to my dad shouting all night, I wake up to the sound of my alarm clock. I dress and go to the living room to get my coat. My mom walks in as I'm putting it on and tells me she needs to tell us something. My sister comes out of her room and goes to our brother’s to make sure he’s up. They come out, and he heads to the kitchen to get breakfast. “Wait, come in here for a minute,” my mother says. His shoulders drop, and he lazily makes his way to the couch.

“Now, I’ve talked to your sister about this. We’re going to move to Missouri at the end of the school year.”

“Why?” My brother shouts.

“Because your father isn’t willing to get the help that he needs.”

“He doesn’t need help,” my brother argues.

“He has a temper problem, and he doesn’t want to deal with it. I’ve asked him to go to counseling with me, but he only got angrier.” She tries to reason, but my brother storms off to his room. She’s disturbed that he took the news so hard and follows to comfort him.

My sister and I finish getting ready for school, and neither our mother nor our brother come out of his room. We give up waiting and trudge through the cold and a foot of snow to the bus stop. He just doesn’t understand what the rest of us are going through.

Prom is in a few weeks, and I still don’t have a date. I've got a big crush on Evan, who goes to the same church as I do. I've been trying to get the guts to ask him to go. It’s awkward because I hang out with his little sister and I’m friends with his mom. I don’t want him to think he has to go because his mom likes me or something.

His sister knows I have a crush on him and thinks it’s gross. She tells me he’s a jerk and I should like her older brother, because he’s nice and all the other girls think he’s hot. I’ve always been too hard-headed to take someone’s word for it. I always think maybe that person just doesn’t understand them.

After church, I finally gather the courage and ask him. He says yes! I wonder if his mom was standing in the background giving him the death glare when I asked. I hope not.

We walk down the red carpet arm-in-arm and smile at the cameras. The bright flashes are almost blinding in the darkness of the gymnasium. After walking the red carpet, we meet our friends in the multipurpose room and wait for families to leave. When families come out, they take our pictures before heading home.
We are free to go to the dance floor. I dance with Evan once, and then Lily takes over, saying they’re friends so it shouldn’t be weird. I go to the restroom to fix my make-up. A couple of friends are chatting away in front of the mirrors, so I join them.

“I can’t believe he didn’t ask her,” the first said.
“I know! She waited for weeks,” said the other.
“He said he’d already asked Kaitlyn before they were going out,” I put in.
“But they’re dating; it’s assumed they’ll go together!” said the first.
“True,” I agreed.

Another girl walks in and says, “Did you guys see how many people were making out on the dance floor? There were like ten people with their lips glued to each other.” She looks at me startled all-of-the-sudden. “Oh! Hello, Rachael. I’m sorry.” She says this like she thinks I got what I deserved. I have no idea what’s going on, but I know it can’t be good. This girl has hated me since the sixth grade.

“What do you mean?”
“Oh, you didn’t see? Lily was making out with Evan.” She goes to a stall, now that she’s done ruining my night. Lily? She wouldn’t do that to me.

Another girl walks in, I recognize her as a friend of Lily’s.
“Did Lily really make out with him?” I ask her immediately.
“Yes,” she nods sympathetically. “I’m sorry.” I burst into tears. I am shocked she would do that after all the time we spent together talking about boys and trusting each other with all our secrets. We’d walked and talked all day then spent hours at a time on the phone in the evenings. She was one of my best friends. I trusted her more than I’d ever trusted anyone. He’s an even bigger jerk; he didn’t have to go with me. I told him it wouldn’t bother me if he didn’t want to go. I hide in the handicapped stall and sit on the windowsill. After a minute I hear Sierra come in.

“Which stall is Rachael in?” I hear her ask, before I see her blond head pop under the stall door. She slides under it and jumps up to hug me. She sits next to me and waits quietly for a minute.

“I’ll stay in here with you all night if I have to. Kevin won’t leave me alone. But it would be fun to go dance together. No boys.” I laugh. Her prom dates are always pity-dates. She always takes someone who’d be left out otherwise. This year her date is one everyone has a reason not to go with. He’s a pervert and apparently a stalker. “We shouldn’t let them ruin it for us.”

After twenty minutes, I finally have no tears left. “Alright, let’s go.” I slide off the windowsill and, with her following, head to the mirror. My eyeliner has given me raccoon eyes. I wash it all off and reapply before returning to the dance floor. Who needs boys anyway?

It’s June 17th when we pull up to the gas station. I’m waiting in my car when I notice movement in the corner of my eye. I look in the rearview mirror and see Lily running toward my car.

“I saw your big sister inside. She said you were waiting out here, and that you’re moving today,” she says this like she can’t believe we’re leaving so soon.
“Yeah, we are.”
“I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I don’t want us to be mad at each other forever.”
“It’s okay.”
“No, it’s not. It was a terrible thing to do, and I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?” I can tell she’s upset, and she’s talking so fast she almost sounds hysterical.

“Yeah, I already have. I understand now.”

“Oh, thank you!” She exclaims and hugs me through the window. She’s so emotional that we both start crying. I’m glad she happened to be here today. I’d hate to have left without making up.

“I should’ve told you I liked him,” she starts again.

“It’s okay!” I say, and she hugs me again. I see that my cousin is coming out of the gas station. “I guess we’re leaving now. Bye.” When I say this she hugs me again, and I can’t help laughing. My cousin gets in the car, and Lily goes back inside. I pull on the highway and watch the small town sink behind the mountains in my rearview mirror. It’s all behind us now.
Nothing was left.

I walked down the remains of the street that used to be my neighborhood. Not a single house was standing. I set my jaw. There used to be Gerald’s house, the man who would barbeque something every weekend. No word of him or his family since the bombing. Most likely that they were dead. I tightened my grip on my rifle.

Hearing a twig snap behind me, I whipped around lightning fast and dropped to the ground. Through the crosshairs of my sights, about fifty yards away, I could see a small girl holding the hand of an even smaller girl, both of them in a disheveled state. At the sight of my gun, the bigger of the two pushed the smaller girl behind her and took two steps back.

I lowered my gun and stood up quickly. My eyes widened. “It can’t be,” I breathed. I started to jog toward them. As I got closer, the glimmer of hope I’d allowed myself to feel at the sight of them flourished, their faces becoming more distinct, the blackish brown hair, the brown doe eyes, brown skin. Yes, that bigger girl was Denise! That must’ve meant the smaller girl was her sister Kaia.

I saw recognition slam into her. She shouted, “Lucas!” and ran straight for me, Kaia trailing behind her.

I had dropped my gun, and my arms were wide open when she sprang into them, wrapping her arms around my neck like a vise. She stood on tiptoe, and still her head just barely reached my collarbone. I lifted her up, and she buried her head into my left shoulder, the tears already flowing heavily. She was so light! I felt two tiny arms circle my right leg and looked down to see the tiny girl sink her head into the back of my knee wailing, “Oh Lucas, you’re alive! It’s been awful! Mom and – and – and –” She broke off and just bawled into my pants leg.

“They didn’t make it,” Denise whispers into my ear.

I somehow managed to tighten my grip on her. God, it felt so good to hold someone close to me that I knew before the bomb. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I genuinely was. Her parents had always welcomed me with open arms and treated me like I was a son of their own. Of course I’d have been an adopted son as my skin was as white as theirs was brown. But Denise and I had been the best of friends and inseparable as kids. It was nearly a physical pain to do so, but I gently lowered her back to her feet. “I am so glad that you’re still alive though.”

“Me too,” she said. She smiled through the tears that left rivulets on her dirt-covered face. Of course, I didn’t look much better. “Look at you,” she chuckled. “You have so much mud you look as black as I am.”

I shrugged. “Chalk it up to my love for adventure and getting dirty. I always did make better mud pies than you when we were little, before…” my voice trails off.

She sobered. “Yeah, before the world blew up our home.”
I wanted to cheer up. “Of course, from where I’m standing, you are still pretty little.” It’s true. She was five feet tall exactly, and I was five-foot nine. Although, during our embrace, I did notice small but subtle curves that I don’t remember always being there.

“Oh, be quiet.”

I realized that Kaia wasn’t crying anymore and looked down to see her leaning her head against my leg. She was staring at the remnants of the neighborhood the three of us used to call home, her face taking on an almost catatonic state.

“Hey Kaia,” I said softly. She jolted back to her body at the sound of my voice and looked up at me with the same brown doe eyes of her sister. “I’ve missed you sweetheart.” I bent down and picked her up. Cradling her in my arms, the five-year-old couldn’t have weighed more than fifty pounds. I kissed the top of her head as she wrapped her arms around my neck just like Denise had done. She didn’t say anything. When I tried to pull her away to hand her to her sister, she just tightened her grip, and I immediately stopped.

“I missed you too, Lucas,” her tiny voice finally uttered.

I reached for the water canteen I had hooked to the belt loop of my brown pants. “Here,” I offered it to them, “you two must be thirsty.” Between the two of them, they guzzled the quart of water like it was the sole source of life. To them it probably had been. I sighed.

“Come on. I wanna show you guys where I’ve been living since the attack. You can tell me how you guys have managed to survive while we walk there. It takes about an hour to get back.”

Denise nodded. When I went to pick up my rifle, she scrunched up her face. “Where did you get that thing? Why exactly do you have it?”

I answered, “Where I’m staying, there are other people who managed to save some guns and there’s no telling what dangers might await us when we go out hunting or –”

“There are others?” she asked enthusiastically, interrupting me.

“Or,” I continued, “when we go looking for survivors like you and Kaia. And yes, there are others.” Her entire face lit up, and I saw hope begin to kindle in her eyes. Her grin was one of such elation that I had to smile back.

We walked passing burned buildings and the dilapidated skeletons of what used to be grandiose structures. I lead the way, and she recounted her survival while I cradled Kaia in front of me and kept the rifle strapped to my back. At sixteen and two years younger than me, Denise launched into her story, painting vivid images of their experience surviving with nothing. I listened intently.

“During the bombing, my mom was still at the printing press, and Dad was still teaching the summer school students at his middle school. I was at home with Kaia. One minute I’m reading a romance novel, the next I’m hearing every type of siren there is: police sirens, tornado sirens, and hurricane warnings. I don’t know if we have hydrogen bomb sirens or not. Jezebel was going crazy.” Jezebel was their hamster. “I remember getting a frantic call from my mom. She sounded hysterical. She kept saying we were getting bombed and to get Kaia in the basement with me and to make sure I had water before anything else. People were screaming in the background and somehow we got disconnected.” She stopped and took a deep breath before continuing.

“Later I figured that her place had been hit. It seemed like minutes after I had gotten Kaia and Jezebel into the basement the bombs started falling in rapid succession. The three of us stayed huddled together beneath a table. When the rounds of bombs stopped falling a
couple hours later, we crawled out from underneath the table and hesitantly stepped over the mountains of debris in our basement and climbed up shaky stairs.”

Her voice began to waver. “Everything was gone. It looked as if the first floor of our house never even existed! All the pictures, the memories, the doorway where we kept track of our height over the years, it was all gone. We only had about four gallons of emergency water with us.” Her voice choked up.

“Why would anyone want to blow us up?” Kaia’s voice drifted up from my arms.

My throat tightened. Denise answered, “Well, there were a lot of other countries that got tired of America’s negligence; we had several terrorists, like those of al-Qaeda, in captivity, and other countries wanted to negotiate their return. America doesn’t negotiate when it comes to terrorism. We had definitely been at odds with several Middle Eastern countries. They had the resources to build hydrogen bombs by the dozens, enough to target the whole country. But we’re still here, aren’t we, honey? Because we’re survivors; we’re strong.”

She was trying so hard to keep it together, but nothing could have prepared her for this. Nothing could have prepared anyone for this. I say quietly, “Where’s Jezebel right now?”

She grimaced as if the question physically pained her. “She was our pet but we couldn’t, we couldn’t spare her any water. She didn’t last very long.”

I paused in my steps for a moment and looked at her. “So the two of you have been traveling without food for what, almost a full week now?”

She nodded. “Today marks the sixth day since the bombs stopped falling. I have no idea how much weight we’ve lost, and my stomach feels like a black hole sucking the life right out of me. We finally ran out of water yesterday.” Her clothes looked incredibly baggy on her, as if they were hanging on bones, and I was willing to bet she could easily count out all her ribs.

Images of shriveled anorexics filled my head. I shoved them away.

We walked a few minutes before I stopped again and said, “This is it.”

Denise looked around. I knew she only saw the bereft ground stretching for miles and was confused. I caught her eye and pointed down. “It’s underground,” I said and bent down to wipe the dirt off of what seemed to be a trap door and peered in. I looked back at her and said, “I’ll go down first,” and took hold of the first rung on the rope ladder after shifting Kaia to my back, carefully aware of the positioning of my rifle.

As soon as my head was below ground, Denise followed me down about seventy-five feet deep into the earth. When we stepped off the ladder and turned, we were faced with a vast cavern that looked like the inside of a massive dome. A large fire burned brightly in the center surrounded by various blowup beds, cots and sleeping bags, some occupied, others empty. We were still in the shadows and remained unseen.

“Wow,” Denise breathed and turned to me. “How –”

“This land used to be rich in oil and people who drilled here left deep holes in the earth. When it dried up and the machines were taken away, someone or a group of people had a mind to come back and dig this,” I said, gesturing in a wide arc with my arm. “There are quite a few ventilation shafts carved into the ceiling leading outside. Otherwise this fire would suffocate us all. Ah, the beauty of nature manipulated by man. There is another level below us that’s not quite as spacious. We use it for storage. Now let’s step into the light, I want to introduce you to everybody.”
I kept introductions short and simple. I didn’t know much more than the names of many of the twenty-three people in the cavern. They were all disheveled and a few of them were injured or sick, coughing up liquids of various colors. Even so, I watched Denise’s face closely the entire time. She was mesmerized by the number of people. Meanwhile I had to keep Kaia from strangling me. She was holding on to my neck so tight. “There are a few others above ground searching for food,” I said after I told her everyone’s name. “This big hole in the ground is basically home for now.”

The glow of the fire momentarily revealed the tears in her eyes. “Thank you for bringing us here.”

“Thank you for staying alive.”
She nodded and yawned. “Lucas, I’m bone tired. I haven’t been able to sleep hardly at all. Do you think that there’s room for me and Kaia here?”
I looked over at my small sleeping area. “Well, I have a pretty nice sized cot that you and Kaia can sleep on.”

“What about you?” She yawned again.
I shrugged. “I’ll sleep on the floor next to you,” as unappealing as that sounded.
She looked at the cot and shook her head. “That cot is big enough for all three of us. I can’t imagine that this ground is comfortable for sleeping.” My thoughts exactly.

I knelt down and let Kaia climb off my back and led them toward my little corner of this massive cavern, tiptoeing over several others. As the two of them settled down on the cot, I went back to the ladder and climbed down to the storage facility to put away my gun. When I returned I saw that Denise was right; the two of them took up practically no space on the cot. At first I thought it would be awkward, the three of us sleeping together, but as I settled on the left side of the cot, Kaia nestled tightly between me and Denise, it felt completely right.

For a long time we were silent, Denise with her eyes closed and Kaia making little snoring noises. They were both sound asleep. I took the time to trace over every facet and plane of Denise’s face with my eyes. Trying to move as little as possible, I raised my hand cautiously and brushed her cheek with my fingertips. Flesh. She really was alive.

I moved a lock of hair from the front of her face and froze, my hand now just above her ear, when I heard her voice, “You never told me how you survived, how you found this.”

I looked down to see her opening her eyes. I swallowed. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I know you did.” Her voice was small. She didn’t make a move to swat my hand away. I finished placing the lock of hair and retracted my hand back to my side of the cot. “So how did you stay alive?”

I frowned. “I hadn’t actually made an effort to try to survive. I didn’t know what was happening because I was asleep most of the time. I had been playing a videogame in the basement when something shook the house and a piece of debris hit me in the head and knocked me out cold. At some point the couch must have been overturned because when I woke up it had rolled on top of me, preventing me from being hit with anything else.

“I haven’t heard from either of my parents or my older brother. I’d tried to call them from my cell which had survived in my pocket, but I could never get a signal after the blasts. We only have one pair of walkie-talkies down here. I don’t want to believe that they’re dead, but –”

“That’s what you were doing outside today? Looking for your family?”
“I guess I was. I’d been looking for them after the attack for about two days, stumbling around, and ran into some guy with a gun who brought me back here.”

She smiled. “Just like I did.”

“Yeah. I’d hoped that I would’ve seen my family here but...” I could see the words playing in her head; they had played in my head several times as well, but she was too kind to voice them. Your family is dead.

She cleared her throat and said, “Well, for now, Kaia and I can be your family.” She reached for my hand, the one that had caressed her face a few minutes ago and twined our fingers together. “Because for now, we’re all the other’s got.”

My heart gave a small lurch. “We’ll be our own family.”

“Because this,” she makes a small gesture to the refugees down here, “this is our future.”

I nod and lean over to kiss the top of her head, careful of the small girl between us. I go to sleep with that ominous thought playing in my head like my own personal mantra. This is our future.
The Perfect Size

Ebony felt fabulous. For the first time in her life, after years of hard work, she had finally achieved her dream. Her body was perfect—so perfect that she had even been signed to a contract with the top modeling agency in all of America, S.S. Butterball Inc. She attended her first modeling shoot last Saturday at the Grand Hilton Hotel in downtown Manhattan and was absolutely enthralled by the experience. Everywhere she looked, models as gorgeous and built as her were teeming, some even more glamorous and attractive than she was. The dressing room was even more exquisite: shelves of purple strapless Armani dresses hung in elegance, bundles of Vera Wang designer totes cluttered the walls, and piles of silvery Gucci gowns lay in heaps in creamy plush chairs. It was any model’s dream. Actually, it was more than any model’s dream; it was pure heaven. Just as Ebony picked out the dress that best suited her body shape, she was quickly escorted to the makeup room, where white faced cosmetologists showered her with globs of thick, droopy makeup to cover her massive face. After her face job, Ebony was rushed into the final room, the last test to see if she was truly fit to be a model. Without the slightest bit of apprehension, she willfully hobbled into the room.

It was a horribly dark room, except for an eerie light shining a halo in the center. Inside the halo was the thing that Ebony dreaded the most. She shuddered at the sight of it, for it was her worst enemy and what measured her slow, agonizing progress to perfection over the past several years: the scale. With trepidation, she broke into a hot sweat just walking up to it. Slowly and carefully, she put one massive foot on the machine and painfully managed to get the other foot on too. It gave a loud beep as red digits flashed on the screen, trying to accurately quantify her weight. The beeping stopped, and with one eye closed and the other open and squinted, she slowly tilted her head down toward the bright LCD display on the weighing machine: 678 lbs.

The commotion on weight started several decades ago, a few years before Ebony was born, by the CDC and some other prominent concerned organizations. This era, seen by many Americans today as the Dark Ages, was filled with a majority of horribly ugly and scrawny people, a complete opposite of the current majority of lusciously plump Americans. It was then that the CDC started campaigning for the plan that would save all these gruesomely tiny and underfed people, Operation Obesity. They sent out brochures, covered billboards, played television and radio commercials, and even hired blimps to extend their message. This operation, whose main purpose was to fatten up people who weren’t already fat, was a huge success and managed to plump up over 80% of the American adult population to over 300 lbs. Overall, it had a tremendous impact on Americans and proudly established the United States of America as the fattest nation in the world.

Operation Obesity was first conjured up by the CDC, or Center for Disease Control, when startling results showed that America was slowly, but surely getting skinnier and skinnier. The most shocking results first appeared in children and teens. Statistics from the
CDC showed that almost 30% of children were considered as thin and relatively scrawny. What's even more shocking is that just fewer than 50% of all American children were considered not obese! Furthermore, this trend didn’t only prevail in children but in adults too. Adults, mostly women in their late 20’s and early 30’s, were also seeing drastic fallouts of body weight. The CDC pinpointed that two of the major causes of this were exercise and food. Experts said that the consumption of too much nutritious and healthy food played a major role in the onset of weight loss. Vile and disgusting foods, such as fruits, whole grain breads and cereals, and nonfat yogurts, were found in abundance. People even drank water instead of soda! These horrible food habits of the American people encouraged Congress to pass the Inorganic Foods Act in 2024, which prevented the sale of all organic foods for the good of the American people’s health. Moreover, another major problem that led to the non-obesity of many Americans was the excess of exercise. The majority of Americans during this time period used to have strict exercise regimens, which were followed relentlessly, rain or shine. Athletic sports, such as tennis, soccer, and football, were also frequently played and encouraged in schools. These athletic endeavors ultimately toned the muscles of the American people, getting rid of the fat and whipping their bodies into lean machines.

Now, however, after Operation Obesity, people are actually embracing the benefits of obesity. Of the several benefits championed by the CDC, four stood out:

(1) Obesity provides for insulation by absorbing heat. Insulation by means of body fat can accomplish two important things: providing heat and protecting from injuries. During the harsh winter months, when the temperatures outside are frigid, people can use their body fat to work as heat insulation. All those layers of thick, voluptuous lipids work exceptionally well to absorb heat and keep the body comfortably warm. This self-provided warmth is also economically ideal because less money is spent on heating bills and new winter accessories, such as hats, coats, gloves, and scarves.

(2) Obesity provides for insulation from injuries. One of the main advantages to being obese is that an increased body size can protect people from harmful injuries, especially those done to your interiors, such as your bones and organs. For example, if someone accidentally runs into you in a grocery store aisle with their shopping cart, you can deflect the force of the collision back onto the pusher of the cart with your built up layers of fat, preventing you from harm. Car makers have seen that obesity can also save people from fatal car accidents. They found that obese people are generally less likely to die in car accident because their fat acts as a safety barrier, reducing the force of the collision. Due to this, several car makers have eliminated the air bag in American cars.

(3) Obesity is beneficial to the economy. Since obesity involves eating to maintain and increase your body weight, food intake must also increase accordingly. This means that more people aspiring to become obese are shopping and buying food from grocery stores and restaurants at exponential rates, promoting a sudden increase in food sales. Moreover, because of increased body sizes, people are buying twice the amount of clothing they previously bought to effectively cover themselves out in public. With increases in both food and clothing sales, the United States economy has been running a bullish market for the past several years and is expected to keep its 40-year standing of having the world’s biggest economy for the next 60 years.
Obesity is cheaper and more satisfying. In order to get obese quickly and effectively, people have to consume extremely high calorie foods. These delicious and scrumptious foods, whether fried in grease, covered with sugar, or smothered with butter, are usually the cheapest foods on the market, and are usually from luxury restaurants, such as McDonalds and Burger King. Moreover, not only are these foods cheap, they’re extremely comforting and satisfying. Why settle for cardboard-like fiber bars and bland oatmeal when you could bite into a classic McDonalds Egg McMuffin or a Hardees Quadruple Angus Beef Burger? By devouring these types of gourmet foods, you’ll be spending less money from your pocket while filling your tummy to satisfaction.

Now of course, like for any similar social movement, there has been opposition to Operation Obesity and the policies of the CDC. These radical extremists have opposed all the proposals and mandates set forth by the CDC and have refused to fatten themselves up. They offer ridiculous excuses and made up fantasies of how being thin is actually “healthy” and obesity isn’t. They offer several fallacious reasons, such as how eating organic foods with lots of nutrients will help you concentrate and prevent diseases and how exercising will help keep your body active and healthy. My favorite excuse of all time is that obesity can cause things like diabetes and cancer, which can lead you to die younger. Whoever conjured up these myths must have been out of their minds because these excuses are beyond crazy! Everyone knows that all organic foods taste like cardboard and give people no satisfaction when eating them, so why would anyone even attempt to try that nasty mush? And everyone knows that relaxing instead of exercising increases leisure time drastically and allows people to rest and participate in laid-back activities, such as watching TV, playing videogames, or sleeping. And, of course, everyone knows that obesity doesn’t cause disease, it prevents it by having the fat cells block all the viruses and bacteria from entering your body. However, the CDC and its allies in Congress have started writing a bill that requires the instigators of these rumors to be found and captured, only to be fattened up so they can realize the joys of obesity.

Being fat has become a way of life in America. People aspire to be obese, just like their role-model celebrities, sports stars, and government officials. Obesity is not only economical and healthy, it is also more satisfying and pleasurable. Being plump and luscious is in and being scrawny and ghastly is out. So if you’re one of the minority of being less than 250 pounds, please fatten up by any means possible.

Ebony’s mouth formed a perfect oval “Oh!” when she saw her weight. She shot a cursory glance over to the assistant, who gave her a thumbs up and a flashy smile, indicating that Ebony had passed the final test. Giddy with joy, Ebony started jumping up and down on the scale (or at least attempted to anyway) and somehow tripped over one of her own obese feet, leaving her in a gargantuan heap on the floor. After trying to lift herself up three times, Ebony gave up and gestured over to the assistant for some help. The assistant, being as bulky and pudgy as Ebony, pulled her to her feet with both of their combined strengths. Ebony was now completely drenched in her own sweat, exhausted from attempting to stand up by herself.

Slowly, but surely, Ebony, in her sweat-stained purple strapless Armani dress, carrying her flashy navy blue Gucci tote, and wearing her size 15 platform heels, straddled outside the room and onto the brilliantly lit catwalk. The floor was so white that it was almost blinding. She looked out into the sea of photographers armed with their enormous cameras, all resembling
oversized beach balls on a white, sandy beach. With fatigue, she waddled down to where a
shimmery sheet hung as a backdrop and hunkered down on the stools placed there (more out
of exhaustion than for a pose), occupying all three of them. The lead photographer motioned
for her to pose stylishly, and Ebony followed, attempting to stand with one leg on the ground
and the other in the air (the leg in the air never reached more than an inch off the ground).
However, tired from standing on one foot for what seemed like an eternity (it had only been
twenty-five seconds), she turned around to get a shot of her back. Her several pockets of fat
bulged out and rippled as she tried not to move. Flashes glittered everywhere and reflected off
the glimmering curtains. Once again, Ebony had the feeling that she was in pure heaven.

After the shoot, Ebony grabbed three Hardee’s Quadruple Angus Beef Burgers and
headed home, clutching the designer clothes she had just worn. She had been delighted to
hear that every model could keep whatever they wore at the photo shoot and was anxious to
show off her new outfit to her friends. Once inside her house, Ebony quickly finished off her
midday snack and rushed to the wall-length mirror in her bathroom to grab another peek of
herself in her new clothes one more time. After slipping them on she took a big long stare at
the curvaceous figure in the mirror. Ebony felt marvelous once again, being a model and all,
except….except….something just didn’t seem right. There was one little fault, a blemish on her
flawless figure, that made her just not quite perfect. She wondered, meticulously observing
herself from top to bottom, on what it was that didn’t fit into place. About halfway down
inspecting her Gucci dress, she saw it. And then it struck, like a flash of lightning penetrating
her thickened brain. Her eyes opened wide, distraught with misery, and she took a step back
from the mirror, suddenly unable to look at herself anymore. What she saw was a baggy spot in
the crook of the side of her dress, hanging there carelessly without any skin, fat, or flesh to fill
it, loose, but too loose for her comfort. What she saw was an imperfection, and until that
imperfection was rectified she could never achieve a perfect body, and there was only one way
to solve this problem. She had to get fatter.
Vietnam: A War to Vie for and a War to Die for

What is worth fighting for?
Albert G. Turner
(1948 – 1967)

Albert Turner was born on January 2, 1948, to Charles and Jane Turner. Al, as he was affectionately known to his close friends, was very enthusiastic about being American. His second grade teacher reports that he always was the first to spring to his feet every morning when the intercom in his small classroom crackled to life and the principal began to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. His friends remember that Al rarely passed up an opportunity to take down the American flag from outside the schoolhouse and carefully fold it up and store it each afternoon. And his local pastor fondly recalls Al’s response when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up: a soldier. As he grew older, Al’s patriotism never seemed to waver. His high school peers knew not to even whisper criticisms about the way the nation was run unless they wished to engage Al in a heated debate. His passion for his country resonated everywhere he went.

After graduating high school, Al immediately enlisted into service. He was accepted into the Marines and began to fulfill his childhood dream. Through the highs and the lows, his attitude remained positive, and his will stayed strong and steady.

Al was part of the Tet Offensive. In the midst of this military failure, he was shot in the chest and fatally wounded. He died shortly after, lying in a trench. Al’s abrupt death shocked all those who knew him; no eyes remained dry after the news was revealed to his friends and family.

Al will be buried on Tuesday. A true countryman to the end, he made it known before his death that he wished for all his worldly possessions to be sold and the money donated to various programs dedicated to the education of American history.

* The Tet ’68 offensive was a major defeat for the VC and the NVA.

“This is a very powerful weapon, sir. I guarantee you that we must use it to win this war. It’s so powerful, in fact, that its mere presence has the potential to exponentially increase our numbers. It will also solve any problems we’ve had with lack of motivation.”

“And what of its offensive capabilities?”

“No number of men can hope to fight it and win. They’ll have to flee if they don’t immediately submit. I’m telling you, sir, this weapon is effective. Everyone knows of its power,
and the many who fear it are right in doing so. Naturally, there are those brazen enough to protest the ethical qualities of it, but with this weapon, we can take care of them at our leisure."

“How efficient is this weapon?”

“It’s quite efficient, as a matter of fact – the only problem with it is that we have to be selective about our targets. Outside of that, it’s near guaranteed to work on whomever we choose.”

“Hmm...”

“Trust me, sir. Use of this weapon is not unprecedented. We’ve used it before to great success.”

“Very well, then – let’s use it once more.”

“Excellent. I will propose this the next time Congress meets.”

“Sounds good. This war should end much sooner once the draft is reinstated...”

*Two-thirds of the men who served in Vietnam were volunteers; two-thirds who served in World War II were draftees. Total draftees (1965-1973): 1,728,344.

June 5, 1966

Dear Mom and Dad,

Sorry it took me so long to write back. I can barely write at all for that matter; I’m so tired, and I can hardly feel my hand.

Don’t worry about me, though. I’ll be fine out here. Everything will be all right. Say hello to Spot for me.

Love,
Jim

*Five men killed in Vietnam were only 16 years old.

I am not a poet.
Am I doing this right?
My specialty is limericks.
My couplets are just trite.

I don’t know what a sonnet is,
Nor how free free verse can be.
I plagiarize my haikus,
And I sometimes use too many syllables as you can see.
But I must pass this English class,
So I must put aside my sorrow,
My ignorance of poetry,
And math due fifth period tomorrow.

I am not a soldier.
Am I doing this right?
My gun is really heavy,
And my helmet is so tight.

I don’t know who you are,
Who you were, or who you’d be.
I plagiarized these intentions.
I know it’s cruelty.

But I must survive,
So I must put aside my guilt
And my innocence
And shoot.

*91 percent of Vietnam veterans say they are glad they served.*

June 23, 1966

Dear Mom and Dad,

I feel so weak...so helpless. I'm always under attack. I find myself lying on my back more often than on a foot. There's never a moment when I feel safe from death. I guess I have to rely on the support of everyone, including you guys back home. I feel so frustrated having to lean on people wherever I go, though. War has infected me...I feel it everywhere. I'm sick of all of this, but it's gonna cost me an arm and a leg to buy me some peace.

Don’t worry about me, though. I’ll be fine out here. Everything will be all right. Say hello to Spot for me.

Love,

Jim

*74 percent said they would serve again even knowing the outcome.*

Will finishes off the last of his pizza, stands up, and tosses his paper plate onto a nearby trash bin. He checks his watch. It is a bit after noon. His psychology class will start in about fifteen
minutes. Final exams are looming in the near future, so Will can’t afford to be tardy for class. Will picks up his folder and leaves the mezzanine, heading off towards Stark campus. His buddy Lou strides past him. Words tumble out of his mouth in torrents. “...sucks you’re not coming, man; it’s gonna be killer...yeah, man...it’s gonna be a riot...” Will nods absentmindedly; he is currently trying to remember if his professor said his paper was due today or tomorrow. As his friend departs, Will approaches Taylor Hall. He rifles through his folder, searching for a syllabus. A wave of noise erupts to his right, and Will turns to look for the source.

The sounds of sharp cracks resound throughout the area. Searing pain rushes through Will’s back as he falls to the ground. The bitter taste of bile and the sounds of screams and shouts assault Will’s senses – and then nothing.

Will never graduated from Kent State University.

*97% of Vietnam veterans were honorably discharged.

June 14, 1996

Dear Mom and Dad,

I’ve been fighting a lot lately. Today, I found myself on my back – dazed, confused, and lost in the heat of the moment. Let me tell you, I thought at that very moment that I was gonna die – I had just been disarmed, you see. My life passed before my eyes, and I was positive a man in white stood before me. I blacked out right then and there, but thankfully, a man named Jack Smith saved my life. Very nice chap, and I would never want to get on his bad side – he’s really good with knives, you see.

Don’t worry about me, though. I’ll be fine out here. Everything will be all right. Say hello to Spot for me.

Love,

Jim

*Last man drafted: June 30, 1973

Sweat beads on his forehead, only to be swept away by the slight breeze rushing through the air. He shoulders his M1 Garand and tromps after the rest of the men up the hill. He sighs to himself. The enemy won’t listen to reason. Violent, crude barbarians – that’s what they are. The opposition also outnumbers them by far, but that’s their only advantage; their weapons are inferior, and they are far less organized.
A command to halt interrupts his thoughts. The enemy apparently has one more advantage – home field advantage. His commander says they are trapped; they had taken the wrong path. Retreat seemed to be inevitable; their adversaries were now bombarding them with tear gas canisters. Turn, run, regroup – yells, screams, and curses pollute the air. He crouches; his commanding officer is shouting something. “Get! Set!” He’s not entirely sure what’s going on, but he knows what the next words will be, and in anticipation, he takes aim. “Fire!”

His bullet embeds itself in a young man’s back. His target instantly crumples to the ground. The soldier’s mind goes numb. He cannot stand to watch as more gunfire cuts through the ranks of the foe. Searching for a reprieve, he gazes up – towards the trees, the sky, the clouds.

Towards the top of the tall buildings of Kent State University.

*The number of North Vietnamese killed was approximately 500,000 to 600,000. Casualties: 15 million.*

July 2, 1966

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Corrigan,

I must regrettably inform you that your son Jim has passed away. After he was injured in combat a month ago, we did the best we could to keep him alive. Yet, even after we amputated his right arm and leg, he could not fight off the gangrenous infection that diseased him, and he slowly succumbed to it. A letter containing details on when and where you can retrieve your son’s body will be sent to you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jack Smith, M.D.

*One out of every 10 Americans who served in Vietnam was a casualty. Although the percentage who died is similar to other wars, amputations or crippling wounds were 300 percent higher than in World War II. 750,000 Vietnam veterans are severely disabled.*

From the desk of Walter Manning...

I’m sure all of you, America, have heard about what is being dubbed, “The Kent State Massacre.” More like the “Kent State the Facts Properly.” So-called eyewitnesses claim that it was an unprovoked attack. I’m sorry, but I seem to have missed Merriam-Webster switching around the definitions of provoked and unprovoked. The only time a college student isn’t causing mayhem is when their requiem is being sung. Those soldiers were acting in self-defense, I’m sure; the outfits of today’s youth are, safe to say, head-on assaults on the eyes of just about everyone. Of course, everyone seems to be eating up their pleas for sympathy, disregarding rationale and other such sensible thought. I suppose I can’t blame them that
much; I pity anybody who lives in Ohio. Go on, then. Feed America to the wolves. It’s fairly obvious that this generation of people has been corrupted, and we’ll see the results of this in a couple of years when U.S. becomes the newest addition to the Comintern. As for me and those actually aware of the current events, we’ll undoubtedly be executed as martyrs to a worthy cause, but so be it. I will continue to write and publish my opinion – which happens to be the complete and sole truth.

Walter Manning, controversial writer for the Archbury Times, will be taking an extended leave of absence from writing his column on account of the fact that he was injured by a brick thrown through his window last night.

*The average age of those killed in Vietnam was 23.11 years.*

Vietnam? Yeah, I’ve heard about it. I’m not the biggest history junkie, so the subject never piqued my interest, but hey, as a freelance writer, you gotta get your feet wet sometimes. When I was hired by the *Daily Examiner* to interview a 55-year old Vietnamese refugee, I accepted, albeit with a small degree of apathy.

She lived in a small, shabby duplex in the suburbs, far from rat-infested, but certainly no manor. I rang the doorbell, inciting the boisterous barks from a dog inside. My interviewee opened the door, greeted me warmly, and introduced herself as Mai. I balked for a moment as she held out her hand, but muscle memory thankfully kicked in, and I shook it, following her inside upon her insistence.

We sat down at a roughly hewn wooden table with tea set for two. Mai poured me a cup, and I took a long draught before I began to talk. Tape recorder in hand, I asked her about her life in Vietnam, her experiences in the war, and her parents. She told me that she was born during the war. Her father was taken by the Viet Cong, a faction that opposed both the United States and the South Vietnamese government during the war, and starved to death in an internment camp. Her mother raised her alone. Mai describes the world she lived in each day: a world of blood, gunshots, and screams. They eventually managed to escape, though; they and numerous other refugees fled by boat to Australia, France, and, in Mai’s case, eventually Canada.

As our session drew to a close, I decided that I had to know something, or else it would bother me for the rest of my life.

“By the way, I don’t mean to be rude…but what happened to your face?”

Mai smiled sadly – at least I think she did—for her wrinkled face was deformed beyond belief.

“Agent Orange.”

“Who?”

“Agent Orange was an herbicide used during the war. The Americans unleashed it upon us so that they could destroy the plant life our troops were using to camouflage themselves. It was extremely toxic, and it not only crippled those who initially fell victim to it but their children as well. We now call it “the last ghost,” and it still continues to haunt us today. The U.S. government has never compensated us for this.”
I had risen to my feet by the time she had finished. I was appalled. Extreme disgust had welled up in me – towards whoever had decided that deforming the innocent was a reasonable price to pay for winning a war; toward the U.S. government for deciding that burdening the helpless was a reasonable price to pay for securing the upstanding of their country; and towards myself for deciding that ignoring the needy was a reasonable price to pay for living a blissful life of ignorance.

I knew that I could not keep my emotions in check for much longer, so I told Mai that I had to leave. I thanked her, we bid each other our farewells, and I hastily gathered my stuff. As I drove away, I swore to myself that I would change this. Nobody should have to go through what Mai had experienced.

I would research more. I would interview more. And I would write more. Because I had found myself a cause.

A cause worth fighting for.

*In February, a U.S. court rejected the latest appeal by Vietnamese victims who were suing the manufacturers of Agent Orange for billions of compensation. As an act of charity, Washington has offered a paltry $3 million not only to help treat the victims of America’s biggest experiment with chemical-warfare tactics but to clean up the contamination that keeps adding to the toll.
A Song for the Soul

Making oneself wake up for class is difficult anyways, but it was made a bit more difficult due to the fact I was going to my first hour class without a chronicle update. Honestly, it wasn't even so much the fact I didn't have the update that bothered me as much as the fact I wasn't doing a service project in the first place. It should have been simple enough; for our TAG (Talented and Gifted) class I was merely expected to help the community which isn't that much to ask. I needed to find a way to inspire the populace or help out with something having to do with art or beauty to improve the world, and record my progress in a weekly chronicle. After several class discussions I was fortunate enough to have an epiphany: I'll sing at a nursing home, or funeral home, or hospital. At least that's what I told myself. I thought it was a pretty solid plan because it was like something I'd done before.

Upon the request of our family friend, Tara, I agreed to sing at the hospital for an annual gathering of parents who had lost their children. It was one of the most amazing things I'd ever been able to do. I won't lie though; I really didn't want to sit in that room as it brimmed with liquid sorrows thick enough to make your throat stop working. I'll never forget their expressions, that boy who died in a motorcycle accident, feeling guilty for helping myself to so many cookies and cups of punch when it wasn't a party, and the refreshments weren't there to console me. The room was tense at the beginning, but what do you expect from a room full of lost parents? My song was the first event. It was probably wrong to be excited to perform, probably insincere, but I'd like to think my honesty by the end of the song repented for that. I had started the song and gradually began seeing tears trace streaks down the faces of moms and dads, and then Kleenexes started being passed around. I decided to keep my eyes locked on my lyrics sheet; the paper was getting wet from the sweat on my hands and maybe a tear or two. I was ok until I heard someone's sob escape their throat's grip. I vividly remember the feeling of concrete in my throat as I choked up on the last round of the chorus. However, it seemed to help the atmosphere; it allowed the release of emotion for others. When I took my seat even people who weren't there in remembrance of those lost, had tiny river replicas on their cheeks, so I knew that my song had connected them all in their sorrows. After I sang I was able to listen and appreciate the stories of each family in attendance and have an honest empathy to share with them.

I wanted to loan out my voice again as a link for anyone who needed it. After all, helping people to feel through music is what I want to do for the rest of my life. Namely I want people to imagine, and dream, and reach dreams thanks to my songs. Let’s be honest though, procrastination of a service project probably isn’t the best step in the right direction. Doing a self-guided project isn’t very well suited to a personality like mine. I’m not very good at following through on the projects I begin. I’m one of those people who will start a hobby, be super enthusiastic for a month or so, and then a week totally forget about the project. Or even more accurately I’d tell someone all about this amazing idea I have for a story and when they
ask how it’s going I might have a drawing of a character to show for it. In the end this project went about that same way; I had the idea, I had the plan, and I had my enthusiasm. But my focus and drive were lacking, which is a shame because I felt like more and more of a loser every time someone had something to show for their project and I sat in my seat with a fake look that indicated “aww, I forgot it” or “darn I wish I’d had time to type that!” I eventually stopped miming fake scenarios and settled for a sigh of contempt at myself each time a chronicle was due.

I wonder how many lives I could have changed. Could a good old ditty have helped someone in a nursing home hang onto their sanity a bit longer? Could I have made the worst day of all time a little bit better for the people visiting or staying at a hospital? I bet I could have; I don’t doubt the power of music. It’s a little bit of magic in our superficial world of today. Magic I wield with pride. Magic I delve in, to experience what I have never experienced. After chastising myself and regretting my procrastination, I have made the decision to still carry out this project despite it not being a class project. I decided that this time I could get help from others to make it more manageable for myself, and thus I will be more likely to accomplish it, and I’m giving myself plenty of time to work up to making the arrangements as well. With suggestions from my mom, I have come to the decision to gather some friends and go caroling at Christmas time. I will bring joy into people’s lives when it’s cold, and make people smile if they have no one else to keep them company.
He knew that death was coming. The cancer cells inside his body had taken over like a sea of angry termites, gnawing away at his vital organs. The doctors had told him that he had no more than a couple of weeks left to live, and as he left his last session of chemotherapy, they all simultaneously burst out crying, tears streaming down onto their artificially white coats as they sent him away with a dozen roses and hollow well wishes. They had looked so rehearsed, standing out in the cold in a single file line, pretending like they cared for another cancer patient who had walked out of those overly sanitized hospital walls and into the arms of death. Frankly, he was rather indifferent about his impending death. When you’ve hit rock bottom, things can only get so much worse.

He sat alone, thinking about all of this in his gloomy one room apartment, empty bottles of liquor and wrappers from half eaten snack cakes strewn across the floor. On one of the walls, he had begun tallying each day that passed, setting a personal goal to hit at least three weeks before he died. Outside, the first signs of the early 5 AM commutes began to show themselves, as streetcars weaved and swayed together into a locomotive tango, and car horns blared in unison like a grand brass symphony. The cacophony of honks and screeches gave him a headache, as he lay there on a cheap and worn out tan matte sofa. Next to him on a matching coffee table lay an unopened biography of Bob Dylan that one of his old coworkers had left behind as a gift when they came to visit. A thin layer of grime and dust had gathered on the cover, a mark of the rejected and attention deprived. The thought of reading it had never even crossed his mind; he hated biographies for the very simple reason that they frightened him. To him, the very concept of being able to dilute an entire man’s life into a couple hundred pages trapped inside of a hard cardboard binding was just wrong. It made him think about how meaningless and wasteful life could be, and how he could probably squeeze all the noteworthy accomplishments of his entire life into one slim chapter. As he lay there on that ugly, beat up couch, staring at Bob Dylan’s weathered, dusty face, he began to wonder what exactly would go into that chapter of his biography. It would probably highlight his business résumé: his graduation from Harvard Business School, his internship at Goldman Sachs, and then his subsequent rise up that corporate ladder to an assistant manager of finances, and end with how he ended up in living in this shithole. His days in the corporate world had been his golden days, when his jet black designer suit jackets and Oxford-styled dress shoes demanded respect and elicited awe and wonder wherever he went.

He was just beginning to reach the prime of his career when, all of a sudden, the cancer hit, thrashing his life and everything he knew against a brick wall until every last dress shirt and tie combo was ripped to shreds and every last pair of those jet black dress shoes became nothing more than a concoction of rubber and Italian leather. Spreading from his lungs outwards, the parasitical cancer cells leched on his energy until he could no longer work and was forced to quit his job. The monthly chemotherapy treatments he underwent took a blow
on his finances too, and as the cancer got worse, the number of treatments he got increased, and the broker he became. That, he thought to himself, was how he ended up in his current situation: broke, single, and living in this pathetic excuse of an apartment.

He thought about this for a while, about how unbelievably average his life had been, and how little he had really done, and especially how little he had experienced. He thought about how his tiny one chapter biography would be one completely void of love, faith, or any real substantial human emotions. He began to think of all the things he had never experienced. He thought about his family that he was supposed to “love,” his doped-up parents who loved the Las Vegas craps tables more than him and his sister who never made it past the ninth grade and ended up working in a whorehouse, calling every so often to beg for money. He thought about music and how, even though he could produce some tolerable melodies on the violin, he had never really experienced music. How he had never lost himself in the notes and not only played the music but actually become part of it, manically flinging the horsehair of the bow into the steel wound strings to create not just a string of musical notes but also a passion that went along with it. He thought about how when he was assistant manager at Goldman Sachs, he would fly out to different corners of the world for business trips, yet had never once gone sightseeing or lost and immersed himself in a foreign city and experienced its culture. He thought about his friends, who were less his friends, and more the coworkers that he didn’t dislike. He thought about all of these things, rattling off list after list of what he hadn’t experienced in life.

Eventually, he came to the realization that he was nothing more than a baby trapped in the body of a 40 year old man. His life had been sad, and on the inside he was still a newborn baby, so innocent and eager to experience all that the world had to offer, and yet at the same time he was so tragically close to death. It was the moment that he realized this, that his whole life fell apart, busted open like a broken crystal chandelier. His legs collapsed underneath him, breaking under the weight of his new realization. As he slumped against the wall, he tapered off crinkled violets and geraniums from the flowery wallpaper, freeing them from the prisons that they had been held in for so long. Useless, that’s exactly how he felt. If only he had a little more time. But time was the one thing he didn’t have. It slipped away, tick by tick, so precious that he started to hold his breath, fearing that when he breathed, he was wasting away invaluable seconds. It was a silly thought, but it was something to cling on to. As his oxygen deprived brain screamed for air, he could feel death’s presence looming over him, so close, that he felt like he could just reach out and grasp it by its neck and strangle it until the feelings of hopelessness, regret, and fear left him. He eventually gave in to the demands of his body and took a long drawl of oxygen that burned and branded the very flesh of his lungs. His whole body sagged limply like a beat up rag doll left in the dumpster, broken beyond repair. He slowly closed his eyelids, heavy with the realization that he was nothing, and fell into a deep, sedated sleep. The day had ended, and another tally mark had been added to the calendar, the black ink still fresh.