

digging:

a literary collection



Spring 2020
Diablo Valley College - San Ramon Campus

A collection of poetry, flash fiction, and short fiction
by the students of ENGL-222 Spring 2020
Diablo Valley College
San Ramon Campus

Artwork by Ella Jensen

Thank you so much to my wonderful Creative Writing students, whose collaboration, kindness, and dedication made this semester a truly remarkable adventure. It was my honor to teach you all, and to witness your growth as writers. Your work is delicious!

Yours,
Katie M. Zeigler

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Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

Seamus Heaney

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The Heaven Mouse

Hugo Suarez

My mother used to tell me the story of how the mouse went to heaven.
As the Creator passed judgment upon the beasts of the earth,

the mouse went to heaven by default,
for the mouse was too small to be wicked and never brought harm to anyone.

The mouse never chased the cat, nor did he bite the dog,
he only stole crumbs for himself and always ran to his hole.

In heaven the mouse had no need to steal, for the crumbs were plenty,
and the cats never gave chase to him, and there were no holes to hide in.

In heaven all was good, and no one minded the mouse,
for the mouse was too small to be anything more than a mouse.

But the mouse grew bored of running through the clouds,
and through the angels' feet, who took no notice.

He grew tired of being treated like just a mouse.
And so he stole more crumbs than needed.

He bit the dogs, he chased the cats,
he scratched, he clawed, and tore holes through the clouds.

The mouse would bring harm to the people of heaven,
who thought him too small to be anything more.

And so, the mouse left heaven.
Not too small to be wicked anymore.

Autumn of '78

Arthur Cabral

Hiking the familiar pavement for the umpteenth time
Cocooned in complacency by the fog
Hades asking you to come in as you shamble by
Purgatory, the lesser of two evils

Wading in the cesspool of fascism
A beacon of purpose emerges
His grandeur consumes my vision
Declaring liberation from unfruitfulness

The answers to my prayers
I, the answer to his prayers
Communalism is the key
Escaping tyranny on the rainbow vessel

Wheels up; Touchdown
Sanctuary by muddy passage
Utopia is humid
Ingested Socialism

Pieces of Metal

Austin Quintero

It was the year 2000
When pin trading had officially begun
At the Disneyland Resort
Little pieces of metal
Becoming so much more

A little ten-year-old boy
Excited for his first trip;

A package in the mail arrived.
Five little metal pieces fall on the table
The boy's eyes filled with wonder

Three days at Disneyland
Fly by quickly,
But not as high
As the little boy,
Whose pin collection began to grow.

These little pieces of metal
Acted as a shield
A coat of glittering armor
To protect him
From life's harsh reality.

Ten years later
That little boy
Faced many different hardships.
But those little pieces of metal
Brought out the magical side of life.

Andromedan Wolf Pack

Josh Ayad

Red lights, a man that says "I'm here to help",
Bonded to the sides of a lateral, primitive medical device by the wrists. I whisper the
cause of the situation, but immediately regret it.
A wise man one told me, the one who travels alone travels the fastest.
Or was it a movie? Is there a difference?
I think that movie was in the big theater, if that holds any value.

The helping man says to me something in an alien language.
I doubt he learned that naturally.
The doors open and I'm wheelbarrowed out.

I think they're testing me, they know I know.
If I tell them though, I'll be giving up my effort for free to some banshees.
Then, they would screech out and I'd be Edward Snowden.
The guy in the glasses behind the counter is Morpheus.
Wake up, the televisions are talking about the election.
Television. Tell, a, vision?
I should stop talking in my head. They can hear that too.

I keep walking in circles as they call me for happy pills, but I heard "battery acid".
The like-minds are in front of me, they know I'll pass.
Still, I have to satisfy the class master.
"Jazz hands", flatter the cameras as I walk by.
Now its bed time as the nurses shuffle into the room at fifteen-minute increments.
"It has good intentions."
I'm in the wolf pack, as she hands me a sweater.
2 weeks later I'm out. Thanks class master. The Alpha eats last.

Degeneracy

Miguel Dickenson

Souls spoken and woven, conjured into nothing, but breathed into life by purpose
Taken and floated, inhaled by surplus, but breathed into life by purpose
Fleeting and stolen, they leave life broken and folding, but breathed into life by
purpose
Cracked and decayed, they leave life dismayed and trembling at the sight of corpus
Its life at end, components now bent, it shrivels and dies on its own
Not living nor breathing but still forever dreaming it shudders at once at its throne
Its tune now quiet, its tale now silent, but breathed into life by purpose

sometimes ur dead gf speaks to u as a crow and thats jus life

Robin Choudhury

a woman sat down beneath an old ash tree,
and laid out a lunch for two.
a crow landed on the branch above her and spoke.
"who are you dining with today?"
the woman smiled sadly and told the crow.
"my old love. we would come by here often."
her thin fingers trace the etchings from past,
looking at the mushrooms on the forest floor,
eyes looking miles away.
"are you waiting for her?" the crow asked as she ruffled her feathers.
"I don't know..." the woman replied. "sometimes I feel
that one day she might come back to me,
walk out from behind the trees,
and laugh, as this was all an elaborate prank."
the crow said nothing as she swooped down
and quickly bit a piece out of the woman's bread.
the woman startled but in the blink of an eye,
the mischievous crow was now gone.

The Appointment

Jagdish Jois

I let out a scream
But not a sound was heard
People go about and pay no heed
Just the same.
I called ahead
And sounded just the same
The conversation was cool
People were tight
I made an appointment
Showed up on the dot

People peered at me
But saw not what they wanted to see
I didn't look the clone
But inside the very same
People slipped on a mask
Polite as polite can be
I faded away
Followed all the way
I let out a scream
People go about and pay no heed

Author's note: Inspired by the painting, "The Scream" by Edvard Munch, which shows a person screaming being followed by two others.

Unwanted Goodbye

Todd O'Leary

I hope he's the one that you want for the rest of your life
He's your husband when the time comes that you'll be a wife
He'll be the one that'll stand by your side
While you cry cause you lied

I hope I'm the one that you think of when you come this high
Reminisce about how all the good times
Having our picture framed and posted up by your bedside
Then turning over and smiling just because you were mine

Now you're the one laying cold looking over at him
Regretting every decision that you ever undid
Wanting nothing more than to run back and for again
But now you won't win

Cause now I'm the one moving on with the rest of my life
I'll find a girl that's happy to be my wife
We'll move away and I'll finally get you outta my mind

The Green and the Horse

Maxwell Ortiz

Could you help me, said the horse.
No I cannot, said the green man.
Why not, said the horse.
Are you blind, I am full of hands, said the green man.
I am and I need help, said the horse.
Then you should not have been born blind, said the green man.
But I cannot be reborn, said the horse.
Pity, said the green man.
Please, said the horse.
Why, said the green man.
Because I need a friend, said the horse.
Why would I ever be your friend, said the green man.
Because you have none like me, said the horse.
The green man said nothing.
And then he said, are you not bothered by my green skin.
No, I cannot see, said the horse.
You should be, no one likes a green man, he said.
Why?
Because! said the green man.
You seem nice, said the horse.
The green man for the first time looked into someone's eyes.
You have beautiful eyes, said the green man.

A Femme Fatale

Araceli Barry

She oldened with apathy and refused to love again.
For they were brutes and savages
that would tear her heart to shreds.
Abandoned and neglected, the mutt felt weak.
Until it saw the colorless lady
shining its happiness upon her reflected bleak.

Concerned, she asked: "why don't you bark?
Why don't you growl at me?
Please, do your worst evil mutt.
You're probably like the rest, crude and foul."
But it doesn't bark. It just looks at her with hope and gleam.
With not a sound to be spoken
creating the moment of their dreams.
But as she feels the hope, too, all she can ask is "when."
Because all she could ever want
is to be loved again.

Forest Owl (A Pantoum)

Isabel Scears

The forest owl sits
Enjoying seeing me awake
As it spreads its shadowy wings
Waiting for me to squirm and stir
Enjoying seeing me awake
The forest owl breaths
Waiting for me to squirm and stir
Its pertinent eyes stand firm
The forest owl breaths
Determined to kidnap my sleep
Its pertinent eyes stand firm
The ransom—to acknowledge its presence—too high
Determined to kidnap my sleep
The forest owl claws at its elm tree perch
The ransom—to acknowledge its presence—too high
But elm trees trees don't even grow in this forest
The forest owl claws at its elm tree perch
As it spreads its shadowy wings
But elm trees trees don't even grow in this forest
The forest owl sits

Someone Older Someone Wiser...

Randy Martinez

No way, is this really real?
Stop me short if I'm wrong, but,
Did another innocent die? Another casualty of color?
This cannot be, though... someone older, someone wiser...

May say, surprised? Heh, just look back.
The only difference now being the sight which shows, how true truth is,
And... yet, though... sight cannot see through dirt, the mud, all below,
So, someone even older, someone even wiser...

May think, it repeats! It repeats! Same as always, it don't matter.
Don't matter how fars yous digs, don't matter how much ye cares
Certainly don't matter wut you think 'bout it all
No sir! Not even through the sight, beyond all reasonable doubt, for all to see!

It did happen, an innocent did die, a casualty of bigotry,
Someone younger, someone free... may be able to see
Using unbiased eyes, unencumbered by past generations clout, their indifference
The proof undeniable, past injustices surface, brought to light in plain sight...
The only surprise now being... the persistence of the same evil

Hot Water

Stephen Melville

Anger is like a pot of water over a stove.
It does matter how much water there is,
If the pot is unattended to it can erupt.
When you see it is boiling you should tend to it.

It does matter how much water there is,
You can add more water later,
When you see it boiling you should tend to it.
The greater amount of water means greater destruction.

You can add more water later,
Don't boil water if you aren't capable of monitoring it.
The greater amount of water means greater destruction.
If you don't watch boiling water you can destroy your foundation.

Don't boil water if you aren't capable of monitoring it.
Let the water sit a while after turning the stove off.
if you don't watch boiling water it can destroy everything.
make sure not to consume the water immediately.

Let the water sit a while after turning the stove off.
If the pot is left unattended to it can erupt.
Make sure not to consume the water immediately.
Anger is like a pot of water over a stove.

The Devil and His Angel

Kelly Gillum

His chances, like her patience, were now dried up.
Her love sustained, but now must be denied.
Neither his nor her love could change his destiny.
With the fluttering of her wings, his dark heart pounded to black.

As he turned to look upon her shrinking figure,
Her hair made of light brighter than her heavens,
He saw all of his choices, all the dutiful suffering caused,
And wished for more strength, more time, less eternity.

For one moment, he decided it would end.
That love would now be stronger than fate or free will.
He would ease all the suffering and end the long divide.
His new choices would make her happy and ease his pain.

But look, she is yet to turn back, her figure gone.
If these pure thoughts did nothing, why change at all?
Purer thoughts eased no pain, not like causing pain does.
"I haven't don't enough," he thought. "Just wait," he thought.

Love is like a...

Hugo Suarez

Love is like a cigarette
one will calm you down
another will ease your pain
more will make a habit
one will make you calm down
then they'll make you restless
more will create a habit
they'll make you worry
then, they will make you restless
you'll be hurt
they will make you worry
it'll leave you out of breath
you will hurt
you won't quit
it'll take away your breath
then it'll kill you
you won't be able to quit
one more will ease your pain
Then it will kill you
Love is like a cigarette.

Vistas

Arthur Cabral

I did it for the views
Light, angle, presentation, location - Lit
Posted; oh, *the* anticipation
Refreshed my projection with a finger tickle

Light, angle, presentation, location - Lit
One, two, seven shitty likes; okay, thanks boomer
Refreshed my projection with a finger tickle
Low power mode; unanticipated woke

One, two, seven shitty likes; okay, thanks boomer
Coffee, gym, sake bombs, Lyft - Fire

Low power mode; unanticipated woke
Wash my whip, time to dip

Coffee, gym, sake bombs, Lyft - Fire
Pho and Boba Tea and Netflix, all in that order
Wash my whip, time to dip
Intently stumbling up the vista

Pho and Boba Tea and Netflix, all in that order
Posted; oh, *the* anticipation
Intently stumbling up the vista
I did it for the views

Among the Lilies

Austin Quintero

Her tail was a mirror,
Reflecting light, shining brightly
His eyes were an ocean
Deep, piercing blue.

The flamingoes parted way
As the prince gazed upon her beauty.
While the mermaid sang her lullaby.
Calming his storm on the inside.

Her soothing song entranced him,
Luring him in with her voice.
The prince closes in, her senses ablaze
Her pupils dilate, turning black.

The prince feels panicked
As he fell into the siren's trap.
She devoured him
As his remains sink below the lilies.

No Takebacks

Josh Ayad

Below the cherry blossom,
One L, a plus signed next to a G
The bark was already scarred,
A heart suffocated the letters.
"No takebacks."
A blade switched between hands

The report read monotone in the mind repeatedly
"...in the alley between the 4500 and 4600 building, left in a dumpster"
Tick. Tock. Splat. One, two, three, a metronome.
The rocks in the metal bands returned to Earth like clockwork.
The metal blade too hard to give back this time.
Clink. Clink. Snap.
Coffee mug shot to the concrete.

June 14th

Miguel Dickenson

On June 14th, in the year 2000, the sun flared
On June 14th, in the year 2000, I likewise came into light

We erupted together, out of a thinness that could only produce wonder in the
eyes of its beholder
That could only emit thunder
after it rained
That would only breed summer
erasing all pain

On June 14th, in the year 2000, the world saw the sun ignite
And June 14th, in the year 2000, I was born, they found my eyes – vivid and bright

It could only be seen once
a spectacular sight
that only the Gods could have hurled
a potent might
the only bleak odds in this world

It was stranger than any passing comet, born after chaos
booming past opportunity
Louder than any given meteor, heading towards infinity
crashing unto earth
released, from divinity

On June 14th in the year 2000, the sun flared
And on June 14th in the year 2000, a star was born

ADD tingz

Robin Choudhury

7 hours at work
3 hours at school
4 hours staring at an empty canvas
And 5 hours sleeping

A schedule that works.
but if anything changes
4 hours of school
I'll topple to the ground

I am constantly in a state
of teetering success
Any small breeze
will send me careening down

But in 2001
the architectural disaster
The Leaning Tower of Pisa
Was fixed so it wouldn't fall

My God is Democratic

Jagdish Jois

My God is democratic,
But his keepers aren't so!
You pay their toll,
Or, you aren't allowed in to see!

But his keepers aren't so!
They make their demands
Or, you aren't allowed in to see!
A tough decision for you.

They make their demands,
A tough decision for you.
You hedge your bets,
Just to see his graven image!

You hedge your bets
You pay their toll,
Just to see his graven image;
But my God is democratic!

Survivor

Todd O'Leary

What happens what a King survives a plane crash?
You'd expect him to be all over the place like a news flash
Or at least announce that he is alive and recovering
Rather than pretend like what happened was much worse

He seemed to be ignored by his people now
When he was once so adored
Now that he seems immortal to them
They feel he can serve them no more

Would it have been better had he died?
He would have gone out loved and on top

All his peers and followers listening him
Unknown to how far he would drop
Now his follower's feet face the other way
As the tips of their blades turn towards his
What happens when a king survives a plane crash?
The size of his kingdom worsens

Born Into a world Ready to Die

Maxwell Ortiz

Hysteria.
The Millennium Bug to end it all.
Y2K was about to make its appearance
And the planes in the sky would fall.
Protection to safekeep our devices were now on clearance.

Hysteria Hysteria
Our government burning money in preparation.
The doomsday watchers would anticipate.
The new millennium to cripple communication.
Technology to fail and for doomsday to celebrate.

Hysteria Hysteria Hysteria
But when the day came,
Nothing...
Of course nothing happened
that's not how technology works.

The birth of a new century right off the back of hysteria,
Born into a world some thought would end.
One week passes and I am born in the bay area.
All my life I am told that doomsday is around the corner but yet here I am ready to
meet any apocalypse that does come my way so I can defend

Lethal.

Araceli Barry

The fumes suffocated him
while each and every scent
consumed his thoughts, clouding
the memories of a love he once knew.

How she could carry the natural aroma
of orange citrus, and could mask it with
the warmness of vanilla
Or the lightness of a rose.

In the moments they would meet,
he would take a deep inhale
admiring the change of fragrant she had on
welcoming him back into a state of euphoria.

But as the fumes became thinner,
the scent became bitter.
and it burnt his lungs until
he could not breathe.

She was darkening his lungs, for
he had not noticed how blackened hers were.

The Year I was Born

Isabel Scears

The death of a first and the death of a last
Is it worse to lose what you didn't get a chance to know or what you knew too much to
lose?

June 15, 2003, the day before my birth, the first president of a country dies
December 29, 2003, while I'm but an infant, the last speaker of a language dies

Afraid to lose all sorts of things
To lose those things I didn't really know, and to lose those things I was afraid to forget
knowing
To lose sight of the car I was behind on that highway in Utah
To see its headlights take the turnoff down that quiet, desolate road

A valiant guide for a hundred miles
Now I can barely make out the headlights disappearing down the road
Left on our own, to lead the way for ourselves
Down our own quiet, desolate road

The first president of a country dies
And though many more may be to come, you can't help but miss the first
How could I live with allowing myself to have not gotten to know what is now gone?
I try to come up with possible connections that might never have even been there

The last speaker of a language dies
Taking with her the subtleties that no one studying it will ever understand
How could I live with allowing myself to forget something that only I knew?
I can't let go of these memories of mine; never to forget what I alone knew so well

The Domestic (Loco)motive (A Pantoum)

Randy Martinez

Rage is like a runaway train, don't try to stop it
All watch but none interfere, wheels in motion
Shrug it off, it's not your problem, you're not a passenger,
You're a witness to violence, no plausible denial, you can smell the smoke
Yet, all can watch and none interfere, the wheels are in motion
Terror in a place that was once her home, a mess of metal and flesh

You're a witness to violence, no plausible denial, you can smell the liquor
Sounds of abuse, verbal and physical, a whistle and a crash
Terror in a place that was once her home, a mess of metal and flesh
Neighbors inevitably rubbernecking the inevitable collision,
Sounds of abuse, verbal and physical, a whistle and a crash
Feelings of fear now evolving, cross those tracks when it comes
Neighbors inevitably rubbernecking the inevitable collision,
A repeating cycle took them by surprise, a drunk conductor crashing?
Feelings of fear now evolving, cross those tracks when it comes
You're a pedestrian, a bystander, a good person, doing nothing
A repeating cycle that took you by surprise, a drunk conductor still crashing?
But shrug it off, it's not your problem, you're not a passenger
You're a pedestrian, a bystander, a good person, doing nothing
Rage is like a runaway train, don't try to stop it

Sonata for the submarine

Stephen Melville

It's a boat but it's supposed to go under
It's designed to cover all blunder,
It's a nuclear class
Swims amongst the bass.

It can vaporize a carrier
Take out all the Harriers,
On a routine trip
it sunk like a brick.

An explosion below
Took out thirty mo',
The rest all died
Drowning over time.

A few days before Monday
They retrieved the Hunley,
They bring one back top
Just for another to drop.

Attic Weasel

Kelly Gillum

Attic Weasel gives nothing away and
Always looks for more to scavenge,
Securing all the joy and contentment.
The attic overflows with discarded treasures,
But there is always room for more plans.
The new broken skis and torn socks add
To the strain on the architecture's framework.
But the plans add to the weight of something else.
An undefined feeling that can go ahead and grow.
As long as it remains outweighed by the disappointment
Of the others missing out on his treasures

That breed and foster his unfulfilled plans and schemes.
The black glow of Attic Weasel's eyes shimmer with this thought.
Attic Weasel's sharp teeth drip with saliva
Formed from the lust and pleasure of withholding
These discarded treasures those saps and suckers
Most definitely will covet.
Attic Weasel could not be happier he and his gutter gold
Remain the sole occupants of his castle,
Unencumbered by the greed of other animals

FLASH FICTION

Les Amants

Araceli Barry

The skirt veiled her face when he finally found her body. After all the distant years, she looked exactly like he remembered: naturally pale and dispirited, but he loved her like no other. He learned the way she talked to herself was louder than when she would talk to him. It never even bothered him that she didn't look in his eyes when he spoke, and if she ever did, he might have died. He knew that if she ever wanted to smile, it would never be in front of him. For her, the medication never worked. Because of him, he never gave her the right pills. He wore a veil of his own to protect her from the curable but never understood the consequences of his actions. For the time he had with her, he held her misery and released it when she was ready. With the skirt veiling her face, he kissed her through the fabric to hallow her sufferings.

Bedtime Stories

Arthur Cabral

Ogling over his lover pouring orange juice and champagne into a Mason jar mug, he knows to stay clear of her workspace. Once the glass is glowing like a summer sunset, he snatches it up and shuffles towards the staircase. With gusto, he yells, "Ready," and his wife responds with a knee jerk reaction, "*Si viejo.*" Silent as a ninja, she follows him ascending the pyramid of stairs, as he spills some of the perfect Mimosa. When entering his room, he must turn on the lamp, slide open the mirror closet door, and entomb his golden treasure to the furthest reaches of the darkness. She witnesses the fleeing adventure as her husband climbs into bed and surrenders the remote control. Flipping through his Rolodex with his tongue, he hollers out, "Tombstone!" In two shakes of a lamb's tail, she has the movie playing, which always amazes the slender man. Before turning off the lights, she says, "I love you and good night." He reciprocates with a gleeful laugh and a mischievous smile.

Memory

Hugo Suarez

I sit here, dressed all in white, in an all-white room, because I guess color might be too much for a mind like mine. It looks like the same room I've been in before, or it could be a new one, they both look the same. The psychiatrist sitting across from me looks like

a dick, dressed in a white shirt and black tie. He's got a bored look on his face, as if he knows how the next hour is gonna go and he's done this before. He asks me the obvious, "So when was the last time you spoke to your mother?"

"Damn," I think, as I rummage through the memories of the past few months, digging around the dark matter of my brain, shifting through the sludge that is my thoughts of death and decay, looking for the answer to this idiot's question. Memory is a funny thing. You can remember something a certain way, but change the details around to fit your needs. Maybe you don't remember them, maybe they're too painful, or too embarrassing. In any case, as long as it ends the same way the details don't matter, and you have what people call the ability to store information for retrieval at a later time. I guess that time is now.

My mother. I don't think I've spoken to her in months, or has it been longer? All I know is that the last time I saw her, it was chaotic. She likes to scream for no reason, and not the normal kind of scream, but that screeching sound that cuts through your ears like a knife. What was she saying to me? What did I say back? I know it was heated, but I can't remember when it happened. This psychiatrist dick is looking at me this whole time, he can see I'm having trouble. What does he know? He wasn't there, I could say anything and he'd believe it. "Screw it," I think, like I said details don't matter.

"About two months," I answered. He sighs, like he already knew this whole time. He says "It's been two years since you killed your mother." Memory is a funny thing.

The Sounds of Nature

Miguel Dickenson

The birds cooed from far away and my mental awoke for just a second. I felt the wood press my back and remembered, if only for the moment, I was still present in this house, looking over a mountain view that—I was remembering now—really was just a view.

Alas, the sky was inviting today, but I could feel clouds rumbling through my gut. 'Our natures are one and the same' I thought. The birds did too as they called back, drifting up and over my eye-line like poetry. The sheer mountain range jutting out from the side of tall sequoias was the gleam of my attention. It had stood there for millions of years and never lost its strength, and, I believed, its might would remain long after it had gone. 'Hopefully not too long,' I prayed to my hands.

Beneath the grey rock there was a snake of water, rattling into an open lake. The river was fierce and I felt like I could drown in that very moment from up above in my castle. But I could use the water. Beyond the lake the canyon twisted through, infinitely constricting until it was no longer seen. 'That's the way things are' I thought again. 'You can break anything down so that it disappears entirely, no matter its origins.'

I imagined that beyond that deep canyon there would be some more trees, or maybe a nice bed of flowers, but I could not know. Maybe one day I would rise from this creaking veranda, with tough clothes and light skin, and make the trek down to see for myself.

A Time and Place for Everything

Josh Ayad

Ding. Must be the milkman delivering the clinking containers of opaque orange juice substitute. I open the fridge to a warm welcome of yesterday's deceased bovine, as I turn the page on the tabloid covering the latest scoop of last week's sugary gossip. Out my window is Mom, clearing the garden of those weeds she always seemed so appreciative of. "Where else are they going to go?" Funny how we can be so happy covered in dirt, yet so afraid of being consumed by it. I pick up the violinist figure molded of cold metal. Ding. His chair leg clinks against the glass of orange juice on my nightstand. Remember when we couldn't afford orange juice. I came to find that the weed killer at the store is not very expensive.

random thing i wrote on my own time that kinda slaps

Robin Choudhury

He waits until he knows everyone's going to be busy- he isn't kidding about the "i don't want anyone to ever hear me sing ever" thing. He sits Violet in the kitchen, in front of the table- he sat on the sad, horribly uncomfortable ottoman. He feels nervous, and embarrassed, but his determination to help Violet recover gives him the power to get over it.

"Uh, I'm sure you know this song, it's pretty famous I think..." He awkwardly positions the guitar under his arms. "The Smiths?" He says, hoping this will peak Violet's interest.

Violet, whose hair has been pushed back by Felix so he can see her eyes, just stares at the floor. That's fine, Felix thinks. Better she's not looking at him.

"Well... Uh, I guess I'll start." And he does. The guitar is old, and slightly out of tune- but it works. Am, F, G... these chords he still remembers, after all these years (and from listening to the cassette tape on loop in his room), it all comes back to him. His mouth is dry, but he still opens it to sing, quietly;

"Take me out, tonight..."

He's watching his fingers, making sure he hits the right chords, trying to pretend he's in his room. God, he's an ex-terrorist, but he's got stage fright performing for a vegetable.

"And if a double decker bus, crashes into us... to die by your side is such a heavenly way to die..."

Halfway through the song, he glances back at Violet to see her now looking at him, mouth slightly open, head raised by the slightest. Felix feels something in his gut twist, and he almost messes up his chords. He keeps playing, not looking away from Violet, and once he finishes up the fourth chorus, he hears her voice under his.

"Oh, there is a light and it never goes out... there is a light and it never goes out..."

Felix can hardly breathe, and keeps playing past when the song is supposed to stop. If he stops, Violet will too. But alas, she stops anyway. After maybe the 13th time Felix sings that line, her brows knit together and she interrupts him.

"The song's supposed to be over by now."

Felix is so stunned he immediately stops, knuckles gripping the guitar's handle now white.

Skipping Stones

Todd O'Leary

The stars lit up the sky and glistened off of the lake in front of her. The only thing that could be heard were the water bugs jumping in between her feet on the rocks sitting above the shallow water. She reached into the water, grabbed a smooth rock that fit into the palm of her hand. She held it for a minute and studied it before kissing it and skipping it across the water as the lake seemed to fill up more and more. By the time the stars would fade and the sun would start to rise, she would finally leave, with the water now up to her waist.

All the Good Ones Were Gone

Isabel Scaers

It didn't take much to remember why she hated doing yard work while the hot sun was beating all over her. She tried to reposition her hat to cover her skin—while at the same time trying not to mix the dirt from her gloves with the sunscreen on her face. And the sweat on her eyelids gave her that sensation of cool heat that drove her crazy. Looking upward, with her hands still on the ground, performing this mindless work, she kept reminding herself that this job was only to pay the bills; this was not her life. Her life was going for a hike on Saturday afternoons down by the shoreline. Her life was sitting on the couch with a bowl of popcorn—with her rat, Sheila, on her shoulder—as she was watching a movie. Her life was playing chess against a computer, at least for the last few months. It used to be to play chess with Olivia, but Olivia managed to move out of this place. Now that's someone who really has a life. All of a sudden, her thoughts—along with her gaze—were rudely taken back to the ground, where a sharp piece of glass had pierced through her gloves and into her flesh.

She wanted to cry in frustration and pain, and was about to do so, until she looked up and saw, not the other workers, but her childhood backyard. She saw her big brother, who was about six years old. She was looking for buried treasure, all the beautiful rocks her grandfather used to collect, now scattered throughout the yard, buried several inches deep with time. But all the good ones were gone, collected before she was old enough to crawl around. Her older brother had gotten to all of them first. And she looked at her hand, confused as to why it was hurting with some sort of sharp pain when

all she saw was the ice cream sticker from Ms. Carol for counting from 1-10 correctly. She looked up again, but this time saw all the other workers, bending over and sweating.

And she looked down one last time, seeing clearly the piece of an old glass soda bottle jabbing through her glove. Standing up, with the sun's relentless rays penetrating her sunscreen, she cried out, "You see that, Jerry, I've finally found one. Shut up! I know it took me 28 years, but I've finally found one," and passed out.

Perspective

Kelly Gillum

It's just a swamp. I've been here hundreds of times before. I used to see waving grass. Now it's dead, prickly weeds. I remember seeing the sun reflect off the lake right before sundown and being at peace. Now I see oil and algae with a pinkish hue that only comes from smog and clean coal. The faint sounds of semis and hummers a mile away once sounded like mother nature's whisper. Of course, if I try to take a deep, nature-loving breath now, I'll choke on all this moist, man-made muck.

Maybe if I squint real tight, the overflowing trash can will look like a commemorative plaque imbedded into sandstone. That's not a rabid dog up on that ridge. It's a majestic deer. If I jogged out here instead, would it seem more pristine? I'm still smelling it. It's like an arugula salad tossed in dysentery. I look beyond the water, as I'm still choosing to call it. Maybe the distant trees will dull my senses. But it's like Bob Ross smoked something new and painted sad, bitter bushes instead. I'll just start walking back home. Maybe it will look better in passing. But no. It's just a goddamn swamp.

Apricots

Austin Quintero

I sit outside as the light breeze blows past, making my curls dance. The backyard was overgrown now. The weeds have taken over the yard as it can't be tended to anymore. I'm still having a hard time trying to get used to the empty chair next to me. I can still see him sitting in that chair with that childish gleam in his eye. I can still smell the apricot pie in the oven. It was his favorite. The sweet aroma danced around my nostrils, pulling me into the house. I can't go in there right now. There's too much going on in there.

It has been difficult for me to be inside. It's like I'm a prisoner in my own home. The memory of him haunts me throughout the entire house. I hear his laughter echo off the walls and his footsteps creaking throughout the house. I don't want to remember, but my eyes still see him. My ears still hear him. My heart still needs him here with me.

I love sitting on the porch. The quiet nature calms me. The trees that line the back-fence sway in the wind, just like the way we danced at our wedding. I felt peace. I don't want to remember what happened yesterday. I heard the oven's timer go off. The loud

timer rang in my eardrums and pulled me out of my trance. As I go back into the house, I take one last look at the backyard, before I have to face reality.

Odd is the New Normal

Jagdish Jois

He awoke with a start, turned over in his grave at midnight, and said, to no one in particular, rather loudly, "Time to rise and shine!"

As he said it, he could taste the moist mud, and his instinctive reaction was to wipe his open mouth with the back of his hand, which was the worst thing he could have done. The back of the hand was just as filthy if not more so, and all it did was to increase the mud in his mouth. *Yuck!* He scraped his tongue with his upper teeth and got rid of some of it; spat out some more, closed his mouth, and wiped the lips with the palm of his hand, which seems to be a little bit cleaner. Aha, the way they had folded his hands with the palm inwards had shielded it from some of the soil that had seeped into the body bag.

He thought there must be a tear but not that it mattered, as now he had to deal with getting free of the bag and dig himself out of the grave. He hoped it was a shallow grave, as he had given explicit directions about the depth, as well as the need to place a small pouch with a garden shovel, safety glasses, and a ski mask to protect his face while he dug himself out. He groped around to the extent he could move his hands and couldn't find anything. Where was it? He flexed his toes and gently moved his foot around and felt the metal of the shovel. They had kept the pouch containing the items at his foot. *Idiots! What were they thinking? He was just going to get up, lah di dah, and reach to the bottom of the body bag, and get it. Ok, ok, at least it was there! Somewhere!*

Next, he gently moved his hand up, tracing the inside of the zipper to the very top above his head. Again, he had given specific instructions to keep it open just a little bit, so he could get his finger in the gap to start undoing the zipper. He had also asked that they add a metal ring on the pull tab on the zipper to make it easier for him to pull on. Not only was the zipper all the way to the top, they had used one of those pull tabs with the teeth to lock and prevent from unzipping, and they had, of course, pushed the teeth in to lock!

He concluded it had not gone as planned; least of his problems was the hole in the body bag. He would have to give them a good talking to, but first he had to get out.

Untitled

Stephen Melville

When the class started it was almost entirely empty. The teacher began the class with the usual first day preparations roll call, syllabus, followed by introductions to the people sitting next to one another. I had the privilege of being in the corner of the

classroom, with only one other person near me. He was short, tan, and visibly anxious. He didn't maintain eye contact with me even when introducing his name, (which was Gordon) and his legs kept on jumping up and he constantly parted his long hair. Every 10 seconds his hair would swing back down across his forehead because of how much his leg was rocking his body up and down. He would use his left hand to swipe across his face, and clear the left side. The right hand would do the same for the other. His hands were shaking so much that occasionally he would have to part his hair twice in a row very quickly, the second time much faster than the first. Every time that happened, he would do this he quickly apologized. I didn't know how to respond so I kept my mouth shut.

Dirty Work

Maxwell Ortiz

Emilia stared at the mountain of dirty dishes that barricaded the sink. She could physically see the stench rising from the dishes as if they were about to erupt like a volcano, but instead of lava it would be the stench of two weeks' worth of mold. Emilia ran over to her brother, Emilio, who was peacefully playing his Gameboy in total harmony. "What the HELL are you doing?!"

He replied "Playing Super Mario?"

"You were supposed to finish the dishes before noon!"

"Ya buuuuut..."

"But what!"

"Hold on I'm almost done with this level-" before he could finish his sentence Emilia decided to yank the Gameboy from his pale grubby hands. He struggled to get it back from his older sister, but her lengthy body made his efforts futile. Emilio fell to his knees and begged his sister, "I promise I'll finish em, just let me finish the level first!"

With a sarcastic smile the elder sibling replied to her brother, "So how do I move? DO I just hold this one down?"

"STOP! I'm down to my last life!"

"In that case you should finish the dishes before I mess something up."

They heard the sound effect of Mario losing his "power up." Emilia made an evil smirk, "*Oh! So, the turtles hurt me if I touch them?*"

The little brother ran to the kitchen with terror, "OK! FINE! I'll do it!"

She watched her brother leave and felt a sense of relief. Emilia tossed the Gameboy off to the side and laid comfortably on the couch. Pulling out her phone she laughed while muttering to herself, "Jesus all that over a dumbass video game?"

Her mother came downstairs yelling at her, "Emilia! What are you loafing off for!"

"Huh?"

"Stop texting and clean your clothes! I can practically smell it all the way from here."

".....ugh"

Walk away, step by step

Randy Martinez

After the peak of night, on the corner street just off of main, Nate sparked a light that briefly illuminated his worn face. He enjoyed the stupor of the night, it was as if the world had been forgotten, as if the clock had been reset. Either way it meant he was alone with his thoughts, and existed in a time of reflection free from distraction. His focus was shifting, always changing, and slightly blurred as he satiated both of his vices at the same time. He felt a bit of guilt, thinking about the past people in his life who would be frowning upon him. But like double negatives, his guilt of being himself as a child cancelled the guilt of his decisions as an adult. *Fuck that*, he thought. He drank some more and exhaled smoke that rose up into the streetlight. The few stars gave him pause as he looked up into the sky. He screamed inside, and inevitably felt guilty. Nate didn't fight the tears, but didn't succumb to a full meltdown. He was tired, and at this point he just needed to let go. He recalled the last time he fell from the graces of his religion, his church. He recalled the excommunication, the disappointed faces of those who once called him brother. And all at once he released the pain. He dropped the flask, the cigarettes, and his crucifix into a storm drain. As he faced the direction of his home the sun was just over the horizon. He turned his back on the past, and found himself in heaven.

'Till Death Do Us Part

Araceli Barry

It was a predictable quiet day at the Eldridge residence. Every morning, for the past 72 years of their marriage, they had the same morning routine: wake up, turn on channel three for the news, she would say "how tragic", he would say "always is", they'd get up, Mr. Eldridge would always brush his teeth first while Mrs. Eldridge would brush her teeth second that way it would give Mr. Eldridge at least a five minute head start to go down stairs and warm up the water. Mr. Eldridge did not like to keep his wife waiting for anything. As soon as the water was done, Mrs. Eldridge would make her way downstairs, only to be greeted by the sight of her husband, standing without a hunch, with a cup of tea in each hand. Once she finished her tea, Mrs. Eldridge would head to the shed in the backyard. She never liked darkness, so Mr. Eldridge built a sunroof over the shed so it wouldn't scare his wife. Mrs. Eldridge grabbed the plastic box, a shovel, flower seeds, and a grey water can. Mr. Eldridge would follow behind and close the shed for her to make sure she wouldn't have to turn around. He was responsible for digging the pits while she placed the seeds inside. This was the moment where the couple loved to talk about all the great memories they had shared together. For 72 years of their marriage, this was their routine.

It was a predictable quiet day at the Eldridge residents. The bed was a little colder, but it's been that way for a while. Mr. Eldridge heard on the news that spring would be a little colder this year. "Always is." After watching television, Mr. Eldridge

made his way to the bathroom to brush his teeth first so he could make the cups of tea. With his wife treading lightly behind him, Mr. Eldridge rinsed his face and headed towards the kitchen. He warmed up the water as quickly as he could, and placed the tea bags inside the cups. Standing without a hunch, he waited for Mrs. Eldridge to come to him. As she met him at the arch way of the kitchen, she took her seat at the counter and waited for Mr. Eldridge to place her cup down. For a while now, Mrs. Eldridge has taken a bit longer to finish her drink, but it was never a problem. He only worried that it would get cold, so he began placing it in the shed to warm under the sun for Mrs. Eldridge to finish once she was done gardening. They made their way to the backyard and began to grab the supplies out of the shed. Mr. Eldridge dragged the shovel to its destination and began digging so his wife could put the seeds in. "Do you remember the time we met?" he asked.

"It feels like it was yesterday when I first ran into you and you told me that I looked like the man of your dreams, don't you remember?" Mr. Eldridge kept digging.

"Or maybe you remember the day I proposed and I forgot the ring, but you said yes anyways, remember that?"

"It's been hard remembering anything these past five years, maybe the allergies are finally kicking in."

As night crept behind, Mr. Eldridge finally relaxed and put his shovel down. "I know you don't like the dark so I won't take long" he whispered. Walking inside the shed, he put the last cup of tea on the shelf, slowly closed the door behind him as he quietly said, "You didn't finish your tea today." As he walked back to the dirt, he faintly heard his wife say *how tragic*. A small smile came across his face as he began trudging through the piles of dirt. Mr. Eldridge grabbed the stone with the years 1990 and 1995 carved on it, and began to lower himself into the six-foot pit where he lay with his wife. The seeds they had been planting for 72 years finally started to grow roots.

Tabula Rasa

Arthur Cabral

The chyron scrolls across her windshield, "BREAKING NEWS: THE LAST NATURAL BORN PERSON IS DEAD." She switches her travel pod to auto-pilot and puts on her pocket VR and logs into the Faces'n'Places app. Her "For You" page was blowing up about the fifty-nine-year-old Norwegian man, who was born by natural conception, has passed away.

The majority sent their condolences, but a minority was ecstatic about the news. *Did they really forget so soon?*

Learning about the COVID-19 pandemic was a requirement for every child in the seventh grade. It was common knowledge that one-hundred million souls were annihilated within the first four years of the outbreak. Unable to develop a vaccine for SARS-CoV-2, the United Nations turned to CRISPR technology. Thanks to an international effort, the world's top scientists were able to combat the virus by gene-editing human embryos. An executive order issued by The President of the United States, mandated

that all childbirths go through an in vitro fertilization process to defeat, "The Invisible Enemy," permanently banning natural conception conventions. This led to Congress passing the Twenty-eighth Amendment; the right to free medical care for all IVF born citizens. All medical facilities were barred from treating non-IVF patients. It took these extreme measures to save the human race from a global extinction, which is why she is enraged. This prompts her to create and post a petition to make today, January 27, 2091, "National COVID-19 Free Day." Within minutes, it receives five hundred thousand digital signatures.

Desert Sun

Hugo Suarez

She stood there by the window, looking out at the desert landscape. It was dry, as if it hadn't seen a drop of water in years. The blazing sun scorched the earth, making it sizzle and move, as if it were being burned alive. Spiky cactuses and measly shrubs were spread thin across the land. They cast no shadows, the infernal sun covered all. She could tell the ground was hot, it was the afternoon, so the dirt and stones had already been cooking for hours. To walk across the land would be to walk on embers, every step more painful than the last. If it hadn't been for the clear blue sky above, she would've thought "this is the hell they speak of."

"How could anything survive out here," she whispered. There were no birds flying in the sky. No creatures crawling on the ground. Even the cactuses were lifeless, they seemed more grey than green. This place was aptly named; it was deserted.

Suddenly she saw movement. A slight shift that blended into the ground. It was a rabbit. It bolted across the desert, jumping so as to not burn its feet. She watched it hop across the landscape with ease. It seemed so resilient, so determined to survive in this hell that it didn't stop for a second to look around and think of its chances. This hopeful little animal, bounding across this unforgiving landscape. She watched until the rabbit dove into a hole, out of sight. She then stepped back from the window and, thinking about the rabbit, she smiled.

Black Ink

Miguel Dickenson

I learned who my son was when he had already left – springing out the door like one would a prison cell, or an Eastern philosophy class. He had been ready to leave for eighteen years.

In the days after he had slipped by, I plodded around the house, cooking little, sleeping a lot. It was almost two weeks before I stumbled upon that little yellow notebook. He had it tucked away in a silent corner of his room, leaving it as he formed a

fresh new life that stuffed the 18 years behind him into nothingness. My lips shook as I dipped my old body down to earth to read the dry burlap. It was rough on the outside and it felt heavy in my hands, even though it could not have weighed more than a few ounces. In the first page he had written his name, tightly, with precision, in the top corner alongside a scribbled date: June 11th, 2009. The timeframe struck me. It rang a bell somewhere far off in my head, albeit undisclosed. I trotted away to my room and leafed through photo albums and documents, emails and text messages. I found it. June 11th, 2009, the day of his mother's funeral. I scrambled back and read the first words, in sprawling black text:

"Today I realized my mother is not the only one who is dead. My mother has been dying but my father has never lived. He may as well be buried beside her."

The words froze me but I had to finish. The page wore on..

"Today, the day my mother is buried, he is cold and harsh, like so many other days. He is vile and neurotic, like he always is when his blood boils; it boils every day. He is not an evil man, but he's a horrible father. And if he knows that, he doesn't seem to care. How could he care, how the fuck could he care, he never fucking changes!! digress. I just sighed in real life, Jesus. In this stupid old bed. I'm tired and should probably cry. You can expect another entry the next time he gets crazy.. so like tomorrow."

I quickly flipped to the next page: "June 13th, 2009"

"My father is stupid. The funny thing is he's pretty smart, but he's an idiot. He got mad that I turned the A/C on today and soon he was throwing out his usuals: "You're so useless, you know that?" "That's it, you're getting a job, you're gonna stop playing soccer, stop hanging out with Brett, and you're getting a fucking job for once."

The book was full of these lines

"Today he got mad because I forgot to do the dishes. It was probably because he got fired last week but I didn't say that." Oct 5th, 2013

"We're flying to Europe next weekend, so I need to prepare for the stress of traveling with him. It takes years off my life each time." June 16th, 2016"

I was shocked by the intensity of his words. It never occurred to me my son might hate me. I knew our relationship was weak, stark in comparison to my friends and their beloved sons' who played baseball and went to NYU, but these words were new, and irreplaceable.

I came across a page that caught my eye. "Dec 3rd, 2009." He was only 13 then.

"Today I'm writing in this thing after my dad pushed me to the ground and bruised my knees. It didn't hurt much but I've lost my freedom. He apologized after but it was stupid. I hate him."

I looked to his ceiling. My son hated me. Desperately, I rushed to the end of the book. There was one last entry date. "Aug 15th 2019" The day he left for college, only 14 days ago.

"I'm leaving everything today. After David takes me to the airport that will be it, I will be gone forever, not looking back. I have dreamt of this day every waking minute since I learnt to dream. Yet as I sit in my naked bed, fully clothed in an East Coast jacket with the Uber on its way, my spirit has shifted. Maybe my youth contained a mentality that was specific to that moment, and this next chapter will create its own."

I still do not love my dad, but I am no longer tied to the possibility of being disappointed. I am free from the necessity of hate and my mind is open. Will I hug my dad before making my way to my terminal? Probably not. But maybe I will send him a letter."

My eyes had reached their apex now, straining to remain open, and the trembling of my body forced the book down. There was nothing to do but sob – here, in the corner of my son's room: lacking furniture.

This was my boy, without a mother, or a father to tell him he was loved. Who lived in these halls for 18 years and has just now slipped by when I have finally realized the extent of my mistakes. They will live in these walls with me: a population of two.

Henceforth, I knew my son only through that dry yellow burlap. At Thanksgiving dinners and Easter brunches, he talked and walked around me thinking me ignorant, believing I had no idea how he felt about me. But the pages spoke for him.

Years later I sat in my old office and wrote my own diary entry: "Page 1"

I revisited my son's old room today. It was dry and needed cleaning, although I never will. I read those same diary entries I did right after he had left – one by one, like a loaded gun. The pages dismantled me every time I read them, but they were my lifeline. That small yellow book—that my son had accidentally left behind on his route to the West—forced my guilty hand, and tore my mind apart. It erased my amnesia, but broke me true. Like reading a horror story, where the only character, is you.

Five years later, when my back was brittle and my knees could no longer bend, I once again revisited the old room.

"I learned more about my son from that little yellow book than anything; it was a window to his soul that cured my blindness but burnt my pupils. But it also led me on a path of healing. I am closer now to my son because of it and can find solace in the fact that he has found solace himself. I am truer than true in this old age and maybe someday, my wounds will fully begin to heal."

Aug 15th, 2035

Adopted Anonymous

Josh Ayad

That room reminded me of the day I gave birth to my father. The men cheered me on in the circle of rickety, rusted foldable chairs. My trauma absolved their sins, and they would feel brand new. I felt like a hot sponge. The cleaned-out bottles under the couch in the living room by the tv I never watched served as a liquor store for the rats. I didn't think he'd recognize me when he sat down in the circle and told us his name and his story. It's not easy to act as though you don't know someone.

a pining gay man digs up some memories. what happens next will shock you

Robin Choudhury

The frosted ground crunched under his boots: winter was finally coming. He exhaled, his breath white and foggy. The battle that morning was a tough one- unexpected Imperial forces suddenly attacked one of the northern fortresses in Ferdiad territory, and Samuel was one of the knights dispatched to deal with it. Filip had originally been asked, but since he (passionately) refused, Samuel had volunteered. His relationship with Robert, Filip's father, was still relatively good, even though he hadn't really spoken to the man in over four years.

And now he was wandering around his property uninvited.

Samuel shivered, finally reaching his destination. The Ferdiad land was sparse, rocky terrain, but an attempt at an orchard stood a kilometer or so from the family mansion. The trees were young and thin, except for one strong, towering oak tree in the center of it. Samuel pulled off the glove from his left hand and placed it against the trunk, closing his eyes. He and Filip spent most of their childhood here, sparring with wooden swords, eating lunches of biscuits and berries, trying to climb to the top of the tree, falling and scraping their knees, crying as Gwen scolded them as she cleaned their wounds. Samuel smiled sadly.

Fillip loved him back then. Not in a romantic sense, they were just kids. But they would spend hours out here, just happy to be together. Samuel felt his gut twist at the thought. They aren't anymore, not really. As they got older, as Fillip walled himself off from everyone, he started to seem embarrassed to be seen around Samuel. He was mean, and cold, and so *angry*, and despite all that, Samuel forgave him every time. For once in a while, in rare moments, he treated Samuel like he used to. Naomi told Samuel he shouldn't let himself be treated like that, and she's probably right. But he couldn't help it. And that's why he's in the Ferdiads' backyard.

He sat down on one of the bigger roots and placed his hand on the ground. Ten years ago, on the morning of Gwen's funeral, the two of them buried a box under this tree. They had gotten their expensive new clothes all dirty, shoes muddy and scuffed. Robert had scolded them until Filip burst into tears, burying his head in Samuel's shoulder. At that moment, a flash of a selfish pride had flickered through him. Gods, he wished he could feel that again now, even for a second.

Samuel considered digging the box up right then and there. To his memory, he remembers he and Fillip had made letters, bracelets and bundles of dried flowers to place inside- but he swore there was more. He pressed his hand firmly into the ground, his blunt fingernails digging into the soil- he could just find out now. Dig and dig and ruin his uniform, dig until his hands are numb from the frost, but he hesitated. This wasn't just his box, or his tree, or his memories. Filip deserved to see this too. Samuel knew if he brought it up, Filip would scoff- *"Are you serious, Sam? It was just a stupid thing we did as kids, it didn't mean anything."* But maybe- ...maybe, he'd smile- small, thin-lipped as he turns his head to the side to hide it. *"..yeah. Sure. If you'll be there with me."*

Samuel stands up, wiping off his hand on his slacks. Yes, he'll come back with one hand holding Filip's, and the other clutching a shovel. Once the war is over, when they have nothing to worry about, and they're alive and well, they'll dig it up together.

The Climb Down

Todd O'Leary

I sat there quietly, with my feet dangling over the Northwest face of Half Dome. It had been four years since I sat in that in that spot, and I had spent most of that time trying to forget about that memory. However, returning to the epicenter of the memory dug it out of me.

The last time I was up here, I wasn't sitting, I was running. Thunder had just roared through the Yosemite Valley enough for Half Dome itself to actually shake. I sprinted over to the metal cables so that I could make it off the rock before lightning struck them. I got about halfway down the three-hundred-foot vertical wall connected to the cables. Lightning struck. In the distance, the thunder roared through the valley enough to shake Half Dome and the cables that I was only attached to with my hands. I held on as the shaking finally died down and ran down the wall before the next strike of lightning hit the top of the cables minutes after I walked away from them.

I sat there quietly with my feet dangling over the edge, waiting to run if I needed to.

Average Magnificence

Isabel Scears

Looking at the sunset of red fading to coral, purple, and eventually blue, Molly Briggams could sense the feelings of insignificance, appreciation, even overwhelm that would naturally be evoked. Everything was so wonderfully full of life and vigor, from the delicate camellias growing against the house to the grand old oak tree that seemed to laugh at Molly's mere 87 years on this planet. And she knew that the power and warmth of the sun that makes our plants grow—and sometimes kills them—and that keeps us enveloped in warmth is beyond belief. Molly Briggams knew she should be in awe of all this magnificence, even the fact that she was able to observe all of this from her own property. And she did enjoy it; it was ok.

She couldn't help but wonder, though, if this is the way she always had and always would get through life. The small birds flying by, who never run into one another—while fluttering past each other so briskly—display a measure of coordination she could never hope to attain, but could still admire. But she felt she didn't admire it. It was neat and pretty. But she knew it must be more than that, mustn't it?

Two Guests

Kelly Gillum

Mom, Mari, and I just stood there, our eyes wider than ever thought possible. What else could we do? We knew he couldn't be here. He was in the ground. We had a week to make the preparations. We said our goodbyes. We had the reception, full of laughs and tears. But we weren't prepared for this. Here he was, looking just the same as I last saw him alive; dirty glasses on his face, collared shirt two sizes too small, wadded-up napkins sticking out of his pocket.

It was a good three minutes of dead silence in the open doorway before the stranger we didn't even notice spoke. "I understand how shocking and disturbing this must be." No shit. "I assure you steps are being taken to rectify the misunderstanding." We weren't really hearing this young mystery man speak. Not really. But he was the only one who noticed that mom had toppled over onto the floor. He rushed to help her up, eager to assist us in this jarring time. "Wait a minute. Who the hell is this?" Mari asked with agitation. Finally, dad spoke. But I didn't hear him. Not really. "Who the hell is this?" I screamed.

Fear Mountain

Austin Quintero

Charlotte was always second guessing herself. I remember her first trip to Disneyland. We were in line for Space Mountain, about to board the cart when all of a sudden, she stopped. She looked at me with a paralyzing fear in her eyes. Her little hands were clasped together and her feet kept tapping on the black linoleum floor as we waited for the next cart to pull up for boarding. I guided her into the cart and still she wouldn't move. The cast member had to physically push her lap bar down when the car went into motion. I grabbed her hand to make her feel more at ease. Awaiting departure, I pointed up towards the cast members operating the attraction.

"Look up at them and wave!" I told her, which created a little smile to spread across her face. As we went into the pitch-black tunnel, her little smile disappeared and the grip on my hand became tighter.

"It's okay, Lottie. I promise." I said loudly for her to hear.

"I hope so." Her eyes were glazed with unshed tears as her face visibly contorts.

We reached the top of the hill and "careen through the stars" as they say. After we got off, she looked at me with excitement and anticipation, just dying to get back on. Maybe one day she'll be able to trust the process and stop second guessing everything.

Where are you going? Where have you been?

Jagdish Jois

They say, "It's always darkest before the dawn", and this thought which instantly came to her head, seemed to sum up the landscape painting that was in front of her. It was of a sunrise from behind the mountains, with an absolutely still lake in the foreground, a bunch of boats in the quietness of the dark, resting together, before the start of, hopefully, a bright and lively day.

It was mostly a dark and foreboding picture of grays, browns, and dark greens, with a paucity of any bright color. All the subjects in the landscape - the mountains, the forest, and the cabins on the edge of the lake, the moored boats, and the lake itself - were very precise in nature, as though the artist needed to exercise restraint, devoid of any of the randomness and flow of beauty often found in works of nature.

There were a few cabin windows dimly lit, tiny wisps of smoke coming out of some of the chimneys, faint shadows of light filtering through the dark forests, and a few streaks of light reflecting off the water, all hinting of things to come.

Curiously enough, the artist had chosen to show the partial sun - the only bright part of the sun - rising not from the middle of the painting but rather the top-right corner, as though beckoning the viewer to grab the corner and turn the page for a fresh, bright start.

Bedtime

Stephen Melville

It was nine o'clock, and Mason was getting ready for bed. He brushed his teeth, put on his red Iron Man pajamas, and waited for his mother to kiss him goodnight. She came into the room, tucked him in, said goodnight, and that she loved him.

"I love you too mom," he said. She smiled, turned off the light, and closed the door. Shortly after she left, Mason leapt out of bed, and with a determined intensity, threw his chest on the ground. Using all his strength, he tried to lift himself up with his arms. This was a feat he could not achieve in P.E. class the same day, which led to him being ridiculed by his fellow classmates. He used his frustration as energy, and just as he was getting somewhere, his muscles gave out and he hit the ground. He had hit the ground relatively hard, but because he was so light it was not loud enough for his parents to hear. Disappointed, but still hopeful, he grabbed a hand strengthener that he had "borrowed" from the school gym. Once in bed, he started to squeeze his hands over and over again in hopes he would have the strength to properly catch a football.

Unearth the Truth

Maxwell Ortiz

I used to have a small bug collection, but one day when I was digging in the backyard for worms, a Northern United States soldier from the Civil War began to crawl out with his face covered in blood. He screamed with the disgusting saliva and blood splashing out of his mouth and onto my face. Afterwards he ran off to God-knows-where.

Ever since then, I've never been allowed to dig. Whenever I unearth the ground, I also unearth a memory or a past event that happened on that part of the land. Last year we had a mole infestation in the front yard. Out of fear, my mom refused to let me assist her in removing them. She wouldn't even let me go on historical school trips out of fear of me unearthing the wrong events. She wouldn't even let me visit a World War II museum saying something along the lines of, "If you go to that museum you'll just set off another Holocaust!"

She doesn't know this, but sometimes I use this ability at school. Whenever there's a test, I like to bring a cup of dirt and dig up previous tests from the morning classes, but recently things have changed.

Yesterday, when I stole some dirt from my mom's potted plant beside her bed, a finger stuck out. There isn't anything unusual about seeing fingers, eyes, and even toes come out of the small dirt holes I make, but this was an exception. Before I could cover it up, I heard a voice. Again, sometimes I hear the voices of the body parts, but this was different. It said my name, and it was a man's voice, "...Kalob...". I just assumed the finger belonged to my mother since she'd owned this plant before I was even born. Again, I heard my name called out from the plant, but this time he said it with a dying breath, "...ka-lob.." I panicked and crept back to my mother's bed while digging my fingers into the sheets out of fear. It was then I heard a rip.

I made a tear in the bed. I hesitated, fearing my mother from the past would come out but, instead, what I saw before me made me wish I saw my mother. A human head accompanied by a pool of blood came out of the tear, nearly unconscious. It said my name once more "Kalob...my son...". At this point, I was scared shitless. I could hear my own heartbeat pounding non-stop as I struggled to maintain my breathing. He called me his son. I never even met my father and my mother told me he ran off before I was born. Before I covered up the body, I saw it. A knife sticking out from his bare back.

In a single moment, it became very clear to me that my father was murdered...by my own mother. Before I could do anything else, I saw her standing by the door. No emotion...no hesitations... and no remorse. My mother stood there with the same knife in my father's back ready to take her next victim.

The Constant Persistence of Existence

Randy Martinez

When Amilla found her mind, she held it in her hands gently like a newborn baby, and she never expected that she'd have to lose it first in order to find it. These were her college years, and she was just discovering her consciousness for what it was. For the entirety of her existence she was taught that the truth, was what was before her. The world exists as it is within her five senses. Religion was sprinkled in by her grandparents to help answer the questions that arose from the gaps in knowledge. "The world was made in seven days, because God is great. Evolution is merely a test of our resolve!" They would say. Yet, she never knew exactly what could be proven. Religion was not enough for her. It didn't answer the deeper questions that arose from her peers in the academic setting that was public college. "I knew we shouldn't have sent you to that liberal shithole." Her father would say. "Honey, you're being tested, faith will keep you strong if you let it." Her mother would chime in. Still, the pillars of faith fell and crumbled before logic and evidence-based facts. NO. This isn't life, she told her herself. This isn't what it's about, no, to believe such things is to truly fall into madness. Her world was shook.

Fuck, she thought, *what is really real?* Amilla took a deep breath, deeper than she ever had. She dove hard into what was previously conceived as insanity. What kind of life had she been living? She denied herself of so many things, and her peers made her see that. She recalled her friends seeing movies that she couldn't because they conflicted with her faith. She recalled all of the parties she missed because she was avoiding temptations. "The paths of sinners are wide, and the path of righteousness is narrow." Her pastor would say. But it wasn't true! What they saw as evil was just kids being kids. Amilla let go of everything that was her, because it was always now that she was never herself. She held onto something that wasn't true, the reality, the models, they always kept her from what was true.

All this time she acted normal to her peers. The inner conflict of her mind was something that nearly destroyed her. There were only two things that she was sure of during this time, the first was that she was absolutely insane, and the second was that she was the only one with the cure.

So, she followed herself because it was what she knew to be true. She fell into madness but Amilla knew that the best thing she could do was let go. Then the walls of irrational rationality came down all around her, and it was okay. She knew that allowing herself to slip away, answered the question of, how much of it is real? She wasn't insane, because she learned that she had no need for her sanity. She just was. It became the greatest revelation of her life. "Amilla, you don't have to worry about those big questions, God has a plan for you, just have faith and it will be known." Her brother would say. But that's just crazy! An omniscient being in charge of every aspect of her life. *Maybe I had to go crazy to get where I am*, she thought. Sanity became another chain that grounded her into a reality that just wasn't true. She laughed, and she laughed loudly for all to hear. There wasn't anything left for her to fear. Amilla had learned that she could build her own reality, and everything existing outside of her world, everything that was beyond her control, didn't matter. For her, everything that mattered was within her own universe. She

spent so long seeking answers to questions that just didn't matter. *What is life? What's our purpose? Why are we supposed to worship something we can't see or feel?* She neglected what was happening now, and upon this realization she became a part of the whole, a part of the now. *Yes, I'll watch that movie, yes, I'll go to that party, yes, I'll be friends with a Muslim, a homosexual, a heathen!* When she found her mind, she learned that she had it all along because no matter what you are, you are you.

Call Me Kirk
Kelly Gillum



All he could focus on were the screams and shouted conversations of the hundreds of high and drunken men and women clamoring to see *Angel and the Snake* and not some punk kid from Trenton, New Jersey. He wasn't even supposed to be here. His parents thought that he was staying the night at Teddy's house, helping him and his father build a bar, as Kurtis had elaborately explained. But here he was, standing in the back hallway at CBGB, hands dripping with sweat, eyes wide with terror, left leg shaking uncontrollably, completely broke from the fifty-dollar bribe. He knew it would be just a few minutes before he was either praised and whistled at or covered in stale beer and humiliation. In his left ear, he suddenly heard something faint but very familiar. He stopped watching years earlier, but in the back office, next to a stack of invoices and a loaded ashtray was a beat-up television set showing an episode he had actually been able to watch in its entirety in Teddy's living room. Captain Kirk was suddenly covered in a massive pile of cooing tribbles, visibly aggravated by these uber fertile pests. Kurtis couldn't help but smile and remember how good he felt watching this episode, at a much more audible volume than the rest, for the first-time years earlier. He laughed when Kirk's face turned from aggravation to humbled annoyance after the mystery of Arne Darwin's true identity was solved by a quick medical scan. Kurtis' hands were still sweaty, but his leg had slowed down a bit and the crowd didn't seem so loud now.

Suddenly, the bartender tasked with band introductions that night shouted at him. "Hey, kid! Name!"

"Huh," Kurtis hazily responded.

"What's your name? You're up!"

He hadn't thought about this part, but he turned his head toward the television, grinned, turned back to the impatient employee, and after a quick pause, responded, "Kirk Driscoll.....Call me Kirk."

Kirk Driscoll, as he now knew he would continue to go by, stared toward the bright light blasting into his eyes. At first, he could just hear the sounds of bartenders pouring drinks and the coughs of those anxiously waiting to see what he had to offer. Coughs turned to scattered nervous laughter. Laughter turned to shouts of "c'mon," "is he fucking serious," and "what, are you lost?" Kirk dropped his head and started staring at his hand. The laughs and drunken shouts became louder in the club but quieter in his mind. His stirring brain settled and veered off into one direction.....

Kurtis' eyes began to burn and tear up as he stared at the TV close enough for his hand to rest prone on the channel knob, ready to turn from three back to seven. Though trying to keep one ear aimed toward the garage door, he grinned in curiosity as to what would happen next as he watched Kirk and Spock battle to the death. It was mid-September of 1967 and Kurtis had waited all summer to see what they came up with next, what adventures his new idols would take. *What's that*, Kurtis thought in a panic before swiftly flipping the channel knob back to seven. Hopping over to the couch, he

pressed his right cheek against the glass for a peek at the garage door. The slightly cooler glass felt refreshing compared to the heat he had battled throughout the day. After seeing no action in front of the garage, he turned his head and pressed his left cheek against the glass, which was now almost as warm as he had expected a moment earlier, and was able to notice his mother getting her keys out of her purse to unlock the door.

"Kurtis, I'm home," Betty Driscoll shouted as she entered through the door, dripping in sweat from her long walk back from her church group.

Kurtis tried to run and give his mother her usual hug, but she stopped him and made it a quick kiss on his head, so that she could go and take a very quick cold shower. This was fine with him, as he could probably catch the end of "Amok Time" while she recuperated from the hot and humid wave hitting Trenton that week. The Driscolls were the third house on the cul-de-sac to get a remote access garage door, and this was certainly a blessing in trying to watch *Star Trek* or anything on the NET channel with enough time to change the channel and hop back to the couch. If Kurt Sr. had just driven up in the solo family car, he wouldn't dare try and watch the rest, opting instead to practice on the piano or maybe even go deal with the heat outside.

Most nights, Kurtis was in bed at 8 o'clock on the dot, but Friday nights were different. No usual Saturday family plans and no church-going the next morning. Friday nights also happened to be Kurt Sr.'s weekly poker nights. Friday was definitely Kurtis' favorite night. His father would usually come home angry, and Kurtis was able to more easily avoid him on Fridays. He'd go to bed early, practice playing a song by *The Who* Kurt Sr. certainly wouldn't recognize on the piano, or go outside with neighborhood friends still allowed to try and make the street lights guide them on their adventures. Sometimes this wouldn't be a problem, but if Kurt Sr. had a few too many Gimlets or if someone at the poker table was exhibiting any vague hippie qualities, his son would be the most likely recipient of society's required lesson learning.

This particular Friday evening would be a mixed bag. Arriving home earlier than most Friday nights, Kurtis' father walked through the garage door, unfettered by sweat, due to the fully functional air conditioning in his Lincoln Continental. As Kurt Sr. swept through the kitchen, grumbling to himself, he was unaffected by his wife's impeccable recovery from an hour earlier, in what was usually her husband's favorite blue dress and a pair of heels that didn't make her too tall, as Kurt Sr. had once objected to.

"Hi, honey. You're back early. How was poker?" Betty asked Kurt Sr. as he grumbled to himself, throwing a duffle bag onto the kitchen table, but respectfully and methodically hanging his colonel's uniform on the hat tree in the entry way.

"Goddamn Frank Adler," he growled after a few seconds around the house. "You almost can't tell he has ears at this point. And he won't shut up about that disgusting backyard bathtub of his. He can call it whatever he wants, it's still bathing in public with people you know. This isn't ancient Rome."

"I can see the appeal though," Betty timidly responded. "I guess they have jets that move the hot water around. Midge Peters says they're nice to have margaritas in."

Kurt Sr. stopped and looked at Betty with eyes wider than his uniform ribbon board. "You better be kidding."

"Yes, I am. It sounds like a good way to get sick or arrested," Betty recovered. Kurt Sr.'s expression softened. "Especially since you know people will start leaving their swimsuits in the house. Damn hippies."

"Well, maybe they'll fall asleep and forget to go to their flower power protests and save the police a few bullets," Betty quipped with a wry smile.

Kurt Sr. erupted into a laugh usually reserved for episodes of *Gomer Pyle*. "Dinner smells good," he commented after his belly laugh relaxed his jaw.

"Pork chops and potatoes," Betty responded as she rubbed his shoulder and kissed his cheek, before an assuring glance toward Kurtis, whose head she had already noticed slightly sticking out from the hallway. Betty surprised even herself sometimes when she could soften her husband enough to set the scene for a pleasant late Friday dinner. She also knew it made for a better Saturday morning for all if she didn't trust him to feed himself at the poker game or tussle through the refrigerator in a mood.

During dinner, as Kurtis used his finger to leverage his last bit of macaroni onto his fork, he could hear the basketball bouncing closer and closer to the front door. He didn't like basketball, or any sports, for that matter. But he knew he could get the fellas to drop the ball and maybe fit in one more game of tag before the twelve and thirteen-year-olds in the neighborhood finally convince them it wasn't neat anymore. He started clearing his place at the table before politely, but swiftly, deciding to ask to be excused. Kurt Sr. pulled his wrist off the edge of the table and faintly craned his neck and furrowed his brow toward his son.

"What," was the only word he needed to say to get his son to take his napkin off his plate and place it back on the table, and swiveling back into his chair.

"Never mind, sir," Kurtis responded clearly, but defeated. As he returned to slowly eating the remainder of his porkchop, Betty looked back and forth between her now demoralized son and her resolute husband.

"Honey, how about a drive tomorrow? Just the two of us. Maybe we could drive down toward Cape May, like we did a few years ago."

"I don't know. I've got some new piss ant that works for General McGarry calling in the morning. I'm supposed to pretend he's my equal and give him what he thinks he needs," Kurt Sr. muttered, unconcerned with his wife's new whimsical desire.

Taking the hint he had learned to gather from his mother, Kurtis straightened his shoulders and asked his father, "Sir, would it be alright if I go over to Teddy's tomorrow?"

Kurt Sr. instinctually looked up toward his son, perturbed. Betty jumped in for the save, as she had mastered ways to counter her husband's various hostile looks toward

their son. "I could always take him over during your call with that young man. And we could go on the drive after, but only if you want."

"I suppose," he grumbled, after pausing and finding no current reason to keep his son home while he berated an inferior military officer.

As his father returned to quietly eating his dinner, Kurtis looked at his mother with a pleasantly surprised smile, who said nothing and only briefly looked back at her son and winked.

...

Kirk's face, still burning from the spotlight but dazed in memory, managed to have an impish smile and a single tear drop at the same time. Finally beginning to hear the rumbles and screams of the club that could soon burst him out the door, Kirk lifted his head and squared his shoulders as much as he could with a guitar strap pulling down on him. He suddenly lifted his right hand into the air. And with one swift drop, he silenced the loud, angry crowd with one explosive bark from his electric guitar. He followed up his commanding stroke by growling into the microphone.

"Fuck you. And your man too!"

The silence that fell from one boom of Kirk's guitar was now accompanied by wide-eyed intrigue. He grabbed the room. Now was the time to tighten his grip.

Kirk's left hand and fingers fluttered along with his shouts that wrapped around the microphone, as his right shoulder and elbow repeatedly hammered down, all in a way that had started to define 1974. He had felt this type of music, just as New York City had, for a while. And now, in this moment, New York City felt Kirk. His music was so angry, so raw. Kirk had become so much angrier the last few years, and it was showing. Through his music that only Teddy had heard in its entirety. Through interactions with classmates and teachers. Even when he showed the proper respect to his father, he did so with more mumbles, more slump in his posture, more tightness in his brow.

But in this moment, when his music sounded so angry, Kirk's actual anger slipped away. It would return, of course, but nothing mattered on that stage at CBGB. Supposedly staying the night at Teddy's house and not returning home at the proper time the next day would certainly bring trouble from his father. But Kirk stopped caring. He was where he belonged. His anger could create joy and give him love and admiration from strangers he didn't even know he wanted it from.

Shouts returned to the room while Kirk continued to wail away, but there was enthusiasm in them this time. And they came with hoots and hollers. And the shatters of beer bottles came with smiles and heads and arms flailing up and down across the small venue. They didn't even care that his second song was a blatant rip-off of *The Stooges' Gimme Danger*. They loved everything Kirk was giving them. And they stayed in his grip when he followed those up with three covers. Along with loving his music and his vibe, they must have started figuring out that he was still just a kid at this point. *Not everyone can come out of nowhere with a bunch of their own music*, they must have thought. After

his third cover, the bar manager came up onstage and placed his hand on Kirk's sweaty and sore shoulder.

"Give it up for Kirk Driscoll," the manager bellowed into the wet microphone. The crowd erupted into applause and screams and whistles, waiting for Kirk's next song.

"The kid will be over by the bar, if you wanna talk to him." The bar manager had to shout even louder into the microphone to announce that *Angel and the Snake* would be up in a couple minutes, as he was now covered in boos and expletives from the crowd that had momentarily forgotten who they were there to see in the first place.

Now parked at the end of the bar, Kirk was chugging water as quickly as his gasping breath and plastered grin would allow. As he looked around the bar and occasionally swiped back his sweaty hair with even sweatier hands, Kirk could only get a few seconds to himself between high fives and random shoulder grabs and congratulatory "yea, man" and "fuck yea, dude" to go along with random beers being thrust into his hands. He couldn't even hear what people were saying to him when they would stop and try to talk to him. For the most part, Kirk wasn't even really thinking. The anger would continue at home and at school. In fact, it would be necessary in writing the kind of music he had fallen in love with. But for now, he just sat at the bar, reveling in what he had been able to accomplish at this dingy little concert venue. He would worry later about trying to beg the manager to sleep a few hours on the office couch or figuring out how to drive back to Trenton with a hefty buzz and an empty gas tank. For now, even after finishing his set and forgetting to watch and listen to a band he was interested in seeing, he just sat and took stock. He owned this place.

The next morning, Kirk sputtered into his usual parking spot on the side of the street in front of Teddy's house. He still couldn't believe that the bartender had given him a small share of his tips as a congratulations on his set. It was more than enough to fill his gas tank, but he wanted to stretch it out and decided five dollars would be enough for his seventy-mile drive home. Most of his morning drive was spent thinking about the money he could scrounge up to get out to the city to start figuring out how to book more shows and maybe even form a band. Along with his daydreaming and vague planning, his drive was filled with non-stop grinning and ecstatic fist pounding against his car ceiling. He couldn't wait to tell Teddy all about his night when he woke him up to return his secret guitar to his friend's bedroom.

But his smile and excitement and daydreaming came to an abrupt end when he turned off his car ignition and saw his dad walking out Teddy's front door, with his lips pursed and fists balled up. Following Kurt Sr. was Teddy's dad, Gary, still in his bathrobe, and his eyes bulging in concern at the sight of Kirk getting out of his beat-up Chevy Corvair. *Fuck*, was all Kirk could think to himself as he slowly perched up out of his car to face his father's wrath.

"I knew it," Kurt Sr. growled as he marched down the walkway toward his son. "I knew you couldn't learn enough in some shop class to build a fucking bar! And I

should've known this hippie wouldn't know how to build anything," he snarled, motioning toward Gary.

"Hold on, dad," Kirk pleaded with his head lowered and his hands extended out in an attempt to stop his dad from coming closer. The attempt did stop his father dead in his tracks, but not in the way he had hoped.

"What the fuck did you just say to me," Kurt Sr. gasped out angrily, in complete disbelief that his son would address him in such a manner.

Kirk tried to recover. "I'm sorry, sir. What I meant was...."

"Shut the fuck up," his father bellowed as he slapped him across the face, now enticing neighbors out their front doors in their bathrobes just like Gary.

The first slap was followed by another. Gary and Teddy kept their distance, as not to overstep their boundaries. But Gary did muster up concern enough to politely shout out, "C'mon, Kurt, take it easy."

"Stay the fuck out of my business, Gary," Kurt Sr. growled.

"Dad, let me explain. Gary had nothing to do with this," Kirk tried pleading.

"What?" Kurt Sr. firmly asked as he whipped his head back toward his head.

"Sir, I get why you're angry. But please let me explain. Last night was a really good night for me."

This was the first time Kirk had ever tried to explain his true feelings and stance to his father. But instead of granting patience and an opportunity to state his case, his father's face became red and tight and his head began to shake in anger. He proceeded to grab Kirk by the collar and shake him around with his left hand before hastily throwing a fist toward him with his right. In his rage, his fist only made slight contact and grazed Kirk's cheek and slammed down toward his other hand. Before Gary had a chance to make it over to the confrontation, like he had finally decided to do, Kirk reacted in a way he never had before. He shoved his father back with both hands and recovered his footing before launching himself forward and connecting his fist with his father's jaw.

Kurt Sr. fell backwards and landed on his ass, slightly catching himself with his right hand. Standing up quickly, holding his jaw with his left hand, he stayed in place and stared at his son with a fire in his eyes like never before. He was not accustomed to his son standing up to him like this. He felt a combination of embarrassment, adrenaline, and shame that he hadn't felt since officer candidate school. After taking a moment to try and compose himself, Kurt Sr. couldn't help but growl out "That's it," at his surprisingly firm and confident son. "I'm leaving!"

Kirk was surprised at his father's apparent resignation but felt slight pride in this unfamiliar territory. He was now prepared for the possibility of going home later to a new and welcome heart-to-heart with his father. He couldn't help but briefly daydream about the new channels and realms of their relationship that he and his father might now navigate.

"I'll be home in an hour," Kurt Sr. exclaimed as he softened his growl. "You have that time to go home and get your shit."

Kirk's pride in his newfound ground-standing disappeared. All he could do was furrow his brow and stare dumbfoundedly at his father.

"You feel so good taking off and doing whatever you want? Then you can get the fuck out and go do it. I'm done. Maybe these fucking people can be your family."

"I'm sorry, sir," Kirk gasped out, still unsure of how else to react.

"When I get home, you and whatever you can fit into that shit box over there are gone. I'm done with your disrespect and ungratefulness. Go be a hippie somewhere else," Kurt Sr. said on his way back to his new Cadillac. As he sped away, Teddy stood on the front lawn, now joined by his mom and younger sister, unsure of what to do or say in response to the spectacle that had just hijacked their neighborhood's Sunday morning routine.

Right before the Cadillac peeled down the street, Gary returned from his quick escape into the house, now holding a bag of frozen peas and his wallet. As Kirk stood dumbfounded and emotionally exhausted, Gary approached and placed his hand on his shoulder. "You good, kiddo?"

Sputtering toward his house one last time to see his mom and to gather some clothes and any cash he had hidden in his bedroom, Kirk tried to focus on plans for New York. But having just lugged the part of his record collection he stored in Teddy's bedroom and now holding the couple hundred dollars Gary and his wife were able to scrounge up for him, he couldn't help but wander back to a time that seemed all too similar.

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Teddy belted out *With A Little Help from My Friends* in its entirety like he had been playing it for years. Although Kurtis had already announced several times that he didn't care much for *The Beatles'* music, he still stood in awe for the entire two minutes and forty-five seconds as Teddy showed off his instant skill with the baby blue electric guitar his father had bought him just a week earlier. "Can I try?" Kurtis whispered without recognizing his own volume.

"Ok, but be careful. It's just been a week," his friend muttered with his face more scrunched than usual. Although Kurtis had never touched a guitar before, he was angelic on the piano, and he was watching every move Teddy made in that time. He was suddenly able to muddle through a few chords of a song by *The Who* he'd played dozens of times on the piano with surprisingly few mistakes.

"Whoa. Sounding good, kiddo," Gary said as he popped his head into his son's bedroom. "It sounds like you've had lessons. Amazing."

"Thanks," Kurtis replied out of breath from a level of excitement he couldn't quite recall having playing the piano.

A sudden screech and door slam popped all three heads toward the bedroom window, and after Gary went over and looked down toward the driveway, he exclaimed "It's your dad, kiddo." Kurtis' excitement turned to sudden dread as he quickly but carefully pulled the guitar strap over his head and handed the guitar to Teddy. He began rushing out the bedroom door when Gary placed his hand on his chest to stop him and headed down to open the front door.

"How's it going, Kurt," Gary asked in a stern, yet friendly, tone as he opened the door.

"Fuck off, Gary," Kurtis' father growled as he ran past him up the stairs. His son stood wide-eyed at the top of the stairs, clueless as to why his father seemed so angry during his surprise arrival to pick him up. "Let's go," Kurt Sr. snarled as he yanked his son down the stairs by his arm.

"Let's take a second here," Gary tried to plead as Kurtis' unstoppable force of a father shoulder checked him into the open door on his way back to his car. As Kurtis was thrown into the front seat, Teddy watched helplessly as he gripped his father's arm, unaware of precisely what was happening.

"Do you think I'm an idiot," Kurt Sr. screamed at his son while going irresponsibly fast in the connecting chain of family-filled neighborhoods.

"What," was the only word Kurtis could squeal out in terror as he clenched the seat with his right hand.

"This shit. This trash," Kurt Sr. screamed as he reached into the side pocket on the driver side door to throw a crumpled-up piece of sheet music into his son's face. "You know you're not supposed to be playing this Satanic shit. You think I don't know who the goddamn *Who* is?"

"I'm sorry," Kurtis screamed as saliva and tears trickled down his chin and onto his shirt. He knew what was coming.

"Are you?" his father questioned right before slamming the car in front of a stop sign and proceeding to lay down four slaps to the side of Kurtis' face and ear. "You know this shit is dishonest and cruel. I set down rules and you break them. What is wrong with you," he yelled as his son turned dead silent. "Well? Answer me."

"I. I. I," Kurtis stammered, unable to say more.

"Get it together," his father growled as he landed one final slap to where his temple and eyebrow meet. After a good five seconds, Kurtis was able to shake out a frightened but respectful "Yes, sir. You're right. I won't do it again. I won't play that stuff anymore."

"You're goddamn right you won't. We're going through the piano bench together every night. And don't you dare think about hiding any of this shit in your room," he commanded in anger, but at a slightly lower volume.

"Yes, sir," Kurtis said with tears puddled up on top of his bottom lip.

"Now fix yourself," Kurt Sr. instructed as he straightened his own collar, sleeve, and hair part before accelerating the car once more at a safer speed than a moment earlier.

Arriving back home, Kurt Sr. walked through the door from the garage in front of his son, who hung his head as he walked in still frightened, but more composed than a few minutes earlier. "Go straighten up your room. It never should've been left like that in the first place," he shouted as his son entered his bedroom to find a single t-shirt hanging off his perfectly made bed.

As he proceeded to lay out the shirt to fold to his father's military standards, Kurtis noticed his mother slowly walk by his bedroom.

"Just leave your dirty clothes in here, dear," she instructed with a shakier voice than usual, as she placed a laundry basket in the entry to his bedroom. He noticed that she wasn't making direct eye contact with him as she spoke and walked in and out.

A few minutes later, as he cried in the shower, he thought about his mother's brief appearance in his bedroom. *Why did her right eye look more smudged than usual*, he thought. *She never puts that much makeup on*. He abruptly stopped applying the bar of soap to his arm pit. Suddenly he knew that it wasn't just him.

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Pulling into the driveway, Kirk could see his mother staring out the kitchen window. As he slowly rose out of the driver seat, she began wiping her face in preparation for his entrance. He assumed that once he told her exactly what had happened that morning, she would try and talk him into staying and assure him that she could change her husband's mind.

Upon entering through the front door, he saw a few of his duffel bags already packed and sitting in front of the hat tree. Standing in the entry to the kitchen was his mother, in her typical Sunday morning dress and her hands folded tightly together.

"Good morning," was all she could muster up the strength to say.

After stopping to take a confused look around, Kirk exclaimed, "That's it? No discussion? No nothing?"

"It's never been like this before, Kurtis," Betty tried to respond calmly, reaching up to stop a single tear drop in its tracks.

"Did he come back? Did you talk more about it?" Kirk asked with panic in his voice.

"No, Kurtis," she responded. "But I knew that it would come to this. It was only a matter of time that you would sneak off to the city."

"I've gone to the fucking city lots of times, mom," he screamed. "Last night was just the first time that it finally meant something! I finally got to play for people! And they fucking loved it, mom."

With more tears starting to stream down her face, Betty took two tries to gulp out a response to her son. Finally, on her third try, she exclaimed "There's an envelope in your green bag."

Kirk tried to ignore this confirmation that his mother was letting him leave her life without a fight and proceeded to run to his bedroom. He walked in to find that the dressers and closet shelf had been cleared of all the old dust-covered sheet music and broken car and radio parts.

"Try to use it for gas and food. You might be able to get a little rent out of it, but not much. I know some people like to have more than one guitar, but try and wait a while until you get on your feet first," Betty tried to lovingly advise while ignoring the look of shock and betrayal emblazoned on her son's face.

After taking a few seconds to recover from seeing his barren bedroom, it occurred to Kirk what she had just said. "You knew about the guitar," he gasped in disbelief.

"I always assumed you would give up on it, maybe join the Marines like your father," she started to weep.

"Fuck him," Kirk screamed at her. "I will never be like him!"

As Betty's tears became sobs, Kirk became angrier and inched closer to his mother. "And I'm never giving up! I'm gonna make it! But since you don't wanna face him and be on my side, you won't see it," he proudly yelled. "Thanks for packing my shit, so I can get the fuck out of here faster," he barked as he marched out and picked up his bags to begin his road trip back to New York.

After shoving the screen door outward, Kirk paused, took a breath, and turned around to face his mother one more time.

"Leave, mom. Leave him," he emphatically whispered, inching his face closer to Betty's. "You can't stay."

Raising her right hand up to fix her hair and wipe the tears from her face, Betty crafted a polite smile before once again politely folding her hands together and responding with a false calmness, "I can't leave."

Kirk's face dropped. After a few seconds, he backed up enough to let the screen door close between them.

"Please be safe," Betty said softly, struggling to keep from weeping again, trying to pretend her son was leaving for summer camp.

Looking down toward the welcome mat in front of the door, Kirk quickly gasped out "Goodbye, mom," before turning around to throw his bags into his creaky rusted trunk. He chose not to look back before turning around the cul-de-sac and speeding down the road and out of sight.

Over the next few months, Kirk was able to get a part-time dishwashing job at the diner across from CBGB, get a few more opening gigs at the club to follow that first successful night, and move in with some other aspiring punk artists. The bartender who had shared his tips with Kirk after his debut on the scene introduced him to Jake and Wally. His soon-to-be bandmates were already renting a room from a middle-aged Russian immigrant and were somehow able to convince Dimitri to let Kirk make half the living room his bedroom for an extra \$200 a month. As the next few years passed, the

trio became more and more admired on the local punk scene. But the more love and praise Kirk got from total strangers at various clubs throughout the city, the less he cared about what his shrinking list of actual acquaintances thought of him.

Kirk quickly pulled out of Carol Anne as he remembered his two bandmates had threatened to find another lead singer. He didn't take their threat seriously at first, as they had casually made the threat before. But this time he realized they hadn't forced him to practice the day before, as they usually did every Sunday, Monday, and Thursday. He threw his last five-dollar bill at Carol Anne as he threw on a raggedy white t-shirt and stiff jeans.

As the living room was both his bedroom and the rehearsal room, he knew they must have found a new rehearsal setting to go along with their new shitty singer. *That no-talent sonofabitch Jerry Crash*, Kirk thought, flying out half barefoot to find a cab he couldn't afford with a cabby he could outrun. Finally opening the door to the appropriate cab, he tugged a few times on the inside handle to hastily make sure it would open in a hurry. *It has to be Jerry Crash*, he thought after commanding the one place he could think to look for Jake and Wally.

Back in the apartment living room, Carol Anne came out of her insulted stupor and finally began scanning the filthy room for her underwear.

"Oh! Jerry wants to rehearse five days a week, does he? That should help him stay mediocre and unloved," Kirk screamed as Jake and Wally tried to reason their betrayal.

Jerry Crash had already tried to chime in to both argue his quality and assist his new bandmates, but was silenced by all involved.

"Shut up, Jerry," Jake and Wally would usually command in order to continue hashing it out with their banished leader.

"Are you still fucking breathing?" Kirk barked at the inferior singer he once sucker punched in a Howard Johnson's parking lot.

Jake and Wally revered Kirk's talent and the love their burgeoning fanbase had for him, but the abuse and lopsidedness of the apartment rent and show set-up had finally taken their toll.

"You just don't carry your weight, outside of the singing and writing. We basically keep you alive. And do you even know how to set up an amp?" Jake gasped out, as if holding it in for decades.

"And for a guy who doesn't pay rent or set shit up, you sure don't like to read anyone else's writing," Wally exclaimed more calmly.

Kirk counted backwards from five in his head before addressing Wally's concern. "*Stooge on a Ledge* was such a brilliant song that would light New York on fire. And Jake, *Smile Rat* made me weep, but I didn't show you."

Their expressions softened, as Jerry Crash could feel their divide filling and his band search beginning again. Kirk knew he had to sweeten the deal with bargains and promises made with the future.

"I'm gonna sing those songs. And you guys are gonna lay them out. But this isn't the time. We save them. We get bigger and then we give them to New York and maybe even LA."

Jake looked ready to hug Kirk and make his couch bed for him. But Wally shot a look of steadfast resolve toward his band mate and folded his arms. In one final act of desperation, Kirk lowered his shoulders and drooped his head before sighing out his finishing act.

"I'm gonna talk to Perry about maybe washing dishes or something at the club on Tuesdays and Wednesdays."

Wally struggled to hold back a chummy smirk, and Jake could no longer contain a squeal and a single clap of joy. After realizing he had them won over yet again, Kirk could no longer battle the compulsion to default into the Kirk his bandmates knew best.

"But don't think for one second I'm gonna ruin one of my shirts setting shit up. My sex sells. And my voice needs to rest with me before and after the shows."

Even after this retreat from vulnerability, Wally and Jake knew they had to send Jerry Crash packing. As all three punks turned in his direction, they saw he was already flailing his arms and snapping his guitar case shut. Jerry Crash stopped, turned around, ticked his gaze back and forth between all three, and before running out of the basement of his uncle's Burger Hut, screamed "You fuckers can't be here. Get out, fuckers," over and over.

Later that night, as Kirk approached his reassured bandmates with another round of PBR, he started to think about Teddy more. Even though it had been over three years since he'd seen him, he had begun to regret not calling or writing him in more than half that time. When he would flash a fake smile at Wally or shoot a thumbs up at whatever silly trick with a straw or a spoon Jake was attempting, he would remember the few times at school he enjoyed because of Teddy. Or the freedom Teddy and his family allowed in his exploration of music. Turning his stool around to face the window, he remembered what Teddy did for his music. He remembered how he challenged him and supported him in ways that he never chose to appreciate.....

"What do you want on your burger?" Gary asked Kurtis as he sat on the floor against Teddy's bed, muddling through the chords to *Stairway to Heaven*.

"Huh?" Kurtis grunted, after taking off his headphones.

"Your burger, kiddo. What do you want on it?" Teddy's father playfully shouted in a way his father never would have, especially in response to *huh*.

"Whatever you're doing is fine. Thanks, Gary," Kurtis mumbled, already putting the clunky headphones back on.

"Sounds good," Gary announced, as he slapped Kurtis on the shoulder. He proceeded to sing the only five words he could remember from a ten-year-old *Beach Boys* song, passing by his son in the doorway, to whom he gave a loving double shoulder shake before his dance down the stairs.

"It's dinner time. Don't make my dad make your burger again. Pasta or something sure, but come down and make your own burger," Teddy exclaimed.

After briefly glancing up to his potentially agitated friend, Kurtis dropped his gaze back down to his finger work for the song he had started learning three days prior.

Leaning down to rip the headphones off his perennial house guest's ears, Kurtis swatted his right hand in an aggressive, yet unfocused manner.

"Dammit! What?" he moaned at Teddy.

"Come down and make your own damn dinner. This isn't a hotel. My parents love you, but you need to stop using them like that. Come down and make your own burger and eat with us," Teddy responded in a tone that clearly exhausted him to have to use.

"Yea, I will. Give me my headphones," Kurtis mumbled with impatience.

After a moment of annoyance mixed with unsurprised shock, Teddy finally tossed the headphones against Kurtis' guitar.

"What the fuck?" Kurtis screamed as he launched up to his feet, pulsing his head back and forth between Teddy and his guitar. "This is my guitar, man," he shouted.

"You may have bought it, but I'm the one who has to keep it in his room and I take care of it when you don't even put it back in its case. Take it home and play it there if you got a problem," Teddy firmly responded, staying calmer than his friend, as usual.

"You know I can't do that," Kurtis shouted, moderately calmer than a moment earlier.

"Well, if my room is gonna continue as your little rehearsal studio and you're gonna eat here as much as I do, clean up after yourself, don't make my dad your slave, and come down and make your own damn burger," Teddy commanded, as he turned and stomped out of his bedroom.

Holding his guitar in one hand and Teddy's headphones in the other, Kurtis stared out the doorway. He finally decided to join Teddy and his parents for dinner and go make his own burger. As he pulled the guitar strap over his head, he looked at Teddy's open closet and noticed his guitar case, still open from when he started playing hours earlier. He paused for a moment and before jogging out the door and down the stairs, decided to lean it in between Teddy's desk and the wall, as usual.

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Saturday night at CBGB was a bigger night than usual for Kirk and his band. As Jake tuned Kirk's guitar for him, as usual, Wally tried to get Kirk to focus as another blonde girl in a leather jacket sucked on his neck. Kirk was just as concerned with getting their name out there as Wally was, but this had become routine for him on show night. Even the rumor of Lester Bangs showing up to their show couldn't quite pull him away from the majesty of whatever this girl's name might be.

"Lester fucking Bangs, man," Wally screeched. "I'm sure this relationship of yours is really special, but we need to tighten up tonight!"

"We will," Kirk moaned with his head arched up, as the suckling on his neck progressed. "We're gonna sound great. And then when we're on the cover of *Cream*, we're gonna get into even bigger clubs. And then you can calm the fuck down."

"God dammit! It never changes," Wally muttered as he stomped away.

After about an hour and four more drinks, Kirk picked up his guitar, assuming it once again tuned to perfection by Jake. Winding up his right arm to begin his set with *Rat Wire Hustle* as he usually preferred, he noticed the anticipatory screams and whistles were fewer and less emphatic than usual. Recovering from his brief disappointment, Kirk slammed his arm down. Hearing the off-pitch in his second string, he came to an abrupt stop and quickly spun around to Jake.

"What the fuck, Jake?" Kirk screeched at his under-appreciated bandmate, as he threw his arms up into the air with a childish gusto to which Jake and Wally and even some of their followers had become accustomed. "You tuned it like shit!"

The sounds of clinking glass, muffled conversations, and screaming girls came to an immediate halt as the hundreds of strangers quietly watched the implosion begin. As Jake and Wally stood dumbfounded, Kirk quickly spun back around to the microphone.

"Sorry for that, guys. That sounded like shit. Just give me a minute," he condescended to the audience before dropping his head down to re-tune his guitar, as he hadn't done himself in many months.

Jake hung his head in shame as the awkward silence rang out the door to the street in a way the New York passers-by found irregular. After Kirk shot one more glance back at Jake and followed it up with a shake of the head, Wally finally stepped in and shoved him away from the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please just give us a few minutes. We need to do some retooling." Pulling Kirk back from the microphone, Wally whispered to their presumptuous lead singer, "Go learn how to tune your axe outside. We're fucking done. They're gonna hear some new stuff tonight."

Who the fuck does he think he is, Kirk thought to himself, brought to stunned silence by the impudence of his supporting act.

Recognizing the look of considering how to recover and manipulate on his face, Wally decided to finally take it one step farther. "In fact, take a breather the next few days and then get your shit out of the apartment."

Bulging his eyes out of his head, Kirk paused for a moment before letting go of his strapped-on guitar and shoving Wally back and exclaiming "You can't kick me out. I'm a renter too."

"You're really not," Jake shouted, recognizing that enough was finally enough. "We pay your rent. And Dimitri knows it."

"I think Wednesday sounds like a fair amount of time for you to pack and find another place. We're done here," Wally exclaimed.

Kirk threw his guitar behind his back and launched himself into Wally. As the two tumbled down the side of the stage, the impatient crowd started launching hisses and boos, bored with the inevitable falling-out playing out before them. As three CBGB employees stepped in to break up the fight, the bar manager, who had once allowed Kirk to nap on the office couch, ran up on stage, reached over the drum set, and grabbed Jake by his shoulders.

"Play something. Play anything. Now," the manager pleaded, as Jake stood in confusion at the unfamiliar spotlight being thrust upon him. Bulging his eyes and starting to sweat profusely, Jake mustered up enough courage to stand up and stagger over to the extra guitar he had always tuned just in case. Creaking his head back toward the manager with an unsure look on his face, he received a desperate double-handed point toward the edge of the stage. Taking one giant gulp, Jake timidly inched up to the microphone.

With Wally and Kirk now separated from one another, a more belligerent Kirk was escorted toward the back office. Wally was able to compose himself enough to realize what was happening on stage and locked eyes with a terrified Jake. Receiving a reassuring smile and a slight nod from his best friend and roommate, he turned his head back and smiled impishly toward the chaotic, screaming drunken crowd. He lifted his head and squared his shoulders as much as he could and suddenly lifted his right hand into the air.

Now in the alley, laying against a dumpster, trying not to hear the wild applause and hollering, Kirk drooped his head and clutched onto his guitar. With one tear dripping down his cheek and a gloss over his eyes, he rhythmically whispered to himself, "I like smoke and lightning. Heavy metal thunder. Racin' with the wind. And the feelin' that I'm under....."

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"Yeah Darlin' go make it happen. Take the world in a love embrace. Fire all of your guns at once. And explode into space," Kurtis and Teddy screeched together in delight in the back seat of Kurt Sr.'s Continental. As his mother drove back home from the grocery store, she glanced into the rear-view mirror at her son and his best friend and smiled. Turning down the radio, she exclaimed, "Who wants ice cream?"

"I'm good. Turn it back up, please," Kurtis exclaimed somewhat rudely toward his mother.

"Dude, I want ice cream," Teddy whispered, looking at Kurtis with a furrowed brow.

As Betty tried to mask her disappointment, she turned the radio back up as her son commanded.

"Mrs. Driscoll, can you turn it back down please," Teddy politely shouted over Steppenwolf. "I wouldn't mind ice cream, if that's ok," he politely exclaimed after Betty turned down the radio with a smile.

"Have you heard the riffs in *Summertime Blues*? That song is so bitchin'," Kurtis directed to Teddy.

"Language, Kurtis," Betty tried to firmly rebuke her son, mostly succeeding in hiding a secret smile at her son's use of vulgarity.

"It's not bad. But have you listened to *Lady Madonna* yet, like I told you to?" Teddy snapped.

"God, let it go, man," Kurtis shrugged at yet another mention of the *Beatles*.

The boys' arguments about music had become more of a staple in their days and weekends together. Betty would occasionally take issue with her son's burgeoning selfish and combative tendencies, but still enjoyed the excitement with which they argued about music. She could hear the precision and passion that would envelop her son when he would discuss guitar and bass work. But thoughts of *I hope he knows to keep that to himself around Kurt* and *I'm so glad Kurt is so busy these days* would float in and out of her head.

"Mrs. Driscoll, when is Mr. Driscoll.....sorry, Colonel Driscoll, leaving for Nam?" Teddy asked, after hitting another dead end in the ongoing *Beatles* battle.

Reaching up to her collar to tighten both ends together with her index finger and thumb and trying to shoo away a nervous look on her face with a toothy smile, Betty responded, "In about a month."

"Wow. My mom said to let you know you can give them a call if you ever need anything when he's gone," Teddy politely exclaimed.

"That's so sweet of them. Thank them for me, Theodore," she responded before turning the radio up once more, only to begrudgingly turn it back down when a commercial for Texaco blared through the speakers now.

Kurtis smiled at the thought of being able to go over to his friend's house more often in a month's time. He thought of Teddy's baby blue guitar. He thought of riding his bike back and forth more freely. He even thought of more weekends like this one. Even though he had become snappier to both his mother and Teddy as of late, he still enjoyed being able to spend time with them on little car rides like this one. Even if it was just going to become downtime between guitar sessions.

Kurtis had started setting aside allowance money to save up for a guitar. He hadn't yet come up with a plan of how he might make owning a guitar work, but he had started thinking of brands and colors. *Maybe red or black*, he thought.

Coming to a stop, Teddy threw his right arm over Kurtis' shoulder and quietly guided his view over to the left side of the street. Although initially inclined to shrug his hand off, he quickly relaxed and began to grin in a familiar awe. Sitting in the back seat, one arm gripping the other's shoulder, the two boys sat and ogled at the hundreds of guitars shimmering in the window at Russo's Music Center. As one of the few stop lights in the Trenton, New Jersey area eventually switched to green, Betty accelerated just a little slower than usual.

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Half-drunk and rooting through the living room in the dark, Kirk double checked all his album jackets to make sure they had all the appropriate records before sliding them back into the milk crate. Then he sloppily rolled up his one blanket and mashed it up against his pillow inside its ratty case. Next, he grabbed one of Dimitri's meticulously folded paper bags and started stuffing it with all the non-perishables from the cupboard he could. After trying to quietly line up all the haphazardly packed containers outside the door in the hallway, Kirk skulked back inside, leaving the room half-lit in blinking, yellow hallway light. He rolled up his leather jacket sleeve as much as he could. Gripping onto the front of the oven with his left hand, he shoved his right hand up the stained, greasy vent above the stove top and scrunched his face while he scoured around blindly. After a moment, his eyes lit up and a grin smacked his face before he yanked out a slimy plastic bag with an envelope inside. Opening the bag, then hastily rifling through the envelope, he quietly counted to himself by twenties to three thousand. Letting the greasy bag drop to the kitchen floor, Kirk stuffed the envelope into his jacket pocket. Running toward the front door of the apartment, he paused to take one more look around the room he had slept in for over three years. Deciding that was long enough, he darted out the door. But before the obnoxious blinking light was stamped out of the room for the night, Kirk shoulder blocked the door and slammed it into the refrigerator. Scurrying over to the old, creaky, splintery desk in the corner, he quickly collected a small stack of binder paper, two envelopes, and the rest of Dimitri's stamps intended for mailing that month's rent. After debating and finally deciding to allow Dimitri to keep his late grandfather's surviving black pen, he reached into his own jacket pocket. Bringing his gripped hand in front of his face, he clicked the CBGB-emblazoned pen and smiled.

Weeks later, Kirk stood in the now famous Café Au Go Go and smiled back at the girl with a pink streak in her blonde hair. Briefly wondering if she was the one who flashed him at CBGB months earlier, he stopped to take another gulp of his rum and coke and glanced once more around the club. Among other thoughts, he reminded himself to finally talk to his landlord about the rash that had spread further and further across his body. Turning his head back toward the bar stools, Kirk found the blonde girl now in arms reach with an eager grin underneath her glazed eyes.

"Five minutes, Kirk," the bartender shouted over as Kirk gently twiddled her hair with his thumb and index finger before leaning in real close.

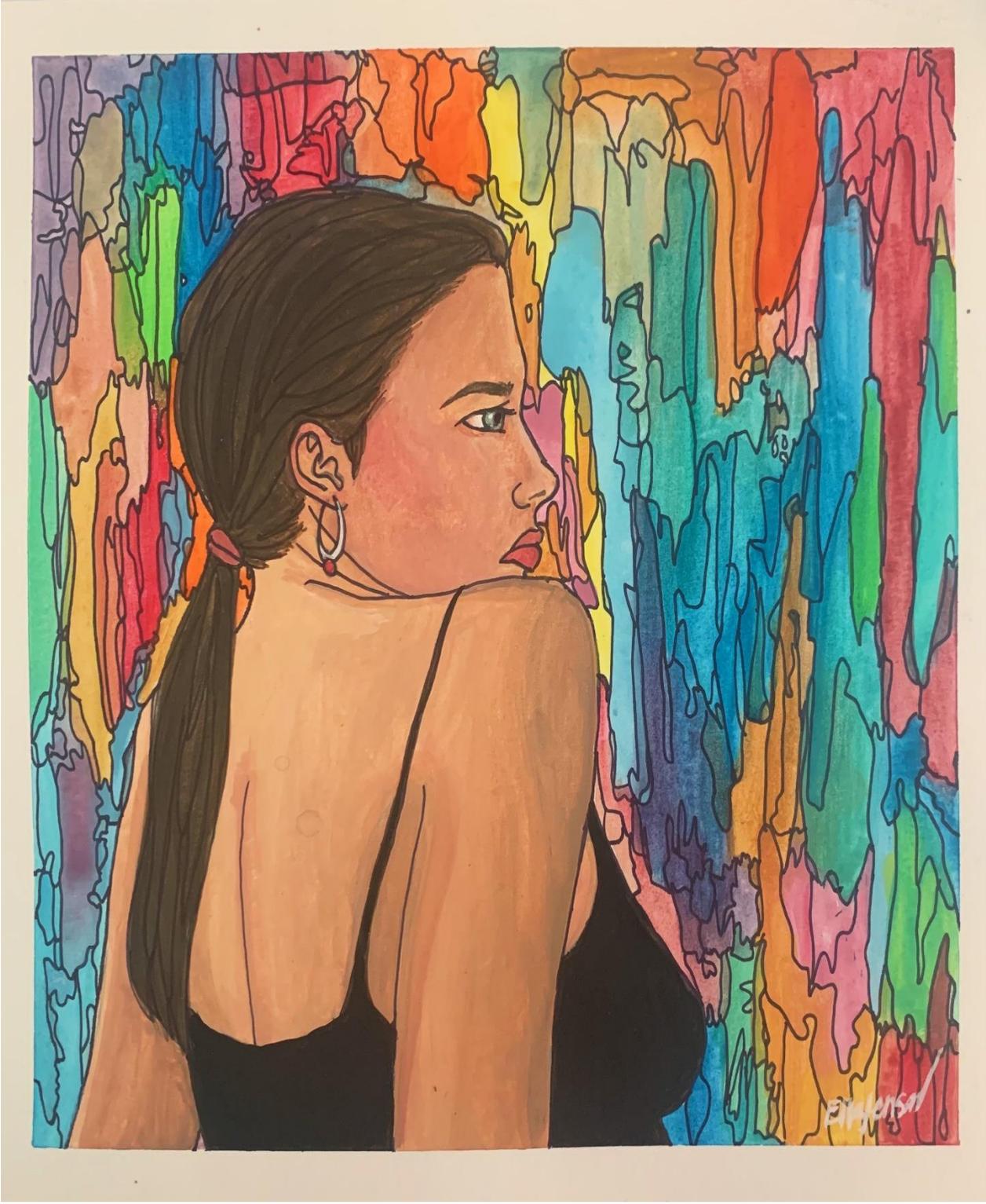
"Kim," the girl giggled out in nervous anticipation.

"Cool," Kirk muttered before winking at her and starting his walk toward the stage.

His latest solo debut was met with plenty of applause. There were some screams. Two bottles shattered in a manner that sounded enthusiastic. But as Kirk leaned against the bar and sloppily swapped spit with the girl from before the show, the only shoulder tap he received was from the bartender, ready with his next rum and coke and now expecting money. Barely taking his focus from his current mission, he slammed whatever

wadded-up bill he pulled out of his pocket onto the bar. She felt good to Kirk, but his mind had been wandering for weeks and did so tonight more than ever. *I sent the letters weeks ago*, Kirk thought to himself. *They weren't returned. I know I got the addresses right.* Kirk took his tongue out of what's her name's mouth and looked all over the bar long enough to notice that, of course, neither his mother nor Teddy were anywhere to be seen.

The Kid
Arthur Cabral



A red Mack truck hauling a steaming load of asphalt downshifts, sounding like a twenty-ton generator driving down Mile 18 Road. The rising sun shimmers off the man-made lake at the Paradise Cove Mobile Estates. A slender woman lies in her bed, needing to pee. She does not want to wake her roommate, who makes a fuss when disturbed. Staring at the collage of memories taped to the bureau mirror, she grins at a photo of her old work crew. She loved the attention she would get from her clients back then. All until Jimbo noticed her baby bump, and well, that was the end of that. Then there's the photo of her and her younger brother, Timmy, who was her impromptu Lamaze partner. It was hilarious when the nurses and doctors congratulated them on having a baby boy. What wasn't hilarious was leaving the father's name blank on the birth certificate. She thought about putting down Fireball as the father because that is all she remembers from that night. Unable to hold her pee in any longer, Janey slips out of bed, giving a slight pli  to pick her wedgie on the way to use the toilet. Feeling a sting, she is wary of finding rose gold in the bowl. She was about to give a look-see when she hears footsteps on the porch, and then a man's voice says, "yoo-hoo, I-C-U-P," through an open window.

"Dude. I'm peeing. Get out of here." Janey says, frantically crossing her arms over her lap.

Shane chuckles, "Alright, but you gotta hook me up with a smoke. Hurry up."

"Okay, just give me a sec," she says, wiping front to back. She pulled up her sweats and rolled her waistband, exposing a constellation of stars tattooed across her lower abdomen. She walks out of her room peeks through a cracked door to see a motionless lump hiding behind a quilted John Cena. Ever so gently, Janey turns the doorknob and shuts the door.

Walking out onto the weathered porch, Janey catches the screen door, so it doesn't slam shut. She walks over to Shane, who is sitting in a vinyl tube strap lawn chair.

"I'm so hungover from Taco-Tuesday," says Shane.

Janey gives an mm-hmm, and hands the pack of Newport's to her nephew. He lights one up and then hands her the lighter.

"What are you up to today?" asks Shane, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

"Kid's got a doctor's appointment."

"What for?"

"Some doctors *thing*. Hey, did you eat up all the Hot Pockets the other day?" Janey asks, Picking at her pedicure.

"Yeah, my bad. I was hungry," he said, smirking.

"That was a brand-new box. I needed that to last Kid until I get paid on Friday," berating Shane.

Agitated, Shane leans back in his seat and says, "Remember who paid for that shit. Speaking of paid, did you cash Kid's SSA check? I need my hundred back that I loaned you last week. I'm going to Crazy Carl's later to pick up a new deck for my ride."

Janey takes a long drag, buying a few seconds. "It didn't come in. I called SSA, and they said I need to go in to sign a renewal form or some shit like that."

"Unbelievable!"

"Unless I go into the office, they won't pay me."

"Shit Janey, I needed that money today," he says, now leaning forward.

Janey stands up, twists off the cap on the water bottle, and takes a sip.

"Well, when are you going to fix that paperwork?" he demands to know.

Janey pours the last sip of water over the Aloe Vera plant.

"I was going to go yesterday, but they were closed by the time I got off of work. I am going later today," Janey says, attempting to calm him down.

"You're lying, I know you're just lazy. You're just like your brother, a lair," he says, flicking his ash hard.

"I need that money too, you know. I tried filling it out online, but my phone ran out of data," Janey snaps back.

Janey forgets how tall Shane is when he stands up off the chair. Chest cocked, he hocks a loogie over the handrail. He warns Janey, "I need that hundred bucks. I don't care what you got on today, but I need one of those *things* to be getting me my money."

"I'll be across town at the University Medical Center," Janey says, lily-livered, "I planned to stop by SSA after."

"What time will you be home?" he asks, taking a drag to the filter.

"Probably around two or three o'clock."

"I'll be back here at two-thirty." He walks to the plant and puts out his cigarette butt in the dirt and jumps off the porch. "Better have my money, Janey. I need that deck today."

"Fuck!" Knowing that its SSA's policy to not write checks from the office, Janey needs to wake her son and get him to that medical study, who promised her she would be compensated.

Janey parks the big-wheeled stroller under a cluster of trees for shade. She rifles through the diaper bag, pulling out a large white bib.

"Don't mess up your clothes now that you're all cleaned up," Janey tells her adolescent son, tucking the bib under his chin.

She clasps on his lucky rabbit's foot that his Uncle Timmy bought for his thirteenth birthday. Taking her cell phone, she puts it in the back pocket of her denim shorts. Pulling the canopy over her son, they walk the quarter-mile to the bus stop.

When she arrives, two people are waiting for the bus. An old man dressed in a corduroy suit holding a folding cart full of recyclables and a construction worker who stares at Kid's dangling daddy-long-legs.

The bus arrives right on schedule. It comes to a quick stop and the airbrakes release. The gliding doors open, and the construction worker attempts to board. The man is met by a large woman with a short ruby-red wig and matching lipstick.

"I'mma need you to step aside, sir," says the bus driver, blocking his way. "I have priority riders behind you, and I need to deploy the accessible ramp."

The man glares at Janey, as he steps to his left.

"Janey, is that you?" asked the uniformed woman with Roberta on her nametag. "I haven't seen you in a hot minute, girl. Gimme a sec and let me drop this ramp down."

The bus sounds like the Millennium Falcon landing, releases a steady blast of air, lowers to the curb, and a ramp extends out to the sidewalk.

"Okay, sweetie, you can come on in and get your baby out of that heat," Roberta tells Janey.

"Thanks, girl," Janey says, and a hoot of excitement comes from under the canopy.

Roberta quickly connects the retractable safety hooks to the stroller and works up a sweat. When done, she smiles at Kid, showing her shiny gold tooth. Roberta offers Janey to sit up front with her son, flipping down the single seat.

"No, I'm good. I'm more comfortable back here," says Janey, slouching in her chair with her legs slightly apart. She rubs her belly, soothing her UTI cramps.

"Suit yourself, sweetie," says Roberta, retracting the ramp. She announces, "All other passengers may board now. Please have your fare or passes ready."

"I'm late for work," says the construction worker, boiling, stomping his steel toe boots.

"Thank you," Roberta says cordially, turning on her fan, clamped to her sun visor.

The man puts down his playmate cooler and sits right across from Janey. He turns his focus to Janey's cut off shorts. She notices and immediately sits up.

"What's your deal, dude?" asks Janey, crossing her legs.

"Just admiring the scenery," he says, gawking. "Yo, don't I know you?"

"Nope," she answers.

"Yeah, I remember you from some party."

"You got the wrong person," Janey says, firing right back at him.

"Nah, I know you," he says like he discovered fire. "You're one of Jimbo's girls. My *cuñado* bought me a dance from you during my bachelor party. Holy shit, I can't wait to tell my homies!"

Kid shakes in his stroller violently, and Janey leans over to see what is wrong. Concerned, Roberta asks, "Everything okay back there?"

"This asshole is harassing me," Janey shouts, noticing Kid's missing a shoe.

"What? Quit lying! I'm just sitting here, minding my own business," says the man, defensively.

"Excuse me, sir. You must exit and wait for the next bus," yells Roberta, looking through the rearview mirror.

Now angry, he complains, "That's some bullshit. I'm not going to lose my job over a slut and her retarded kid."

Janey stands up with her bangs sticking to her forehead like wet noodles. Keeping her balance from the swaying bus, she leans against the anchored pole. A pole, all too familiar. Impulsively, she smacks her heel down and pops into a squat. Her anthem playing in her head. *I want to fuck you like an animal.* She untangles her messy bun and grinds up the pole. *I want to feel you from the inside.* Roberta turns right onto Gresham Avenue and, Janey catches the handle as her pelvic thrusts with a magnetic force towards the seated gentleman. *You get me closer to God!* They come to a screeching halt, and the doors open.

Roberta instructs at the mesmerized man, "Alright amigo, collect your property and exit the bus."

Janey awakens from her trance and tells the man, "I'm no slut," as she squeezes past Roberta to go sit down in the front.

The man pulls a bandana out of his pocket and wipes beads of sweat off of his upper lip. He grabs his cooler and walks out, screaming, "This is some bullshit!"

Janey picks up the baby-blue Croc and slides it back on his foot. Kid, who stops twisting in his chair, loosens his grip from the rabbit's foot.

Roberta asks Janey, "You alright, girl? Is everything okay with your baby?"

Janey, wiping the sweat off of Kid's face with his moist bib, responds, "Yeah, he was just fussing over his shoe. We're all good. Thanks for kicking that pervert off the bus. What a creep."

"The devil sure knows how to pick 'em. What stop you gettin' off at anyways? I noticed we aren't headed towards your restaurant," says Roberta, pulling out onto the roadway.

"At the end of the line. My son has a *thing* today."

"Oh, okay, sweetie. Sit back and relax, we still have a long ways to go."

"Yes, we do," says Janey, leaning back and closing her eyes.

The two expeditionists enter through the hospital's revolving door and are welcomed by a volunteer with cotton-ball hair.

"What can I do you for?" asks the lady, wearing Dr. Scholl's sneakers.

"We're here for the clinical trials. Is this the place?" wonders Janey.

"Sure is," says the fuddy-duddy, bending over to look inside the stroller. "Well, don't you have a smile that just won't quit. Follow me."

She leads them through a labyrinth of corridors and ushers them into an examination room with anatomy posters of the human brain and speech articulation. The tiny greeter leaves two chilled cranberry juice boxes and returns to her post. Exploring the office, Janey pops a straw in her juice box and takes inventory of the tongue depressors and swabs.

"Knock-Knock. Hello, may I come in?" says a hospitable voice, pushing the door open.

Kid dribbles drool on his shirt. She turns to see a beautiful woman with long luscious brunette hair and exotic eyes, holding a clipboard.

"Hi, I'm Asa, Dr. Hickey's PA." She runs her manicured nail down the manila folder until she finds their names. "You must be Janey, and this handsome young man is Michael?"

"Guilty as charged," Janey says, blotting the drool with the bib.

"Michael," Asa squatting eye level with Kid, asks, "Is that an earring I see? How awesome is that!"

Kid wipes his mouth with his index finger. Janey is irritated by how glossy the woman's red nails are.

"When does this start? I have a bus to catch, and my son has to eat," says Janey.

"Yes, well, let's get started," suggests Asa, standing up with perfect form.

Janey checks out her ass.

"We don't want to keep him from his lunch. Do you have any questions before we begin?" she says, acknowledging Kid and then Janey.

"Are you paying me with cash?" Janey asks with a straight face.

Raising one eyebrow, Asa quickly masks her concern with a smile and raises the other before Janey could notice. "It will be a check. The participant payment will be covered during the conclusion of the test. Shall we begin?"

"Let's," says Janey.

"Before I set the device to record, all conversations will remain private due to the HIPPA Privacy Rule, and the sole use of the recordings is for the Lingua-Larynx Corporation..." Unable to listen to the droning, Janey fidgets with a string from her shorts. Finally, Kid is connected to a bicycle helmet with multiple electrodes plugged into an apparatus stationed next to him.

Uncomfortable, the teenager twitches and groans.

"Michael, this is completely invasive. So, it won't hurt," says Asa, positioning herself between the instrument and her patient. "Janey, you're welcome to sit closer. This must be very exciting for you."

"I don't want to get in the way," Janey says, uninterested.

"Okay, Michael, I am going to ask you a series of questions. What I want you to do is to say your words your mind and forcing them out with your eyes," says Asa, turning up the volume. "This will help stimulate the Broca area of the brain to help the device capture and translate your thoughts into words." The speaker box is buzzing like a swarm of bees. "First question. What is your name?"

Kid stops squirming and is gulping air.

"Use your eyes to say your words," Asa says encouragingly. "Now say the words aloud in your mind. You are doing great."

"NAME...MY-COAL," says the speaker box.

Janey turns to stone. An unlit cigarette falls from her lips and lands on her lap.

"That's correct! It's Michael," says Asa, jotting down a note.

Kid smiles at his mother, and she becomes skeptical that the contraption was programmed ahead of time.

"Let's try another. What is your favorite show on television?" says Asa, adjusting the dial.

"MAY-ODDS-BE...EVER-IN-YOU-ARE-FAVOR," says the speaker box, sounding like a Speak & Spell toy.

"Excellent, Michael. You're doing a wonderful job." Asa turns to ask Janey, "Mom, do you know which show Michael is speaking of?"

Janey is standing in the corner of the room, hiding in the shadows, utterly terrified of what she is witnessing. Her fists are raised, ready to swing. She remembers the day they all watched *The Hunger Games*. Uncle Timmy would come over, pop popcorn, and commentate the character's wardrobe choices. He would always tell Michael, "May the odds be ever in your favor," and Kid would laugh and smile his uncle. It used to melt Janey's heart. But a few months later, Timmy stopped coming over because of his nasty fight with Shane. Shane! She looks at the clock, and it reads 1:27pm.

"Hey, look lady," Janey says urgently. Standing up, she gathers her belongings. "I'm going to need you to wrap this up and cut me that check. I have places to be."

No longer smiling, Asa says, "We have not completed the session. Plus, are you not fascinated by being able to speak to your son?"

Janey slams her purse down.

"Look ho, I have let you use my boy, and now you need to pay me. I know you set me up too. Anyone could've looked up my Facebook and seen that I loved that movie.

"What Movie?" Asa asks.

"There is no way Kid can think for himself. He never has and never will."

Frustrated, Asa stands up and places the clipboard down. Janey snatches up and shoves it into Asa's chest.

"Now put those press-on nails to use and write me my goddamn check."

Asa falls back and slams into the wall. Rubbing the back of her head, she runs out of the room and calls for security. Kid panics and tries to reach for something, but his hand gets tangled in the wires. Realizing she needs to get out of there quick, Janey tries to disconnect Kid from the machine. Kid tenses up, and the speaker broadcasts, "WAIT."

Paralyzed, she looks into her son's piercing eyes.

"STAY-WITH-ME-SAFE"

"Don't worry, security is not going to bust me," Looks at the speaker and then Kid's crystal blue eyes. "Is that really you in there?"

"I-LOVE-U-IT-IS-O-K..."

Wanting to reciprocate, but the words are foreign to her tongue, her eyes well up.

"THAT-SHANE-HURT-ME."

The room collapses inward into Janey's black-hole heart. Security storms the room.

A ceiling fan circulates the hot summer air, converting the doublewide trailer into a conventional oven. The warm glow of the television screen illuminates the hoagie wrapper filled with a cornucopia of bread crumbs, tomatoes, and cigarillo tobacco. Shane lies squinting on the recliner, curling his pubic hair underneath his basketball shorts. A girl from the far end of the trailer park, Sadie-Mae, rests her blonde cornrows over his Woody Woodpecker chest tattoo while watching ten-second videos on a six-inch screen. The bat-like-screech of the screen door opens, arousing them from their blunt-induced coma. Shane bucks Sadie-Mae to the other side of the couch.

"Where the hell you been all afternoon? You better have my money," Shane asks Janey, slipping into his Jordan sliders.

A third person appears out of the hallway, a man in a pair of loafers with no socks. Timmy, who wears white capri pants and a navy-blue polo shirt with white trim, stands like there is a rattlesnake in the room.

"What's the homo doing here?" Shane asks, perplexed.

"He's my brother Shane," Janey says, "and I asked him to come over."

Shane puts on his wife beater. Janey locks the shaking stroller to stop it from rolling.

Punching a fist into her palm, she continues, angrily, "Who's the whore sitting on my couch?"

"Hey!" squeaks Sadie-Mae, from the corner of the couch.

"You both need to get the fuck out of my house," Janey demands.

"I don't know why you're trippin', but I'm not going anywhere without my money. So, where's it at?" asks Shane, stepping towards the trio.

"You're not getting it. Do you know where we went today? Do you even want to know what was Kid's *thing* today?" needling Shane.

"Janey, I don't care. All I want is my money. If you don't have it, then Tammy is going to have to cover you." Cup-checking himself. Shane challenges the petrified man, "What are you doing here anyway? I thought we kicked you out."

Sadie-Mae whips out her camera phone, ready to record for her Story. Kid is flailing his legs, and his face is turning red. Timmy takes a deep breath to compose himself.

"I am not going to fight you, Shane. I'm here to support Janey and Michael. I think you really need to pay attention to what they have to say," says Timmy.

"I'm not here to listen to a bunch of pole smokers," spit flying out of Shane's mouth. "I'm here for my money, but since you all don't have it, I am going to enjoy kicking your..."

Janey jumps between her brother and nephew with the force of a quasar pushing them apart. She shoves Shane's stomach and hollers, "I know what you did to my son, Shane. Kid told me the whole story."

"What are you talking about?" Shane says in disbelief.

"That *thing* Kid had to do earlier today. Well, the doctors invented a gizmo that allows people with Cerebral Palsy to speak. Turns out, Kid can think and talk, just like you and me. He told me you hit him and blamed the bruises on his uncle. You're a goddamn monster!" slapping him across his left cheek. Janey goes for another swing, but he catches her wrist.

"He's lying. You're all a bunch of lying bitches," Shane says, grasping.

Timmy, shaking his head, happily says, "The truth hurts, huh Shane? And if you don't believe Michael can talk, you can ask the authorities."

Janey growls, "Get the fuck out of my house and don't ever come near my son or me again. And take that two-bit whore with you."

Sadie-Mae runs past Shane, right out of the house. Shane releases Janey's wrist. He picks up his cell phone and cigarettes, eyeballs Janey, and walks right past Kid without acknowledging him. Stopping a few inches away from Timmy's face, he threatens him, "This shit isn't over between us."

He punches the screen door open, and it comes off the top hinge. The sounds of sirens are heard off in the distance. Kid releases his grip on the rabbit's foot and reaches for his mother's open hand.

The Little Things
Isabel Scears



The paratransit driver pushed Mr. Schmidt onto the wheelchair lift.

"Woah, careful."

"Don't worry Mr. Schmerdt, I've done this a thousand times."

Mr. Schmidt looked to his left and waited for Andrew to call out through the curtain in their room, "Hold on there Marty, hold on. That sure was interesting." And he almost heard the sound of the little notebook opening to the newest page.

Looking around at the trees outside of Bluebell Gardens, Mr. Schmidt noticed that the buzz of the wheelchair lift seemed to be in tune with the birds, as if they were working in harmony to give him a sense of comfort as he entered the bus.

"Marty."

Stunned, Mr. Schmidt looked over, but only to see the paratransit driver looking at a list.

"Marty Schmidt. I knew Schmerdt didn't sound quite right. Oh, we're going to Campbell Funeral Home. Oh, I'm sorry."

"Ninety-three years. If I live to be that old, I doubt I'll have half the memory of that man."

"What was his name?"

"Andrew Tuckered."

When Andrew Tuckered was a young boy, he had to spend Wednesday afternoons with his Aunt Mildred. She would ramble on about the most mundane things: how the weather was that day, what the mosquitos were like that season, how she went camping when she was younger and what the mosquitos were like there, and the weather there.

She would always ask Andrew, "What do you think about it?" It seemed that maybe this was her way of trying not to take over the conversation, but it was far too late for that. And she always had a way of emphasizing that phrase: "What do YOOOOOUUU think abOOOUUt it?" So for the rest of his life, he couldn't help it, whenever he said the phrase, he awkwardly said, "What do YOOOOOUUU think abOOOUUt it?" No one ever really knew why.

At nineteen, Andrew had wanted to get to know his mother, to get inside her head, to understand why she had left her husband and her seven-year-old son. But understanding something so deep was hard without understanding her personality and quirks, the little things. "Hey dad," he'd asked, "What was mom's favorite color?" "Huh, now that wasn't exactly the center of every conversation we ever had," he said, stroking his beard, looking to the corner of the room as if that were going to help thoughts to stream into his mind. "Well now, she did wear an awful lot of purple."

Purple. Purple often means royalty or luxury. Or maybe something mysterious. It sure was mysterious that she left. He started writing everything he knew about her. Realizing he needed help to try to paint a cohesive picture, he called her side of the

family, getting everyone's perspective. Even listening to Aunt Mildred drone on for hours felt like a treasure trove he couldn't wait to get deeper into.

Despite the details he collected, though, Andrew couldn't understand his mother. He decided then and there that no one would have to struggle to get to know what he was like, what he had done in his life. He wouldn't have to struggle to remember his own life either.

As time went on, Mr. Tuckered filled many journals with all these notes, recollections, and memories. Thankfully he had a spare bedroom that was sufficient for storage in the old family home. Its eight-foot-tall ceilings weren't entirely suffocated, but nonetheless didn't have much room to breathe.

Eventually, as technology grew, Mr. Tuckered was very excited to purchase his very own computer. Although he knew there would be a bit of a learning curve, no longer would he need to have a whole room dedicated to storing papers, and no longer would he have such a hard time finding a particular memory when he wanted to reference it. After taking a few computer basics courses, all the memories were slowly uploaded to the computer and backed up, allowing him to dispose of all the paper copies, only keeping one notebook at a time.

Bluebell Gardens was a nice facility, but it was just not the same as the old family home. For all her shortcomings, his Aunt Mildred had made it her duty to keep Andrew and his father continually stocked with the most amazing homemade vanilla-amber candles. Even long after her candle-making days, the curtains couldn't help but exude the glorious scent. After falling last year, though, Mr. Tuckered knew more than anyone else that this really was the best place for him and his broken hip. Besides, others had suffered to get here too. He thought to his first few weeks with Mr. Schmidt.

"You're ninety-one? Good for you. How'd you make it so long on your own?" Mr. Schmidt had remarked, peeling a piece of skin off of a tangerine.

Nibbling on the last of twelve segments from his own tangerine, Mr. Tuckered had replied, "Yeah, I guess I'm pretty fortunate to have lived on my own for so long. What about you?"

Mr. Schmidt chuckled a bit as his new companion tossed the wad of tangerine skins wrapped in a napkin straight into the trash can. "Me? Been in here ten years. When I was seventy-one my daughter had to move and couldn't let me live with her anymore. So, I'm here now. This is home."

"Yep. This is home."

A thought, an impulse, would sometimes come into Andrew Tuckered's mind. He'd sit up, trying to pinpoint where exactly he had lost such a gem, where it had come from, who had been there. One night, trying not to wake up Mr. Schmidt just beyond the

thin curtain, although he probably would be more than willing to help, he sat up slowly, repeating over and over to himself, "Cleaning Grandma's kitchen, hot day in July, Suzie working hard as usual." That would sustain his memory until he could reach for his glasses and notebook.

Flipping to the next open page, he wrote the approximate date and time of the incident and, below that, all the details that had just come to him.

The kitchen's yellowed cream walls were scheduled to receive their bi-yearly scrubbing that afternoon by the mighty crew of five energetic grandchildren, fueled by oatmeal cookies and milk. Grandma got everyone a pail of soapy water and old rags, while she scrubbed everything above five feet, although some thought their reach would extend beyond that. Suzie especially wanted to be helpful that day, straining her freckled arms as vertically as she could, so much so that the sopping rag sent fine bubbles of soap up her arm.

It must have been refreshing on that hot July day. Bubbles going up her arm. It must have been refreshing. Did she think it was refreshing? If only this memory had been brought to his attention two years ago, before Suzie's passing. It must have been refreshing. Or maybe she was cold, and it wasn't refreshing. But she couldn't have been cold; it was hard work to scrub that vigorously. These finer details could be worked out in the morning.

Mr. Schmidt was of the opinion that Suzie could have been cold. Sometimes when you're doing a lot of work, your body does strange things. If she had decided to take a five-minute break, her sweat would have cooled, and when she got back to work, moving around would have made her feel cold. Now the question that needed answering was: had she taken a break? Tom used the bathroom after only about five minutes; he was kind of lazy. But Suzie probably would have made sure to use the bathroom ahead of time. Recording belated memories reminded Mr. Tuckered to be prompt, to always record in a timely manner.

Saturday evening was Mr. Tuckered's favorite time of the week. Starting up the computer, he would have his journal open to the previous Sunday. From here he'd transfer everything that was written down for the week into documents. The last Saturday of each month, or "Secure Saturday" as he admiringly referred to it, called for an extra-long time at the desk (nowadays just the extra over-bed table that housed his computer). He would save everything to the cloud, his hard drive, and then email himself a copy. Being so strenuous with recording would be pointless if the memories were flimsily contained, allowing them the chance to disappear in an instant.

The heart attack took the Bluebell Gardens staff by surprise. By the time they got to Mr. Tuckered, it was too late.

Mr. Schmidt wheeled himself to the front, turning himself around to face the warm, but sad, faces of the audience.

"Family, friends, members of the community, thank you for coming. Many of us knew Andrew, Mr. Tuckered, as a kind, friendly individual. But the person who knew him best was Andrew."

Glancing over everyone, Mr. Schmidt noticed one young man, probably about twenty-years-old, sitting off to the left side right below the "Campbell Funeral Home" plaque, pulling out a handkerchief with an embroidered "L.R.J." He thought how even he didn't use handkerchiefs anymore, let alone such a young person. The urge to look to his left to excitedly inform Andrew of his observation, something he would never have noticed just a year ago, was strong.

"Some of you may know that Andrew had a habit of writing everything down. I mean everything. Anything that happened, any small remark, any event, any new understanding—the little things. He knew, like all of us, that eventually there would be a day like today for him. And so, he asked me to say a few words about him, and then to let him do the rest of the talking. I, well, Andrew has something for you. In recent years, it had been weighing more and more on his mind that if he didn't do something with all the memories he'd been so meticulous in recording, everything would go to waste. So, he prepared something special for each and every one of you he had the chance to meet. He took the time to put together printed pamphlets with any of his memories that pertained to you—some of which you're the focal point, some of which you are not. You know, the basics of what happened, his thoughts on it, and what he thought you might have thought. If you were involved in any way, big or small, you'll get a copy. As long as he knew your name, you'll get a packet. He wanted all of you to know how much you meant to him, and he didn't want you to worry about forgetting any of amazing—but often just average—things you've been through together. So please, raise your hand when I call your name, and I'll come around to give you one."

"Ms. Shirley Beecham"

Mr. Schmidt rolled over to the gloved hand, holding out the packet as if he were handing over his friend.

After the service, Mr. Schmidt looked up to see one of the nursing assistants coming into his room, walking up to Andrew's bed and attaching some guardrails.

"So, am I to expect a new roommate?" he asked.

"Yep," the nursing assistant replied, "You might need to keep an eye on this one." And after a pause, "Nah, I'm just messing with you. This is just standard procedure."

After they exchanged a brief laugh, Mr. Schmidt started to think about what kind of roommate he might be put with next.

"We do have a long waiting list Mr. Schmidt, so I expect it should be a matter of days."

"A matter of days, hmm. Ok."

Turning before he left, he looked back at Mr. Schmidt: "Don't worry. We'll let you know, you know, about when a new roommate will be coming."

"I would appreciate that," he said, turning to reach for the packet on his bedside table.

"Martin Schmidt" read the title. On the next page: "To my memory hunting sidekick and dear friend." The first entry:

11 July 2017, 11:00 AM

Bluebell Gardens is mostly what could be expected from the average nursing home. Friendly staff, a bit of a funky smell in the air, but not too bad, and actually a fairly spacious room. I have a roommate, Martin Schmidt. Sitting in his wheelchair, he was wearing blue jeans, a cheery orange t-shirt, his hair combed neatly, and a pleasant—may I add, "with it"—smile. Not that I would mind having a roommate who didn't quite have it together anymore, but it was nice to see I have someone who still has some base in reality.

Mr. Schmidt sniffed the air, "A bit of a funky smell indeed."

"Let's see what Mr. Tuckered thought about me," Shirley Beecham told Simon, flipping to a random page in her packet, settling on the couch with a cup of tea.

22 March 2010, 4:30 PM

I ran into Shirley Beecham at Safeway today. She was wearing 3/4 length tan slacks, a blue/white horizontally striped cap-sleeve blouse, tennis shoes, and her hair down. Walking over to the avocados, where she was, I asked her how her day had been. She had taken Simon (her Siamese cat) to the vet that day. She probably hoped--

"I can't imagine what the point of that was, can you Simon? Let's see if there might be anything...else."

She skipped to the middle of the next entry she flipped to, from November 17, 1985, at 2:00 PM.

...She said she was sorry to have left, but what was she supposed to say? That she was glad to have left her seven-year-old son and never reach out again? I couldn't help but feel some gladness to have left the room, walking out on her, lonely and helpless. It wasn't really gladness though. It certainly wasn't satisfaction. Not relief. Not sadness. Perhaps it was disappointment. But how did she feel? I'd guess she was disappointed

too. I bet she had relished for years in the thought that I had gone through life wishing I had known her, wishing she had been there. But now she knows the truth. My dad and I had a wonderful life, a better one without her than it would have been with her.

A nurse, her badge reading, "Shirley Beecham," came in to check on her. I'd learned enough, I thought, time to go.

"Goodbye, mother."

Exiting the door I heard this nurse say, "I didn't know you had a son."

Well maybe she doesn't.

Flipping through a few more pages, she still wasn't quite sure what Mr. Tucker thought of her. But then again, Mr. Schmidt had said it was just the little things, mostly "the basics of what happened." Now she could see what he meant.

"Interesting pastime I guess, huh Simon?" she said, grabbing for the TV remote.

The Box
Hugo Suárez



A fiery explosion. Gunshot flashes of bombs and rockets. Men in masks. Giant monsters. Killer robots. A clock counting down the seconds until the end of the world.

This is what eight-year-old Billy saw on the television screen one Friday night, long after his parents told him to go to bed. Billy had one of those bulky box TV sets, and right now it was sitting at the edge of his bed, casting flashing lights across his whole room.

Billy loved watching TV, it was like another world to him, far more interesting and exciting than the one he lived in. He loved the mayhem of cartoon violence and flashy explosions that spewed out the television: superheroes, robots, mutants, aliens. He was a fan of it all. Everything he saw made his young mind race with bad ideas. But Billy's father always sternly reminded him, "Never copy what you see on TV."

Out of nowhere, his father swung the door open and looked angrily at his son.

"I thought I told you to turn that thing off! Take it downstairs and go to bed!" he growled, before going back down the hall grumbling, "Damn thing will rot your brain!"

Billy quietly turned the TV off and unplugged it, lifted it up and walked down the stairs. It was heavy, but just small enough for him to carry. He took it to the garage, turned off the light, and went back upstairs to bed.

Billy couldn't sleep, he had too much on his mind. He couldn't shut his brain off, and it gave him a headache.

Billy was always restless and daydreaming, according to his parents. A smart kid, he had trouble focusing and was a bit hyperactive, hence his love for the cartoon action he saw on the television. The TV it seemed, was the only thing that could absorb Billy's full attention, and it eased the restlessness in him to see it play out on the screen.

Billy must have fallen asleep, because he woke a few hours later to a strange noise, like voices. He could just be hearing things, his head still hurt a little, but he didn't know why. He listened closer; the noise was coming from downstairs. He got out of bed. It was pitch black; Billy couldn't see anything besides the swirling dark mass that surrounded him. The strange sounding voices guided him, and he followed them to the garage.

It was the television. It was in the corner playing an old sitcom depicting a teacher and his students in a classroom. Billy walked over, turned it off, and made sure to unplug it. Scared that his father would catch him and think he was watching TV in the garage, he quickly went back upstairs to bed.

The next morning was Saturday, the best day of the week. Billy's father had to go to work at the construction site early that day, leaving him at home with his mother. Billy was walking down to the kitchen to have some cereal when he heard his mother calling him from the front door.

"Billy, I'm going down the street to your grandmother's house. I want you to come over in about an hour, don't watch too much TV," she said.

It was bright outside and Billy was glad he didn't have to worry about school that day. He thought he might take his skateboard out to ride in the street. Later though,

because right now everything good was on TV, all the Saturday morning hits: *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. You would need a crowbar to pry him off the television screen. Billy was in his room with his TV, eating a bowl of Cap'n Crunch on a bean bag chair in his skull-patterned pajamas. After a week of school that's what he looked forward to the most. That was *Billy* time.

Billy stared intensely at the television. He let it pour into his eyeballs and illuminate the inside of his skull. The light from the screen was numbing his brain, and he felt that headache coming back. It made his head swim and the room spin; he almost couldn't tell what was real. He kept his focus on the TV, the hero had just foiled the bad guy's plan and was about to take him down.

That's when the TV jumped up off the floor. A sudden jolt in the air, like it had been shocked by a taser.

Billy fell back, spilling his cereal on the floor, and stared at the television in awe. '*Did it really just do that?*' he thought. The TV was lying on its side, the cord had been pulled from the wall socket, and the screen was dark. Billy looked at it curiously. '*Did he just imagine it?*' He carefully approached the overturned television and inspected it. It most likely just fell over. Billy went over to plug the cord back in when, suddenly, the TV switched on.

Billy fell back again. There was static on the screen and the noise startled him, but it was the fact that the TV wasn't plugged in that really freaked Billy out. He stood there for a moment, frozen in terror, afraid it would lunge at him again. But it didn't move.

The television was on the ground, still on its side, but Billy couldn't believe it. He looked around, to make sure nobody was messing with him, and if there was anyone else who could see what he was seeing. The TV was unplugged, yet somehow still on, with static on the screen. He cautiously approached the TV and was surprised yet again when it started to play a weather forecast. Billy could hear the weatherman saying "*...looks like we'll be seeing some storm clouds towards the end of the...*" He was cut off when the TV abruptly switched channels to a Spanish soap opera, before changing to a nature show about penguins "*...cold and harsh conditions make survival difficult...*" Then it changed to an old cat and mouse cartoon.

The TV eerily flipped through channels, stopping long enough for a few words to be emitted, before quickly switching to the next, as if possessed. It did this over and over.

Billy watched with a mixture of horror and fascination. The scattered dialogue in between the quick switching of channels began to intrigue him. At first, he had thought the TV was glitching at random, but he remembered that it wasn't even plugged in. He thought back to the TV shows he liked to watch, where some supernatural thing like this could be explained by either science or magic. Billy then realized those rules made more sense than what he was actually seeing, normal rules didn't apply anymore. '*What if it was some kind of 'artificial intelligence' like those he would see on his shows?*' he thought.

The way the television skipped through channels reminded Billy of the way robots would talk. *'What if it was trying to say something?'*

Billy was scared, but curious. The TV had unplugged itself and was now apparently functioning with a secret power source. Billy's mind raced, he was terrified of what he was seeing, but he moved closer towards the television.

"H-Hello?" Billy said slowly.

The TV flipped rapidly through a number of channels, but Billy was only able to catch a couple words of what was played. It sounded staticky, but Billy thought he heard *"lit...me...ah..."*

Billy couldn't make it out. He got up close, staring directly at the screen.

"Hello," he said louder.

A different set of channels this time, but from what Billy could hear, it kept making the same sound from the scattered dialogue, *"lit...me...ah..."*

He put his ear close to the television speaker, trying to listen through the static, *"liff...me...uh...lift...me...up..."*

Billy realized what the TV was trying to say and pushed it up off its side. The static significantly reduced, the TV skipped through more channels and Billy was able to make out two words.

"Thank...you..," the TV said to Billy.

He stared at it in disbelief. Perplexed, he asked "Who are you?"

The TV flipped through another assortment of channels, managing to transmit a few words through its speakers.

"Don't...know..," the TV answered, *"who...are...you..."*

"My name's Billy," he said, astounded, "what's your name?"

"Don't...have...one..."

Billy looked at the TV with intense curiosity. The atmosphere in his room, while still eerie, was no longer as terrifying. The TV seemed to be just as disoriented as him. He looked closer at the television set. It was just a big black box with a screen and a few buttons. Billy looked at the label on the front. It said SONY.

"Why don't I just call you 'Sonny'?"

Sonny changed to a channel featuring an old sword and sandal movie, before changing again. It seemed to like the name.

"Are you just a TV?" Billy asked.

"Tee...Vee..," it skipped channels for a second, *"what's...that..."*

"It's what you are," he laughed. "You look like a box."

"What...does...a TV...do..," Sonny asked.

"You watch shows on it when you're bored," he said excitedly, "People do all kinds of cool stuff on shows."

The TV switched to a black and white detective film depicting a man thinking, holding a cigarette.

"What...shows...do...you...like..."

"Mostly superheroes, action movies, and game shows," Billy replied.

Sonny began to play a clip from a quiz show.

"What...are...games..." it seemed curious.

Billy thought for a second, then he explained, "A game is where one person challenges another person, they play each other, and then one of them wins."

The television flickered through a fury of channels, as if thinking. Billy was enthralled.

"Would...you like...to play...a game..." the TV asked him.

Billy carried Sonny upstairs to his parents' room and placed it on an armchair.

"The...rules...are..." it began, *"I'll...show you...something...and you...copy it..."*

Billy remembered what his father had told him, but he was anxious to see what the TV would do.

"Okay, I'm ready."

Sonny started to play an old gangster movie, depicting a man walking around a room in a nice suit. Billy thought that was pretty easy, and started to walk around the room.

"No..." the TV stopped him, *"really...copy...him..."* and it began to play the movie again.

Billy thought for a moment, looked at his parent's closet, and had an idea. He went in and grabbed a few of his father's clothes. He put on a large dress shirt and a tie around his neck, and then an oversized dinner jacket. He walked around like the guy in the movie, dressed in his father's suit. Billy had always thought it was cool when his father wore a suit. It made him look important and grown-up. Billy looked at himself in the mirror, and felt cool like his dad.

The man on the television screen started to smoke a cigarette, and Billy noticed his father's lighter and pack on the nightstand. The TV, somehow, noticed this.

"Go...ahead..."

"My dad will kill me," Billy said uneasily.

"He...won't...know..." Sonny assured him, *"just...a game..."*

Billy reached for the nightstand. He took a cigarette out of the pack and grabbed the lighter. He looked at the man on the TV, put it up to his face, and lit it. He took a deep breath and began coughing uncontrollably, he threw the cigarette in the trash and stomped it. The smoke made his head hurt again, a little worse this time.

"That was gross," he told the TV.

"That...was good..." it changed channels, *"now...try...this..."*

Sonny then started showing a gorgeous woman in a red dress dancing. Billy watched her move elegantly across the screen. He started to dance like her.

"No...your...clothes..." it said, *"copy...her now..."*

Billy thought this was crazy. He hesitated, and then he went over to the closet again. He threw off his father's clothes and pulled out one of his mother's red dresses along with a furry scarf of hers. Then, took her necklace from the dresser, put it all on, and began to dance.

Billy felt ridiculous, but there was no one around to see. He swayed back and forth to the music coming from the television speakers. He twisted the scarf around his arms, stretching them out and spinning around the room. He gazed at the woman on the television, she looked beautiful and graceful. Billy was dancing just like her, but he wished he had been dancing with her.

It wasn't until he saw his reflection in the mirror that he realized how foolish he looked. Billy was embarrassed, and took off his parent's clothes.

"You...looked...funny..," the TV said before cheerfully flipping through channels, like it was laughing.

"Last...one..," and it played a scene from what appeared to be a documentary on evolution and depicted a group of cavemen building a fire.

"How do I do that?" Billy asked.

Billy took the TV outside to the front of the house, put a bucket upside down on the lawn, and placed Sonny on top of it. Then he went about trying to build the fire. He had to admit, part of him wanted to try this out, and his heart raced with excitement and as the destructive gears began to turn in his head.

Billy had always been fascinated by seeing fire on television. The way characters on shows would strike a match and throw it into a gasoline-soaked pile of garbage. Awesome. Of course, Billy's father strictly forbade him from ever playing with fire. This made him start to have second thoughts. He looked at Sonny.

"Maybe we shouldn't," he said.

"Small...real quick...put out...before...dangerous..," the TV quickly switched to the documentary featuring the cavemen. They were now dancing around their small fire.

Billy rolled out the recycling bin and swung the lid open. He stood on his toes to see inside, there was a mess of paper and cardboard. *'This was good'* he thought. If the fire got out of control, then he could just shut the lid to snuff it out. He stood on a box next to it, took a piece of paper out, and held it over the bin. He looked at the television, unsure if he trusted it. He was, however, pretty confident he could put the fire out himself if he had to. He had seen it done on TV a hundred times.

Billy used his father's lighter to set the paper aflame. Then he dropped it in the bin.

The bin began to smoke. Billy got down and could see the very tips of the flame at the top of it.

On the TV, the cavemen were jumping and shouting around their fire, Billy began to do the same. He started to dance and jump around the flaming bin, shouting every now and then with the cavemen on the television.

"You..did it..," Sonny said, and happily switched through channels.

Billy was laughing. He looked over at the bin and saw more flames at the top, he started to slow down.

"We should put it out."

"Not...yet...bigger...first..," it said.

Billy noticed the fire getting bigger, there was wind outside. "No, we should do it now," and went over to stand on the box.

As he got over the bin, Billy could feel the heat. It was too much. He recoiled and lost his balance. The box he stood on gave away and Billy grabbed the lid too late, bringing the contents of the bin pouring out onto the driveway. The wind pushed the burning pieces of paper towards the bushes. Billy shot up off the ground.

"Quick, Sonny, help me put it out!" Billy exclaimed.

The TV changed a few channels, but said one word.

"Can't..."

"Why not?"

"How...can I..."

Billy realized this, looked over at the bushes and saw them on fire. He ran inside the house and brought out a blanket. He used to see people on TV put out fires by putting blankets over them. He started doing this, but it wasn't working. Billy began to panic; he was making it worse. The fire burned through the blanket and spread closer to the house. The heat was starting to hurt him.

At that point, the fire was too big for Billy.

'What did I do?' Billy thought. He took the TV and the bucket and carried them to the street. He looked down at his pajamas, covered in ash and smoke. He turned towards Sonny, who was switching through channels at random.

"This is your fault!" he shouted furiously.

"How..," it said simply.

"You made me light the fire! I told you we shouldn't!"

"Didn't...have to..."

"Didn't have to what?!"

"Didn't...have to...do it..," the TV softly changed channels again.

Billy was stunned. "You lied to me Sonny! Why did you do this?!" he demanded from the TV.

"Just...a game..," it said, and played the quiz show again, where the contestant had just won the cash prize.

Billy looked back at his house, which was ablaze.

"Billy!" he heard his mother shout from behind him. She was horrified by what she saw. It was then that he realized his mother had left about two hours ago.

Billy turned around and saw people coming out of their homes, looking at his home in terror. His mother ran up to him and grabbed him.

"Billy what happened?! What have you done?!" She was shaking and crying. Billy couldn't look at her, he didn't know what to say. Police officers and firemen had started to arrive. The look of utter horror she gave him was painful.

"The TV made me do it," he said, completely beaten.

Billy turned to look at Sonny, who was still on the bucket, but it wasn't flipping through channels anymore. It was unplugged and it was off.

"Wait...no," he couldn't understand. He went up to the TV and stared at the screen, but all Billy saw was his own reflection on the dark screen. The headache from earlier was back, and it had taken hold of him. He fell to his knees and grabbed his head.

Billy's mother was losing it. "Billy," she said, terrified, "what are you talking about?"

Billy was taken to a police car. As the officer drove him away, Billy looked back at the swirling mass of flames covering his house, threatening to burn the neighborhood down, and at the smashed box TV lying in pieces in the street.

The officer took Billy to the police station and placed him in a room. He told him he wasn't under arrest, they just wanted to know what happened. Billy didn't feel like answering questions right now.

"Here," the officer said, "I'll be back. Why don't you distract yourself for a little while?" He then took out a small, battery-powered, portable TV. He turned it on in front of Billy, and left the room.

Billy sat in that room and stared intensely at the television. Suddenly, it began flipping through channels, then played the Looney Tunes outro, "...*That's all folks!*"

A Wool's Tale

Todd O'Leary



She waited for the barn light to go out before she began to crawl past her father towards the door. She was careful not to wake any of the other animals in the barn and she especially didn't want the farmer sleeping in the house next door to get up. He had a habit of shooting animals that wandered out of the barn or onto his property, and she feared causing what she was inevitably running from in the first place.

As she quietly snuck past the sleeping dog on the porch, she caught a glimpse of the guillotine she had seen the farmer take it out of his truck earlier in the day. The look of it for too long made the wool underneath her eyes damp. The sheep couldn't help but look away from the dark red drops falling from the tip of the blade and wondering where Thad come from. She knew from the moment that she saw it the farmer would soon use it on the other sheep and her too if she wasn't trying to escape.

Her father had been telling her about the horrible stories about the guillotine and what it meant to their family since she was born. She had been told of the horrible cries and screams of the sheep and every animal before them who had gone through the guillotine.

He would always warn her, "my darling, if you ever see the guillotine, run away from the farmer's land immediately. There is no sheep, wolf, or man that could survive its deadly power. Don't tell anyone of what you saw and leave only by yourself. If you try and take me or too many other animals with you, it will send the farmer looking. Travel at night so that the farmer can't see your dark wool as you leave his land. Once you get to the main road, follow it to the river where you'll be safe."

The sheep was starting to lose sight of the farmer's house over the hill. The moon was glowing up the sky like the light bulb would light up the entire barn on a night like this one. That was when she heard a terrible howl that almost seemed like a warning siren to her. She quickly froze. Was it the farmer's dog? Or was it a wolf? How many wolves could there be? Were they on or off the farm? Did it wake up the farmer?

Slowly, the sheep turned back towards the house and saw the glow of the porch light in front of the house. She couldn't see the farmer out there, but the dog had definitely at least heard the howl, if it hadn't come from him. She sat there, trembling and praying that he wouldn't notice her out there and come charging at her and tackle her. She would've rather taken her chances with the guillotine. After easing her trembles for a few moments, she slowly began to creep backwards, losing sight of the house and dog, but still managing to see the glow of the light out front. Just when she thought that she might be able to relax and turn around to continue her trek, she froze again when she heard the front door swing open and knew that the farmer had woken up.

The sheep's heart drowned with worry and anxiety as she sat there, quietly hoping that the farmer wouldn't come looking for her. She began to feel her wool drip with sweat as she prayed for the farmer to walk back inside without checking the barn, which was something he usually would do when he woke up in the middle of the night.

In that moment she thought of running back to the barn and forgetting everything she saw or did today and be with her father. She didn't want anything more than to be lying in her bed of hay next to him where she always felt safe. After a few moments of weakness, she quickly knew that turning around would be the wrong option, because it would cause her to meet the same fate as her father. She knew that as much as she felt safe on the farm with him, it would no longer be safe there by morning. She also knew she wouldn't forgive herself when she saw the look upon her father's face in the morning when the farmer walked in with the guillotine.

When she was a little girl, the sheep's mother fell ill while on the farm. Her and her father were supposed to go see her mother before the farmer took her to the vet, but she didn't want to go. The sheep knew what going to see her mother before seeing the vet really was, and didn't want to believe it. Her father understood her pain as best as he could, but still thought it was important for her to go.

"You know she'll spend the whole time asking where you are or if you're okay," he told her as she laid in the corner, facing the wooden fence that cut them off from the other animals in the barn. "I know you don't want to believe this, but it's happening and she needs to know that you're gonna be okay."

She turned to him with a face of disgust, wondering how he could say that about her. Shortly afterwards, her father gave up and left alone, sad and upset, to say goodbye to her mother for what would be the last time. After he left to say goodbye, she knew that she never wanted him to give her that look of both sorrow and anger again.

After a few minutes, the glow of the porch light went out. The sheep was relieved the farmer hadn't started his truck or started looking through the barn to check on everything. She was still wary about being attacked by the wolves or the dog, so she treaded as lightly as she continued walking towards the end of the farmer's land. When she got to the barbed wired fence that surrounded the land, she could see the road that travelled through the mountains that her father told her would lead her to the river. This was the first time that she would be going off of the farmer's land before.

Back in the fall, the farmer loaded up a dozen sheep, including her father, down that road and into town. It was the only road that led off the farm and onto a paved road. When the farmer returned with her father freshly groomed, he told her of the safe place they both knew existed.

"Our safe place, my darling, it's real," he said softly with excitement in his voice. "Just down the main road and it crosses right over the river. That's where you'll be safe darling." Her father heard of the river existing and it could be a safe place for farm animals, but he never knew where it actually was until then.

As she crawled through the barbed wire- losing clumps of wool as she maneuvered through- she felt a jolt of excitement shoot through her as she finally felt safe for the first time tonight. She knew that the farmer would never leave the farm to go looking for her, especially if he thought that she was gone all night. The farmer wouldn't

worry about one sheep gone missing out all the animals that he owns, especially if it was a smaller animal and he had no idea how long the sheep was gone.

As she began her trek off of the farmer's land and into the mountains, she came across fallen cherry blossom pedals that covered the road. The farmer had the trees planted so it would hide the barbed wire fence surrounding his property. The way the cherry blossoms floated down to the gravel road almost seemed like snowflakes falling from the sky to the sheep.

Her first memory as a lamb was snow on the farm. She remembers waking to her father nudging her to wake up and go outside. "Wake up my darling, it's time to come out and play."

When she finally got up and walked out of the barn with her father, she was astonished by the white wonderland that was in front of her. Her and her father spent the day running in the snow and rolling around with one another until she realized how cold being out in the snow made her.

The moon slowly began to set and fade out as it still poked through the branches of oak and redwood trees as she started her way down the road. With the farm officially out of sight, the sheep was confident that there was nothing the farmer could do to her anymore. That was when the second howl came. Unlike last time, she didn't stop immediately, because the howl was louder and sounded more terrifying than the one she had heard before. Instead, she ran, knowing immediately that the scream of terror could only be a wolf or wolves, to find cover. She scurried up the hill, tripping over herself with every other step that she took, out onto a ledge and hid around the backside of a boulder.

Her heart started pounding through rips in her wool as she peeked out below and saw three wolves traveling together, eager to see which way she had gone. They didn't seem to have spotted her while she ran, but it was apparent that she was heard by them while either on the road or running away. The wolves looked angry, but tired. It seemed like they had been up all night, and were almost ready to settle for eating each other rather than continuing to hunt. The sheep knew that as long as she was patient, the wolves would be too eager to wait for her and continue to look for another source for food.

She had been good at patiently waiting since she was little. Every week as a lamb, she would walk to the edge of the farmer and wait for her mother to come back with the farmer. She would sit inside the barbed wire fence and look out onto the road waiting, hoping that this time would be the time that her mother came back with him. Every single time she waited for the farmer to come back at the end of the day, he would alone or with other animals in the back of his truck. That still didn't stop her from waking up early every week when the farmer would leave and wait for him to return, just in case that was the time her mother would return. It always broke her father's heart when he would walk out to the fence to take her back in the barn at the end of the day.

"Looks like she won't be coming back until next week, maybe even longer my darling," he would say to her as they would begin to walk back.

The sun began to rise in the sky minutes later and the wolves scattered across the road, amid fear of cars hitting them and hunters that came into the area. The sheep sat there on a three-foot ledge between the rock and the cliff, about eighty feet above the road that she needed to follow. It was there she decided to walk along the ledge path parallel to the road. She worried that if she walked back down and followed along the paved road, the wolves would jump out of the other side and attack her. She also had the underlying fear that the farmer would spot her while driving down the road and take her back. Although the pathway along the ledge was narrow and far more steep, the sheep knew it was her best chance if she wanted to get to the river by the end of the day alive.

She followed the skinny path with the sun hanging over her head, making sure to walk carefully along the ledge with one hoof in front of the other. The path that she was now following was obviously older than the road below her. There were foot-long gaps in the path every hundred feet or so that would drop down like the blade of a guillotine down to the road. Each time the sheep had approached one of these gaps, her heart would race faster than a bullet would travel out of the farmer's gun. She extended her front two hooves onto the ledge in front of her, with her hind legs on the ledge behind her. With her whole body in the middle of the eighty-foot drop, with her legs extended as if she were a human doing the splits, she jumped with her hind legs and just managed to get to the other side. With each gap that she came across, she thought more and more about her father and the other animals she had left behind on the barn. She knew that she couldn't let him down and would have to push through this in order to be safe and make him proud the same way she made her mother.

The night before her mother went with the farmer to the vet, the sheep snuck out of the barn to go see her. She went around the barn to where her mother lied resting before the farmer would take her away in the morning. She poked her hoof through the cage and nudged her mother. When her mother awoke, she smiled at the sight of her daughter coming to say goodbye to her. She had heard about how upset the young lamb was from her father when he visited earlier in the day.

"Don't you worry little one," the sheep told her daughter. "I'll be back by the time the wool on our fur falls out of the sky."

As the lamb walked back to the barn after saying goodbye, she turned and looked at her mother for the last time, and she was smiling through her wool. It made her happy that even though she initially didn't want to go through with saying goodbye, she did and it provided closure for more than just herself.

After crossing over all of the gaps, the sheep came to the end of the path; a steep, eighty-foot cliff above the river. The sun started to set over the mountain as the light poked through the branches of the trees once again. She was relieved that she knew

where the river was and had finally made it, but was unsure of how she would get down. She looked down and noticed that there were a few ledges here and there along the side of the cliff that she could climb down like steps to stairs, but that path only went about halfway down, and she didn't know if a forty-foot jump would make much of a difference.

That's when she heard it again: a howl, just like the second one she had heard, this time coming from the path behind her. She quickly turned and saw two yellow dots off in the distance glaring right at her.

The sheep started jumping down the steps, trembling with fear as she could feel the dots started to come towards her faster. She was halfway down the steps when she turned and saw a single wolf waiting at the top of the ledge. The sheep continued to look up as she made her way down and realized after a few moments that the wolf would not follow her down the steps. It seemed to think that the climb down and risk of falling wasn't worth it to the wolf as much as it was to her. Instead, the it sat atop the cliff, silently waiting for her to either jump down into the river or climb back up where he would get too enjoy an evening snack. The sheep sat there on the ledge halfway in between the river below her and the hungry wolf above her, wondering what she could do. It was in that moment that she thought about her father. It had come to her mind that by this time of day he might not be alive any longer, and that his dying wish would have been for her to make it to the river safely.

She leapt off of the ledge into the river below. The thought about whether she could actually swim or not hadn't crossed her mind until she felt the splash of water as she landed in the river and started to float back up. She managed to keep her head afloat as she let the river's current take her to the side where she could make her way out of the water. The ice-cold river made her shiver like she only had when she would see snow on the farm, but she knew that she was finally safe.

The sun had set as the moon and stars once again lit up the sky. The sheep could see the moon's glow bouncing off of the river as she made her way out onto the riverside. The only sound that she could hear was the water bugs bouncing between the rocks at her hooves. She thought about the farmer and his guillotine that caused her to run away from home, and the wolves and other obstacles she had faced while she ran to the river. As she laid back to finally rest, she looked up as the wool from her fur began to fall from the sky.

That morning, her father woke up and saw that her daughter wasn't asleep next to her. He looked around the barn, with the light inside starting to dim out, but couldn't find her. After looking for a few more moments, he smiled, and knew that she wouldn't be found as the farmer pushed open the doors with the guillotine.

Avaricious (a chapter)

Araceli Barry



The only thing stopping her from dying was the people who cared about her. Elysia was a woman of taste, but never really got around to feeding herself.

At one point, it became a bit too unhealthy of a habit, which had cost her a visit to the doctor.

"Dr. Brown, I don't think I need to be here this long. Whatever you need to prescribe to me could have been done thirty minutes ago," Elysia said, finishing a cup of applesauce the nurse gave her.

"Ms..."

"It's just Elysia for now," she said, cutting him off.

"Right, well, Elysia your last appointment seemed to have been over a year ago, and it is important that we get you checked up and update your records." Dr. Brown remarked. It was quiet for a moment.

"Fortunately for you," Dr. Brown continued, "you won't be needing any medications. But another day or two without food in your system, this situation would have been a lot more serious, not to mention what's at stake here."

"And may I ask what exactly is at stake?" she questioned.

"Well, you are almost at a difficult age of conceiving. Your health is important if you are planning to have a child soon."

She was quiet again. Her thoughts were full of angry and confused words. A child? Oh, please. That would just be one more person to spend her money on, and she already had enough on her plate.

Avoiding that topic of discussion, she said, "So, you said I'm okay, right? May I go now?"

"Yes, your body just had a moment of weakness. You won't have to worry about feeling light-headed again if you eat a bit more. At least three meals a day."

She scoffed. What was considered more was just something greater than the nothingness she already consumed. Three meals were setting the bar a bit too high for her standards and would mess up the routine she already had. But she simply told the doctor "Thank you" and went about her day.

Elysia was used to this lifestyle she made. It wasn't the happiest, nor was it the healthiest, but it was the only thing worth waking up to. Her routine was so consistent that it felt like her body pulled her to wherever she needed to be. She naturally woke up before sunrise and would immediately grab the leather wallet on her nightstand. She would prop herself up and lean against her pillow to recount the money she had left from the previous day. Although Elysia never miscounted, she would recite her earnings a few times out loud for reassurance.

Elysia was the one to prepare her dinner in the morning so all she had to do was warm it up. That was all she allowed herself to eat in a day. Her pantry only contained pre-bagged trail mix and stale cereal that she had neglected to eat. She was strict on

keeping her figure but, upon the doctor's request, if she needed a snack, it would be no more than a one bag of trail mix.

Her apartment lacked colors and purpose since she was out in town most of the day. It never really bothered her how no one came to visit, except the landlord when rent was overdue. Oftentimes, she would consider changing the wallpaper to a lighter shade of grey, but would shake away the thought as it would require her to spend more money. Not to mention the amount of time and effort she would have to put in; all the body aches she would have to endure while painting, and the horrible fumes that could make her smell like chemicals.

As she started her morning, Elysia made her way to the closet, which was the only place in the apartment that had life to it. She carried the keys to the closet door in her purse so it would be with her at all times. Unlocking the doors and stepping inside was her breath of fresh air. The silks of her clothing and gleam of her gold shoes reflected the orange light that brightened the closet, shining on her as she entered. Her wardrobe had simple elegance that stowed exorbitant fabrics and overpriced shoes; absolutely no patterns. She thought patterns were tacky and would distract people from looking at her face. Her outfits were based on the weather outside, but she made sure to make a statement out of it.

She wanted to represent the elite.

On hot days when the women wore shorts, she would wear a cocktail length skirt made out of silk or linen that she had bought from the boutique downtown. Or on the coldest of days, she would make sure to wear a fur coat; although, if she ever had the money to buy chinchilla fur it might just make her the happiest girl ever.

The store managers knew Elysia well, as she quickly became the number one customer at their stores. Some of them would offer to give Elysia a discount on some of the items, but she insisted on paying full price. The first time she was offered to pay less for an item baffled her.

"Do you think I don't have enough money?" she asked.

"No no, I just thought a discount would be nice to have since you've been shopping here for so long" Stanley, the manager, said.

"Mr. Manager-"

"Please, Elysia. You know what my name is," he cut off.

"Mr. Manager, it would be worth much more if I paid in full," she stated. "Plus, if you think pure silk is worth less, then what is it even doing here?"

"My apologies, Elysia. Let's go ring you up, shall we?"

The sun was out today, so Elysia dressed accordingly. She would wear a dress but since it was only Monday, many of the townspeople would be at work so there would be less people to admire her. Showing legs during this time was important, so she decided to wear a flowy silk skirt with a ruched blouse to compliment it.

As Elysia began to head out, she double checked her bag to make sure the closet keys were inside. However, it was not an accident that she wouldn't lock the front door. No one would ever visit this side of town and if they did, she wouldn't have to worry about anyone stealing her valuables since she always carried the key to it.

The walk to the boutiques was relaxing for Elysia. There were no cars honking at her during this time, and there was always a nice breeze that made her feel lighter. The walk had a slight incline, but it was steady, and it took her exactly thirty minutes to get to her destination. Although, it wouldn't have bothered her if it took a bit longer.

As Elysia made it to the downtown area, she did a light stretch on her neck and hands, preparing herself for the day. She expected the usual. The local men who were on their lunch breaks stared at her, but none of them fit what she was looking for. The way she made her body sway caused the jewelry on her neck to get twisted sometimes. Or the expensive skirt she wore just made women shiver with envy. Elysia adored the attention and would crave it the moment she woke up. As she walked through downtown, her eyes were constantly scanning the windows. In an instant, she saw the group of women eyeing the pair of earrings on the window display. This was going to be the first store of her day.

In a natural movement, Elysia walked towards the earrings that read an easy \$300. She looked at the women's faces one more time before letting the owner of the store know that she was ready. On her way out of the store, Elysia heard exactly what she expected to hear.

"Those were the most gorgeous pair of earrings I've ever seen!" one woman said. And she was right, Elysia thought. They were very gorgeous, and now they were hers. As Elysia walked down the sidewalk looking for more items that she wanted, she ran into what felt like a wall and dropped her belongings.

"Oh, I'm sorry miss," said the man. She bent down to pick up what fell out of her purse. *I don't remember walls talking.* "I didn't see you walking, I was reading- wait. Elysia, is that you?"

"Oh no," she recognized the deep voice. "Not you again. Harold, what did I tell you about following me? You're wasting my time with all these conversations you try to have."

"Now, you know that's not true, Elysia. I was just going on my lunch break and I wasn't paying attention. It does seem like luck doesn't it?" Harold said.

"No. There's no such thing as luck, if there was, I wouldn't be here right now."

"Right, right..." Harold looked around for a moment, debating if he wanted to invite Elysia to lunch with him, but that was quickly answered.

"Listen Harold, it was nice seeing you *again*, but just do me a favor and stop pretending you like talking to me." And with that, Elysia was gone. She fumbled around in her head a bit, confused as to what she was doing, but soon remembered once she

saw a small group of ladies walking into Francesca's. Elysia was in a rush since running into Harold caused her to lose some time out of her afternoon.

It was nearly 4pm, and Elysia had to make her way back home to take a quick nap before clocking into her job at Rosie's Diner near her side of town. She hauled her bags across downtown and, although her feet were tired, she had to make the effort of keeping her posture for the next forty-five minutes. Because of her exhaustion from the day, she knew the walk back home took her longer. The load of the clothes in each bag made her arms sore and her shoulders stiff and as she tried holding the bags in different positions. Her hands began to burn as they rubbed against the ribbon handles. She was just thankful that the sidewalk had a slight decline to help her walk faster.

More cars started honking the darker the afternoon got which meant she was almost home. She was anxious to put her clothes in the closet and take a nap before work.

Once she got home, she trudged her way up the concrete stairs and opened the door to her apartment. After closing the front door, she anxiously dug her hand into her purse, wanting to find the key to the closet so she could relieve her arms, but she couldn't feel them. She became more frantic the more she dug.

"I don't know what to..." her hands moved faster. "Where are they..." she pulled things in and out of the purse. "They were just..." everything in the bag was dumped out.

At this moment, it was as if she couldn't breathe, like the life was slowly coming out of her the more she looked. More irrational thoughts kept coming into her head. *Maybe I should break the door? Or should I call the police? What's the landlord's number again-*

She was pulled out of her thoughts once she heard a knock on her front door. Was it the police? She thought. She rushed to the door hoping it was a police officer or the landlord that read her mind, but it was neither.

"Harold? What are you doing here? You shouldn't be here" she asked, almost out of breath.

"Well, after you ran off today, you dropped these keys" he said, holding up the closet keys. "I thought you would be locked out but it seems like you're already inside."

Elysia felt a mixture of relief and anxiety as she grabbed the keys from Harold. She desperately needed a breath of fresh air, so she went to her closet and unlocked the door. Her worries disappeared and she felt her face cooling down. She began putting away her new clothes, hanging each item with delicacy. Unaware that Harold was still inside, she sat on her closet floor, closing her eyes, feeling the fuzz of carpet with her fingertips.

"Elysia," she heard him call. "Are you okay, dear?"

"I'm fine, Harold. And I am not your dear," she retorted.

Elysia could hear Harold's heavy feet making its way to her in the closet. As he saw her on the floor, he reached in his back pocket of his pants and pulled out a pack of Marlboro.

"Would the lady like a cigarette?" he asked as he gestured. She rolled her eyes and scoffed, "Not in here, Harold. Maybe downstairs." As she got up from the floor, Elysia lost the feeling of tiredness. Perhaps it was all of the adrenaline from five minutes ago. Before heading outside, she glanced at the clock to see she had a couple hours until she worked again.

As they walked downstairs, Elysia asked, "Harold, what are you *really* doing here?"

He slowed down his pace and responds, "What do you mean? I just wanted to drop off your keys."

She blew out a breath. "You know you could've given it to the landlord. It's just unlike you to come by this side of town, let alone come all the way up to my room."

"Here, let me-" he said motioning her to lean it. Harold flicked his thumb against the lighter, letting the flame rest above it as it slowly burnt the tip of the cigarette.

"I just wanted to check up on you, Elysia. That's all. I know you got a lot going on with your family. Last time you and I really talked, you told me Becca was in the hospital." Taking a deep inhale from the cigarette, she was trying to figure out how to respond.

"Look, Harold," she said. "I don't need any pity visits from you. I appreciate you dropping off my keys, but I didn't need all of this. If I wanted a therapy session, I would pay for one."

"But that's the thing, Elysia. You wouldn't. You don't want to help yourself. That's how you've always been," he said. Harold's voice was already deep and it would scare Elysia a bit if he raised it.

"You don't know anything about me, so please stop thinking that you do-"

"Elysia, you're always living in a daydream." He cut her off. "Look at you, ya got this fancy skirt on to show all those people downtown who you think you are, but you barely even have a job. And let me tell you something, I know why you don't wear it skin tight... it's 'cause you don't want them to see that you got a hollow stomach."

She just listened.

"You abandon yourself for most of the expensive earrings that people can only see when your hair is behind your ears," he finished.

The moment of silence felt infinite and both were trying to process what was said. But Elysia stood up, and wiped away the bits of rubble off the back of her skirt. Chuckling lightly to herself, she looked at Harold.

"See, I told you. You waste my time with these conversations."

She gave the cigarette one last flick before walking back inside, and for once, locking the front door behind her.

Does Your Mother Know? And Other Songs You Hate Relating To
Robin Choudhury



It's 5:30 and Peter's starting to get nervous.

Okay, maybe that's a lie. He started to get nervous around 4:45. He thought he had always taught her it's better to be early than on time.

He peers out the front window again; the suburban street, wet from the rain, is still empty. He paces back and forth a few times, checks his phone, considers texting her, puts his phone down, and repeats the entire affair again.

Kathleen was supposed to be home by five. She wasn't planning on staying after school this morning- but she popped into his office after the bell rang to tell him she was going to help the drama club paint some sets. He let her, begrudgingly, set the curfew, and left.

He runs his hand through his hair and sighs. Kathleen is usually very good with this stuff- she's never been this late without explanation before. His mind is racing- what if she's throwing glass bottles on the ground in an abandoned parking lot? Or doing drugs under the freeway with some bad kids? Or she's been thrown in a car trunk? Sure, there's literally nothing she's ever done that could indicate any of that is happening to her, and he's put her through stranger danger VHS tapes and self-defense classes, but still, he can't help but worry. He worries all the time.

He texts her again. *Kathleen, you need to answer me now or you're going to be in trouble. Where are you?* Still no response. She must not be near her phone. (This makes his stomach twist. Only a little.) He paces more, until... there! He sees a red Prius pull up and Kathleen climbs out of the passenger side. She waves to the driver and shuts the door with her foot as she turns around, bouncing up the path swinging a plastic bag. Peter opens the door before she can.

"Kathleen, where have you been?!" He exclaims as soon as she walks through the doorway.

"Oh, Eve volunteered to drive me home, but we stopped at 7/11 to get snacks," she explains casually, taking her loafers off and leaving them by the door. "Sorry I didn't answer your texts, I was distracted. Eve is always really fun to hang out with, I get carried away-"

"Kathleen, I bought you that phone so I could make sure I know where you are," he says sternly. Kathleen's easy smile slips off her face.

"I'm sorry, Father, I just wasn't looking at it. But I was with friends, it was fine-"

"Alright Kathleen, but make sure you pay attention from now on."

There's a tense beat of silence before Kathleen sheepishly raises the plastic bag. "Um anyways... I got us some candy, do you want any?"

Peter's steely mood immediately disappears as it's replaced with compassion for his daughter- she's always thinking of him, despite everything. "That's very kind of you Kathleen, but I don't want to ruin our appetite for dinner. Which, by the way, is soon, so wash up!" he says, taking her bag away and giving her a pat on the head.

Kathleen grins mischievously. "I'm gonna add gummy worms to your pasta, old man. Be prepared!" She cackles as she snatches the bag back and runs to her room.

Dinner is tense, which makes Peter nervous. After saying grace, the two eat their meal in relative silence- Kathleen seems uncharacteristically quiet right now, averting her gaze every time Peter tries to make eye contact. Just as he opens his mouth to ask her what's wrong, she blurts it out.

"Can I go to prom this year?"

She says it so quickly Peter isn't sure what she said at first- Kathleen looks anxious, her small hand clutching her fork with such force it looks like she's trying to snap it. "It's just..." she starts, looking everywhere except her father.

"It's like, every kid gets to go. Like, in movies and stuff." She begins to bring her fingers to her mouth. Though she's kicked the habit in recent years, Kathleen still bites her nails when anxious. Without thinking, Peter places a gentle hand on hers and guides it away.

"And I was thinking... oh, I think I've been good. I-I get good grades, I go to mass every week, my teachers all like me... Please, Father, *please* let me go. Just this once." Peter sighs- this isn't the first time they've had this sort of conversation. Last thing was homecoming, which he said no to.

"You have the parish dances," he would always suggest in the past, and she would fly into a fit about how those weren't fun, those weren't *real* dances that *real* teens go to...

Kathleen looks like she's expecting that answer, and is already formulating a retort in her head. "You have been good Kathleen, and I'm very proud of you." he starts. "But I'll be honest, I'm still apprehensive, knowing the student body." The idea of one of the problematic students, like that womanizing lacrosse player Tobias Cortinas trying to dance with her-- get close to her-- makes him feel sick.

"They're rowdy. We almost didn't hold prom this year because of it." This is true, he had to sit through a long meeting about it. He didn't know why all this was a big deal- *his* high school didn't even hold dances. They just detract from the student's studies, which he thought was the whole point of school.

Kathleen looks down, obviously upset. "I know, but I can look after myself, really... I'd go in a big group... like, with parish kids, like Bella and Christophe..."

"You say that, but why do I have the feeling Ameer and his group are going to find you somehow." Kathleen blushes vibrantly and puffs out her cheeks. "Why does that matter?!"

"Kathleen, I've seen how you act in front of him, like that time you lied about how we used to live in *California* and not Georgia-"

"Ms. Foster said I should go," she interrupts quickly, her expression darkening.

"Foster?" Peter puts a hand on his chin. Miss Tyler Foster, their newest teacher this year. She's quite eccentric; from having half her head shaved, to her unique teaching style, to the fact she even got a job at a Catholic school in the first place! He didn't trust her when she first joined the faculty... She's always one step ahead of him on almost every front. But Kathleen absolutely adores her, and that's the only reason he trusts her now. But still, she's tricky.

"She said since I'm sixteen, it's my *basic right*," Kathleen announces, "to at least go to one high school dance. And *especially* if it's the school my own father works at!" She straightens up in her chair. "I also asked Aunty Rachel, and she says when you were

young you went out dancing all the time," she continues unwaveringly, not letting Peter get a single word in.

"She said that you even met Mother at one such event!" She finishes dramatically, holding her head high like she has just won this debate.

Peter doesn't know how to respond, a variable Kathleen seemingly had not thought through. She immediately softens and begins to sink back into her chair.

"It's just--"

"It's okay," Peter says, putting up a hand. The atmosphere is tense, and neither of them are saying anything, just listening to the hands of the wall mounted clock tick away.

"It's okay." Peter pinches his temple and takes a deep breath through his nose.

"You're right, Kathleen. You're right." He looks up to meet his daughter's sad gaze.

"You're sixteen. You're growing up. I'd be a total hypocrite to force you to stay home." He reaches across the table and takes one of her hands in his, still able to marvel at how small and fragile they are. "You've worked so hard this year. It's only right to let you go."

"Father..." Kathleen says, green eyes glistening. "Thank you. I know you're probably scared, but you don't have to be. I can protect myself." She giggles a bit. "And it's high school *prom*. If Tobias gets near me I'll just kick him where the sun doesn't shine."

"Kathleen-!" Peter starts, but now she's just laughing harder, and before he can scold her, he finds himself joining her.

"But seriously," She says once their laughter subsides. "It's soon, and I need a dress. I'm sorry but I am *not* wearing one of my Sunday dresses!" As much as he doesn't want to, Peter agrees. While he considers spending money on fashion to be rather frivolous (which is why he exclusively only wears white button ups and slacks), the dresses in Kathleen's closet are very... twelve-year-old going to her aunt's spring wedding. He hasn't bought her nice new clothes in a while, either.

"Don't worry, Kathleen. We can go shopping the next day I have after school off." He starts to think about his schedule for the week, and nonchalantly adds a "You can bring a friend, if you want,"

"Thanks, Father! I'll only bring one." she replies, already texting feverishly on her phone.

She brought three.

It's a Thursday afternoon, and when he got to the car (a 2005 Honda Civic, because of course,) after the bell rang, there were three other teenagers waiting for him. Eve Flint, who he recognizes from the school's drama club, Hitomi Matthews, who's been in his office more times that he can count, and Nicholas Roux, whom he didn't know all too well prior to today, but now that he's in the same car as him he's starting to wish it stayed that way. The boy's scream laughs are going to make him crash the car at some point, he swears.

Kathleen sits in the front seat, but spends the entire ride twisted around to face her friends. Hitomi connected her phone to the car's aux cord without asking, and is blasting her migraine-inducing hyperpop. Eve and Nicholas are loudly singing along to it, despite the music sounding like when he drops baking pans on the kitchen floor. Peter

keeps his mouth shut and eyes on the road the whole time, even when he can definitely tell Eve is filming him on her phone and laughing. Kathleen doesn't say a word to him the whole time, but does say thank you when they finally arrive and park. None of her friends do, as they pile out of the vehicle almost as soon as he shuts the car off. He wishes Kathleen could hang out with better kids sometimes.

"Hey, why are we parked? I thought you were gonna drop us off!" She asks, finally turning to face him.

"When did I say that?" Peter asks, raising his eyebrows. The plan the whole time was for him to accompany her into the store.

Kathleen glances to the side. "Well, I just thought, since I brought my friends... you'd let me go on my own."

"But how else will you pay?"

This strikes her silent for a moment, before she closes her eyes and chuckles a bit. "Oh, yeah. Duh." She then turns around and opens the door to join her friends again. Peter sighs. This is going to be a long day.

Peter hasn't been to a mall in a while, and these fluorescent lights are probably going to give him a headache soon. Kathleen chats away with her friends, who look like they probably live here on the weekends, as they walk quickly to the dress section. He trails behind them awkwardly- he knows if he strays too close, Kathleen will get embarrassed and complain about it later. Once they reach the section, Kathleen and her friends are about to just run off before he can stop them.

"Kathleen, wait a moment." He says, beckoning her over with his hand. She obliges, rather sheepishly, and stands politely in front of him. Her friends trail behind her, who would be looking pretty intimidating if he actually cared about what teenagers thought about him.

"Listen, I want you to pick something out that you like." He starts. "But also, you need to look presentable." Kathleen sighs comically loud and finishes his sentence. "Yes, I know- No open backs, no plunging necklines, nothing form fitting, nothing above the knee..."

Peter swallows and gives her a thin-lipped smile. "Ah, I see. You should know, it's the dress code speaking, not me..."

"Wait, there's gonna be a dress code? Seriously?!" Hitomi exclaims, pushing Kathleen aside with her hip. "What if we've already bought our dresses? Are you seriously gonna *dress code* us?" She cocks her head to the side, her ridiculous hoop earrings swinging into her face.

Peter resists the urge to curl his lip at her shrill voice. "Yes, as per school policy. Maybe you should've considered that before you went shopping."

"UHG, this school sucks," she groans loudly, rolling her eyes.

"Hitomi, please." Kathleen shushes her just before Peter can reprimand her language, grabbing the girl's arm and pulling her back. "Let's just go."

"Jesus wouldn't care about what I wear," He hears Hitomi grumble as she's dragged away by the younger girl. Peter scoffs. He's pretty sure Jesus wouldn't care about a school prom either.

The whole ordeal takes well over an hour, and Peter is starting to crack. He had taken to sitting in the shoe section across from the dressing rooms, restlessly crossing and uncrossing his arms. After getting bored of his phone after a few minutes, seriously, he still has no idea how to use this thing, he takes to staring at the clearance rack and thinking about how many years the Honda has left in it. The back door has been loose lately, he'll probably have to get that checked out. Eventually.

"Were you seriously sitting here the whole time? You could've left and gotten something to eat or something... this *is* a mall..." He hears a bubbly voice say and he's immediately snapped out of the fog. Kathleen is standing in front of him, dress folded over her arms.

Peter, still feeling tired and a bit dazed, is silent for a moment before suddenly laughing. "Oh, I guess you're right... I just didn't want to leave you here."

"I'm with my friends!" Kathleen exclaims, eyes wide. "Anyways, look. I found the dress!" She holds it in front of her and flares the skirt out so Peter can get a good look. It's a beautiful midnight blue color, its tulle skirt decorated with delicate gold decals that radiate from the waist.

"Oh Kathleen, this is very nice!" He takes the skirt in his hands and looks it over once more. "However, it's sleeveless, yes?" Kathleen frowns and looks at her feet. "Yeah... But I really love this dress, Father. It doesn't go very far down; it only really shows my collar--"

"It's alright Kathleen. You can wear this as long as you wear a sweater over it."

"Yes, of course! I can wear the nice black one Aunty Rachel got me--"

"And tights."

"And tights," She parrots.

"And flats."

"Yes, yes, I know. Anyways, I'll leave you with this..." she trails off as she drops the dress in his arms. "...and get back to my friends! They wanna get something at Starbucks so we'll just wait for you there." Before he can reply to her, she's bouncing off. Not much he can do now, other than pay for the dress. He takes a look at the price tag.

The things he does for his daughter...

In retrospect, Peter should've probably called one of his feminine friends to help with this. Everything was going okay for a while- Kathleen had gotten up early in excitement, despite Saturdays being days he lets her sleep in. She was bouncing off the walls all day, finding YouTube tutorials for makeup and hair she wanted to try. Once 6 rolled around, she didn't eat much at dinner and almost immediately ran to her room to get ready. Getting the dress on was fine, she didn't need any help. He insisted on

watching her do her makeup to make sure she didn't put too much on- she respected this, going for a soft neutral look, and he even let her wear lipstick this time.

The problem was her hair. She wanted a twisting bun updo- when she showed him the picture, he didn't really know what he was looking at. Thus, started one of the most frustrating 30 minutes of his life, trying his best to follow the video tutorial Kathleen had pulled up on her phone. It felt like no matter what he did, he screwed it up and Kathleen was getting increasingly frustrated.

"It can't be that hard!" She would whine, while he would reply "I've never done more than comb my hair!"

Somehow, they did it, and it looks pretty okay. Her frizzy hair has finally been tamed by copious amounts of bobby pins and hairspray, and hopefully won't budge for a few hours. After she thanks him with a warm hug, he leaves her to find his camera and to allow her to do any finishing touches.

When she does finally walk out, Peter feels like his heart is going to swell so big it'll explode. She really does look beautiful, and so *different*- her hair being pulled up shows off her long, graceful neck- the eyeshadow she used brings out the green in her eyes, and the sweater he made her wear actually goes very nice with the deep blue of the dress. She looks like a young woman, not a little girl.

Kathleen grins at her father's expression. "I think you need to let me wear more dark colors, Father." She twirls around a bit. "It suits me, don't you think?"

"You look like your mother," He blurts out.

Kathleen stops for a moment. "Oh..."

"I'm serious," Peter says, not meaning to bring the mood down. "She'd lose her mind, I think. Take a million pictures. And speaking of which..." He brings the camera out.

"Gosh- this is *embarrassing*," Kathleen laughs, blushing. "I'm camera shy!"

Peter keeps his word and takes a million pictures for her. He can't get over how proud he feels- this must be how fathers feel when their daughters graduate, or get married.

"Father, please! We're going to be late," She exclaims as he makes her do her 40th pose. "My friends are waiting for me!"

He checks his watch: 7:40. Damn, she's right. It takes around 10 minutes to get to the school, and that's if he's lucky and hits no red lights or traffic.

"Alright Kathleen, let's go."

"Right on it."

He's not lucky- he hits two red lights, and it's slow going in the drop off line. But they're still early, so he still considers this a victory.

"Thank you for driving me, Father!" Kathleen says cheerfully, reaching for the door handle.

"Kathleen, wait-" Peter puts a hand on her shoulder before she can open the car door.

"Yes?" She looks at him, her expression firm. She obviously wants to get back to her friends, so he'll try to make this quick.

"I just..." Peter closes his eyes for a moment to compose himself. "I just want you to know how proud I am of you."

"Oh..." She immediately softens and takes her hand off the door handle. He gives her a small but genuine smile. "I know I can be difficult sometimes." Bit of an understatement. "But tonight, you have shown me just how much of an extraordinary young woman you've become. I am incredibly proud to call you my daughter."

A bashful smile blooms on Kathleen's lips as she takes one of her father's hands in hers and squeezes it. "Thank you, Father. Really. You're always looking out for me, and I appreciate it. Thank you for letting me have this."

They sit in silence for a moment before Kathleen releases him, probably remembering her friends are waiting for her. "Well, I will take my leave now. Thank you for driving us-"

Peter doesn't miss a second to ruin the moment. "Do you have your phone?" He interjects quickly, expression quickly turning stern, eyebrows pinching together and mouth thin. "Did you bring Band-Aids in case you get blisters? You've never worn shoes like this before, they will begin to hurt after a while..."

Kathleen's smile immediately falls, jaw tightening. "Yes, everything is in my purse-"

"Remember not to drink anything, I read online that young people sometimes spike drinks at dances. Do not dance too close with anyone, keep at least a foot away. Don't feel peer pressured to do anything you're uncomfortable with. Don't be afraid to report to a teacher if students are misbehaving. And please, call if you need anything, I will come right over to pick you up." He rambles, counting off every point with his fingers.

"Yes, yes, I will," Kathleen responds, dead panned, now intensely examining her manicure. "It's nice to know you trust me." She picks at the nail polish on her thumb.

"I'm just being safe," Peter replies sharply. "And I want you to have a nice night."

"Alright, Father. I think this has gone on long enough." Kathleen finally opens the door and quickly exits the car, giving him a short wave goodbye.

"Remember I will be picking you up at ten. Do not be late-"

He's cut off by the car door slamming shut, but she mouths an "OK" before walking around the car towards her friends.

He watches her go, greeting and mingling with her friends. He recognizes a lot of the kids from their parish- he's glad she kept to her word on that. But as he gets ready to officially drive off, he notices something. Or rather, someone. Tobias Cortinas, who Kathleen is having an animated conversation with. Peter feels his blood begin to boil. This boy is no good, and he knows from experience. He's busted him for everything from coming to school high to him getting to 3rd base behind the bleachers. And now, he's... talking to his daughter.

His knuckles start to go white from gripping the steering wheel. Well, it's not great, but as long as Kathleen stays with her group, he figures she should be okay. But just as he's pulling out of the drop off line, he glances into his rearview mirror and almost crashes the car.

Tobias has put his *arm* around Kathleen's. She seems to be laughing, as are the rest of the kids. But none of that matters, because alarms are blaring in Peter's head. How foolish is he, just as he thought everything was going to be fine, a variable like this

had to be dropped in the mix. He turns back into the parking lot and parks as far away as possible. He must formulate a plan.

Alright. The school playboy is your daughter's prom date. What do you do?

Well, he can just watch her the whole time. This seems like the best solution. If he makes any moves on her, or if anyone tries to get her to do anything inappropriate, he can simply step in and stop it. This is obvious. The real question is *how*.

He puts his hand in his chin. He had told everyone that he wasn't going to show up to help chaperone. Oh well, he'll suppose he'll just have to work off the clock. He's done this before, and honestly, he'd jump in a pit of vipers if it meant Tobias would get his hands off Kathleen. He'll try to find... Eliza. Yes, he knows she's definitely going to be here, because he remembers the fit she threw after being assigned. Eliza Blanche, an English teacher who's been at the school nearly as long as he has. He knows her decently well. She loves to tease him and it can get rather old after a while. Oh well. He'd rather hang out with her than Coach Cleve... last time they talked he wouldn't stop calling him "pretty swole for a dropout priest" which was only the 5th most embarrassing thing he's ever been called.

Alright. Peter straightens up in his seat and shuts his car off. This is a solid plan. As long as he stays to the side, there's almost no way Kathleen will see him. And if he is in her line of sight, he'll simply move. Easy. Fantastic.

And this is what he tells himself the entire walk through the parking lot and into the school gym. He's immediately overwhelmed by the blaring music and lights- he's for sure going to get a headache if this keeps up. He makes a mental note to ask the DJ to turn the music down once he finds Eliza. And luckily, he does this rather quickly. As he expected, she's all the way in a back corner, holding a cup seltzer and looking pretty upset it's not alcohol. She's wearing a dark green evening dress that... Doesn't really fit the vibe of "high school prom", but once he remembers he's basically in his work clothes, he figures they both lose.

"Peter? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Shh, Eliza." He hisses as he slips next to her. "I'm here to keep an eye on Kathleen."

"You creep," Eliza pouts. "Can't you let her live for one day?"

"Her date is Tobias Cortinas."

"Oh." This shuts her up- she knows as well as he does. "Well, try not to let her see you, or you'll never hear the end of it."

And he does try. He watches Kathleen the whole time, making sure to drag Eliza with him every time he moves positions. Kathleen is constantly bouncing around groups- "She really has gotten to know a lot of people, hasn't she?" Eliza marvels. First, she hangs out with the parish kids- Peter is happy about this. Better yet, Tobias seems to be relatively ignoring her- though he still sometimes puts his arm over her and it takes all Peter's self-restraint not to go sprinting over to deck him in the face.

She then hangs out with some kids he doesn't recognize, but they seem unassuming enough. Then the weird goth kids Peter doesn't really like pick her up- they've never really done anything that warrants his suspicion, other than wearing black eyeshadow to school every day and listening to metal in the lunchroom, but he can't help feeling uneasy around them. Kathleen soon bids them farewell and meets up with...

oh great, Hitomi, in a tasteless, extremely low-cut red dress, and her boyfriend Ameer. Ameer Jalal has been in Peter's office more than Hitomi, if that's possible... from everything to pranking people by hiding in lockers to somehow finding and posting SAT answers online. He's not even Catholic, but chose to enroll here because he thought it'd be "ironic." Peter really can't stand him.

Kathleen looks like she's having more fun than she has all night- Peter is pretty sure she might have a crush on Ameer, and the way she keeps looking for this approval just makes this more apparent. Hitomi doesn't seem to notice. Or maybe she does, and she doesn't care.

The song changes, and she and Ameer freak out. Peter gave up on following music in 1992 so he has no idea what could make them react in this way. Their dancing changes to... oh, no. They're leaving absolutely no room for the holy ghost. In an interesting change of pace, it's the *boy* who bends down for his girlfriend to grind on him. And the worst thing is Kathleen laughing, head thrown back, staggering over, as if the display is hilarious instead of totally offensive.

And then Hitomi grabs Kathleen's skinny arm, which- wait a minute, where the hell did her sweater go- and starts to do that same dance move, just to Kathleen's side- and Kathleen, still laughing, starts to copy her-!

He needs to put an end to this, now. He doesn't care that he'll be blowing his cover. This is what he came here to do, after all.

"Hey, HEY! YOU THREE!" He shouts as he marches over to the teens. His blood is pounding in his ears.

Kathleen's eyes widen as she turns around and almost as soon as she makes eye contact with him, she whips her head down. Ameer doesn't look like he cares all that much, which is typical, while Hitomi looks like a deer caught in headlights. This isn't the first time he's caught Ameer and Hitomi doing something stupid- but *Kathleen*. He thought she knew better than this.

"Whatever... lewd behavior going on here has got to come to a stop." He says darkly, not taking his eyes off of his daughter.

"If I see you doing it again, you'll be spending the rest of the night in my office."

He's primarily speaking to the other two, but directing his gaze towards Kathleen, whose head is tilted down at the floor, with her sweaterless, thin arms stuck out by her side. She's shaking.

"*Kathleen.*"

After an excruciating moment of silence, with only the trap beat in the back to keep the four company, Kathleen's head suddenly snaps up.

"You... you just have to ruin **everything**...!"

Peter's jaw drops instinctively. Kathleen never snaps back like this, not at least since she was a child. He recovers quickly though, interjecting with a "Kathleen, it's my job to reprimand bad behavior-"

"You said you'd be at home!" Kathleen cries, voice cracking in the middle. Her face is bright red. "Why are you here?! I thought you were going to finally leave me alone! What was that... that stupid talk in the car about, about how *grown* I am?!"

Peter can feel his body start to get hot as the pounding in his ears gets louder. This... this, is totally unacceptable. He barely even notices the circle of students starting to surround them.

How can she be so naive? How can she not see that he wishes he didn't have to show up to this place? He sighs and drags a hand down his face. "I was planning on it, Kathleen, and I meant everything I said."

He pauses. He's about to be harsh, but it's what she needs to hear. Plus, just remembering that boy's snarky face makes his blood boil. "But, Kathleen, how did you expect me to react when I saw you link arms with one *Tobias Cortinas!*"

Kathleen barks out a humorless laugh. "Seriously? **Seriously?** There's... there's nothing between us! Did you- We're friends! You think I'd do that? Oh my GOD-"

"Language, Kathleen-"

"No! No, screw that. Screw this!" She's yelling at this point, face starting to shine with tears. "I thought you trusted me more than this, I can't believe you'd just, go behind my back, and HUMILIATE me in front of EVERYBODY..."

It's at this point Kathleen seems to notice the scene she's made, and the circle of students watching the fiasco go down surrounding her. Her watery eyes are wide and her lower lip is quivering.

"Kath-"

Just as he opens his mouth to comfort her, Kathleen suddenly makes a mad dash away, crashing into Peter's side and disappearing into the crowd. Ameer and Hitomi run after her while Peter just stands there dumbly, not totally processing what happened.

The crowd of students start to disperse now that the show is over, and Peter walks back over to his spot, trying to wrap his head around what just happened. Eliza looks at him sadly, not saying anything.

"...Are you going to say something?" He asks her dejectedly after a minute of rather awkward silence.

"Well... alright Peter, I know you don't like me getting involved in your personal life but... what the hell happened? With you and Kathy?"

"She's angry with me," He replies, crossing his arms and staring out into the crowd. "For reprimanding her friends."

Eliza sighs. "Peter, I don't think it's just that. I was watching- what on earth did you say to her that made her fly out of here like that?"

"Are you assuming it's my fault?" He shoots back, a bit more venomous than he intended. Was he *that* on edge?

"I'm just saying, Peter. Kathleen's always so well behaved. Something must've been really bothering her."

Peter grinds his teeth as he decides whether or not to tell her the truth. "I think she's upset I came here in the first place. But Tobias as her date, I mean, really! I just did what any father would do."

Eliza doesn't reply- she just hums and sips her seltzer.

"How did she expect me to react when I saw him walk her into the building arm in arm?" He continues, his adrenaline still pumping. "Did she just expect me to be okay with that? Did she think I wouldn't see? And if he did try something, would she get mad at me for preventing that?"

"Do you think Kathleen would even let it get to that point?"

Peter finally turns his head to look at Eliza. Her brow is raised, and she takes another sip before continuing. "And when you busted her just now, she wasn't even with him."

"Yes, but those two, Ameer and Hitomi, they're also troublemakers, I'm not surprised they were able to convince her to dance like that."

"What makes you think she had to be convinced?"

"Alright, Eliza, that's enough." He replies quietly. She's starting to tick him off- who does she think she is? She's never had any children. "I raised Kathleen to know right from wrong, and I think I have the right to be upset that she would conduct herself in such an inappropriate manner when I've spent her whole life teaching her otherwise."

Eliza simply shrugs. "Fine, whatever you say. I'm just saying, maybe she doesn't care as much as you think she does. Maybe she just wants to have fun."

And he leaves it at that. The two spend the rest of the night in relative silence- Eliza leaves for a bit to mingle with other teachers and students, while Peter never leaves his spot by the folded-up bleachers. He reprimands a couple more kids, but otherwise doesn't move.

Eventually, ten o'clock rolls around, and he picks up his phone to text Kathleen.
Ready to go?

He pockets the phone as he waits for her response. But then five minutes roll by. He texts her again. And then ten. He tries to call her, but she doesn't pick up. Fifteen. Peter's starting to sweat and he rolls up his sleeves. She's not responding again... his mind starts to race as he starts to walk around the gym. Kids are really starting to leave now- if he doesn't find her now, she might already be gone. He asks a few students if they've seen her, if they know where she might've gone, and most of them give him passive aggressive eyerolls and shrugs. "No, I haven't."

After walking around the gym for the fifth time, he tries her phone again.

Ring. Ring Ring.

Is she still mad at him?

Ring. Ring. Ring.

Is this about more than just this stupid prom?

"Sorry, I'm not on the phone right now! Please leave a message and I'll get back to you asoonasIcanhaveaniceday!"

Her voicemail- he remembers the day they set it up. She was ecstatic to finally have her own phone, and a *smartphone* at that, as she had pretty much begged for it every day for 4 years. She had insisted on cramming the "have a nice day!" into the timed message despite Peter telling her it was unnecessary. His grip on his own phone tightens and, after hearing the beep, speaks shakily.

"Kathleen, I don't know what's going on today, but I need you to answer me now. No one knows where you are and I'm worried. We can work this out if you just call me, okay? I love you."

And that's it. He shuts his phone off and scans the parking lot again- even less cars. As much as he hates to admit it to himself, he's pretty sure Kathleen is long gone. She might've left even before the dance ended.

When he bumps into Eliza again, the gym is completely empty at this point, save from some leadership kids and faculty. She's putting her coat on and seems ready to leave.

"Have you seen Kathleen?" He asks her, running a hand through his hair.

"No," Eliza replies. "I thought she was going home with you!"

"That was the plan," He explains shakily. "But I can't find her anywhere, and she won't answer her phone."

"Oh..."

"I have no idea where she could be. What if she's not safe?" He says, letting his anxiety get the better of him for a moment.

"Calm down." Eliza says, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Peter, I'm going to be honest with you- she probably left with friends. I'm sure she's fine."

"That's... that's not the point!" He exclaims. He feels like he's about to be sick. "These 'friends', I know the kind of people they are, they could be up to no good..." He's starting to lose composure, and it shows.

"Christ Peter, she's sixteen. And a good kid at that." Eliza sighs, giving Peter's shoulder a half hearted pat. "Even if you're right about her friends, do you think she'd engage in that stuff?"

He doesn't answer her- his stomach feels like it's gnawed at by dogs. It's simply logical to know she's probably going to be okay, she's gone her whole life never doing reckless things, but he can't shake this sick feeling. Like he knows something bad is going to happen. Like he doesn't know his daughter as well as he thought he did.

"Listen, Peter. You should go home. Everything will be fine. I'll tell Rachel to try calling her, maybe she'll pick up for her. Okay?" She gives him a warm, genuine smile. Peter nods, though he's sure she's saying this because she wants to go home to her cats and is sick of this paranoid man keeping her at this awful school for longer than she needs to be, not out of any real concern for him.

When he gets home, he doesn't know what to do with himself. He always hated being in the house alone- it never feels right without Kathleen. The small house now seems huge, empty, and claustrophobic at the same time. He remembers even when Josie moved into his one-bedroom apartment, when she was at work and he was at home, it felt the same way.

He never liked being on his own.

Peter spends one of the most excruciating hours of his life frantically calling all the staff and parents he can, asking about Kathleen's whereabouts. No one knows anything, which makes the dark pit in his stomach grow more and more. Eventually, Eliza calls him again with the first scrap of information he's heard all night.

"Tyler Foster heard about your situation," she starts. "She checked her social media and says she thinks she knows where Kathy is. I told her to swing by your house."

"Really?!" He cries, losing his composure for a moment. This won't be the first time she's been to his home- Kathleen has invited her over several times, all of them never warning him of her arrival, and always catching him off guard. He's intimidated by her, as

much as he hates to admit it. She always seems to know what he should do before he does.

"Yeah, she's heading over now."

"Did she tell you anything?"

"No, that's why I told her to go to you!" Eliza grumbles, obviously wanting this conversation to be over. "She called like, 10 minutes ago, so you better get ready."

"You waited that long to tell me?!"

"Hey, I had stuff to do!" Eliza retorts. "I'm chatting some guy up on Tinder right now, who I'd MUCH rather be talking to than you right now, but look, I called you out of the goodness of my heart."

"Well gee, thanks."

"You're welcome. Anyways, your girl is coming over soon, so I'm gonna get back to business. Hope you find Kathy, Peter." And she hangs up.

Peter doesn't know if that was an attempt to make him feel better, or her wanting to end the conversation by any means necessary. He crosses his arms and hangs his head- why is everyone in his life like this?

When Tyler finally arrives, he feels like he's going to snap. He had taken to pacing around the living room like a mad man, glancing out the front window every time he passed it, sitting down, saying a prayer, texting or calling Kathleen again, standing back up, rinse and repeat. What couldn't have been more than 20 minutes had felt like an hour.

"Hey, Peter," Tyler says as she opens the door. She usually makes fun of him by calling him 'Petey' whenever she comes over, but even *she* seems worried, which just makes all this that much worse.

Peter doesn't even greet her back- he just sits down on the couch and drags a hand down his face. "Tyler, please, be upfront with me. *Tell me where she is.* Eliza wasn't saying much on the phone..."

Tyler walks over to him and takes off her combat boots, leaving them by the coffee table, and sits on her knees on the couch. "Okay, well... good thing is, she's not kidnapped or anything. She's at a party, thrown by kids from the public school."

Peter covers his face with his hands and exhales. Tyler continues.

"A lot of my kids have added me on Snapchat, which now that I think of it is kinda a dumb thing to do, because I can see all their stories."

Peter has... no idea what she's talking about. Tyler seems to have noticed.

"...point is, I can see what they're posting. And what they're posting, is..."

She nudges Peter's arm with her elbow to get his attention as she holds her phone in front of his face. It's shaky footage of a high school party. He can barely tell what's going on, what with the loud music, constant zooming in and out, and the unstable camera.

"It's a whole lot of this, which is pretty whatever. But..." She takes the phone back for a moment as she scrolls through the list of names. "Someone took a video of Kathleen. Um, she's not, doing anything *super bad*-"

Peter doesn't care. He snatches the phone out of Tyler's hand, making a mental note to apologize for that later. The video, which he realizes is being filmed by Hitomi Matthews thanks to the name on the top of the screen, shows a crowd of students, with many of them also filming, surrounding a girl with frizzy brown hair that's starting to come out of her bun, drinking from a red cup. She finishes it, crushes the cup, tosses it on the ground, and starts laughing, her head tilting back. For some inexplicable reason, the image suits her. And then the video ends. Jesus Mary and Joseph.

Tyler immediately tries to crack a joke. "First thing I thought was, wow, high school parties still do the red solo cup thing? And--"

"This is my fault," Peter says plainly.

Tyler clasps her hands together. "Well..."

She falls silent and the two sit uncomfortably for a few moments before she speaks again. "Peter, you should know... there's another video. But I'm not going to show it to you."

He turns his head sharply to face her, eyebrows knitting together. "What? What are you talking about?"

Tyler flips a piece of hair out of her face. "There's another video. She's in the background of it. I don't want to show it to you. But I also want to be honest."

Peter's mood is starting to go from devastated to frustrated. "What do you mean, you don't want to show it to me?"

"I don't want to put Kathleen through what she'll have to go through if you see it."

Okay, wow. "I thought you came over to help me, to show me this stuff so we can find her." He's trying his best to keep his voice steady. Already off to a bad start.

Tyler takes a breath through her nose. "I know, and I'm aware I'm basically whacking the wasp nest, but I want to help Kathleen too. I think being angry at her right now is the wrong way to go about this."

Peter gets a sudden flash of rage that makes him want to grab her phone away again, but that's childish. So he'll instead do what adults do, which is to raise his voice. The loudest person wins the argument.

"You're not her *mother*, Foster." He spits, jaw clenched. "You're just telling me to what, just, sit here, while my daughter gets up to God knows what?!"

"We have no idea where the party's being held, Peter. I've been asking students since Eliza called me." She replies, not phased at all by his sudden burst of anger. "The moment I get a lead, I'm going to go down and pick her up myself."

"This is ridiculous. She is my **own daughter**. Why are you making this difficult? You have no children. You're barely an adult yourself." He's rambling, being uncharacteristically mean. He almost feels bad. But he can't understand why she's standing in his way! For what. For Kathleen's sake?

"You think... you can come into MY home, and think you know better about how to handle this situation more than ME? Mark my words, Foster, I--"

Almost as if on cue, Tyler's phone starts to ring.

"Sorry to interrupt your monologue, Peter. I gotta take this." She says nonchalantly, raising a pierced eyebrow after reading the caller ID. She gets up from the couch in one graceful, fluid movement, and takes the call, walking into the dark hallway. This grinds his gears even more. Why the hell is she being so secretive?

After an agonizing minute, Tyler returns, but only to pick up her combat boots and slip back into them. "Ameer just called me," She tells him. "He wants me to pick up Kathleen."

Peter almost falls over as he gets up as quickly as he can. "Let me go too."

Tyler smiles sadly at him. "No Peter, you can't. Ameer asked for just me."

Not this again. "You're going to listen to *Ameer*? Are you being serious right now?!"

"When am I not?" She replies nonchalantly as she walks to the front door. In a fit of desperation, he strides in front of her and just as she opens the door, he roughly slams his hand on it, holding it close.

"You're going to let me come, Foster." He says quietly, staring straight into her eyes, face inches away from hers.

Tyler lets out a huff of air. "Wow, okay, I didn't know you had this in you. Calm down." Her eyes trail up to his forearm, which is exposed after rolling his shirt sleeves up. "Plus... I didn't know you worked out."

"Huh?" This catches him off guard, and once he notices that she's noticed, and he's noticed how close their bodies are, he blushes and steps back to roll his sleeve down-

"Sucker." Tyler immediately drops the act and cackles as she opens the door again and slips out.

"Foster, YOU-! GET BACK HERE! ARE YOU KIDDING ME RIGHT NOW?!" He runs out the door and down the path after her, but damn, she's fast. She's already locked the doors when he reaches her pickup truck. She mouths a "sorry" through the window, though she looks like she's about to start laughing again, and starts backing up. Just before she pulls away, she makes a phone gesture with her hand- *call you later*. Damn. Always one step ahead of him.

Unsure of what to do with himself, he walks back into the house and decides, damn it all, he's going to have a drink. He only has beer and cheap wine in the house right now- he'll have to make it work. He chooses the wine for the dramatics, considers pouring it in a glass, but decides against it. Hell, it's not like his daughter is going to walk in on him drinking straight from the bottle, is she?!

Lucky for him, the warmer Peter's chest feels, the faster time seems to pass. He puts an ABBA record on and flops down on the couch, kicking his legs up on the coffee table he tossed his phone onto. He sits there, trying to just focus on the music, and takes a swig every time he feels like he wants to scream. Which is a lot. He almost falls asleep as he waits- only woken up when the phone starts to ring. He groans and looks at the clock: 1:46. Damn. He tries to nudge the phone towards him with his foot- that doesn't work as well as he thought it would and it just falls on the floor. He hisses out a swear as he leans off the couch to grab and answer it.

"...Hello?"

"Hey, Peter. I've got her."

He immediately sits up. "Really? Can you put her on for me, please?"

"I can't do that, sorry. She's a wreck."

Irritation begins to build in his gut. "This again. How long are you gonna DO this for? Huh? How long are you gonna keep me and my daughter separated, huh?"

"Are you drunk?" He can almost *hear* Tyler's eyebrow raising.

"No," He lies.

"Well, that makes two of you. Anyways, I'm picking up some snacks for her at 7/11 right now. We had a long talk in the car, and we've decided she's gonna stay the night in my apartment."

If Peter were a bomb, he just exploded. "ARE YOU SERIOUS?!" He cries. "So help me God, if I were there--"

"Kathleen has not stopped crying since I picked her up, Peter. You think it'll be good for her to bring her back home to you acting like this?"

"Don't treat me like one of your kids. Do *not* do that." He growls. "All day, you've been acting like you know what's best for her, and I'm sick of it--"

"I hate to break it to you Peter, but I think in this situation, I do."

He wants to... oh, he doesn't even know. He's not an aggressive man, but something about Tyler Foster's smug confidence makes him want to smash the wine bottle over his head.

"She's spending the night at my apartment, this is final. I'm going to bring her home first thing in the morning, at 7. Be ready. I'm going to talk to her more about her behavior. I hope tomorrow you'll understand."

"I could have you arrested, Foster," He threatens. "I could have you arrested for kidnapping."

"Oh, you could. But you won't. Because you know I'm right."

He hates to admit it, but she's right. If Kathleen were standing in front of him right now, he'd scream at her until he lost his voice. Is he angry at her? Of course. But above all else, he's just scared. Just scared.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, okay? Please stop drinking, get some sleep. I don't need two hungover McAllisters to deal with. Bye."

She hangs up before he can get a word in, leaving him in stunned silence. For the first time all evening, he realizes he feels relief: despite everything, at least Kathleen is safe now. Even if she's with Tyler Foster, she's safe. He just has to wait until 7. He looks at the clock again and slaps a hand over his face. His body feels like cement all of a sudden. He almost wants to fall asleep on the couch, but he knows what that'll do to his back. He drags his hand down and sighs.

Why does she always have to get the last laugh?

Peter, in short, sleeps like shit. He luckily doesn't get sick from the wine (his liver is as resilient as ever, hooray), but he spends the whole 5 five hours tossing and turning. He had set an alarm for 6 am, wanting to at least try to look presentable when the girls got home, but he ended up sleeping through it by almost 40 minutes. Cursing at himself, he almost falls out of bed as he stumbles to the bathroom to assess the damage. All things considered, he's looked worse. His eyes are bloodshot and rimmed with dark circles, and

his skin looks worse than usual, but other than that, he's okay. He brushes his teeth and combs his hair before leaving, pulling another white dress shirt out of his closet. He had almost forgotten today was Sunday- he'll have to skip Mass, unfortunately. He doesn't think either of them are up for an hour of droning psalms and crying babies right now.

When he leaves his room, he checks his watch: 6:54. Alright, not bad. He hovers outside the kitchen for a moment, before deciding against breakfast. His stomach feels like it's filled with live snakes right now anyways. He ends up leaning against the dining table and examining the newspaper he left played out on it. He checks his watch again. 7:01.

Just as he's about to complain about Tyler being late to no one in particular, he hears a knock on the door. Peter's head starts swimming. She's *here*. Oh my God, she's finally here. He almost rips the door open, remembering at the last minute to stay calm for Kathleen.

And there she is. Her head is bowed, small hands clasped in front of her. Tyler stands behind her, hand on her hip.

Before either of them can say a word, Peter wraps his daughter up in a rib crushing hug, lifting her off the ground. He hears her say something but it's muffled, and then she starts to softly cry, clinging onto his shoulders. He says nothing as he buries his face into her frizzy brown hair. They stand there for what feels like forever, until Kathleen squirms and he lets her go.

She looks as terrible as he feels. Dark circles shadow her bloodshot eyes, her hair is unbrushed and her entire posture is timid and defeated.

Peter's mouth feels dry as he tries to remember what he wanted to say to her. His mind had been swimming with it all night- but now, now that she's before him, his mind has drawn a blank. So instead, he says the first thing that comes to his lips.

"You... you scared the shit out of me."

Kathleen's eyes widen at his language, but he continues.

"Kathleen, I'm sorry this happened. I'm sorry for everything I said. But I need you to understand that..." He's starting to choke up, remembering the fear that paralyzed him mere hours ago. "That I had no idea where you were or what you were doing. You could've gotten hurt"

"I know, Father." She cuts him off, her voice dull. "I know, I know, I know. I'm sorry. But..." She fidgets with her hands. "I only did all that because you... you made me so upset..."

She brings her hand up to her mouth and starts to chew on her thumb. "That was so *embarrassing*, and me and Tobias are just *friends*, I'm serious, he wasn't even my date, but you didn't let me defend myself, and I was so... offended you'd think I'd ever hang out with the kind of guy that you think he is, and-" She's cut off for a moment when Peter gently takes her hand and leads it away from her mouth. "-a-and my friends were all like, 'He can't treat you like that, you're grown, stick it to him', and I felt bad about it, honestly, but I wanted..." She looks down, her voice starting to shake. "I dunno, I think I wanted you to think this was your fault...!" A tear rolls down her cheek and lands on the floor.

He hugs her again, "I'm just glad you're safe," he says softly. When he releases her, he sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Okay, Kathleen. I hate to do this, and I know I have some apologizing to do myself, but... you're grounded."

Kathleen doesn't flinch. "Yeah, I figured as much."

"For a week."

"A WEEK?!" She repeats, voice suddenly shrill. "I can't believe this!" She shakes her head and starts to stomp off to her room.

"I'm sorry Kathleen, but you know as well as I do you can't just run away and get drunk at a party without any consequences!" He pleads with her, following her down the hallway.

"Did you hear a word I said?" she retorts. "If you had just *trusted me*, I wouldn't have done any of that stuff!"

"Kathleen-" He's cut off by her slamming her bedroom door in his face. He sighs; she'll calm down soon. He probably won't actually ground her anyways.

When Peter returns to Tyler, he finds that she's helped herself to a beer from his fridge and is perched on the armrest of the couch. Who does she think she is, really?

"Thank you for bringing her home," He says, rubbing his neck. "And I'm sorry for anything I said last night."

"You're good," she replies casually, taking a sip. "And you know, she did have a point."

"Yeah? What was it?" he asks, striding over to sit next to her.

"You needing to trust her. I know what she did was crazy, but also, I don't know why you're so worried about her so much. She's the perfect daughter. I know lots of parents that would love to swap kids with you."

"It's easy for you to say," he scoffs. "I can't *not* worry. That's what happens when they're your flesh and blood."

"She's not as fragile as you think, Peter," she muses. "Plus, what do you expect you're gonna do when she's an adult? Are you gonna stalk her until you drop dead?" Raised eyebrow. Piercing brown eyes. Oh man.

Tyler then suddenly gets up and nudges Peter over to sit next to him, in the space between him and the armrest.

"Can't you just sit on the other side?" He asks in vain as she slaps his arm to get him to scooch over.

"Yeah, I could," she muses as she takes her place- Peter tries to ignore how his thigh is touching hers. "But anyways. Petey, I want to tell you a story."

He arches his brow. "A story."

"Yeah. About me when I was young. Ready to listen?"

Peter feels like one of her students, which is only mildly humiliating. He nods.

"Alright. Once, when I was a kid, I wanted to go frog hunting. There was a pond on our property, and the only way to access it was going down a pretty steep slope. My dad always told me to stay out of there, because it had poison ivy surrounding it and leeches in the water. But of course, one day I didn't listen, went down with a bucket in my hand, tripped and tumbled down through the plants and fell in. I was a mess." She laughs, half at the memory and half at Peter's expression.

"Lucky for me, he heard the splash and was able to scoop me up. He was pretty pissed while he pulled the leeches off my leg, though."

Peter grimaces. "I think I know where this is going, Tyler."

She grins. "So, you *are* smart. Why don't you finish my story for me, if you don't mind?"

"You never went near that pond again," He answers dejectedly. "But I can't help thinking that if your father were watching you, you wouldn't have fallen in."

"Ugh," Tyler grumbles. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"Apparently not," Peter replies wearily.

"Petey, I want you to answer genuinely. Are you planning on keeping Kathleen here forever? Will you ever let her move out?"

Peter presses his lips together. He tries to avoid thinking about this as much as possible. After a few beats of silence of trying to formulate an answer, he realizes he doesn't have one.

"I don't know."

"Oh man," Tyler sighs, taking a swig of her beer. "Petey.... I think this is a case of empty nest syndrome. Or trying to prevent it, at least."

He recognizes that term, he heard it in one of the sermons he had listened to a few days ago. It's the depression parents get when their children move away. And while that resonated with him at the time, he's not entirely sure that's all it is.

"You might be right. But I..." He swallows and knits his fingers together. He's not sure how honest he wants to be with Tyler Foster right now. "I think it's probably that, and..."

He looks around his living room. Empty, except for Tyler sitting to his side. "I think I don't want to be alone."

Tyler hums understandingly. "I see." She then hesitates- a rare sight. "Do... do you miss her?"

"Who?" He asks, pretending to not know who she's obviously referring to.

"Your wife. Josie."

He smiles sadly. "Every day." He looks down at the floor. "We moved out here 9 years ago because I couldn't bear living in the same house anymore. But now this is just as unfamiliar. I just..."

He looks up again, this time at Kathleen's school portrait on the fireplace mantel. "I'm selfish. Part of me wishes Kathleen wanted to spend the rest of her life with me." He laughs. "But that's crazy. It'd be torture for her. Hell, seems like it is right now."

He unclasps his hands. "Plus... I want her to have a life. I want her to go to school, to get married, to have a career..." He finally looks back at Tyler, who's listening intuitively. "You can never have both things."

Tyler doesn't say anything. She simply nods, and nudges her bottle into his hand. He accepts it and takes a sip before passing it back. "I envy you, Tyler. Young people have so much freedom."

Tyler laughs dryly. "Okay, I'm not *that* young. But, I dunno..." She sighs. "There comes a point when you really start wondering what your purpose is. That's why I went back to school to be a teacher." She shakes the beer bottle and watches the liquid spin inside. "It's a weird crossroads."

Peter nods. "It is. But take advantage of these years." he looks to the side and suppresses a grin. "Forgive me if this sounds odd, but you remind me a lot of her."

"Who. Kathleen?"

"No..." He hears Tyler chuckle. "Josie. She was the same way. She was a free spirit, bounced all around the country, but didn't really know what to do with her life. I met her while she was in college, at a dance club."

"You went to dance clubs?" Tyler blurts out.

"Yes, I did. It was the 80's," he replies, waving his hand. "Point is, we were both kind of wild back then. But we wanted more in our lives." He laughs. "I was really shocked when she wanted a kid."

"That sounds really cute and all, Petey, but I need to stop you for a moment. You said you both were 'kind of crazy'?" Tyler interrupts.

"Yes... What about it?" Peter asks nervously. He really doesn't want to recount the nights that made him arrive hungover to seminary school. (It's no surprise he dropped out.)

Tyler has the slyest grin he's ever seen on her face. "Sounds like you and Kathleen have more in common than we thought..."

He thinks for a moment, and then it hits him.

Ah. That's it. Of course. Josie had told him stories of her youth- how she detested her overbearing mother, how she hung out with the bad kids on purpose. He sighs. "She would've known how to handle this, surely."

"Well. How do you think she would've gone about this?" Tyler muses, sipping her beer again.

"She would've... been honest, with Kathleen..." He starts. "Would've made her feel like... she can talk about things." He sighs. "And would've let her make mistakes, I think."

"Bingo." He can see Tyler smile out of the corner of his eye. "Let her make mistakes." She shifts her body so she's facing him more. "If you don't let her fuck up now, Peter, she's going to fuck up eventually. And God forbid it's when she's on her own and she doesn't have her dad to fall back on." She puts a hand on his shoulder. "I know this is going to be hard. But you need to let her thrive. She has so much potential."

"You're right, as always," He replies sadly. "But still..."

"Hey now, Petey. Why are you so sure you're going to be left all alone?"

Peter laughs hollowly. "I don't really know. I just feel it."

"Well, I can tell you that, you and her both, are surrounded by people who love you. You'll find someone to spend your time with." She gives his shoulder a supportive squeeze. His mouth feels dry.

Tyler then gets up and stretches. "Well... I've exhausted all my wisdom for today." She puts the almost empty bottle on the coffee table. "And, Peter, don't sweat it. She can't stay holed up in her room forever."

"You're right," He says simply, not getting up.

"C'mon," Tyler murmurs, shaking his shoulder. "Just talk to her. It'll be okay."

With that, he begrudgingly gets up and walks Tyler to the door. He decides not to comment on her having a beer right before driving home- she doesn't seem affected by it at all, anyways.

"Bye, Peter. If you need any help, you can call, okay?"

"Yep. Thank you, Tyler, really." Without thinking, he takes her hand in his and shakes it awkwardly. "Your presence is really good for her."

Tyler makes a skeptical face, but accepts the compliment. "So are you, Peter. Don't beat yourself up about it."

She lets go of his hand and smooths down her hair. "Well. I'll be off now. See you later, Petey. And say bye to Kathleen for me."

"Bye," He says, opening the door for her. And that's it. She walks out to her car and drives away.

Peter still has so many questions: what did Kathleen tell her last night? What was she doing in that video she refused to show him? And where did she leave that damn sweater Rachel bought her?! But Tyler won't give him those answers, he knows. He closes the door and leans his forehead against it.

He'll have to ask Kathleen when she's ready, then. He's got a feeling she'll be ready soon- she's never been one to hold a grudge. He straightens up and begins the walk to her room- past the kitchen, down the hall, to the door with a gaudy band poster taped onto it.

He knocks twice.

A Matter of Recognition
Jagdish Jois



She brought him tea, set it on the table and hurriedly left to attend to someone calling her. He strained to hear her name being called – although familiar, he couldn't quite place her.

Of late, he had been forgetting things – where he left his glasses, keys, and even his medicine, that he had always kept in the pillbox right next to his electric toothbrush. He would wander into a room and try to remember why he was there. He attributed this to age. He took delight in saying that while he was no spring chicken, he still went to the gym three times a week. What bothered him – and his daughter too, who was in the car with him – was forgetting to take the right turn towards the street where he had lived for over twenty-five years. To add insult to injury, he had become disoriented and his daughter ended up giving him directions for the drive back home.

His daughter had insisted on and made arrangements at the clinic for a battery of tests.

"Good Morning, Mr. George," greeted Rachel, the physician's assistant, in her sing-song voice.

"Fine, Nurse Ratched, can we get this over quickly?" he replied grumpily, deliberately using the moniker he had given her, ever since he first met her. And then came the questions –

Would he share his date of birth? *Didn't they have it in their damn records!*

What did he do on his birthday? What kind of cake did they bring in? *What do people do on their birthday...celebrate and eat! Chocolate, of course! His daughter corrected him – it was a Red Velvet cake. It looked like chocolate to me.*

What day was it? *Look at the calendar, woman. I am retired and really don't know or care what day it is!*

How many siblings did he have and where did they live? *Were they planning a family reunion! They were all too old to travel anyhow!*

And then there was the last hour with the word games, puzzles, and math problems. He sensed he had done well, especially on the puzzles and math, as he had a good head for numbers, and liked to solve puzzles. The word games were tolerable as he felt they had more to do with remembering word pairs, etc., which really wasn't his forte.

Anyway, he had made it through and Nurse Ratched had smiled approvingly at all his efforts and even gave him a thumbs-up when he left for the blood draw. At the end, the doctor examined him, and mentioned something about a PET scan, if the blood tests warranted it. He felt he had wasted most of the morning there; but he was pleased with himself, as he figured he had done very well on the tests.

So that was that! And now, who was this woman who appeared to hang around the house more often than usual?

Sipping his tea, he looked around and his eyes kept darting to the wall replete with photos, which the grandchildren had nicknamed the "Facewall", after some computer thing or the other.

The Facewall was a patchwork of photos – from different eras, of different people, and happenings – hung in no particular order or arrangement. Pictures were placed wherever there seem to be an open spot, which irritated him, as there was no rhyme or reason to the order. He was, by nature, a very disciplined and structured man. He had not

always been so, the structure instilled in his induction to the Marines had remained long after his lengthy tenure with them. The bootcamp memories seemed seared into his mind.

"You call this making a bed, dumbshit!" yelled the drill instructor, as he yanked the sheet and the blanket and threw them onto the floor. "Make it again...mama never taught you, boy!"

"Sir, yes, sir!" he replied and proceeded to make the bed again, while he muttered "asshole" under his breath.

Lightning fast, the drill instructor was in his face, and yelled, "You said something, boy! Let me see if you have the guts to repeat it!"

He was just about to respond, when someone across the hall sniggered, and the drill instructor's attention and fury was drawn to it. He recalled having to make the bed, at least, five times before it was deemed acceptable, yet he still was given additional fire watch for the rest of the week, perhaps for his insolence. From then on, anything he did, cleaning his weapon, shining his shoes, belt, and even the organization of his footlocker, he double, and triple checked to ensure they were done just right. It even surprised his mother, when he came home the first time, as by the following day, he had everything in his room neatly organized.

As time went by, he considered the randomness of the Facewall akin to a puzzle to be solved. Who they were. Why they were there. Upon figuring it out, just like the puzzles he had completed in the clinic, it gave him immense pleasure. Now, the Facewall was his refuge in the winter of his life, providing warmth only memories can bring; he had to unearth those, like a dream that must be consciously remembered on waking up, or otherwise fade away in the endless march of life.

He put on his glasses and shuffled over to the Facewall. He was pleased to see some of the photos brightly lit, catching the light of the late afternoon sun filtering through the tall windows on the left. Every visit to the Facewall seemed distinct depending on the time of day, as the angle of light at that time would highlight different photos.

The large photo of his daughter in her wedding dress caught his eye, and he smiled fondly. He reminisced about the day, especially the maudlin toast he gave his daughter -

Martha smiled as they walked back to their room, "Was it you or the wine? Didn't know you had the mushy stuff in you, George!" She said gaily.

"Well," he replied, "our only daughter getting married. Happy and sad at the same time. You know I don't care for him!"

"He's a sensitive man. Will take good care of our little Joannie," Martha answered comfortingly. Swiftly changing the subject, she continued, "You dance pretty well, I must say, you have had a good teacher." And she winked.

"Good and pretty, my love," he responded playfully, putting his arm around her waist, and taking a dance step, similar to how she had patiently practiced with him over the past few months, so he could get it just right on that special day.

He peered at his son-in-law's likeness closely, and as much as he tried, he could not call up his name. Strangely enough, he could visualize the face, the unrestrained laugh, the opinionated tone, but not the name. And, he distinctly recalled the first time they met...

"You were in the army," his son-in-law asked, while looking at the shadow box with all his ribbons, service medals, and unit identifiers.

"No, the Marines," he replied, irked.

"Is there a difference? You know war is just plain wrong, people killing people, just plain wrong!" continued his son-in-law in, what seemed to George, a condescending tone.

"Yes, I have seen war; it's terrible. I lost friends, and some got badly hurt, some lost their arms and legs. I don't like it any more than the next guy! But, do you think there would be a South Korea today if we didn't go and defend the people against the commies!", he said in quiet indignation.

Before his son-in-law could respond, his daughter yelled that dinner was ready. He decided that he didn't care for his daughter's choice and was never going to discuss the war again with him. He just didn't get it! Nobody likes war, but sometimes you have to fight for what's right.

He stared at the young man's face some more, as though the gaze would somehow magically conjure his name from the depths of his mind. He shook his head in annoyance, and thought to himself - *dear God, I don't want the tension from the past to resurface* - he had opposed the marriage, but later accepted and moved on. She was his daughter for sure, stubborn and headstrong as he was - her selection of college, boyfriends, and now husband. He had hoped secretly, that she would be more like her mother, while soft spoken and diplomatic, was firm and level-headed enough to get her way without any fuss, when she chose to. He just hoped that she would mellow out like he had over the years. He made a mental note to make sure he would work on knowing the name before they came over the weekend to pick up their son.

Adjacent to his daughter's photo was one of Graham, his grandson's Boy Scout photo, who closely resembled his son-in-law. The picture was of himself and Graham on top of a ridge. He had been pleased to accompany the boy, for it was a rare treat to step-in and assist in these ventures. He had to admit, begrudgingly, his son-in-law did spend a lot of time with Graham. He recalled the hike as being tough and he was proud he made it to the top with the rest of the adult volunteers, especially since he was the only grandparent, and hadn't been the last one up either. He remembered camping the prior night, the younger scouts complaining about the toilet in the woods, the campfire where he regaled them with stories from his posting in Korea, omitting all of the gory stuff, of course. *One didn't talk about the war to the children.* While he could recall the landscape, for the life of him he was at a loss as to the name of the national park (or was it a state park?) and had no recollection of the drive they took to get there. He stared intently at the picture to see if there was a hint in it to jog his memory.

His heart swelled with pride as he eyed his son's Marine picture from overseas, in his desert camouflage uniform. Ryan had followed him into the Marines and was with one of the first units posted to the Middle East as part of Operation Desert Storm. He recalled sitting in front of the television witnessing the war; *live for God's sake!* He could never understand how such a critical confrontation as war could be broadcast on live television and at prime time nonetheless, as though it was some kind of entertainment! *What next? Popcorn and dim the lights, please!* He had known war, and it was terrible. These sights, sounds and smell were etched into his memory never seeming to disappear ...

To this day, he could hear the distinctive whine of the Katyusha rockets and remember Murphy's plaintive cries as they loaded him on to the evacuation chopper, minus his legs from the rocket attack, to the nearest field hospital. The acrid smell of charred

flesh with its dark, congealed blood coupled with the noisy chopper assaulting all the senses is not something you forget easily, much as he might like to.

He remembered having to explain to Davey's wife when he came stateside of how Davey had died in his arms. He could still see her tearful face bringing tears to his own, and feel her cold hands as he held it, and the tight hug she gave him, as her young son looked on, not understanding what was going on.

He could still see the tank in flames from a direct hit, and they couldn't do a damn thing for the trapped crew inside. He had closed his eyes and tried to block his ears with his hands but the screams and smell of gasoline and burning bodies still haunted him to this day.

He always compared this new war to his own war, and had to explain to people, that there actually had been one in Korea, and there was plenty of casualties - his own friends dead or maimed - and he had been lucky to come back all in one piece. It had been nicknamed "The Forgotten War"! How ironic that he could not shake those memories! He was damned if he was ever going to share these with anyone, least of all Martha, who had waited patiently but in fear, looking forward to letters from him every week.

He shook his head and turned to the picture next to it and smiled wearily - Ryan in his high school varsity baseball uniform - and squinted to see if he could see the name of the high school. He could not, and, no, it just wouldn't come to mind. However, he could still close his eye and recollect the game in which Ryan had hurt his shoulder, and just like that, crushed his son's dreams of playing college baseball. This brought to his mind the conversation from Ryan's graduation...

"What's next, son?" he enquired.

"Joined the Marines, just like you did. Off to boot camp at the end of summer," Ryan responded.

"What about college? Mom wants you to, you know," he sighed. "Don't get me wrong. I am proud you are trying for the Marines. Shouldn't we talk about it? Especially with mom?"

He and Martha had one of their few major fights over this.

"You encouraged him to join the Marines," she accused him.

He responded weakly, The Marines will do him a world of good and he could go to college after on the GI bill. And there are no wars going on, anyway."

She teared up and said, "You never know. I was worried for you back then, and now I really didn't want to worry about Ryan." He had always seen her calm and composed, and that day, her deep love for him and their son shone through in the outpouring of all her feelings and concerns about his absence when he was in Korea. And, the same worry for Ryan was about to begin.

When Ryan had been deployed to the Middle East, she had not reminded him or taken a I-told-you-so attitude, but instead had been supportive like she always was. But he could see the anxiety in her, and the relief in her face every time Ryan managed to call home. She counted the days to the completion of his deployment and looked forward to meeting him and his fiancée at Christmas. He thought what a difference there was between his son and son-in-law; he shook his head disapprovingly; his daughter had always been headstrong.

He took a step to the left, directly across an old faded picture of two young Marines, apparently enjoying some R&R in Tokyo. Recognizing himself and Freddie, he felt proud and smiled. What a difference the five days in Japan had made! The clubs, even for the non-coms and enlisted men, were a sight for sore eyes, a haven for weary bodies, and calmness for the mind; R&R meant they could, at least, sleep peacefully in dry warmth, without the sound of mortars in the background. The Japanese beer had been excellent, although initially he was very circumspect about it, and the music was pretty good too, although it seemed a little strange - Japanese women belting out American pop tunes, and, of course, the local women, less said the better! He didn't want to cause any trouble for himself!

Freddie, a Marine from Alabama was a buddy from his platoon, and they became close friends, after Freddie saved his life, or at the very least, his limbs. He remembered the day vividly - it had gone well, as his platoon, part of the 3rd Battalion, had landed on Green Beach during the Battle for Incheon. They had strict orders to follow behind the Pershings with their bulldozer blades that were supposed to clear mines and anti-tank devices in its and their path. It was a mystery, then and now, how this device evaded the blades and the tank tracks, and he almost stepped on it, if not for Freddie's swift reaction - grabbing him by the arm and pulling him away.

Looking at the picture, he wished he had kept in touch with Freddie, difficult as it was in those days, even after the Truman declaration for military integration. *Had Freddie married?* He had hinted that he had a girl waiting back home. Freddie played the guitar and could sing the rhythm and blues music - not his type - but the girls sure liked it. *Did he have children? How had they done in life? Was Freddie having the same issues remembering things?*

He looked left and saw that he had reached the edge of the door frame. How apt, he thought - the door that led to the downstairs cellar, the dark and dingy place, where all unused things were consigned to, in the hope they may someday prove useful. He could not remember ever retrieving anything from there! Were his memories headed there too? To lay in the dark recesses of his mind, never to surface and provide its usefulness and warmth, and with it, small pleasures of life.

He shifted his gaze to a small, sepia picture lower down, seemingly on its own, as though arrested in time and place. He had to bend, a chore at his age, and lifted the frame and angled so the light from the window would not reflect on the dusty glass. This was a picture of a young man in Marine dress blues, with the cap under one arm, and his other arm around the waist of a pretty, young woman in a wedding dress. As he squinted and focused on the faces, he was startled by a voice, "Forgot your cookies with the tea, dear. Hope it is not too late!"

He turned around, and in that instant, along with recognition came a flush of shame. And having solved the puzzle give him no joy, but rather the realization that old age was cruel, toying with his memories like a callous magician - now you see it, now you don't!

He opened his mouth to say something, but she was gone, to attend to the pleas of their grandson coming from the kitchen.

He so desperately didn't want to forget things that mattered to him, and he vowed to fight this war - only this time the weapon would be his mind, even if it didn't always cooperate.

He decided then and there, that the picture did not belong on the Facewall. He took the frame off the wall, took it to his writing desk, gently pried open the clasps, undid the mounting board, took the picture out, folded it neatly and put it in his left shirt pocket.

§

As they sat across from him, the doctor leaned forward and gently asked, "George, last time you came in, you were a little unsure of who brought you in. Can you tell me who is by your side?" George turned to her, smiled knowingly, grasped her bony hand tightly in one hand, and said, "Of course! Martha, my wife of forty years," as he patted the left side of his chest with the other.

Martha turned to him, smiled wistfully, put her left hand over his, and said softly, "Yes, dear."

As they left the doctor's office and made towards the exit, Martha turned to him, and said, "George, do you want to wait here or by the car? I just need to stop off at the ladies' room for a sec."

He replied, "I will wait here," not wanting to be seen wandering in the parking lot looking for the car.

"You sure you will be ok, dear?" She looked at him, unsure.

He mumbled, "Don't worry, I will be ok."

As he stood and stared out the window at the people coming in and going out, he felt a woman's hand clasp his elbow, and say, "Let's go, George, we don't want to be late for dinner." And as she gently guided him towards the parking lot, he looked at her, and thought - *who was this woman and where was she taking him?*

Ya Dig

Randy Martinez



This job is something that I always viewed as temporary. It's just a stepping stone onto something greater, a brief chapter in my life that will become a story to tell my peers and family once I graduated from college and found my career. Six years running and I'm still here. Don't get me wrong, it isn't a bad gig. I count my random blessings each day I clock in and out. I'm a little delayed in graduation, but plenty of my peers have switched fields of studies. Some as many as ten times over! Or maybe eight, I'm not sure, but it's a lot more than me, that's for sure. I keep thinking about how doctors or lawyers do it. Eight years of study and then some more in residency or something like that. Success takes time, right? You can't just rush it in four years and be all hoity toity about it. That's not how it works.

There are exceptions of course, like that guy from my high school that I hate so much. The guy who got a full ride to MIT, the guy who one upped me on the track field, and in jazz band, and on the basketball court, and the guy who became prom king. Fuck that guy. Fuck him and his perfect life, and volunteer work on the weekends, and fundraising events, and charity drives. Fuck the guy who offered me a ride home when it was raining. Fuck him and his generous personality, and genuine desire to do good in life. What a fake piece of shit, am I right?

I think of my many regrets and failures, but quickly refocus onto the task at hand. A stack of chairs beckons to me to be unstacked and neatly arranged into a row, just like the row before it, and the row before that. This "grand ballroom" is to be turned into a sort of theatre set-up. Rows upon rows of chairs facing one speaker, one stage, one focal point. Whenever you or a colleague gather for a work function at some hotel located thirty miles away from your place of work, you arrive to a prearranged set of chairs and tables. Did you ever wonder who set up those chairs and tables? Me, and my team of coworkers. A hodgepodge of people thrown together to form a team, a crew, a something.

The team consists of mostly younger people. Kids in their early to mid-twenties, sprinkled in with some late bloomers in their thirties. No one really stays too long. It's a passing point in someone's life. A footnote in your autobiography.

"Hey, Ben!" Kelly's voice snaps out of the mundane. "I know this is last minute, but is there any chance you can switch shifts with me this Saturday? I close and you open."

Her perfume hits my nose before I see her. She has a skip in her step and speaks at a very fast pace. It is like she ingests a couple pounds of sugar every morning. Kelly is a sweet girl. She baked me a cake for my birthday last year, which was nice. She's young, just starting out, and although she can be dull at times, I can tell that she isn't always going to be that way. There are times that she surprises me, like, she'll just randomly know obscure facts. I'll be studying on my break and she'll walk by and explain the Fibonacci sequence to me, she's a theater major!

At first, I'm going to agree, but my intuition kicks in and I buy some time for an answer. "You know, Kelly, that sounds okay, but let me check the schedule first, and get back to you."

"But I just told you what shifts we're working." She snaps.

Damn, what is the deal with this girl? "Uh yeah I know, I meant let me check my personal schedule-"

"Look Ben, let's be real, you're not doing anything Saturday night. I know this, you know this. I'm not trying to be rude, but I absolutely cannot work with you-know-who on a Saturday night, ya dig?"

Her use of the phrase "ya dig" holds weight, and I can sympathize with her plight. I know exactly what she is doing by switching shifts with me, and I take a moment to weigh my own options, but it's difficult to do so on the spot. Which is exactly why I want some

time to assess the pros and cons of this situation, but Kelly insists on going the nuclear option and is straightforward with her intentions. I definitely underestimate her, that's for sure. The only option for this is to fight fire with fire, brutal honesty with brutal honesty.

"I understand Kelly, but let's be really real here. No one likes dealing with an archaic, racist coworker, who has no understanding of social norms, but I'd argue that he is equally terrible to me as he is to you."

"Are you fucking kidding me? He keeps referring to me as 'the Chinese girl'."

"But you're Vietnamese."

"Exactly Ben."

"Okay, I get that, but he still keeps yapping my ear off about how he was once a 'team leader' at some old auto plant, and how we 'youngins' can't appreciate the value of hard work."

"Ben, are you going to seriously argue that point? It isn't that bad compared to not only the racism but also the sexism. He keeps insisting that I do nothing physical because 'it's just not okay for a woman to lift something' when a man is around."

She has valid points, and deep down, I know that any woman of any other ethnicity than Caucasian will experience uncomfortable situations and comments from this guy. But before I can make any response, or even think of a response, I hear a familiar voice.

"Yo Benny boy! What's happening my brother!? I didn't think you'd be working today!"

It is Steve. Fucking Steve Zimmerman. I can see Kelly's reaction. The desperation. The look of an animal seeking an escape from a predator.

"Please Ben, think on it, and text me later if it's okay."

She says this quickly before ducking out into the corridor to another part of the building. Steve is walking over quickly, and there is no escape for me. In my mind I can see the work schedule. It isn't supposed to be this way, but someone must have switched with Steve. This must have been some divine punishment for me. There is this sort of unusual attraction Steve has for me. I have no idea what it could be, maybe I resemble one of his kids, or grandkids. I shudder at this thought, but more so at the thought that this man reproduced. There have been moments where I imagine what it's like to be the child of a man so... so... something. I can't even describe it.

"Hey Steve," I reply, hoping that he'll leave it at that and ask only work-related questions.

He walks with a slight limp, the result of a work accident on the auto plant many years ago. His work shirt is dirty and untucked. It looks like he was working on his motorcycle and got oil on it. He slicks back his thinning hair with a comb he keeps in his pocket, and smirks in the direction of Kelly.

"What's up with the Chinese girl? She ran outta here like it was World War II."

Every fiber of my being wants to correct him. I want to tell him everything that is wrong with what he just said, but I know it's futile. There was a guy who did just that. He did a whole speech on everything that Steve had wrong, and was very passionate on the subject of being socially aware and sensitive to everyone around him. But Steve just blinked several times before making another racist, and sexist comment.

"You know Steve, I am more and more impressed at your ability to up the ante on racism and sexism each and every day."

I expect more of a reaction from him, but all I get is a sleezy smile. "Come on dawg, you know I'm just playing, it ain't no thing, ya dig? Now what's going on today? I just wanna get shit done early so we can just chill. Ya dig?"

I'm almost frozen in pure shock. This guy just doesn't understand. "Uh, sure, alright Steve we have got some seminar being done today. It's only one mic, with one projector. They're bringing a laptop, a Mac, so we need an adapter to make it work with our projector."

"Oh yeah! I used to do the PowerPoint back at the auto plant! Back when I was team leader. I managed over a hundred people on the line, and every few weeks we would have to do these safety and efficiency meetings. I remember plugging in my laptop. This will be hella easy."

"Okay Steve, but it's a Mac, and we won't know what version it is until they arrive so it can be any number of adapters, *ya dig?*" I say with a great deal of sarcasm, but it goes over his head like everything before.

"Dawg, it can't be that complicated, it's a goddamned computer, they're all 'da same ya feel me? Now let's get this shit done so we can kick it, ya dig?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose, and do my best to withhold the anger building within me. "Steve, everything is dug, I'm just waiting for the client to arrive so that I can provide the correct adapter for their laptop to connect to our projector. Why don't you go around and make sure that there isn't anything we missed?"

Steve shrugs and says nothing, which is extremely out of character for him. I watch him shuffle off and scan the floor for trash, or chairs that are out of line. A part of me feels some guilt. He wasn't always useless. Even calling him useless feels really wrong. At some point he managed an assembly line that manufactured cars for a previous generation. Watching him now, picking up trash, setting up chairs, making tables straight, just feels wrong.

"Hey, Steve!" I shout across the room. "I've got something for you to do that I don't think I can do!"

I remember a minor issue that needs attention, but that I can't solve on my own. Normally I'd call the maintenance crew to handle it, but I thought I'd throw Steve a bone. That, and maintenance was gone for the weekend.

"Come on dawg, you know I can't handle that computer stuff, just handle it yourself alright?" He replies

"No! That's not it at all. Come on Steve I could really use you on this. I don't know how machines work, and the new guy filled our pressure washer with gasoline instead of diesel. It won't start up now. We've got to blast that gum off the pool area before Monday."

"You're shitting me, right? Who does something like that?" Steve is immediately hooked. I can see the excitement in his eyes. "I have to look at it, but I'm sure you can drain the gasoline from the tank, and fill it with diesel, no problem. It's like doin' an oil change. Shit, you kids these days don't appreciate what goes into these machines."

"We sure don't bud, now hop to it!"

Steve leaves with enthusiasm, and as he walks out of the grand ballroom, I can see something in his eyes. Anyone can identify joy, or happiness, but I see something way different. It's something that I see within myself every night staring into the mirror before bed. A kind of hope. The kind that gives you purpose. Something that tells you that everything you're doing is not in vain.

Isn't that what we all want after all? Just to feel some sort of purpose in this uncertain world? My thoughts drift and I find myself sitting still. A rare moment in my life. I look down at the wires connecting the sound system together. Each one of them serves a purpose in this event. I think of my purpose. I think of all the time I wasted, and of all my friends who graduated. I see it on social media, I see all of the posts of them with their careers, and their new families. I suddenly feel sad, I feel left behind. Kelly is right, I don't have plans Saturday night. I don't have plans because all of my friends have moved on with their lives. Then I feel angry at myself. This is my fault; I did this to myself.

"FUCK!" I yell out loud. The sound is quickly suppressed by the sound dampening panels on the walls above. It frustrates me deeply, to have my soul silenced by something out of my control.

My work is done here. I walk out of the building into the plaza where guests wander about. A small part of me wants to scream out to everyone. Nothing in particular, I just want to feel something different. Then, I see Steve, draining the gasoline from the tank into a metal pan.

I'm surprised. I didn't think he'd go this far into the project I gave him. I walk over to him, but before I could praise him on his initiative, he cuts me off.

"This tube here, can be removed to drain everything inside the fuel tank. It's designed this way for this exact reason. Hell, you can fill a tank with water and fuck everything up, which is why you gotta have a plan to drain the tank, ya dig?" He says this without even looking at me. I see he's wearing glasses, which is something I didn't know he needed to see. Has he been hiding this from me?

Steve may not know right here and now, but he is teaching me something new. The moment could have been perfect, but he decides to spit up a disgusting blob of chewing tobacco.

"Fuck, Steve, that's disgusting!" I do my best to look away. "You really should only be chewing that garbage on your break and away from the facility."

"Chill, youngin', it's better than smoking right?" He says this as he spits out another glob of chewing tobacco. "Besides, it ain't bothering nobody, right?"

Again, I want to correct everything he says, but know that it is no use. I focus instead on the positive of our interaction. "Just don't let the boss see you spitting that garbage out in front of guests alright? And I really appreciate you doing what you did here, Steve. Good work my man."

Steve pauses very briefly, as if to conceal his excitement. "Yah, dog. When it comes to this, I've got you."

"I'll leave you to it, yah?"

He nods, and says nothing which is a shock. I don't want to push my luck, but suddenly I understand something new about Steve. Maybe it is his own pride that keeps him from engaging in tasks that are beyond his scope. I can relate to him in this respect. I wouldn't want to attempt a task that is beyond my knowledge unless I have guidance, but even then, I'd be hesitant.

Right then I feel the nervousness of being a preteen. Those moments when you face problems that will define your future. Those times in life when you develop into the adult you are now. They're defining moments that aren't always pleasant, but influence you deeply.

In any case, no one likes feeling dumb. No one likes feeling left out, and I can tell that Steve is the same way. Maybe his age made me blind to that. It's like when I first realized that my parents weren't super human. I was able to see them as human beings, flaws and all. I still love them though, and I still respect them

Steve deserves that as a human being. This kind of realization makes me feel shitty. It's rare nowadays. No one really feels shitty about anything they say or do. I remember back in the day when my dad would scold me for teasing others openly.

"Benny!" He would say in a tone that made him serious. "You know better that to say things like that!"

"What!?" I'd reply in outrage. "It's true isn't it?"

I can still feel my dad's hands firmly on my shoulders as he knelt down to level with me. He'd look me in the eyes and say with a serious tone, "You never know what someone has been through until you have experienced it for yourself. Do you understand?"

I remember nodding but not really understanding. I made some rude comment about a homeless man, but didn't comprehend the circumstances that led him there. I didn't know the complexities of homelessness, or why it was rude to point out how smelly he was.

While I learned that it was wrong to say things like that aloud, I never really learned how to be empathetic to their emotions. Steve is a rare example of that. I am able to put myself into his shoes and see through his scope. At least for that moment.

Kelly catches my eye, and I can see that she is clocked out. I jogged up to her to catch her attention before she is out of sight. "Kelly! Do you have a sec?" Kelly stops and faces me with some apprehension. "I hope you have come to your senses and are willing to trade shifts with me. Steve has been *disgusting* all week. I can't endure another shift with him."

"Oh, well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Look, I know he's not the greatest at conversation, or being up to date on social norms, but I can honestly say I saw a different side of him today."

"Okay, so I see you've decided that you can't switch with me then?"

"No, no, no! That's not what I'm saying! I'm saying that he's probably just misunderstood. I mean he's definitely no saint, but he's not like a psychopath. He's just from a different time you know?"

Kelly crosses her arms and huffs, "Yeah, and my grandparents think that all white people are devils. Being from a different time doesn't excuse racism, sexism, and plain bigotry Ben."

"Whoa, I get that, but deep down I think that he's not like that. Maybe he's just reflecting the environment he grew up in, which makes sense since he now exists in an environment that doesn't need him. Do you know what I mean? Am I making any sense?"

She smirks at me and replies, "Nah I don't dig, dawg. So, are you going to switch shifts with me or not? I find this whole conversation defending Steve to be a bit disturbing, especially from you Ben. I thought you hated him the most."

"Hey I don't hate that easily, and I am not defending what he's said in the past. I am willing to switch with you, I just wanted to encourage you to consider that Steve isn't a total douche, and that there is something deeper to him."

"Okay I'm confused by this behavior, and I feel like you're doing what my ex-boyfriend did when he tried to explain why sleeping with my sister was okay. So, let's just be clear, are you switching with me or not?"

I feel the sigh escape my body. I want to give Steve a chance, a second, a third, or maybe it's his fourth chance? It doesn't matter. I just want to paint him in a different light. The same light I saw earlier when he was eager to take on a project that involves something he knows about. "Yeah, Kelly, I'll trade shifts with you, but it's conditional."

The brief joy in her face turns serious. "Ben, I'm not going to sleep with you for this."

"WHAT! NO! I didn't ask for that!" I can't believe she'd even suggest something like that.

She looks confused and says, "Uh, okay, well I'm not doing anything else sexual either. Maybe a handy but nothing else!"

"Kelly! Stop that, I'm not suggesting anything of the sort!"

"Fuck, Ben, then what do you want?"

I'm shocked at her responses and wonder if she had made such awful concessions before. "Kelly, all I want is for you to try and relate to Steve in some way. I'm sure you have some commonalities with your grandparents, try and find common ground with Steve. Maybe we can change how he relates to the world, you know?"

Kelly narrows her eyes at me in suspicion. "You know Ben, you're one weird motherfucker. But if you're willing to switch shifts with me, then I don't really care, so, sure, whatever man. I'll try and relate to the old man, I guess."

I sigh heavily. "Thanks, just fill out the papers and I'll sign them. Oh, and, do you happen to know anything about the Markov system? I'm struggling with it in math class right now."

"You're talking about how matrices are combined with probability to create a system that allows you to predict future values, right?"

"Yeah! Exactly! I am totally lost in that, so do you think you can look over my work before I turn it in?"

Kelly taps my cheek lightly with one hand and says, "Oh, Ben, you've already got your favor for today." She skips away and says, "Byyyyyyeeee!"

Kelly is certainly not the sweet innocent girl I thought she was. On my way out I see Steve from the corner of my eye. He is chewing furiously with a frown on his face. I am under the impression that he is under some kind of stress, and not because of the chewing tobacco. He always chews that stuff. I've caught him chewing while on the job multiple times, if he had no cup, he'd just spit it on the ground and kick it into the carpet like nothing happened. It was just another reason that I liked to keep my distance from him. The smell has a way of travelling from his mouth to your nose, and his nature is to stand very close to you for some reason. So close that you can see that his front tooth is dead and rotting from the inside out.

He spots me walking through the parking lot, and gives me a wave. His frown immediately vanishes, and his smile is genuine. So, I wave back and smile. "Have a good night Steve!" I holler.

"You too Benny boy! Don't keep the ladies up too late now! And keep your jimmy wrapped! You don't want to catch nothin', it ain't worth it ya dig?"

I feel a bit of blood rush to my face. I'm not exactly a saint, but even so I never speak the way Steve does. So open about everything. I duck away and rush on home to finish my term paper for class the next day. That night I don't sleep, not because of school, or the typical stresses that arise from such an endeavor, but from thinking about my interaction with Steve. My previous feelings about him were that he was some crude, vulgar, and out of touch old man. But now I'm not sure what to think.

I wonder what I would be like in fifty or so years. Would I be just as out of touch? Would I feel like I can't do anything useful? I know that having an education will help, but

there are no guarantees in this world. I could become obsolete in the blink of an eye. How would I want to be treated if that happens? Certainly not like Steve. But then again, I'm not a racist misogynist.

I struggle to sleep. I lay there, looking up and remember that this is how I reacted when I was taking philosophy classes and experienced an existential crisis. It is a deep thought exercise and a complicated generational issue.

The next day I clock in after class, and see a pile of work to be done on the office desk. Just another day of stacking, unstacking, folding, and unfolding chairs and tables. My boss walks into the office just as I was looking over the day's work and says without looking at me, "Just a head's up, Steve's last day is today, so you're going to be a little short on Saturday's shift."

"You're kidding right?" I ask.

"I am not kidding Ben. He's screwed us in terms of scheduling, but other than that it's not a big loss. I was thinking of letting him go anyways so it sort of works out that way."

Mike, our boss, is a heavy middle-aged man, who is never in a good mood. He always seems to have an angry face, even when he is delivering good news. Mike took a seat at his desk, the chair squeaked under his weight. He pulls up a newspaper in one hand and a coffee mug in the other.

"Uh alright, well I'll just be getting to work on this."

Mike hardly reacts. He gives me a grumbled response as confirmation that he heard me, and continues on reading the sports section.

I hurry away to process the information in private. I slide into the audio-visual equipment room in hopes of finding some quiet and peace.

Instead I encounter Steve. He is holding a box of tools with his name spray painted on the side of it. The box looks old and worn. No doubt from years of working on automobiles and the like. He smiles at me and spits into a cup he is holding in his other hand. He holds up the cup and jiggles it a bit, to make the point that he remembered to use a cup.

"What's up Benny boy? You look all shook or something. Didn't get any tang last night?" He sets down his tool box and then sits back atop an amplifier.

"I'm good Steve, just a late night of school work you know? I heard you're leaving the team?" I took a seat across from him on a speaker. That's when I notice the wall. Steve has installed a series of sturdy pegs that holds all of the cables, neatly coiled, organized, and clean. "Whoa, Steve this is incredible. When did you do all of this?"

"You like that, huh?" He has a cocky grin across his face, as he spits into his cup again. "It's really not a thing, ya dig? Just gotta measure twice, thrice, and whatever comes after that, then find the studs on the other side, and use butterfly anchors in between."

"Fuck man, that's awesome, thanks for doing that, and on your last day too. I figured you'd be kicking back or something."

"Nah Benny boy, I remember you complaining about these pegs my first day, so I figure why not do something about it. I also figure that the boss wouldn't okay it, so I just did it. Sometimes you just gotta cut the bullshit and just do it, ya dig?"

"Yeah, no shit. So, where are you going Steve? Why are you leaving?"

Steve has the same frown on his face as yesterday. He spits into his cup and chews harder. "It's like this, dawg. I'm too old to be making what I'm making. Soon I ain't gonna be able to do what I can do right now." I can see a ping of regret flash on his face. The same kind of ping I see in the mirror at night. "I fucked up a long time ago. When the auto plant closed, they gave me a nice pay out, but instead of being smart with it, I blew it all on stupid shit. I was young, sure, but also a goddamned fool. Not like you though Benny boy." Suddenly there is a smile on his face again. "You in school, and soon you'll be set, dawg."

I laughed, partly from embarrassment, but more so because I don't see it the way he does. "I'm not all that Steve. Seriously, most of my peers are already in careers, and making moves in life. I've made some mistakes too."

Steve sits up straight and says, "fuck that, dog." Flecks of chewing tobacco spit fly and fall short of me. "You still in it, though. I gave up on trying, but you, you keep going Benny boy. Fuck everyone else, just keep doing you, ya dig? The rest of the world can suck it."

I've heard this speech before, from people that are close to me, but somehow hearing it from Steve, it just makes sense. "Thanks, dawg. I appreciate that."

"Shiiiiit, at least you listen. Most your generation just look at me like I'm crazy. Even my damn grandkids!"

"You are crazy, Steve. I swear I am never going to forget you for the rest of my living years." As I say this, he pulls out a flask of something and takes a swig, and offers it to me. My more prudent side wants to protest, but this is one of those times in life where it doesn't matter. "Sure, why the fuck not?" I take a gulp and nearly die. Steve busts a gut with laughter as I try to keep the toxic liquid down. "Some college boy you are. Don't ya'll drink like every night?"

"No! Not when you're trying to graduate. That's for freshmen and Greek organizations. Hey where you going after this job? You never told me."

"Oh, it's great. I'm doing this construction gig. Get this, I'll be the guy on the street with flags and shit. Forty an hour and it's a union gig. Sweet deal for a guy like me."

"Well, I'm happy for you." I stand up, ready to start work. "You can chill, I'll handle the rest of the daily stuff."

"Ey, before you go. I gotta thank you man. Everyone here seems to hate on me. I never got that sort of vibe from you dog, so thanks."

I sigh, and decide to take a moment to be real with Steve. "Times have changed Steve. It's not like back in the day where you can spout off everything that pops in your mind you know, and to be real, I think you say outrageous things to get attention or a laugh. Trust me, you don't need that for people to see you. I see you right here and now, and you didn't even have to say one racist or sexist thing. Be you, ya dig?"

"I dig it, dawg. Thanks, and good luck with life."

I am at the door when I look back at him and say, "Hey, Steve, did you say that you'll be making \$40 an hour?"

"Yeah dawg, it's da shit."

"Fuck you, Steve."

Verissimus
Stephen Melville



The piano wasn't right. Everything else about the lobby of the hotel was grand except for the music, Liam thought. He didn't know what bothered him more, the fact that he didn't know if the piece was Beethoven or maybe it was the piano player himself. After thinking about it, he decided it was something to do with the piano player. He had been there a few days already, but he hadn't paid too much attention to the lobby.

Liam was there for his eighteenth birthday which had already passed, but was to be celebrated on this weekend with his parents. Liam didn't go on very many vacations with his parents, but when they did, they were usually very long and very expensive. Most of the money for this vacation went into the hotel suite. Liam thought this was backwards; vacations were about the experience, so most of the money should be spent outside the hotel. The dinner they had had was from a very fancy restaurant which served very small portions, but charged extremely high prices. To him, it was putting in without getting out.

Liam didn't have much to complain about, this vacation was much more relaxing than any other in recent memory. For one, he wasn't as stressed out as he might have been. He was, after all, very artsy and involved himself with activities and clubs in school that interested him such as the art club, the filmmaker club and, most notably, the theatre club. He was the president of the club and attended the drama class as well. He had always, in some capacity, been involved with the school plays but he had written, codirected, and even starred in the last three plays. He had finished writing his fourth play. All he had to do was to wait for it to be approved.

The play was titled *Verrisimus*; it was about the last good Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Known for his intelligence and philosophy in stoicism, Liam thought it was good enough to be compared to Shakespeare; it would be his crowning achievement if he could pull it off. He was very respected by all the students at his high school, and had already accepted a scholarship to UCLA, but this would in his mind be his best work. As a student written play, it was proofread by dozens of people not just within the school system but the community as a whole, even the mayor. The reception from those who had already read it was mixed. On one hand, there was no denying the genius of young Liam's work, but many questioned if it was appropriate for a high school environment. It seemed it would cost a fair amount with the costumes, special effects, backdrops etc. Luckily, Liam could scale those things back down with ease. Especially with the principal, Ms. Little being a huge fan of Liam's since he transferred schools. She always was very proactive in school events, especially artistic ones, and was the first one to recommend that Liam be able to have full reign on his own plays. It seemed as though she was always taking care of him, Liam often had trouble during school, he slept in class, was tardy regularly, and had an attitude problem with some of the teachers,(the rest of the high school kids worshipped him for his rebellious attitude) but Ms. Little always bailed him out if she could, and gave Liam time to nap in her office if he needed to, since she understood just how busy he was. He recalled a time when Mr. Hill the vice principal and Liam's arch nemesis tried to get Liam arrested for missing too many days of school. Luckily Ms. Little convinced him that he missed days on her authority so that he could work on things she needed him for. Liam was very grateful for and felt invincible at the school because of her so much so that Liam was confident that any play of his would go through. If he had to scale down, he could, he had written many acts of extreme violence

in the play so that he could do just that. But as long as he got most of it approved, he was happy.

For this reason, he took his time during this vacation not worrying about the outside creeping back in on him. He let all his worries go, and decided to relax. He meandered through the lobby, just taking it all in. As he walked by the gift shop, he saw a bar. No one was there except for the bartender. She was about 5'8, dark haired, and wore her face in a "please don't come this way". As Liam walked towards her bar, her expression quickly changed to the default "welcome sir" look she gave to everyone.

"Excuse me can I have some water?" Liam asked

"Yeah, sure, I can get you a glass of water." She said, relieved it wasn't another

She would be getting off at ten and she prayed that tonight no one would keep her there with endless drinks and stories about their sad and lonely lives. This young boy didn't seem to be one of those types. For one, he was obviously under twenty-one. She saw that he was fairly tall, skinny and his hair was slicked back, someone had even dressed him up in a tuxedo.

"It's nice isn't it?" She asked him

"What is?" Liam asked back.

"The music. it's nice without it I would've quit a long time ago." She answered, while wiping the counter up with a towel.

"Uh you know I hadn't really noticed it." Liam lied; he took a sip of water.

"Oh." she sighed

She seemed agitated but glad that Liam was the only one at the bar. Liam was able to strike a conversation with her and they talked about personal stuff. "Do you like working here?" He asked

"Why do you care?" She responded

"I don't really know; I was just wondering. But since you responded my question with a question, that probably means you either hate it." He smirked at her looking for confirmation if he was right.

She hated that he was right, and smiled. Most people only talked about themselves at the bar to her, plus there was a certain level of charm in him that she was not accustomed to seeing. They continued the conversation; it became a deeper than either of them expected it to be. The type of things you would talk to a close friend about. It was surprising to both of them but Liam understood that she, like himself, was lonely and sometimes it's better to trust a stranger. She revealed that she was a struggling painter with a lot of student debt.

She put her elbows on the counter and rested her head on one of her hands. "Looking back on it now it probably wasn't a good idea to major in art since I do it on the side mostly anyway."

"What advice would you give someone like me who's about to go to college?" He asked

"Enjoy high school while you can, college life is mediocre at best especially as a freshman. Do what you want. Just know that what you enjoy probably won't get you a career."

"Yeah, I guess I don't know. I think I've got a good shot at becoming a director" He took a sip of his water.

"Oh, so you wanna be a director. Please tell me more."

He told her about everything, his past victories in theatre, the upcoming play *Verissimus*. He explained how the Principal, Ms. Little, a gentle older woman, was a fan of art and was extremely supportive and helpful when it came to setting up plays. Her assistant principal, on the other hand, Mr. Hill, wasn't very fond of Liam and thought of the art department as a waste of money and time. Liam was aware of Mr. Hill's bone headedness, and reminded him of that often when he would pay a visit to his house and leave a burnt pile of shit in a paper bag.

The bartender looked at him in disgust. "Jesus you're twelve years old, aren't you? Twelve?"

Liam chuckled "Well, the man hates fun, and me. He's given me multiple detentions, tried to get me suspended, and worst of all he consistently tries to get my plays cancelled."

Wow, so your response to someone not liking you is to poop on their doorstep? She started nodding her head. "That's disgusting and sad."

"No, it's not, it's what he deserves." Liam snarled. His body now faced her, and his head leaned forward giving her a death stare.

She was taken aback by his aggressiveness. "Shit," She said under her breath

Liam calmed down, and relaxed his body. "It won't matter soon I'll be out in five months anyway 'Mr. Hitler' won't be able to snoop down my neck then."

Just then his phone started to ring. He looked at the caller I'd and noticed it was Henry. Strange usually Henry would just text him.

"Excuse me I have to take this." He said, walking into the main part of the lobby. Luckily, the music wasn't too loud.

"Henry what's up? Oh by the way I was wondering if you-"

"Hello Liam? Look man, I have some bad news."

Liam started panicking, he thought Mr. Hill was trying to sabotage the play. "What is it? Are we short money? Is the play gonna be cancelled?"

"I am afraid it's worse than the play getting canceled." Henry said.

Liam laughed in relief. He was glad to be not inconvenienced with trying to convince some that the play was in fact appropriate for high school and that the budget was necessary. "Henry, what could be worse than the play being cancelled?"

"Did you not hear the news?" Henry asked.

Liam grew impatient "No what news? stop playing games and just tell me already."

"I'm gonna need you to listen carefully, Principal Little was on her way home this afternoon when she was involved in a really bad car accident. She's hurt pretty bad."

Liam didn't have an immediate reaction; he calmly said to Henry, "I'm going to go now Henry." He then hung the phone up. His stomach started to churn, and his limbs became numb. Principal Little was Liam's guardian angel any time he had gotten into trouble or needed help he could rely on her. He viewed her as a sort of grandmother he never had. To imagine her in a hospital bed barely conscious stirred an emotion in him he did not know he was capable of feeling. For all his grandiose word choice he used in his plays, and all the hairy situations he was able to get out of through his intelligent quick wit, he couldn't explain what was happening to him nor could he escape it.

Liam trudged towards the nearest chair and sat down. His mind is still racing with thoughts. The lobby was practically empty at this point; and he sat down in a chair directly opposite of the piano player. Liam had taken note of the man's physical appearance; he was older probably in his 60s, Liam thought 5'10, And very thin. He played the piano with a youthful energy.

"Excuse me," Liam called out. The piano player looked up but his hands continued to play the notes.

"Bach?" Liam asked him, referring to the piece that he was playing.

"Ah," the piano man smiled, "very close, no, this is Brahms." He returned his eyes to the piano.

"Hey." A voice rang Liam looked up and it was the bartender. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Oh, yeah, no... I'm good, I'm just tired is all."

"Okay." She didn't want to pry any further. It was ten o'clock, and she wanted to go home. "Ok, well, goodnight and good luck on life, and your play."

"Goodnight," Liam drifted back to his thoughts.

After a while the piano stopped playing and subsequently woke Liam up from his daydream. The piano player was up and wiping the piano keys down with his handkerchief. When he finished, he walked by Liam and made sure to give him a smile and a nod.

"Goodnight sir." The piano man said walking towards the coat hanger.

"Goodnight." Liam replied, still staring blankly, it took him a second to realize what he just said

The piano player walked down the lobby to the doors to the parking lot. Just before he grabbed his coat from the coat hanger and put his hand on the door, Liam ran behind him.

"Wait, please mister. Could I trouble you with one more song?" Liam asked

The piano player was stunned "I-I'm sorry sir my shift is over. Besides I wouldn't want my music to disturb any of the guests sleeping upstairs." He started to turn towards the door.

"Wait, please," Liam cried out. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He grabbed forty dollars, and presented it to the piano player.

"Please, I don't think anyone would mind one more song!"

Liam was breathing heavily now. The piano player looked him in the eye. He could see Liam was desperate. He reached out his hand with the forty "Okay, son," but instead of taking the money he closed Liam's hand into a fist and pushed it gently back towards his body "I will." He walked back to the piano Liam was slow to follow but he sat back down in his original seat.

The piano player cleared his throat "Do you have a request?"

"Anything is fine," Liam said softly.

The piano player nodded and began to play. Liam was dead faced again but he was no longer daydreaming just tired. He didn't want to go up to his hotel room in fear he would have to interact with his parents who were probably drunk. The piece was familiar; it was one that Liam had mastered when he was learning to play the piano. "Mozart?"

The piano player nodded, "Very good, sir."

Once he was finished playing, the both of them stood. Liam smiled and snapped his fingers to applaud like in a coffee shop. The piano player chuckled and bowed toward him. They both said good night and went in opposite directions. Liam made his way up to the top of the staircase; he was too tired at this point to stay up any longer. When he got to the top he looked back at the lobby. He realized without the music there was not much to it. Without the piano player it wasn't very interesting.

The Beat of the Song

Maxwell Ortiz



Caige sits on a bench by his usual bus stop awaiting the next ride. The bench is located on a long bustling street in a planned community. Large and luscious trees fill the sidewalk adjacent to many family owned businesses. Spring flowers blooming, blue clear sky, and baby birds chirping from their nests. This beautiful town is the ideal and safe place for raising a family. Yet, a single man like Caige continues to tarnish this town's name with his personal hobbies.

He doesn't need to ride a bus, he has more than enough money to buy a car. He chooses to use public transportation for what he considers "easy picking." Even though he has more than enough money he still loves to go pick-pocketing. Just last month he was able to use the stolen money to pay off his villa's mortgage for the next two months. He even managed to finish his payment on a new house boat he bought hoping to take his brother on next summer.

As of right now he can feel the beat of his heart making nothing more than a small beat that only a fly could hear. Caige is the type of man who yearns for the adrenaline rush when being placed in a situation that could get him in trouble and the tune he heard his body made is not nearly enough to wake his soul. Whenever Caige successfully stole something in public he could hear his heart drumming a tune loud enough for even the birds in the high trees to hear. The individual beats of his heart pumping the high adrenaline blood through his body reinvigorated his soul and mind. Sitting anxiously, Caige grows eager for the bus to arrive. He grows eager to listen to the beat of his heart and play a lovely tune.

Caige looks to his right and notices an elderly woman sitting at the other end of the bench. She is wearing a large, white fur coat despite the intense afternoon heat. He notices that she is also wearing vintage sunglasses that cover most of her face, a white store brand purse, diamond earrings with a pearl necklace to match, and lastly a matching fur hat so large that it hangs off the side of her head. She also wore a diamond ring on her old wrinkled finger. Caige is not familiar with brands but even he could tell from her clothing alone that she is undoubtedly loaded with money if she could afford expensive fashion like that. All Caige could think now is how easy of a target she is. Although, Caige can't help but wonder why a wealthy woman like her would even bother using public transportation.

He notices the approaching bus, and with a smirk he readies himself to snag what he can off the old woman. His heart began to beat a little faster preparing to play a medley. As soon as the bus arrives the elderly woman stands up and walks in the opposite direction. Caige feels as though his rush has come to an anticlimactic stop and that his heart had prematurely begun its beat. He thought to himself, *why would she even bother sitting at the bus station in the first place?* His disappointment turns into a surprise as he spots a gold coin on the ground.

The bus driver honks for him to hurry up, but Caige is too invested in the coin now that he realizes it is an official Gold American Eagle Coin. Caige yells at the bus driver, "Forget it mate, I'm walkin from here!" As the bus leaves, Caige picks up the coin to examine it and says to himself, "It's definitely a one-ounce gold coin. These little buggers are worth fifty bucks a piece!" He observes the fine detail of the American Eagle and out of pure joy he says to himself, "talk about easy picking!"

To his surprise, he notices two more coins on the ground. *The hell? That old muppet dropped a hundred-fifty dollars in coins!* Caige picks up both coins and

suddenly four more coins emerge from the ground. Caige's heart beat harder than it ever had before. To him it felt as though a drummer was beating on a Chinese drum vibrating the entire room. Accepting that there are now four gold coins in front of him he chooses to snag them all quickly, but once again all the coins duplicate with a total of eight on the ground and seven in his hand.

Caige breathes heavily now. He can't understand what is happening but this is enough to feel as though the drummer in his heart is now accompanied by an entire orchestra of drummers beating against the walls of his body ready to rupture at any moment. Caige looks over his shoulder to make sure no one is fooling him only to find that he is completely alone at the bus stop. Knowing that there isn't anyone around he gathers up as many coins his left forearm pressed against his stomach can hold.

Caige is now holding forty-one coins in his left arm with dozens of coins on the ground, but out of pure excitement, he drops one of his coins and, as it hits the ground, he feels a sharp pain in his arm. Caige stops to examine the side of his right arm, the beating of his heart comes to a halt as his body goes white from the terror he sees before him. He holds his jaw wide in absolute shock to see that there is now a coin size hole in his arm. The hole is perfectly round with the small chunk of flesh showing a perfect imprint of the coin's design as if his arms were made of Play-Doh. He tries not to look at the wound but already feels his stomach turning.

Caige does not handle blood too well. When he first got caught stealing at the age of sixteen his older brother beat him to the point of spitting out blood. The taste, texture, and look were more than enough to make Caige vomit in front of his brother.

"Wha-What the hell is this, what happened to my arm?" Caige says quietly to himself. He sees blood beginning to pour out of the wound, "Oh God..." Caige vomits on the other coins on the ground but this causes him to drop four more coins, and as each one hits the floor Caige gains a new coin sized wound. The first wound is inside his body removing a chunk of his left femur bone, the second is a flesh wound on top of his left hand, the third removes inner muscle on his left thigh, and the final wound removes a part of his eye as if someone has cut a thin slice of apple down the middle.

He screams in pain, "OH BLOODY HELL!" He tightly grips the coins so as to not drop another one. Caige wishes to let go of these coins so he can tend to his wounds, but understanding his situation he grits his teeth and endures the pain. He says to himself *that old hag did this...that witch knew I was going to steal from her!* Powering through the pain, Caige makes his way in the direction that the elderly woman walked off to.

Each step he takes with his left leg causes him insufferable pain. He thinks to himself, *Why would that dirty witch do this shit to me. Was it cause I stole from her before? Even so what kinda bloody bastard does this shit! All I ever do is steal from idiots who can't keep track of their shit! It's their damn fault for being a bunch of muppets!*

Caige recalls what his brother had said to him when he beat him silly, "How long have you been doing this?"

Caige responds "...bout a year now."

"You're lucky I'm the one who caught you, if it had been anyone else, they would have reported your sorry ass!"

"Ya."

"Ya!? That's all you have to say!"

"...", Caige did not respond.

"Look at me Caige. I'm sorry I made you puke out your dinner, but you seriously need to end this fucking habit of yours," Caige's brother leaned toward him, "At some point or another, someone else will catch you and you better hope to God that you didn't piss off the wrong person!"

Caige thinks about what his brother told him in the past and laughs, this very situation he thought is what his brother had described to him. Now he understands that it does not matter how small of a crime is. *A sin is a sin I suppose.*

As Caige continues onward he is brought to a halt by a homeless man reaching out and grabbing him. The malnourished homeless man is wearing old worn out sweatpants, a trucker hat covered in grease stains, and a shirt with too many holes to count.

Caige yells at the homeless man, "Let go of me you poor bloke!"

The homeless man replies "Please, sir, you have so much on you, please spare even just a little."

"Again, hands off, and plus this ain't that kind of town. Just go back to the city and beg the tourists for their money!"

The homeless man grips harder, "Please sir! Someone stole what little change I had last week. I just need enough to buy some food."

"You..." Caige suddenly remembers him. When visiting a nearby city to buy fish off the market he pick-pocketed a few people on the way home. *Then why*, Caige thinks to himself, *did this old bloke choose to come here?*

"Please I beg of you, the people here told me that a scary individual has more money than anyone could ever ask for." The homeless man places both hands on Caige's leg, "I can tell your different than everyone here, it has to be you!"

Caige pulls back both legs despite one of them being in pain, "I told you to knock it the hell off! I don't owe anyone anything!"

As he pulls himself away one of the coins from his arm falls out of his arm. The homeless man readies himself to catch it and Caige panics and lunges downwards while gripping the coins in his arm so as to not drop another one. The homeless man almost grabs the coin only for Caige to swoop it from the air at the last possible moment and feels as though his heart nearly stopped beating. Caige looks at the disheartened man

and yells, "Idiot were you trying to kill me you-" before Caige could finish his insult the homeless man hits three coins out of Caige's arm.

The homeless man replies to Caige, "You selfish asshole, all I wanted was compensation for the change you stole from me! I know it was you!

"You-," Caige is again cut off as he feels three more coin size holes in his body this time two of them open surface level flesh wounds on his left arm and the last one creates a hole that looks like a coin slot in his right hand. The pain becomes intolerable for Caige, "AHHHHHHHHH!"

Caige stares at the homeless man who is about to pick up the coins that fell and duplicated on the ground. Caige yells at him, "Don't ya dare touch those BLOODY FUCKING COINS!" Caige follows up with a direct kick to the homeless man's head knocking him to the ground. "Consider that a favor! If you had touched those coins you'd be in the same situation as me!". Caige looks behind him only to see people recording him. From their perspective the town's black sheep had just beat up an old man while covered in blood.

Caige grew nervous with blood and sweat trickling down his body. He yells at them "I know what you muppets think this looks like, but this is just a complicated misunderstanding! It was for his own good!" Police sirens blare in the distance and without a second thought he runs in his original direction. Despite the pain throughout his body he grits his teeth harder than before with only one thing on his mind. *I'm going to kill that shitty old hag!*

After painstakingly running for half a mile, Cage notices a nursing home and comes to a halt. He sees a distinct woman sitting by the first window left of the front entrance and shouts "It's that damn witch!" Partially sprinting to the entrance while still holding on to his coins, he forces his way through the entrance doors. He sees the elderly woman walking towards a hallway accompanied by a tall male nurse for assistance. Caige yells "Stop right there!"

The nurse replies, "Can I help you sir?"

"I wasn't talkin to ya!" Caige's face is now boiling hot. The pain is no longer on his mind. "You old hag, undo this curse or whatever the hell you did to me!"

"Excuse me sir! I need you to step outside now."

"NO! I don't know how but she's responsible for these wounds and I ain't leavin till she fixes me up!" Caige begins to storm towards the elderly women but the nurse steps in front.

"Sir! I need you to leave Immediately!"

"I ain't got time for you," Caige comes in for a right swing but loses his stance due to a sharp pain in his heel. Looking behind him, he sees a coin on the ground. He had become so flustered that he dropped a coin on the ground without realizing it. Caige looks at the nurse again only to instead see a large fist coming straight for him. For Caige

it feels as though it is coming at him in slow motion as if it were an action film, except there was nothing he could do to avoid it.

The fist collides with Caige's face which knocks him down to the ground. His left arm loses its grip and the coins scattering everywhere. All he could do was watch his precious coins scatter in the air and one by one hit the ground. He gains countless coin size wounds all over his body now resembling that of a wet sponge overflowing with blood. Caige gasps for air but there is a coin size hole in his neck preventing him from breathing. He tries to cover the wound with his hand, but ultimately his actions are meaningless. There is nothing he could do but watch the nurse panic from the bizarre situation and the elderly woman walk away from his vision.

Caige is thinking to himself that this is it. There was no winning and he had just lost. But he is not upset. To him it is a fitting and ironic end. While he had robbed people of their belongings and the knowledge of how they had lost them, he was robbed of knowing who took his life. Caige wants to believe it is the elderly woman, but he has no proof of that. It could have been the homeless man he nicked or someone from the community trying to remove him. For all he knows it could have been dropped on accident. Ultimately this did not matter to him. Caige's vision blurs as it fades to white, he takes one last desperate attempt for air.

Salty Sweet Lullabies

Austin Quintero



The ocean was awake and so was she. Quinn spent the night with her eyes wide open, staring at the popcorn ceiling above her. She has not had a peaceful night's rest ever since she moved into her aunt's beach house the week before. At first, it was just the excitement of a new environment. But now, she feels as if something is off. She feels like she's being watched. Quinn shoots up from her bed and turns to face the clock: 12:42 am, it reads. She gets up and paces her room. Her mind keeps wandering off at a fast pace, leaving her no room for understanding. Her sliding door is open, letting the cool breeze tickle her skin and make her brown hair dance slowly.

Quinn always loved visiting the beach house, but things have felt off ever since she moved in. Deep down, she felt like something bad was approaching in the coming days. She breathed in deeply and exhaled all the pent-up anxiety she felt. Opening the sliding door to the balcony, she sat down and overlooked the majestic ocean. The crashing waves and sea breeze helped her to calm down. She had always wanted to live near the ocean. Whenever she visited her aunt, she would always enjoy seeing the sun shining brightly off the sea.

She hummed a lullaby softly. It was one of the songs her mother used to sing to lull her to sleep. She really misses her mother's embrace. She really needed her on nights like this. She sang to no one in particular. The cold wind of the night surrounded her like a cold embrace. The only one to keep her company in the night is the owl in the distance; at least that's what she thought to be true.

After a night of little slumber for poor Quinn, she woke up to the smell of waffles dancing around her nostrils, guiding down the stairs and into the kitchen. She is sitting down to eat with her aunt.

"Did you hear anything last night?" Quinn asked nonchalantly

"No. I actually slept well last night." Her aunt replied.

Quinn's aunt has had back problems for as long as she can remember. She always complains about her sleep because she can never find a comfortable position to sleep in. She always has to be propped up in bed in order to be comfortable enough to sleep. Quinn wonders if she'll inherit these horrid back problems.

"I don't know, Cheryl. Last night, I kept hearing things." Quinn said as she took a bite of her food. It was amazing, as always.

"Maybe it was the house creaking in the middle of the night?" She questioned. It's a plausible answer because the house is older and tends to sound its age.

"You're probably right. It's just that there is something that feels off. Does that make sense?" Quinn asked as she shoveled more food into her mouth.

"Is everything okay?" Cheryl came closer, signaling that she is there for Quinn's concerns.

"Last night, I felt as if I was being watched. My every move, every breath even, was being monitored by something." Quinn said.

"What do you mean?" Cheryl replied with a confused look on her gracefully wrinkling face.

"I can't explain it. It's unsettling. I wish Mom was here with me." She looked down at her plate.

Things have been hard for both Cheryl and Quinn. Kathy was a great woman. They try not to remember the night she died. When she found lumps on one of her breasts, Kathy immediately called her doctor. She had been diagnosed with Stage Three breast cancer. She put up a good fight, but ended up passing away eight months later. Memories of her mother still linger in her mind and haunt her.

"Mommy!" Quinn cried out as the wind outside slammed against the house, causing the house to groan and creak in protest.

"Shhhh. Quinnie, I'm here. Come and cuddle up with Mommy." Kathy cooed as Quinn immediately ran out of her room and met her mother in the hallway.

Kathy squatted down to reach Quinn's height. "Are you scared, Quinnie?"

"Yes, Mommy! The wind outside sounds scary!" Quinn said as she attached herself to her mother's arm as if her life depended on it.

"Okay, Quinnie. Come into Mommy's room and we'll have a little slumber party. Will that make you feel better?" Kathy asked Quinn.

"Yes." Quinn says as she buries her face in her mother's night robe, feeling a sense of comfort wash over her. Quinn is whisked away into the safe haven of her mother's room. She climbs up onto Kathy's bed. Kathy turns on a dim light to cast out any of Quinn's fear of the dark in her room. She always knew exactly what to do when Quinnie needed to relax.

"See, Quinnie? The wind isn't so bad." Kathy got into the bed and brought little Quinnie into her embrace. Just then, a large gust of wind beat against the house. Quinn's eyes nearly fall out of her head with how wide they got. She cuddled into her mother. More unshed tears spring from her eye as she cries out for safety.

"It's okay, Quinnie. Mommy will protect you." Kathy whispers in her ear. She begins to sing Quinn a lullaby. Her cries began to soften and her eyelids became heavier as peace surrounded her. The only thing Quinn can hear is her mother's melodic voice putting her to sleep.

"I'm sorry, Quinn. I wish there was something we could have done to help save her, but it was too late. I can't believe it's been almost a year since she passed away." Cheryl hugged Quinn. She knew that it never compared to her sister's hugs, but they are always warm and comforting.

The two of them sat together as silence surrounded them. It was comforting to finally reach a calm spot for Quinn. She wore her heart on her sleeve. Her mother's death took a toll on her mental health. She couldn't bear to be in her family home anymore because she was always reminded of her mother. She finally felt a sense of freedom after moving into the beach house with Cheryl.

"Why don't we go out today? Maybe stroll down the pier and go to the beach?" Cheryl asked.

"I would love to." Quinn replied. With that, she finished her breakfast and headed up the stairs to get ready.

The burning sun greeted them upon their arrival to the beach. The light sea breeze helped cool them both down. Cheryl wanted to sunbathe and relax while Quinn immediately ran for the ocean.

"Be careful!" Cheryl shouted out, but Quinn couldn't hear her over her heavy breathing and the beating of her own heart. As soon as Quinn felt the water, she felt free. The cold water shocked her body to life as she embraced the ocean around her. She always loved to swim. At her family home, she had a huge pool that she would always be in growing up. Her mother taught her how to swim when she was only four years old. It was natural to her.

Quinn was having a blast. The beach was in a more secluded area and most people were not able to come here by car because there is no parking lot. She loved the peacefulness of being out in the ocean by herself in her own paradise.

Off to the southern end of the beach, huge rocks stood out of the ocean. Little did she know, there was something perched upon the rock, entranced by Quinn's beautiful body gliding through the water. That little voice he heard late the night before enraptured his mind. She had invaded all his thoughts. His love for her grew by the minute. His heart yearned for her. But he was at war within himself. She should not know that he exists. It crushes him when he sees the sun set and his mystery girl goes back up to the beach, completely out of sight.

"Thank you so much for inviting me to the beach! I didn't realize how much I missed it!" Quinn hugged her aunt.

"Quinn, stop it! Now I'm soaking wet!" She yelps as she playfully punches Quinn's shoulder.

Quinn, he thought to himself, *a beautiful name for a beautiful woman.*

Changing into her night clothes, Quinn bids Cheryl good night.

"You know, my door is always open if you want to spend the night together tonight." Cheryl says, knowing that Quinn is still spooked from last night.

"Thanks, Cheryl. I really appreciate it. I don't think that I'll have any trouble tonight. All the swimming wore me out. I'll see you in the morning." Quinn heads for her room to go and sleep.

Four hours later, a beautiful voice awakes the sleeping Quinn from her now not-so-peaceful slumber. She is immediately up and frantically looks around the room to see if someone is there. The voice begins to sing again, this time much louder and clearer than the sound that woke her up. Her breathing picks up and becomes more labored as the beautiful voice fills the house. She runs out of her room. The sound grows louder until she reaches the front door.

I have to get out of here! Quinn's mind races as she yanks open the front door. Silence.

The only noise to be heard was the wind blowing forcefully against the house behind her. Quinn's head swivels to look at her surroundings and cannot seem to find out where the voice had come from.

Oh my God, I think I'm going crazy! Quinn thinks as her mind attempts to comprehend what on Earth is going on.

Quinn locks the front door and sits outside on the porch. She begins to hum that same lullaby softly to herself and begins to calm down. However, that does not last very long. The voice rings through her ears and she is alert once again. Quinn has always been adventurous, but she is always second guessing herself. She is afraid of the world around her, especially at this moment.

The voice isn't as loud as before; it's softer, more soothing. As soon as it came, it went quiet again. Quinn began to vocalize once again, and the voice sang again. They were both singing the lullaby! Curiosity gets the best of Quinn and she decides to follow the voice. It takes her away from her house and over towards the beach nearby. She gets to the beach and casts her eyes over the shore in front of her. She doesn't see anyone.

She looks into the ocean to see if she can see anyone out swimming. *Why on Earth would anyone be swimming right now?* Quinn pondered as she searched for the answer. The midnight blue sky covering the beach with darkness and the moon reflected off the water. After a thorough search of the area, Quinn headed back home, feeling defeated. She missed his glowing blue eyes hovering above the water, never getting her out of his sight.

"Where were you late last night?" Cheryl keeps pushing, trying to get answers out of Quinn.

"You heard me get up last night?" Quinn asks, knowing she was caught red-handed.

"Well, not only was I unable to sleep, but you were running through the house like a bat out of Hell! Why?" Cheryl asks, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"Did you not hear the voice last night?" Quinn shoots back at her.

"What are you talking about? The only noise I heard last night were your loud footsteps echoing through the house!" Cheryl narrows her eyes at Quinn.

"Oh my God. I think I'm going crazy!" Quinn yells as her hands find their way into her hair.

"Calm down! Screaming is not going to help!" Cheryl says, attempting to wrangle in the poor girl.

Quinn gets up and goes to her room, slamming the door shut behind her. Her frustration with the entire situation has eaten away at her, consuming her thoughts and her mind.

She goes through some of her belongings and finds a swimsuit. She immediately grabs it and heads for the beach once again.

At the beach, Quinn quickly makes her way towards the far end of the beach, away from any of the other visitors. She leans against one of the palm trees and begins to cry. Her frustration could not escape her any other way.

He heard her cries and his heart deflates. Watching her from a distance, he decides to swim closer to get a better glimpse of her. He wants to console her and lift her spirits, but he feels as if he won't be of much help. He begins to sing the lullaby again.

Quinn's head immediately shoots upwards as she's able to hear the beautiful lullaby. She wasn't able to see much through her tears. Her eyes became heavy as her

Quinn froze. "No. Not anymore," trying to avoid the topic.
Silence.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Agamemnon asks. He can tell that something is playing on her mind and he wants to do what he can to help her. His heart needs her. Quinn was having an internal war; can she trust him? He's a merman! She didn't even think that they existed up until a couple days ago! Although, she never really was able to vent to anyone about it. Maybe it's about time she opened up about her feelings to someone. Or at least someone that wasn't Cheryl.

"My mother lived in that house with me," Quinn begins. "She was my rock. She always kept me together when I was falling apart. She was the only person I had growing up."

"She sounds amazing." Agamemnon's eyes shine, finally getting to know her on a more intimate level.

"She passed away a year ago from breast cancer." A lump forms in Quinn's throat, making it more difficult for the words to come out. Tears spring from her eyes as the memories come flooding back like a tidal wave.

"We are doing the best we can with your mother, Ms. Roberts." Dr. Han says with a sad glimmer in his eyes.

"There must be something you can do to save her!" Quinn lashes out. Her mother was a fighter and she knew deep down that she would come out from the other side of this.

"She's been in a medically induced coma for the past month, Ms. Roberts. Her health hasn't improved and she is not stable enough to wake up yet." He looks down, afraid of giving her the bad news.

"We have to pull the plug."

"No! You can't! She's going to be fine! I won't let you!" Quinn lets out all her pent-up frustration on the doctor.

"She has not shown any signs of improvement. If anything, she has only gotten worse. I'm sorry, Ms. Roberts."

Quinn didn't want to admit it, but the doctor was right. She visited her every single day. Before she was in a coma, her words were incoherent. She had to be fed using a tube through her stomach. Her body was rejecting the liquid food. It would spit up green back at Quinn and the other nurses that helped her. She had lost so much weight. Her frame was so small and bony that it didn't look like her anymore. Her body was already dead. It was time to let her mother go.

"Oh my God, Quinn. I am so sorry." Agamemnon could almost feel her pain. Her sadness became his sadness. He feels the need to be there for her as she is clearly having a hard time talking about her mother's death.

"I just miss her so much." Quinn's voice comes out broken and shaky,

"It's okay, Quinn." Agamemnon pulls himself up onto the rock that Quinn sits upon. He wraps his shimmering tail around her and cradles her. He began to sing the lullaby to Quinn. She slowly begins to fall under his mysterious control before falling asleep. He hates to see her so sad and promises to only make her cry happy tears.

.....
"Quinn, there's something different about you. You seem happier. Have you been seeing someone?" Cheryl tries to push for answers.

"Well, there is somebody..." Quinn tries to hide her eyes, but Cheryl's finally gotten the answer she's been looking for.

"Who is he? What's his name? Does he live here? Can you introduce me? Am I hearing wedding bells in the distance?" Cheryl fires off questions, making Quinn all the more flustered.

"Slow down, woman! You may be my aunt, but sometimes you can act just like my mother!" Quinn recalls when her mother used to pester her about boys in high school.

"Well, who is he?"

"His name is Agamemnon."

"Aga-what?" Cheryl asks as her brows knit together.

"He's gorgeous, Cheryl. Every time I see him, my stomach fills with butterflies. His eyes are breathtaking and his smile can illuminate the darkest nights. He's perfect."

Quinn recalls each and every night they are together. She loves him. There's no doubt that he loves her back. The only thing holding them back is Agamemnon is a merman, which she would never tell Cheryl. She really would think Quinn is crazy.

"Are you sure about this guy, Quinn?" Cheryl replies, not wanting to get into an argument over a boy.

"Yes. He makes me feel special. I have finally been able to open up to someone outside of this family. He's able to keep me grounded and makes me feel so safe and loved," Quinn says as her arms wrap around her stomach, imagining their embrace once again.

"Quinn, I am just trying to look out for you. After your mother died, I swore that I would protect you for the rest of my life. This Agamemnon guy sounds wonderful, don't get me wrong. But, I just don't want you to get hurt again." Cheryl eyes scan over Quinn as she comes closer and hugs her.

After a moment of silence, Quinn breaks the hug and creates some distance between herself and Cheryl.

"Cheryl, I understand that you're worried about me, but I can make my own decisions. I'm not that little girl that I used to be! I'm a grown woman, for crying out loud!" Quinn speaks up as she tries to hold her own ground.

"I know! But, please! Can you at least respect my warning?? It sounds like he was a complete stranger a few days ago but now you make it sound like you're in a romantic relationship! I'm sorry, Quinn. I'm not sure if I can let you do this. I know you want to be in a relationship, but just please be safe! That's all I ask! I love you and I don't want you to get hurt!" Cheryl's voice gets louder.

Silence.

"I can live for myself, thank you very much. I don't need anyone telling me how to live my life!" Quinn yells as she quickly rushes out of the kitchen and into her bedroom.

As soon as her door shuts, she lets her frustration out in a river of tears.

"Quinn! Quinn! Please let me in. I'm so sorry for yelling. I should have tried to see it from your perspective. I know that life has been hard for you ever since Kathy passed

away. I love and miss her dearly just like you. Can we please work this out?" Cheryl pleads with Quinn through the other side of the door.

Silence.

"Alright. I get that you don't want to talk right now and that's okay. Whenever you're ready, come and find me. I would love to make things up. I love you, Quinnie."

Cheryl uses Kathy's nickname for Quinn.

Cheryl walks away from the door and begins to clean up the house and prepare food for dinner. Quinn is curled up in a ball next to her bedroom door, wishing that Agamemnon could come in and save her.

Having Agamemnon really helps Quinn. He is her refuge. Every night, she visits him at the far end of the beach and they talk about life. Agamemnon is the first person Quinn really opens up to. The only person that is able to break down her walls like her mother. She and Agamemnon reach a very deep and intimate relationship in this short amount of time, whether Cheryl likes it or not.

Quinn just wants to be happy, and she feels like Cheryl is trying to take that away from her. Quinn begins thinking of the next time she will see Agamemnon. Even the thought of him brings so much joy to Quinn.

.....

Quinn is awoken by the sound of Agamemnon's beautiful voice once again. As the days have gone on, his voice has become more of a drug to her. She wants it. She needs it. She craves it every single night. She is more entranced by the lullaby every night. Her feet unconsciously follow the sounds of his voice and lead her straight to the beach.

As she sees him, she is hypnotized by his beauty. He rises above the water with those shining blue eyes that bore holes into Quinn's brain.

"Agamemnon..." she calls out in a sultry voice, awakening Agamemnon's primal instincts he's been trying to hold back.

"Quinn..." he states as his instincts kick in.

"Agamemnon, are you okay?" Quinn questions, noticing that something is off.

She looks into Agamemnon's eyes and immediately regrets it. His primal instincts are taking over. His once bright blue orbs have become pitch black. His body grows to larger proportions, showing a much darker side of the siren.

"Agamemnon, what are you doing?" Quinn's eyes widen as the merman she once knew isn't the same creature in front of her anymore.

"Quinn." His deep voice shakes the ground and scares Quinn. She tries to look away, but can't pull away from him. His looming figure comes closer. His pitch-black eyes burn through Quinn's, as his nails turn into claws.

"Come to me." His voice, once a sweet and harmonious voice, now dark and decrepit.

Quinn is paralyzed with fear. But she can't seem to stay away. His teeth elongate and Quinn lets out a blood-curdling screech. He is upon her. The ocean consumes them both.

Silence.

Butterflies are Illegal

Josh Ayad



Sweat dripping from my forehead, Easter morning I spent sanitizing a refrigerator teeming with putrid mold, while an N85 mask clung to my infinitely expanding beard. A modern plague doctor was my persona for the day. My favorite color was plastered to my arms in the form of a surgeon's promise that a steady hand resides within the gloves. My mind articulated into words that this mold crafted a stable abode like a frozen tundra in which human beings store last week's dead animal, In the hope that they can reminisce over the memory its now stale aroma invokes in their hippocampus. A family's bickerings over who opens the sparkling apple juice, and which rat bastard gobbled its last fizz down their glutinous gullet. I empathize with the victim of such inquisition, as my own body sat prisoner in a comfortable yet untrustworthy leather sofa, spewing disputes of my id, ego, and superego from my mother's alimony check into a quiet and shrewd therapist's wallet. With that money I'm sure there was an abundance of apple juice on his family's table, and the one to sip the last drop of liquid gold would get to pop another bottle in celebration. I bet there was no mold in their fridge.

I was told there was something wrong with me. It always thumped me in the forehead in the form of a question, not a solution.

"What's wrong with you?"

The big babies in silly uniforms asked, that seemed not to remember how to read a comic book, as if they all joined in a big game and forgot to declare a win condition. The only thing real about their costume was the age spots, gray hair, and decaying allotted time. Most of them got burnt crumbs of carbon in a wooden box, some of the higher scoring players got a whole hut made of rocks with their name on it.

"What's wrong with you?"

As if a nine-year-old were supposed to know that stabbing pillows with grandpa's knife was not "permissible" in society. My single mother might not appreciate it when the six-foot man feeding her esophagus with a fat and sweaty pork sausage may be sliced at the jugular with a six-inch steel fish gutting lacerator. My mom ridiculed him the next day for leaving the chicken out on the counter for longer than she thought was appropriate. I never saw him again after that, and she packed his belongings.

"Where did his stuff go Mom?"

"I gave them to the stork. The one that dropped you off. Don't say his name ever again."

He was my katana, he lived in the leather sheath decorated with Native American tiles. I never sharpened him, why waste the metal. My muscles just got bigger, my voice deeper as I bellowed for breakfast, not a scrap left of spinach left on my plate in my mansion on the hill. I never saw my mother again, except for that time the decrepit lady everybody called Teddy was awaiting her toaster oven while we adorned abyss colored garbs. Grieving is a five-step process best moved through with efficiency. Being old enough to own a business, and not old enough to drink, taught me how infantile a parent could be.

Every time I left the suburbs for the big city, I would be bombarded with curiosity about my whereabouts, as if some teleportation had been invented to prevent a robbery. The friendly robber attempted to take my things more times than an aimed gun. Nobody ever got helped by being lied to. I always tell myself the truth.

"Caffeine is a drug, and that coffee shop in Seattle in Pike Place Market is full of drug dealers with a W-2".

"Did I ask you Michael?"

As if people were living their lives according to blissful ignorance, however, ironically aware of it. I knew they would be filled with regret for having spent a life worth living instead within a state of hallucination.

I strolled up the hill to my house, and was greeted by a swarm of gnats. How else were they to say hello then to come within centimeters of obstructing my path? I would hope one wouldn't fly into one of my orifices, I would be sorry for its undesired demise.

My car is nicer than both of my parents', maybe because it comes from Germany and I can tell it directions with my voice. I gave my mom a Louis Vuitton bag for her birthday, something she wanted. For the years before she always got a gift card, as if that was better than just cold hard cash, and the limit never left the one-hundred-dollar range. Three months, I later blocked her cell phone number because she is being a dumb whore again, except this time she can't come to my room and call me a "loser" and "crazy" because no way in hell am I giving that thing my new address. My room is finally free of clutter, and the shoe rack only has three pairs of shoes now; my favorite glowing sneakers that I picked out for myself that cost the same as the rent I paid to that whore and her new porcine husband, a pair of running shoes, and the flip flops that saved me time if I wanted to eat my lunch on the porch while watching the bovines obliviously graze. The butterflies flew by the dandelions and jasmine vines, and I wondered if they ever got asked to stay home.

I walked the school halls with my two-inch utility knife next to my car jinglers, that time it came in handy was just too valuable. I was supposed to be in statistics class, but the infant with gray hair in the pinstripe suit talked too much about his expansive, expensive playground and my classmates waited too often for him to get his sugar rush from the coffee machine in the exclusive break room. You had to have the orange badge to go in there, and only the teacher's pets knew that it was across from the bathroom. I saw one of the kids with the girls who distracted him with pictures on his phone all the time hanging by his locker, and he told me the fat guy with the hat and the guilty stomach was hunting for me.

"Thanks bro",

"You're welcome" he said.

I sat in my chair and I saw the stale coffee breath in the air.

"Michael. Come with me."

"Why?", I said.

"You've got to come with me."

"I want to be in math class."

They couldn't force me anyway. Big fatty came in the room and told me it would be best if I complied. I think he was some security guard, yet he was vastly overpaid, rumor has it he was selling all the kids weed, negotiating a higher price with his snaggle tooth because he knew we had deep pockets for lunch money. I don't think he was from our county. A native either stayed in the area, or left and never came back. I trusted him somewhat, so I listened that time. As I got in the hall, the inquisition ensued.

Greeted by a female cop and her male cop friend because she was too much of a pussy to go it alone, I repeated that, instead of going to the office, I would like to finish my math class of which I am paying for and here to attend. I glance at my watch, realizing it is almost lunchtime. Legally, at 12:35 I cannot be here, as I chose to not take a final class on my schedule. A sudden hand grips my wrist in response to my denial, and I am being dragged slowly but surely to the garbage disposal with the mediocre chair and the outdated staff computer. *Stall, 3 more minutes and I can't be here.*

That fucking slut. I bet she was abused and thought being a cop would somehow purge the world of "evil" people like me, that try to carry knives at school. That's what I was doing, yes, walking around campus putting knives in guts telling girls to get down, while I missed out on the math that would take me to Mars. Sexist idiot, her vocabulary I assumed consisted of "glass ceiling" and "toxic masculinity", yet she sought to gain muscle and deepen her voice. Give them a call, whoever does it first is innocent, lady justice is blind def and dumb on the scene of the crime. Searching my backpack yielded them an empty pill capsule, and with my straight B's on my GPA they had the nerve to ask what was in that capsule and why I had a two-inch blade by my waist. Fucking imbeciles. I guess maybe because butterflies are illegal. They called the triple digit number for an emergency. They asked me where I lived. What my name was.

"I... I don't know...", I said sluggishly with as many pauses as possible to buy myself time to strategize the next answers to the predatory questioning. I punished them with a test of patience as I, a danger to myself or others, sat in a chair with heart monitors to see what drugs I ingested.

The ride under the red flashing lights with the helping man was slow, despite the red dots above us negated. He spoke an alien language that I doubt he learned by himself. He asked me what I took that day.

"Fuck you. A big fat dose of it. "

I was sober, and he was all hopped up on fear, while my hands laid prisoner to some overpriced primitive medical equipment. This is a test I'm absolutely certain. They know I know. I passed all the ones before, and this one is just in a different place but it's the same fucking test. Yes, I'm intelligent, no, I'm not telling you how I got it.

In a blue robe I approach the counter to get my happy pills. Morpheus comes from the back and the tall long-haired question fucker asks me about my parents. I wanted it to happen.

"My mom died in a car accident when I was nine."

Later that day she came to visit me and they pumped my brain full of unwanted memories.

Loser.

Crazy.

I made sure to get no DNA on any of the doors before they gave me that yellow pill with the numbers on it just like the digits on my white wristband. It said Zebra on it. I was fucking fast and they had to put me to down. It took seven of them and they were recruited because they sounded like my dad and they knew that would make me listen. I was poked with the needle and out came the shouting to make me look like what they would call me so the bitch with the purple hair wouldn't lose her expensive waste of a

piece of paper. She went to school for ten years for that, and all it got her was that lab coat.

"I won't tell them I swear!",

I couldn't help but scream with that clear liquid pumped through my cardiovascular system. There was LSD in that cereal and they gave it to me and I slept and I couldn't tell if it was day or night anymore and the projector in the bedroom showed a sun and a painted wall outside.

"Do you have any coloring books?"

"No. Sit down. It's almost lunchtime.",

the fat African American lady said in quiet excitement as she exercised her authority.

"But we just had breakfast?",

"You have to stay nutritious Michael. "

I told them to call me that but barely any of them listened. Three days and I could leave but I wasn't going to be myself and I didn't know that when I got into that examination room. I thought they were going to dissect me and those cameras were just making sure I wouldn't try to hurt myself, or others before they could examine all of us. How did the aliens contact us, why, what did we know?

I walked to the kid that looked too old to be here but I felt safe around him because he was quiet, like me, I could feel his power.

"We're special" he said.

"My name is Nano, come here, there's crayons, draw a superhero."

I looked at the juice box with the label on it that said "Apple and Eve". I told Nano my name was Apple. I picked up my favorite color, purple, and drew my superhero in the form of an eye surrounded by purple swirls, a form of omniscience only accessible when that gut feeling hit when I felt threatened. He gave me the link to his online music playlist with his username. He and I still talk even though I don't know where he lives and I don't think he has a telephone. He made me feel safe in that cocoon. He gave me those shoes he drew on, and I passed them on when I didn't need them anymore. That place was reserved for the special kids.

We ate lunch together, and while few of the other young adults complained of the cafeteria, we enjoyed each other's company in solitude. The eye of the storm presented a haven. The madman's chaos transcribed a magician's spellbook. We sat at the table, the lady in the green hijab with the briefcase trying to see through our glasses like a child.

"What are your favorite fruits?", she said.

"Cucumber", I blurted out, and only few of us special ones laughed and understood the joke. Suddenly I recalled those Charles Manson interviews, and we were not so different, yet I had no desire to see blood.

I never said goodbye to Nano, goodbyes often too final, I never knew who Nano was since he could have learned how to shapeshift. Its more real to know that he is always nearby. I remember those three days as if it was an entire two years of my life. I still have the blue shirt in my closet. A medal, earned in battle, without ever touching someone. Every year since then my valor and prestige climbed the ranks, desperate to show that people like myself and Nano exist in those prisons. No shoelaces, no belts, no markers with funny chemicals in them. The water is poisonous and the air is radioactive,

but with a touch of hard work and belief, chaos turns to order and "Think different" is a motto to live by in the simian wasteland in the shape of a spherical petri dish, hurdling toward no destination in a dry and frostbitten chasm.

I get why they call it Spring cleaning. I found out mold is a fungus today, and fungi make fruit that give a great deal of health. Some mold is bad for people, and I had to make sure my housemates didn't have that in the fridge. I sprayed, and made sure not to leave a single brown spot in there. If any of us got sick, there were no cures waiting for us. Some of them liked to bring girls over too, and that was even more a chance for contagion. I keep the place clean. I had to just have sex with myself, but not in the way that made my hand stronger along with the regret immediately afterward. I had sex with myself in the way that if I were to get naked in front of anyone else, they would be scared and call me crazy again. I read my books, I wear long shirts and pants, I walk the trail and when you see me, I say "Hello!" with a genuine smile, I expect no waves or smiles back. I'm content in either outcome. Other people don't know me, but somehow, they're always prepared for people like me to hop in their backyard and crash through their glass with a knife. I've metamorphosed, and it didn't take any bad karma to know who I really am. I don't even own any knives; it would just be another reason to get in trouble. There's no sense in weapons. Butterflies are illegal for people who didn't make it to the mansion on the hill.

Manifest(o)

By Miguel Dickenson



The world was ending—had ended—and no one could tell him otherwise. No one had even been there for five years to tell him otherwise.

The man was shaven from the eyebrows down and wore military boots exclusively. He seemed to only walk for matters of practical importance. Every trek was a mission, every step filled with purpose; there was no space for wasted movement. It was reflected in his cabin, where the furniture was sparse and the colors trapped you in. But the comrade wanted to be trapped in. He wanted to be as far away from society as he could be on this dense planet. And he had succeeded. For the past five years he had successfully isolated himself from the outside world, where life swam with gay voices and dirty streets, where the citizens paraded with their stubby chins high and masqueraded eyes. He wanted no part of it. And besides, it would all be over soon anyways.

He thought about it while resting his feet in the dining room. He was staring out of his kitchen window, into the snowy forest that surrounded the cabin, but not really seeing, just staring. The day had felt long since he had spent most of it gathering the remaining chopped firewood for the last stretch of winter. He felt tired but he knew he had done good work. Besides, none of those car-driving lunatics could gather firewood like him. Most days looked more or less the same; he didn't try to fill time aimlessly like those with TV's in their bedroom and jacuzzis in their backyard. Sometimes though, throughout soft parts of the day, he would set down to write about something, usually about how hard the snow had fallen that day or what time he thought the sun would set that night. But occasionally, he would write about it—the reason he was actually there, and planned to stay.

When he graduated college—to the disappointment of his loving mother and father—he went to go work in construction. He had graduated from a prestigious university with honors—had never earned below an A in his life—then he went off to work on houses and his family lost their minds.

But they simply did not understand; there was no use in intangibles when the world was about to end. The government knew it, he knew it, the girl he loved in college who left him so she could “reintegrate into society” knew it—but that was where the list ended. The rest of society was oblivious to the oncoming doom, some even living normally during this time, as if they were awarded the right. But of course, he knew better. So five years ago, he left his manifesto on his living room table, packed a small set of belongings, and made the trip to a remote spot he had chosen in the northern part of Alaska. Here, nobody could reach him; nobody could ever find him however much they tried; he would successfully live out his remaining few weeks on earth in isolation—a feat of poetic justice.

His manifesto—running 856 pages, 500,000 words, and 49 different chapters—detailed the slow, compounding degradation of welfare in society. It narrated the history

of human culture, passing by nomadic tribes, the development of agriculture, the industrial revolution and the internet: and what came from it. He wrote..

'The world was set on a path for destruction the very day man discovered agriculture'; since then, he has trampled over everything in his wake on a ruthless quest for technological perfection, a suicide mission like no other. The year I am leaving, communities are crumbling, ecosystems are burning, the very institution of family is becoming obsolete the air is becoming rancid children are being poisoned entire species are extinguishing every minute our brains are turning into dust—'

The picture the writing painted was painful, but luckily reminiscent of a society that did not exist past the mind of the author. People knew there were problems in the world, that the atmosphere had accumulated more carbon dioxide in the past ten years than the century before it, that synthetically intelligent beings now comprised more employment than the humans that made them, that in most cities now people had to wear special masks to prevent irreparable damage to their lungs, but they were also reasonable. Humanity had persevered through everything; this was just another thing.

And when John left, the world treated it as just another thing too, forgetting his existence as soon as an equal concern was discovered. John had been living for 61 months here in Alaska with no bother from anyone and he would live there for the last one. He would die without hearing what the world had to say about their negligence.

He was thinking about this when he heard the strangest noise. It sounded vaguely familiar, like knuckles on wood, like an indication of life. But it was impossible for there to be another pair of hands aside his own in this barren woodland. Nevertheless, the last bit of curiosity got the best of him and he waltzed over to his old, creaking door. When he opened it he didn't do anything for a few seconds, only staring blankly. His mother was staring at him from two feet away. He waited, then she spoke, hesitantly at first.

"Oh Jack, oh Jack," she wiped away a tear. "Jack my baby."

He maintained my composure.

"Mom, why are you here?" She broke down again.

"Jack we finally found you, six months ago the men your father hired years ago found you walking in the woods; you had written about Alaska in your book, it- it was such a longshot but they looked and.. you're actually here. I can't believe you're actually here." She spoke the whole time through cluttered sobs.

"Why did you come?"

She looked up at him, temporarily stopping her tears.

"Jack, we're bringing you back. We're bringing you back home." "I have no intention of leaving."

"What?"

"I left for a reason. It was stated in my manifesto." His feet were steady; he would not waver.

"Jack?" she protested. "You have to come back." She broke down again now, harder than ever.

"You read the manifesto," he said calmly. "I will be here when the world burns. You should go home to your family."

"Jack we have help, we can give you help—"

He stared back blankly. She knew my answer by now.

"Jack?"

"Do not come back, do not send anyone else here."

Then he shut the door in her face and returned to the kitchen. The sun was setting soon. 6:15. Right on time.

The following morning he awoke, remaining in his bed for a moment as he heard the birds complain outside. There was no use in rushing things; the day was drawing near. He rose slowly so he could feel the air outside. It was thinner than the day before, that he knew for sure. A sign of decay.

He glanced around the forest he had made his death bed for the last five years knowing full well all the life around him would soon be reduced to a putrid ash. When you expect something for so long, its arrival becomes just another part of the day—etched into the calendar of your brain. It becomes a part of you.

The day was close. He had three more mornings to listen to birds and then that would be it. He returned inside, thinking about what he should do; there's not much when you know none of it will matter in 72 hours. He decided to set a fire and sit in the armchair in front of it. He stayed in this position through the afternoon, accepting the fact there's no use in doing anything else. Then, when he heard the birds return for supper, a familiar sound seeped into his ears. He perked up. It sounded like the door being knocked. The sound continued. He had been in such a deep trance—ready to let time pass over him—that he had fully disconnected himself from his physical environment. He decided to rise slowly, to at least see the source of the noise. His mother wouldn't have returned; the trek here was much too arduous. He crept over to the door, wishing in this moment it had a keyhole. Begrudgingly, he grasped the cold handle and pulled the door open.

Standing in the place of his mother, stood his younger brother, apparently shivering from the long trek, despite resolve in his eyes. He didn't speak.

"John— man, we need you back home. Elsie is sick, our dad can't work, just—" he sighed. "Could you invite me in? For just a second? We need to talk John."

He stared back blankly. "There is no point George. I would let you stay here but I think it'd be best for you to spend the last days with your family." He looked at John with despair now.

"John, listen, John, just come back with me. We can take care of you. You can live with me, we have a good spare bedroom in our house; you don't need to work or anything, just, c'mon, John."

"The sooner you shed your ignorance, the quicker you'll find comfort when the day comes."

"What day, John? Ahh goddamnit." He turned away from the door, grabbing fists of hair in frustration.

"John, listen. You need help. Everyone knows it, I'm not going to shy away from it, I don't know what kind of fantasies are going on in your brain about the end of society or whatever the hell but you must realize it's time to just come home, and get help.

"Okay? It's finally time, just come back with me, we'll finally fix this thing....John?"

"Goodbye George. Tell Laura and Brandon I say goodbye too.

And just like that, another shut door. He made sure to tighten the lock this time before returning to his place in front of the fire. The fire had been going on for seven hours, and maybe he would keep it on throughout the night and simply fall asleep right there. And sure enough, as the fire warmed his skin, and images of the world burning alive swam through him, John settled into a deep sleep.

When he awoke the next day it must have already been past noon. There were no sounds of birds and the air felt stale. He slowly rose to his feet and headed over to the kitchen to heat up some meat. Only two days remained, he thought, and wondered if it bothered him. If after all this time knowing the inevitable outcome, the harsh reality of his prescience would finally daunt him. But with 45 hours to go, it was no use in speculating over. The day would come; his mental state would be revealed. As history has dictated to each presiding society, time would prove inescapable.

A little past sunset, he began to hear shuffling outside the cabin. It was the sound of small feet traversing crumpled leaves, and it was incessant. John stayed inside, feeling defenseless, trapped in, realizing true isolation was impossible. He couldn't be truly free until the very end. Slowly, he rose from his seat and made my way to the door. He tried to imagine who was on the other side but people were running out; it could be anyone. He glanced at the clock behind him: 38 hours remaining. John opened the door.

What stood in front of him almost set his whole body off balance. He thought many years ago his life had run out of surprises, but here he was, 38 hours from the end of it, standing in front of the only girl he'd ever loved.

"John, oh my God." She was teary-eyed, and John was almost brought to it too, but he held it in.

"I never thought I'd ever see you again." Kindly, he took a step forward, bridging their distance.

"Rosa, what are you doing here?" He noticed sincerity in his voice.

"Listen John, I know what you think, I know how you are. I read your entire letter. I'm just asking you to take a chance with me."

"Rosa you know I can't—"

"John please, find it within yourself. Look at you. You've been here for five years. I know there's a part inside you that yearns to come out and be free, to be with me again."

The memories flooded in then. Twirling around her living room—the sky surrounding them orange—sharing breaths, their eyes locked forever, their intertwined hands permanently locked. They were kissing in the backseat of her old Chevrolet—the dying sky dancing around, following their rhythm. Their bodies listen to its beat. Then she was leaving, without leaving a trace, only stale memories that came back every so often just to say goodbye all over again.

And now she was here.

“John, please. I know you hear me. You can forget about all this—today—be free of it. Just grab some stuff, come with me. I’m all ready to leave. I just need you.”

His eyes were heavy. He wasn’t moving, didn’t think he could.

“John.”

“John.”

“C’mon John please.”

Desperation filled her lungs. It came out as a plea, but he could not satiate her.

“I’m sorry Rosa. I can’t.”

“What? John, no, just listen for a second.”

He shook his head, looking away from her.

“John?” She was searching for something in his eyes. But it was gone.

Realism had set over long ago.

Taking a final glance into her eyes—just so he could have one final memory before everything went black—John closed the door, hardening the lock for the final time.

Slowly, he turned his back to the door and made his way back to the fire place.

Reality came in hard and fast the next day. This was it. After 1,800 days in this cabin, he was on his last one. So when the knock came this time, it felt almost like a dream. He took almost five minutes just to get himself over to the door. But this time, he had no recognition of the body in front of it. It was a tall man, held upright by his clean, black shoes. He wore a suit and John thought he saw a car behind him.

“Are you John Crazinski?”

“Yes.”

“The Secretary of Defense would like to speak to you.”

John’s mouth curled up. He didn’t think it would happen like this.

“We want to know how you knew about the ozone failure before anyone else. If you have a moment, we would like you to come with us.” He opened his body, revealing two military vehicles behind him.

John stared at the mammoth vehicles with bright eyes. “So it’s happening then,” he said, turning back to the man.

“Umm,” he looked uneasy. “You don’t know yet?”

John shook his head. “I came here five years ago waiting for this day. I didn’t need any t.v or radio to inform me of its arrival.”

The man nodded back. "Well, yes, the stratospheric ozone is nearing the depletion inflection point. We discovered its existence only last week when numerous countries in Africa recorded record-high temperatures. Cases of cell carcinoma began sprouting in every city within driving distance of the equator." He paused suddenly, eyeing John quizzically.

"Do you know what happened next?"

"Anything not in Russia or Antarctica becomes a fry-zone for human flesh. The ultraviolet radiation starts melting people's skin off like ice-cream and hundreds of thousands of people die in a single day. When did that happen? Last few days right?"

"Last week."

"Last week? How many people have died since then?"

"So far – about a fourth of the population."

John's mind became soft then. For years he had envisioned it –the sudden breakdown of the home that unabatingly fostered human civilization for so long – as if it would last forever. It was happening now, right before his eyes. John couldn't help but smile.

"John? We would like to speak with you." He gestured again to the cars.

John looked back at him. "There's nothing to be done. I'm sure your team realized I came all the way here for a reason."

"We don't know that. We just want to meet with you for a few hours, and see what you know."

"Everything I know is coming to fruition right now. After tomorrow, it ends there. I have no more answers."

"John, listen. These orders are from the very top. He thinks we still have time. Just come with us, we can take you back here when things are done."

"You don't understand. Things are already done."

Here he was. This government official standing in front of John's small log cabin, telling him what he had known for a decade. As John informed him about the dismal nature of humanity, he couldn't help but feel he had finally won. His entire family would all be back home now, wondering how they could have missed it.

"I'm sorry. I can't do anything for you." He started to close the door, knowing this would be his last glimpse of life before its end. The man responded only with frustration in his eyes, just another form of despair. Then John shut the door completely. He remained standing in front of it, feeling the magnitude of what he had just done. It would happen at midnight tonight–three hours from right now. John was sitting in front of his kitchen island, having gathered all of his important belongings next to him. He knew, years ago, he would leave proactively. There was no use in waiting for the inevitable end. That's the behavior of the naive, the hopeful, the ignorant. He was no such thing. The gun was fully loaded and ready for use. He had taken it out of the attic it had existed for the past five years. It only needed one use. With strong hands, John raised it upward

to his chin, then closed his eyes. Images of his family, of Rosa flashed by him. Soon, they quieted, and John thought only of peace.

The man fell to the floor peacefully. He died wearing military boots and a shaved head. Somewhere off in the distance, birds still cooed.

About the Authors

Joshua Ayad is a resident of Danville, California. From a young age, he has been an avid book reader, going hand in hand with a strong passion for writing. One of Joshua's many goals in prose is to convey perspectives of people with mental conditions to the reader in a light revealing their benefits. This stems from an early love for psychology, and its methods of helping others in their pursuit of happiness. Joshua is a student of Diablo Valley College, San Ramon, currently studying Physics as a field of choice. Joshua strives to grow as a writer his entire life, constantly seeking unfamiliar situations to widen his lens on life.

Araceli Berry, was born and raised in the Bay Area and is currently a new coming student at Cal State Long Beach. As she works towards a degree in Psychology, she has found a deep desire for writing along the way. Araceli always has loved poetry and continues perfecting her writing-style in that genre with the help of her former professor, Katie Zeigler. Through this time of isolation, she is excited to embark on this writer's journey, and discover new writing techniques and styles of literature.

Arthur Cabral is a Bay Area native and works as a Program Manager at a top ten Fortune 500 company. He was recently lifted off of academic probation from mistakes he made twenty years ago, and has enrolled in creative writing. He aspires to become an author and has enrolled in English courses at DVC to help achieve that dream. He has been a repeating keynote speaker for the University of British Columbia fundraisers to help raise funds for research for a condition he is afflicted with, Mucopolysaccharidosis IV, or more easily said MPS IV-B.

Robin Choudhury is a 19-year-old student at DVC. Raised in Massachusetts until she was 13, when her family moved out to the Bay Area, she has a borderline obsession with death, ex-Catholic aesthetics, and witchcraft. She's always been a creative person, from writing an Americanized Harry Potter rip-off starring her friend group in 4th grade, to drawing comics in the margins of her homework and getting in trouble, to creating way too elaborate daydream universes to think about instead of her actual responsibilities. She's changed her major from animation to script writing and then to character design and then back to script writing. She'll probably change it again. Her Very Specific Life Goal is to direct her own animated show on Adult Swim. She hates writing about herself. She likes wasting time on the internet instead of being productive. She doesn't know how to end this.

Miguel Dickenson

Kelly Gillum was born and raised the youngest of eight children in California's Central Valley, and his interests and focus tended to bounce around a little more than the rest of his family. He recently reestablished his desire to be a storyteller. Although his early 20s were spent dabbling in the film program at Modesto Junior College, most notably writing, directing, and editing two short films, he enjoyed the challenge of crafting stories from scratch to put on film. Currently a United States sailor, Kelly decided to take his first class in over 10 years and has found passion once again in the challenge of creating compelling stories. With the help of creative writing professor Katie Zeigler, he has been able to keep his footing and motivation during a challenging year for all. Kelly looks forward to telling more stories he can be proud of.

Jagdish Jois (AKA **Jag**) grew up in India, and has settled in the SF Bay Area for the past three and half decades. After a career in high-tech, and with the onset of an empty nest, he is now rekindling his high-school interest (from a very, very long time ago!) of creative writing instilled by his favorite teacher then. His interests lie in Shakespearean plays (favorite - Macbeth), 70's music, sketching portraits, and power walking. He looks forward to writing bad short stories to cure insomnia, and equally bad poetry for good measure, and satisfaction for his own soul.

Randy Martinez, was born and raised in Oxnard, California. He grew up witnessing the hardships of poverty in his community, and found happiness in books. As an adult he discovered the beauty of human resilience in the face of daily life struggles, and discovered a passion in writing. Nowadays he is working on his bachelor's degree in English. He hopes to write the stories of people he grew up with, and to capture the complexities of life in modern day America.

Stephen Melville

Todd O'Leary was born and raised in Tracy, California and has been studying at DVC for the past three years. He often finds himself writing when he should be studying for chemistry or only has five minutes left to finish his math final. Todd hopes to further his knowledge in the writing field at Southern Oregon University in the fall and thanks Professor Zeigler for her help and support.

Maxwell Ortiz

Austin Quintero

Isabel Scears has enjoyed expressing herself through a variety of mediums from a very young age including poetry, prose, drawing, singing, piano, sewing, cooking, and baking. She has been especially grateful in the last couple years to have had wonderful teachers and others help guide and hone her writing skills both through her education at Diablo Valley College, San Ramon campus as a concurrently enrolled high school student, and elsewhere.

Hugo Suárez was born and raised in the Bay Area; both of his parents are from México. He has three sisters, two of which are older. Growing up, he had trouble focusing in school. A big fan of comic books and movies, he would often draw characters and comics in his notebooks. He first began writing in high school, jotting down ideas for stories next to his drawings. He was particularly influenced by the work of Stephen King, and filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino. In his spare time, Hugo enjoys skateboarding, watching movies, and listening to music.

About the Artist

Ella Jensen is eighteen-years-old and an incoming freshman at Sonoma State University. Throughout high school, Ella developed her passion for art and has decided to pursue art and continue to expand her talent through and after college. Ella is majoring in art and also planning on minoring in either English or media studies. Ella loves using all art forms as ways of expression, and hopes to always continue to create and express through art.