

ORPHEUS



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, BAKERSFIELD

Orpheus

A Literary Journal

Volume XXXIV

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Cover Art: Photograph of Dr. Solomon O. Iyasere, founder of *Orpheus*.
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Orpheus is a yearly literary journal produced by California State University, Bakersfield. Submissions must be typed, double-spaced, and on 8x11" paper. *Orpheus* accepts submissions of all kinds, as there are no restrictions on the context or form. Use of profanity must be crucial to the context of the work.

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Dr. Solomon O. Iyasere, Sr.

1940 - 2016

Dr. Solomon Ogbede Iyasere, Sr., 76, CSUB Outstanding Professor of English, died Sunday, March 20, at San Joaquin Memorial Hospital after a brief illness.

Solomon spent a distinguished 44-year career at CSUB, joining the CSUB faculty in 1972 after completing a PhD in English from Binghamton University in Binghamton, NY.

Hired as an assistant professor to teach Shakespeare and literary criticism, Solomon earned early tenure and promotion to associate professor in 1974 and became a full professor in 1978. He received the Millie Ablin Excellence Award in Teaching in 1985-86, the Exceptional Merit Award for Excellence in Teaching in numerous years, was a Wang Award and Professor of the Year nominee, and was one of 50 professors selected nationwide by the American Association for Higher Education, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, for extraordinary leadership in teaching, scholarship, and service. Solomon developed and taught more than 35 courses in creative writing, world literature, Shakespeare, non-western literature, African literature, and African-American literature. He published extensively on the

oral tradition in African and African-American literature, earning international recognition as a pioneering scholar of African literature, rhetorical critic, and essayist who distinguished Eurocentric and Afro-centric forms of literary criticism and devised a new approach, which he termed “cultural formalism,” to analyze African and African-American literature.

Solomon’s most highly regarded scholarship includes analyses of Nobel prize-winning author Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Sula* and of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, as well as publications on *Othello*, including *Racial Issues in Shakespeare’s Othello*; “Race Matters: Approaches to Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” and “Pardon Me, Professor, Why Do I Have to Read *Othello*?”

As founding Director of Diversity Services (1988-92), Solomon laid the groundwork for inclusive excellence and collaborated to establish effective policies and guidelines to diversify faculty and staff. He helped revise the general education curriculum to include multicultural and international dimensions and designed the English Single-Subject Teacher Preparation program to incorporate multiculturalism. He developed the MA in Teaching of English, now the cornerstone for educating community college writing teachers in the region. He chaired the Department of English and Communications (1992-98), co-founded the Career Beginnings Program and the Ernest Williams, Jr. Scholarship Fund, and served on numerous departmental and university-wide committees.

Solomon’s legacy includes his founding of *Orpheus*, CSUB’s annual student literary journal. Since 1973, *Orpheus* has published the work of more than 2,500 students, several of whom have become national award-winning writers and playwrights.

Son of the late Johnson Uigwe and Esimotogiwa Okoro Iyasere, Solomon is survived by his wife, Marla Wynn Mudar Iyasere, PhD, their three children, Christiana Adesua Modupe Iyasere, MD MBA, Solomon Ogbede Iyasere, Jr., MBS; Julia Esimotogiwa Iyasere, MD MBA, son-in-law Saumya Das, MD PhD, and grandchildren Nayan Iyasere Das, Lola Iyasere Das, and Ayla Iyasere Das.

A Memorial Tribute will be celebrated at 10 A. M. on Saturday, April 9th at Hillcrest Memorial Park Pavilion, 9101 Kern Canyon Road, Bakersfield, CA.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations be made to the Dr. Solomon O. Iyasere, Sr. Memorial Scholarship, CSUB Foundation, 9001 Stockdale Highway, Bakersfield, CA 93311.

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Poetry



Photograph by Darlin Morales

Shydel Villa

Fleur

She capsulated
The sun,
The bristle of the leaves,
The touch of skin,
And honey breathe

She was everything
Everywhere

She feels deeper
Understands more

Only to be ruined
For brisk emotions.

So perhaps when they say-
To leave what is beautiful alone

It's to save-
Us instead.



The Grove

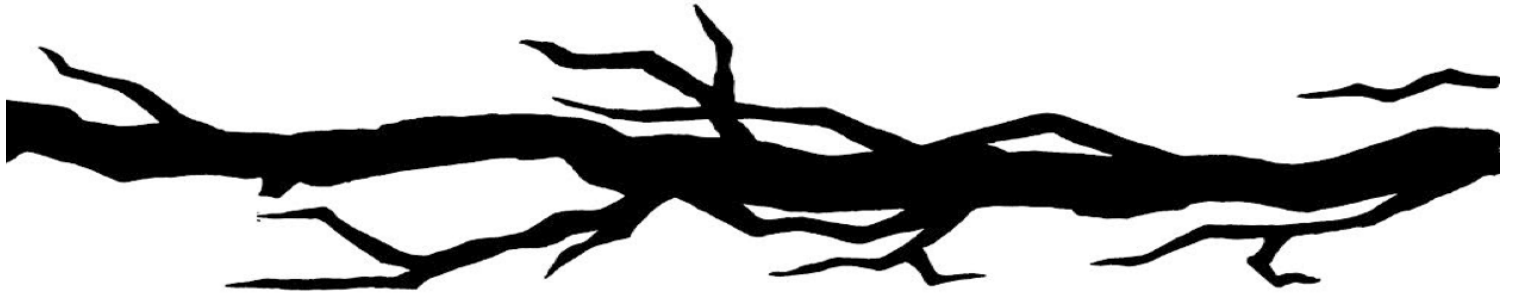
Pink, a color of distinct marvel that has descended over time from a trait of masculinity to femininity. It's true how colors have no connotation; we as humans have assigned meaning. The indecisive red pastel of a color decorates the flowers, staining them with an iridescent glow, transcending over the small grove in clusters of buds and blooming tendrils.

It's simple in its magnificence, as people stray by the path and stop to admire or meager along the cool path protected by the shade of the grove. Delicately placed on that pathway was a stack of books one could only look peculiarly at because of its odd mixture of genres and time relevancy, and the only pattern that could be deciphered in its entirety was that each had a moral theme with a purpose of bringing humility and understanding to the readers. As to why they were stacked in such a pile, one think they were forgotten, but time and age had been the most unbecoming to the novels seeing as they were consumed by the flowers within the grove, the branches reaching out to cover the books to offer them peace and protection, but not enough to dismiss their titles to give a peek as to what they were.

And with this, one could be tempted to reach down and take the books, but it was a common pathway, and no one had touched the small pile of words, so it leads to wonder as to why nobody else had thought to take the books throughout the years for their self-possession.

No, they were to be preserved, and the soul that was to reach down and break up the scenery and detach the flowers from their belongings would be a courageous soul destined to change their life.



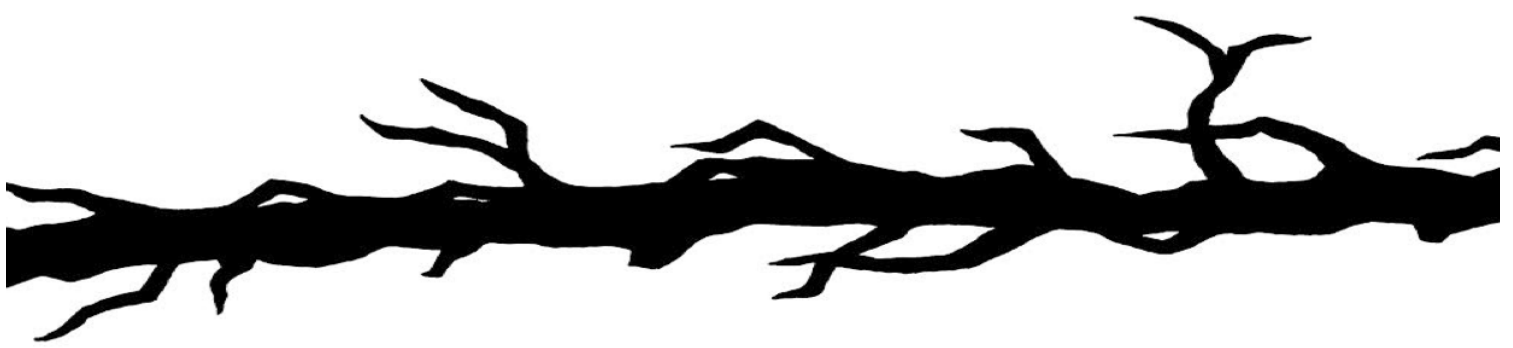


Mateo Lara

The New Age and Other Poems

The New Age

I've burned off my fingerprints and I've been hollow ever since, transcending the gray space,
I'm a ragged path into the woods to hidden lakes, stillborn worrier of a never-ending night,
And this color of the void can never be replaced or altered.
I'm in the mouth of Eliot and the womb of Plath,
Struggling for a modernist/post-modernist sentiment of the past,
That doesn't cling to the bones like the words "fuck" and "faggot" do.
I'm of the new age with a bitter tongue and reviving what it means to be "too sensitive" and
"politically correct," a "social justice warrior," never getting a proper grip.
But, god, I find something holy about blood, and something holy about when you cum,
And drinking in bars downtown, when you're 21, with people you love, and watching people who
don't know the difference between Donald Trump and the Devil, distorting their lives.
I'm searching for answers in the pit of my stomach, and my ribs are bruised and my lungs and
my heart are rotting like meat in the sun; I took a prayer and buried it.
And I know love, not like a Shakespearian sonnet,
But like a creature with claws and fangs, all Halloween, bleeding in my dirty mouth.
I'm still the little brown boy, who loves pale white angels, Seraphim, Ginsberg's old white tale,
On the way it is and was to be gay, only his skin was the snow,
My skin... muddy from all my ancestor's graves in the water,
In the wombs of their mothers and their words in a language that has been lost to me since I
was 5 years old in a city with bad air.
I swallow my sorrows every night, give up my light to the majesty darkness, I grit my teeth when
I sleep and I whisper boy's names that catch their afternoon classes,
With girls they don't love properly. I'm learning the world is shattering,
And we're of the new age, built up in new rules, all of us, pretending we're not, but we are, just
in different degrees like the temperatures rising in the waters of the world, and the earth is
crying, and there's some change in a thought, pressing on, boom, like that,
"I have nothing to do with explosions," but I'm always bursting



Rush

I am... wild nothing,
Had built churches for a purity ring,
Sought balance and composure,
For having such small hands,
And in replacing my only sweet sorrow,
I have rushed the art of growing up.
I am cancerous and needy,
Built a fine shrine from your body ache,
Bled you out every chance I got,
Collected bones in a chest, like treasure, with fingers against thin veins of a lover,
Pale-moonlit temple and scepter and altar,
Combining the want and the fallen other,
I am that one...I know no other way to find the truth.
I am black hair, brown eyes, broken unwashed hands,
Copper, dizzying deep mud skin,
I am rushing the art of honesty,
Of truth, of lying, of prey and predator,
Of drinking, of fucking, of buying, of working,
I am rushing the art of survival, learning how to shut my glitter stained mouth,
Took a whiskey shot in the pool, and watched you drool over girls,
As I snuck a cigarette from your back pocket and lit in my heart,
All rage and chemical moans,
Burned desire like a forest, and watched flower petals disintegrate.
There it is...the rush, now hush... watch the aftermath of our best laid plans...consume.

Nihilistic
For Mihael

A serpent ate your fruit, (as vicious)
And went writhing with you in the garden, (as natural)
Told you light was darkness, (as wicked)
And duality meant despair, and you laid there, (as tiring)
Swallowing everything, as if gold would pour from out your tears, (as daunting)
I see the strong playing with your bones, (as strength)
Suffocating everything you've ever been, (as identity)
To think it meant nothing to hold the sun between your hands, (as light)
And dream about the knife under your bed, and what love felt like, (as passion)
Deep in your red wine, there was blood and a lover that haunted you. (as nightmarish)
You were everything and nothing, swinging your arms, (as eternity)
In ritualistic patterns, to tell me life had oblivion as mistress, (as eternally)
And you did this to prove a point, left me in the garden, (as growing)
With all your rotted memories, I still whisper your name, (as echoing)
Even if everything was dying, I held one belief in the eyes you stole from me. (as energy)

Keith Kirouac

The Truth about the Birds and the Bees

The bees are unlike birds.
I've heard the buzz.
Hawks soar solitarily
On great wings
While bugs huddle lowly
To flutter
Then sting.

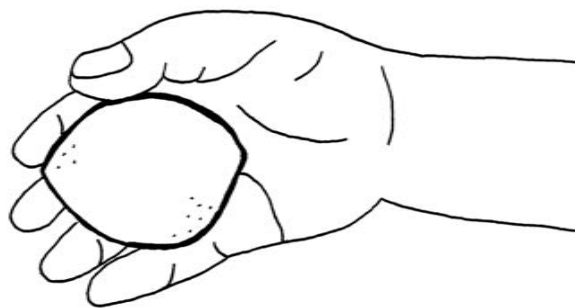
Beware!
Insects do not pair.
It is a many-feathered friend
Who builds a nest
And rests upon the eggs.

Still, not all birds fly
Though they might. . .make an attempt.
The cock knows only cooing and preening.
Meanwhile,
Hives come alive
With drones who know
That at the center lays a queen.



A Stand

Surviving hard times
Is not turning sour lemons
Into cool refreshment;
It's taking those lemons
And trading for limes.



Keith Kirouac

Loving a Woman

Loving a woman
Is not about bringing her
A beautiful bouquet
Of fragrant flowers
And a dozen of her
Favorite sweet treats.

It is not escorting her,
Arm-in-arm,
To the latest hot-spot,
Turning her friends green with envy
And her pink with giddiness.

Loving a woman is
Watching her trip
Over ridiculous shoes
That she honestly believes
Make her legs look better
To skin her perfectly round knees red
As she noisily spews
Pinkish liqueur
On expensive floors
Before smearing it on
Your carefully knotted tie.

Loving a woman
—really loving her—
Is still being glad
You can kiss her
Goodnight.



Jeff Eagan

Because a Science Book Told Me So

I read or heard
from a science book or a teacher when I was ten (or eleven)
that all the water in the world would one day end
with every drop I'd never saved. Neither mild was my alarm nor thought of my trepidation
but frivolous waters I enjoyed and wasted.
Yet this memory remains: that one
day I'll never live nor drink again.



Harrington Park

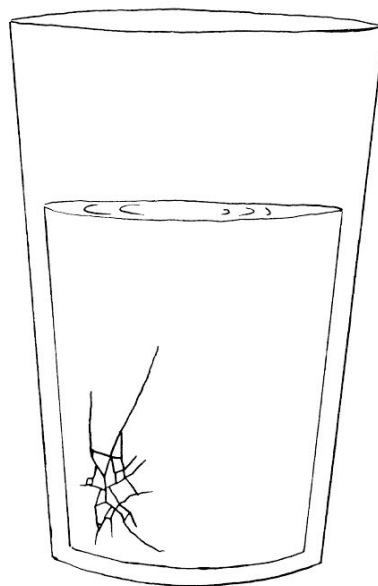
Will it matter that
you swim in water,
spelling thankless death?

Will my privilege treading gallons –
marked with chlorine sweat –
matter when in dusty corners
my lonely trophies rest?

As a boy I swam in poisoned waters,
As a child you were irrigated.

Your children will kick dirt with fool's gold and feel rich yet
My son will inherit the anxiety of memory, an intruder in your dust

And soon it will not matter; he'll swim
but he'll fear drowning.



Mark Saso

Inside the Life of a CSUB Student

Arrive 45 minutes before class
To find a decent spot. Walk
10 minutes even with a pass.
Must hustle to class, no time for talking.

Walk into lecture find my usual seat.
Unload my bag: a pencil and notebook
I throw onto my desk. Shall I retreat
To study or open up my Facebook?

The professor shows up, he speaks, I write.
Check the clock 14 times until he stops.
I pack up and walk into the sunlight,
Only to repeat it for 10 weeks tops.

Keep going to school "I will pay it off in
Time." Get your degree, walk. Fin.



Greg C. Bolanos

Seahorses Don't Have These Problems

Seahorses never discuss politics.

They live their lives without questioning their existence.

Male seahorses give birth, but do they consider this a miracle?

Do they talk about seahorse abortion like it's a one-way ticket to Hell?

Nah. They bump their pregnant bellies together in celebration

And have up to fifteen-hundred babies at a time without blinking an independently operable eye.

Do they mock each other when they have more than five-hundred babies?

Do they call each other "wide load" or "egg cradle"?

Of course not, they just move on and eat thirty to fifty Mysis Shrimp a day without a care.

They don't call one another fat for eating forty shrimp in comparison to their thirty-five.

They don't compare anything at all really.

Seahorses don't hate their fellow seahorses for voting Trump.

They don't shame their friends for masturbating daily.

They don't try to convert each other to seahorse Christianity.

They swim and eat and use pair bonding to choose a single mate for their entire life;

Seahorses don't debate if they love someone; they do a courtship dance and then they know.

They don't argue about their reason for existing, why the sea is blue or why eel grass is green.

They don't covet what famous seahorses have because they just don't think about it.

They don't even discuss politics during voting season.

Seahorses just don't have these problems.



Laura Robbie

Patient Notes

“1971”

I- the human coat rack
which left my two feet sore,
smelling of rotten egg-
standing by the classroom door.
On the bus ride home they'd shout
OUTHOUSE! OUTHOUSE!
I- a deliberate turn to the right-
would ignore their stares, their hate-
wringing sweaty hands, and wait till four.
That night, as every night that dragged by-
the old clock stuck on six-
the rats in mother's cabinet
scurried by and stared at me.
CHILDHOOD
should not be so hard- or bleak- or dark-
but it was for me, that child of eight.

"1999"

I remember too well
that dank smell that permeated
inside the store-
END OF RIVER ANTIQUES
a sign read, outside the door.
I, about 36, along with two boys-
ages two and six. Well, it was
our favorite place just up that road!
Their fireplace hot- yet it heated only
one small room where Dale sat,
rocking- day by day.
The rest of the store was cold.
My sons would gather toys.
Me? Porcelain pieces and dolls.
That was long ago-
1999? My mind is gone.
Two years ago we drove by
and the store was gone as well-
replaced by some other "99" edifice
so common today. Sickening.
My sons- much older now-
but I could see that sadness
they refused to express.
They are now adults-
not "allowed" to miss
memories of the past.
But I do.
And I am not afraid
to admit.

“2016”

Continued fascination
at the life I've been given-
punctuated by this messy brain.
“Why this? Why that?”
Alone, unable to escape,
I turn to medication
And wait. How long?
I cannot say,
because I must wait
that appointed time-
Ten days? Two weeks?
He looks up at me,
briefly. Only for seconds-
and then repeats his diagnosis.
“This time be compliant
if you want to get better!”
But there is no “better” for me-
only marginal improvement
from some anti-anxiety agent-
and some false sense of direction
of someone I pretend to be.
I leave that room,
walk down the hall,
and smack the arms that
reach for me.
“Stay inside your frames!”
I yell at them, and ignore the stares
from behind the desk
of that arrogant receptionist.

Sylvia Brown

To Ama, From Your Forgotten Daughter

your love for men consumes you.
i cannot compete.
i am not big enough.

you never wanted a girl.
you even told me you wept in sadness when the doctors told you i would be a girl emerging
through your womb and into your life.
the nine months you carried me in your womb was not enough- it was too much. (what a
burden)
the twelve hours of labor you endured to bring me into this world was not enough- it was too
much. (what a burden)

the first year of my life- when you first heard me call to you- you did not like the sound.
when i walked my first steps, you walked the other way.
when i began to flower, you told me i was a weed.
when i began to grow breasts and hips, you told me i was too thick around the middle.
i started to grow long legs: the only gift you gave me.

your beautiful long, long legs. boy, do men see those more than mine.
you use those legs like magnetic fields, alluring men who cannot be tamed.
you love that.

ama, ama, did you know our Mayan mothers before us had those same long legs?
our beautiful ancestors who prayed to the moon,
our beautiful ancestors who slaved all day ensuring their families could eat,
our beautiful ancestors who were vicious against unfaithful men,
to prioritize the sanctity of Family.
their legs were not for luring danger.
they were used to elude brutality. rape.



and our Mayan mothers' broad noses were completely crucial,
for validating the safe content of the food to feed their family.
if only that was the case with you.
you use that snout of yours to whiff out savages.
you've muzzled through your trove of male chauvinist pigs,
found the most plump to send around your daughter.
Your Daughter.
Your Daughter.
Your Daughter!

your little loverboy dehumanized me, antagonized me, assaulted me, and left me powerless.
and you let him.
you chose a man of one year's conditional- excuse me- you chose a coward of one year's
conditional "love" over your daughter's twenty years of **un**conditional love.
you betrayed me.
that is the least of it.
you betrayed the body your ancestors gave you.
you betrayed yourself.

Short Stories



Photograph by Darlin Morales

Marlin Morales

Dastaar



The window was open. A draft wafted into Rahul's bedroom, weighty like hot breath. Sid sat hunched on the corner of the bed furthest from the door. If he straightened his spine, he could see out the window. The draft passed over his head, over his unkempt hair. Sid would have to put on his dastaar if he went downstairs, but he didn't want to deal with his family just yet. His fists clenched every time their voices rose. A few minutes of silence wasn't too much to ask for.

Sid lied back on the bed; the cloth of the dastaar wrinkled underneath him. Faded plastic stars littered the ceiling. He was amazed they were still up there. The carnival from elementary school. The raffle. Sid had won the packet of stars, and then immediately lost them to a race with Marla. He was stunned she had them all these years, and she had given them to Rahul as a token of friendship his first day of high school with them.

A few raps on the door made him twitch. "Sid? You in there?"

He cleared his throat and sat up, adjusting his suit. "Yeah." While he would've rather stayed alone, at least it wasn't his dad looking for him. Or someone worse.

The door opened and Marla walked in slowly, mindful of the skirt that hid her tanned legs. Her hand remained on her headscarf—it'd been tossed on haphazardly by Sid's mother, and hung loosely. "Your dad's looking for you," she said as she closed the door. Her eyes swept over most of the room. "Looks like he changed nothing." Marla gasped and rushed over to the bookcase left of the window. "He still kept the roadster?"

"He kept a lot of things you gave him."

She held the roadster like it was a baby bird in her hands. "I used to think Rahul had a crush on me." She smiled and snickered about something remembered.

"He sort of did," Sid admitted. Rahul had confided in Sid how he liked the way Marla said

his name. Not 'Ra-Hool' the way it was written and normally said. Marla would say it the Spanish way, 'Rrra-ool'. She never hesitated saying his name while others got hung up on its pronunciation. Rahul had liked that straightforwardness from Marla, admired it. "You just scared him a lot."

"Not like those *modest* girls he was used to." She caught her reflection in the closet mirror, pulling her headscarf forward as she went over to the bed, to the side adjacent to Sid. "He was *really* shy around girls his first days of school." She adjusted her skirt and lowered herself down, leaning her chest against the edge of the bed. "He couldn't even look me in the eye when I'd wear my shorts." She started driving the roadster along the patterns of the bed sheet.

"An obedient Indian boy," said Sid, "and you corrupted him. Made him a rebel."

"Pssh. A little rebellion is healthy for the soul."

Sid chuckled softly. "I can't take you seriously in the headscarf."

Marla rammed the roadster into Sid's hand, clearing her path. "He looked really serious in his turban thing."

"Pagri, pagga, dastaar.... My family uses dastaar."

"I like dastaar better. Rahul just wanted to be like everyone else."

"Hard to do when you're the only boy with a turban." Sid looked to the window. "He could never get used to the attention."

"You don't wear one."

"My parents are chill about tradition. You should see how mad my grandparents get when they see me without one." Sid laughed at the memory. "One time they yelled at my parents saying I'd be confused for a Mexican and get sucked into a gang." It suddenly didn't feel so funny said out loud. Sid lied back on the bed, a little further from Marla. He didn't want to think of his grandparents downstairs.

“You *do* look Latino sometimes,” she allowed, “but we’re not all in gangs, man.”

“I know. My grandparents don’t want to know much. It inconveniences them.”

One of the wheels on the roadster squeaked every left turn. “Remember when he was wearing those hoodies to hide it?”

“Yeah,” Sid laughed. “He didn’t last a week.”

“It was really meant to be a winter thing.” Marla had the car drift by Sid’s shoulder. “I liked that orange one, the puffy one.”

“He looked funny from the back in that one.”

Marla started doing figure-eights, wrinkling the bed sheet. “I ran into his parents on the way up here.”

Something rattled through Sid, hot and angry, and he had to choke it back. “They say anything?”

“It was more like a synchronized glare.” Marla made the roadster brake hard and flip a few times, landing on its passenger side. Marla was thoughtful for a moment. “His mom’s got pretty eyes. Not like his, though.”

“They don’t blame—”

“Oh, they *totally* blame me, like *I’m* the one who made him jump.” Marla had the roadster right itself. “I bet he didn’t leave the house much back in India.” Marla drove the roadster on. “Probably did very little in India.”

Lived very little, breathed very little. “Different place and customs, Marla.”

“Guys and girls—especially girls—are freer here. Didn’t his parents do any research before moving? *Especiallly* to California during the summer? It’s too hot for modesty.”

“India gets hell-temperatures in the summer. Don’t complain.”

“Latin people aren’t afraid of a little heat.” The roadster sped ahead and sideswiped Sid’s ear. “And another thing. Rahul was going to *want* to fit in. What did they expect?”

“They hoped he wouldn’t *want* to. Duh.” Sid rolled over onto his side, his back to Marla. He played with a loose string from the bed sheets. “Your parents and his aren’t that different, you know. Really strict and—”

“He was scared of his parents. I’m not.”

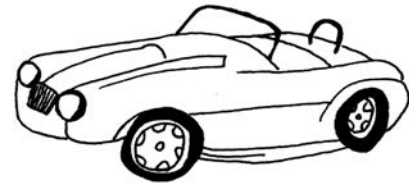
“Being obedient isn’t fear.”

“It’s submission.”

“No.”

“You’re defending something you don’t even practice.”

“*Marla.*” Sid pulled the string so hard it ripped clean off.



They both quieted, the silence broken by the occasional squeak of the roadster’s wheels as Marla maneuvered it over the wrinkles of the bed sheet. “You know I never mean any disrespect, Sid.”

“I know.” He dropped the string to the floor, studying the shape it took once it landed. It’d fallen so gracefully. Sid had plenty of time to admire it.

“You’re supposed to correct me when I say something dumb.” Marla chuckled half-heartedly before sighing back into seriousness. “You only feel it when your family visits, and they don’t visit a lot.”

“Feel what?”

“That push and pull. My parents think I’m too American. At school and everywhere else, I’m too Mexican and should be deported.” She scoffed. “My mom’s from El Salvador—*not* Mexico—and my dad’s from *Puerto Rico*, where they’re U.S. citizens from birth.” She chuckled. “If you wear your *dastaar* around town, you’re considered Muslim. Your family’s freaking *Sikh*. You can Google it. Everybody’s gotta know that by now.”

Sid rolled onto his back. “My grandparents call me coconut.” He didn’t get any reaction and cleared his throat. “Not to my face, but I can hear it when they whisper to each other.”

“Agh,” Marla groaned, “those whispers. What they won’t say to your face. When we went to my uncle’s house for Christmas, my grandma kept calling me ‘gringa’. *Gringa*. I was just speaking more English than usual, *damn...*” The roadster sped up again. “She flew all the way from P.R. to *here* to visit us. What did she expect to hear?” The roadster did a wheelie and proceeded to flip over onto its face.

“That’s probably what he felt a lot,” Marla continued. “That push and pull. I think Rahul couldn’t take it for long.”

They quieted again, the room growing warmer with the presence of body heat and the outdoor air. Sid’s forehead prickled with sweat, heat from the room as well as inside.

“We’re both and neither,” he said.

“What and what?”

Sid sat up quickly enough that his vision went for a few seconds. “We’re born here but it’s like we’re being raised in two different countries. Foreign parents with American kids.” He stretched and his back popped

“Something *hyphen* American kids,” Marla corrected. “Indian-American, Latin-American...” She gathered her skirt in her hand and got to her feet. “We only *half-count*.” She sat on the bed, bouncing twice.

“Half ‘n halves. That’s what we are. Two pieces that won’t fit together.”

Marla picked up the roadster, tossing it between her hands. “I bet Rahul felt like a half when he came here,” she said quietly. “He was a very sensitive guy. It hit him hard.”

“No doubt about it.” Sid stood up and stretched, his back popping painfully. He went to the window and thought about poking his head out to see if anyone was— “Did you say something about my dad earlier?”

“Oh, yeah. He wanted to know where you were, and I started looking for you.”

“What did he want?”

“He didn’t say, but it probably wasn’t important if he hasn’t been yelling your name.”

Marla flopped onto her stomach on the bed, her headscarf flying down her head. “We would’ve heard from up here.”

“Loud like your relatives from P.R.? We can pass, can’t we? We’ve already got the brown skin.” He turned to face Marla. “Donday estuh el bibliotecuh, Marrrrla?”

“Gross.” She threw the roadster at him.

But instead of catching the car, he dodged it. The roadster flew.

“Shit!”

“No—”

It clanged down the fire escape, its fall so violent compared to the string’s. Sid stuck his head out the window, but he couldn’t see it through the rusted metal bars and planks. No one was in the alleyway, so there was no risk of someone stealing it. Sid came back into the room. “I think it hit the ground.” He started following Marla to the door and then stopped. “Damn it.”

“What?” Marla turned back.

“One second.” Sid shook out the cloth, folded it into the width he wanted, smoothing out the wrinkles he’d made.

“I’ll be outside.”

“Wait—I don’t want to go by myself. Just hold on.” The section he’d placed on his head, from the nape of his neck forward, kept slipping off.

Marla came closer and held the point Sid wanted to keep in place. “I got it.”

“To the mirror.” They made their way over to the mirror hanging on the closet door. “Hold it tighter.” Sid knew exactly how it needed to go, but his arms weren’t reaching where he wanted them to and they were already starting to ache.

“Want me to call your—?”

“No.”

She giggled. "It's been a while, huh?"

"Yeah—*damn it*—ah—"

Marla watched him concentrate in the mirror. "I bet Rahul did it faster."

"Like in two minutes. Should've asked him to show you." The challenging part after wrapping the layers at differing angles was dealing with the extra cloth waiting to be placed. It kept entangling in his arms.

Marla put her hand down and backed away as Sid finished the difficult part of the dastaar. She fixed her headscarf. "He had it on, didn't he? When they found his... him."

"Yeah. It was still on." The tightly-bound dastaar had survived the fall while its wearer had not. Rahul had been meticulous about it even then.

Sid reached back for the small tail of cloth and brought it forward, opening it out and then covering his hair showing on top. He tucked it into the sides, finishing the shape, checking the back in case any hair was sticking out. He straightened it a little, carefully patting down the cloth and smoothing out the wrinkles.

The two of them went out of the room, the hallway air only two degrees cooler. Voices and exclamations in Hindi or English (a little bit of Hinglish) rose up the small staircase as Marla and Sid went down. Marla went slow, the bottom of the skirt piling at each step, and she was already minding the headscarf. Sid held the back of her skirt to make it easier on her only to immediately drop it once they were within sight.

Sid led the way, both he and Marla nodding respectfully to every adult they happened to make eye-contact with. The living room wasn't too crowded, but the groups were constantly breaking up and changing members, everyone needing to speak to someone. More commotion than usual. His parents were nowhere to be—

"Sidharth!"

He and Marla jumped, but it was just Sid's father—not angry, but more annoyed that his

son had been difficult to find. “Where have you been?” he asked, towering over them both. He was already dressed for the ceremony, his dastaar bright orange while Sid had opted for a dark blue. “Everybody’s grouping up into car—”

“*Ohhhhh*, he joins his people!” Sid’s jaw clenched at the sound of his grandmother’s grating voice. In dark purple clothes, flowy and minimally decorated, she broke into their group. “You look so handsome in the dastaar, beta. Why don’t you wear it more often?”

The look she gave Sid made him feel sick. “*Visit* more often,” Sid replied. “Dad, we’re going outside for some fresh air.”

“You feeling sick?” Sid’s grandmother asked, not even giving her son a chance to speak. “It’s this dirty California air, isn’t it?” Her eyes darted to Marla and then back to Sid. “All this pollution is disgusting.”

Sid shook his head. “No, no. There’s just too much hot air in here.” He took Marla’s hand and led her out.

She covered her mouth with her hand and made a scandalized, “*Oooooooooohhh*,” as she followed Sid. Once they’d gone a few steps down the duplex staircase, Marla let out a breathless laugh. “You didn’t see her face! Hey, it was something like this.” Marla stopped to make the face: furrowed brows, a scowl with a twitching upper lip. Exaggerated on Marla’s soft features.

Sid only glanced back before continuing on. “Yeah, yeah. Let’s go. It’s hotter here.” He wanted to get outside, to breathe.

They both flew through the building door, recoiling almost immediately at the hot sunlight. Marla pulled down her headscarf while Sid’s forehead prickled with sweat from the heat and the dastaar. The two quietly rounded the corner into the alleyway and searched the perimeter of the fire escape.

“Just like my abuela,” Marla said. “I hope I never get like that. Insensitive bitch.”

He only pressed his lips together, making a sort of “Mmhm” and wished Marla wouldn’t mention her. Conversation was the last thing he wanted this moment.

Sid leaned over the two trash cans, hoping the car might’ve landed outside of them. He could feel his breathing go uneven and heart race at thought of the fall from the top of the overpass to the freeway below. For days he tried to stop wondering what it was like. Did Rahul feel free during that short fall? Was it wrong to imagine what it would be like? Was Sid thrilled or scared by his curiosity of it?

“I mean—”

His right leg swung forward and kicked one of the trash cans into the other, both of them falling over and puking onto the cracked pavement of the alleyway.

Marla backed away in time, watching Sid’s body spin to face away from her. Both of his hands reached up and pulled the turban off, sending it straight into the pile of trash. He kicked at it a few times before staggering away and resting his forehead against the cool brick wall.

Sid felt like he would throw up at the thought, at what his imagination could readily conjure up. That willingness to leave the apartment, to walk that far with so much time to think and change his mind, to hop onto the ledge and completely let go. Rahul had never seemed so brave. Sid felt sick at how easily he could see his friend do all this.

Could Sid really call Rahul’s suicide bravery? His family had no problem thinking it cowardice. Rahul’s parents might’ve thought the same, only not as vocally as Sid’s grandmother. She was the oldest at the gathering, and her word carried a finality to it that couldn’t be fought no matter how ugly her words were.

“We’re supposed to respect our elders and get *none* of it back,” Sid managed over the lump in his throat. He wanted to cry but he choked it back a little longer. “She comes here and *judges me* for not wearing the dastaar when it’s the dastaar that killed him.” He couldn’t get louder, *too* angry to yell.

Marla inched closer, dragging her feet so Sid would know. She placed a hand on his back, and braced herself as he whirled back around and hugged her.

“He was torn apart the second he knew he was different,” he said into her shoulder, “spent so much time trying to come up to our level, to *be* one of us just to live in the gray. Please *us* or please his *parents*. He could never get it right. *We* never will.”

He stayed in the steadiness of her arms. She passed her hand over his head, through his unkempt hair. They stood together in a few minutes of silence.

Shydel Villa

Invisible People

At night they come out.

Like animals.

Helpless, sad animals.

They're lifeless, just as myself. They're tired, and I see myself within them, because I'm so tired, oh so very tired. I sit there on the park bench, and a few familiar faces cross my path, some with eyes just as hard as my own, others light hearted and adjusting to the world that belongs to the people at night. We're here, everyday people see us and pass by us with a disgruntled look, shaming society or simply shaming us for the pathways that have taken place forcing our paths to cross.

A late night jogger passes me, his eyes fixated on the road before him, and he keeps his head held up high, but I know what he's struggling to do. The if-I-don't-look-at-them-I-won't-feel-guilty. Or better yet the look-past-them-and-they're-not-there. You can easily see it because his eyes are straining forward, and it's natural for a human's eye to wander as they walk, but people's eyes stay forward, creating ghosts of ourselves in their minds.

I glance dimly at my hands, and a small cough shakes my body, and I sniffle. It had finished raining earlier, and my body was still soaked from walking to the secluded park where I decided to sleep for tonight. I had avoided most of the heavy rainfall that plagues the Northern Bay Area by hiding in the 24 hour gym that is my refuge and a building that I would never originally think would bring me so much relief in the sense just to avoid the conditions outside. Although my relief may have been short lived because I could feel the hot air escaping my throat and nostrils, just to add to the incredible day that will roll into the hundreds of days that will make me familiar with the darkness.

I could never beat the darkness.

I was getting sick.

I refused to go to one of those places where they hand out medicine to the people that simply take with no amount of gratitude, or so much gratitude and thanking God profusely that I feel a shiver of embarrassment for them. Not as if I'm one to talk, I'm here, just like the rest of them. I'm past being scared and feeling alone, there's just the strings of my dignity that I'm desperately attempting to cling onto, although they're very steadily slipping out of the strength of my white finger tips.

To add salt to the wound, a drop of rain hits the palm of my hand, and another, until I glance up and there's a dark storm cloud rolling stealthily above me. They fall in the hundreds, and I grasp the meager items I have that are intricately placed in my backpack, shoulder my jacket on, and flip my hood to cover me from the rain. Within moments, I'm soaked completely again, and I don't want to walk the four miles back to the gym. I debate internally and head out of the park. There is a storage unit that I could go to, but that was even further and higher into the hillside. However, there would be a cot I could sleep on and even a small heater, so I decided to take my chances there. I walked steadily on the sidewalk, sticking close to the sides of buildings that could offer me cover with their ledges.

The tips of my fingers began to numb after the first mile, and I could feel myself shaking, taking every short cut through parks and tunnels that I could find to save me from the onslaught of rain. By mile two I felt my toes losing this battle, and a car suddenly paced itself beside me. I keep my hair tied back and tucked into my jacket to keep the appearance of a male from afar, seeing as my body was gangly already, to save myself from the trouble of defending my womanhood. However, this car was driven by a female, and she rolled down the window to catch my attention. I glanced in her direction briefly, hoping she would keep going, but she motioned towards me.

"Do you need a ride?"

I shook my head.

She persisted.

"It's raining! I'd feel awful if I couldn't help!"

She'd feel awful if she couldn't help.

In that moment, I thought about the frigidness in my body, and internally my mind screamed for me to take the ride. The tightness binding my chest, the itch to cough and numbness among my limbs was calling out for me to just take the ride. As a bitter bonus, I had been walking among the urban districts all day, and I could feel the energy seeping away with me down the gutters along with the rain.

Momentarily, I stopped my trek and glanced both ways to make sure there wasn't anyone lurking. The stories you hear among the creatures, especially girls- are terrifying. I'll be damned if there's a day where I get taken. Then again, most of the people relaying the stories are high on meth or inhibited from alcohol, so there's that factor to chime in.

Against my better judgment, I entered the vehicle with an awkward smile of thanks. I was soaked, and I was soaking this poor lady's Benz with my wet clothing. I placed my backpack on

my lap and closed the door behind me. Truly, I didn't want to look at her. To look at her would mean for me to see the sadness that plays into a Good Samaritan's eyes, and the good gestures are welcomed, but the pitying for our species is not.

Not for me; I don't want people to feel sorry for me.

Typically, people think of homeless people as dirty or disgusting humans that have succumbed to the lower end of society by their own will. To be fair, I had thought so too at a young age, always taught that the people idly sitting on the sides of the road and corner stops between streets with their bicycles filled with cans and bags and utterly useless shit would only beg for money, and turn around and use it for whatever recreational drug of their choice. Quickly, as with anything else; I learned that was hardly the case. There are many of those that spoil it for the other majority that create the face of homeless people; however, a silent majority are clinging to the ropes, untouched by the addictions of crack and alcohol that begin to plague you as the days creep by without a place to necessarily call your home.

Because of that, the silent creatures that pass each day on the street can look as clean as anybody else, and those that stay prideful and silent are resilient, and I force myself to be as such. The only notion that I gave to my status was the familiar backpack over stuffed with too many items, although I attempted each day to conceal the necessities I learned were needed.

"Where do you need to go?" the lady said gently, although there was a new undertone of annoyance in her voice because her seat was sopping with water.

"Pacheco street, please."

"You were going to walk all the way there?" her eyes widened and she began the climb into the distance with her purring vehicle, and I merely nodded.

"Honey, you're very young for being outside so late."

Oh.

"Thank you for the ride," I cut in, "I really appreciate it." Truly I did. The warmth from the vehicle's heater was lifting the numbness off my toes— I mean— I was still shaking and the water was clinging to my skin, but the conditions in here were heaven compared to a few minutes ago.

I attempted to remain silent in the heaviness that plagued between us. I knew she wanted to question me further, even maybe *help* me, but there was no alternative that would work. So I sat there resigned to the silence, understanding we had a few miles left on the journey, which would have normally taken me another hour to reach, but the minutes swayed

by, and I could only hope to press myself further in her seat to remain invisible until she reached the street.

Unfortunately, she was a genuine human being and broke our barrier of silence within the ten minute drive.

“Honey, I can’t help but wonder why you’re wandering the streets in the rain all by yourself. I know you probably don’t want to talk about it—“

“I really don’t.”

“Yeah, but—“

“If you could pull over please, we’re almost there.”

“Honey,”

“It’s a long story—“

“But there’s so many places that could help you! Where you don’t have to be on the streets, do you know how dangerous it is to be out this late?”

I could feel my blood burn dangerously beneath my skin; this was a subject I avoided, even among those that were close to me in our barrage of creatures.

“I could take you to one of them? I think they may still be open!”

My jaw clenched, and I avoided the eyes of sympathy from this woman of leisure, who had her nails done in some absurd style, a designer bag nestled in the back seat, and an exasperating attitude of *knowing* my situation. There was no inclination of her truly understanding, as if I hadn’t already been to the homeless shelters where there’s no space to sleep, and if there is, you’re stuck next to a pedophile who steals your shoes the following morning or women that whispered death threats all the while the workers gave a half-assed characterization of you and, no matter your gratitude, felt that we felt we were owed their help. I was just another creature lost in the sea of creatures that are too lazy to fix their lives and *want* to be in the shelter where it’s just as cold to sleep outside as it is next to the others that practically live there.

“You don’t have anyone you could—“

“Pull over!” she halted the car and before it was at a complete stop I exited the vehicle, but to keep a sense of my dignity I leaned in, “thank you for the ride. I really, *really* do appreciate your help.” I slammed the door and ducked into an alley way that would dump me onto the main street where the self storage units would be at.

My body was reminded of the conditions outside and attempted to revolt in their nature by bearing a new heat to my cheeks, but my head was spinning. I hated this. Tears leveled to

my hot face, and it took an extensive amount of will power for me to shut it down. I had already spent an unhealthy amount of tears upon first being welcomed by the darkness, and the only remnants of those tears were brought on by the shrinking size of my pride.

I knew these tears, they were hot and jumbled with a stabbing burst to my dignity, and it hurt more to understand this than to pity myself. I know, I know, *I know* she was only being helpful, and I shouldn't have reacted so irrationally, but this world, a world separate from the one that runs on normal time of free days and warmed nights. Instead it's a world where I'm never safe and have to get by on the generosity of strangers and my own clever ability to find a way to eat. So she can't act like I haven't already tried all options that seem plausible for me. That lady can't deem to try and question me when the events that took me here were a spiral of fire and misfortune.

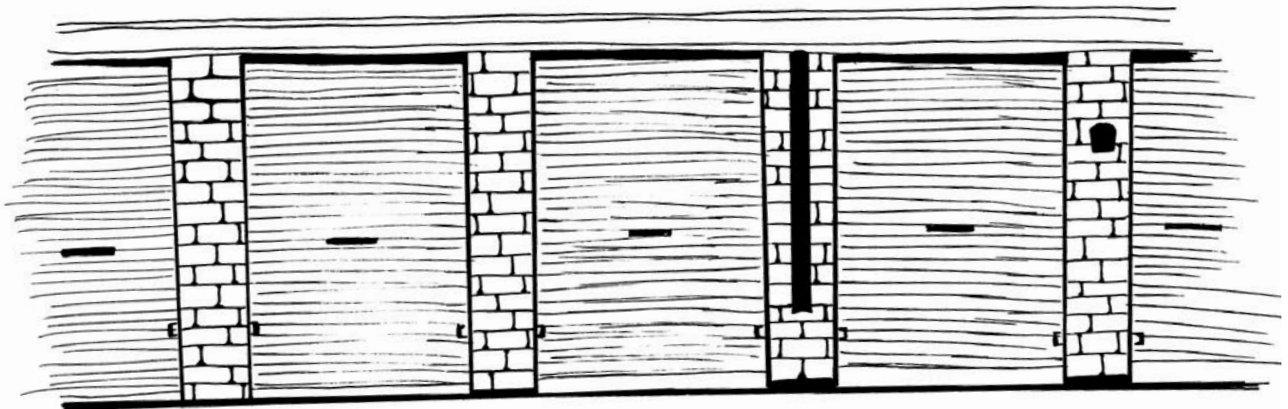
She just can't understand.

The rain washed away the warmth my emotions brought, and I forced my stiff legs to move accordingly down the street. The rain had subsided, which was according to my luck in life seeing as I was already rounding the back of the storage sheds. I crept behind the fence, glancing at the shed in the far corner to check for the red light. It was there, subdued by a reflection that could only be seen from this angle; I glanced around a few times before climbing through the broken section of the fence and quickly ran to the shed and knocked.

For a few moments I was left idly standing there in the rain, and I began to panic in fear that he wasn't there and had forgotten to turn the light off. I knocked one more time, impatient for the door to open that when it began to slowly slide open, a sigh of relief escaped me.

"You've looked better," came a familiar voice.

"Shut up."



Garner wasn't an extremely wonderful person to be around, but he understood his position in life and made do with his circumstances. When I had first left the foster home, I had stayed in a park for two weeks crouched by a thicket of bushes and trees, and it wasn't until someone had called the police about a loiter that I had run and found myself finally bawling in an alley way. Garner had entered the picture then, worn for wear and simply dirty looking, but it was his off week. He sat down next to me and handed me a granola bar, to which I had been hesitant to eat at first, but like a starving dog, I reluctantly took the bait from the stranger and ate it within a few bites.

The beginning of our friendship had been rocky because I had been so unwilling to relinquish my pride, to which he always tells me, "It's freedom if you look at it the right way."

I didn't see our condition as freedom, and I was going to leave as soon as I could. As soon as the opportunity arose, I wouldn't be having this strung out affair with the streets in an area where we were forsaken. It was a horror going through the tent cities, traveling and wondering each night where I was going to sleep. In a city and suburbs where the expenses to live were so high, I found it sardonic that I was the poorest.

Garner sneezed, and I instantly glanced up to see him closing the shed. He was in his early thirties, and he had the sense of strength within him, and although his physique was diminished by hunger at random intervals, there was still the allusion of bulk that resided within him, and at first I assumed it was because he was a survivor and proud, only added by a horribly broken nose, but learned quickly his wholesome image stemmed from a warm heart, and a zest for life even though he was handed the slum of a deal from this world.

"Are you getting sick?"

To get sick was to be succumbed to the worst. To enter the facilities in which they gave free medicine, with the people that leeches off of those that were giving enough; it made my stomach flip.

"No."

He sneezed again.

"Fuck."

I shook my head for his temporary demise because to be sick was a debilitating factor for us creatures. To already be dehumanized by society, but then promptly follow with our health declining, it wasn't fair. Yet I saw the same crack heads daily that could go days without sleep or food, shoot binge themselves into a close run in with a forever sleep, but wake up ready to take on the day with a readiness that I still hadn't managed to gain.

“Here, I have some extra from a few weeks ago when I grabbed them at the shelter,” I offered him a pair of Tylenol, wrapped pristinely and he sighed off-handedly. To take an offering from someone was almost signing for a loan. There was an unspoken rule that when you help someone, the favor should be returned. When daily items are seen as a fortune, there isn’t a sense of giving nature, you merely fend for yourself and repay those that have helped you.

“Thanks,” he grabbed the pills and sat on the cot opposite of me and swallowed them dry.

Soon after, I sneezed, and that flush was creeping to my cheeks again.

Shit, I knew I was getting sick.

“What the hell, Lo?”

“No, I wanted you to have them,” I sneezed again, “I’m always sick; it keeps coming back.”

“Exactly, so why the hell would you let me take these?” he paused, “besides, you look like you needed them more.”

I shook my head, and the warmth was burning the back of my throat to the point where it was beginning to hurt to swallow. I shrugged off my thick jacket and shoes, and suddenly I was in a rush to discard all of my soaked clothing. The slight warmth from the makeshift heater had halted my body’s reaction to my wet clothes, and it was propelled into the reality that I was still cold. Garner grabbed a blanket and moved my stuff aside to push the heater in my direction, and I gave an exasperated sigh.

“Please, Garner. I can take care of myself.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I knew I took a step further than I should have considering I was in his premises, using his spare cot, taking warmth from his heater, and he was offering me help.

“You have a real problem with accepting help from others, you know that?” he began to help remove my shoes, and the lull of the heat touching my skin forced me to try and focus on anything but the increasing shit that I felt.

“That’s not true,” my voice lost confidence as I remembered the woman who had essentially driven me here, and by my voice alone he murmured something incomprehensible under his breath; he knew I was ruminating on something by the lack of a response.

“And you can’t take care of yourself for shit. You’ve been sick for weeks. You have the gym membership, it’s raining like fuck outside, and you decide to walk here?”

I shook myself away from him and settled myself further into the cot, accepting the blanket he offered me as he continued his venting on my lack of common sense.

“Why won’t you just sleep there?” he questioned.

“So that people can wonder why I’m sleeping on the spare benches and sofas in the changing rooms?” I retorted, “It’s bad enough I go there every day to shower and struggle with paying them each month. I’m pretty sure the front desk girls know I’m living off the streets, I don’t need everyone knowing it.”

He sat on his cot once again and threw his blanket my way.

“No, then you won’t have—“

“Let your fucking pride down, Christ!” he nearly yelled.

I shrank suddenly, because of all the times I had annoyed him, he had hardly raised his voice. Perhaps it was my rebellious nature, or the fact that I couldn’t allow my pride or sense of self-worth be pushed to the side like everything else in my life had.

It was all I had left, and he knew that.

I stayed quiet, unsure of what to say. I could apologize, but the words wouldn’t form in the base of my chest. I had no air to simply apologize or thank him. I was about to force a conversation after a minute of tense silence when the front gates of the storage units began to mechanically open, and that sent both of us in a hurry to turn off the two lights that could give us away.

The owners of the storage units knew there was a homeless man there that would bring in a few others to sleep for the night. They turn a blind eye to us, seeing as they are a very religious couple, but by law they need to have security or police patrol the place nightly to make sure there isn’t any malicious activity happening to the storage units.

People like us sleeping here. Squatters, etc.

He moved to turn of the reflecting red light, which was a miniature lantern and I scrambled to unplug the heater. Although there was no way they could hear or see the heater, any sign of activity would uncover us, arrest us for trespassing, shut down this unit, and we would be out of another makeshift sleeping spot that Garner had worked so hard on.

We could hear the patrol car roll by a few rows down, and the cop must of had his window cracked, because in the dead of night we could hear his radio in the distance. When he crept by our unit, we held our breaths, although this was a routine we had gone through many, many times. We heard the car stop by our shed, and I gave Garner a look of anxiousness in the darkness, but he was pressing himself to the wall. I counted ten seconds before the cop

continued on his way, and it wasn't until we knew he was down another five rows that Garner spoke.

"Let's get some sleep."

"Yeah," was my small response.

The exhaustion from the day must have hit me hard across the head, because the next morning I didn't remember falling asleep; a vague thought occurred to me that is what death must feel like.

It happens, but you don't know it.

I've never been a morning person, and with good reason. More so now that I have to strategically plan my day, manage to get myself two meals, bathe, and somehow collect money. However, on this morning I woke up with railroaded sinus congestion and a heavy cough that made me wheeze. I couldn't breathe through my nose, and my throat was raw from using it most of the night to breathe. I couldn't swallow, and I was so incredibly cold. I curled further into the blanket and tucked my feet beneath my legs, but I was at the point of exhaustion that left me paralyzed, though I was in a grey area that left me incredibly uncomfortable and unable to fall back asleep.

I heard a shuffling beside me and lifted my head to glance at Garner who was creating a small breakfast of champions for people like us, but I couldn't muster the strength to get up.

"Morning Princess," he said cheerfully.

I groaned in response.

"I'm going to go out and get you medicine; you won't get any better going out there in the rain and attempting to hide how sick you are."

I sat up in that moment, understanding how big of an inconvenience this was for him.

As a veteran of the creatures, he had a plan that he stuck to that worked, and my ailment was only setting him back from acting accordingly.

My stomach flipped at the thought of having to repay him, and I shook my head.

"I really appreciate it, but I can go, I just need a little more time to rest."

He rolled his eyes and began cleaning his space, ignoring my rebuttal, and I could easily fall back down onto the cot and succumb to the sleep my body was desperately requesting, but I couldn't allow myself to do that. I (weakly) lifted myself up, and swung my legs over the edge of the cot. A hot flash rose to my head, I breathed in once, twice, focusing all my energy on keeping my misery at bay.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to get my medicine.” How could he not understand? The unspoken rules prevented me from allowing him to help me. Perhaps it was my pride, perhaps it was my unyielding nature to my circumstances, but I wouldn’t be defeated. Life had shitted on me constantly, and I rose each time with a new resilience that could only be claimed as stubbornness.

“No, you’re not, Lo. Lay back down.”

I stood up then, proving my point in my determination, and I could see the puff in his chest in annoyance.

“Why are you so fucking determined to go against me?” he snapped, “I’m trying to help you!”

“I appreciate your help, but I can’t ask you to do this for me,” my face felt hot, and sweat began to gather above my lip. “I know you have a lot to do today, and I can’t have you taking care of me.”

“And what if I want to?”

His statement annoyed me, and I don’t work to be a likable person or character, for anyone, “well, you shouldn’t.”

He tossed something by my feet, and I could see it was a water bottle amongst the fuddle that constituted my mind. They were golden for us creatures, refillable, small, and didn’t cost a dime if you could find a clean faucet or a restaurant with relaxed employees.

“Thank you,” I said, although I had to bite back my initial thought of refusing the offering, but Garner had a way of being resourceful in our craft of scraping by.

“Now lay back down,” he said while grabbing his backpack. The nearest gas station was a mile or so away, which would take an hour or so for him to return. I knew he was going into the city later to collect (beg) today because he mentioned it a few days ago, and hours counted in that business.

“No, Garner! I can do this myself. You’re not my caretaker; I don’t need your guidance in this, ok? I’ve been out here for months now, I think I have a handle on things.” I knew I was biting the hand that was more than helping, but I had to give in to my rebellious self. I had a habit of making enemies out of friends, and as a third person from myself I could even see I was pushing him away, when he was only helping the child that was truly and utterly lost.

“You want to do this by yourself?” he retorted, a flame lit within him, “then do it your fucking self. I’ve helped you, but you can’t help those that don’t want to be helped.” He grabbed

my things abruptly and threw them towards the entrance of the unit, “find how easy it is to pretend you’re able to handle this when you don’t have me to depend on.”

I bit back a tear, only because I knew he had every right to be upset.

“I’m done helping your ungrateful ass, go.”

“Garner, try to understand-“

“Understand what? That because you’re one of the hundreds of young girls out here that everyone will take pity on you? That you’re going to keep that pride? What fucking pride is left! You have no home! You don’t have anywhere to go! None of us do! So until you get over that, understand that help is all that is going to get you a meal or warm place to sleep!”

This time I did cry, the truth stabs through you when it’s presented right before you.

I could have apologized; I could have admitted that I have an issue with keeping my pride; I could have relented and allowed him to help me and get me the medicine. I could have done any one of those things, but instead I slipped on my shoes and grabbed my things. I could see there was a pang of regret within him, and I reveled in that like an asshole and quickly left the storage unit, uncaring to the fact that it was broad daylight and any one person could have spotted me.

I was uncaring to a lot in my dazed confusion as a creature, and I was mad because of the truth.

I’m a stupid girl.

xxx

An hour later, I was close to the city, all mostly downhill which made it easier, but my lungs were burning as if I had ran the whole distance. My head felt jumbled with mucus, and that god awful feeling of attempting to breathe through my nose, but being unable to was forcing me to breathe through my mouth. I should be relaxing somewhere; sleeping would be ideal. It wasn’t warm enough for me to be comfortable, and the dim breeze was burning my nostrils. I had to sit down or else risk getting sicker.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the past two days and my ability to ruin things. Garner would forgive me; he was a forgiving man in his righteousness and generosity. Could I forgive him? I would have to, but I have a problem with forgetting. Problems stick with me, anxieties never fade, and I hold a grudge that could halt storms.

My mother had said I gained that from my father, a burly man of 6'3" that had been my protector when the light used to shine brightly each day. Unfortunately, such a man believes he can take over the world, never taught limitations as he looked down on everyone, and it wasn't until he gambled our rent for the sixth month that my mom left him. She snuck me into the car and left to live with my GrandMa several hours north from my original home.

I could have tried to reach him, but there hadn't been a single call, a single ounce of interest in me since we left. I had half expected him at my eighth grade graduation, my birthdays, kind of like in the movies when the dad comes and I'm left there standing speechless until tears rise to my eyes and in a miraculous move I forgive him for his absence in my life.

Well, it never happened.

Instead, I was left with my GrandMa that was struggling physically, and a mother that slowly fell into herself. The depression took over my mother, leaving her numb to the world once I hit the maturing age of thirteen. My Ma tried everything she could to help my mother, but could barely get around herself as well as care for a mentally ill daughter and confused granddaughter. I used to cry about it, asking for her to come back to me. She would only look at the face that I reminded her of, past me and into the honey hollow eyes of my dad.

"Mom is really sick, isn't she?" I asked Ma one day.

"She'll be ok."

"But Ma, she never leaves the house! She doesn't do anything! I miss my daddy too, but I'm not in bed all day!" I couldn't get much further than that statement in asking Ma questions without bursting into tears and she could only coddle me in the way grandmother's do.

Sympathizing to our ignorance, but never telling us the truth.

I learned everything myself shortly after that. My period - asked my friends at school. Self respect? Mrs. Jones, my English teacher. Homework I was able to handle myself since I actually enjoyed learning. I did well in school, and I always made sure to keep a book snuggled deeply in my backpack to keep me company when everything else failed to make sense.

Like these stories go, my Ma died last year from a failing heart, removing us from the home she had allowed us to live in, and losing the last connection I had with myself. It hurt to lose my best friend at fifteen, and I still get a lump in my throat at the thought of her. My mother had to act at this point, and finally went to a doctor long enough to get medication to help her move us into what I liked to call the closet. A small room, big enough for a double bed and a restroom attached, with a small TV stand. No kitchen, nothing aside from the cheap rent my

mother could pay with the small left overs she had saved before Ma passed. We ate out constantly, and once her medication became too expensive, she got stuck again.

Unable to keep herself going, I tried desperately to care for her. I brought her food, which she barely ate. I couldn't attend school anymore because of residency issues, which was ok because I was begrudgingly scared she would curl up and never come back to me. Each day I tried and begged and tried some more, sometimes yelling at her or even hitting her to get a reaction out of her. *Anything*, but then one day they came. The neighbors in their large and assisted apartments noticed I wasn't attending school and called CPS. Go figure.

After that, I was dragged away and my mother was taken somewhere. The lady told me but I didn't pay attention. At this point, I lost the urge to care. I didn't understand depression; I only understood my mother's absence. Her lost eyes, her apathy to Ma's death. Her apathy to her own daughter and how weak she became. She lost everything within her; there was no fortitude for her sense of self or pride.

I escaped before my path of life got worse.

I was done relying on those that couldn't even help themselves. Four boys in the foster home, and I was one of two girls. The leering stares, the sadness that enveloped that home - no. I snuck out into the rain and a small backpack packed with snacks and some warm clothes that were much too tight on me. I found the small park and began my planning. In hindsight, I should have stayed because as a creature it's harder to plan on evolving when you have no resources.

Where do I go from here?

A coughing fit racked my body until my ribs began to hurt from the force of my shaking. I needed real medicine soon. I only had a few bucks, and I would need to buy a can of soup and a new pair of socks with that if I planned on getting any better.

So, I made my venture to the city. Not a city in terms of what you may think, but small cities that are developed on the outskirts, in abandoned lots, hidden parking structures, freeway underpasses. Tent cities host many of the creatures, those that have banded together in their fight against the night.

I arrived with my head low, as I've only been here a few times before. The people here are either welcoming or hostile. Angry against a government that failed them, family members that forgot them, or righteousness for the world that places them on a secular level of freedom. There were only a few people I knew here, and only because Garner dragged me here so I could buy a few shirts from someone he knew.

Almost, and similarly it felt like a Sunday morning farmer's market, displaced among the buildings in its half-hazard items and tents with people that were worn for wear compared to the fresh and vibrant Sunday markets, and yet it would be odd if it weren't here. A few people glanced up at me as I passed by, my face being unfamiliar, and I could sense the sharpness in their gaze. Places like these weren't safe for young girls, but I was clever, I was going to ask-buy-leave.

A man fitting new shoelaces to his rotting boots with a low ponytail sat in the corner, and I walked up to him. *Confidence.*

"Excuse me—" my voice broke mid-way, a cough squeezing my lungs and turning me into wheezing idiot.

He glanced upwards at me, mildly annoyed at being interrupted, partially curious as to what I wanted.

"What?" he said.

Well this was lovely, I wasn't even sure if this was Garner's friend. Someone in here collected medicines, prescribed, over the counter, vitamins. I had little to no idea as to how he would get ahold of them, but I needed antibiotics, seeing as I was sure at this point I was facing a lung infection. "Is there someone here with antibiotics?" another wheeze.

His coal eyes fluttered over me once, and he shook his head with a small sigh. "That'd' be him over there," he said.

I followed his gaze and was faced with mild confusion to his reaction, but I went on to see a man towards the back of the tents, face older than what he seemed to be, and yet he was much like myself. I hadn't been scrubbed by the night; I was still a relatively clean creature, as was he, groomed and had the smallest of the tents, but there was no lack of supplies that were decorated around him.

"Thanks," I murmured quickly before leaving rotting boots, and I could feel his eyes piercing into my back.

I walked up solemnly, too tired to hurry at this point, and my chest ached an incredible amount. I was wheezing, and the cold air clung to the walls of my lungs. I would run to a doctor's office, but I was sure that my medical coverage was gone, and instinctually I knew no normal doctor's office would help me.

"Sir?" I piped up.

He was jostled between fixing his bike, a rarity among us, and only glanced at me for a moment before turning his back.

"I don't have anything today."

"Oh." The ache in my chest grabbed me, and I could have left timidly, but resigned myself further. "Aren't you a friend of Garner's?" I asked.

This caught his attention because he stood promptly and looked at me. A monster, clearly. I was not a short girl, and he stood roughly ten inches higher, but the bulkiness of him was what I hadn't seen from afar. Unlike that of Garner, there was no warmth to his size, no welcoming energy. Knowing his size was ailing because of a lack of eating, this man had instead a frigidness that intimidated me more than it should have.

"He told me you would have medicine?" another cough. Normally it would have bugged me, as if I were trying to have his sympathy, but my emotions were fraying at the ailment of my body.

"He did, huh?" This time, much like I remember seeing in movies, he sized me up, which I couldn't see there being much interest. My body was too skinny, all my color was flushed, I'd barely slept and the exhaustion from being sick could not have aroused any man.

I was such a stupid girl.

I don't remember many words being spoken, but feeling utterly helpless to this man. There was no force in his nature, and he waited until I agreed to it before opening his tent. It was drawn out, painful, uncomfortable, and I remember coughing several times, and he would grimace and it would be distracting, and it would only last longer. He put his hand over my mouth when it began to hurt, but I knew there was no use in fighting, and I could only allow a few tears to disgrace my pride.

I left with antibiotics, and it felt as if a whole day had gone by when I left the city, older women and men alike staring at me with pitying eyes, others apathetic because my situation was no worse than their own.

I was just another young face.

I reached Garner that night, and together we were able to take the medicine in which we got better.

No words were spoken about how I attained the medicine.

We just got better.

XXXX

I sat in the doctor's office tapping my foot with a new impatience that had never been a noticeable part of my nature. I knew I wasn't ok. I had been throwing up constantly for the past week. I continued to attempt to cure myself again since I was sick a year prior, but my body was weaker than I could say it had ever been.

The room was sterile, and the people around me were former shadows of themselves, some staring into the oblivion set before them, others still alive with the anxiousness that I could share with them. My guts twisted, and a sweat began to break out on me and coat my forehead, which could only be explained by my body's own phenomena because the temperature in the waiting room was undeniably cold.

"Hansen."

I glanced up at the lady who looked at me from the now opened door with a reserved smile, and I attempted to read her for further indication of what was wrong with me, but instead I averted my gaze and stood up.

"Ready?"

'No.'

I pursed my lips and nodded.

For the second time within the last week, she took my weight, temperature, and there was a stiffness within her that hadn't been applicable a few days ago. I know there's something wrong with me, and I can already feel my body reacting with a new warmth to my nose and cheeks.

I could see on her face she was used to being aside herself when bad news was brought to patients. There was still sympathy within her eyes, but it was a stifled emotion, daunted by years of this line of work where she was accustomed to people being sick. I sighed inwardly.

"Let's take you back now," she said after scribbling something down on her file with her half-hazard hand writing.

She sat me in an even more sterile room and asked me the same questions as earlier, and although it was of a particular annoyance, I answered them. I took a steadying breath, although I'm positive I couldn't breathe.

Grab my arm, check my blood pressure, heart rate, ear light, the works. I was just another car in the menial business of this woman's day, only pretended with a smile because I was a conscious being and not another car in her line of work.

“Alright Lola, the doctor is going to come in and discuss your test results with you shortly, ok?” There was a new sympathy in her voice, a guised friendliness that made me tap my thumb nervously against my thigh. She left and closed the door softly behind her, cushioning all things that could possibly worsen my condition.

I was pregnant; I had to be.

All the symptoms were there, and I wanted to burst out in retaliation at the unfairness of this fucking world, but I bit my lip and waited in the silence of the room. Much like I would imagine how it plays in a sad movie; the clock ticked rhythmically, ticking away at my inevitable fate I could only pray to the god that Garner had continuously mentioned to me. I bit my lip at the disgusting fact that this could have been avoided if I had just listened to him. I sat there dwelling at the decisions that led me to this seat, wondering my fate.

Simply, I’m an idiot, a proud idiot.

Pride wouldn’t be worth bringing a child into this world with no home, no family, and a mother that was a creature just like myself.

I forced myself to stop over thinking, that I could simply be over analyzing the situation and that I only had a weird cold or sporadic flu, though I knew that was only wishful thinking.

A knock echoed within the room, and with no further assistance a short Asian man walked in and gave me a grim smile, although it could be easily taken for hastiness of speed for his long line of people waiting to see him.

“Lola Hansen?” he questioned out of courtesy.

“Yes?”

He put my file on the counter and flipped through it back and forth before sitting down across from me on the rolling chair.

“Just tell me,” I said suddenly, the anxiety within me was raging as a ball of unkept energy that would soon spill into my delusions.

“From your testing, it seems it came back positive.”

“Positive?”

I knew it.

I was pregnant.

“You tested positive for HIV.”

My chest clenched uncharacteristically, and my face fell at the comprehension of his words. I had been tested for everything, and my main concern and only thought had been that I

was going to be growing a human inside of me, and the thought that I could be sick never entered the picture.

“HIV?”

Three letters, and they felt like a death sentence.

“Yes, but don’t get too anxious, with modern medicine there are effective treatments that make it easier to handle, but it’s something we’re going to have to take care—“

I stood up at this point, feeling close to that lovely edge of fainting, and he stood up then, unsure of what I may do.

“I can’t afford that type of medicine,” I began to mumble to myself, “I can barely afford to eat.”

There’s a moment I read somewhere, that everyone experiences at some point in their life. A crushing, devastating realization that the world is crashing down on them. This was that moment, and it was clutching at the strings of my chest, breaking glass into my skull and forcing the world to sway, and my delusions were beginning. Suddenly, the thought of a child had been a pleasant alternative to this, and hot tears rose to my face, but I felt exasperatingly numb.

“Ms. Hansen, you need to sit down.”

His voice was a blur, another voice in the millions in the world that pass by us and have no realization. They can’t come close to comprehending that this is a common occurrence among the creatures that decorate the day and light the night. A light that is hidden in the politically correct shadows of our society that help those with a mislead form of reality, but just as soon whisper to others on the societal scale about the nuisances that are us.

I sat down to his suggestion, and he began to explain what I would need to do, and that there were ways for *people such as yourself* to pay for the medication. I would be ok if I was able to get things together. He didn’t think I was trying to get away from the conditions that led me here? He didn’t think I had a sense of pride left?

I didn’t.

I was sick, through no fault of my own.

And there was nothing, except clawing to grasp the edges of my life to keep from drowning.

Except now, I had an anchor tied to my waist.

Hopeless, sad animals.

Chip

“But Mommy! I don’t wanna go to bed!” A little boy whined, tugging on his mother’s red and pink pinstriped robe as she opened the door to his dark room and flipped the light switch. “Monsters come out at night.”

His mother chuckled softly as she lifted the little boy and gently placed him on the foot of his bed, “And that’s why I got you a little friend.” She then gestured to me sitting propped up against a pillow. “Dean, why don’t you say hello?”

With a skeptical look on his little face, the small boy crawled over to me in his pirate feety-pajamas. He reached out and picked me up; and then he studied me with his large blue eyes.

“What’s his name?” He asked as he looked at his smiling mother from over his shoulder.

Trafalgar.

“He doesn’t have a name yet.” His mother explained. “Why don’t you give him one?”

I have a name. It’s Trafalgar.

Still studying me, the boy scrunched his eyes in thought. “Is he strong?” he questioned as he started turning me around in his small grasp.

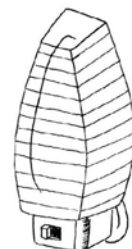
Stronger than you, that’s for sure.

“Strong?” His mother repeated and tilted her head slightly in confusion.

The little boy nodded while he turned me right-side up. “Daddy says that strong guys need strong names so if he’s strong, then he needs a strong name.”

Trafalgar is a strong name, you little punk!

“Is that so?” His mother chuckled. “Well, your father’s right. So, go ahead and give him a strong name.”



The boy placed his little chin between his thumb and forefinger and began to hum in thought as he stared at me through unblinking eyes. "Chip." He stated after a few moments of silent deliberation. Then he giggled as he added, "Because his fluffy hat looks like Chocolate Chip ice cream."

You're killing me here, kid.

"That sounds like a great name." His mother agreed while a gentle smile broke out on her lips. "Now, I think it's time for you and Chip to go to sleep. You have to get up early tomorrow if you want breakfast before school."

"Yes, Mommy." The little boy nodded obediently as he tucked me under his arm and situated us underneath his Batman covers.

His mother then came over and kissed the little boy on his forehead. "Goodnight, Dean." She smiled as she headed toward the door, "Sweet dreams." And with that, she switched off the lights and closed the door.

It was dark. The only source of light was a tiny nightlight off in the opposite corner of the room which automatically began to dimly glow a few seconds after the mother had shut the door.

I felt the little boy squirm uncomfortably next to me. "I-it's o-okay, Chip." He whispered shakily, hugging me tighter. "I-I'm here to...to protect you from the...from the mo-monsters."

I feel so safe in your shaking arms.

Suddenly, a tapping noise echoed quietly throughout the room; the little boy whimpered.

Calm down, it's just a tree branch. When your mother brought me home, it started getting cloudy outside. I'm guessing a storm is probably going to hit later tonight.

The little boy nuzzled his face into my back and shook. "I want Mommy." He mewed softly as he continued to cling to me.

Your 'mommy' isn't here. Now man up and go to sleep. You're making too much of a fuss.

He took a deep breath, "I'm a brave, strong little man. I'm a brave, strong little man." He began chanting in a mumble.

Whatever helps you go to sleep faster.

After almost an hour and a half of incoherent mumbling, I felt the slow rhythmic breathing of the little boy against my back.

"Finally," I sighed, lifting a paw up to my sewn nose to give it a good scratch. "I had that itch since you guys came into the room."

Laying my paw back down, I stared at the shadow casted wall in front of me. *Hmm...I should probably go do a perimeter of the room and get myself familiar with my surroundings.* With that thought, I carefully wriggled my way out of the little boy's tight grasp. "God, this kid is such a crybaby." I mumbled as I rubbed my dark blue fur in irritation.

I lifted my face up and glanced around the room. It seemed to be a pretty typical little boy's room—action figures strewn everywhere, Lego pieces overflowing from a rather small tub and spilling onto the carpet, discarded clothes thrown carelessly at the hamper—nothing really out of the ordinary. I then noticed that the nightlight's faint glow revealed a television hidden underneath a pirate's hat that I had missed before, the shiny black screen glowing slightly almost as if it had a life of its own.

I chuckled at my own imagination as I skillfully climbed off the bed and made my way toward the glistening screen. "Heh, a TV coming to life. What's next, a toaster?" My chuckles faded as I drew nearer to the television, my reflection mimicking every step I made. I was soon able to see myself clearly in the television's mirror-like surface.

My dark blue fur was pressed flat in several places where I had forgotten to fluff after the little boy had clung to me for dear life. I saw my own sliver threaded nose twitch in irritation as I

went to go fluff myself with my stubby paws. I then noticed my sliver glass eyes travel to my hat and my sewn mouth frowned.

“Chocolate Chip ice cream, huh?” I muttered, running a paw over the extra fluffy brown spotted white hat that was hand-sewn onto my head. “Kid’s got no imagination.” I snorted as I let my hand roam to my one of my ears. There were two vertical strips of white fur on each ear where they had gotten stuck in the dyeing process and didn’t get properly dyed; I gently felt over the miscolored fur as a sigh unconsciously slipped from my lips. A teddy bear—that’s what I am—nothing more than a handmade teddy bear.

A sudden roar of thunder boomed from somewhere outside, causing me to freeze and fall to the floor. Realizing that I had mistaken the sound of the oncoming storm for a human, I lifted myself with a snarl.

“Stupid storm.” I spat, “Couldn’t wait until I was back in the bed, could you?”

Another boom of thunder followed by the sporadic howling of the wind rattled the window. The little boy let out a small whimper in his sleep as he curled into a ball underneath the covers.

I let out a tired sigh as I rubbed the back of my neck, “I guess I should stick to him the first few nights before I start wandering about on my own. Especially since there’s a storm coming.”

With a hesitant step, I began making my way back to the little boy. I was about halfway up the bedpost when I heard a noise. I stiffened, unsure if it was a human or the storm that caused the noise—it was neither. The fur on my body stood on end and I felt a cold chill trickle down my nonexistent spine. I knew this feeling; it’s ingrained in all teddy bears and stuffed animals alike to recognize this terrible, bone-chilling aura.

As a curse flew from my lips, I desperately looked around me for something to fight with. “This kid’s got a ton of action figures, but no baseball bat? No Nerf gun?” I whispered harshly

under my breath, "Not even sharpened colored pencils?" My eyes then landed on the overflowing tub of Legos. I pursed my lips, "Guess I gotta make do with what I got." I grumbled as I hopped off the bedpost and ran toward the tub; the dark presence steadily growing closer with my every step. Grabbing pieces left and right, I quickly tried to make a weapon of some sort before the thing could show its ugly mug.

Not really happy with the haphazard sword I managed to make but finished nonetheless, I hastily made my way back to the kid's bed. I only made it to the foot of the bedpost before a pitch black fog began swirling through the crack at the bottom of the bedroom door. I stood frozen as I watched the fog slowly manifest into a creature-like being. It had a rather large circular head with six flat nodules stemming at equally spaced intervals all around, the face was mostly taken up by two great pit-less holes near the top serving as eyes with an even greater grin taking up the lower half, and its serpentine body slowly oozed some type of black slime that gave off a horrendous stench. The space around the creature had gotten noticeably darker and it was when I noticed the lighting difference that I noticed the white wisps of my breath escaping through my silver snout; it was almost as if the creature was sucking up all the light and warmth in the room.

A deep gravelly chuckle drummed from this creature as it turned to stare at the little boy. "My my...looks like you've fallen asleep." It cooed softly, slowly slithering nearer. I began making my way up the bedpost with the Lego sword clenched in my mouth. "And after all that noise you made earlier," it continued as its head rotated downwards. "I hope you taste as good as you sounded." The head reverted slowly back up and long tendril wisps of smoke curled out toward the kid.

"Yo, Fugly!" I shouted, hoisting myself up on to the bed. Surprised, the creature froze and snapped its attention toward me. "I wouldn't eat him if I were you," I continued, picking up

my sword that I had tossed on the bed. "This kid's a real momma's boy. He'll probably give you indigestion or a bad case of the fuzzy wuzzies."

The tendrils dissipated and the creature straightened its shoulders. "Insignificant little toy." It growled menacingly. "How dare you interrupt my meal? Do you know who I am?"

I leaned on my sword and rested my cheek on the butt of the hilt, "Don't know. Don't care." I smirked slightly.

My answer seemed to irritate the creature. "My name is A'ku, the Dream Eater!" he crowed. "I am a dream devouring demon born from the destructive soul of the great scientist—"

"Yeah, yeah." I yawned as I waved a dismissive paw. "You're all great and powerful and blah blah blah...stuff I don't care about. Can you leave already? I really don't like wasting my energy on things I could give a crap about."

A low and gritty growl emitted from the glaring creature, "Are you mocking me?"

"No. I just want you to leave." I gave him a cold smile, "So scram, Goldilocks. This bed isn't for you."

Suddenly, the room got colder. Beneath my feet, the bed quivered slightly as the little boy shivered under his blankets. I felt myself stiffen as I peeked at the creature from underneath the brim of my hat.

A dark chuckle echoed eerily throughout the room. "You can't intimidate me." The creature grinned. "I can rip you to shreds without even using half of my true strength. You think you can hurt me with your little building block sword? Try it." Its grin widened. "I dare you."

Again, the tendril wisps of smoke began to snake out from the creature and like whips from a cat o' nine tails, they came after me. I managed to deflect them with my sword and as I used the momentum to twirl myself around, I gathered enough speed to jump into the air and tried to inject my sword into the creature's face. It was no good. The creature was able to twist itself just enough to the right to avoid my blow. I landed gracefully on the carpet floor in between

the Lego tub and where the creature stood simply a few moments ago. As I tried to quickly straighten back into my fighting stance, a pair of needle-like tendrils shot out toward my face. Caught off guard, my deflection was sloppy and a sharp stinging sensation spread hot across my left cheek. I stumbled back from the force of the blow and hit the wall hard. Gasping for breath, I slumped forward slightly and had to use my sword to steady myself.

This guy isn't gonna go down easy, he is? I thought to myself, gripping the hilt of my sword. *I should probably try something a little less head on. I don't know how much my handmade body can take...just hitting the wall took my breath away.*

A harsh cackling pulsed in the room and I lifted my eyes just enough to stare at the creature a few yards in front of me.

“What’s wrong, little teddy?” It snickered, amused. “Already feeling tired? But it’s only the beginning.”

Feeling the air return to me, I lifted myself off my sword and held it by my side. “No,” I shook my head, my silver eyes never straying from the creature’s plastered grin, “It’s already over.”

I quickly plunged my paw into the tub of Legos and threw a paw-full at the creature. As it was disoriented with all of the colorful blocks raining down on it, I sprinted my way toward its snake-like body and with the calculated precision of a surgeon, I sliced open its stomach.

The creature howled in pain as foul black slime poured out of the wound; almost bathing me in its pitch before I swiftly moved out of the way. Around a hundred tendrils sprouted from the creature’s back and immediately tried to close the wound, but to no avail.

“How dare you?” the creature gasped painfully as its eyes narrowed. “H-how dare you...you do su-such a thing...to me?!” Its breathing had become extremely labored, but the venom in its voice never wavered.

I couldn't help but crack a cold smile, "I never turn away from a dare." With those words still hanging in the air, I jumped on one of the creature's tendrils that was being used as a stopper and used it to help push me off to the next tendril. As I bounced from tendril to tendril working my way up, I spun my sword around and deflected oncoming attacks.

"I will not lose to a mere toy!" The creature declared furiously as it kept sprouting tendrils from every part of its body in an attempt to stop me; I dodged and deflected every single one.

Closing in on my target, I spun my sword until the grip of my left paw was hitting the hand guard and the palm of my right paw was pressed up against the butt of the hilt. With one final jump, I stabbed the creature in the heart with my blade and twisted it until I was sure it had gone all the way through before jumping away. The creature's frozen grin let out a silent scream of agony as its body slowly melted to the ground. I watched in silence as the last of the creature melted into a puddle of nothingness, leaving behind only my sword.

Finally being able to breathe a sigh of relief, I trudged my way through the Lego pieces to retrieve my sword.

"God, that thing was annoying," I grumbled to myself as I hefted my suddenly heavy Lego sword over my shoulder. "Are the rest of the nightmares gonna be that bothersome?" With a tired sigh escaping my lips, I carefully placed my sword underneath the bed and began to pick up the mess the fight had created.

I was almost done putting everything back to the way things were when I heard the little boy start mumbling in bed. With a slight panic, I quickly made my way to the bedside closest to him and immediately dropped to the ground.

"Chip?" Came the little boy's sleepy call. There was some rustling up on the bed. "Ch-Chip?" The little boy repeated his voice now tinged with anxiety. More rustling before a mop of unruly blond hair followed by a pair of bright blue eyes peered over the edge of the bed. "There

you are!” He smiled as he precariously leaned over the edge and lifted me up by my ankle with his little hands.

He sat up on his knees as he looked disapprovingly at me.

Don't you look at me like that!

“Chip,” the little boy addressed me with a serious gaze, “I know you’re new to this family, but I don’t want you to go off by yourself, you hear me?” he chided as he wagged his finger dramatically.

Look at me, I'm getting scolded by a four-year-old.

“Chip,” he warned, bringing me closer so he could peer into my frozen silver glass eyes.

Yeah, yeah...I'm sorry.

He giggled as he scrambled us back underneath the still warm covers. The little boy let out a tired yawn as he snuggled up against my back.

“I’m glad I now have a friend like you, Chip.” He murmured sleepily.

I stayed silent.

He gave another yawn, this time a big one. “Goodnight, Chip.” The little boy mumbled tiredly under his breath. “Sweet...dreams.”

I had to stifle my own yawn. *Goodnight, Dean.*

How to Make Pop's Sketti Sauce

1) Initial Incident:

You'll walk in through the automatic double doors and immediately veer left. You know where you're going, but starting in the gardening section would be too easy and too frightening. Building up the courage to bite your lip as the cashier comments on how fine the weather is for tomato planting, then biting harder when he calls them "tomaters" jokingly, just like he used to. A polite smile makes his day just a little bit better; he can go home and fantasize that you were interested in him. He won't know you were using him as his employers wanted him to be used, but you'll know and you'll feel a little guilty when you over analyze the encounter. You get home and close the door behind you. You lean against it and cry when you realize you were so distracted worrying about the cashier that you picked up the wrong kind of seeds. Getting into your car, you make the thirty minute trip across town to the other Home Depot to ensure you don't run into the same cashier, which turns into an hour-long trip when you factor in building up your courage for a second time. You got the right seeds though.

2) Growth and Decay

You planted your garden and watered those tomaters regularly. Every now and then you catch sight of the small plant from a new angle and think it's grown a bit taller since the previous day, but it has not. You know it hasn't. After about thirty days you begin to see small buds turning tomato red and the discomfort starts to grow in your stomach. It hurts, so you go to the gym and work out some of the aggression. You bruise your hands.

The tomatoes are nearly ready to be plucked, just another couple of weeks. On day fifty you decide to pull the plumpest one, only to accidentally juice it in your palm. Upon closer inspection, you discover flea beetles and aphids, as well as cutworms wiggling on the ground below.

An hour later you rake up the exploded pieces of tomatoes, scraping it off of the nearby fences with a gas mask on to protect yourself from the can of *Raid* you carelessly soaked the Earth in. You'll drive immediately to the nearest Home Depot to purchase new seeds, thinking the adrenaline will allow you to enter without preparation, but it does not. The cashier from before was fired for sexually harassing a customer he thought was you, but you don't know that; you're just glad you didn't have to smile at him again.

You bought the right seeds. First try.

Fifty days later and your indoor tomato garden is flourishing. You pluck the plumpest one with a delightful grimace because it's finally time to pull out the recipe.



3) Sketti Time

After sweeping up the smashed pieces of the glass bottle which contained the secret recipe, you begin cooking. There are no tears because the recipe does not call for extra salt. A drop of sweat falls into the pot when you aren't looking; you didn't notice.

You add a pinch of salt and a dash of pepper, then you remember how he used to do it, and you add another couple dashes of pepper. Stirring the basil with the garlic cloves, oregano, diced and mashed tomatoes creates a familiar aroma. It's nearly time. Allow the sauce to simmer for an hour and half on medium heat. You sit on the couch.

After staring at your reflection in the television screen for a half hour you decide to watch an episode of *The Cosby Show*. This is what you used to do together; those memories sting. The similarities between the lead and your father sting more.

You turn off the T.V. and stare at your reflection for the remaining hour.

After pouring the sauce over the noodles, letting the steam heal your puffy eyes, you raise an empty glass to the empty house. You pour yourself a scotch, no rocks, like he used to drink it. You don't drink, nor do you eat.

The wrong seeds are still sitting on the counter.

You go to bed.

You rest.



Drama



Photograph by Darlin Morales

Anthony Jauregui

Figment

LIGHTS UP ON:



[A small strip of land just off the west coast, DR. LIMBURGER sits on a decrepit beach towel. She uses it to move about the strip of land. CHARLIE, is off hunting for food. The two have been alone for the past 36 hours and have been separated from civilization for the past week. Their clothes are wet, discolored, and shredded. CHARLIE returns from the hunt with three raw figs.]

CHARLIE

I got it! I finally know why!

DR. LIMBURGER

Give it to me.

CHARLIE

When you were a little girl, you had a dream that you were walking down a pier holding hands with your Mom and Dad. Then this picture perfect dream quickly turns into a nightmare when a worm the size of the pier bursts out of the sand, and kills your Mom right in front of your eyes. Sand flies everywhere... And I mean like sand literally flies everywhere not like flies made of sand fly everywhere. Although that would be really horrifying. Wait, imagine birds. Like Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Big 'ol birds made of sand flying everywhere! Now that would be creepy! I'm hungry, want a fig?

DR. LIMBURGER

I'm impressed with your elaborate story on my past, Charlie. But, as you know, a good therapist never reveals her inner struggles.

CHARLIE

Darn! Thought I would've got it for sure this time!

DR. LIMBURGER

I did learn something from listening to you though.

CHARLIE

What?

DR. LIMBURGER

You're insane.

CHARLIE

The DSM-5 calls it Impulse Control Disorder. My parents call it lazy. My friends called me retarded. But of all the people who'd call me "insane" I would never think it be my therapist.

DR. LIMBURGER

Times have changed.

CHARLIE

I know.

For one, we're outside.

For two, the flood destroyed your office didn't it?

DR. LIMBURGER

EASE OFF CHARLIE.

CHARLIE

Sorry.

[The two sit in awkward silence. After a moment, Charlie holds his nose and stuffs a whole fig into his mouth. He takes 3 bites and swallows to avoid the pungent taste. He offers one to Dr. Limburger, but she ignores him.]

CHARLIE

Yeah, these don't taste much like those Fig Newtons we used to have.

I'd prefer those over these any day. I'd even prefer Cam Newton over Fig Newtons and that's saying something. I just really dislike Newtons, I guess.

DR. LIMBURGER

There's one thing we have in common.

CHARLIE

What?

DR. LIMBURGER

I fucking hate Fig Newtons.

CHARLIE

Intense language Dr. Limburger. I like it.

...You wanna talk about what happened?

DR. LIMBURGER

No, Charlie. I'm okay. Let's just sit here. In silence.

CHARLIE

Okay.

(beat)

Where were you when the flood hit your house?

DR. LIMBURGER

I don't want to talk about it.

CHARLIE

Okay. Sorry.

(a beat)

Was it the office?

DR. LIMBURGER

(frustrated)

Dammit... Of all places to be during a flash flood. I was taking a bath.

CHARLIE

You're kidding me, right? You gotta be kidding me. Though that would explain the beach towel you've been sitting on.

DR. LIMBURGER

I'm being serious. I was relaxed, naked, and taking a bath. Three things I'll never have again.

[Charlie covers his ears after hearing that Dr. Limburger said she was naked.]

CHARLIE

Lalalalalalalalalalalalala-NOT LISTENING-Lalalalalalalalalalalalala!

DR. LIMBURGER

For Christ's sake snap out of it Charlie. Its only natural to bathe naked. How often do you hear of someone bathing with clothes on?

[Charlie looks down.]

CHARLIE

I told you this in a session on March 9th, 2016 at 10:38AM. How could you forget?

DR. LIMBURGER

You know what? I'm sorry. My mind has been a bit boggled since we're stranded on an island in the middle of nowhere. The last thing I'm going to remember is what you told me in one of our 176 meetings.

CHARLIE

Oh, so you can remember how many meetings we've had, but you can't remember what we've talked about?! Or the time that I confessed things to you? Or what day it was? What kind of therapist are you!?

[Charlie cries and eats another fig to calm his nerves.]

DR. LIMBURGER

Okay then, lets talk about what we talked about that day.

CHARLIE

(stops crying)

Really?

DR. LIMBURGER

I am your therapist, so I'm willing to listen. Refresh my memory.

CHARLIE

I hate that word and all that it stands for. I don't like being *it*, I don't like hearing *it*, and I certainly don't like hearing that my therapist gets *it* in the bathtub!!

DR. LIMBURGER

Okay, you don't like the N-word. I understand. But, fears like this don't just appear. We need some sort of inciting incident to this. How was your relationship with your mom?

CHARLIE

I told you about my relationship with my mom on September 30th 2015! Don't you remember?!

DR. LIMBURGER

It's been awhile. Please, remind me again.

CHARLIE

She used to beat me while she was *it!* No clothes, no shoes, nothing! Just slap me around for no reason. I would just go into her room while she was with her boyfriend and then she'd start slapping me around like a couple of flapjacks on a hot plate!

DR. LIMBURGER

Wait, what did you just say?

CHARLIE

Slap me around like a couple of flapjacks on a hot plate?

DR. LIMBURGER

Before that.

CHARLIE

She'd start slapping me around--

DR. LIMBURGER

No. Something about your mom and her boyfriend.

CHARLIE

Oh, yeah! Every day at 6:30 PM they would go into their room and watch *Family Feud*. Now my mom knew I loved Richard Karn so whenever he was on I'd always hear her yell, "Come on, Dick!" And I'm a little smart so I know a shorter way of saying Richard is Dick so I'd always go in and see what happened. Then, she would beat the hell out of me, but she was always *it!*

DR. LIMBURGER

(*speechless, a beat*)

Mmmhmm.

CHARLIE

This happened all the time. That's why I don't like that word!! How can we fix it?

DR. LIMBURGER

Well...

CHARLIE

Yeah?..

DR. LIMBURGER

Well Charlie, a good therapist should never say anything. A good therapist should just listen to what the patient has to say then react accordingly.

CHARLIE

I'm done with my story. But when I told you the first time you kinda said the same thing so I don't know what to think anymore. You're an okay therapist Dr. Limburger but sometimes I wonder. I'm gonna go pee.

[Charlie exits.]

DR. LIMBURGER

A good therapist does not focus on one sole client. I am a good therapist. No, I am a great therapist. No, I am the greatest therapist!

(looks up)

Aren't I? Come on, God. I'm a little good aren't I?

(a beat of silence)

Oh screw you.

[Charlie enters.]

CHARLIE

I put a leaf over my pee so you don't step in it.

DR. LIMBURGER

Thanks.

CHARLIE

You know, we've had a long day we should relax. I think I know what we can do.

DR. LIMBURGER

What's that?

CHARLIE

This doctor at the urgent care taught it to me.

DR. LIMBURGER

What is it?

CHARLIE

Come with me and I'll show you.

DR. LIMBURGER

No. I am not leaving my towel.

CHARLIE

I don't understand. There's water all around us. We have the only earth terrain capable of walking on for miles and you don't wanna leave that raggedy old towel? Suit yourself.

[Dr. Limburger strokes the towel, non-sexually, comfortingly.]

CHARLIE

I'll be right back.

[Charlie exits. Dr. Limburger sits on her towel and sees something in the far distance.]

DR. LIMBURGER

What is that? Is that a... no. Ugh.

(looking at sky)

You can take your feet off your pearly white recliner and fix this anytime you want. I know you have a magic wand somewhere. Get off your ass and end this torture you cast upon me!

[Charlie enters. Dr. Limburger quickly snaps out of it, and rejoices. He is holding two figs in his hand.]

CHARLIE

Here. Grab one.

DR. LIMBURGER

What do I do with this?

CHARLIE

You ever been to a pharmacy?

DR. LIMBURGER

Yes.

CHARLIE

Some of them have waiting areas and some have these things called stress balls. You squeeze them and roll them around your hands and its supposed to relax you. Here try it.

[Dr. Limburger takes a fig and begins rolling it. Within 2 seconds she squeezes it too hard and it squirts all over her.]



DR. LIMBURGER

Great. All over my new shirt. Give me a less ripe one that won't burst so easily.

CHARLIE

Sorry. Let's try again.

[Dr. Limburger moves it to the other hand and begins squeezing gently.]

DR. LIMBURGER

I think I'm getting the hang of-

[The fig squirts all over her again and she throws it aside.]

DR. LIMBURGER

Screw this.

CHARLIE

How about I try it.

[Charlie begins rolling the fig and it does NOT squirt all over him.]

DR. LIMBURGER

You've got to be kidding me.

CHARLIE

I guess maybe it doesn't work if you're too stressed.
Hey what is that?

DR. LIMBURGER

What? Where?

CHARLIE

Its floating near the shore, let me grab it.

[Charlie exits.]

DR. LIMBURGER

(looking at sky)

Hey about earlier... If this is something good...Forget about what I said. I repent.

[Charlie enters with an IPA bottle and an oval can.]

DR. LIMBURGER

WHAT IS IT?!

CHARLIE

Its an IPA bottle. I think there's something inside it too. Looks like a pen and paper.

DR. LIMBURGER

Oh my God is that food?

CHARLIE

It looks like sardines. Gross. I'll just toss em-

DR. LIMBURGER

Are you fucking crazy? Hand them over!

[Charlie gives the can of sardines to Dr. Limburger. It's an easy open seal so she quickly opens it and begins scarfing down raw sardines and drinking the broth they're in. Charlie stares.]

CHARLIE

I didn't know you had such an appetite.

DR. LIMBURGER

Its either this or figs.

CHARLIE

What should we do with the bottle?

DR. LIMBURGER

Save it. We can break it and maybe use the glass as a tool.



CHARLIE

Let's send a message in a bottle.

DR. LIMBURGER

What?

CHARLIE

Let's write something out, put it in the bottle, and toss it back into the ocean.

DR. LIMBURGER

Are you crazy?

CHARLIE

I ain't the one eating raw sardines.

DR. LIMBURGER

You really believe in that message in a bottle stuff?

CHARLIE

What's to believe? All we're doing is entrusting all of our hope into one message in a bottle.

DR. LIMBURGER

Not only that. Its a sign of loss. I am not ready to give up. We are going to survive.

CHARLIE

Oh sure and you're going to survive on that hole-y towel?

DR. LIMBURGER

Yep.

[Dr. Limburger begins licking the can of sardines dry. As she does this Charlie begins writing something on the paper.]

CHARLIE

I'll be right back. I'm gonna go... exercise.

DR. LIMBURGER

Do some for me too.

[Charlie exits with the bottle. After a beat, Dr. Limburger notices Charlie took the bottle with him.]

DR. LIMBURGER

Charlie... Charlie! Get back here!

[Charlie rushes back without the bottle.]

DR. LIMBURGER

Where is it? What did you do with it??

CHARLIE

I threw it out into the ocean.

DR. LIMBURGER

What?! WHY??

CHARLIE

I just really wanted to see if my message would be received!

DR. LIMBURGER

GODDAMMIT!

(lunges at Charlie)

Are you crazy?! Why would you waste our only means of communication with the world!

CHARLIE

Hey you stepped in the sand!

Fuck the sand!

DR. LIMBURGER

[Dr. Limburger straddles Charlie and begins choking him. After a beat-]

CHARLIE

Hey... stoppp.. Look. Over there.

DR. LIMBURGER

What the?...

[Dr. Limburger exits. Charlie recuperates. Enter Dr. Limburger with the same bottle of IPA, a pen, and paper and a small baggy of nuts.]

CHARLIE

What is it?

DR. LIMBURGER

They're nuts? But they're soft. And doughy.

CHARLIE

What?

DR. LIMBURGER

What did you write?

CHARLIE

Dough nuts.

DR. LIMBURGER

How'd you spell it?

CHARLIE

D-o-u-g-h n-u-t-s?

DR. LIMBURGER

What. The. Hell. These are dough nuts. DOUGH NUTS.

CHARLIE

Great. This is just great!

DR. LIMBURGER

Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

CHARLIE

Yes! Let's write oven on the paper, throw it out, and wait for one to wash ashore. Then we can bake these dough nuts!

DR. LIMBURGER

No!!! This means that anything you write on this paper comes true!

CHARLIE

How can you be so sure?

DR. LIMBURGER

I can't. But it's worth a shot.

CHARLIE

I'm all for experimentation, but didn't you say a minute ago that you're not into this whole giving up thing, and that succumbing to this is like facing defeat?

DR. LIMBURGER

Screw what I said a minute ago, it's time to experiment!

CHARLIE

If you say so. What should we write first?

DR. LIMBURGER

I don't know. Do you have any ideas?

CHARLIE

I already said oven.

[Dr. Limburger paces around while Charlie thinks and eats another fig.]

CHARLIE

You know, once you get passed this disgusting texture, figs aren't so bad.

DR. LIMBURGER

We should send out for something that will help us survive here. Maybe some firewood? How about some matches? Or a matchbook? Then we would get a whole lot of matches. We could light a fire. What do you think?

CHARLIE

I like the matches idea. But I think we should be extra careful about how we write it.

DR. LIMBURGER

Don't worry I won't use cursive.

CHARLIE

No, like maybe be really specific how it's written. I thought I was spelling doughnuts right, and look what we got there.

DR. LIMBURGER

Hmm. You're right. I'll make sure to write matchbook with no spaces, no cursive, and I think we'll be set.

CHARLIE

Okay. I trust you Dr. Limburger.

DR. LIMBURGER

(tries to write)

The paper is difficult to write on. You got it wet when you picked up.

CHARLIE

I mean I did just pull it outta water.

[Dr. Limburger writes "matchbook" on the paper with the pen. She puts it in the bottle and sends it out to sea.]

DR. LIMBURGER

There. That's taken care of. Now we wait.

CHARLIE

Can I ask you something?

DR. LIMBURGER

What is it?

CHARLIE

You think we're gonna be okay?

DR. LIMBURGER

We've made it this far.

CHARLIE

It's been a week. A week is not that long!

DR. LIMBURGER

A very long week but we've made it. We'll just keep our heads down. During Katrina some people waited up to 14 days for help. Its been 7 for us, so let's just keep at it.

CHARLIE

You know, you're a good therapist. You make me feel better. All this water makes me wanna go pee. I'll be right back.

DR. LIMBURGER

Have fun.

[Charlie exits. Dr. Limburger sits in angst.]

DR. LIMBURGER

(looking at sky)

I have to admit it, that was a good one. I didn't think you'd reply with such disdain for me, but thanks, I really appreciate it... God, doughy nuts. How original of you. Like I said before, you can stop with the prank. Hit reset on the game, I'll be glad to take it back to my last save.

CHARLIE (OFF STAGE)

Dr. Limburger! There's a box! A box of something!

[Charlie enters with a small box, the original IPA bottle, and piece of paper.]

DR. LIMBURGER

What is it?

CHARLIE

I don't know! I was over by the shore and it sorta appeared out of nowhere. Maybe its the matchbook. Should we open it?

DR. LIMBURGER

Yes!

[Dr. Limburger opens the box quickly. There is a brief moment of astonishment as she looks at what's inside.]

CHARLIE

Well?

DR. LIMBURGER

(holding the matchbook)

It's a matchbook!

CHARLIE

Oh my god, yes! Let's start that fire. No, let's warm up those dough nuts!

[After a beat, complete silence. Dr. Limburger reveals there are no matches in the matchbook. She falls in defeat and begins to cry.]

DR. LIMBURGER

You... You did this! Why was matchbook even an option in your stupid little head?

CHARLIE

Matchbook was your idea!

[Dr. Limburger lunges at Charlie. She straddles him and tries to choke Charlie to death. After a few beats of fighting, he breaks free.]

CHARLIE

What has gotten into you?! You aren't supposed to be emotionally unstable! That's my job. I'm the patient, you're the therapist!

DR. LIMBURGER

Not anymore. It all changed when the flood destroyed my office, my car, my family, and me...while I was taking a bath... IN THE NUDE!!

CHARLIE

Lalalalalalalalalalalalalalalalalala- NOT LISTENING Lalalalalalalalalalalalalalalalala!

[Charlie exits. Dr. Limburger cools down and gets herself together.]

DR. LIMBURGER

What am I doing? He didn't do anything. I'm losing my mind. I shouldn't-

(looks at sky)

You! You did this! Why smite me? I've been good. I pay taxes. I feel bad for people on *Hoarder's*... Oh, so you're blaming me for this?

(increasingly tense and manic-like)

What do you mean I brought this upon myself? You created this. All of this. If I make an ant farm I don't blame them for raping each other, doing drugs, or stealing from one another. I take responsibility because I created the world they live in! Something you obviously don't do. Me, narcissistic? No. Well I'm not the one who created beings capable of acquiring these millions of mental illnesses! You know what, we are done! I'll just end this all and write down a gun and wait for it patiently to get here. Then I'll off myself and there will be no way for Charlie to repopulate the Earth. Take that God! Don't forget to wish for bullets? Oh, you're hilarious!... Don't smirk at me. I can see you doing that. Hold on, I thought of something better.

[Dr. Limburger grabs the pen and writes something on the paper. She puts it in the bottle and seals it up.]

DR. LIMBURGER

"I want my life back."

[Dr. Limburger takes the bottle off stage and returns to her towel. She curls into a ball, and falls asleep.]

LIGHTS DIM.

[Charlie enters. He is wearing a dress shirt, tie, and slacks.]

LIGHTS UP ON:

CHARLIE

Samantha. Samantha. You've fallen asleep again. You have 17 minutes left. Clocks ticking.

DR. LIMBURGER

Huh?... What?

CHARLIE

You were telling me about Hitchcock's *The Birds*? Sand flies? Your mom?

BLACKOUT.



"The Even Couple" was produced as part of CSUB's Theatrefest (2016) One-Act Festival: *Theatre of New Voices*. I have also attached a photo from the production that shows characters Benjamin (LEFT) and Albert (RIGHT) played by Mike Allen Moore and Benigno "B-Jay" Mojica. Scenic and Lighting Design by Chris Eicher and Costume Design by Roger Upton. Photo Credit goes to Mandy Rees/Chris Eicher.

Anthony Jauregui

The Even Couple

AT RISE:

[Benjamin sits at a table with two menus, four glasses of water, and two wrapped silverware in a quaint diner in suburban Los Angeles. All the aforementioned items are on the opposite side of the table, but Benjamin constantly rearranges them in order to satisfy the itch in his brain that tells him to move them. Every time Benjamin feels an "itch," he plays with his little car, but only if he's alone. After a few moments of his rearranging, he takes out a little car from his pocket, and plays with it before being interrupted by the server, Albert. Before Albert can speak, Benjamin chugs one of the four glasses of water.]

ALBERT

(french)

I don't think she's coming.

BENJAMIN

(hiding his car)

Really? I think she will. Let's just give it a few more minutes.

ALBERT

It's been 4 hours. I'm pretty sure she's not coming.

BENJAMIN

Thank you for your concern Albert, but she said she'd be here.

ALBERT

Al-Bare.

BENJAMIN.

What?

ALBERT

It's pronounced Al-bare.

BENJAMIN

Sorry. French?

ALBERT

(American)

I'm from Utah.

BENJAMIN

Come again.

ALBERT

(French)

Albert is from Utah. I'm from Alberta.

BENJAMIN

So what do I call you?

ALBERT

(American)

Albert.

BENJAMIN

Okay Albert can I-

ALBERT

(French)

It's AI-BARE!

BENJAMIN

You just said it's Albert!

ALBERT

You want more water?

BENJAMIN

Yes. One more glass will do. I'm very parched.

ALBERT

Right... I'll be back.

[Albert exits. Benjamin sits for a few moments, and gets a sudden urge to urinate, but doesn't go. He looks at his watch, makes sure no one is around, and pulls out his little car.]

BENJAMIN

Its okay Clark. She'll be here soon. Very very soon. Then we can go to the rest room.

[Albert reenters with more water. Benjamin sits as he battles his urinary angst.]

ALBERT

Here's the fourth glass.

BENJAMIN

Thank you. Could you tell me the time?

ALBERT

17:37.

BENJAMIN

Seventeen? Thirty-seven? How is that even possible?!

ALBERT

Military time. Haven't you ever heard of *Jarhead*?

BENJAMIN

I've only read *Jughead*!

ALBERT

Jarhead is a war movie. They use military time. What's wrong?

BENJAMIN

(Collapsing)

2 sevens? A three? A one? Oh my! I thought time reset at 12?

ALBERT

It does! I just like telling people the time in military time. It's 5:38 now.

BENJAMIN

Where's the rest room?!

ALBERT

Through the double doors, make a left before you hit the kitchen.

BENJAMIN

I'll be right back! And if a woman comes in asking for me, tell her I'll be right back.

ALBERT

(American)

Anything for you...

Fifteen dollars an hour isn't enough for this bullshit.

[Benjamin exits after putting his car into his shirt pocket. We then hear the front door ring open and Suzanne enters. She is an older woman wearing multiple layers of clothing. Albert unwillingly greets her.]

ALBERT
(French)
Here's a menu. Sit wherever you want.

SUZANNE
I'm meeting someone. He may already be here.

ALBERT
Meeting someone?

SUZANNE
I don't know what he looks like.

ALBERT
You know his name?

SUZANNE
This is sorta one of those blind date things.

ALBERT
Really?
(*noticing attire*)
That makes so much sense.

SUZANNE
Yes. My, uh friend, said she wanted me to start dating again.

ALBERT
Did she recommend that coat? That blouse? And those shoes?

SUZANNE
No... This is just something I like to wear when I go outside.

ALBERT
Avant garde. I like that.

SUZANNE
Thank you.

ALBERT
There's only one guy in here and he's in the bathroom. He's been here four hours though.

SUZANNE
4 hours? Dr. Limburger said 6 o'clock.

ALBERT
Dr. Limburg-

SUZANNE

My friend!

ALBERT

I see. He's been here. Real nervous too. Been drowning himself with cups and cups of water. I think he's trying to kill himself

SUZANNE

I'm nervous too, I've never been on a blind date before.

ALBERT

Dates are scary for everyone. Just take a seat. It'll be over before you know it.

[Albert seats Suzanne at Benjamin's table. She notices the abundance of water.]

SUZANNE

You weren't kidding, he has been drowning himself.

ALBERT

(American)

Told you so.

SUZANNE

What happened to your accent?

ALBERT

What accent?

SUZANNE

It sounded French.

ALBERT

Nope. No accent here.

SUZANNE

I guess that means he's as nervous as I am.

ALBERT

Probably just hates California. You do know we're in a drought, right?

SUZANNE

I'm aware. But, tell me about him. Does he smell nice?

ALBERT

He smells like a guy. That's all I can say.

SUZANNE

I'd hope so. But what is he like?

ALBERT

He's like real nervous, I don't know.

SUZANNE

Well, what's he look like?

ALBERT

What's he look like ...Well, he's got less clothes on than you.

SUZANNE

What else?

ALBERT

You're very curious aren't you?

SUZANNE

If this is between you and me.

ALBERT

Of course, of course...

SUZANNE

I haven't been on a date since high school.

ALBERT

Really?

(aside, French)

With that fashion sense I would've thought guys were dying to get under those pants... that blouse... those shoes! Ugh!

SUZANNE

Yes. But, here I am. As ready as I'll ever be I suppose. One more question Albert.

ALBERT

(French)

Al-bare. What is it?

SUZANNE

There it is!

ALBERT

What?

SUZANNE

Your accent!

ALBERT

(American)

Oh, that was nothing. What's your question?

SUZANNE

Is he handsome?...

ALBERT

I'll let you decide for yourself. Here he comes.

*[Albert exits. Benjamin enters with his little car in his
clutched hands. After realizing his date is at the table,
he stuffs his little car in his shirt pocket. He
approaches the table and Suzanne stands to greet
him.]*

SUZANNE

Hi, I'm Suzanne.

BENJAMIN

I'm Benjamin. Or Ben for short. But I prefer Benjamin.

SUZANNE

Benjamin, nice to meet you.

BENJAMIN

Nice to meet you also. Too. That's a nice coat. And blouse.

SUZANNE

Thank you. These are my blind date clothes.

BENJAMIN

Blind? I have 20/20.

SUZANNE

Clever.

BENJAMIN

Dr. Limburger said you had an eye for fashion.

SUZANNE

She did? That's nice of her. Have you ordered?

BENJAMIN

I had some water.

SUZANNE

Water is good. There's so much to choose from. The fish and chips look good.

BENJAMIN

You should get whatever you want. Don't worry about eating less because you're on a date.

SUZANNE

Excuse me?

BENJAMIN

I'm sorry... Did that come out wrong? - Wrong. - I didn't mean anything by it.

SUZANNE

Yes, just a tad.

BENJAMIN

I'm sorry. Let's start over. Hi, I'm Ben. Benjamin for short.

SUZANNE

Suzanne.

BENJAMIN

It's so great to meet you again.

SUZANNE

We introduced ourselves just a minute ago.

BENJAMIN

I know. But I needed to do it twice.

SUZANNE

Twice.

BENJAMIN

Yes. Second times the charm, right?

SUZANNE

I guess so.

BENJAMIN

Sometimes I just need to find a way to break through to an even number, so if I ever make you upset, its because of the odd number. Odds are bad. Very very bad.

SUZANNE

Now that's odd.

BENJAMIN

Al-burt?

[Albert enters.]

ALBERT

(French)

We went over this. For the last time, it's--

BENJAMIN

Al-bare. I'm sorry. We are ready to order.

ALBERT

What'll it be?

BENJAMIN

Two orders of the Salisbury steak dinner please--

SUZANNE

--I'm sorry, I didn't want--

BENJAMIN

--That's all I'll have. Suzanne?

SUZANNE

Oh, those are for you?

BENJAMIN

Yes, go ahead and order.

SUZANNE

I'll have the fish and chips.

ALBERT

Two Salisbury Steak dinners and an order of fish and chips. Got it. It'll be out sometime in the near future.

[Albert exits. Suzanne begins to wipe the sweat off her forehead.]

BENJAMIN

Great choice. I love the smell of fish.

SUZANNE

Really? The smell usually grosses people out.

BENJAMIN

Yes. It reminds me of the fish market I used to go to with my dad as a kid. 6 o'clock every Friday for Lent. That's probably the only thing I enjoyed about growing up catholic.

SUZANNE

You'll be glad to know I'm 46. As even as they come.

BENJAMIN

You're telling me. I used to hate my teen years. Every other year celebrating an illegitimate age. I felt awful. "Happy 11th birthday Ben!" "Happy 13th birthday Ben!" "Happy 15th birthday Ben! You want a Quincenera?" No! I don't want a quincenera. Spanish odds scare me too.

SUZANNE

How old are you?

BENJAMIN

22 if you count the odds.

SUZANNE

You seem to really dislike odd numbers. I like how honest you are. You're honest right?

BENJAMIN

Honest? Yes! Very much so.

SUZANNE

Honesty is important to have. Too many people tell lies.

BENJAMIN

You're sweaty, you should take off some of those coats of yours. Here let me help you.

SUZANNE

(pushing away Benjamin)

No! That's alright, I'll just ask Al-bare to turn down the AC.

[Albert enters with food in hand. However, only one of the Salisbury steaks are present along with Suzanne's order of fish and chips.]

ALBERT

(American)

Here's your food? Oh yeah, we had to 86 one of the Salisbury steaks.

BENJAMIN

What?! WHY?

ALBERT

Do you really want to know?

BENJAMIN

Yes!

ALBERT

Are you sure? It's pretty gross.

BENJAMIN

Please just spit it out!

ALBERT

How'd you know?

BENJAMIN

Huh?

ALBERT

I ate it. Chef overcooked it so I figured I'd eat it. There's still half in the back. But it kinda rolled onto the floor. And it's all burnt and black.

BENJAMIN

That's fine. I like my steak well done. Bring it out.

ALBERT

Oh no. This steak is beyond done. Its way past done.

(aside, French)

Its probably as done as whatever's under this woman's clothes.

BENJAMIN

Bring it out please and thank you Al-bare.

ALBERT

(American)

Albert. Suit yourself.

SUZANNE

Where is your bathroom?

ALBERT

Through the double doors, make a left before you hit the kitchen.

SUZANNE

I'll be right back. And could you please lower the air conditioning?

ALBERT

I'll see what I can do.

[Albert looks at the ceiling and claps his hands three times. Nothing happens. Suzanne exits.]

ALBERT

You okay there?

[Benjamin is unresponsive. He sits and clutches his shirt pocket where his toy car hides. After a beat,

Albert decides to leave. Benjamin then takes out his car and begins playing with it on the table.]

BENJAMIN

Zoom zoom Clarkie! Zoom zoom. It's going to be vroom vroom!



[Benjamin accidentally drops the car on the floor under the table. He quickly drops to look for it. Enter Suzanne, she is a layer less.]

SUZANNE

Benjamin? What are you looking for?

BENJAMIN

Uh, the bathroom...

SUZANNE

Its back there.

BENJAMIN

I'll be right back.

[Benjamin quickly exits for the bathroom. Albert reenters with the burnt to hell order of Steak and some fish stick looking food for Suzanne.]

SUZANNE

This looks... captivating.

ALBERT

(French)

It sure does. Take a picture before it swims away.

[Albert exits. Benjamin reenters shirtless. He immediately digs in. Every time Suzanne asks him a question he shoves more food into his mouth even though it is quite disgusting. His demeanor has changed and on a scale of 1-10 of anxiety he is reaching a 9.6.]

BENJAMIN

Man these steaks are great!

SUZANNE

I see. Where were we?

BENJAMIN

Honestly? I mean, honesty.

SUZANNE

Honesty. Yes, it's very important to me.

BENJAMIN

It's important to me too. Say, this is pretty good.

SUZANNE

Since you're so honest, could you answer a question for me?

BENJAMIN

Absolutely...

SUZANNE

Why did you get here 4 hours early?

BENJAMIN

I need need to use the restroom.

[Benjamin exits whilst eating a plate of burnt as hell steak. Suzanne sits in silence, but removes a scented perfume from her purse and begins spraying her body and under the table. Albert enters coughing.]

SUZANNE

I'm sorry.

ALBERT

(American)

How are the two love birds?

SUZANNE

He's different. And nice. He's nice.

ALBERT

The perfume tells me its going to end well.

SUZANNE

I hope so.

(whisper)

Wait, you don't mean sex, do you?

ALBERT

What the hell? NO!

SUZANNE

He's a very nice man so far.

I don't know what to expect though. I just feel like there's an even number for everything. Bathroom breaks, waters, Salisbury steaks. I feel like he's obsessed or something. I saw a program about obsessive men who were obsessed with pornography and they weren't the least bit desirable.

ALBERT

I get it. You think he's upset. But ever since the invention of free porn, everyone's been tripping out. I mean there's a difference between being obsessed with numbers and being obsessed with pornography. Quite frankly, being obsessed with numbers is creepier. But, don't listen to me, ask him directly.

SUZANNE

I was going to, but then he just sprung up and ran to the bathroom. I shouldn't give up just yet. I just want to know why he got here so early. And this whole even business?

ALBERT

He's probably just nervous. Loosen up. Show some skin, guys like that. Here, I'll take your coat.

[Albert reaches to take one of Suzanne's layers off, but immediately pauses, and explodes in retching sounds by the smell of Suzanne's body odor.]

SUZANNE

Oh no.

ALBERT

(American)

MY GOD! WHAT IN HOLY HELL ALMIGHTY...! MY EYEBROWS!!!!!!

SUZANNE

Oh no no no no...!

ALBERT

(French)

Is that Hitler's mustard gas!?

SUZANNE

Please, I can explain. Just keep it down!

ALBERT

(American)

It smells like some bullshit Donald Trump is feeding Republicans!

[Suzanne gathers her belongings. Benjamin enters, with only undergarments. Albert exits retching.]

BENJAMIN

I've never been on a date before. I don't know how to dress. I asked my mom to dress me and I felt so suffocated! I don't know what I'm doing AND I PLAY WITH A LITTLE CAR! Yes, I play with little cars to calm me down. And I have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder! Yes, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder! I can't live without even numbers! And I have ANXIETY!! If you want to leave I understand but please give me a chance.

[Benjamin weeps on Suzanne's shoulder, not flinching at her incredible stench.]

SUZANNE

You don't smell that?

BENJAMIN

The rotting fish?

SUZANNE

It doesn't bother you?

BENJAMIN

No....No.

[Suzanne begins taking layer after layer off, the stench of a thousand rotting fish emerge, we hear Albert retching offstage and Benjamin stares in awe at Suzanne's beauty.]

SUZANNE

I have Trimethylaminuria, or as Albert said "What the hell is that smell?!" My mother had it. And so did hers. The family heirloom.

BENJAMIN

That's why you dressed like that?

SUZANNE

For years, yes.

BENJAMIN

Your smell comforts me. It reminds me of my youth.

SUZANNE

I was afraid I'd gross you out, but I ended up hurting Albert.

ALBERT (OFF STAGE)

AL-BARE!!

BENJAMIN

I was afraid I'd scare you away if I did something wrong. I didn't want to hurt my chances of getting to know you. I just wanted to impress you.

SUZANNE

You don't need to impress me. You're wonderful. And you're the first person to not get hurt by my smell.

BENJAMIN

You're wonderful too. Maybe we should start over.

SUZANNE

I'd like that.

BENJAMIN

Hi I'm Benjamin. Or Ben for short. But you can call me Benjamin.

SUZANNE

You're funny.

BENJAMIN

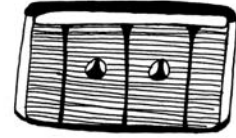
Al-bare or Albert... Check please!

LIGHTS DIM.

END PLAY

Bailey and Sidney Russell

Five Renters, One Landlord, and the AC Unit



Scene 1:

Fade in to a close up of screwdriver working on AC unit. Zoom out to see Mr. Price who is kneeling working with the screwdriver. Standing around him in what appears to be either a hallway or a back room are Ronald (to his left and desperately trying to remove a pair of handcuffs), the Twins Beth and Sarah (center back with their noses stuck in thick books, possibly medical journals) and Aaron (to the right holding what appears to be test tubes). As the scene begins, Cindy walks in, observing the room.

Cindy: *speaking to all.* Do you remember when we thought this was a good idea?

Scene 2:

Scene fade. Four years earlier... Re-open to a high school classroom at lunchtime when Mr. Price sits behind his desk eating. The twins sit properly in desks near the front of the room, sipping milk while reading. Cindy sits on a stool she has moved to face them and is heard in the background talking about a TV series she has been watching. Leaning against the whiteboard, Ronald munches a sandwich while seeming to rock out to something playing through his ear buds. Aaron meanwhile is talking in between bites while illustrating his tale with sketches on the whiteboard.

Mr. Price: You know, *everyone freezes and the twins look up,* graduation is next week. What are your plans?

Beth: A four year college in pre-med.

Sarah: And then Medical school.

Cindy: Well, I'm going to be a nurse. Only three years of school and I'll have my RN. I already started the R.O.C. program. *Continues on topic*

Aaron: *speaking on top of Cindy's speech* I was going to be a physicist in the Navy, but I ended up choosing a regular four-year university in the area. I'm planning to get a Masters of Science and then start teaching.

Ronald: *slouching* You know me. I got no plans.

The twins resume reading and Cindy finally realizes no one is listening to her.

Cindy: *to Mr. Price* So what will YOU do without us next year? *Asked with a humor that is funny only to her.*

Mr. Price: Oh, I'll probably make do by creating Sealandia. And hopefully I'll find some renters for the house my grandfather left me in his will. *Head cock*

Twins: We'll rent it from you. *Said without looking up.*

Everyone stares at them, Ronald jumps a little.

Ronald: Creepy.

Aaron: Perfect unison. It is their special talent.

Mr. Price: *Ignoring the others* You will? That's great. You have money to do that? Where'd you get it?

Twins: Yes. *Ignoring the last question.*

Moment of silence. All wait in anticipation of second answer. Sound of bell ringing. Twins rise quickly as the other kids gather belongings (aside from Ronald who has nothing).

Mr. Price: *noticing immense number of textbooks layered on rolling backpacks that the twins pull out the door* You need a crew just to lug your books around. I know; we'll invent the secret book service... They carry your books for you.

Sarah: Nah. We're fine.

Beth: We'll come by after school to arrange the rent.

End scene as the five teens exit and a class floods in chatting wildly.

Scene 3:

Scene opens to Cindy's bedroom on Saturday morning. Sunlight streams in the window to reveal piles of clothes on her bed. Cindy is half in the closet tossing more clothes onto the bed. Suddenly her phone begins ringing covered by clothes on the bed and somewhat muffled.

Cindy: *not noticing the phone* No, that's not right. This top's too brown. Too many flowers. Ew, when did I get that?

Phone still ringing and shoes flying out of the closet now. Cindy finally notices and pokes her head out of the closet.

Cindy: Hold on, hold on, I'm coming. *Digging her way out of the closet and through the mountain of clothes to her phone* Hello?... Oh, hi!... What shirt are you wearing today, Christian?... Why? I just want to know, I mean my outfit should match yours. Oh! I know! Wear the Star Wars shirt I got you and I'll wear my Dr. Who shirt! *said with too much excitement and a laugh.* Huh, did you say something?... What do you mean it's in the wash?... Well of course I know what "in the wash means" I meant why NOW?

A knock is heard at the door and a female voice, presumably Cindy's mother, is heard

Mother: Cindy! Can I come in?

Cindy: *To her mother* Yeah, come in. *Over phone* Oh, not you Christian. My mom's here. I'll have to call you back. Bye. I love you.

Cindy hangs up the phone as her mother enters, pushing the door hard as its movement is hampered by clothes.

Mother: I need to talk to you, Cindy. *Aside* I wish you wouldn't toss your clothes around so much.

Mother finds a seat haphazardly on the bed, almost slipping off.

Cindy: *Also sitting and actually slipping off the bed.* So what's going on? *Peeking head up from beside the bed*

Mother sighs heavily and Cindy struggles to actually gain a seat, finally giving up and sitting on a pile of clothes on the floor in the shape of a chair.

Mother: Well you see... wait is that your desk chair?

Cindy: Of course! *Not said hurtfully but rather oddly amused*

Mother: *exasperated* Why don't you take the clothes off before you sit down? *Sigh* Anyway, I know you want to stay here and go to nursing school in the fall, but

Cindy: *cutting Mother off* Yeah, and I'm already starting the R.O.C. program. Only three years of school and I'll have my RN.

Mother: *over Cindy* But unfortunately your father was transferred to Orlando, and you know how hard it is for a colorblind electrician to find work, so he couldn't refuse.

Cindy: What? *Questioningly humorous* Did you say something?

Mother: We're moving to Florida.

Silence while Cindy processes the information – her face displays several rapidly changing emotions, finally settling on troubled.

Cindy: But – if – I – have – to – move then I can't start the Nursing program, and I'll have to wait 'til spring to start at a different college, and it's harder to apply when you take a year off. *Gradually spoken faster*

Mother: *cutting her off* And there's no more housing at the Nursing School, so unless you find a place here that's safe and free...

Cindy: *standing abruptly* I'll just have to find someplace to stay. *Oblivious to Mother's previous statement* Sorry Mom, I know you'll miss me. *Mother agrees softly* But I have to.

Cindy rushes out the door still wearing pajamas, tripping on clothes.

Mother: *Calling after Cindy* Good luck! Be safe! Try not to befriend any psychos! *Shakes her head and sighs*

Scene shift

Scene 4:

Camera pans showing Cindy running up and down a street of houses, still in her pajamas, knocking on doors and heard talking (words muddled) to people who answer. She has a seemingly random pattern. As Cindy runs she passes by Ronald. Camera zooms to see Ronald dressed in his usual tank top and shorts carrying a carton of eggs, tossing one up and down in his hand. Ronald is slouching against a tree.

Ronald: *talking to himself* Hmm... Dad told me to get rid of these rotten eggs. But he never said how. Maybe I'll go egg City Hall. *Pause for a moment* Yep. It's decided. To City Hall.

Ronald stands and begins walking, camera follows him. In the background Cindy is seen still running from house to house. Fade out.

Scene 5:

Black screen. The sound of an explosion is heard as fade in to a house with broken windows and smoke rising. Jump to inside where Aaron is standing in the center of a blackened room wearing safety goggles and a lab coat, still holding test tube. Single cough emitted by Aaron followed by rapid footsteps as a man, presumably the landlord, rushes in angrily.

Landlord: Ah, agh, argh! That's the fifth explosion this week! I've had it! I told you: one more explosion and you're out *said frantically*. Get packing!

Aaron: *oddly composed* I graduate Friday.

The landlord freezes, looks confused, and continues as Aaron sets down the test tube in tray.

Landlord: What does that have to do with anything? *Pauses to shake his head* I told you to get packing! *With renewed anger*

Aaron: *Digs in pocket to pull out phone and dials a number* Hello?... This is Aaron... I'm coming over... About fifteen minutes... Yes as long as I walk at 1.012 meters per second... Sounds good. *Hangs up phone, turns to Landlord* I'll be out in .725 minutes.

Landlord: *having been staring the whole time, snaps to attention.* Yes, well... good... um, how long is that?

Aaron: *digging key out of pocket.* 43 seconds and 50 hundredths.

Landlord: *accepting key in a daze.* Right.

Aaron walks out after grabbing a bag by the door. End scene.

Scene 6:

Another street appears and Cindy is seen now jogging heavily door to door in pajamas.

Scene 7:

Outside City Hall, Ronald is seen attempting to throw the last egg, tripping on the carton by his feet, and struggling against three police officers in the middle of reading him his rights.

Policeman 1: You have the right to... hold still... remain silent. Anything you... Rob take his other arm... Anything you say can and will *continues rights as Policeman 2 talks over him*

Policeman 2: I'm tryin' Jack, but it's not working.

Struggle continues as Policeman 3 comes at Ronald from the front, receiving the final egg in the face. Blackout.

Scene 8:

A library with a desk and three chairs in the center comes into view. The Twins are seated on either side of the desk with closed book and look at Aaron, seated at the head of the table.

Aaron: ...So I decided to rent the house with you.

Beth: That sounds like a good plan, but where will you stay until then?

Sarah: We do not move in until the day of graduation.

Aaron: Graduation is Friday, six days away. The cost of a hotel is about *writes number in the air...* So times six equals *more numbers in air, box answer* and I have *writes in air* So, I can afford to stay 6.953 days.

Beth: Okay, then we will see you at school.

All three rise, cross arms and shake hands once firmly.

Sarah: I will show you out.

Aaron follows Sarah through one line of books to door where Aaron exits to the street. As he walks down the stairs, Aaron is passed by Cindy (still in pajamas) who stumbles up the steps huffing, puffing, and dragging her feet. Oblivious to open door, Cindy knocks three times on wall.

Sarah: Cindy, do you have Epstein Bar? You seem awfully exhausted.

Beth comes up from behind Sarah, evidently wondering what is taking so long.

Cindy: *heavy breathing* Me *breath* You guys *breath* No rent 'til *breath* job *breath* Nurse *breathing.*

Twins: Okay.

End scene.

Scene 9

Three days later on Tuesday... Scene opens to the Jailhouse. Ronald is in the cell twiddling his thumbs and muttering something under his breath about how unfair it was for his parents to leave him there for three days. Suddenly a door opens and a middle-aged couple walks in and crosses to where an officer sits behind the desk.

Officer: May I help you?

Ronald's Dad: Yes, I'm here to pick up Ronald McDuffie.

The officer points to where Ronald is still grumbling. Ronald looks up.

Officer: You mean him?

Ronald's Mom: Unfortunately, yes.

Officer: Okay. Hang on a minute.

Officer walks over to cell, pulls a key out of his pocket, unlocks the door and pulls it open.

Ronald jumps up and rushes out at the officer's bidding, meanwhile his parents stand stock still and wait for him by the desk.

Ronald: What took you so long? I had to spend three days here.

Ronald's Mom: And hopefully it did you some good.

Ronald's Dad: If I'd had my way you'd still be in there. *Pointing to cell.* Come on, let's go.

As they walk out, Ronald and his parents are arguing. End scene.

Scene 10:

Three more days have passed. It is Friday and graduation. On the football field is a temporary stage prepared for the ceremony and several graduates stand around chatting, all dressed in traditional graduation gowns. Some teachers and parents are also present, looking distinguished in suits, gowns, and other formal attire. Among the crowd of people the camera notices Aaron, Cindy, Ronald, and the Twins huddled together and talking to Mr. Price. Twins both wear valedictorian sash. Momentarily a voice is heard over a speaker calling for all graduates to come to the stage and line up. Mr. Price and the other teachers and parents find seats in the bleachers. The Principal steps forward to a podium at the center of the stage.

Principal: Good evening ladies and gentlemen. As most of you well know, I am the principle of Alpha High, Mr. Nonpareil. I know you are all anxious to get this ceremony underway so that these kids can graduate, but first I wanted to say a few words. This has been a year

unparalleled in surprises, most good, some bad. Our school has been blessed with intelligent and creative students and gracious teachers all seeking to advance education. To those of you sitting in the audience on this bittersweet day and watching your children, grandchildren, and students take their first step into a new world: may you find something to do when they leave and you no longer have to pick up after them and tell them to wake up in the morning or do their homework. What will you ever be able to do without having them to look after? *General laughter.* But truly, you will miss them. Don't worry too much though, I'm sure they'll visit you often so you can do their laundry. *Laughter.* To those seated behind me, hoping that I'll stop talking soon so that you can get your diplomas and proudly say "I am a graduate:" thank you for letting me talk. *Laughter.* And also, good luck. Now, I would like to introduce our valedictorian, or valedictorians I should say, Beth and Sarah Russo, to deliver a farewell address.

General applause as the Twins step forward from the middle row of seats (alphabetical seating) and make their way to the podium. The principal steps down and they step up.

Beth: Good evening friends, teachers, parents, grandparents, and other relatives. It is a great honor for us to be here speaking before you on behalf of a graduating body of students dedicated first to family, second to education, and third to everything else.

Sarah: We have always believed in education as a path to success, and the students here behind us are there for the same reason, or because their parents threatened to take away their phones and internet access. *Laughter.*

Beth: When we first sat down to decide what to say today, we considered telling you about the wonderful achievements that this school has guided its students to and presenting statistics showing the vast number of students with outstanding GPAs...

Sarah: But that would be pointless, for the proof of how incredible this school and these students are is seated behind us. It is the students who earned their diplomas and the

right to be here today and stand on this stage. It is the joy in their hearts and the hearts of their families. So with this, there is only one thing left to say.

Twins: Farewell, and yes, we are twins.

Laughter and applause as the Twins make their way back to their seats and the principal steps forward.

Principal: Well put, well put. And now, without further ado, it is my proud pleasure to present this year's graduating class of Alpha High!

Applause as all students rise and make their way in single-file line to receive their diplomas and shake hands with the Principal. The third student trips on an excessively long gown and takes the principal down with him as the scene fades out of view.

Scene 11:

Ronald saunters down the sidewalk whistling and swinging his diploma dressed in his usual tank top and shorts (having shed the gown) in addition to which his head is adorned with his graduation cap. Arriving at a house with one duffel bag packed and sitting on the lawn, Ronald freezes in his tracks and stops whistling.

Ronald: Hey! Anybody here?!

Ronald's parents come out to lawn.

Ronald's Dad: So they actually gave you a diploma?

Ronald: Of course they did. I graduated didn't I?

Ronald's Mom: Just barely, and you didn't get into college. *Crosses her arms.*

Ronald: *reproachfully* I don't need to go to college.

Ronald's Dad: Then what do you plan on doing?

Ronald: Well isn't that obvious?

Ronald begins to enter the house. His dad stops him by the arm and his mother hands him the duffel bag from the ground.

Ronald's Dad: No you don't.

Ronald's Mom: You aren't living here anymore.

Ronald: You're kicking me out?! You can't do that!

Ronald's Dad: You're eighteen. We can kick you out if we want,

Ronald swings the duffel bag over his back and begins to walk away in a huff.

Ronald: Well fine! Be that way! Who would want to live here anyway?

Ronald's Mom: Me! *Shouted after the quickly leaving Ronald.* And your father too!

End Scene

Scene 12:

A nice house is shown from the outside. There are three wide steps leading to the double French-door and boxes are scattered about on the lawn. Mr. Price is unlocking the doors. On the stairs are Aaron, holding a box labeled "FRAGILE TEST TUBES" at the right, Cindy to the left and down leaning against a box labeled "CLOTHES #4," and the twins stand behind and to the left of Mr. Price balancing a box between them with an open book on top of it. Sarah reads out loud, seemingly from a medical journal. She is interrupted by Mr. Price as he swings open the double doors.

Mr. Price: There we go. Welcome to your new house. I'll have the AC fixed by Monday.

Mr. Price steps aside. Sarah tips the box, sliding the book toward Beth who is about to start reading when Ronald comes sauntering up with the duffel bag still over his shoulder.

Ronald: Yo. *Two-finger salute.*

Ronald trudges into the house. Sarah and Beth shrug, Aaron just shakes his head.

Cindy: Wait. Is he living with us now too?

Mr. Price: Why not?

End scene.

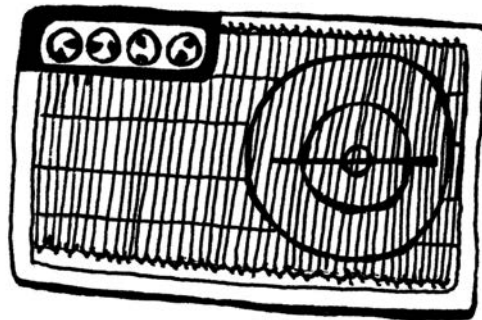
Scene 13:

Fade back to present time inside the house where Cindy has just finished re-telling the story.

Aaron sets down his test tubes, the twins close their books, Ronald drops the handcuffs finally successful in removing them, and all are silent as Mr. Price finishes tightening the screw and closes the AC unit. The AC is heard kicking on.

All: Yeah... That was a bad idea.

End scene, fade to credits.



Artistic Credits

Photography:

Darlin Morales

Cover photo for Poetry section (Page 8)
Cover photo for Short Stories section (Page 24)
Cover photo for Drama section (Page 64)

Mandy Rees and Chris Eicher

Photo of CSUB's 2016 Theatrefest Performance of "The Even Couple" (Page 80)

Photograph of Professor Solomon O. Iyasere (Page 4) has an unknown photographer.

Sketches:

Sarah Harmon

Mateo Lara's "The New Age and Other Poems" (Pages 11-12)
Jeff Eagan's "Harrington Park" (Page 16)
Marlin Morales's "Dastaar" (Page 25)
Jayme Reyna's "Chip" (Page 53)



Marsalh Musaad

Shydel Villa's "Fleur" (Page 8)
Shydel Villa's "The Grove" (Page 10)
Keith Kirouac's "A Stand" (Page 14)
Jeff Eagan's "Because a Science Book Told Me So" (Page 16)
Greg C. Bolanos's "Seahorses Don't Have These Problems" (Page 18)
Sylvia Brown's "To Ama, From Your Forgotten Daughter" (Page 22)
Marlin Morales's "Dastaar" (Page 28)
Shydel Villa's "Invisible People" (Page 39)
Greg C. Bolanos's "How to Make Pop's Sketti Sauce" (Pages 62-63)
Anthony Jauregui's "Figment" (Pages 65,70,72)
Anthony Jauregui's "The Even Couple" (Page 92)
Bailey and Sidney Russell's "Five Renters, One Landlord, and the AC Unit" (Pages 97, 108)



Nashwa Rafiq

Keith Kirouac's "The Truth about the Birds and the Bees" (Page 14)
Keith Kirouac's "Loving a Woman" (Page 15)
Mark Saso's "Inside the Life of a CSUB Student" (Page 17)



