

Orpheus

XXXVII



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Cover Art Image: “Five to One” by Dravon Vega

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If any student is interested in joining the *Orpheus* staff, please email Dr. Charles MacQuarrie at cmacquarrie@csub.edu or Dr. Carol Dell’Amico at cdellamico@csub.edu

Orpheus accepts submissions of various kinds. Please send submissions to orpheus@csub.edu, but first visit the Department of English’s website (www.csub.edu/english) for complete information.

Orpheus follows a blind submission process that includes pieces submitted by the journal’s editors.

Orpheus was originall founded in 1973 by Dr. Solomon Iyasere, a professor in the CSUB Department of English. His contributions to the university were many, and his legacy lives on through *Orpheus*.

This edition of *Orpheus* was especially challenging since it was primarily assembled via online collaboration during the coronavirus pandemic. Much of the design and final editing was done after the end of the semester when finals were complete. I want to specially thank Kaitee McDaniel, Stephanie Sanchez-DeLeon, Kelsey McJannet, and Sidney and Bailey Russell, for sticking with it to the very end. We couldn’t have finished without your hard work, devotion, and editing.

Thank you,

Sam Underwood

Orpheus

XXXVII

A Literary Journal

California State University, Bakersfield

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Orpheus, as we know, did not end well. Sure, he successfully travelled to Hades and used his phenomenal musicianship to spring his wife Eurydice from the underworld, but by looking back too soon he violated the terms of his contract with Hades and back down she went. In a Rilke poem, which just kills me, Hermes turns to Eurydice and says with deep emotion “I am so sorry, he has turned back” and she responds “who?” (the quotes are dialog not verbatim from Rilke). I love the idea that she has already forgotten him, and it is no tragedy for her. Orpheus also ends up badly because, in the most popular version of the myth, he runs afoul of a troop of drunken Maenads who dismember and send him and his lyre floating down the river.

Like the Maenads, Covid-19 separated the senior seminar class in which we were preparing the current issue of Orpheus, and yet we were able to assemble the various beautiful parts into a whole. Sam Underwood, the floating head of this Orpheus, is to be much congratulated for his patience and perseverance -- he also was head editor of the Runner newspaper this year. The excellence of his work speaks for itself. It is notable that Sam is a transfer from Porterville College, and we included some wonderful contributions from current PC students in this issue, most notably the cover art.

We want to thank various people for their support, but first we should thank the student editors themselves -- we created 5 sub-committees one each for visual art, poetry, short story, and drama as well as a head editor committee. Each of these committees had a designated head and the head-head who was the redoubtable Sam. This methodology allowed decisions to be made sub rosa in committee, edited at that level, and then forwarded up to the head editors for final editing. This is TMI no doubt, but the point is the students did a lot of great work at every level even in these very challenging times.

Thanks are also due to the support of the English Department, especially the administrative assistant Analia Rodriguez and the chair Steve Frye. The Dean of Humanities, Bob Frakes, is ever supportive of student publications as is Vernon Harper our beneficent Provost, and of course we want to acknowledge the continuing encouragement from our hard-working President Lynette Zelezny. We also we want to thank Professor Rachel Tatro-Duarte of Porterville College for serving as liaison and bringing us wonderful submissions from PC students.

Finally, we want to thank all the students who submitted their work and to encourage any students who are reading this to submit their work to us for consideration in our next issue.

We also should thank the gods, except Pan, for allowing this edition of Orpheus to end well -- despite the panic and pandemic.

Be well,

CWM

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Poetry

Alyson Bravo

Te Amo Tambien

It was always so cold in the room,
Hearing the machines, lack of sleep,
Nurses waking us up every 20 minutes, Who would have ever known those were the last Memo-
ries I would have with her?

Leaving to pursue my dreams to
Become a better person
To only get a call receiving the bad news That she was gone.
Her last "I love you too"
Was just 40 minutes ago.
Who would have known?

My heart suddenly hurts, My soul cries.
Eyes flood with tears.
I scream in disbelief that her voice Will no longer be heard.

Who would have known?
That I would not spend those cold days In the hospital with her no more.
Who would have known that my heart would still hurt to this very day?
Who would have known that was her last breath?

Not a day goes by that I don't think of her.
How proud she would be of me.
I miss you abuela.
I love you too.

Joseph Furtado

An Invocation of Dreams

The grand vistas of the Dreamlands

are varied in scenery and danger.

Burning white tundra, frozen blue sands,

and dead forests with spirits that linger.

I have seen abodes of arcane dimension,

found the end of hallways eternal,

climbed mangled mountains that natives shun,

and heard the void's symphony infernal.

Perhaps I am not as well travelled,

but journeys are made by the brave.

Many tangled paths are unraveled,

by those unafraid of the grave.

Adventure awaits each mortal child

when they sleep and return to the wild.

Taylor Clark

inchplant

it's
overgrown
like a weed
wild and unwelcome
overblown
like a wrinkling rose
someone's been meaning to snip
overflown
like a leggy, lanky, low-laying
thing
. .
crawling
. .
inch
by
inch
. .
spilling its tentacles
over the windowsill
against the glass
sprouting wiry, weak limbs
that do not work
. .
creeping
. .
inch
by
inch
. .
reaching-
. .
to Nowhere.
. .
roots stifled
slowly suffocating
in a pot
it's
overgrown

MacQuarrie (I Really Do Like Your Class)

Loosely based on Sir Philip Sydney's poem "Astrophil and Stella 39".

Come Sleep! O Sleep, the certain knot of peace,
Sitting on my lids in Renaissance Lit.

Come sheep! O sheep, come to give me release,
Jumping over the table where I sit.

Wolfe, Milton, Yeats, Donne,

I'd rather be outside, lying in the sun.

To His Coy Mistress, I say goodbye,

Smack The Flea, shut an eye.

Don't check your phone, it's almost time to leave;

But until then, I've got something up my sleeve.

I'll mimic form- and write and write and write,

But the rhyme and meter aren't even right!

So until next class, I'll content to dream

Of a warm cup in hand, full of caffeine.

Bad Manners

I do not want to be good or presentable anymore.

Too much of my youth has been spent buttering myself up to be paired

With a slice of lamb, or silky scallops

On somebody else's plate.

The men can keep their meats.

I'll waste the rest of my years as I have always wanted:

Cursing and dancing and yelling,

Tangling my hair, taking up space,

Doing the things my mother told me not to do.

Sharing my laughter with the grass and the sun. in a delicious exaltation:

All for myself.

Rachel Stratemeier

Stars are Free

From across the room,
A distance as vast as the space between the stars,
And time lasting eons
Between us;
Walls as tall as planets,
Separating us,
I observe quietly in my corner
A remarkable event,
Which I may never encounter again
In many eons.

A heart is like glass;
It cannot withstand
The pressure of mass
Weighing down on it from above.
Yet yours remains free
As if it were floating
And racing across the sky.
It flashes its colors as they burn
Hot and heavy in the atmosphere

You are a shooting star,
Free from gravitational forces
To careen wherever you may.

My heart is contained in a wrought iron prison,
One it constructed for itself
Piece by piece
Until it forged every rivet,
Shaped every bar,
Compacted every brick,
Welded every element
In the name of security,
And in the name of survival
It locked itself
With three bolted snaps
And threw away the key into the river.

Maybe you've felt the same.
Maybe you appear liberated
Through considerable toil and wrenching
To break free of your chains.
Maybe all this is the result of organized efforts,
And maybe if you looked at me
You'd see what I see in front of me.

Either way, I don't care.
Reach the strings of your heart
And entangle me in your freedom.

Andrew Almaraz

Human Resources

Thinking myself of worldly taste and cosmopolitan composition, I once worked at a Hollywood grocery store,
(You wouldn't know it)
In a position far, far from the sales floor, Near the back,
Near the back,
Stocking the dairy rack, Not
Yet comfortable by the computer screens, Though I knew machines could be trusted Even the ones
Worn and rusted, Old and intricate
Like a man on his second wife, Delicate
Deliberate
Those who had dental, Their braces showing
A knowing, nervous smile
Forced, strained, their lips twitch—denial—and yet somehow Exquisite,
As if they were the type who were paid to sit and visit And not the kind who lacked a certain,
call it appreciation For the risks taken
By those behind closed doors,
Their skin made a pallor grey, (obviously still white) By countless wars waged on spreadsheets
Their eyes too wide, frightened Of the mounting losses,
The bosses sit with bit lips, unsaid recriminations Choosing to stare at each other instead
Of the computer screens showing, in silence The workers outside their door
Choosing violence.

Sam Underwood

Real Man

I work all day with callus'
on my hands like the grain of old
dry wood, knotted muscles strain,
cause I am a real man.

I watch sports, drink beer, cuss,
gamble, and fight.
I am a real man.

I cherish my girl, and value her as an equal.
I treat her like a queen, never taken her for granted.
I am a real man.

I can cry unashamed, at the end
of a movie, when the fervor of the
story reaches an apex.
I'm still a real man.

I get lost in the sounds of a cello,
sounding an old Keltic tune,
and I smile from my heart at poetry
that describes the ocean,
because I am a real man.

I wept when my children
took their first breaths, tears falling
unhindered on the bloody floor,
which makes me a real man.

As I grow old and am ready
to leave this world
I leave on my own and all alone.
Shed no tears for me
because I lived as a real man.

Finite Chaos

Time flutters away like unknown strangers
passing me as I scramble about my day.

Unnoticed and unaware of this moment
my mind is clouded with thoughts, to-dos and to-don'ts
taking life with it...

What have I forgotten?

Thoughts in a state of mind like millions of buzzing bumble bees
vibrating my brain with the flutter of their wings.

If only I could slow it all down and see one frame at a time.
A broken reel to real projector
would show that scene

that is dooming me to a life led at the speed
of an infinity that doesn't exist.
At least not for our mortal world.

Time becomes meaningless as it is frivolously discarded
and yet, the most precious thing, as days, weeks, years
slip away, never to be seen again.

I need to slow it all down.

Time is stolen from me by duty, ambition, and by goals,
but never my dreams, never my desires.

The thought passes with the hum of the bees' gossamer wings
and I continue my day
undisturbed in my routine of chaos.

Katie McEvoy-Holguin

Cold Open

Bright lines and white lies
Thrown into the limelight
Staring into the darkness
I burn

I fear the steady ground
The echoing quietness
The doubt before the applause
The night before the dawn

I fear the outburst
The opening act
The lines I didn't learn
The beats I forgot to take

Center stage
I fear the routine
To bask into normality
Blinded by dim lights

Fernando Valdivia

Autumn

She speaks to me, swaying her wings of
crimson leaves across back and forth, back and forth
as the ninth month has come and gone.
She speaks to me, descending, Tsk Tsk, scraping
against the salt splintered cement,
underneath the cold October sun.
She speaks to me, Crunch straining
to voice herself underneath the
pervasive weight of ignorance.

Kayla Culberson

Atlas

You are Atlas.

The weight of the world rests on your shoulders
(like it has since the day you were reborn,
a child still, but old enough to know your world has changed).

You see the color drain out of the world
as a vulture's voice comes through a speaker,
cutting through the sanctuary of a home you'd once shared.

You are dead to me.

Death should feel cold. Sharp. Final.

But you have been craving this Death.
This feels like a burst of color.
Your life has been black and white until this moment,
until Death touches.
Now all you see are colors:
reds, yellows, peaches, browns.

You are Atlas.

But Atlas has stopped caring about the consequences
of removing the world from his shoulders and setting it down at his feet.

"The Dream"

I saw my friend today
Well- I guess I know his name
He walked into class
Like any old day

As my peers filed in
Hardly being settled
He slipped right out of class
In a rush he must've been

He was quite young
Carried a lot of baggage
Sometimes no one noticed him
Or the tune he sung

Never truly heard
He slipped away unnoticed
Except for me
Who spotted him through the herd

I didn't think much at first
Seemed like a normal Wednesday
Then my stomach knotted
For clarity I thirst

My friend from this course
Well- this guy I knew
Was enrolled in the class
Lost in remorse

He wasn't supposed to be
In class Wednesday
For he had already left
The previous day, see?

Trauma from the past
Haunted him today
So the future would never see
The truck that had passed

I saw my friend today
Well- I guess I knew his name
He walked out of class
For his final day

“Disapproval from the gods”

How many licks does it take
To reach your sweet center
To grace by your saccharine core
To taste what you have in store - for me

How many looks will it take
To see through your outer shell
If I leer long enough will I know
How far I need to go - for you

How many spins can my neck
Handle before it breaks
Attempting to watch your back
Deprived of all grace - but not you

Let's find out!
One, I begin to lick
Two, proceed to stare
Three, attempt to spin
Crunch.

How do you get close
With a bird of the night
When Minerva her mother
Doesn't see it right
The World May Never Know...

Lauren Silvis

“The Overthinking Poet”

I came here for inspiration.
The clock screams at me “Assignment Due at 2:55”
But it’s not louder than the espresso machine,
the cloaked green goddess of caffeine grinding away.

Okay, focus. Let’s go.
I look in the mirror.
No.
I glance in the reflection.
Gross.
I look at myself, myself looking at me.
Nope.

Maybe I should get another coffee.
The sweet embrace of cream and beans
Might be exactly what I need,
a splash of pull-your-shit-together flavoring

Come on, 20 minutes left.
The reflection on the wall, I see myself.
Seriously? No.
Right there, in front of me, myself.
Hmmm, no.
In front of me, right there, myself I see.
Okay fine.

2:45. Only 14 lines to go.

A Cure

For every gash, there's a Band-Aid.
If you break a bone, it is cast until mended.
There is medication for a warped psyche.
But there is no remedy for a *broken heart*.

To finding a way of eradicating the aching,
the debilitating desolation,
the tears of salt tarnishing my skin,
I'd dedicate my life.

Discovering a way to regrow the shards of my heart you shattered.

When you walked out that door,
You took my heart's most crucial portions.
You hurled them on the floor.
Abandoned them to dry out, shrivel up, and never return to their owner.

I'd search for a cure because deprived of one,
I don't know if my heart can remain
to take another stride, speak a single phrase,
or pump the blood through my veins.

Daniel Gallardo

Panic

It's the tendrils of an octopus
Suction cups shoveling your eyeballs
Ink coating the insides of your gut
Beaks tearing through your flesh
Until, a flake of your skin drifts onward
Like a feather in the wind, shouting, screaming—
Echoing around, to and fro, back and forth
Landing on the razor's edge, balancing on the heavens

A lighthouse beams a stream of clarity
But it's too little, too late
You have passed on—
Where? You might ask—
Where you always were!
Entrapped within a melody
The key had changed, abruptly, obscurely!
And now, dreadful silence—

Tianna Belcher

Sister

My sister will not be an interrupted sentence
Her words will flow out of her like a geyser that will never cease or dry
And she will be articulate and strong
Confident, self-assured

Her love will not be written off
And her head will be high as she will not be bothered with the opinions of those below her

Her value will spill out through her speech
And will be the key to open doors I could never reach

Victoria Cipres

Three Years and Counting

March 17th, 2017

He makes me come undone like jazz pianists
Writing melodies on my skin
It's a symphony that begins
And never wants to end

-vc

November 16th, 2018

You're my favorite blanket
To wrap myself in
When I need the warmth and safety
During my own storm

-vc

August 21st, 2019

Sorrow is the best medicine
To deal with pain
Don't be afraid and
Swallow that jagged little pill

-vc

February 20th, 2020

You have helped me water
My own garden on the
Days I cannot do so myself

-vc

Joy Gamble

Mother Dearest, A Wall

I walk down the halls,
The halls with the white walls.
It's only 30 minutes
That I need to stay and talk.
But it seems I always look
At the abnormally slow clock,
On those white walls.
Never ticking fast enough
Tick-tock, tick tock.

These walls must be haunted
With my memories of you,
And how you have a face like mine.
But I don't know you like they do.

They feel your nails on their flesh,
As you scratch your way away from them.
The demons you speak to
One pill at two, three pills at four,
The voices aren't so scary anymore.

The next day you do it all over again,
Suffering in solitude day by day,
From the time they locked you away.

Mother dearest, it hurts me to see you like this.
You will always be a mystery, and someone I think I miss.
I don't know how to be
Anyone
Without the knowledge of a mother's touch.
Kern Medical Center Psych Ward 3b
I see your face on mine,
Forever haunting me.

Girls These Days

Dear Kayley,

I'd like to tell you something about what I've witnessed from you

Twelve years passed, being that our friendship ended and no one knows you like I do.
I've seen the way you treat men, and how you wave yourself like steak in front of them.

No one likes a tease but to be honest, it's just plain mean to let them believe
a so called "good girl" would give them the time of day.

Over and over I've seen the routine, aren't you tired Big Kay?

Don't get me wrong, your beliefs work for some, but hating someone for being gay

Reminds me that the hymns are not what your practice, only what you hum.

Your pedestal is a fake alter like Mount Sinai, your tiny feet step up to look down on others,

It's lined with gold and riches that help you perform your show,

Of the she-wolf named Hypocrisy dressed in jewels and sheep's clothes.

Some people have the light of Jesus, humble men and women you've identified yourself with

But your light is not that shade of purity you compare yourself to,

Doing everything but something, to prove "I'm still worthier than you."

You shame people in this way, but have you looked at what you do?

Being pure and being a virgin are the same in your eyes,

But the devil seems to have his hooks deep inside,

Penetrating you in places you can no longer disguise.

You have these depressive episodes, wallowing in self pity

Letting the world know you're the one who's suffering.

Are you sad because you've kissed too many toads?

Never mind you're not a princess but a heart thief speeding on every road.

Hungry for more love? Let's turn to your friends.

Suck the life out of them, make them feel less than.

Greater than, less than, math has never been your strong suit anyways.

That's probably why none of this is adding up still, Kayley Janay.

You have no shoes to fill but the ones on your own damn feet,

but you still feel the need to compete.

Friendship means loyalty, something you'll never know.

You wonder why no one stays, then proceed to look them in the eye

through your sickeningly sweet, dark pink evil haze.

Nothing is perfect and one day I hope you will see the light.

A woman does not break other people, but holds her beauty to her own standards, knowing that
it will truly exist inside her soul, not her face.

So when you look in the mirror and don't like what you see,

examine your thoughts, your space, and alter your ego

because it's going straight to your waist.

Thinking Thoughts

Thinking thoughts over and over,
Back and forth,
My mind keeps racing,
Trying to find my four leafed clover.

Minimally searching for maximum depth
To the meaning of life within this unkept theft,
That my ego has stolen,
Blocking my happiness.

Quieting my mind becomes a struggle,
Tightening and twisting a frayed rope
That seems to be breaking with my strengthless hope.

Tick, tock, time is escaping,
Grab it quickly and please stop pacing!

Look in the mirror and stare,
Believe you can do all refrain from using you or referring to this ambiguous 2nd person
Without the fear of failure; the fall,
And begin your journey if you dare.

Esmeralda Torres

PORTAL

Are you okay?
You see under me, wait maybe you don't see it yet
In front of me, there's A step, the last step
A step that can either be the turn of my life or the end
It's clear, hard to view but it's there
Crystalline like nothing else in this world
When you look down
Every color you can ever imagine can be seen
I hold on to a rope tightly with both hands
The rope is my best friend and worst enemy
It burns me, yet it heals me

Burns to force me to let go
Heals me to give me strength
Yet I possess a power, myself
A power to control the power
What's the power then? You might wonder
I will leave you with the question for now
Now, the step possesses the future within
It's like a life of its own, it can make you see/feel/breathe as it, please
What it portrays can make you afraid or full of joy
It works as a clock, but only moves forward
You cannot make it move backwards
Once you step on it, there are no back steps
Everything disappears
The past was the previous steps
The step is a new life or the last breath
To dare to take the step or maintain your step is the question
The new step can be anything you have ever imagined
Yet it decides, not you
It's one step but it possesses the strongest power in the world
It's your choice, you take the risk or maintain your step
You risk experiencing fear/anger/loneliness
Or love/protection/happiness
It's unknown to everyone
Yet visible to who dares to step within
Happens unexpectedly
Begins as a fairytale
Sometimes can take a life away
Other times can bring meaning to a life
It's a battlefield
Weapons become words
Bullets are your knowledge
Used wisely, you continue the battle
Otherwise, you are defeated
Your enemy can become the person in the mirror
Lead it, never force it
You use force, you confuse it
Once confused, the obstacles gain power
Once they gain power, you lose strength
Can gain it back but never strong enough
Doesn't mean you are defeated
Weaker you feel, the more knowledge you have acquiring
Yet what happens to the real enemy?
The real enemy can be the savior or the evil itself

Percy Ednalino

PANTONE 2727 C

Cerulean fumbles along glumly
Azure fancies itself too erudite
Electric blue seems spot on
But maybe that's too obvious

My cheeks flush, pulse quickens
And my heart skips a beat
Whenever you smile at me
It makes me feel alive

Beryl carries a nice hue, while
Navy demands your loyalty
Cobalt embraces the cold
Which is the opposite of you

Maybe it's better this way,
Me feeling lost and confused
And you never having a clue
Of the crush I have for you

Royal suits you, yet
Teal timidly declares itself impure
Cyan carries an inherent shallowness
To properly capture your depth

Schoolboy crushes are agonizing
Shyness bars me from asking
If you'd like to hang out sometime
So I'll quietly adore from afar

Sapphire captures your spirit
Mazarine does not
Periwinkle perceives itself too delicate
For someone with such inner strength

Those few minutes we share
Walking the hallways between classes
Are the highlight of my day
And leave me wanting more

Turquoise enviously avoids you, and

Ultramarine stands too rigid
Cesious feels complicated
I'll find the right shade for you

But we're thousands of leagues apart
Our ships sailed at different times
I could spend an entire day just
Staring into those piercing blue eyes

PANTONE 19-1664

Sanguine eyes defeated Hector
since unchecked rage shares the color
of violence and love.

Crimson rivulets flow
when passion overwhelms a life
harvested by obsession's theft.

Cardinal-robed clerics whisper last rites
for fallen loved ones who ascend
to heaven's shining gates.

Ruddy little cherub faces
are hesitant to flush away
pet goldfish that have sunk.

Cherry slushies are thirst-quenching
but when consumed too quickly they
can also freeze your brain.

Fate's vermilion curtain
keeps separate star-cross'd lovers
who dream of rain-soaked embraces.

Scarlet's many meanings
would make a ginger blush
and hide behind her auburn hair.

Bat-Ami Gordin

I met the night Girlfriend

Up to the beds,
as always, cold,
in the darkest apartment,
where every candle is snuffed,
I met the night Girlfriend.

Ears stood still
to tear glimpses of horizon.
Mercurial hearts –
a three way love affair,
at the speed of light.

Then boldly I said:
Who is to be "together"?

Failure never jades
more than planet
more than sky,
more than music.
more than countries you have visited.
I give you more than she.

Kimberlee Dorado

Sound + Color VT (2-6-20)

Remnant embers of California wildfires glow in your eyes
Lips taste of a golden Smyrna fig
Please kiss me beneath scarlet skies
Then, snap me in half like a twig.
As I lay drenched in your bedroom light, red
Each touch is a Book of Revelations
I can hear the clocks constantly ticking
Your departure is something I dread
I find this feeling somewhat sickening
There shall never be another nightfall quite like this one, I drown myself in crimson lies
And all I see are your sunset eyes.

Jorge Lopez

The Praying Man and the Fishing Man.

The Praying man and the fishing man,
sit on the beach today.
The praying man and the fishing man,
watch the poor girl dance away.
One wants to take her home,
the other hopes she finds god.
The praying man and the fishing man,
Listen to the poor girl sing.
the praying man and the fishing man,
Hum along in the heat.
The poor girl lifts her skirt,
watching the men's eyes avert.
She grabs hold of their arms,
Dragging them toward the sea,
Together they sink,
their souls free.

White, Like a Bunny

I've got so much pain in my heart
Filled to the top.
Hell,
I'd thank the Devil if he'd make it stop.
I'd heat him a cup of tea
Mix it with some honey.
Hell,
I'd thank the devil for his company.

We'd talk about our day's and how long they've been,
how tonight I've only eaten top ramen.
Hell,
The Devil and I have so much in common.
It's a misconception that his skin is red.
"My skin is white like a bunny!"
Hell,
The Devil is so damn funny.

"If you could do one thing, what would it be?"
"I'd let the Devil set me free."



Tanner Harris

Phrases

“What’s going on, dude?”

“Is everything okay?”

“What’s on your mind?”

“Did you get enough sleep, my guy?”

“You can tell me what’s wrong.”

“You’re my friend, I won’t judge you.”

“It’s okay to have feelings, man.”

“You don’t have to tough it out all the time.”

“Sometimes talking about it helps.”

“What have you eaten today?”

“You look like something is bothering you.”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk.”

“Do you need me to stay with you?”

“What can I do to help?”

“Would you like me to just listen?”

“Just checking up on you, buddy.”

“How are you feelin’, chum?”

“We’re in this together, right?”

“You’re not alone.”

“I’m here for you.”

A Disconnect

The voices are here
And like to murmur
As they whisper in
The great, big hallways

The voices don't give
They know to take

I cannot unhear
Their white, hot lead words

The voices make waves
In once smooth waters

And have to throw spears
At each other's hearts

The voices know me
But they make me ache
With the longing for
Parents who really love.

Jeopardy

The Anticipation is white hot
and searing.
It is the worst waiting, the silent staring.

The brain does not know,
The family does not know,
The "knowledge has failed."⁽⁴⁾

But maybe it is there.
The light is brightening,
The tunnel is ending.

The elation!
There breathing again,
The Joy!
It was correct.

Bailey Russell

More Than That

Some say the world is black and white
Others say its every shade of gray
But I have found it's more than that.
It's the fiery red and flaming orange of the setting sun
It's the calming deep blue of the ocean
And the snowy white of crashing waves
It's the refreshing green of trees and grass
It's the twinkling diamond of the stars
It's the crimson red of fallen blood
And the faded pink of washed bandages
It's the sparkling emerald in her eyes
It's the shimmering pearl he gave her
It's the bright pink of the sweet-scented rose
And the burnt black of charcoal from the fire
The world is black and white
And the world is every shade of gray
But it is also so much more than that.

Sidney Russell

The End

The battle wore on and on until
Crimson liquid bled across plains of pearl
And weapons clanged through fields of fire.
The world itself turned over.

Golden arches once shining and brilliant
Lay broken and tarnished.
Tongues of flame sizzled out
Then raged all the hotter.
A lone figure bemoaned the loss of his lover.

No joy bells were ringing -
Even Hell's bells were silent.
The angels were weeping,
The demons were moaning,
For all was lost forever.

Yaritza Castro

“Daydream”

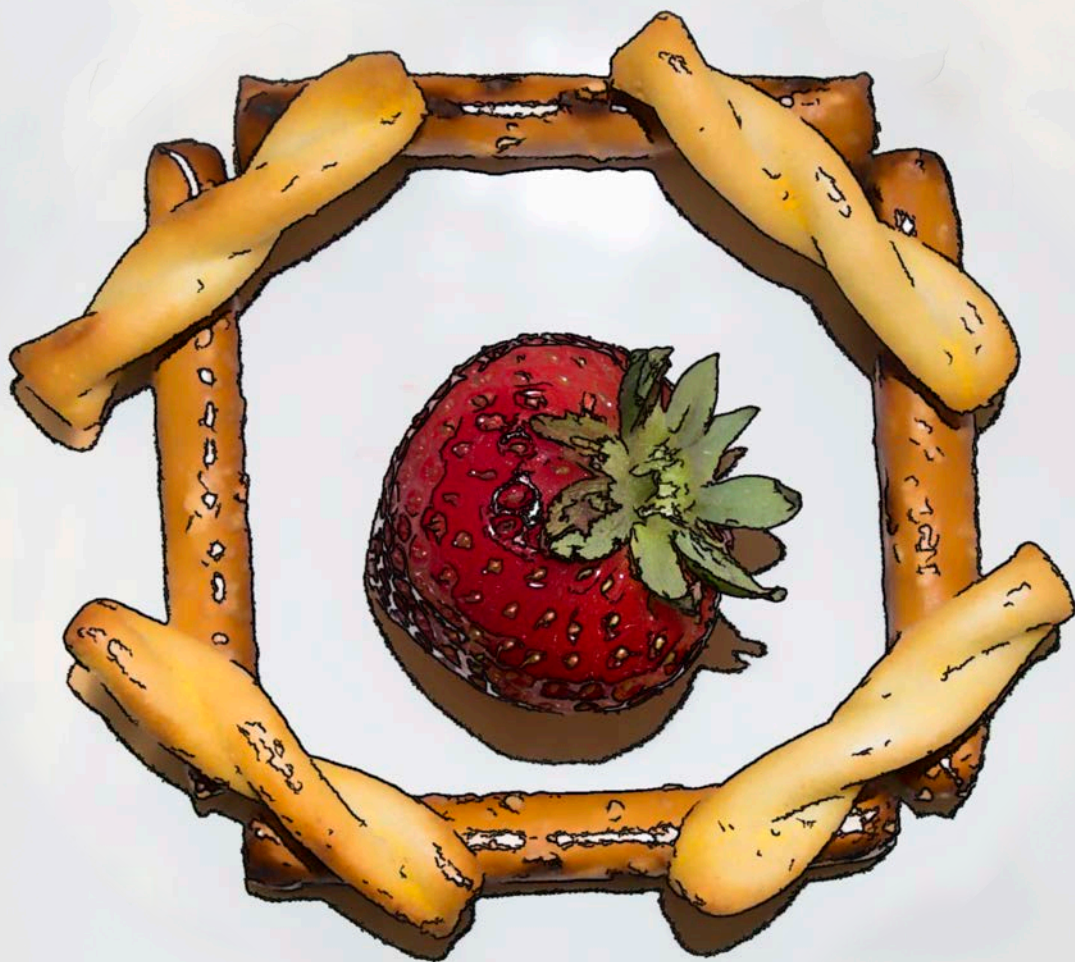
Reflections of orange bounce off your face
Like the sunset yellows and cotton candy pinks
I'd Daydream about being kissed under.
The rose colored carnations on your cheeks
Call me in, and I just can't resist.
You are flower petals against my palms, and
I'll let my eyes melt into yours like
Chocolate kisses
And wishes of tomorrow.
Tonight, I'll close my eyes when the stars rain, and
This might only last as long as
The nights we won't remember,
But infatuation is a hell of a drug.
If I tell the stars your name,
Will you remember mine?

Marissa Patton

Seize the Day

He stays in the car. Completely silent.
A ghost, only much more present.
A shadow.
He doesn't follow you inside but remains there, watching, waiting.
The car starts and there he sits, looking with sharp green eyes, that silent voice that
scolds.
You reason with him, but your agitation doesn't make a difference.
What's done is done.
You pull out of the parking lot and crank on the radio to tune him out, trying, hoping.
Neither the past memories, nor the ghosts, nor the dead haunt.
What haunts is that ever-present, elusive thing that follows you without knowledge.
If you could stop that thing, you would.

SHORT FICTION



Somniphobia

You really think tonight is going to be any different? You think you're going to dream sweet, little nothings and everything is going to be okay? You've forgotten everything you've been through when you lie down at night, like a child forgetting what he had for breakfast a week ago. But I remember.

You don't remember the night you woke up to your mom and dad arguing, hearing the thumping of heavy footsteps coming towards your room. You had, in a moment of panic, thrown your comforter over your head, thinking that whoever came into your room would assume you were asleep. That if you didn't see them, they couldn't see the conscious you, or hear your staggered and shallow breathing as you clung to your pillow like a lifesaver. Of course, their arguing had only died out when they realized it was late, and they "didn't want to wake you," but by then you had already experienced a nightmare. I remember that night.

I can't believe that you would forget the morning after you turned 16, when you found out that your favorite aunt had died. She passed peacefully in her sleep, or so they all told you. But you couldn't understand why it happened, especially to someone like her. She was young and beautiful with what seemed like all the time in the world. You cried later that night, begging to anyone and everyone above you – God, Ra, Brahma, Zeus, Papa Legba, even Satan – to bring her back to you. They never answered your prayers, of course. But that was enough for you to turn your back on them, to lose faith. I remember when you let your faith fall.

Nowadays, you're so consumed by your work that getting more than 4 hours of sleep every TWO DAYS is some sort of blessing. You don't really believe in those anymore, remember? Your mind is constantly running and jumping around in your skull as if it were a bouncy castle, giving you incessant migraines until you're doubled-over on the couch at night, swallowing pill after pill until the pain subsides enough to think clearly. By that point, it's always late at night; usually the next day has already started. So many hours in a day, yet with you it always seems like there's never enough. You always find some excuse not to rest – the dishes need to be washed, that group project is due next week, and you've barely done your share – but those aren't the reasons, are they? You know, don't you?

You know the real reason lies in those nights where you "success-

fully” fall asleep. The nights where you feel like Sleeping Beauty, except you’ll actually wake up when the sun comes up. Those nights when you are, quite literally, paralyzed with fear from some unknown source. You might finally find peace within your mind, enough to rest your eyes and just fall.

However, when you wake, something feels off. You want to turn your head and look around... But you can’t. Your mind is willing your body to respond, to move the required muscles, yet you remain stiffly in place. Maybe someone came into your room while you slept and strapped your head down against the bed with some sort of rope or belt. So, you move your arms, or at least you try to. But they feel like concrete, sinking into the grooves of the mattress – they can’t move either.

You feel a tightness beginning to creep from your stomach into your chest, and you realize you can’t breathe. You want to open your mouth and swallow sweet air, but your lips are numb. You want to cry out to someone, anyone, that you need help. You want to reach your fingers up to your neck, as if feeling around for the cause, but, again, they won’t budge.

You want to look around your room for something that could help, but your eyes always land on the mirror in the corner, the floor-length one that your aunt gave you for your birthday so many years ago. Your eyes travel around its edges before landing on your own reflection. But there’s something there, on top of you. You still can’t move, and yet your first instinct is to run. A black beast almost appears as though it’s sitting right over your chest, but when you move your eyes away from the reflection, it’s not on you.

You begin to panic, sweat droplets gently caressing your face and neck as they slide down to your pillow. The beast isn’t on you – it’s in your closet.

Wait, now it’s in your hallway, peeking in through the little crack in the doorway, or at least you think it is – it’s too dark to see anything. You can’t make out where it’s gone, if it’s even moved at all.

You begin to feel something crawling up your legs, but you can’t shake it off...

A hand grips your throat... But it’s still. Not. Yours. You can’t move, remember?

You feel the burning sensation of hot tears dripping from your eyes, down your cheeks, as you start to feel like this might be the end. You don’t want to die, no one truly does, but you don’t see any way out of this.

You wonder if this is what she felt before she died. Your poor aunt.

Wait, no... She didn't - didn't die. She was killed. Murdered. By the same creature now haunting you. You're next. Are you scared? I don't think anyone could tell; you're so expressionless. Save for those eyes, nothing else is budging.

Those eyes of yours that blink so rapidly... SOS... SOS. Help me, they seem to say.

You want to scream, but your throat constricts even more. You feel your eyelids drooping down. You're too tired to fight anymore. Your body is giving up on you. It can't save you.

Maybe this really is the end?

Maybe it's my time to go.

At least now I can see my aunt again...

The beast has no breath, yet you feel a cold chill brush against your tear-stained cheek, and suddenly you feel relaxed. You've accepted your fate. You feel your body begin to release all the tension it held. Your heart, practically doing jumping-jacks against your ribcage, now starts to slow itself down, dropping from the "fear high" it was getting.

It's time. You hold your breath one last time...

... Then the sun rises, and you realize it's a new day.

You've forgotten what just happened, as though your mind is trying to protect you from the trauma of chronic flight responses. You remain peacefully ignorant, in a way. You always forget what you've gone through.

But I remember. I always will. Do you know why?

Because I'm the beast.

And I'm never leaving your side.

The Honey Hijackers

“What in the name of God’s third nostril happened here?” asked Chief Bartlett, with absolute bewilderment in his voice. The other officers also wanted to know what transpired in the last hour. They were told it was a vehicle hijacking. While it may seem like a typical crime, none of the officers there expected it to involve the destruction of a local cake factory.

“Well, I don’t know about you, Chief, but this is one hell of a sight, isn’t it?” asked one of the officers.

“Cut the crap, rookie. Now where’s that damn detective at? He was the one chasing those bastards, wasn’t he?”

“He should be on his way, Chief.”

At that moment, a car pulled up to the scene. It was covered in all manners of frosting and whipped cream, as this was the detective that was chasing after the vehicle hijackers. He calls himself... G.B. Rasgrease. For whatever reason, he was covered head to toe with some kind of golden, sticky substance. The chief approached Rasgrease and was prepared to give him an earful about the amount of damage he caused not only the factory, but also to all of the streets and buildings that were on the way to the factory.

“Alright, Rasgrease, you got five minutes to explain to me why I shouldn’t take your badge and shove it right up your rectum!”

“Calm down, Bartlett. Whatever I got to say wouldn’t really matter anyway. The bastards who started it are already taken care of.”

“That doesn’t excuse the damages you caused! This town’s going to be deprived of sweet, delicious cakes for months!”

The chief’s personal priorities were as clear as a crisp, spring morning. To G.B. Rasgrease, this was just another typical day. The chief was just a loud airhorn in his eyes. Dealing with street crime is something all cops have to come to terms with at some point in their career, but this one took the cake... literally.

It was a beautiful summer morning. Detective Rasgrease was outside his home, enjoying a wholesome water hose fight with his cardboard cut-outs of the Spice Girls. He happened to have his radio playing, nestled

on the ground under a beach umbrella that he had set up in his front yard. The radio broadcast was interrupted by a breaking news bulletin, in which a truck carrying one thousand jars of honey was hijacked. This news devastated Rasgrease. The thought of having no honey to pour into his almond blend tea was a very depressing thought. He had no choice but to cut his day off short and pursue the Honey Hijackers.

With no other officers even bothering to help in this terrorist-level crime, Rasgrease had no choice but to go about it alone. He always did prefer to be a solo act. After failing to save his partner from drowning in a puddle of mud five years ago, he just couldn't handle the thought of letting that kind of thing happen to another officer under his wing. Having lost all sense of direction, Rasgrease radioed to dispatch, "This is Rasgrease. I put out an APB on that honey truck fifteen minutes ago, so where the hell is it?"

"It's just a honey truck, Detective," replied dispatch.

"Damn it! Fine. I guess I really am on my own for this one," said Rasgrease, as he destroyed his dispatch radio in anger. Shortly after destroying the radio, Rasgrease decided to stop the car and take a breather. It was a good thing he did because at that moment a large truck with a bee logo sped past Rasgrease's car. With no hesitation, he floored the gas pedal and the chase began. All Rasgrease could think about was retrieving that delicious honey, though he was also wishing that he hadn't destroyed his dispatch radio. He was the only man who could handle this sticky situation.

The hijackers were speeding down the highway with Rasgrease on their tail. These hijackers were composed of three men, The Nagase Brothers, a trio of siblings hailing from the far reaches of the Kanto region of Japan, who just so happened to crave honey that day.

"How you doing back there, Vic?"

"Never better, Harry, but I think the fuzz is onto us. It's just one guy, but he's chasing us like crazy!" replied Victor. The hijacker in the passenger seat took note of this and got his rifle ready. These guys didn't know who they were messing with. G.B. Rasgrease was considered a legend in the history of the police force. He singled-handedly arrested over a thousand criminals in the last three years. Legend has it that Rasgrease once stopped a bank heist using nothing but four painkillers and a banana nut muffin. These men were mere toothpicks compared to Rasgrease. His car inched closer and closer to the honey truck.

"Alright, Marv, give this pig some lead!" yelled Harry. Marv stuck his head out the window of the truck. A loud shot was heard. It turned out that Marv didn't even get one shot in. Rasgrease was a real deadeye

with his revolver. Marv's lifeless corpse remained hanging outside the passenger truck door.

"Harry, what just happened? Is Marv alright?"

"NO! You cop bastard! You're gonna pay!" yelled Harry at the top of his lungs. It was the heat of the moment. Harry didn't even pay attention to where he was turning his wheel. That's when it happened. When Harry looked at the road again, he realized that the truck was mere meters away from crashing into a Betty Crocker cake manufacturing plant. The truck was going just fast enough to crash right through the brick walls of the factory and straight into a tanker filled with white cake frosting. There was frosting spewing out in all directions, even getting all over Rasgrease's car, which had followed the truck through the gaping hole it left when it crashed. When Harry the Honey Hijacker got out of the driver's seat, he was too injured to make a move on G.B. Rasgrease, who already had his revolver drawn on him. Rasgrease was ready to put one right between his eyes.

"Why go this far, you piece of shit?"

"Because I'm G.B. Rasgrease."

"What does that even mean?! What does G.B. even stand for?" cried Harry before the loud boom of Rasgrease's gun echoed throughout the cake factory. Rasgrease had to check on the honey jars at the back of the truck. With a crash like that, it would be impossible for all the honey jars to still be intact. Sure enough, when Rasgrease opened the cargo trailer, some of the jars were indeed broken. The jars were secured to both sides of the trailer, but the crash caused one of the honey jar holders to collapse. All of a sudden, the third hijacker, Vic, emerged from the pile of broken honey jars and tackled Rasgrease. The two engaged in a match of sticky fisticuffs. Unbeknownst to this hijacker, Rasgrease spends the majority of his time watching the Food Network, so Rasgrease had enough fighting experience to end him thoroughly. Rasgrease was victorious, very sticky, and in desperate need of a drink. He made his way back to his car and went to find the closest bar. But he never did get to that bar because as soon as he made his way out of the ruptured factory, he noticed that a bus full of beautiful super models had broken down just outside the factory. By the time Rasgrease was finished repairing the bus engine, the police had already made their way to the factory.

"So, yeah, that's more or less what happened. Hate me all you want, but you know as well as I do that no self-respecting American can live without honey. I saved American lives today, Chief. I know I'm going to sound like a real prick right now, but I'm going to need that raise."

"Up yours, G.B."

5
29
19



Being Blakely

There were only 300 approved foster homes in Kern County in 2017. By contrast, more than 2,000 children are served each year in the county's foster care system.

– Kern County Department of Human Services (DHS).

I watch the blonde-haired boy by the lake's edge twist his torso to skip stones across the water. He's wearing a red PAW Patrol hooded sweat-shirt, faded denim jeans, and cream-colored, low-top Converse Chuck Taylors.

His head bobs up and down each time the stone skims the surface. First, it's seven skips. The next throw is eight. Then nine.

He hops and pumps his fist like a miniature Kirk Gibson. "Yes!" he yells back to me. "Next time, I'm getting ten!"

"You can do it, kiddo!" I yell back. "Don't stray too far, though!"

"I won't," he says loudly. He's preoccupied with thumbing through the small stack of smooth skipping stones he gathered while walking along the shore. For ten skips, he needs the most flattest, most skippiest stone in the stack.

He'll find what he's looking for, just like I found what I was looking for.

Blakely's been in and out of foster homes and elementary schools ever since that cold October night when he was discovered, wrapped in an old blanket at the steps of the main downtown fire station. The blanket and a quickly scrawled note with Blakely's name and the words "I'm sorry, I can't" are all he received from the birth mother who abandoned him.

Blakely is nine years old. He's a bit short for a boy his age, but his heart and imagination make up for his size. His favorite color is blue because it reminds him of the sky, and one day he wants to be an astronaut. Bob's Burgers is his favorite television show, and Louise Belcher is his favorite character because she wears a funny hat. Blakely loves grilled cheese sandwiches, but hates asparagus because he says, "it makes my pee smell funny." If he could have any pet in the world, it would be a kangaroo so he can ride to school in the pouch.

All of Blakely's teachers agree he's the sweetest boy, but it takes him a bit of time to overcome his shyness around new people. Drawing is

Blakely's favorite pastime. Colored pencils are his preferred medium, and animals are his favorite subject. Last year, Blakely's third-grade teacher submitted his drawing of a squirrel to the county superintendent of school's art showcase. It earned a silver ribbon, which Blakely proudly shows anyone who asks.

Blakely's a fourth grader at Shermer Elementary School in Miss Mayfield's class. He gets good grades – not great ones, just good – but sometimes he has problems with other children.

The new kid in class is always an easy target for bullies.

Being a foster parent has its joys and heartaches, but foster children deserve good, loving homes as much as any other child.

My wife, Melody, and I welcomed Blakely into our home two months ago, and the first thing we noticed when he came into our lives was how his big, blue eyes lit up whenever he encountered something new. Blakely seems to look at the world as if every day was Christmas morning. And he always has questions:

“Why do cats always sleep so much?”

“Why do rabbits eat carrots instead of grilled cheese sandwiches?”

“Can we go to Starbucks and get some cake pops?”

“Why do you always sing the same song in the car? Mel says that song is cheesy.”

“Were you really born and raised in South Detroit?”

I don't have the heart to tell Blakely that South Detroit doesn't exist. And my wife is wrong: Journey's “Don't Stop Believin'” isn't “cheesy.” It's awesome. It's one of my go-to karaoke songs – that, and The Cure's “Just Like Heaven.” When Blakely and I sing together in the car, it's usually a Kidz Bop cover of stuff like Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars' “Uptown Funk” with Blakely squeaking, “Gotta kiss myself, I'm so pretty.”

Only once has Blakely asked the tough question. It happened while we were watching an episode of Bob's Burgers on Blu-ray. It's the episode where Louise is horrified at discovering she has a crush on Boo Boo, a member of a boy band called Boys 4 Now. Blakely curled up onto the couch next to me and used my lap as a pillow.

“Jack, how long am I going to be part of your family?” Blakely asked.

I paused the episode and mussed his hair. “Oh gosh, Blakey, that's not an easy question to answer. As long as possible? I mean, we love having you here, you know?”

“I know,” his voice fell. I gave Melody a pained look as she sat on the recliner next to the couch, and my heart sank. I wanted to tell Blakely that he’d be part of our family forever, but I know that while he’s still in the foster system he can be pulled from us at any time – particularly if a biological relative decides to assume responsibility for his care. As foster parents, we’re well aware that getting too emotionally attached to a child can be heartbreaking when they leave your home. We feel the most important thing for foster children is simply to make sure they have some sense of safety and stability in their lives.

Falling for a foster child is easy; seeing them go is gut-wrenching.

Adopting Blakely wasn’t on our radar until that evening. First priority for adoption typically goes to parents, then close family members, then other relatives. Melody and I fall low on the priority scale, so we’ve felt it best not to get our hopes up with Blakely.

I hit “play” and the episode resumed. We laughed at the screen a few more times to break the silence.

Blakely’s teacher contacted us on Wednesday. He still does his school work, but, like I said before, he always asks questions. Lately, though, Blakely would just sit quietly at his desk with a disinterested look on his face. His interactions with his classmates have also been unusual. Normally, Blakely asks if one of his classmates can come over to play or watch TV. But he hadn’t done that lately, and he would get noticeably irritated when we’d ask why. Until now, Blakely’s behavior had been impeccable. He never lashed out around us; he’s always been loving and kind. How this charming little boy got bounced around from home to home still mystifies us.

Blakely’s school principal called Melody today. It seems Blakely roughly pushed a girl in his class to the ground and yanked on another girl’s pigtail so hard that her scalp bled. We met with Miss Mayfield and the principal. Apparently, the girls and two other students had been picking on him during recesses. Name calling. Pushing. Pranks. You get the picture. This went on for several weeks, and Blakely finally had enough of the bullying when one of the girls allegedly called Melody a slut. Miss Mayfield also found a stash of little erasers, stickers, and plastic toy animals in the desk assigned to one of the girls. They were rewards Miss Mayfield specifically remembered giving to Blakely. The girl confessed she had stolen them from Blakely’s desk.

“The toy animals, especially, were something Blakely loved,” Miss Mayfield told Melody. “Blakely was always asking me if I’d seen them in the classroom. I thought he was just being a bit scatterbrained and misplaced them. It never dawned on me that his classmates would steal

from him.”

It gets better. Other teachers found several signs left around the school – by water fountains, lunch tables, and other places where it was obvious they were meant to be seen. “Blakely lives in a trash can.” “Blakely eats dog poop.” “Blakely has no friends.”

Fourth graders can be vicious.

It was quiet during the ride home from Shermer. Once we were inside, Blakely stomped into his room and slammed the door. I quickly followed and barged inside.

“Hey!” I snap at the sobbing boy who was curled up on the bed and intentionally had his back turned toward me. “What the heck? Why didn’t you say anything to us?”

That’s when I see them. Some of Blakely’s drawings had scattered onto the floor of his bedroom. There’s a baby wrapped in a blanket next to a fire truck and a woman fleeing the scene – it’s how Blakely imagines the day he was abandoned by his mother. There are four scary faces surrounding a small boy and word balloons that read, “Nobody likes Blakely,” “I hate Blakely,” and “Blakely is a stupid name.”

Several pencil-and-crayon drawings show a child between a man and a woman. They’re eating. They’re laughing. They’re watching TV. The man and woman in the drawings are unmistakably me and Melody – in each drawing, the man’s T-shirt has the band Weezer’s “W” logo. Blakely knows my favorite shirt is a black Weezer tee. I breathe in deeply.

Blakely drew us doing stuff as a family.

Blakely is still curled up on the bed; his back is still turned to me. Suddenly, my irritation with him over his school problems vanishes. I remind myself that being Blakely has to be frustrating. There’s always a new home. There’s always a new school. Sometimes there aren’t any new friends. You never know how long you’ll get to stay in one place.

You’d never know what effect being a foster child has had on Blakely, though, since he always seems so cheerful. We’ll have to talk to him about how it’s okay to vent to us when problems arise.

Some other time, though.

Now’s the time for me to just be there for him – not as a foster dad, but as a dad. Someone he can trust. Someone who won’t judge him.

Someone who loves him.

I sit on the bed next to the Blakely-shaped ball.

“You hungry, Blakey?” I ask. I reach over and muss his blonde hair, hoping to reassure him that I’m on his side.

Blakely turns over and sits cross-legged in bed. He looks up at me. The whites around his blue eyes have turned pink from crying. Tears have carved their way through the dirt on his ruddy cheeks. The edges of his mouth are still stained light red from the juice box he drank at lunch.

“Cuh-can I huh-have a guh-grilled cheese sandwich with avocado slices?” Blakely asks.

Avocado slices. He picked that up from Melody. She’ll try avocado or guacamole on cereal if you told her it tasted good. He adores Melody, always clings to her for a few extra seconds during their goodnight hug. I’m sure Blakely’s birth mom had reasons for abandoning him, but I can’t help but be perplexed that she gave up someone as wonderful as Blakely. I love seeing the relationship that’s blossomed between him and Mel. It’s so pure, so amazing. When I see those two together, it’s as if Blakely’s telling the world, “See? I have a real mom, and her name is Melody.”

“Okay, let’s get that for you,” I say as I scoop Blakely off the bed and start walking toward the kitchen. He snuffles as he rests his head on my right shoulder and tightly wraps his arms around my neck.

“Can we get that at Starbucks?” he asks softly. His sobs have started to subside. His little chest is pressed against my shoulder and I feel him breathe in deeply.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

“Buddy, I don’t know if they have that at Starbucks, but we can go and find out,” I say, supporting his weight with my right arm and snatching up my cell phone and car keys from the kitchen counter with my free hand.

We let Blakely stay home from school the next day and told Miss Mayfield he’d be taking a mental wellness day. She understood, and told us the bullies’ parents apologized for their children’s behavior and made them write formal letters of apology. The rest of the class made cards with notes of encouragement for Blakely, which Miss Mayfield said would be waiting for him when he returned to class on Monday.

We took Blakely to the lake near our home and had a picnic. Juice boxes and grilled cheese sandwiches with avocado slices – the quint-essential Blakely lunch. Afterward, we let him feed the ducks. Melody and I watched as he squatted and meticulously made little piles of bread crumbs near the water’s edge for each duck.

“I want to adopt Blakely,” I blurt out. Tears well up in my eyes. “I don’t want to lose him.”

“Yeah, same here,” Melody says, leaning her head on my left shoulder. “We should talk to the foster care folks pretty quickly, huh?”

“Monday works for me,” I say. Blakely was now skipping stones across the water. “I’m perfectly okay with taking the day off.”

Blakely yells out our names. “Eww! There’s duck poop all over the place! Why does duck poop look like raisins?”

Vintage Blakely, always asking questions.

In 2012, 13.1 percent of all foster children nationwide were adopted. That’s up from 12.6 percent in 2011, and the numbers are climbing nationally.

– U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families.

The adoption process was surprisingly quick since there were no biological relatives to claim him. Melody and I were officially Blakely’s parents only six months after we filed the adoption papers. We’re thrilled to call him our son.

“Our son.”

Wow. Blakely’s my son. Sometimes, it still takes my breath away to think that. And I’m still amazed that he bounced from home to home before coming into our lives. What were these other foster parents thinking?

I mean, every kid deserves their fairytale ending.

Along the River, They Were Burning

I remember cricket songs and the slip of mud beneath my feet. The roughness of aspen against my hand. The cascading scent of the rush ahead and emerald everywhere; a blanket of life cut back.

Such things are as clear to me now as they were then.

In the mornings, the sun filtered through my window and the crack of blinds lanced against my eyes. The taste of bacon always came wafting from below; the trill of scrub jays through my window.

After breakfast I would soar along the whitewashed slats of the porch, trailing a hand along the railing. I took careful steps into a lawn, wide and well-tended, where nature was sculpted to perfection until it was no longer really nature at all, but an alteration, an unnatural evolution.

And then I was free.

In my mind, this was always the most graceful part of my journey—now, when I set the tape clacking into the machine and the video begins, line-laced horizontal with threads of pink and green, I can't imagine why. I thought myself a spectacle, infused with all the elegance and in-born grace of a benevolent queen; of course, I was a spectacle, but one more of bumble and sway rather than bauble and savvy. We like to pretend otherwise, but even at the elevated age I thought myself as having attained then, such concepts as 'grace' and 'elegance' were still unattainable.

In the video I bobble back and forth in my charge, wobbling unsteadily. My arms swing loose at my sides, hinged at the elbow with this step too wide, that too short, until it appears I'm doing little more than jerking myself forward in some ungainly dance.

At length, I reach the property line and stop, craning my head skyward, dwarfed by a colossus of trees and brush that stretch left and right like a giant's hedge and I, meek in a peony dress, can do nothing but stand in awe. Here the video zooms in, shaking slightly, and at a call I turn, mouth agape, eyes ignorant in the bosom of youth and flash a toothy smile...

... and delve headlong into wild frontier.

The video is useless from here; the fantasy and faulty recollections

of my mind ascend once more. What marvels we are, the elevation we create for ourselves, as though the world is nothing but a sepia-infused monochrome of our own making, every detail so lovingly staged and vibrant beyond all rights.

In the same way a boy can maneuver tin soldiers into battle with methodical precision and tactical insight and picture himself Napoléon reborn— though the empire he seeks to amass is but the expanse of his mother's well-tended garden— I imagined myself to be the scion of some long-faded culture, the last daughter in a line unbroken by the travails and travesties of history, enwreathed on all sides by a verdant realm in which every tree became a tower, every rock a snowcapped peak, where even the lithesome flowers were essential to the balance of time and the circumnavigation of the sun above.

And when the evening began to draw across the sky like a curtain studded with diamonds beyond counting and the dimness pooled around me, the unease would hitch within my throat and remain, cloying, suffocating. Even the breeze seemed to falter in its face; the scent of the grove would splash limply to the earth with the speed of an up-turned bucket. In these moments, my routine was always the same: to put my back against an oak, to sink to my haunches, covering my eyes with hands fashioned into blindfolds, peeking forth. Sometimes relief came quickly, sometimes slowly and laden with tension... but it always came.

It poured from between the trees, rose from the rocks and the grass, whirling into the air in sweeping rhythms and undulations, flickering to life one at a time or all at once until the darkness was banished, routed by the brilliance of so many living stars.

I found my way home by the light of a thousand fireflies.

Into this dream, I danced daily, immersing myself in the soft golden glow of sunlight against the leaves and the dappled shadows, lacing my breath with promises of kindness and decency, though my subjects were but the occasional hare or sprinting squirrel. Where once the grove had been soured by the taste of fear and the pattering stumbles of my heartbeat, these idle dalliances had since become my most cherished detours—and then I found it.

It seemed, as so many things in the tenderness of youth do, to appear out of nowhere, sparked to life in the forges of emptiness that lie just beyond the next ridge, the next hill, and flee the moment before you crest them.

I stumbled upon it one morning in the crispness of the dawn and palest light. The rain had slammed madly on earth for days before, and when the storm had finally blown over, I ventured forth once more with wide-eyed wonder. Moisture clung to trees, to grass, pooled in depressions with the same glass-like hesitance as mirrors, and rippled to rest in the wake of my touch.

The air was particularly quiet, even for the oppressive thickness of the grove, and the sounds of crashing water bubbled into the stillness, breaking through the hush and my own bated breath. My reign seemed suspended in the face of this new development—I remember padding forward, slowly at first, but eventually with rising speed, willing the undergrowth to part before me, until I came upon a clearing, soaked and sodden. Mud clutched at my soles as I pushed on toward the sound, stronger now; I slipped in it as I went. Here and there, a dash of motion caught my eye: crickets and grasshoppers leaping lengthwise or chirping in turn, restless beneath the swooping sapphire and vermilion of the dragonflies.

It lay just beyond the clearing, a veritable roar and thundering. With the slimness of my right hand, I parted the fins of a massive fern and beheld it for the first time—

—a river, rushing and crashing, spilling forward and frothing white, railing against its banks with uncontained fury, laving over boulders and trunks and roiling into blackness just past the rapids.

And I ran shrieking from the grove on feet even more unsteady than those I had taken in, until I burst atop the porch and tugged at Father's jeans and cried that the ocean had come for us, for surely I had just seen the most water that could possibly be assembled at one place and thus, it had to be the ocean. I had always been reasonably confident in my logic, so you can imagine my surprise when he hoisted me, laughing, to correct my error and set my mind at ease.

But a young mind does not accept comfort easily, as all who have been young know too well, and that night I writhed in my bed as images of surging currents and rising tides threatened to sweep away all I had ever known and held dear.

This fear persisted in my mind for several days, and stopped my trips to the grove altogether; I was a queen in exile, regent in name alone, and my heart quaked in fear for my subjects and shame for abandoning them.

It was, of course, a state of affairs that could not be allowed to continue. Day by day I pondered my options, stretched drowsily across the lawn—since the grove had been denied to me—until at last I came to a

decision: the river would have to be conquered, brought into the fold, made mine as wholly as the grove itself.

Thus committed, I began plotting the tentative explorations. I returned twice more to the same place along the banks overlooking the rapids, and twice I fled with the sound of its crashing echoing in my ears. To find a calmer stretch, if one even existed, seemed equally impossible—the river curled away from the grove in both directions, cutting so far from the gentle glades that I dared not follow. Five days I spent with dogged determination before it broke beneath the weight of the rapids and flooded my resolve, drowned beneath the floundering press of the ebony currents.

On the sixth day, my dejection drew attention.

Father had noticed my absence from the grove—manifested in my unfaltering attendance at home, and, after much prodding, coaxed from me the reason for my depression. I still remember his smile, his half-hidden amusement, and his promise.

That evening, we entered the grove together.

It was too early for the fireflies; the sun hung just over the mountains to the west, and they only sparked to life in the dimness after twilight. Devoid of their comfort, I slipped into the trees, his hand in mine, through the gathering shadows and rising chill. He trailed a pace behind me no matter how slowly I went, and in his insistence, I felt the weight of responsibility settle upon my shoulders, a mantle royal in its bearing, and I remembered.

I had feared my realm destroyed in my absence, savaged, oppressed—to my relief, I found it much the same. The squirrels still perched in their trees, bowing low as we passed; the hares darted past to guard our path.

I led the way with surer steps, weaving through my kingdom as though it really were mine, and when he told me how well I seemed to know it, hope sparked in my chest and warmed me to my core. Pride welled thick in my throat.

He took the lead when the river split the air and the sun had disappeared. Through the shadows and the blackness, he guided our path with long strides, until at last, there was only the fern to separate us from the beast who had struck the crown from my brow. He pushed the fern aside; I watched his face break into a smile, smoldering awe. I pushed past him, curiosity overwhelming my fear, casting it aside like a blanket...

...to gaze upon the river, reflected golden beneath the twirling of untold fireflies, gleaming and sparkling, sliding past with elegant countenance and utter tranquility. They wove through the air in greater number than I had ever seen in the grove, and I, enraptured, followed them in either direction. The image danced in my widened eyes, and even now I remember.

Along the river, they were burning.



Christopher Chrobak

The Seat

Curtis buried his face in his hands to muffle his crying so he wouldn't wake Edie and Anna. His head pounded from the sleepless night he spent pacing around the kitchen in his only suit, which clung to his sweaty, desperate, bloody body. He rolled up his sleeves, stumbled to the bathroom, and stared into the dilated eyes looking back from the mirror. No one has ever looked so dead. The blood, which hours ago flowed from his forehead into his eyes, cleared as he imagined himself back in the car as rain unrelentingly pelted the windshield while he drifted in and out of lanes. He'd taken this route enough to know it by heart, but not in these conditions.

Who'd get married on such a gloomy day? The windshield wipers struggled to combat the torrential downpour as he roared back home. He could barely see through the fog, no thanks to the overworked Volvo's inoperable defrost fan and his heavy breathing. His left side was soaked from the rain which poured in the cracked window—the cool air his only hope to clear the windshield. He tried to focus on driving, but the harder he concentrated, the more distracted he became. He wiped the windshield with his sleeve as he took a curve and noted another car fast approaching, the headlights beaming directly into his eyes. He clenched the wheel.

“Have a good time, but don't get too out of hand, and make sure you're quiet when you

get back. Edie's been so sick and needs her rest, especially if we want her to feel well enough for the vacation.”

“And so do you. I don't feel right going to the wedding without you two, but that'll give me an excuse to come back early.” Curtis kissed Anna's forehead. “Edie'll be fine. I'll be home in a bit, and in three days we'll be on the beaches in sunny Miami without a worry, except making sure Edie doesn't get sunburned.”

“How soon do you have to leave?”

“As soon as I get into this suit, but I'm in no hurry.”

“Edie's asleep,” Anna took his hand and led him to the bedroom.

“Don’t get dressed too quickly.”

“God dammit, Maggie. I’m not sleeping with anyone else!” Charles yelled, as he dodged his finest glassware.

“Then explain the credit card statements. Do you keep them as souvenirs of your mistresses—a way to remind yourself of how big of a man you are? How clever you are for going behind my back? Not that you’d remember them anyway. You probably won’t even remember me in a few months.”

“I was doing charity.”

“Charity? A new flat screen television, security system, and home furnishings? Some charity, especially at the expense of our savings for whatever pretty thing was dumb enough to take a seat next to you. Do you at least have enough decency to tell them—or better yet, to not fuck them? I’m tired of this.”

“And I’m tired of you. You wonder why I act out? Listen to yourself.”

“Can you, for once, just admit that you fucked up instead of making it my fault?”

“I don’t need this. I’m leaving.”

“Fine. Don’t bother coming back.”

Charles squealed out of the driveway and called Veronica, “I’m free. Where should we meet?”

Curtis wiped the blood from his hand, splashed cold water on his face, and watched as pink water swirled down the drain, leaving the taupe bowl a sickly salmon shade. He cleared his throat and spat, missing the sink. He tried to scrub away the blood with his cuff because he couldn’t bear the thought of Edie or Anna stumbling into this slaughter. He wanted nothing more than to forget, but he would never forget those eyes, that face, the viscera, blood, broken glass, and blinding headlights. The further he stared into his eyes, the deeper he saw into the past and the slower the disturbing detail of the events replayed. He still felt shaken from the collision, trembling as he crashed again and again; all he could see was rain, his breath as it warmed over the windshield, and Edie and Anna asleep in their beds, certainly not the car as it whipped around the corner. In a matter of seconds, it was all over. Curtis had no time to react, but he felt he could’ve done something, anything. What damaged him most was the hopeless look in their eyes. There couldn’t have been

any lifetime revelations or even a flicker of understanding of what it all meant. There was no time for that. He was the last thing they'd ever see; he was only in their life for barely a moment, yet he made the biggest impact. Here today, gone tomorrow. Because of him.

He was trapped in an eternity of regret, certain he could never experience joy with Anna and Edie again because he convinced himself that the innocent dead had a family of their own— perhaps a child, maybe two. He watched tears roll down his face and felt horrible for being able to feel at all because he took that ability away from two complete strangers. After he cleaned the sink, he looked at the sky, which did not yet bear any trace of the sun, threw on his overcoat, kissed Anna and Edie, and left, utterly desperate and powerless.

Veronica bent over the sink and looked through the curling smoke of the Marlboro 100 resting on the ashtray as she cautiously applied mascara. After she had done herself up, she puckered her lips, blew a kiss into the mirror, and struck poses to assure herself of her flawlessness. As she leaned forward on the smooth marble counter to make sure her top allowed for prominent cleavage, yet not an excess amount, her phone lit up, and Charles's ringtone blared from the speakers. She answered she'd be right out and hurriedly, yet warily, clicked out of the bathroom in her heels, grabbed her coat and purse, turned on the home security system then slowly strutted to the black Cadillac, consciously exaggerating any movement which might emphasize her curves despite the pouring rain.

She climbed in, pulled out two cigarettes, lit them both, and placed one in Charles's mouth after kissing him. "Where to?"

"Doesn't matter. I just need to get loaded."

"Rough day?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. How about the Velvet Lounge?"

Veronica sighed as she exhaled through her nostrils and placed her hand on Charles's thigh because the Velvet Lounge was one of the most lavish clubs in the area with a reputation for its party culture, and she was Charles's trophy, his own private attraction which he'd parade and frivolously toss down money for without a second thought because he was vulnerable and needed affection.

"I'd love it, honey. Tell me all about your day."

Charles unburdened and described Maggie's confrontation in vivid detail, including the fine china warfare. He hated to admit it, but he was concerned. Maggie had never been that upset with him, nor had

she ever seriously suggested he leave; he never considered the anger, frustration, and sadness it brought her because he was too preoccupied with himself until he was caught in the crossfire of porcelain. Despite his uneasy conscience, he shook off the day because he couldn't share too many of his problems with Veronica for fear she'd grow bored and move on. He had to focus on what was in front of him—a night with a diabolically striking bombshell who didn't judge him for his shortcomings. There'd be time for Maggie later. But nothing he said mattered anyway. Veronica didn't care enough about his personal life to become affected. He was solely her escape, the only thing that made her feel beautiful after her bigwig husband left her for someone a decade younger. Charles showered her with anything she wanted, so long as she gave him the company he needed.

By the time he finished telling her about the fight, Veronica had calmly fallen into the aroma of the cigarette and the crackle of the tobacco as it burned, taking slower drags to sustain the pleasure as she got lost in the warm blur of streetlights, rain, and anticipation.

After hours of drinking, dancing, and doses of Veronica's X, they paid their last visits to the bathroom then gathered their coats and stumbled out of the door beneath the flashing multicolored exit sign. Harsh gusts of wind welcomed them back to reality as they tried to find the car. Veronica clutched Charles's elbow and wrapped her other arm so tightly around him that he couldn't walk in a straight line even if he'd been sober. Her eyes rolled in and out of consciousness as he led her to the passenger side, slid her onto the leather seat, and prayed her \$100 tab wouldn't resurface. By the time he got in, Veronica had regained composure and sloppily drew her tongue over his face and into his mouth before he could turn on the car. When he could no longer stand the gin still rich on her breath, he suggested they at least go back to her place.

Charles followed the back roads because, although it'd take a little longer, there'd be fewer cops. As he watched the final streetlight from the downtown area disappear into the rearview, he sighed and felt accomplished. Halfway there. We'll make it.

After a few minutes of silence, Veronica poked Charles's shoulder, batted her lashes, and exaggerated a smile, "I can't wait any more. Can't I just have you now?"

Before Charles had time to respond, Veronica wrestled his belt undone and ripped his pants open so intensely that the button flew off. Without allowing time for protest, Veronica unbuckled, bent her head into Charles's lap, and wrapped her lips around him. His knuckles whit-

ened as he gripped the wheel and tried not to let his mind wander off the road, but failed as she bobbed her head faster and harder, making Charles moan in ecstasy as he moved one hand from the wheel to play with her hair. He closed his eyes and focused on nothing but Veronica's soft lips as he approached climax, but he opened them too late to notice he was swerving around a curve right into an oncoming car. He screamed as lights overcame them. The last thing he felt was Veronica's teeth biting into him as everything dissolved into perfect whiteness.

Curtis gasped as he finally noticed the cars ahead and slowed down to a jog. He stopped to vomit before he reached the scene, then collapsed. He felt feverish, weary, and overwhelmed because he had no idea why he returned; some unexplainable force within him drew him back to the wreckage, regardless of his intention to distance himself as far from the accident as possible. As he laid on the ground drenched in dirty rainwater, the sun peaked over the horizon and called him back to his feet. He shrugged off the nausea until he could stand up and follow the blood-soaked pavement to the cars. As he neared, he began to tremble and once more lost his balance as he erupted into a violent seizure before slumping onto the road. Curtis felt futile and pathetic, especially because he had no reason to be here. He wanted to die, but couldn't decide why; there was a war inside with one army fighting for closure and the other for sanity. He couldn't stop it, much less understand, and it tore his mind apart to even try. His body throbbed with pain, and every possible ounce of will was strained beyond use. He howled in despair until he grew too lightheaded to see. But when he finally lifted his dizzy head from the concrete to the sky, he basked in the warmth of the rising sun as absolute stillness descended upon him like cooling balm. He watched as his memories sketched themselves onto the sky, becoming more fractured and unintelligible the brighter it grew. By the time the sun reached its zenith, Curtis closed his eyes in repose, and felt the life drain out of him as his consciousness evaporated into nothing.

Joseph Furtado

AN EVENING IN OLD BADEN

I do not need to remember her, for she continues to visit me in my dreams. I return to that night when I was but a child lost in Old Baden Wood. Why I was lost I no longer recall, but the darkness had closed in and hidden my path back to the farm and my parents. The twisting branches of the old oaks strangled any light from the stars, and the sounds of the creatures of the dark muffled my cries.

At that moment of hopeless solitude and fear was when a melody drifted through the breeze. The song was barely a whisper, but still alluring to my young ears. Tears stained my cheeks and blinded my eyes, but I was nonetheless guided into a glen where the milky light of the full moon held the darkness at bay.

She sat beneath a willow, the curtain of its leaves setting the stage for the haunting performance. Even if my eyes had been clear, the hood of her dark, verdant cloak concealed her face. Across her lap she held a lyre, her slender fingers plucking the strings with a nimble grace surpassing that of the kingdom's traveling bards. The leaves and wind of the forest obeyed her song, rustling in harmony with each chord and rhyme. The fireflies waltzed on the air, synchronized in the enchanted dance of the lady I beheld.

“Hear me now,
O' lost child of man,
Come now to the forest glen,
To sleep in my lost garden.”

In the tavern I have heard many tales of the forests of our country. Merchants traveling the roads bring tales from Blakewüd and beyond. How their forests are guarded by a horse-witch and her antlered knight. How the nymphs of the First Empire survive, dancing their fairy enchantments in haunted meadows despite the best efforts of the Inquisitors. How the kobolds remain hidden among the denizens of the overgrown cities. Such tales are the bread and beer that grease the wheels of commerce in our dim and smoky inn.

Our native story-tellers share the legend of Lady Fraukinder. An an-

cient crone that drifts through the trees of Old Baden Wood, she lures children deep into the forgotten paths choked by oaks and elms more ancient than the foundations of Caer Münch. Sometimes the children return, yet they are more often never heard of again. Some are so bold as to claim she visits the village on occasion, snatching from their beds the children who fail to say their prayers.

Even my parents have told me these tales, encouraging me to be obedient and never approach the forest as twilight begins to fall, as the sun sinks over the western peaks. Then how was I lost to the darkness on that fateful night?

“See me now,
Fear not my blinded eyes.
I see the pain of sorrow,
Promise broken by lies.”

I had wiped away the tears on my frayed sleeve as I approached, drawn by the melancholy silk of her voice. She lifted her face to the moon, the cold silver beams caressing the pale softness of her cheeks. A bandage of deep violet tightly wrapped around her eyes, peeking out from between long quicksilver braids that flowed along the sides of her face.

From what could be seen of her appearance, there was no hint of her being any older than a maiden. The flesh of her cheek and fingers were subtle with no sign of wrinkles or blemishes. Her movement and posture were fluid and limber, betraying no coming infirmity of an elder. Not even her voice could break the illusion, as it was vibrant and smooth with the confidence of youth. The only hint that betrayed her eldritch origin was an aura, a radiating power that I had only felt later when trying to comprehend the weight of mountains or the multitude of stars.

The wonder of her presence dwarfed all mountains and outnumbered the stars flickering in the sky above the willow in that magic clearing.

The village chapel was maintained by an old priest, burly and stooped from years as caretaker of both souls and the grounds. I had approached him while he was busy with the shrines of the saints, the patrons of farmers, of hunters, and of lambs lost without the Shepherd. His initial concern with my request for answers was dampened somewhat with disdain upon learning the question. He had no knowledge of my visitation, so I refuse to blame him for his curt response.

His voice echoed in the rough stonewalls that were stained with the soot of candles and smelled of incense, both clinging like desperation and fear during blight. He was absolutely certain as to the truth behind the Legend of the Fraukinder. She was a relic of when the pagan gods perverted the land, before they were all slain at Sarkenhain and the newly freed souls of our ancestors were cleansed by the Church.

She was now a demon, catching children that entered her forest. He went on about salvation, how even if the body was destroyed, faith would save the souls of the children ensnared. However, the best cure was prevention, to avoid the forest. Many Inquisitors had attempted to purge the pagan remnant here and in other lands, yet their heathen craft allowed these dark influences to survive, for now...

Her song faded from the forest as she looked upon me, the last reverberation of her lyre dying to the silence that now unnaturally pervaded the glen. Her fingers stretched out and lightly caressed my unkempt hair, a smile slowly growing on her now quiet lips. She seemed to be taking measure of me, this lost urchin born to peasants now being judged by a mind more ancient than mankind.

“Come now, child,” she spoke at last, breaking the stillness with a gentle whisper. “Thou must be tired from thy journey. Take comfort and rest, for I have found thee hale and whole.”

She beckoned me to lay at her feet, and I obeyed, curling up on the smooth grass and soft leaves. From the depths of her cloak she produced a woven shawl and laid it over my small, ragged frame. Still warm from her own body, I was enveloped in a sense of safety and comfort unlike any I have felt since. My eyelids grew heavy, yet I resisted the summon of dreams so I could continue to behold my strange and alluring nursemaid. At least for a moment more.

As if sensing my refusal to succumb to exhaustion, the woman’s hands returned to the lyre as she drew a breath from the cold darkness and the nourishing moonlight. Fingers slowly began to find the notes of her lullaby, each pluck and strum sending me further into the oblivion of slumber. Her silken voice returned, soothing all tension and lingering resistance.

“Feel the roots of ash grow deep,
Hear the rustle of willow’s leaves,
Smell the berries in elder’s eaves,
Embrace the charms of sleep...”

I was abruptly awoken with a violent shake and a terrible cry. The abruptness shattered all reason as I confusedly tried to comprehend what was happening. It was light, early in the morning since the sky was still a rich, drowsy blue. I slowly recognized the voice and face of my father kneeling over me, his rough hands firm on my shoulders. His urgent questions I briefly ignored, too concerned with looking for the lady of lullabies. She was nowhere to be seen.

My own memories of what followed are somewhat faded but refreshed with the recitations of my father and mother. Whenever I mention going near the forest or they wish to laugh at past fears, they remind me of the anxiety they felt when they discovered my empty bed and no sign of where I had wandered. They finally found me around dawn, asleep at the edge of the forest. All I would tell them was that I had gotten lost and fell asleep, an answer they found unsatisfying but grew to accept since my tale never deviated.

I lied, and continue to lie, to spare my parents from worry, though that is far from the only reason. At worst, someone could accuse me of consorting with demons. Our priest would quickly handle such a claim, but recent rumors of traveling witch-hunters are far more sinister.

I know that this memory is not the product of a child's dream, nor is it a symptom of some fever. When my parents found me, they did not immediately question the woven shawl. I hid the evidence before they noticed its presence, only recovering it when I was certain of being alone.

The dark green woolen threads are finer than that worn by local lords and knights, and embroidered along the edge with shimmering trees, dancing beasts, and fluttering birds. I often stare in awe of the artistry, and imagine that this is my treasured beauty that would make nobles jealous in their tapestried halls.

However, this gift is far too precious for me. I have grown and now feel I must return the shawl to its proper owner. That is the excuse I have crafted for myself anyway, the truth being that I wish to visit that lady once more. I no longer fear her and the monstrous legends that surround the forest. I will embark on my own journey to return her shawl and discover the truth of Lady Fraukinder.

In truth, I do not expect to return. Whether my fate is to wander the forest till beast or hunger take me, to die by the hand of a siren's lure, or something more mysterious than I can imagine is no longer my concern. THE END (perhaps...)

Dinner is Served

Jack was on his way home from work, and it had been a very long day. The company had doubled the orders again, and he had just finished a sixteen-hour shift at the warehouse. He hadn't even had time to call Susan and tell her he was running late, which meant her mood was going to be particularly foul if she had noticed the time. More importantly, though, Jack had a story due for his writing class tonight and he had not even begun to come up with an idea yet. It was going to be a long night. The time was 4:00 p.m.; eight hours till deadline.

When he arrived home, the first thing he noticed was that it appeared Susan was still in bed. The house was a mess, and he instinctively began picking things up as he came through the front door.

"Honey!" Jack called. "Sorry I'm late; it was a long day at work."

"What time is it?" Susan answered from the bedroom groggily.

"A little after 4:00. What do you want for dinner?" Jack yelled as he continued to pick up clutter around the small house.

He was thinking of something easy he could make, something that wouldn't take long so he could get started on this story. Hot dogs...mac 'n cheese... The story! He still needed an idea for the plot.

"Make your spaghetti tonight; it's been forever since you made that."

He thought two things immediately: he hated yelling through the walls to have a conversation with her, and he never made his spaghetti anymore because it took hours to make the sauce from scratch. Between work and school, he just didn't have that kind of time.

Jack remembered the first time that he had made dinner for Susan. They had been dating for less than a month and they had been very much in love. He had made the very sauce that she wanted him to make tonight, a family recipe that had been handed down from generation to generation.

He reminisced about the day his grandma had taught him the recipe; he had been little more than twelve, and he remembered how he thought her advice had been silly.

"Now, Jack, save this recipe for that special someone. She will not be

able to resist you. There is nothing more appealing than a man who cooks," Grandma had said to him.

"Yes, Grandma," he had replied. Little did he know how right she was. There were only two women that he had made his sauce for, and Susan had been the latter and only since. Things had been so much simpler then. They were inseparable after that date, and completely in love. Jack admonished himself; he didn't have time to daydream right now.

"How about something quick tonight? I have to write a story."

"You always have something to do, and I'm already thinking of your spaghetti now!"

Jack cringed. Would it kill her to get out of bed and have a normal conversation? "Honey, there is a jar of sauce down here. I'll just use that tonight and I'll make you my sauce next time." Jack anticipated the response before she yelled it through the walls.

"That stuff is terrible. Just make some sauce!" There was the beginning of an edge to her tone; Jack knew when he had pushed far enough. For the sake of his story, though, he had to try one more time.

"Susan, I don't have half the ingredients I need. I would have to go to the store and I really need to get started on this story." His train of thought went back to the story. He needed a plot, but what to write about? He started trying to think of a catchy title, hoping that it would trigger a plot.

"NO!" Susan was screaming from the room, "I WANT YOUR SPAGHETTI FOR DINNER!" ... A buzzing tension had started in Jack's head.

Suddenly, her tone changed from frustration to sensual.

"Come on, Jack," she said in a sweet, playful voice meant to entice him.

"Make me the spaghetti and I'll make it up to you after dinner," Susan said in her most seductive tone.

The idea of a little romance was appealing. They had not had much time together due to his busy schedule. Jack understood that Susan really just wanted attention; she wanted to feel special. That's why she was so intent on spaghetti for dinner. Nevertheless, he had a deadline and dinner was going to cost him precious time.

"Please, Jack?"

"Ok, dear!" he said with feigned affection. "I'll just run to the store."

5:00 p.m., and he was wandering through the grocery store with little thought of food or his story. Frustration had clouded his thoughts, and

he ground his teeth as he chose ingredients mechanically. When had things gotten so bad? He knew it was his own fault. He had spoiled her since they had gotten married, and now that he was going to school, he just didn't have the time for her that he used to have. It was very stressful for her. Jack nearly forgot cooking oil and made a quick turn down the aisle that held it. He was still shopping on autopilot and remembering the time she had gone on vacation with her sister. They had driven cross country, and he had worried incessantly about something happening to her. Suddenly, a disturbing thought had surfaced; things would be a lot easier if she hadn't come back. He immediately felt guilty about the thought as he checked out and loaded the groceries into the car.

6:00 p.m., and as he arrived back home, he was still feeling guilty over the rogue thought. He unpacked the groceries and began to chop vegetables. A quick glance around the house confirmed she had not been up yet. At least that meant things were still tidy. Damn it! I still need a plot for my story! Jack cursed himself. As he grabbed the oil to begin sautéing the vegetables, he realized he had accidentally grabbed peanut oil. Whoa! That was close. Susan was highly allergic to peanuts and a mistake like that could be deadly. Jack shuddered and thought of a camping trip they took shortly after they were married. There had been a cereal bar with a label guaranteeing that it was peanut free. It turned out the label had been wrong. Driving her to the nearest hospital had been one of the scariest moments of his life. He had thought the entire time that she was going to die and it was his fault. He had not been careful enough. He threw the peanut oil in the trash and found a little olive oil in the cabinet.

7:00 p.m., and the sauce was simmering. He had a little time to work on his story. He decided to start with a theme.

What about a comedy? No... he wasn't that funny.

Drama? No... I already have enough of that here.

"Jack!"

No... I need to write something challenging.

"Jack!"

What about a romance?

"Jack!"

Jack was in the zone, lost in thought... "JACK!"

Startled out of his thoughts, he yelled back. "What?"

"Why are you yelling at me?" Susan indignantly asked.

“I’m sorry, dear. I was concentrating. It won’t happen again.” The buzzing returned.

“Did you remember to get sourdough bread? You know how much I love sourdough with your spaghetti.”

“No, dear, I forgot the bread...” What about a mystery? A good mystery could write itself if I could come up with the right concept.

“But, Jack, I really want sourdough!”

“Yes, dear, but it’s 7:30 and the sauce is already going. I don’t have time to go back to the store.” What about a cheating spouse? Or it could be a noir.

“Jack!”

A detective looking for a particularly elusive bank robber.

“Jack!”

Jack didn’t realize he was grinding his teeth while stirring the sauce. Not a bank robbery...

“JACK, I WANT SOURDOUGH!”

A murder...

He lost his train of thought again as he yelled back through the wall, “Yes, dear, I’ll run right out and get it!” He turned the burner on the sauce down to low and went to the store.

8:30 p.m. – Three and a half hours to deadline, and Jack had not put one word on paper yet. He was going to be cutting it close. On the drive to the store, Jack had come up with some great ideas for his murder mystery. His head was buzzing again, this time with words and lines that he had to get on paper. But first, he needed to finish dinner and it was already getting late.

He was sitting at the table pondering some ideas after returning to the store. The sauce was simmering, and he finally had some peace to write.

“Jack! Is dinner ready yet?” Susan bellowed from the bedroom.

“Almost, dear!”

Susan had still not come out of the room; there must be a good show on television. One of those she liked to binge-watch for hours. No matter, it was easier to concentrate while she was not in the room. Everything was nearly done. It just needed time to cook at this point, so Jack got out his note pad and started outlining a story. There was a thought that kept eluding him, something he knew he needed to focus on in his

story. His pen was tracing doodles along the margin as his mind drifted.

“Jack! I’m hungry!”

“Just a few more minutes, dear!”

He needed something grand for his story.

“Jack! What is taking so long?”

The idea was right at the edge of his thoughts, but he just couldn’t seem to grasp it.

“Jack! Answer me!” Her voice had shifted to a whine. Jack’s teeth clenched again.

“Jack!” The buzzing of thoughts and tension became intense in his head.

Suddenly, it stopped. Something had changed. Jack could feel it in his mind, the tension, the buzzing; it was all gone, and a calm came over him.

“Jack! What are you doing?”

“I’m just finishing up dinner, dear!”

Everything became clear.

“Jack! It’s taking forever!”

He needed a good death scene. But the details were hard to write. He didn’t want to overdramatize it, and yet he needed it to be meaningful. Jack suddenly stood and got the peanut oil from the trash. He opened the bottle and poured a sizable amount into the sauce. He stirred it well, served two plates, and sat them at the dinner table.

“Ok, Susan, dinner is ready!”

He got his notepad and sat across from the plate he had just made for Susan. He wanted to be sure to write down every detail. This was going to be a great story.

A Hard Day for Hades

Hades remembered Atlantis. Beautiful stonework, cobbled walkways, bustling ports, and crystal blue waters all around. Then, those same crystal blue waters rose in a wave that blocked out the sun, casting the city's terrified citizens in shadow. That was a very busy day in the Underworld.

He remembered Pompeii, too, that lively city of Romans. It was hard to watch when Vesuvius erupted, spreading those black clouds of ash and soot out for miles. Fire and smoke rushed out over the city, greedily devouring the people whole, leaving only stone and death in their wake. Many souls still gasped agonizingly for breath as they appeared before Charon the Ferryman.

Hades could recall so many things that had left him busy: hurricanes and wildfires, earthquakes and tornadoes, famines and droughts. The Black Plague left a nasty pileup at the Styx as it crept its way across Europe. At least that one had let him spread the work out over a few years.

As Hades gazed out over the Fields of Asphodel toward the River Styx, he remembered each of these events. Each and every one of those disasters had been devastating, but none of them compared to what had come next.

Hades had always known war to be a tragedy. From the Siege of Troy to the French Revolution, war had been a bloody, cruel, and horrifying affair. But the work of Ares was blissful compared to humanity's newest alternative.

It began in the trenches, Hades recalled morosely. The soldiers had approached the Styx coughing and wheezing afterward. The feeling of their lungs dissolving into mush still too fresh in their minds.

"Gas!" they screamed, panicked as they scabbled along the shoreline, hoping to dive away from the yellow smoke that they could no longer see.

For some years to come, it became a common sight. So, too, did the sight of men screaming in pain, tearing at their bodies as they searched for the shrapnel that they were certain was still ripping through their flesh. Some were lucky, doing little more than blink in confusion, stupefied as they searched for bombs they had never seen explode, or snipers they had never heard fire.

Eventually came the lull, that sweet bliss following the influx of souls, in which work was smooth and easy. Then came the next wave.

They too cried out “Gas!” as they appeared on the black shores. Their cries, however, were not of panic, but despair – despair and resignation. They welcomed the Underworld, for there was food and rest aplenty, and the life they had left behind had known nothing but starvation and labor for such a long time. They arrived heedless of gender or age, and they came in numbers that made even the Lord of the Underworld weep with grief. All of them cursed the same crimson, four-armed symbol, not unlike a bloody windmill.

“Nazi,” they spat with vitriol.

The horrors did not cease, and time proved only to sharpen the blade with which mankind drew its own blood. They rained fire down upon the Earth and unleashed a booming monster that even Vesuvius would have dreaded. They crashed planes into buildings and infected cities with plague. They placed bombs in the streets and screamed hate to the very skies.

And, of course, they have done this, Hades thought, watching Charon’s ferry cutting through the swirling waters.

Persephone, his loving queen, fell in step beside her husband as he strode down the shore to meet it. Hades was glad to have her; he had never been especially good with children.

They were so very small – too small to be stepping so timidly onto the shores of the dead. They shuffled about, as uncertain of their surroundings as they were fearful of them. Hades allowed Persephone to take the lead.

“Don’t be afraid,” she told them softly and reassuringly. “You’re alright now.”

“Where are we?” a boy asked timidly, no older than ten. “What happened?”

Hades knew what had happened. He could tell them all about the man that had come bursting into their school, his weapon spewing his hate. He could tell them about the storm of pain, blood, and fear that followed – that still follows, even now. He could tell them of the cruel world that brought them to his shores before they were even old enough to understand what it meant.

But he wouldn’t.

Instead, he watched silently as his wife led the children away, smiling lovingly and reassuringly as she promised them pomegranate juice in

Elysium. She would take care of them, Hades knew. He would gladly deal with the rest.

Charon pushed off from the shore, headed back to fill the next ferry. Hades' fingers twitched in anticipation, knowing exactly who would be on it. His mind already whirled, preparing for him the worst tortures the Fields of Punishment could concoct, the most horrid punishments Tartarus had to offer.

But as he gazed out over the River Styx, watching Charon fade away into the drifting mist, Hades couldn't help but sigh in remorse.

Yes, he remembered Atlantis. He remembered Pompeii, too. He remembered the Antioch Earthquake, and the Calcutta Cyclone. He remembered the great floods of China, and the fires of Peshtigo.

But more vividly than any of them, he remembered the yellow gases that filled the trenches during the First World War. He remembered the starved, exhausted figures that the Nazis sent to him en masse during the Holocaust. He remembered the bombs of London and Paris, and the falling of the Twin Towers. He remembered them all.

As he watched the ferry begin reappearing in the mist, Hades longed for the days when the worst tragedy that mankind faced was a city swallowed by the sea.

“Morning Jog”

Each morning, I wake up at 6:30 a.m. and go for a brief morning jog to clear my head. As I’m running, I listen to my and my Jefito’s favorite band, Los Inquietos Del Norte, even though I can’t understand the lyrics. Regardless of the content, I find my own meaning in each song, depending on the rhythm and energy: the passion in the singer’s voice, the swing in the drums, the bounce in the bass, the high squealing accordion... Sometimes my Jefito asks me, “Hey Junior, what is Inquietos singing about right now?” and I respond with a subtle shrug of the shoulders. I hate it when he does that because he knows damn well that I’m not as fluent in Spanish as my older hermana, Jessica.

Around 6:40 a.m., I reach the 7-Eleven that’s about as old as my recently deceased abuela, so at least 107-years-old. The pavement in the little parking lot is chipping away like my sanity, and the shrubs near the main entrance are terribly overgrown. I try not to focus on the exterior, but how could someone not notice? That’s all people ever seem to notice: my teachers, my “friends,” my neighbors, the Sikh man who sells me my Vitamin Water at the 7-Eleven each morning. They all take one look at me and make their judgments, the same way my Jefito does. But they don’t know me; only God and I know me. Well, at least I like to think I know me, but that’s none of your business...

After I break the seal on my Pomegranate Vitamin Water, I proceed to take a shortcut through Riverside Park. Ironically, there isn’t any water to be seen for miles in each direction, yet my small town has several landmarks named after water: Riverside Park, Oceanside Market, Clear Creek Insurance, Bed Bath & Beyond, and Laketown Inn. I’m not sure if it’s irony or ignorance that led to so much disillusion in this God-forsaken town. Maybe the Illuminati is playing a cruel joke on us. Imagine it, a town set in the middle of the driest region of Arizona trying to promote water, as if to bait poor tourists into staying against their will. It’s 6:52 a.m., and Inquietos is still ringing in my ears.

I’m the physical embodiment of this town; just a bunch of false advertisements loaded with predetermined disappointment. People assume I’m fluent in Spanish because I’m brown, but in reality, I know less of my native tongue than my 4-year-old cousins that still live in Guaymas, Mexico. Occasionally, little, old white ladies in the local deli eyeball me to remind

me that I don't belong in "their" town, let alone the country. What was that one song Mrs. May taught me in the 1st grade?

"This land is your land, this land is my land..."

What a load of steaming bullcrap. When my familia throws parties, I'm usually outcasted by my extended family that know as much English as I know Spanish. I'm scolded for being "un muchacho sin su voz," which makes them resent me; their resentment makes me resent myself. Language has created barriers in my familia, in my house, and in my life.

It's five till now. While I'm jogging through the park, I see a homeless couple cuddle up in an old, grayish blanket under the jungle gym. I think about sparing them a buck or two, but then I ponder, "Would they do the same for me if I was sleeping in a park and they had a wallet full of cash?" I doubt it, so I keep a steady pace and avoid eye contact. My Jefito taught me that life is all about survival: "Comer o ser comido." Basically, sink or swim. Everyone is so concerned with floating that they are willing to watch others drown around them. My Jefito couldn't be more right about that one. I can take care of myself. I have to. Sink or swim; eat or be eaten; try or die; assimilate or dissipate.

As 7 a.m. rolls along, I make my way back home, so I can get ready for another long, grueling day at Crystal Lake High School, yet another annoying reference to water. I didn't do my homework last night because I hate my English teacher. I refused to write my reflection just to spite him. To get under his thin, ivory skin, a skin tone that I'm jealous of. Every time I refuse to do an assignment out of civil disobedience, I can tell it grinds Mr. McKay's gears. I can tell that he wants to rant to my parents about it, but they don't care either. They care less than I do, which gives me the upper hand. I bet Mr. McKay would like to give me his upper hand. I'd like to see him try. "I dare you," I think to myself. He won't do it. But if he does, I won't hold back.

As I make my way up the driveway to my house, I can hear my Jefita cooking breakfast for my familia. The old, red frying pan sizzles away, and my nose begins to lead my vessel. I take a seat in the dining room next to Jessica, who isn't amused by my presence, and wait impatiently for my Jefita's amazing cooking. I just hope to God that she doesn't serve breakfast with a glass of agua again... I think that might just make me snap. As she approaches me from behind with a warm plate and a cold glass in either hand, I pray that I won't have to start my day in remembrance of the predetermined disappointment that dictates my life; it's as if each morning, I'm taking Holy Communion with a glass of water to remember that I'm not good enough for anyone. Not my familia, not my teachers, and certainly not the Sikh man from 7-Eleven.

Katrina Singleton

Stage 1: Shock

Everything was gray. As if when I heard the news, all of the color was stolen from every nook and cranny of my life in one swift motion. I didn't feel a pulse within my own body. All I could feel were the bones that caged my heart attempting to catch every shattered piece falling from the cavity in my chest. I felt as if my own existence was beginning to wane. I looked out the window and memorized the lines on the sidewalk two stories below, recalling the steps I made to get to this spot five minutes ago.

"Miss," I faintly heard someone calling me. "I know this is hard to take in, but we need to know what you want us to do for him."

It was the doctor. I stared at his teal scrubs in the reflection of the window and that stupid, white mask that all the damn doctors were constantly wearing in this squeaky-clean building. And why did they always have white walls with pointless portraits of things that always looked so happy? This was not a happy place. It would never be a happy place. This is a fearful place. Instead of white walls, they should be gray. Then I would have something to blame for draining my cheery emotions.

"I don't have an answer, but you will hear from me when I do," I didn't look the doctor in the eye as I answered. "I'll only be here for a couple more minutes."

I walked over to his bedside and placed my hand on top of his beautiful brunette curls, pushing them away, so I could place a gentle kiss on his forehead. I felt the normal lump in my throat that occurred when I came close to accepting the fact that this is the end. I swallowed the lump so loudly that it could've possibly woken him up from his comatose state.

A sigh escaped my lips and I made my way for the door, quietly turning the doorknob and slipping into the hallway. I made no contact with any doctors, visitors, or secretaries like I used to when he was first put in this wretched place. I just didn't care. They broke their promise to me. I wouldn't care if this whole place burst into flames.

I finally made my way out of the treacherous sliding glass doors and decided to go for a walk around the city to clear my head instead of going to our home. The whole world became the epitome of dull darkness. The once bright faces I saw everywhere I turned became sickly and de-

pressing. The beautiful and cloudless sky of Manhattan on this lovely July afternoon only reminded me of the endless days and nights filled with decisions that I shouldn't have to make at twenty-two years old. I kept my eyes on my shoes, the ones he bought me last year for my birthday, and kept count of each time they hit the pavement.

One, two, three, four, five. I thought to myself. I didn't know where I was going, and I really didn't care. Thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four. Each step containing a memory from our past three years together taking turns stabbing into my chest.

And that's when I heard it. The chime of a bell, but not just any bell. The bell to Billy's, our favorite restaurant. I looked up from the concrete and took in the view of the rustic red brick. The neon sign was still missing the second 'L,' and the first one still flickered in and out like it did that Tuesday night in December:

"C'mon, eat it!" he playfully demanded, as he shoved the most disgusting looking oyster shell into my face.

I pushed it away and shook my head all at once. He knew how much I hated seafood, or all meat for that matter. "No way, you know I'm a vegetarian. It's one thing to eat your animal carcasses right in front of me, but don't make me a murderer, too!" I smirked and shoveled a fork full of salad into my mouth.

"Y'know what confuses me about you 'vegetarians'? Y'all eat eggs, like literal baby chickens, but shame me for eating steak," he raised an eyebrow at me.

I rolled my eyes. "How many times do I have to remind you that the eggs that are bought in the grocery store are produced from hens that don't mate with roosters? That makes it more of a—well, period than a baby."

He nearly choked to death on the French fry he placed in his mouth. "Okay, okay, okay! Enough chicken talk. Let me grab the check and we can go home," he gently grabbed my hands and rubbed my knuckles before getting up from the table.

I went to grab our coats from the rack, and we exited the building. We were instantly welcomed with the slap of Manhattan's famous December winds as we shivered and trudged our way to the apartment.

"Billy's is such a great restaurant; their fries are unbeatable!" He threw his arms in the air like he made some unbelievable discovery, and I laughed.

“They are pretty good,” I smiled at him, and he smiled back.

His smile was a bit lopsided, which I found odd because he looked extremely nervous. I grabbed his hand to reassure him that everything was going to be okay and that the cold wasn’t getting to me. But I had no idea that wasn’t what he was worried about.

~

We made it back to the apartment. I headed towards the kitchen to make us two cups of black coffee, and he made his way to the couch to find a good late-night talk show to get us ready for bed, like we always did on Tuesday nights. I opened the cabinet door that held the coffee grounds, but they weren’t in their normal spot. The filters weren’t anywhere to be found, either. Then I remembered he made the last grocery trip, so I decided to look where he thought the coffee materials were supposed to be. I looked behind every cabinet door, and in every drawer, and found nothing.

“Babe, have you seen the coffee stuff? I can’t find it anywhere!” I shouted out to him, hoping he would come to my rescue.

“What stuff?” he responded. His voice was a little shaky, which was unusual for him.

I walked towards him, so I could tell him what I was talking about when I stopped in my tracks underneath the arch that connected the living room to the kitchen. The living room lights were dimmed, and the television was on the channel that broadcasts a fire log for some reason. I looked at the ground surrounding my feet and my mouth gaped in awe. Petals, beautiful, yellow sunflower petals, were scattered all over the floor. As my eyes scanned the room, I saw about fifteen candles set up all over the floor, the coffee table, and the end tables. They were lit and giving off their own hues of reds and pinks. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

As I attempted to call out his name, his strong arms wrapped around my torso and his chin rested on my right shoulder. I felt his breath tickle my neck as he whispered in my ear, “Marry me, baby.”

~

I wiped the tears from my cheeks and turned away from the restaurant and walked towards the hospital. I kept my eyes on the ground and counted every step I took.

Thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight. I saw tiny wheels on the sidewalk and noticed a flower cart blocking my path. I looked over all the flowers that engulfed the cart and spotted a small bouquet of sun-

flowers. A few of them were withering, but I decided to buy them anyway. I handed the flower man a crumpled up twenty-dollar bill and told him to keep the change before I continued my trek to the hospital.

Forty-two, forty-three, forty-four, forty-five. I found myself in front of the once ghostly looking hospital doors that now suddenly felt inviting. I took one step forward, and then one back. I finally forced my way through the doors and toward the elevators. I looked over to the secretary at the front desk and she smiled so gracefully that I gave her the best smile I could manage in return. I decided not to take the elevator and instead use the stairs to stall the time between here and his room.

Fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five. I was standing in front of his door. I was afraid to turn the knob, but I did it anyway. I stepped into the room and saw his almost lifeless body in the same position I saw it in when I left this morning. His caramel-colored irises were covered by his pale eyelids. The hospital blanket covered his entire body, but his arm that held the IV and his left foot were hanging slightly off the bed. I placed the bouquet on the bedside table, and I quietly walked over to the bed and lifted his foot; his thin flesh allowed me to feel every bone. I placed it back on top of the bed ever so gently in fear that any wrong move would cause it to disintegrate. I gazed at his beautiful face as I revisited the memory of that Tuesday night.

“Oh, you’re here so soon?” the same faint voice from this morning called out to me. “It’s like I said earlier; there’s not much else we can do for him. I’m so very sorry.”

I looked back at the doctor with a gentle smile and embraced him ever so gently. He stood slightly frozen in shock, but slowly returned the gesture. We stayed that way for a while, neither of us saying a word. As we broke our entanglement, he headed towards the door and gestured at me with his clipboard.

“Follow me, ma’am. As his caretaker, there are some forms that need to be filled out by you, so we can go through with the DNR.”

“Can you give me a minute?” I smiled bleakly at him, hoping he would understand what I was asking for.

He nodded and silently closed the door behind him. And once again I was alone with his body. I grabbed the bouquet of flowers, picked out the withering ones, and placed them on his chest. I took the remaining live ones and picked off the petals, one by one, letting them fall all over the floor of the hospital room. Once the bouquet was nothing but stems, I walked back over to his side with tears in my eyes. I gently grabbed his hand, bringing it up to my lips, and placed a miniscule kiss on the knuck-

le of his thumb, then softly placed his hand back on the bed.

I sighed as I fixed his brown curls one last time. “I would marry you in any lifetime, my love,” I whispered as I exited the room. I turned off the lights and silently closed the door.

Allison Bush

Girl on the Stairs

You were approaching the gray staircase that leads to the library. I wasn't sure whether you would actually walk up the stairs or continue walking towards the parking lot the way most people do. I saw you hesitate and turn around as if you were waiting for someone. After you took eleven steps up the stairs, you stopped. Your head turned from side to side before you pulled your phone out of your pocket. Putting your phone up to your ear, you had an inquisitive look on your face before throwing your head back and smiling from ear to ear, laughing. I only wish I could have heard that laugh. From one hundred feet away, it looked like the sound a dog makes when it's stepped on. Again, you started to walk up the concrete steps, but now with a smooth stride. You even took a few stairs two at a time. At the top, you disappeared into the arms of another girl. I could see the excitement clear in your faces. You once again laughed that outrageous laugh before vanishing into the building with her. I was only one hundred feet away, but it felt like I was observing you from another world. I walked towards the library, hoping to find you, but paused and thought better of it. I did not want you to become a reality.

Katie McEvoy-Holguin

The Only One

Emily tore the name tag off her clothes. She sat down in the grass, behind the track field benches, before crumbling the piece of paper and tossing it to the ground. She wrapped her arms around her legs and, for a while, she simply stared at the horizon where the sky met the earth. Her vision began to cloud, but she forced herself to not let a single tear escape. Emily had always dreamt of leaving the city, so when representatives of West Wertow University— one of the prestigious institutions near the area— announced they would be visiting her high school, she let herself get lost in the beauty of her dreams. Emily had spent years preparing for the transition to college. She did everything to become an ideal candidate— extracurricular activities, countless hours studying for high grades, and volunteer experience. All of these things must add up to something, right? Emily knew it would be challenging, but she wasn't quite prepared for the tide that swept through her. Like a daunting nightmare sinking into reality, Emily could still picture the admission's representative standing in front of her. She was a short woman with long, silky brown hair, who talked about the school as if it was poetry and answered every question with enviable poise. This was the opportunity Emily had been waiting for to change the course of her life, so she started to explain the peculiarity of her case. The representative listened attentively, but her polite smile started to fade as soon as the word *undocumented* began to float in the empty space between them.

Soon, the silence stretched and began to inundate them with discomfort. Emily started to awkwardly play with the rings she wore on her fingers in an attempt to calm the emotions that threatened to explode inside her. Finally, the woman spoke. Emily could still hear the pity in her voice as if it was some sort of background song. After that exchange, everything became hazy. Emily managed to mutter a soft 'thank you.' She almost bumped into a group of people before rushing out of the auditorium, and although she managed to escape the situation, it was too late. The words had already been engraved in her memory.

"Hey," a voice brought Emily back from her trance. A tall, lanky boy stood next to her.

"Hey, Matt," Emily replied softly. Matt was the last person Emily wanted to see. She had distanced herself from him a while ago, way before he started dating Nichole, one of their mutual friends. Emily knew it was the right thing to do, but in moments in which the world seemed to

crumble all around her, she couldn't help but reminisce about his company. There was something comforting about Matt's presence. He had a solemn candor, which Emily admired. They were friends for a long time, but the wall that Emily had imposed between them had not allowed her to admit how much she missed him.

"Were you still there when they talked about the admission essay, or did you leave before that?"

Emily took a deep breath. It was reassuring to know that someone had noticed her absence, especially when that someone was Matt. Even so, although Emily's first impulse was to revel in the light of that little gesture, she didn't feel ready to admit anything.

"How's that even important?" Emily asked, trying to deflect the conversation to the surface, where inane and everyday stories prevail.

"Well, one of the admission people was telling us about a dude who wrote his essay about a girl he liked, or a guy... I don't remember. But the whole essay was like a long poem about them. There were pictures, too."

Emily chuckled. "Is this your way of telling me you're going to write yours about Nichole?"

"Oh, no...Colleges want to hear about sad stuff. Like, how you overcame something or, if you're like me, how it was growing up without a dad."

"You can also add the fact that you're Asian American. Colleges love when you mention your culture. I was gonna do that on mine."

"Was?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm just... tired, and we still have to go to that other presentation in the auditorium. What was it? Something about FAFSA?"

The bell rang, and in the distance, Emily could hear a group of students walk out of the gymnasium. Their chatter inundated the air, bringing a momentary distraction. Many thoughts were passing through Emily's mind with each one heavier than the one before. It was too much... college, Matt, her feelings. It was all capsizing, and she didn't know what to do. She felt crushed by the weight of everything.

"I haven't talked to you in a while," Matt said, breaking her train of thought. She let his words bathe her in guilt, which added additional weight to the emotional rollercoaster she was experiencing. Was he judging her? Had he finally caught on to Emily's behavior? Of all days, Matt had to choose today to confront her indifference, and although Emily recognized her role in the game, she didn't want to admit it. She began

to run through excuses in her head, trying to find the one that would fit their situation the best way.

“Matt, listen, I—”

“I’m really sorry.”

His words resonated above the hustle and bustle around them. They felt like cold water, splashing right against Emily’s skin. She didn’t answer. Instead, she feigned interest on a small, yellow flower as she ran her fingers along its petals.

“It’s been tough with school, Nichole, and everything else.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, camouflaging her surprise with forced indifference. “We’re busy, and it’s my fault, too. I haven’t tried in a while.” Those last sentences flew out without caution. They were a small glimpse of the truth sneaking through the cracks of Emily’s façade. For the first time in the conversation, Emily looked Matt in the eyes. He was more familiar than she remembered, and the more Emily let herself get lost in his gaze, the more her body relaxed. It was as if those defenses she had tirelessly built had started to collapse, one by one.

A second bell rang, announcing the end of the passing period.

“Well, we better go ba—”

“Let’s ditch,” Matt interrupted, still looking at Emily. Against the backdrop of a dimly lit sky, Matt seemed to shine a little brighter.

“Are you sure?” Emily asked, smiling. “We could be missing a life-changing presentation.”

“You trust me, right?”

The words settled between them. They lingered in a weird limbo, an unspoken place that existed within the uncertainty of their relationship, and although Emily had labeled their friendship before, she felt an urge to break free and let everything run rampant. Emily had lived all her life in the confines of walls that the world had convinced her she could not leave, and although there was some truth behind that belief, she knew she was more than her limitations. She heard the admission lady’s voice again, feeding into her fears and reminding her how different she was, but for a wild moment, she wanted to be like every other girl. She craved to be carefree and just live in the moment. She simply wanted to be without labels, anchors, or attachments.

“I trust you,” Emily’s answer came as a resolute statement, which made Matt smile. She unfolded her arms before accepting Matt’s out-

stretched hand. As he helped her stand, she felt a wave of anticipation. A sudden rush of adrenaline traveled all throughout her body, making her heart beat faster against her chest.

“Let’s go.” And as Matt guided her away from the track field, Emily realized she was still holding his hand.

The afternoon was cold, but she felt warm.

Esmeralda Torres

Your Friend, I

You never see past who you greet every morning. The person trapped in a dark room with only three walls and one glass window where he waits for you. The individual you talk to, you dance with, you smile to, you cry to, and who knows you better than even you know yourself. His name is I. I has seen your evolution before you even knew he was there looking out for you; he has watched you fall, even falling with you and getting back up with you, sometimes shedding a tear or laughing at your mistakes. He has never spoken to you, but you have talked to him all your life, and you have surely never stopped and asked yourself how it feels to live in a dark room where you can only hear the echoes of your exhaling despair.

Did you listen? No.

What if you changed lives with him for a day?

I has reached out to you without you noticing; I has let you into his world. The moments you have felt sad, he cried with you; when you felt afraid, he didn't sleep that night because you didn't, either; and when you felt lonely, he wanted to scream to tell you that you weren't alone, but he could not make a sound. He must not speak unless you do. The world of I is chilly and deserted, with no one to talk to but you. Let me explain. It is similar to the moment you enter a food market in hopes of finding fresh ingredients, almost smelling earthy still, for that New Year's resolution of a healthy lifestyle. It's summer, which means you have decided to wear paper-thin clothes and maybe those light gray running leggings, but you forgot the coldest place in the food market is where your ingredients will be. That chilly air causes goosebumps to rise all over your body. Yes, I know what you are thinking; we'll get the necessary components and leave. No big deal, right? But what if you can't leave? What if your home is there? There is not a control switch like the one you probably have

at home. When wintertime arrives, your most significant punishment is leaving the warmth from those three or four blankets you slept with during the night. His imaginary friends, made by the paintbrush of his fingers in the dry, cracked ground where he lays every night, do no talk to him, yet they share the same world. Almost like you when you had your imaginary friend as a child, when only you knew they existed. He does not tell you what he feels, but you can see it in his eyes. You are his only friend, and even you have let him down. You have crushed him without intending to, shattered him to pieces. You have picked him up, piece by piece, like he has done for you when you didn't feel happy with how you looked. He witnessed your compliments after you gained your confidence back, screaming with joy to see you so happy. Yet you have hurt his feelings by yelling at him over the disappointment and anger you feel towards him when all he has tried to do is help you see yourself.

I has travelled with you, watched you from the plane or car's glass window, seeing how you enjoy your music at full volume even when other people are around. We don't all have your courage and bravery. He has been there, watching your different facial expressions as you scroll through social media, wondering what society has come to be. When you see something funny, your lips quirk upwards in a joyous smile, sometimes even a *ha ha* can be heard. When you are mad, your eyebrows join together, resembling the cartoon-like birds you drew in kindergarten. When you are sad, your lips form a half-drawn upside-down u, and your eyes look like the sun's reflection in the ocean; oh, you are such a crybaby. I can't forget the moment you encounter a picture of the woman you have dared not speak to. Your cheeks turn pink, and you appear to be in another world, possibly daydreaming of the family you desire to have with her or the wedding you want to plan with her. I imitates your expressions like a baby watching his older sister bite into a fresh lemon. He watches your stressful moments at work as you try to finish your report to turn in to your boss. He says goodnight to you as you scroll through your last email before you take your well-deserved rest, waiting to greet you in the morning once again.

I has, and will always, be there as long as you see him.

Christopher Chrobak

Breather

What was I thinking? I looked down and frowned. I never imagined it would come to this, but here I am, perched atop this bridge like a vulture waiting to descend onto the lifeless, except I can't fly and the only corpse is me.

It'd been a tough few years, the entirety spent in a perpetual state of an existential crisis.

Everything disillusioned me, and the only skill I'd acquired was an unmatched degree of self-loathing. All of my friends abandoned me, too preoccupied with their nine-to-fives and growing families to put up with me. I wanted nothing more than to reach out, yet I wasted night after night sponging up bourbon like it was my job. I wanted to die. Not because I was depressed, but because I was bored. I lacked any initiative to pick up my life; I was directionless, save for my tendency to fall further and further into my own self-indulgent sorrow. And the trust fund would run out soon. My parents wouldn't have been proud of the way I spent it, but they'd died, so they had no say in the matter. Lucky me.

I had to do something quickly. The problem, however, lay in my aforementioned lack of initiative. I wanted to die, yes, but how? I feared it'd require more work than simply making the decision. I hadn't been driven to suicide because of an abusive past, failed romance, death of a loved one, or any other tragedy; I was only disgustingly bored. Did this make me a special case? Was I only entertaining the thought? No. I was definitely serious.

It was a brisk evening for July. The wind battered my face as the water below beckoned me with promises of warmth. Soon I'd cleanse myself of the cold, cruel world's apathy in the warm currents of death. When I decided it high time for my leap, I noticed a pair of headlights racing towards me. For the first time I felt like a star, as if the screaming car was a spotlight which shone on the legacy I'd soon leave behind. Instead of zooming past me the car continued to document my final moments as it slowed down. It eventually stopped, and a young woman hurriedly rushed out and yelled to me.

"Hey! What are you doing!?! Come over here!"

I realized the woman did not trust me. Instead of waiting for me to slink

over to her as she demanded, she ran to me. In the glow of her headlights I noticed that she was just my type—alive. But more stunning than her appearance was her determined, empathetic expression. One look at it, though obscured, was enough for me to reconsider my fate. I found it ironic that this attractive woman who would've never found it feasible to even look at me in the past now rushed to my rescue.

“I was just taking a walk. The view up here is great.”

“Cut the shit. I'm not stupid.” She was also aggressive. Even better.

“I'm going to take you home right now,” she declared with so much assurance that it intimidated me. I had no choice but to submit to her, but first I had a question.

“Do you know what time it is?”

Her incredulous stare betrayed her thoughts—of all things to worry about at this moment, considering his life, he's curious about the time?

“It's about midnight.”

“Wow! Tomorrow just began! The first day of the rest of my life! Let's celebrate!”

My strange behavior oddly intrigued her, as I soon found her arms wrapped around me as her breath danced upon my neck. She was probably much warmer than death, so I changed my mind and decided I didn't want to die anymore. I wanted to live in her warmth, not death's embrace.

Her name was Sandy, and she was a nurse. I felt like a soldier injured on the battlefield, and that she was my savior, except that in place of white garments, she wore black stretch slacks, a matching tank top, and an open sweater. Instead of triumphantly bearing a real injury, I expressed only cowardice and clumsiness. But that didn't bother me. I was stuck in my wartime reverie and wished I could be a hero. Her balmy breath plucked me from my imagination.

“Let's go. I have to work early tomorrow.”

I obliged, but drifted back to my daydream. Maybe I'd be dispatched due to my injury and we could escape together. But as soon as I looked up, I knew it wasn't possible. Tires screeched, and I screamed. “Sandy! Get out of the way!”

It was too late. The car had mauled her. It was a terrible sight. Poor Sandy flopped to the ground like a sack of meat, quickly surrounded by the blood which drained from her head. The grisly image overwhelmed

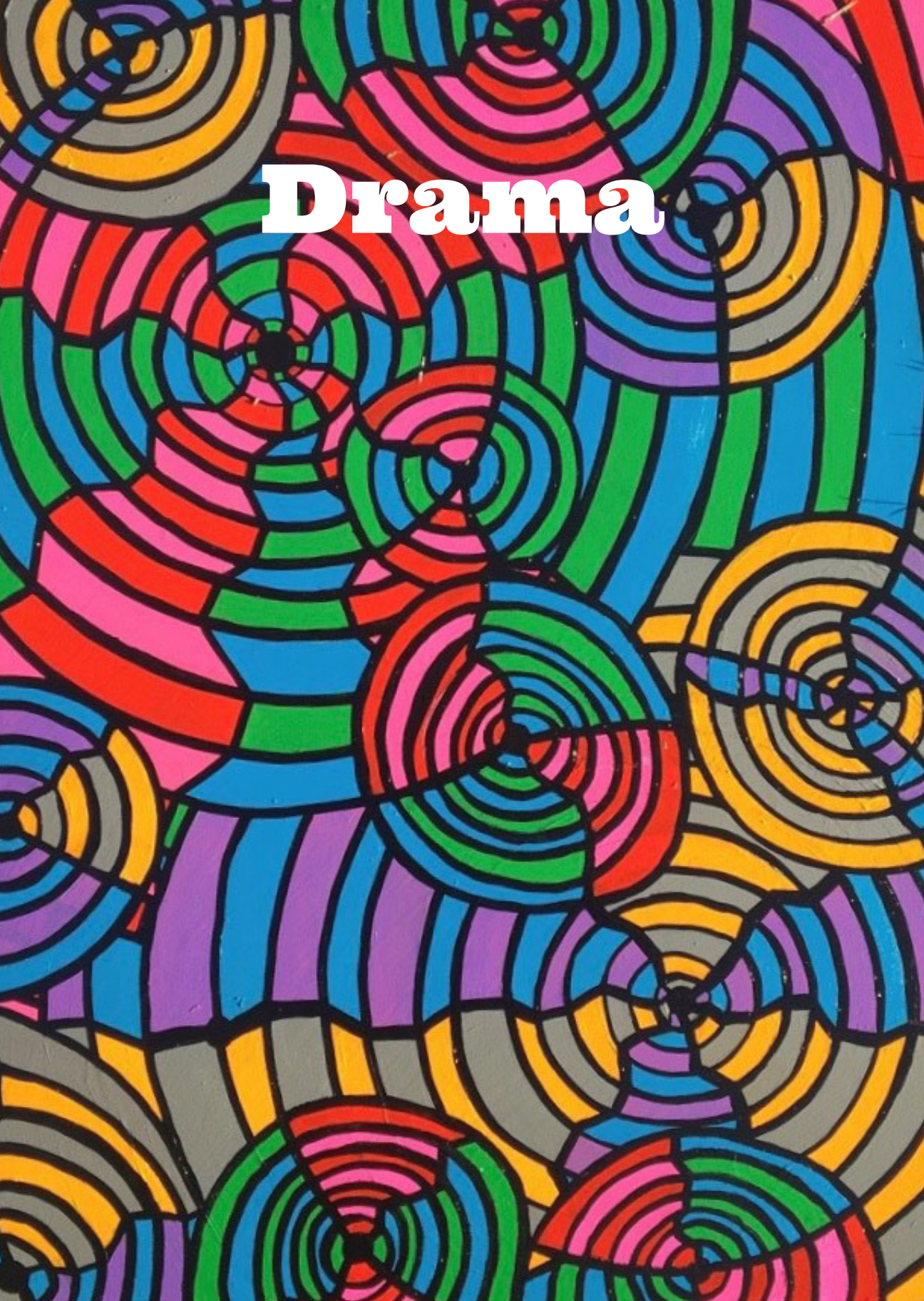
me. It was so unfair; I had only known her for a matter of minutes and she was already taken from me. And she seemed so beautiful, caring, and aggressive. I would've learned to love her dominance, but it was too late now. My fantasies would never be lived because my companion lay there lifeless, struck by an idiot who should've never been granted his license. Hysterical, the man fumbled for his phone, dialed 911, and bent by Sandy's side. I cursed him. "Murderer! Murderer!" and swung my fists at him. The timid man began to cry. I sensed the experience was already too rough on him, having accidentally offed an innocent human, and that he didn't need to be the target of a crazed fool's rage, so I left him alone. He wasn't worth my wrath.

Now with Sandy and my fantasy dead, I had no reason to live. My original plan to leap from the bridge echoed like a mantra in my head. I climbed over the barrier and plunged into the welcoming waters of death. I would've preferred to have seen Sandy as my last sight, not the bloody, disfigured mess that she was now, but the vixen who had reached out to me. Instead, I spent my last moments condemning a stranger.

Lights flooded the scene while a chorus of sirens sang throughout the night. After the police questioned the panic-stricken man, they pronounced Sandy dead. No coroner was present, but there didn't need to be. Paramedics crowded around her and tried to hoist her into a body bag when they were utterly shocked by sudden, uneven gasps and feeble whimpers coming from the heap of flesh. Could she still be alive? Baffled, everyone swarmed. It was true. Her panting had now given way to blood-clogged coughs, which the paramedics tended to immediately.

"Well, won't you take a look at that? I guess miracles do happen! She's a breather!"

Drama



Sam Underwood

THE STUDENT A DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

SETTING: CHRIS, a student, enters statistics class a few minutes before a big exam and sits between his two friends. On one side is ANGELA, a very successful student and study partner. On the other side is DAMIAN, who plays in a metal band with CHRIS, who is usually asleep when he bothers to show up for class at all.

CHRIS

(frustrated) What am I going to do? I didn't have time to study for this exam today! Between English, History, and Physics, I barely have time to eat.

CHRIS turns to DAMIAN as if to say something, then thinks better of it and turns the other way to ANGELA.

CHRIS to ANGELA

(exasperated) Tell me Angela, how do these professors expect us to have time to study for their exams along with a relentless string of assignments to complete?

ANGELA raises her eyebrows at CHRIS in an amused expression.

CHRIS to ANGELA

I know, I know! I am the one who chose to take on a heavy workload to keep my summer free. Reminding me of that does not help me now! It surely won't help me remember how to figure out the weighted measure of daily production and show the probability of errors, given that the odds of an error are conditional to the mean.

DAMIAN passes a piece of paper to CHRIS, and CHRIS studies the paper for a few minutes. ANGELA looks over CHRIS's shoulder and expresses a look of horror on her face.

CHRIS to DAMIAN

(shocked) This is the answers for today's exam! Damian, what have you given me here? This could spell certain doom for me if I were caught with this. (thoughtfully) Yet it could also be my salvation.

ANGELA shakes her head furiously, giving CHRIS a look of scorn

CHRIS to ANGELA

(harshly) Do not judge me Angela! These equations come naturally to you! You couldn't begin to understand my struggle. Besides, when will I ever need to know how to figure out the weighted measure of daily production and show the probability of errors, given that the odds of an error are conditional to the mean!

DAMIAN gestures for ANGELA to be quiet.

CHRIS to DAMIAN

(serious) We should both heed her warning Damian. While I may consider this because of the circumstances of this particular situation, you make cheating and deception an everyday practice. If I were to taste this forbidden fruit you hand me, (Chris looks at the paper longingly) it would only be this time. I would pledge to double my efforts for future exams!

ANGELA looks at CHRIS disappointedly.

CHRIS to ANGELA

(pleadingly) I know this goes against my principals, but what would you have me do? A poor grade now can have a dramatic effect on my GPA and ruin my chances of transferring to a good university.

CHRIS to both

(resolute) Enough of this debate! Class is about to start. I will take your offer Damian, but know that this will be the only time.

ANGELA shakes a fist at DAMIAN. DAMIAN shrugs and smiles smugly.

SETTING: 10 years later, CHRIS sits at his desk in his office reviewing company emails

CHRIS

(excited) Look here! An email from Mr. Marlowe; they are still considering me for the promotion! This is wonderful news! (inquisitive) Wait... he has a task for me. (Reading the email) This says... "I need you to create a presentation reviewing the weighted measure of daily production and show the probability of errors, given that the odds of an error are conditional to the mean".

CHRIS screams to the heavens in horror

CHRIS

Nooooooooooooo!

THE END

Jorge Lopez

SAND PEOPLE

Cast of Characters

DAVID: Male college student who doesn't worry
ALEX: Female college student who worries.

ACT I: SAND PEOPLE

Scene: curtains rise and we see the backyard of a house. There are some chairs positioned into a semi circle. There is a screen door through which we can see into the house, giving off a sickening yellow light. ALEX sits alone drinking a beer. She takes a few sips and stares off into space. After a few moments DAVID opens the screen door with a beer in his hand. Through the screen door we can hear the sounds of a party.

DAVID

(To someone off stage)

Hell naw, I just took a shot! Naw fuck that, dude!

(To Alex)

Alex, you tryna take a shot?

(No response)

Alex?

DAVID closes the screen door and moves closer to
ALEX

DAVID

Alex? Alex.

(Finally ALEX notices him.)

What's up?

ALEX

Oh, nothing. Just thinking.

DAVID

'Bout what?

ALEX

...Nothing.

DAVID

You fuckin high? Took a hit outta Alejandro's pen already huh?

ALEX

No, I've just been drinking.

DAVID

You don't wanna come inside? They're taking shots. Fucking Fernando keeps wanting everyone to take shots of tequila.

ALEX

I'm good. You seem pretty gone already, how many shots you take?

DAVID

Just one times three.

ALEX

Beers?

DAVID

This my fourth one.

ALEX

Must be delicious.

DAVID

You think I drink this shit cause I like the taste? Fuck that. I drink to get drunk and that's it.

(Offers his beer to her.)

ALEX

Don't really feel like getting drunk right now.

DAVID

What? Alex the Modelo goblin doesn't want to get drunk? That's a first. Thought I'd see hell freeze over.

ALEX

David.

DAVID

Sup dawg.

ALEX

What do you think happens when we die?

DAVID

Okay... just gonna ignore that question and go get more drunk.

ALEX

Come on, please. I'm asking seriously.

DAVID

I don't know. Why you asking me? I'm just tryna get drunk.

ALEX

Aren't you tired of that? I mean That's all we ever fucking do when we hang out. Get drunk or get high.

DAVID

Chill out girl. I mean, isn't that what we're supposed to do? We're college kids. Its only like five bucks for a blunt and like six or seven for a six pack of like Bud-

weiser. That beer is ass though.

ALEX

Exactly! It's so easy. Don't you ever feel like we're wasting time?

DAVID

Wasting time? Hanging out with your friends is wasting time?

ALEX

That's not what I was saying.

DAVID

Well alright; then, why don't you tell me up there from your fucking high horse what you were trying to say.

ALEX

I don't know. I just feel like we could be doing something more productive.

DAVID

What like study? We all study plenty enough. You got like what? A three point eight GPA? I got on the dean's list this last semester and so did Alejandro. Fernando is kind of a dumb ass but even he hasn't gone lower than a two point eight.

ALEX

What happens when we die?

DAVID

Alex, who cares? Probably nothing.

ALEX

Exactly, nothing. Nothing after this. Doesn't that scare you?

DAVID

No.

ALEX

Why?

DAVID

'Cause I don't think about it! Why would I? I'm probably wrong anyway; there might be heaven who knows.

ALEX

That doesn't scare you even more? What if you go to heaven tomorrow? Tomorrow God judges you and he looks back at what you've done.

DAVID

What you don't think I'll get into heaven?

ALEX

I don't know; will you?

DAVID

Fuck yeah. You think God is gonna judge me for drinking some booze and smoking some pot? That fucker was drinking wine all the time anyway wasn't he? Why are you even worried about this?

ALEX

You know why. Stop acting like you don't.

(A heavy silence.)

DAVID

...Kim and DJ?

ALEX

...Yeah.

DAVID

You think they ended up in heaven?

(ALEX doesn't answer.)

DAVID

You think they ended up in hell?

ALEX

I don't know.

DAVID

Alex, no one knows how it's going to end. Probably isn't a hell anyway.

ALEX

What if this is it?

DAVID

Fernando's backyard?

ALEX

No, this. Here. Earth.

DAVID

You are high.

ALEX

No, I'm serious. What if this is hell. I mean would you need much convincing? Everyone fucking hates each other! This country wants to build a wall to keep people out who don't look like me or you. Schools are getting shot up left and right and they're just watching not doing shit about it. I have a younger sister, David, and so do you. You don't think every morning when she hugs you to leave for school that maybe, just maybe, this might be the last time you see her? And everybody knows! There's no way no one on this damned planet doesn't know. They're all connected through social media constantly sharing the next tragedy and all they fucking do is scroll past it. Sending their thoughts and prayers. Doesn't matter if it's a shooting, murder, or... crash.

DAVID

You really using they a lot huh?

ALEX

What do you mean?

DAVID

What you think you're Moses or Muhammad? The next messenger or some shit? Yeah Alex, everyone fucking knows, that includes you. So don't go using they or them like you're some fucking helpless outsider who just can't baffle what the fuck is going on. You do the same shit just like everyone else. Nothing. That's what you're saying right? That the world is going to shit and WE are just sitting here with our thumbs in our

ass and ears. You could do so much better but the world is just doing nothing huh?

ALEX

I could've stopped them! I could've stopped them.

DAVID

No, you couldn't, no one cou-

ALEX

Don't say that. I know DJ said he was good but he wasn't. We all knew.

DAVID

Alex, we didn't know. DJ said he was good he-

ALEX

That's why he crashed? 'Cause he was good? I could've done more. You could've done more.

DAVID

What the hell am I gonna do? What? Stop every person who looks somewhat drunk from driving? And the schools? You want me posted up ready to tackle the next shady guy who walks past? Want me to be a cop? Huh? Wear the same uniform that killed my uncle eight years ago? What you want me to be the president? Yeah right. They barely want me in this country; no way in hell they letting me run it. Maybe you're right, Alex. Maybe this is hell. And this right here (points at beer) this is heaven.

ALEX

We're all trying to get to heaven.

DAVID

What'chu say?

ALEX

We're all trying to get to heaven. Maybe that's what everyone is doing.

DAVID

Sure whatever. If that were true you'd think we'd be there by now.

ALEX

Hey David?

DAVID

If you ask me what happens when we die one more time I'm gonna go back inside.

ALEX

Why do you drink?

DAVID

...I don't know. It's my heaven remember?

ALEX

Is it?

DAVID

Naw, it's more like glue. Or seawater.

ALEX

Seawater?

DAVID

Yeah. I'm a sand man.

ALEX

What?

DAVID

It's like...I'm slowly falling apart, but once a bit of water hits me, I stick together nice and tight.

ALEX

Wouldn't you eventually fall over? Or be consumed by the sea or something?

DAVID

Probably. But it's slower than staying in the sun. Right?

ALEX

I don't know. If we're all sand people, I'd probably just want to go back to being sand.

THE END

Bat-Ami Gordin

ONE COOKIE, ONE CANDLE COPYRIGHT © 2014 REVISIONS 3 2 MARCH 2016

EXT. PLAYGROUND OF MOBILE HOME PARK - DAY

CELIA FOSTOCK (10) sits on the only SWING on the SWINGSET. The other swings are missing, although CHAINS are hanging from the FRAME.

Celia is sad and looks off to the distance, as if thinking. Celia's BACKPACK leans against one of the frames of the swing set. She holds a MYLAR BALLOON, shaped like a heart. HAPPY BIRTHDAY appears on the balloon.

MRS. BRUNELLE (75) walks her well-groomed TOY SIZED DOG.

MRS. BRUNELLE

Why, Celia. It's your birthday, and you're all alone.

Celia comes out of her deep thoughts and smiles.

MRS. BRUNELLE

Come now. You should be beaming. Aren't you ten today?

CELIA

(sparkles) You remembered!

MRS. BRUNELLE

Why of course! Why wouldn't I?

Mrs. Brunelle leans down to pat her dog. As Celia hops off the swing to pat the dog, she accidentally releases the balloon.

Celia jumps in an attempt to catch the string. She fails.

Celia and Mrs. Brunelle watch the balloon head skyward.

MRS. BRUNELLE

Perhaps your mother has a whole bouquet of these balloons waiting for you?

As Celia puts her heavy backpack on her back, a pack so heavy it makes her walk like a hunchback, she rolls her eyes upward, as if to say "yeah sure." Then, she rolls her eyes over to...

EXT. FOSDICK HOME - DAY

The Fosdick Home is just another shabby looking TWO BEDROOM SINGLE-WIDE in the trailer park.

INT. FOSDICK HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

As the radio in PENA FOSDICK's (late 30's) home plays the introduction to Beyoncé's Drunk in Love, the camera pans over the wall. There are PHOTOGRAPHS of Celia at various stages of her life. They hang in chronological order.

The first picture is with Celia as a newborn in Pena's arms. Next, Celia is one. Pena holds Celia closely; Celia touches Pena's face and both have very happy smiles.

At two, Celia sits on Pena's lap. At three, she is next to Pena, smiling. By four, Celia no longer smiles. She pushes away as Pena tries to hug her.

At five, they are in the picture together, but disconnected. Celia is sad. At six, Celia is alone in the first grade school portrait and is alone from then on, from second grade until this year, fourth grade.

Every aspect of this living room indicates a dysfunctional family in which an alcoholic resides. CLOTHES overflow from a LAUNDRY BASKET in the corner of the room.

BEER CANS are on the floor, EMPTY BEER BOTTLES on the

COFFEE TABLE, and a LAMP-STAND has MAGAZINES next to it. CUT COUPONS are scattered all over the stack of magazines.

Pena searches through the beer bottles for one that is half full. When she finds one, she guzzles a swig.

Pena holds a LEGAL DOCUMENT. As she alternately looks at the document and paces, the words to the song are heard.

BEYONCÉ (O.S.)

I've been drinking, I've been drinking
I get filthy when that liquor get into me
I've been thinking, I've been thinking
Why can't I keep my fingers off it, baby?

Pena stares at the speaker incredulously.

PENA

Fuck this shit.

She changes the station quickly.

DJ (O.S.)

Hello. Aye Bee Yooo.

RADIO CALLER (O.S.)

Hi, I'm Jenny and it's my birthday today...

DJ (O.S.)

(interrupts to sing) Happy Birthday to you.

Pena suddenly stops, her eyes pop out. She just remembered something.

RADIO CALLER (O.S.)

(continues) ...And I was wondering if I could get a birthday shout out and you guys could play "Birthday" by the Beatles.

DJ sings the famous guitar intro then...

DJ (O.S.)

Are you doing something for your birthday?

Pena RUSHES to the...

KITCHEN

...where a CALENDAR, on a nail, on the wall, hangs tilted.

Pena pulls the calendar off the wall.

RADIO CALLER (O.S.)

I'm definitely going out to Ginger's Cookies for my favorite Quadruple Chocolate Chip with chocolate sprinkles and chocolate syrup to boot...

DJ (O.S.)

(as actual intro of Beatle's song plays) Wooo Hoo. Seranonin rushtime. You go girl!!

Pena flips the pages of the calendar. When she gets to the right month, there is a big heart with "MY BIRTHDAY" in a child's handwriting...

PENA

Shit. What am I gonna do?

Pena haphazardly throws the calendar, returns to...

LIVING ROOM

Pena sporadically reads her legal document and guzzles beer. SOUNDS: DOOR LOCKS and DOOR OPENING.

Pena looks at the door.

Celia enters. She moves like an "old soul" not a little girl full of hope and dreams. She looks around. The house is its usual mess. She holds her eyes shut.

CELIA

You forgot...

PENA

I didn't...

CELIA

...I didn't ask for a cake. I didn't ask for a present. I asked you to clean up.

PENA

I was busy.

As Celia removes the backpack...

CELIA

Yeah. Busy.

Celia, a little less hunchbacked posture, disappears from the room for a beat, and returns without her backpack. Pena waves the legal paperwork at Celia.

PENA

With this...this here paperwork. How you expect me to remember your birthday when I...

Celia tears paperwork from Pena's hands...

CELIA

You're my mom.

Celia looks at paperwork which says ORDER MODIFYING CHILD SUPPORT form.

CELIA

Grandma?

Pena points at the complainant's name.

PENA

Can't you read? Don't they teach you how to read in the fourth grade?

Celia shoves the document back to her mother and heads to...

KITCHEN

...where she opens the REFRIGERATOR. It has more BEER in it than FOOD. She disgustingly shoves aside the beer and finds a half full gallon JUG OF MILK and pulls it out. Pena enters and smacks Celia on the upper arm.

PENA

You see what you do for me?

Pena spills milk on Celia.

PENA

Nothing but trouble. Now, I have to appear in court...

CELIA

Let her have me...

Celia drinks the milk out of the container. Pena smacks Celia on the upper arm again.

PENA

You just come in my life to test me. (beat) You hear?

CELIA

You give me nothing but hate.

Pena points to milk container.

PENA

I give you food, I give you...

Celia opens refrigerator and points.

CELIA

Food?

PENA

Don't be correctin' me.

Celia heads to her room. Pena grabs her.

PENA

You tryin' to pull a fast one here?

Celia looks at her questioningly.

PENA

Ain't you gonna call her? Ain't you be findin' what she up

to? You fuckin' brat?

Celia pulls away from Pena.

PENA

You headin' to your room? For what? To loaf?

Pena reaches to grab Celia, but she punches her instead.

PENA

You ain't good for nothin' but loafin' and causin' me trouble.

Celia shakes her head. She does not need to go through this again. She leaves the kitchen and goes to...

CELIA'S ROOM

...where Celia slams the door shut and locks it. She leans on the door and takes a deep breath.

She listens and hears FOOTSTEPS approach the door. She rolls her eyes up, puts her fingers out to count up to four and the FOOTSTEPS move away.

She smiles, moves from the door, puts the milk down on her desk and moves the papers away to leave a space for something.

She gets down on her knees and reaches under her bed to get an old, worn TUPPERWARE CONTAINER with a RED TOP. She pulls it out. It takes a few seconds to open the tricky seal.

From the container, she removes a BIRTHDAY CANDLE with a previously lit BLACK WICK. She wipes it down with her fingers. She finds an old HANDKERCHIEF in one of her pockets.

She gets her backpack and pulls out a GRANDMA HOMESTYLE CHOCOLATE BROWNIE COOKIE.

At her desk, she spreads the handkerchief, opens the cookie packaging, puts the cookie on the hankie and the candle into the cookie.

She looks around her room, and finally finds a BIC LIGHTER in the back of one of her DRAWERS. She looks at the fuel level. It is near empty. She sneers.

CELIA

(mutters) Just my luck.

At the desk, she tries to light the lighter. Although it flames a few times, it never stays on long enough to light the candle. She gets more and more frustrated as she does this. Her fingers hurt and she drops the lighter.

She rubs her fingers a bit, picks up the lighter and puts it back where she found it. As she does this, she takes some deep breaths and calms herself.

At her desk, she takes one BIG DEEP BREATH, closes her eyes and imagines the candle being lit.

CELIA

(sings) Happy Birthday to me. Happy...

She can't go on. She opens her eyes and blows on the black wick.

BLACK OUT.

THE END

Bat-Ami Gordin

NEXT TIME, DELETE THE NUMBER

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Revisions by (Names of Subsequent Writers, in Order of Work Performed)

Current Revisions by

24 July 2014

Based on the Urban Legend that if you don't delete a dead person's phone number they will come back.

KITCHEN

DOOR OPENS. MISTY (20) walks in, CLOSES DOOR as CATHERINE (47) speaks on the LAND-LINE PHONE, Catherine's eyes open wide as she hears the door.

CATHERINE

Okay, Mary. Okay. That's good advice. Thanks. I have to go. Misty's home.

SOUND of a PHONE being put back in its CRADLE.

MISTY

Hey.

CATHERINE

Hi. That was Mary.

Misty opens the FRIDGE and looks inside.

MISTY

Yeah?

Misty pulls a DRINK out of the fridge. Catherine stops her from drinking from the container, gets a CUP and hands it to Misty. Misty pours the juice into the cup.

CATHERINE

Mary was telling me that her SIM card died. She got a new one but now she doesn't have anyone on her phone contacts because her micro SD was corrupt. She suggests we write down all our numbers.

MISTY

(bored) Yeah, great advice. I'll do it when I get home.

The SHUFFLE of items. As Catherine looks through draws...

CATHERINE

Here's a little NOTEPAD.

MISTY

What for?

CATHERINE

Sit down and copy your numbers.

MISTY

From my phone?

CATHERINE

Yeah.

MISTY

I don't see you doing it.

CATHERINE

My numbers are copied in an address book. I did that since I was little.

MISTY

I'm not doing this.

CATHERINE

Just go through your phone and write down the hard-to-find important numbers.

MISTY

Fine. I'll do that. (rolls eyes up) Don't be so Oh Gee Dee.

Misty punches "contacts" and we see "A".

MISTY

(sarcastically) Oh! Wow! Look at this. (shows phone to Catherine) The first listing on A is the triple A. Can I look that up online anytime? Is that on the back of my car? Duh! I think so.

Misty scrolls through her phone once more.

MISTY

Then comes Abrams. He's your gynecologist. I'm sure that's on YOUR phone, or I can get that online. (looks bored) Then comes Alice. Haven't seen her since third grade.

CATHERINE

Third grade? You didn't even have a cell phone then.

MISTY

OK, I'm exaggerating. My point is, I don't care. (beat) Next cousin Arthur...

CATHERINE

(interrupts) If "A" is so boring, you don't have to start there.

MISTY

Fine. I'll just be random. (very bored) Give me a letter in the alphabet.

CATHERINE

Jay?

MISTY

Sure. Jay.

We see Misty scroll down to J.

MISTY

Let's see. Jason Seemly. (thinks a beat) OK. I'll write that one down.

Slowly, Misty calls out each number as she writes it.

MISTY

Seven seven one, five five five, eight seven six nine. Jasmine from English Seven seven one, five five five, seven six zero four. (Looks back at phone) Jay for Joanne, Oh. Wow.

Misty's voice fades, in a rather pathetic way.

CATHERINE

What is it honey?

MISTY

Joanne! You know her, I mean, The Joanne. The Joanne in the car with Randy.

CATHERINE

Randy? Your Randy?

MISTY

Yes. Of course. Don't you remember? You ask every day, "why did your fiancé have to drive your bridesmaid home after your rehearsal?"

CATHERINE

I ask that. And you keep saying, she was needy, and I say that...

MISTY

...you think there was something between them. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. We've gone over this.

CATHERINE/MISTY

You don't want to believe it./I don't believe that.

MISTY

But now. This number. I'm. I don't.

Misty takes little gasps, as if she finds it hard to breathe.

CATHERINE

What's the matter honey?

MISTY

I don't know. (takes deep breaths) It's something. Something telling me to. Dial the number.

CATHERINE

Maybe that's a good idea then. (beat) When you hear a secretary from some business answer the phone, and say "may I help you," you'll know you don't need that number any more. You'll know you have to finally delete it. It might help with the healing.

MISTY

(sighs) I'll do it.

Misty hits "call" next to Joanne's name. Faint RING.

JOANNE (O.S.)

Hello?

MISTY

(on phone -- gasps) Hello? (beat) Joanne?

JOANNE (O.S.)

Yeah. Of course it's me. You dialed my number, didn't you? You called me!

MISTY (ON PHONE)

Joanne???

JOANNE (O.S.)

Stop asking if it's me. You know it's me. You're the one who dialed. (beat) How's it going?

MISTY

(whispers to her mom) It's Joanne!

CATHERINE

(gasps) What?

MISTY

(whispers to Catherine) It's Joanne! How am I supposed to answer her?

CATHERINE

I. I don't...

MISTY

Ummm...

JOANNE (O.S.)

Yeah. Ummm. That's nothing new. So, how's Randy?

MISTY (ON PHONE)

Randy?

JOANNE (O.S.)

Last time I saw him, he was driving me home. I can't remember even getting home. That punch was a bit too punchy, you

know what I mean?

MISTY (ON PHONE)

Ummm. Yeah.

JOANNE (O.S.)

I never wanted to let you in on this, but Randy had "some" punch before he drove me home.

MISTY (ON PHONE)

(numb) Really?

JOANNE (O.S.)

Oh. Sweetie, I'm sorry. He does a lot of things you didn't realize, you know.

MISTY (ON PHONE)

He does? (gets teary) I mean, he did?

Catherine takes the phone from Misty and puts it on speaker.

JOANNE (O.S.)

And your mom. She saw, she knew, and she tried to keep him from driving. But you're the one who insisted he was sober.

MISTY (ON PHONE)

I did? I don't remember that. I didn't see him drink. I mean.

JOANNE (O.S.)

He's so much more fun when he's drunk. Downright silly.

MISTY (ON PHONE)

Was he?

Catherine sits down.

JOANNE (O.S.)

Why haven't you called me?

MISTY (ON PHONE)

Called?

Misty paces.

JOANNE (O.S.)

Yeah. I haven't heard from you. And, I haven't heard from Randy.

Misty returns to the table, leans over the phone and...

MISTY (ON PHONE)

Randy? He's in the hospital. He woke up once since, and I wasn't there. No one told him. I never told him. No one knows if he knows.

Joanne continues as if she didn't hear what Misty just said.

JOANNE (O.S.)

Did your mother finally get to you? Did she finally manage to convince you that something was between Randy and me?

MISTY (ON PHONE)

NO! He's been in a coma since...

JOANNE (O.S.)

I don't believe you.

Misty goes back to pacing.

JOANNE (O.S.)

I don't believe you. You know why? Cuz Randy also stopped calling me. Did she finally talk you into not letting him have anything to do with me?

MISTY (ON PHONE)

I never said anything to him about not calling.

JOANNE (O.S.)

Then why hasn't Randy called? It's gotta be cuz of you. He

promised no matter what, he'd always be my friend.

MISTY (ON PHONE)

What?

JOANNE (O.S.)

Yes. Me and him were "friends" much longer than you and him were. He promised way before you got in the picture.

Misty sits.

MISTY (ON PHONE)

I. I didn't.

JOANNE (O.S.)

Why didn't you call all these long months? Why isn't Randy calling?

CATHERINE

What's she saying?

Misty looks her mom in the eye.

MISTY

She wants to know why I stopped calling.

JOANNE (O.S.)

Why don't you guys call me anymore? Why isn't Randy there for me?

MISTY (ON PHONE)

(slight anger) Because, because. You're dead!!

SILENCE. Then phone shows END.

CATHERINE

What happened?

Misty shows Catherine the phone, stands up and starts pacing. Misty screams then enunciates each word alone while sounding as if she is about to hyperventilate...

MISTY

I don't know what just happened.

CATHERINE

Calm down.

Misty's breathing begins to slow.

CATHERINE

I'll tell you what. You were talking to your dead friend.

MISTY

That's impossible.

CATHERINE

Either you were having an imaginary conversation, or she's not dead.

MISTY

We saw her body. At the wake.

CATHERINE

She looked dead to me and everyone else there.

MISTY

It could be it's a prank. Like one of our friends got her number on her cell, and saw my name on caller ID and they just wanted to mess with my head.

CATHERINE

That doesn't sound like a friend to me.

MISTY

Someone we know. An acquaintance. I don't know. But the voice was hers. It was definitely, and totally and certainly hers!!! What else could explain this?

CATHERINE

I think... (quietly, as if scared to suggest this) That you have to call back.

MISTY

Yeah. (beat) Yes. For sure, I have to call back.

Misty hits "log" then hits the most recent call. Two rings and...

FUNG (O.S.)

Kam Fung Chinese Take Out! May I take your order?

FADE OUT.

THE END

Bat-Ami Gordin

LOOSE CHANGE

SHELLY

I have to ask you something...

PAT

...I know, you want to know why I keep following you. It's our new procedure. The hospital has very high security, and with all the thefts in the gift shop, they were gonna send a security guard to follow people around, but we said we would try to get extra volunteers in, so now one person is at the cash register and another on the floor.

SHELLY

What if it gets really busy?

PAT

Then, security will arrive and have someone armed in here too. See there's a camera up there; we don't even have to call them. They are watching all the time. It's procedure. They watch, it gets crowded in here, they send someone, it magically empties out...and then the auxiliary council wonders why sales are down.

SHELLY

{pause} Oh, look at this. My friend always liked this author. I guess, I should say likes this author. I think this book is one of his old ones, though. Have you read this?

PAT

No... Ma'am.

Pat just realized she hasn't said ma'am yet. Pat is not used to saying ma'am and will be saying it awkwardly, too often and in the wrong place. Pat also has a tendency to be impatient and/or interrupt. Pat is trying to do a "just the facts ma'am" kind of character, but it doesn't work for her.

SHELLY

Hear if it's any good?

PAT

Never heard anything about it, Ma'am.

JULIE

{Girl comes all out of breath} Mom, the ATM machine across the street isn't working. Did you ask if you can pay here with the ATM?

PAT

...No, we just take your money.

SHELLY

Well, the book was kinda pricy anyway. I can get it for him at a thrift shop, and give it to him next time.

JULIE

Mom, I thought there might not be a next...

PAT

{interrupts}...wait...we have some used books, here follow me, right here. Only 50 cents, Ma'am.

SHELLY

Oh wow. These aren't bad. I guess I can get him this one. Not sure how much he can read anyway...he isn't doing...

PAT

{interrupts}...the volunteers donate them.

JULIE

Mom, check this out. If you were in the hospital, someone would get you this one, I Keep Losing Weight, but It Keeps Finding Me.

SHELLY

{laughs sarcastically} Very funny. Ummm...Jules, there's really high security here. I bet there's a long line to get an admittance badge. Why don't you go get our badges while I look around?

JULIE

OK, mom, but don't I need your ID?

SHELLY

You have it.

JULIE

No, I have your ATM card, not your ID.

SHELLY

Oh, yeah. {looks for her ID, can hear some loose change in her purse} Take it. I'll wait for you here. {sees lotion} Oh, lotion. I love smelling lotion. Vanilla spice? I never heard of that for lotion. {sniffs} Hmmm, interesting. I say a bit fruity. {sniffs again}. No, on me it's not fruity. {sniffs again} I guess it has a spicy edge. I mean the edge is spicy, like not the whole fragrance of spice. Kinda like the edges of a jigsaw puzzle put together without the whole center picture in the middle. How much is this regularly?

PAT

I don't know. We had to put 50% on all these things, but I couldn't tell you the regular price.

SHELLY

And Blackberry Current...another one I never heard of. {sniffs} Hmmm...nice too. How did you get all these exotic scents in this store?

PAT

The volunteers ma'am. Different moms get them in these fund raisers for their kids, and ladies get them from... um... from fund raisers in their churches. Then they bring them here... Donate them, usually. For the hospital auxiliary, Ma'am.

SHELLY

{nods and puts down lotion} So, where're the cards now?

PAT

Right here, ma'am.

SHELLY

{picks up lotion again} Nope. It doesn't seem spicy at all now. It's real fruity now.

PAT

Didn't you put Blackberry Current on top of it, ma'am?

SHELLY

Yes, I did. Wait. I just put the black current on the fingers of my right hand. It's the left hand that smells real fruity. {puts lotion down and picks up card} So...let's see. You know, I was going to get him a "Get Well" card. That's what you usually get someone when you go to the hospital. But, he's not going to get well...

PAT

...you mean, he's terminal.

SHELLY

Yes. So maybe...hmmm...let's see, do you have a "You'll See the Light Soon" card?

PAT

No ma'am. I don't think they make those. Maybe you should write to Hallmark and suggest it. I hear you could get royalties, Ma'am.

SHELLY

Oh, this looks like a nice one. It's a bit too religious for me, if you know what I mean. But he'll find it...uh...spiritually peaceful. I'm ready to go to the register and pay for it. Jules should be back any second now.

PAT

Ruth, I'll take the register now. You can take the floor. {some rustling sounds, people changing places}

SHELLY

So, how much do I owe you for this card?

PAT

Let's see. Right on the back. These aren't discounted. It's \$2.50.

SHELLY

No tax?

PAT

No. This is a charitable organization, Ma'am. The auxiliary.

SHELLY

OK. I should have enough change here in my purse. Huh {laughing} speaking of purses. picks up purse} What are these little tiny purses?

PAT

Those are coin purses. They are for change.

SHELLY

So, it's like a purse in a purse. How do you get change in there?

PAT

You stuff it in from...here. {shows her where to put change in} Someone said she would get it for her mom's dolls...but I guess that would depend on the size of the doll.

SHELLY

Yeah, would have to be a pretty big doll, or you could give it to a stuffed animal to hold. That would look weird. But a purse in a purse is not any more strange than a stuffed animal with a purse...let me go back to counting my money. {rustling and change sounds} Let's see. Here's a single. Here's, one, two, three four, five quarters. Here's a dime, a nickel, three pennies. That's it. It doesn't make \$2.50. Oh boy. I have to get the card.

PAT

Ma'am, I get a 10 percent volunteer discount. I'll put the card on my account, and then you can keep your dimes, nickels and pennies.

SHELLY

Really, that's so nice of you. Here comes Julie. Just in time....Jules. I found a nice card. Where are the badges?

JULIE

Mom...ummmm....I don't know how to tell you this, but, he's not...

THE END

